

Interactive Communication Group Guidelines

It's common for you to experience some anxiety about participating in an interactive group. Questions like these might come up for you:

- Is this the right group for me?
- If I open up and be vulnerable, will I be safe here?
- How much should I share?
- Will I fit in?
- Can I connect with people of a different race, gender, sexuality, age, and experience?
- Do I understand what we are doing together?
- What is a typical group meeting like?
- Does the facilitator know how to lead this group with competence and care?
- Do I understand the group norms?
- Will I benefit from this group?
- Do I want to get close to anyone in the group?
- Will this interactive group style of learning work for me?
- Will the group value how I choose to participate?
- Will I be able to contribute to the group?
- Do I have enough skills, knowledge & experience to do this?
- Am I more or less competent than other members of the group?
- How do I take responsibility for making this a great learning community?
- How do I ask for and give support as needed?

Interactive Communication Groups go through several group developmental stages. They are: inclusion, mutuality and intimacy. In the beginning stage, members will take notice of each other to determine whether this is a group they want to be in. Some may mostly observe and only speak up occasionally. Others may jump right in and bare parts of their soul. Each person moves forward at their own pace.

One way to participate at first is to talk about how you feel to be in the group. One part of you may feel anxious, while other parts can feel excited, curious, cautious or other feelings. It can be calming to name what you're feeling. Doing so helps you to be aware of your experience in the moment. This is an important skill in an interactive group. By naming what you're feeling, you will discover other people often feel the same way. This can meet needs around shared reality, support, community, belonging, and inclusion.

When you're ready, you can let the group know who you are, what brought you to the group, and what you'd like to work on. Here's one example of an introduction:

"Hi, I'm John, I'm really nervous right now. I joined this group because I want to learn to be more open. I was raised to be the strong and silent type and I really struggle with opening myself up to people in an authentic way. I also want to work on my anger. My

partner says I take my anger out on whoever I think doesn't appreciate me. I don't like that about myself. That was really hard to say out loud."

When someone shares something vulnerable, if you were moved by their sharing, you can let the speaker know.

For example, Kishna just finished working with someone in the group, and Beth was touched by what transpired. Beth responded by saying, "Kishna, when you said how you were hurt that Jamal said you were too much in your head and not in touch with your feelings, I was really moved. Part of me struggles with being true to what I feel because I'm afraid my feelings won't be accepted. I feel safer in my head. I appreciated how you responded by getting in touch with your feelings. It helped me realize I can do the same."



Modalities

In these Interactive Communication Groups, we use two modalities to help create a safe space for everyone to feel seen and heard: *Internal Family Systems (IFS)* and *Nonviolent Communication (NVC)*.

Founded by Richard Schwartz, IFS states that it's the natural state of the mind to be divided into many parts or subpersonalities. These "parts" have different thoughts, feelings, needs, memories, goals, and beliefs.

For example, one part of you might want to share what's going on inside of you but another part might be terrified to speak up. We all have parts like the inner critic, the abandoned child, the people pleaser, the fierce controller, the angry part, and the loving peacemaker.

So it can be very helpful for group members to take the time to speak *for* their parts in the group.

For example, you might say, "A part of me is angry by what you said Sherry and a part of me is hurt because I'm wanting some understanding that I'm not trying to smooth things over." Speaking for the different parts that are up around a situation helps group members take responsibility for their feelings and their thoughts (their parts), and creates space for what IFS calls the Self, which is at the core of us all and has characteristics such as compassion, curiosity, calmness and courage.

IFS divides “parts” into three types: Managers, Exiles and Firefighters.

Managers are parts that protect a person from past pain or from being hurt by others. They take on roles such as the inner critic, the pleaser, an organizer, a judge, or an intellectual.

Exiles are often young parts that have experienced pain, shame, fear or trauma, usually in childhood, when they had no resources to heal from the experiences. The job of the managers and firefighters are to prevent the pain of the exiles from coming to the surface and flooding a person’s system.

Firefighters are parts with extreme behaviors and emerge when the managers have been unable to prevent the exile from surfacing. These firefighter parts work to immediately distract a person’s attention away from the hurt or shame of the exile. They are often associated with addictive behaviors, such as overeating, drug addiction, violence, sex addiction, overworking, or over-medicating.

IFS advocates that we learn to separate from our strong emotions and thoughts (our parts) so that Self can emerge and develop an empathic relationship with each part, and help heal our wounded ones.



Nonviolent Communication (NVC), founded by Marshall Rosenberg, is the second modality that can help support a heart connection between group members. To do this, we communicate our observations, feelings, needs, and requests.

This compassionate, needs-based language model helps us to move away from judgment, blame, shame, interpretation, analysis and demands, and shift into the heart-centered world of feelings and needs.

In NVC, we take responsibility for our experience by understanding that everything we say or do is a strategy to meet a basic human need.

According to NVC, underlying all of our feelings of upset are unmet needs. Discovering what the unmet need is that is causing our discomfort shifts our perspective from blaming others to taking responsibility for what we’re feeling and needing. This can move us to make a request - a small, doable, action step - to get the need met.

To give empathy, we listen for the feelings and needs behind the words of others and reflect back what we hear. To do this, we take a guess at what they may be feeling and needing around the situation.

It's okay if you don't guess right. They will correct you, which means you've helped them dive deeper into their own self-discovery process to get more clear around what is alive in them. It can be even more powerful for them to discover this clarity on their own. Your empathy guesses help them get there.

Self-empathy is checking in with our own feelings and needs with compassion and understanding. There are three opportunities to give ourselves self-empathy.

1. When someone says or does something that stimulates discomfort in us.
2. When we think of something that causes us distress or discomfort.
3. When we notice a body sensation but we don't know what we're feeling.

The question to ask ourselves is, "What am I feeling and needing right now?" Some feelings are strong and obvious, but others are more subtle and harder to pinpoint. Taking a minute or two to go inside and notice and name the feeling is the first step to self-empathy. Once that happens, determining the need comes next. The more precise we can be with what the need is, the more effective it will be at calming our nervous system.

The benefits of self-empathy are:

- Helps to connect with what's going on for us internally.
- Helps to get centered so we can express ourselves with honesty and compassion.
- Helps to stop the vicious cycle of getting triggered into a fight, flight or freeze reaction and triggering other people.
- Helps to open up our hearts so we can resolve conflicts from a calm, more mindful place.

Just as in IFS, all parts are welcome. In NVC, all needs matter.



Awareness

Awareness is the ability to notice and name what you are feeling and needing in the moment. This is easier said than done. Noticing body sensations, changes in your posture, your breath, your voice, can all serve as clues that you have feelings and needs arising.

In an intense interaction, it can be challenging to be aware of your feelings. However, this is the time when it is most needed.

Awareness is like a muscle. You have to develop it, and it takes time. Once your awareness grows, you will notice there are many levels of awareness. The first feeling you become aware of in a situation is often the tip of the iceberg.

As you become more proficient, you will begin to be aware of subtler and deeper experiences. This allows you to begin to identify the parts of you that are having these experiences.

Initiating interactions

Any group member can initiate some work with another member. Sharing how you feel toward the person when you notice a reaction coming up is one way to initiate some interactive work. You also can think about what you want to work on before the session.

Once the group starts, you can decide when you want to announce that you have some work you want to do and who you want to do it with. You may want to share some feelings you have toward a group member or address something that happened in a prior meeting that created a reaction in you.

It won't take long before you have some reactions to every person in the group. At first, you can start some interactive work with someone you feel safe talking to. Your reactions can be positive or negative, big or little.

Many people begin by sharing positive reactions because this helps to build trust and safety. As the group grows closer and can hold space and care for whatever parts arise, people often gain the courage to express deep pain, or fear, or shame. This can create a sense of solidarity in the group.

We all need to have our vulnerable parts accepted and acknowledged.

The group support allows these parts to be witnessed and held with compassion, which is incredibly healing.



Speaking *for* our parts

For many of us, it can be difficult to hear or express feelings of fear, anger, hurt or jealousy. Using parts language, however, can soften the impact of intense emotions. When you speak *for* a part, you are in Self as you describe the feelings of the part. For example, "There's a part of me that is hurt that you said that because this part wants me to be seen for who I really am."

Rather than blaming, attacking or trying to educate, the speaker takes ownership of any reactions (parts) that may arise. So it's okay to express negative feelings toward others as long as you speak for your parts. Often, if not always, our triggers run deeper than the person who triggered us so it's important to have a language that helps us navigate our strong reactions to people so we can heal and grow in a safe environment.

When group members work through an interaction until they feel complete, the group becomes like a healthy family where each member is seen, heard and understood.

Facilitator's role

The facilitator's role is to keep the group interacting with each other using the modalities above. Sometimes this means slowing down the process so group members stay in the present and explore what parts are alive in them in the moment. Sometimes it means allowing silence so things can be processed.

Group as a healthy family

Because the origins of most of our issues stem from our early relationships, our healing can come through our relationships with the others in the group.

Just like people in our outside world, the group will often trigger painful experiences from our family of origin, giving us a chance to heal them. As group cohesion and intimacy develops, the group work deepens.

Members feel more safe to explore the places they need to grow. They can trust the group to hold with care their deepest secrets and their most difficult pain, as well as, their greatest joys. There often is a deep caring and love between members. Close relationships develop, and the group becomes like a healthy family where you feel safe, valued and loved; where you can be autonomous and powerful.



Quarterly private sessions

Included in the cost of the group is a 30-minute consultation with the facilitator every three months. You can use the consultation to:

- get clear on how to initiate interactive work in the group
- get in touch with subtle reactions you have experienced in the group
- talk about feelings that you don't feel safe exploring in the group

- strategize about how to work on a specific issue
- get clarity about what is holding you back

For example, suppose you want to learn to deal with your tendency to jump into conversations to fix someone's problem, and then you realize how this tendency is such a knee-jerk reaction within you that you can't see it until after you've jumped in. You feel embarrassed, and withdraw from the group in shame.

You can discuss with your facilitator ways to address your shame live in the moment and get support from the group. Your facilitator can help you get in touch with your anger and your shame and help you to bring your feelings up in the group.

Conclusion

I've spearheaded many peer-led interactive groups. I love the excitement and the intensity of sharing and learning and growing together. I love the realness that takes place between group members, and the safety and trust that is established through people sharing the deepest parts of themselves. I hope these guidelines give you enough information to make a decision on whether joining a group is right for you.

Look forward to supporting each of you in this group process!

Best,
Kathy