Virtual/ONLINE GROUPS – Things that we have learned

Background

COVID changed the way we support participants. We only knew how to connect with people in-person - it's what we have been doing for over 20 years.

We had no idea how to run online groups when we started, but everyone was eager to learn how to make this the best experience for participants at each virtual group.

It was an interesting experience from May 2020 to Sept 1, 2022, filled with some sad and many happy moments. Some of our virtual groups were very large with 50+ people, and some were small with only 2 people.

Our online groups were successful because our staff care deeply for participants and each other.

Healthy Start is successful because of the people who attend our program and because of the staff who consistently strive to provide the best support possible.

Here is a list of the top lessons learned while hosting virtual groups for the community.

Format of virtual groups

Staff complement at each group:

- Supervisor – provide support, take attendance, admit participants
- Outreach worker – facilitator, greeter, welcome everyone to group, facilitate group and keep everyone on-time
- Outreach worker –manage the chat
- Dietitian
- Public Health Nurse

We want participants to have a positive experience, and so we offer the following tips from what we learned facilitating online groups.

Helpful Tips for facilitators of an online group

1. Arrive online early and write info in chat (welcome message, icebreaker, topics covered for the day and housekeeping details). It is easier to copy and paste in chat as participants arrive as they can't see information in the chat that was written before they joined.
2. Test everything (presentations, videos, etc.) early to make sure it's working (15 to 30 minutes early).
3. Team work is invaluable!! Have someone managing and sharing info in chat.
4. Behind the scene chat – have a separate chat just for staff to discuss any group issues while group is running.
5. Introductions – ensure presenters/staff introduce themselves and participate in the icebreaker. It is difficult for all participants to introduce themselves in a larger group so offer an ice breaker question where people can answer in the chat or unmute mic for smaller groups.
6. Make all feel welcome when they join.
7. Camera on – it's important for presenters to keep their camera on during group – even when not presenting.
8. Explain the role of each staff person - especially since we have less contact with participants.
9. Share your contact info at the halfway point to ensure that those who need to leave early have a way to contact you after group. Post in chat.
10. Helpful equipment - head set, wide angle camera if doing cooking demonstrations, external speakers, power bar and extension cords - stay plugged in!
11. It is helpful to have one staff person admitting participants as they arrive (prevents distracting presenters). It makes things easier if the staff taking attendance is the one admitting participants.
12. Mute on - Ask participants to stay muted during presentation but offering times for questions and comments.
13. Do not admit people into group until everyone has finished setting up and testing equipment for the group. Put a message in the chat for those in the waiting room. Some participants want to connect with us before group starts. Be flexible, but start on-time.
14. Videos can be shown – It's better if the person sharing the video can use a headset and mute herself from the headset to assist with sound clarity, which enables the person to unmute easily if they need to talk. (Make sure to click the option "Share sound" in the window that opens when you sharing your screen).
15. Keep updating the chat with current topic for those arriving after start of group.
16. Consider activities that work online. Try a variety of styles of activities (PowerPoint, games, poster, hold up items, demo, discussion etc.) - this can impact engagement.
17. Managing the chat - always have someone present on chat and responding even if question will not be answered immediately. Acknowledge all comments/questions.

18. Ensure each person feels valued for their comment or question.
19. Team members can help by contributing to the conversation with questions when a group is quiet and people are not asking questions.
20. Facilitator needs to watch the time. This is helpful for presenters and for managing the length of the virtual group.
21. If a presentation is going well and participants have may questions, keep it going and shorten another part of a presentation.
22. Have a detailed document about how to join a virtual group handy - easy to email anyone who is having trouble joining.
23. Many participants use online names different from their actual names. Reach out via a private message in the chat on the online platform to find out actual names. This will be helpful if any follow-up is required.
24. Validate misinformation shared by participants and then respond with correct info in a gentle and informative way.
25. Have information links ready to share OR have a team member who can search up the additional info needed so it can be shared in the chat.
26. Look and smile at the camera throughout the presentation.
27. Don't sing together on-line. It works much better to have facilitator (one person) sing and everyone else have their camera on and stay muted while singing along.
28. Virtual format works better for information sharing vs discussion. Allow for discussion time afterwards since it's difficult to manage during presentations.
29. Need proper internet connections for staff; preferably plugged-in, not Wi-Fi.
30. Be flexible, experiment and be open to adapt to this format. Share tips with your co-workers and PRACTICE!
31. Stay on at the end to help your participants leave the online group. Say goodbye to everyone as they leave.
32. Team debrief time (confidential) – what worked, what didn't work and what could we do better. This is a critical step to build our relationships with team members and improve the quality of our virtual group.
33. Consistency is important. Offer your group at the same time every day of the week and if you promise to follow-up with someone, do it. That's how trust is built.
34. Provide presentations/activities/games in advance to team members to review material and make changes as needed.
35. Offer close captions for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. This may also help participants who have English as second language. Announce how to use it at the beginning of group.

Things that don't work for online groups

1. Singing together is more fun for all but does not work well when everyone has their mics on. as the timing is off and the song is difficult to hear
2. No Wi-Fi
3. Limited computer equipment - limited connection
4. Can't smell delicious food being demonstrated
5. Connections between participants is very difficult or impossible in this format - for newcomer families it is so beneficial to meet others who speak the same language in-person
6. Socializing babies and young children does not happen when connecting virtually
7. Information presented is not as powerful as the role modeling that we see at in-person groups
8. Eating together helps create connections
9. No opportunity to try new foods
10. Unable to assess topic comprehension from participants
11. No childminding - constant distraction while trying to focus on information being presented
12. Limited ability to offer introductions of staff due to time constraints
13. No eye contact, reading social cues from participants
14. Difficult to ask a private question to team member
15. Easier to participate in a group from home but no necessarily better for someone's mental health
16. Don't call them virtual groups for newcomers to Canada, call them on-line groups instead
17. Difficult to offer groups online every day due to online fatigue – participants usually only attended 1-2 groups