

Guide: Trauma-Informed Meetings, Discussions & Conversations

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Trauma-informed conversations create and maintain conditions where participants fully engage with one another with respect, authenticity, and openness.

CTIPP has created this short guide to help facilitators navigate this process and re-establish a healthy space if the discussion becomes unfocused and unproductive.



Considerations & Principles

The following is grounded in SAMHSA's six principles to guide a trauma-informed approach: safety, trustworthiness/transparency, peer support, collaboration/mutuality, empowerment and voice/choice, and cultural/historical/gender issues.

Facilitators can support an environment where everyone feels they may communicate openly by letting people know what to expect and what is expected of them (trust and transparency), which might include:

- Logistics or ways someone can participate (E.G., through text, unmuting audio, etc.)
- Procedures, or what the experience during and following the discussion might entail (E.G., someone is expected to take notes, one person from breakout groups will be asked to report to the larger group, etc.)
- Role clarity (E.G., as the facilitator, what you will be doing – “It’s my job as a facilitator to _____,” “Time-sharing is a priority for me, and I will be working to ensure everyone has the opportunity to speak,” etc.)
- Community agreements to which each person is expected to hold themselves accountable (see example below)

People sharing their journeys is a gift. It is essential to enter facilitation with reverence (safety) for the wisdom, adaptive capacities, insight, and other gifts that each person’s lived experience has played a role in shaping.

It's critical to remain respectful and encouraging of the experiences participants share. Sharing lived experiences can create enriching connections that deepen the conversation. Encourage folks to "speak from I, think from we" (empowerment and voice/choice) to avoid anyone speaking for others or making generalizations. It can be helpful to utilize open-ended questions that invite deeper insights, and you can encourage participation through questions like:

- What was that like for you?
- How have you been impacted?
- What do you need to move forward?

It's also important to stay focused and rooted in the purpose of the discussion. This work has many dimensions, and many are relevant to discuss! In those moments of "distraction," use your best judgment to determine whether the diversion advances or is helpful to the purpose of the discussion.

Simply restate the purpose of the conversation, invite consideration around whether the discussion is getting to the heart of the topic, and gently redirect the discussion back to the original topic.

And last but not least, safety extends to you as the facilitator. It's important to reflect honestly on your willingness to stay with opinions that may differ from your own and sit with uncertainty or unresolved conflict.

If you notice something coming up for you that might interfere with the group process, simply say to yourself:

- It's not my responsibility to 'fix' this for the group; I must sit in this discomfort and hold space for all to participate.
- Noticing and discussing differences allows us better to understand one another and the issues at hand.
- It's not about me.

See also: [Mindfulness practices to befriend discomfort](#)

Each participant comes to the discussion with unique experiences. In alignment with a trauma-informed approach, it is crucial to maintain awareness that such experiences may have been shaped by trauma and adversity (universal precaution). As a facilitator, you must use this awareness to:

- Notice nonverbal signals that participants are dysregulated or distressed (E.G., people suddenly turning their cameras off after a comment is made, body language that is closed off, multiple people looking distracted or having side conversations, etc.)
- Intervene when someone's trauma response leads to them attacking the person rather than the inequity, injustice, or broader issue at play
- Naming the tension and allowing space for people to label and explore their feelings about what is happening in the process, then working together to re-establish an environment to support meaningful, authentic engagement and participation
- Check in with the person/people you noticed may have been impacted and support them in doing what they need to do to remain in the space
- In moments where you notice escalation/activation, it can be helpful to lead a guided embodied/movement-based activity, followed by taking a brief break
- Strive to stay solution- and strengths-oriented with discussion prompts that probe strengths and creative thinking around moving toward what we want rather than away

It can be tempting to follow up on someone's share with a profound comment that intends to commend the courageousness of sharing their story. While we recognize that intent is "good," we can validate without our lens distorting (safety, empowerment, and voice/choice) their true meaning:

- Demonstrating gratitude: "Thank you for sharing with the group."
- Lifting courage: "It was courageous of you to share that. I appreciate you trusting us with your truth."
- Shining a light on character strengths: "Wow – that sounds really hard. I think you've shown a lot of courage in your approach."
- It helps when facilitators maintain consistent and clear communication
- Be mindful of your body language (E.G., if you nod or snap your fingers to acknowledge one contribution, consider doing the same for all contributions, etc.)
- Notice your tone and remain aware of how you are holding yourself accountable for holding space for and valuing all perspectives shared

Trauma-informed facilitators should manage time thoughtfully, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to be heard (and the option to pass) (empowerment, voice, and choice; collaboration and mutuality).

Make sure everyone knows the various modes to participate (E.G., chat function, unmuting audio, being on video, etc.), and if you notice an imbalance, support more equity through statements like:

- "I wonder whether anyone in the group who has personal experience with this is willing to share."
- "I'd love to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."



Awkward silences can be uncomfortable and essential because each of us processes and makes meaning of information differently. Allowing people the time and space to put their thoughts together and consider whether/how they might like to contribute is an integral part of facilitating group conversations.

If you ask a question and it is met with silence, consider counting—slowly!—to four before moving on to something else (anything longer than four seconds can feel like rejection). If things remain silent, stay anchored, and say something like, "I wonder what's happening that's making it hard for us to have this conversation. What do you all think?"

This is more likely to generate meaningful discussion and engaged participation than simply asking the question again by phrasing it differently or staying silent until someone speaks up out of a sense of obligation.

Trauma-informed conversations maintain awareness of facilitator-to-group power dynamics and identity-based dynamics (cultural, gender, and historical issues) that mirror power imbalances, inequities, and oppressive norms in broader society.

Traditional group facilitation can preserve and perpetuate white body supremacy culture, so we should strive to create "brave" spaces rather than "safe" ones to avoid harm and oppression.

Remember, your role as a facilitator is to create and maintain conditions in which participants may fully engage with one another (collaboration and mutuality; peer support; empowerment, voice, and choice). Simply by being in this role, you are moving with power and privilege. While you may have expertise or experience that you feel moved to share, consider how that signals approval/disapproval for a particular way of thinking, being or doing and how that may chill authentic, diverse discussions.

By giving the group the responsibility of shared leadership, you can leverage your wisdom to make connections between what has been shared and invite participants to address wonderments, share thoughts, and suggest actions.

Sample Community Agreements

We will commit to...

- Inviting everyone to participate while allowing everyone the right to pass
- Demonstrating respect by:
- Giving our attention to the person who has the floor
- Creating space for others' perspectives, experiences, ideas, and contributions
- Prioritizing impact over the intention
- Preserving confidentiality and privacy
- Choosing and using our words with the intention
- Engaging with curiosity and compassion rather than shaming others or making assumptions by "calling people in" rather than "calling people out" (examples)
- Using inclusive language that is accessible to people with varying levels of knowledge and familiarity with the topics being discussed
- Taking space and making space by paying attention to how frequently, how long, and how quickly we participate
- Speaking from our own experiences by using "I" statements rather than generalizations
- Engaging in ongoing self-reflection and taking care of ourselves in whatever way makes sense for each of us

