

Best Practices in Facilitating Virtual Support Groups

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Objectives

- Describe the benefits and challenges of a virtual support groups
- Identify best practices for facilitating virtual support groups
- List how virtual tools can support the group process




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Mute and Video



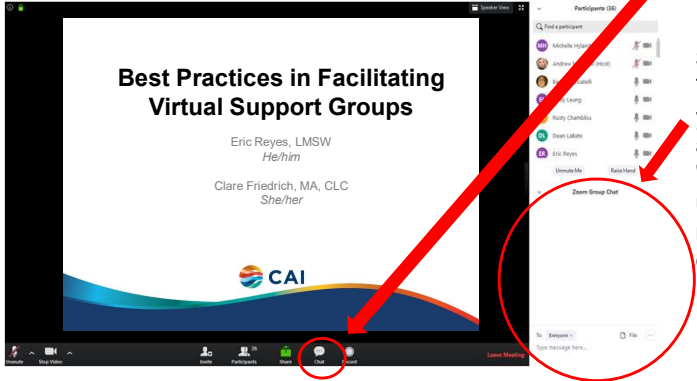
Bottom left hand menu

- 1. Mute**
Please only unmute yourself if you are going to speak, and then immediately mute yourself again
- 2. Start Video**
Please share your video as much as possible




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Chat



Step 1: Click "Chat"

Step 2: Type in your chat and press "Enter" or use it to read the chat



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Poll:
Are you currently facilitating a virtual support group?




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A Support Group...

- Is a gathering of people with common experiences
- Is additional support outside of one's own immediate circle
- Provides the experience of receiving as well as providing support and care to others
- Occurs at least once a month
- Is NOT group therapy and is NOT a class or workshop

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Group Variance

- Content: Maternal-child health (breastfeeding, parenting during COVID, 1st time parents)
- Frequency: Weekly, monthly (at a minimum)
- Responsibilities: Leaders can work with members to share responsibilities: reminder calls, setting up the link, signing on 5 minutes early, assisting members with technology issues
- Models: Curriculum-based, Topic-focused, Open Forum



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PROS & CONS



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Chat In: What are Benefits of a Virtual Support Group?



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Benefits of a Support Group

- Realizing you are not alone
- Receiving and offering help to/from others
- Expressing feelings
- Learning or validating helpful information
- Improving social skills (and potentially others)
- Increasing hope
- Reducing distress
- Increasing self-understanding



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Benefits of a Virtual Support Group

- Affordable
- Accessible
- Flexibility to join/facilitate from anywhere with an internet connection
- May allow for more diversity in group
- Safety in social distancing, not isolating



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Chat In: What are Challenges with a Virtual Support Group?



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Challenges with a Support Group

- Concerns with confidentiality
- Concerns with privacy
- Limited individual support
- Managing group dynamics
- Organizing, coordination and preparation



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Challenges with a Virtual Support Group

- Informal breastfeeding assessments are harder to do remotely
- Technological literacy
- This may be peoples' first experience with virtual platforms
- Internet bandwidth
- Zoom fatigue
- Distractions
- Background noise



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Best Practices – Facilitator Role

- Maintains a safer and inclusive environment
- Sets purpose and agenda for the group
- Keeps discussions constructive
- Helps members learn how to listen and offer support to each other
- Manages interpersonal dynamics
- Engages participants as experts of their experience



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Best Practices – Who's Coming?

- Advertisement, recruitment, clear purpose
- Pre-screening (fit, needs, strengths, etc.)
- Describing what the support group will and will not do
- How might this benefit the individual
- Optimal size group – 6-12
- Frequency, date/time offered



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Best Practice – Communication Skills

- Open-ended questions
- Affirming
- Reflective Listening
- Summarizing



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Communication Skills, More Important Than Ever

- Different, limited or no body language
- Conversation moves slower
- Key to addressing issues that arise
- Key to fostering learning



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Best Practices – Foster Safety

- Clear purpose, goals and roles of all involved
- Group agreements – what behaviors are expected and welcomed
- Accountability for behaviors are predictable
- Voice, choice and control is maximized
- Predictability is emphasized



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Best Practices – Foster Connections

- Encourage group discussions around shared lived experiences
- Encourage dialogue amongst themselves
- Inviting folks to turn on their video and unmute themselves
- Reflecting, highlighting and pointing out similarities



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Best Practices – Foster Collaboration

- Brainstorming
- Ask group to problem solve together
- Invite group to share their lived experiences
- Encourage outside contact (if appropriate)



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Best Practices – On Track

- Managing challenging behaviors (not people)
- Re-direct, re-focus the purpose of conversation
- Highlight successes and progress made



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Best Practices – Next Steps

- Participants reflect what new skills, knowledge, attitudes or resources they've gained
- Participants have active plans to manage situations
- Participants have resources identified that might be helpful to themselves



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Best Practices – Resources

- Know your local, community resources
 - How has it changed in the last 3-6 months?
- Have variance (online, in-person, phone etc.)
- What's your elevator pitch?
- Foster relationships with those resources
- Warm-handoffs



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A graphic with a decorative wavy top border in shades of blue, orange, and yellow. In the center, there is a grey silhouette of a toolbox containing a hammer, a wrench, a screwdriver, and a pencil. Below the toolbox, the text "VIRTUAL TOOLS" is written in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom center, the CAI logo is displayed, consisting of a circular icon with horizontal stripes in orange, blue, and white, followed by the letters "CAI" in a dark blue, sans-serif font.

VIRTUAL TOOLS



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A graphic with a decorative wavy top border in shades of blue, orange, and yellow. The text "What's working for your organization to keep your support group members engaged?" is centered in a black, sans-serif font. Below the text is a dark blue speech bubble icon containing three white circles. At the bottom center, the CAI logo is displayed, consisting of a circular icon with horizontal stripes in orange, blue, and white, followed by the letters "CAI" in a dark blue, sans-serif font.

What's working for your organization to keep your support group members engaged?



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Remote Facilitation

- Etiquette and patience
 - Be specific about remote features
 - Give people time to learn the features
- Co-facilitation is a great way to share the workload and bring multiple skillsets to the group



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Ideas

- This will vary depending on platform:
 - Chat
 - Video
 - Small breakout rooms
 - Interactive activities
 - Grounding or relaxing exercise
 - Adopt an opening or closing for meetings (a song, reading, reflection, etc.)



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Clear Virtual Guidelines

- What are the expectations for the group?
- What do we do if a lot of people are having trouble getting on the platform?
- How do we handle phone calls or other things that take us away from the meeting space?
- How can we be sure this is still a private space?



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Eliciting Feedback

- Tell participants you would like to hear from a wide variety of folks
- Prompt people to talk or chat in
- Become comfortable with the silence
- Ask the question again in a different way
- Move on when it seems right



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Getting Creative

- Adopt an opening or closing for meetings
- Invite a guest such as an art therapist, music therapist, yoga instructor
- Do a relaxation exercise
- Celebrate birthdays, holidays and personal triumphs of members
- Work on a craft project together
- Show a video, film, or slide show



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Keep Things Light

- When it's appropriate, infuse humor.
- Laugh together about face freezes, sirens or cats jumping in front of the screen, people forgetting they are muted



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Case Study

- You would like to start a new breastfeeding support group in a month.
- Chat in: What do you need to prepare?



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Best Practices: Preparing



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Case Study

- 40 minutes into an hour-long support group, the conversation has moved away from breastfeeding. Participants all want to talk about what brand of stroller they have.
- Chat in: What's your strategy for getting back on track?



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Best Practices: Facilitating



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Case Study

- Next week is your last scheduled breastfeeding support group because most of the members are soon returning to work.
- Chat in: How might you wrap up in a meaningful way?



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Best Practices: Wrap up



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