Considerations for Temporary Transitions to Online Support Groups

The current public health crisis around COVID-19 has prompted the temporary transition to online delivery for many supports and services, including support groups for bereavement. Perhaps more than ever, it is important for people impacted by suicide loss to be able to connect with others. While adjusting to an online support group format can create some discomfort for both the facilitator and attendees at first, adequate preparation can help set the stage for a successful transition. To support facilitators in the transition to online meetings, this document provides key considerations about group process and technology for facilitators.

This information is intended to highlight considerations that may be new to facilitators operating in the virtual format so that facilitators can ensure safeguards are in place in light of some of the potential challenges. Additionally, this information can be used by facilitators to help participants prepare for the virtual group format. For example, it may be helpful to draw from this document to create resources to support participants in engaging with the virtual format for the group. We encourage you to use what you find helpful, though certainly not all of the information will be relevant or necessary for your group.

Please note that this list of considerations is not exhaustive, and there may be additional considerations specific to your unique context beyond those included in this document.

Pre-Registration and Contact before the Meeting

Technology Considerations

Provide potential participants with instructions to become familiar with the software before the meeting, including instructions for downloading the software on a computer or phone and instructions for testing the technology before the meeting. If the group allows for people to call in rather than participate via smartphone or computer webcam, provide information about how to connect through a phone call.

Provide potential participants with a brief overview of considerations for using the technology for the group. Consider drawing as appropriate from the examples below:

o Inform potential participants of the limitations of online communication, such as the potential for breaches of privacy. While the software may be encrypted, privacy cannot be guaranteed. With knowledge of these potential limitations, participants can decide what and how much information to share.

o Inform participants of the potential challenges of participating in online groups, such as difficulty reading body language and the possible lag in communication through unstable internet connections.

o To promote safety and confidentiality, encourage participants to participate from a quiet, private space with limited distractions and no one else present. If participants cannot participate from a private room, encourage the use of headphones.

o Provide participants with a phone number to call if they have trouble connecting to the meeting or using the technology.

o Provide basic information about the functions within the software, such as the mute option.

o Inform participants that they may want to close down all apps, devices, and programs running in the background.

o Inform participants of the importance of a stable, private internet connection (rather than public Wi-Fi).

o Provide basic information about setting up the camera for optimal participation. For example, let participants know that if their camera is facing a window, it will be difficult to see them clearly.

Consider constructing a FAQ handout for participants with the suggested information above.

Process Considerations

If the person has never attended the group in person, the facilitator should schedule a pre-meeting via phone or teleconference software to connect, review basic information about the group, and ensure the group is a good fit for the person's current needs.

Some software options allow the meeting host to set up a required pre-registration process before the person can join the meeting. Consider requiring this for new members who join the group.

The pre-registration or intake process should identify ways to connect with the person if they leave the group early, either as a voluntary choice or if they get disconnected due to technology issues. Potential participants should be informed that if they leave early, the facilitator will make contact after the meeting to check in.

More Technology Considerations

As the facilitator, spend time getting comfortable with the technology and learning how to use all of the features (e.g. breakout rooms, chat function, mute all option, etc.) so that you can provide instruction and troubleshooting support to participants.

Be sure that the link for joining the group is private and only shared with participants (rather than posted on a public Facebook page, for example). Consider requiring a password for joining the group as well, it increases the security of the connection.

To maximize security, be sure your operating system and browser are up to date.

More Process Considerations

For both new and ongoing group members, verify contact information, including phone number and email, to make contact if needed.

Consider the length of time for the group. 60 or 90 minute meetings may be most suitable for the online format.

It may be helpful to let participants know of any logistical changes or expectations, such as whether it is okay to drink a beverage or eat during the meeting.

Managing Expectations and Using Technology during the Meeting

Technology Considerations

As the facilitator, be sure to log on to the software platform early (15-30 minutes before the meeting start) to be sure that people can connect and work out any technology issues before the group begins.

To attend to the environment of the online format and encourage participants' comfort with the environment, spend the first 5-10 minutes of the group guiding participants through the features. Provide a verbal tutorial to help participants identify key features that they will likely need to use during the meeting (e.g. mute function for both audio and video, chat box, etc.).

On some software platforms, you can check a box to indicate the meeting cannot be recorded. Be sure that participants know that the meeting will not to be recorded. Participants should be discouraged from taking screenshots or recording any portion of the meeting.

Consider using the "Share Screen" function to post guidelines for ensuring safety and technology housekeeping points. A simple list might include:
- Mute yourself if you are not speaking to minimize background noise
- Be mindful of what others might see in the background
- Ensure confidentiality by participating from a private space or by using headphones to connect.

Process Considerations

As with in-person support groups, the group should begin with a process to agree on or review guidelines for ensuring safety in the group (also known as ground rules).

While many of the guidelines may remain the same, additional guidelines may need to be negotiated within the group as well. For example, in the process of reviewing housekeeping details, the group may need to decide the best way for people to leave early or excuse themselves temporarily if needed. Another housekeeping matter to consider is the pull to multi-task while participating online. The facilitator may want to encourage people to be fully dedicated to the meeting as though they are in the same room with other participants.

A review of the guidelines should also include guidelines for using the technology (see additional information in the Technology Conside-rations list).

If you plan to take notes for the purpose of getting back to a point, person, or issue, inform participants that from time to time you may not be looking at the camera in order to take notes that will contain no personal information.

If the group tends to be unstructured or minimally structured, you may want to increase the structure of the group format and take a more active role in facilitation. Consider using specific questions or prompts to promote sharing and connection.

As the facilitator, pay attention to the time and contributions of group members. Be sure to check in with participants who may not speak up as much, and consider offering an explicit invitation to them to contribute.

Consider setting up a buddy system so that group members can check in or debrief with one another at breaks or after group. Many of the connections among members happen informally before and after group, and it may be helpful to think of ways to create and support these connections virtually.