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The *ESDT Alliance Consumer Feedback Toolkit* is also available electronically. Microsoft word versions of some tools have also been created so they can be used electronically.

<https://www.esdt.com.au/>

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**Focus groups bring together a small group of people, who are guided by a facilitator, to discuss their opinions, beliefs and attitudes about a specific issue.**

This resource provides information about how to plan and conduct effective focus groups with consumers. It brings together information from the best practice literature and our experience conducting focus groups with consumers in health and community services.

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# Introduction

Focus groups bring together a small group of people, to discuss their opinions, beliefs and attitudes about a specific issue. Collecting information in a group setting allows participants to interact with each other and use the natural flow of conversation to share and generate ideas. This provides valuable information about the similarities and differences of participants' opinions and experiences.

## Focus groups can be useful to:

- Understand a new or existing group's needs (and how well they are being met).
- Explore the strengths and weaknesses of a program.
- Understand how and why consumers experience a program in different ways.
- Test ideas or generate new ideas.
- Validate, clarify or explore information that you've gathered from a survey (or other research/evaluation strategy).
- Inform the development of other data collection strategies.
- Collect feedback about a resource, product or approach.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow you to understand a variety of experiences and opinions to create a detailed picture of what participants are thinking and feeling.</li><li>• Can quickly identify common themes and points of difference among participants.</li><li>• Group discussion encourages people to reflect on their own experiences and share their own insights.</li><li>• Valuable for people with limited literacy, or those who may not feel confident to participate in one-on-one interviews.</li><li>• Can create a culturally safe and appropriate way to collect feedback.</li><li>• Can reinforce a sense of shared experience, where people feel validated and safe to share their ideas or experiences with their peers.</li><li>• Flexibility allows the facilitator to quickly and easily clarify information, ask follow up questions and probe for further detail.</li><li>• Practical activities and visual aids can be integrated to actively engage participants and supplement verbal feedback.</li><li>• Quick and effective way to test resources or tools and collect feedback about their usefulness, appropriateness etc.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Require expertise to facilitate effective group discussion and analyse qualitative data.</li><li>• Group setting may inhibit or influence some responses.</li><li>• Difficult to collect sensitive or personal data.</li><li>• Challenging for people who have communication difficulties, cognitive impairments or mobility/travel restrictions.</li><li>• The accuracy (or validity) of the results are dependent on the facilitator enabling honest and equitable conversation and then interpreting information accurately (facilitator bias).</li><li>• Can be sidetracked by a few vocal individuals.</li><li>• Limited generalisability – you cannot assume that the group's views, represent your entire population.</li><li>• Lack of anonymity and facilitator cannot guarantee that other participants will maintain their confidentiality (although this is clearly stated as an expectation of all members).</li><li>• Existing relationships and dynamics between individuals can influence the information provided.</li></ul>

# Recruiting focus group participants

## Limitations of this resource

This resource contains information about focus groups that are held face-to-face, with all of the participants meeting together in an appropriate venue. While it is possible to conduct focus groups online or via teleconference, these approaches create a unique set of challenges for the facilitator and the participants. They require excellent communication skills, familiarity and availability of appropriate technology which may exclude many healthcare consumers from participating. A list of resources that specifically address technology based focus groups is included on page 20.

## Who should attend?



Detailed information about participant selection, sampling and recruitment strategies is included in ***‘Collecting and using consumer feedback effectively: Designing your approach’***. Outlined below are a brief summary of some specific strategies to consider when recruiting participants for a focus group.

Bringing together the right participants is critical to the success of a focus group and requires thoughtful planning. First and foremost, focus group participants should be representative of your target population and be willing and able to provide the information you need.

**Before you start recruiting, make sure you are very clear about the purpose of the group and the information that you need to collect.**

When you are ready to start recruiting, remember:

- Focus groups should bring together a small group of people who share common characteristics, knowledge or experiences. This allows you to explore the range of attitudes and beliefs within the group.
- Be sensitive to any differences within the group (e.g. recognising the different skills and experience of the group).
- Consider what is culturally appropriate for your participants (e.g. having men and women together, clients and carers together).
- If you need to collect information from a diverse group of people running multiple focus groups usually works best, each targeting a specific group of people (e.g. one group for clients and another for carers).

## How many people should be invited?

When deciding on the number of participants for your group, first consider the needs of your target group, the environment and group structure that would enable them to participate most effectively.

Focus groups can include between 4 and 15 participants, however groups of between 6 - 12 participants are often considered ideal. This allows natural group dynamics to support the flow of the conversation, while allowing everyone the opportunity to participate and share their ideas. If the group is too small, it can prevent open discussion while large groups can be difficult to manage and can easily lose focus. It can be useful to invite a couple of additional participants, if it is likely that some people will not turn up on the day.

## How can participants be recruited?

When recruiting participants for a focus group:

- Invite people personally. When people feel that their input is valued, they will be more motivated to participate.
- Ensure that any associated costs (e.g. travel) are reimbursed.
- Consider whether providing incentives is appropriate. Remember that focus groups often require a significant time contribution and it's important to acknowledge the value of people's time.
- Give people adequate notice about the group (generally 1-3 weeks).
- Explain why you are conducting the group and how you will use the feedback.
- Clearly describe how you will manage confidentiality.
- Let people know if you will provide food or refreshments. This is a great incentive!
- Incorporate focus groups into existing service provision (e.g. conduct a focus group within a pre-existing group).
- Consider the location of the focus group, make sure the venue is accessible.
- Make reminder phone calls the day before the group to confirm details, attendance and provide participants with the opportunity to ask questions.





## How do I establish consumer consent?

All participants need to provide informed consent before they take part in a focus group. Where possible, this should be documented on a consent form. The example included below can be used as a guide about the key points that should be included in a consent form. It's essential though, that you consider the needs of your target group and ensure that the information provided and the language used in all of your documentation is meaningful and appropriate for your participants.

### **Example:**

#### Consent to participate in a focus group about the Healthyville Community Centre's Jumping Jack's Program

We are conducting a focus group with people who have been involved with our Jumping Jack's program. This will help us understand how to improve the way we share information about Jumping Jacks with the community.

We want to find out what information would be useful to help people decide if Jumping Jacks is right for them. We are also keen to understand how we should present information to families who may be interested in joining the group.

During the group, we will ask you to read through the current Jumping Jacks brochure and the group information on the Healthyville Community Centre website. We will ask you to provide feedback about these resources and how we can improve them. We would also like to hear your ideas about other ways to spread the word about Jumping Jacks.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions asked in the group. We understand that everyone's experience is different and it's important to us to hear everyone's opinions and ideas. Understanding what you don't like about the resources, is just as important as understanding what you do like.

You can choose whether or not to participate in the group and you may stop at any time. Your feedback will be kept private and your name will not be included in the report or shared with anyone. The group will be tape recorded so that we can capture everyone's feedback. Once we are sure that we have documented everyone's feedback, the tape will be destroyed.

The feedback you share in the group will only be used to update the information we provide to the community about Jumping Jacks. Your views will not have any impact on the services you receive from Healthyville Community Centre.

**I understand this information and agree to participate in the focus group at Healthyville Community Centre on Monday 3rd November 2024.**

Name	
Signature	
Date	



Additional information about consent processes is included in *'Collecting and using consumer feedback effectively: Designing your approach'*.

# Scheduling the focus group

## When and where should the focus group be conducted?

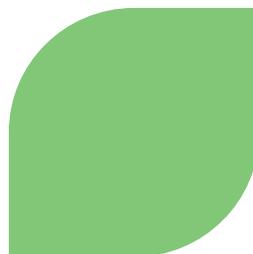
Focus groups should be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient and respectful to your participants' circumstances (e.g. if your participants are mothers of young children, scheduling groups within school hours may be most appropriate and/or you may need to consider the availability of appropriate childcare).

Think about whether there are existing places or times that key people come together. This may provide you with a captive audience who are willing and able to attend with minimal disruption.

The session should be held at a venue that is convenient, comfortable and private. Consider the needs of your group in relation to the accessibility of the venue. Choosing familiar locations and providing transport to and from the venue, can increase participants' confidence about attending a focus group.

## How long should a focus group run?

The length of time that the group should run for, will depend on the needs of the participants. Generally focus groups should run no longer than 1.5 hours.



# Choosing a facilitator

Focus groups are usually led by a trained facilitator with support from an assistant. Most importantly though, leading a focus group requires great communication skills and the ability to manage group dynamics!

## Role of the facilitator

The facilitator's role is to lead the group and ensure that key information is collected. The facilitator needs to create a safe and comfortable environment, where participants feel confident to speak up and share their ideas. The facilitator should encourage different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote, plan or reach consensus.

Facilitating focus groups requires particular skills and experience, including the ability to:

- Relate to, and build rapport with participants quickly and effectively.
- Actively listen and engage consumers to keep them focused and involved.
- Create an inclusive and non-threatening environment that fosters open and honest conversation among participants.
- Think on their feet and adapt the approach to ensure that the goals are met, while ensuring that participants feel listened to and able to contribute information they believe is important.
- Observe participants closely and be responsive to the dynamics of group and individual responses.
- Remain neutral and impartial.
- Demonstrate a solid understanding of the group's purpose, processes and key issues and instill confidence in the group of their leadership skills.
- Manage time effectively and keep the group on track.
- Model appropriate behaviour and enforce the group's ground rules.

**If you haven't run a focus group before, consider whether it's appropriate to co-facilitate a group. This allows you to take turns asking questions and gives you extra time to think about your approach.**

## Role of the assistant

The assistant often has a major role in coordinating the focus group and managing the logistics of the session. This includes:

- Taking notes.
- Managing the recording equipment.
- Monitoring time.
- Supporting participants in and around the group.

The assistant does not usually have an active role in leading the group, asking questions or managing participants' interactions.

## Who should facilitate the group?

Focus groups can be facilitated by staff who work with the consumers, a staff member who isn't regularly involved with the consumers or an external person. The table below outlines the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches:

Who	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>A staff member who works with the consumers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapport has already been established between the consumers and the facilitator.</li> <li>• The focus group can be conducted with a pre-existing group (reducing time and resources).</li> <li>• The worker will be familiar with the context of the consumers feedback.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumers may not feel able to give negative feedback.</li> <li>• The staff member may not be skilled in facilitating focus groups.</li> </ul>
<b>An internal staff member who isn't regularly involved in the consumers' care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff member represents the organisation that the consumers are familiar with which can help to establish rapport.</li> <li>• The focus group can be conducted with a pre-existing group (reducing time and resources).</li> <li>• A staff member who is familiar with the program will understand the context for the discussion with the consumers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumers may have reservations about giving feedback directly to the organisation which can bias their feedback.</li> <li>• The staff member may not be skilled in facilitating focus groups.</li> </ul>
<b>An external person</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has dedicated time and resources to allocate to planning and facilitating the group (likely to complete the groups in a timely manner).</li> <li>• Will be skilled/trained in facilitating focus groups.</li> <li>• Is less likely to bias the results as they are independent from the organisation and consumers may feel more able to give honest feedback.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The consumers may be reluctant to communicate with someone they are unfamiliar with.</li> <li>• It is likely to be more expensive than using internal resources.</li> </ul>

# Conducting effective focus groups

## Facilitator's guide

A *Facilitator's guide* provides the framework for how the group will run and the processes that will be followed to help you achieve the group's objectives. This will help you focus on priority topics, stay on track and keep to the allocated time. When you are running multiple focus groups, it also helps to ensure that information is collected consistently between groups (and facilitators). To ensure the focus group remains relevant, it is important to review and revise the *Facilitator's guide* after each session.

**Developing a *Facilitator's guide* creates consistency and in turn, builds the credibility and reliability of the information you collect.**

The *Facilitator's guide* should include:

- An overview of the purpose and goals of the focus group/s.
- Roles and responsibilities for staff before, during and after the focus group/s.
- The information provided to participants prior to the group including recruitment and consent strategies/tools, confirmation and reminder processes.
- A group introduction statement.
- Ground rules/expectations of participants.
- Key questions, priority issues and relevant prompts.
- Risk management strategies.
- Conclusion and summation statements.
- Follow up activities.



A range of *Facilitator's guide* templates are included in '**Consumer focus group tools and templates**'.

## References

For further information about conducting focus groups see:

Health Promotion Unit (2007). *Focus groups. Queensland Stay On Your Feet® Community Good Practice Toolkit*. Division of the Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health

ACI (2016) *Guide: Participant experience focus groups: Facilitation guide*. Chronic Care Network, NSW Agency for Clinical Innovation

Cancer Research UK (2020) *Using focus groups to gather patient insight*.

NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement (2009) *The Facilitator's Toolkit: Tools, techniques and tips for effective facilitation*.

Community Tool Box *Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups*. Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.

CEH (2011) *Conducting focus groups with CALD communities*. Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH)

## Beginning the group

The first few minutes of a focus group are critical to set the tone and create an atmosphere that will allow people to participate enthusiastically and appropriately. Regardless of how much information you have provided before the group, it's essential to provide an overview of why the group is being run and how everyone can contribute.

Within your introduction, you should:

- Welcome the consumers to the session and thank them for attending.
- Introduce yourself and others involved in the group.
- Provide an overview of the topic and purpose of the group.
- Acknowledge the consumers' commitment and the importance of their contribution.
- Introduce how the group will run (including the overall schedule, whether you'll have a planned break and how people should let you know they need a break).
- Ask the consumers to introduce themselves and perhaps describe why they chose to be involved in the group.
- Reinforce consent and confidentiality. Remind the group that they don't have to answer anything they are uncomfortable with and can stop at any time.
- Set the ground rules (or group agreement).
- Show people how information will be recorded, analysed and reported.



## Establishing ground rules for the group

Ground rules describe the expectations of group members and what is considered appropriate behaviour. This encourages equitable participation and builds people's confidence about how they should contribute to the group. While this may seem like common sense, establishing clear ground rules is important to ensure that the group remains on track and makes it easier to manage any challenges as they arise.

### How to develop ground rules for your focus group

At the beginning of the session, the facilitator should work with the group to develop a set of ground rules. It's important to provide participants with the opportunity to contribute to the ground rules. There are a range of ways to do this and your approach should be informed by the skills and needs of your participants. You may begin with a set of non-negotiable rules that you discuss with the group and invite them to add or clarify anything that is unclear. Alternatively, you may start from scratch and brainstorm a list of ground rules with the group. This helps to foster a sense of ownership. Once complete, display your agreed ground rules, so they're easily visible throughout the session.

#### **Example:**

- We value and respect everyone's opinions and ideas
- We don't need to agree with everyone's ideas, but we will listen to them
- There are no right or wrong answers
- We will ask each other questions and add to each other's comments
- We will not pass judgement about what others say
- One person talks at a time
- What's said in the room, stays in the room! We will not share the information that is discussed during the group
- We will use each other's first names
- Mobile phones need to be switched off, or turned on silent



## Asking questions

Every focus group will be different. The information you collect and how you collect it should be driven by the purpose and objectives of the group. You also need to consider what is appropriate for your participants, what is achievable within the timeframe (and within your skill set) and what is most important.

You should develop a set of key questions that will guide the conversation, but allow space to be flexible and encourage people to share the information that they think is most relevant.

### Key questions

It can be difficult to predict exactly how many questions can be covered in a focus group, but as a general rule, 5-6 key questions can be included within a 90 minute focus group.

Develop your key questions by:

- Writing a list of the major themes you want to cover and then prioritising them. Identify the questions you must ask and then you may also have a list of 'nice to know' questions, that are not essential.
- Focusing on open questions to promote discussion and conversation. 'What' and 'How' questions work particularly well.
- Only using closed questions if you want to check facts. Always follow closed questions with open questions.
- Being mindful of who is asking the questions and their relationship with participants. For example, staff should not ask questions about their own performance.

### Prompts and probing questions

Brainstorm and practice the prompts and probing questions you can use to encourage discussion, clarify and explore the group's responses. Particularly at the beginning of your group, asking probing questions is also a useful way to build rapport, show the participants that you value their feedback, recognise their expertise and demonstrate the level of detail that you're looking for.

#### **Example:**

Probing questions can include:

- Tell me more about ...
- Can you explain XXX a bit more?
- Could you give me an example of ...
- Why do you think ...
- What happened then?





## Creative ways to engage the group

Once you've developed your key questions, consider the best way to collect that information.

Using a range of strategies to collect information can be useful to encourage everyone to get involved and keep people interested.

**Be creative about the way you engage with the group - you don't need to always just sit in a circle and take turns talking.**

Think about using visual cues and hands on activities in your group, or simply mixing up the way you ask questions. This could include:

- Asking people to reflect on their own experience and share examples.
- Making a mind map or brainstorming ideas on a whiteboard.
- Role playing.
- Making something.
- Choosing among alternatives.
- Using rating scales and then asking people to explain how and why they made their decision.
- Fill in the blanks.
- Using cue cards with pictures or key words.
- Drawing pictures.
- Using word associations.
- Asking people to note down ideas and then use these as prompts for further discussion.
- Discussing videos, pictures or other resources.

## Listen first ... ask second

Regardless of how you collect information, the most important thing is to listen carefully and show people that you value their feedback. Actively demonstrate that you're listening with verbal cues, body language and positive reinforcement.

Resist the urge to fill silences. Give people time to process information and think about what they want to say ... try the 5 second rule. You can also indirectly prompt people to elaborate on their ideas by paraphrasing their responses and validating their answers.

### **Example:**

- 'I can see why you felt that was difficult'
- 'that's very interesting/insightful'
- 'I hadn't thought about it that way before, that's really helpful'.



## Recording information

A key benefit of collecting feedback via a focus group, is the level of detail of the information you collect. Direct quotes and comments can add great context and value to your reports, so it's important to consider how you can record that information. You may choose to:

- **Use a recording device**

Even if you don't intend to transcribe the focus group verbatim, recording the session can be very useful. It allows you to concentrate on facilitating the group discussion, without having to take too many notes and creates a record that you can use to review or clarify specific points. It also allows you to collect verbatim quotes which can provide powerful evidence / examples to illustrate a point in your reporting.

Make sure you practice using the recorder before the session and prepare a back-up plan, because if the recording doesn't work, the entire group is lost.

- **Take detailed notes.**

Depending on the context and purpose of your focus group, it may be appropriate to document notes and key themes. Taking notes is nearly impossible while facilitating the focus group, so this is usually the role of the assistant. It's useful to create a template, to assist you to record notes in an organised way.

Whichever option you choose always tell the group participants how the information will be recorded, stored and destroyed.



Please refer to '*Consumer focus group tools and templates*' for an example of a note taking form.

## Concluding the group

Once you've asked all of your key questions, it's important to include time and space to allow the participants to add their own ideas or provide other feedback they believe is important to understand the key issues. To encourage participants to share their ideas you should:

- Finish asking questions at least 10 minutes before the scheduled finish time. This allows people to add any relevant information without feeling rushed.
- Provide a summary of the key points you discussed.
- Reiterate the purpose of the group and ask if anything has been missed.
- Clarify the next steps, including when and how you will share the results/findings from your evaluation.
- Provide participants with the contact details of someone they can speak to if they have any follow up questions, additional feedback or concerns.
- Thank the group!

# Follow up activities

## Debrief

Immediately after the group is finished, the facilitator and assistant should debrief to discuss their experiences of the group. Note down what worked well, what didn't work and any unexpected information or reactions.

## Transcribe recordings

Focus groups are often recorded and transcribed verbatim. This is a very time consuming process and needs to be factored into the resource allocation. You should determine what is appropriate depending on the context of the focus group and how the information will be used. In some cases, it may be adequate to document key themes.

Provide participants with the opportunity to review transcripts and a summary of the themes to ensure that you have accurately interpreted the information. For some consumers, it may be necessary to review this information in person or over the phone, rather than sending out large documents. While many consumers don't feel like it's necessary to review the transcript, you should always provide them with the opportunity.

Notes about the facilitator's experience and observations of the group (as described above) should also be stored alongside the transcripts / notes.

## Review and update the Facilitator's guide

While your *Facilitator's guide* is designed to promote a consistent approach, the priority should always be to conduct focus groups that make it as easy as possible to collect the information you need.

Therefore, after each focus group, it is important to reflect on what did and didn't work and revise your guide accordingly. Ideally, your key questions will remain the same, but the way you ask questions, or the strategies you use to probe for more information, may change. When reporting your results it's important to describe any changes you made to the *Facilitator's guide*.



# Managing challenges

Careful planning is important to ensure that it's as easy as possible for consumers to participate in your focus group and provide you with useful information. This is never foolproof and sometimes even the best prepared focus groups go awry.

## Brainstorm potential challenges and risks

It's important to consider how you will manage any challenges that arise when you're running your group. Think about your consumers, what is required to support them and any challenges they may have participating in the group. Also think about the logistical challenges you may experience planning or coordinating the group, recording information and analysing the results.

### Example:

Challenge/ Risk	Management Strategies	Person Responsible
We are unable to recruit enough participants	Focus group will be introduced to existing Jumping Jacks participants during the session	LD to introduce
	Call all families that attended Jumping Jacks in the last 12 months to personally invite them to the group	LD
	Introductory letter to be signed by CEO to demonstrate the organisation's commitment to the group	KP draft AW sign
	Provide participants with a \$30 voucher to the local supermarket to encourage their participation and thank them for their contribution	KP buy vouchers AW authorization
	Participants will be provided with free transport home after the group via taxi voucher and/or volunteer driver (depending on their level of function and preferences)	LD coordinate transport
	Afternoon tea will be provided	DP coordinate LD include question re dietary requirements on recruitment checklist
	Focus group will be scheduled immediately after the Jumping Jacks program to reduce burden on existing clients	



Please refer to '*Consumer focus groups tools and templates*' for a brainstorming template.



## Common challenges

Included below are a summary of common challenges that facilitators experience and some strategies that can be effective to avoid or manage them.

Challenge: Some group members dominate the conversation	
What to do:	What not to do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge the person's contribution and probe for other points of view or experiences (e.g. Ask 'Has anyone had a different experience?' or 'Does anyone have different ideas?', 'Who agrees or disagrees?').</li><li>• Make eye contact with people who haven't had an opportunity to participate.</li><li>• If one participant is not contributing, include them in the conversation by asking them a direct question.</li><li>• Invite participants to take turns.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bring together people with vastly different experiences, or levels of knowledge. This can create a sense of inequitable power distribution and discourage some people from sharing their ideas.</li><li>• Ask dominant people to stop talking or just speak over the top of them.</li></ul>

Challenge: Participants are reluctant to speak/share ideas or provide vague answers	
What to do:	What not to do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Include an ice breaker activity at the beginning of the session.</li><li>• Ensure your initial questions relate to something the participants are knowledgeable and/or passionate about.</li><li>• Use probing questions, or brief silences to encourage participants to speak up or elaborate.</li><li>• Ask the question in a different way.</li><li>• Move to a different question and come back later.</li><li>• Pick up on cues during conversation that allow you to probe more about the relevant issue.</li><li>• If someone says that they feel uncomfortable answering a question, respect their decision and thank them for their honesty. Ask if it's ok to move on to the next question.</li><li>• Review and reconsider your questions before the next focus group.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Start the group by asking highly personal, sensitive or controversial questions.</li><li>• Keep asking the same question over and over again.</li><li>• Make assumptions about what people mean and just move on.</li><li>• Imply someone's answer is incorrect or unhelpful.</li></ul>



### Challenge: The conversation moves off topic

What to do:	What not to do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be familiar with the <i>Facilitator's guide</i> and remind the group of your priorities and timeframe.</li><li>• Listen for a natural segue and redirect the conversation by repeating or re-phrasing the question.</li><li>• Develop a strategy about how issues that are out of scope will be documented and shared with the appropriate people (e.g. facilitator can write issues up on a whiteboard so that participants know that their concerns have been heard and then redirect conversation).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jump between topics.</li><li>• Allow participants to control the conversation and lead you off track.</li></ul>

### Challenge: Participants try to convince others that their opinions or ideas are wrong

What to do:	What not to do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reiterate that understanding the differences in the group's opinions or ideas are particularly valuable and that there are no right or wrong answers.</li><li>• Remind the group of the expectations that were set out at the beginning of the session.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Force people to agree or reach consensus.</li><li>• Take sides or enter into a discussion about who is right.</li></ul>

### Challenge: Participants get stuck on one question/issue

What to do:	What not to do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide a clear introduction at the beginning of the session about the key issues/topics you will be discussing and refer back to this.</li><li>• Gently remind group of time limitations and that you need to keep moving to make sure that you won't run overtime.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cut someone off.</li></ul>

## Challenge: Participants start having side conversations or talk over each other

### What to do:

- Remind the group of the expectations (ground rules) that were set out at the beginning of the session.
- Demonstrate that you're interested in what they have to say and would appreciate if they could wait until the other person has finished so that everyone can participate in the conversation.
- Take a 5 minute break.

### What not to do:

- Embarrass or discipline participants.
- Include lots of facts or complex information that will overwhelm consumers.
- Ignore signs of impatience, annoyance or boredom.
- Keep pushing when people have had enough.

## Challenge: A participant raises an issue of concern (e.g. a safety concern)

### What to do:

- Use your professional judgement to determine the steps required to support your group members.
- If the issue is deemed serious, you may need to stop or suspend the group to provide individual support to the participant. Before continuing, check in with every participant to ensure they are happy to continue.
- If the issue does not need to be addressed immediately, re-direct the focus group and then discretely discuss the issue with the participant after the group has finished.

### What not to do:

- Ignore it.
- Put the person on the spot to address the issue in front of the other participants.
- Continue the group if you have any concerns about a member's safety or wellbeing.



# Online and phone based focus groups



Focus groups can also be conducted online, over the phone and via a range of technological platforms. There are also a number of companies that provide software and cloud based services to support online focus groups. While these are beyond the scope of this resource, a list of relevant resources has been included below. The following resources specifically address technology based focus groups.

## References

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Allen, M. (2013) *Telephone focus groups: Strengths, challenges and strategies for success*. *Qualitative Social Work*, 13(4), 571-583.

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