



FOCUSING ON FOCUS GROUPS

A Toolkit for
Substance Misuse
Prevention Practitioners



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INTRODUCTION

Focus groups serve as invaluable tools in prevention initiatives, offering a platform for gathering valuable perspectives from diverse stakeholders. These sessions provide a unique opportunity for participants to engage in open dialogue, share experiences, and contribute to the development of effective prevention strategies.

By harnessing the collective wisdom of community members, focus groups can help prevention practitioners better understand the root causes of substance misuse and develop interventions tailored to specific community needs. By embracing the participatory nature of focus groups, practitioners can foster community engagement, build trust, and co-create sustainable solutions.

This toolkit is designed to equip prevention practitioners with the tools and guidance needed to conduct effective focus groups. From clarifying the purpose to crafting research questions and facilitating discussions, each step is outlined to ensure that practitioners can leverage the full potential of focus groups in their prevention efforts.

What Is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a systematic way to collect qualitative (i.e., descriptive) data. Participants are chosen to represent a larger group of people from whom you want information. The following are key elements of a focus group:

- **Small Group:** Focus groups are usually comprised of 6 to 12 participants.
- **Shared Characteristics:** Focus group participants are similar in one or more ways (e.g., age, role/profession).
- **Set Timeframe:** Focus groups typically run between 60 and 90 minutes.

In-Person vs. Virtual Focus Groups

While the guidance provided in this toolkit is most relevant for in-person focus groups, many of the suggestions can also be applied to groups conducted online—particularly those related to developing goals, crafting protocols and questions, and conducting analyses. Throughout the toolkit, we will highlight those areas where adjustments may be necessary to accommodate an online group. To learn more about conducting online focus groups, please visit [this guide from Vital Strategies on conducting online focus groups.](#)

- **Skilled Facilitator:** Focus groups are led by someone with knowledge of the topic and group moderation skills.
- **Structured Discussion:** Focus groups explore participants' responses to a set of predetermined questions on a specific topic.
- **Documentation:** Focus groups require a strategy for capturing the data generated through group discussion for later analysis and application.

Inclusivity in Data Collection: Recognizing Neurodiversity

Focus groups offer a unique opportunity to learn, in real time, how selected groups of community members understand and think about a given issue. Their effectiveness depends on participants' willingness to share their experiences openly, and to respond to the comments of those around them.

This approach can work well for neuro-typical participants—that is, individuals who think, perceive, and/or behave in ways that are considered the norm by the general population. But traditional focus group settings fail to capture the insights of those participants who are neuro-diverse. For these individuals, challenges may arise due to differences in processing information, comfort levels with group interactions, or sensory sensitivities. While these challenges are not inherent or explicit to neurodiverse individuals, they stem from the structure of traditional focus groups, which may expect quick responses and extensive verbal contributions.

To improve the inclusivity of focus groups, consider providing clear communication about the format and topics beforehand and offering flexible participation options, such as virtual attendance or alternative communication methods. Creating a comfortable environment with minimal sensory distractions and facilitating structured discussions with opportunities for diverse contributions can also enhance inclusivity and accessibility. Additionally, actively seeking feedback from participants about their experience and adjusting the format or accommodations based on their input can further improve the inclusivity of focus groups.

To learn more about running neurodiverse-friendly focus groups, consider the tips in this [case study](#) on facilitating groups with people on the autism spectrum.

Benefits

Prevention practitioners often use focus groups to gather information from community members to help shape effective new prevention practices and enhance existing prevention practices. But practitioners are increasingly using them to inform prevention planning, as well.

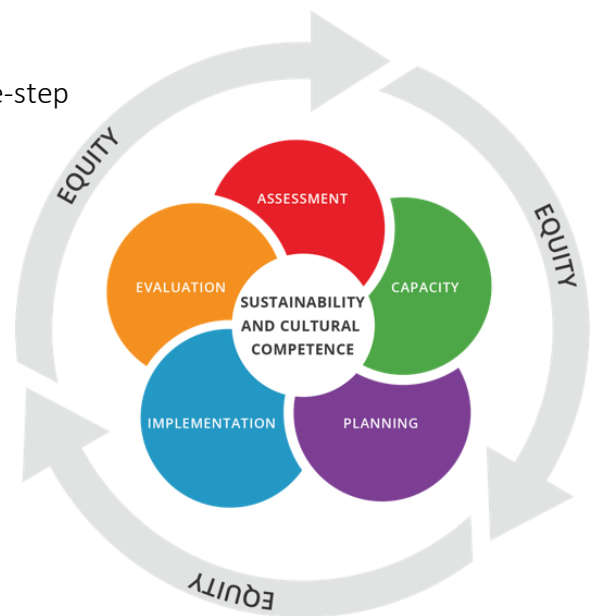
Through focus groups, practitioners can explore prevention-related topics in depth and participants can share their unique perspectives. Specifically, focus groups allow prevention practitioners to:

- Ask questions that might be hard for people to answer in writing
- Clarify participants' responses through probes and follow-up questions
- Create a rich dialogue, as participants build on one another's comments
- Generate narrative information that is compelling and easy to understand

Focus Groups Across the SPF

SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) is a five-step planning process designed to help states, jurisdictions, tribes, and communities establish effective prevention programs and services.

Throughout the SPF process, prevention practitioners are expected to gather and use data to guide their decisions. Focus groups can support this process every step of the way. Below are some examples of how prevention practitioners can use focus groups across the SPF.



Step 1. Assessment: Prevention practitioners can use focus groups to:

- Help fill data gaps, particularly among populations that may be hard to reach using quantitative data collection methods (e.g., surveys)
- Inform the design and delivery of other assessment tools (e.g., customize survey language and incentives for participation)
- Explore the meaning behind quantitative assessment data (e.g., why people answered a survey question the way they did)

Step 2. Capacity: Prevention practitioners can use focus groups to:

- Explore local resources and readiness for prevention
- Raise public awareness and support for prevention within the community

- Identify and meet service providers' training and technical assistance needs

Step 3. Planning: Prevention practitioners can use focus groups to:

- Guide the selection of prevention strategies and programs for the focus population(s)
- Shape prevention messages and materials that are most appropriate and effective for the focus population(s)
- Adapt strategies and programs to increase their fit for the focus population(s)

Step 4. Implementation: Prevention practitioners can use focus groups to:

- Identify factors that either challenge or support the effective implementation of prevention strategies and programs
- Refine the implementation process while there is still time to make a difference and produce more positive outcomes

Step 5. Evaluation: Prevention practitioners can use focus groups to:

- Inform the design and delivery of other evaluation tools (e.g., customize survey language and incentives for participation)
- Explore the meaning behind quantitative evaluation data (e.g., why people answered a survey question the way they did)
- Assess awareness of and exposure to prevention practices, as well as areas of potential impact (e.g., community norms, ease of access to substances, perceptions of harm), among the focus population(s)

Sustainability and Cultural Competence: As with all prevention practices, practitioners must consider issues related to sustainability and cultural competence in order to use focus groups successfully within a community. Additionally, prevention practitioners can use focus groups to explore these key concepts at the local level (e.g., identify program champions and funding options, learn about the perspectives and practices of different cultural groups).

DEVELOPING A PROTOCOL

The information you get *out* of a focus group is only as good as the effort you put *into* the planning process. A clear protocol can help you define what you want to learn from your focus groups and help to ensure that you get the information you're looking for. To develop a protocol, you will need to:

- Clarify your purpose
- Craft your research question
- Create a discussion guide

Clarifying Your Purpose

The first step in planning a successful focus group is to clarify what you hope to learn. Start broad, then zero in on what you really need your groups to help you understand. A carefully focused topic will allow you to make the best possible use of the limited time you have for each focus group session. Consider the following example:

Broad topic: Prevent underage drinking among high school students

Narrower topic: Understand how local high school students get their information about alcohol (to inform the development and dissemination of prevention messages)

Focused topic: Find out which sources of information about alcohol they trust

Once you have a focused topic, consider which individuals or groups can provide you with the most credible information. These are the people you want in your focus groups. Keep in mind that it is best, whenever possible, to ask people directly about their perspectives and experiences. Others may be able to make educated guesses, but prevention-related decisions should be based on the best data available—not guesswork. For example:

- If you want to find out which sources of information about alcohol local high school students trust, you would want to conduct focus groups with local high school students.
- If you want to find out which barriers parents face when trying to discuss alcohol with their teens, you would want to conduct focus groups with parents of local high school students. High school students could not give you the information you need.

Crafting Your Research Question

With your topic and potential participants in mind, it's time to develop a research question: the "big" question you want your focus groups to answer.

So, if you want to find out which sources of information about alcohol local high school students trust, you might write the following research question to guide your focus group planning efforts:

To what extent do local high school students trust their different sources of information about alcohol?

What makes a good focus group question?

Good focus group questions sound natural and conversational. They should be:

- **Short and clear** so participants can understand them easily.
- **Neutral** so participants feel comfortable answering them honestly.
- **Open-ended** to allow for a range of responses, encourage discussion, and explore why people think or feel the way they do.

Creating a Discussion Guide

Once you have your research question, begin creating a discussion guide. This guide will help to ensure that each focus group you convene produces the data you need. Your discussion guide should include approximately 5-10 questions that encourage group discussion on your topic of interest and help you answer your research question.

A good discussion guide offers facilitators a clear roadmap for leading a focus group, from start to finish. It should include the following three types of questions:

1. **Warm-up questions** that help participants settle in, get comfortable, and start talking (e.g., What are some things you like to do in your spare time?)
2. **Key questions** that fully explore the topic of interest and help you answer your research question. Key questions can ask about feelings, beliefs, opinions, values, experiences, behaviors, and knowledge. It's helpful to begin with relatively easy questions on the topic of interest (e.g., Where do you get most of your information about alcohol?), then work

your way up to more challenging or sensitive ones (e.g., Of the sources of information we have talked about, which do you think are most trustworthy?)

3. **Wrap-up questions** that offer participants the opportunity to share final thoughts and help them feel a positive sense of closure when the focus group ends (e.g., Are there any other sources of information about alcohol that we didn't talk about today?)

Your key questions are the heart of your discussion: your reason for convening focus groups in the first place. So, plan on devoting most of each session to these questions.

Probes are follow-up comments or questions that facilitators can use to get more information from participants in response to key questions. In general, facilitators use probes to:

- *Explore* key questions in greater depth (e.g., We've talked about the look of our agency's brochure. What do you think about the language we used?)
- *Clarify* the meaning of participants' responses to key questions (e.g., When you say that the brochure's description of programs and activities is "poorly organized", what do you mean by that?)
- *Elicit* responses to key questions from quieter participants (e.g., How about from the other end of the table . . . do any of you have suggestions for improving our brochure?)

Don't Do It Alone

It takes a team to develop a good protocol. Connect and collaborate with people who can help you clarify your purpose, develop your research question(s), and write appropriate focus group questions. These partners include colleagues who have experience working with your focus population and/or research expertise, your supervisor/director, and members of your focus population. If possible, pilot test your discussion guide with members of your focus population before your first focus group session.

 [See Appendix 1: Sample Probes for Clarifying and Eliciting Responses](#)

IDENTIFYING STAFF

In a focus group, discussion equals data. The quality of these data depends largely on those responsible for the discussion. This module explores the roles and responsibilities of two key players: the group facilitator and the note-taker/recorder.

The Group Facilitator

The focus group facilitator is the person in charge: a confident leader, clear speaker, keen listener, and impartial referee. To wear this many hats, the facilitator needs the right blend of knowledge, traits, and skills. Qualities of an effective facilitator include the following; many of these are traits commonly found among prevention practitioners:

- **Good Communicator:** Able to speak clearly, listen actively, and demonstrate understanding
- **Knowledgeable:** Sufficiently familiar and comfortable with the topic to fully explore all points
- **Neutral:** Able to maintain an objective perspective and avoid revealing opinions through words or body language
- **Friendly:** Warm, welcoming, and able to put participants at ease
- **Perceptive:** Able to pick up on nonverbal cues and “read between the lines”
- **Skilled Group Manager:** Able to support full participation while maintaining order and staying on track
- **Patient:** Able to give people enough time to process questions and share comments fully
- **Respectful:** Genuine appreciation of diverse backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences
- **Trustworthy:** Able to create a safe space during and protect confidentiality after the session
- **Organized:** Able to start on time, complete the protocol, incorporate needed breaks, and end on time

Above all, the ideal focus group facilitator must be the right fit for the job. Determining fit is more of an art than a science. Ask yourself: *Who will my focus group participants feel most comfortable opening up to?* The answer may be a member of your focus population (e.g., a senior leading a focus group with fellow seniors). Or it may be someone who is quite different from, but experienced in communicating and working effectively with, your focus population.

When determining fit, it is important to consider the facilitator’s level of cultural humility. Cultural humility goes beyond cultural competence, emphasizing an ongoing process of self-

reflection, learning, and openness to different perspectives. A facilitator with cultural humility not only acknowledges the diversity within the group but also actively seeks to understand and respect the unique cultural backgrounds, values, and experiences of each participant.

Cultural humility involves more than just surface-level awareness of diversity; it requires a deep appreciation of the complexities and nuances inherent in cross-cultural interactions. This includes recognizing power dynamics, historical contexts, and systemic inequalities that may impact the dynamics of the focus group.

Furthermore, a culturally humble facilitator demonstrates a willingness to adapt facilitation techniques to best suit the needs of the group. This may involve modifying communication styles, incorporating culturally relevant examples and metaphors, and creating a safe space where participants feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically.

In essence, cultural humility serves as a guiding principle for effective facilitation, fostering trust, respect, and mutual understanding among participants. While cultural humility cannot be achieved overnight, it is an ongoing journey of self-awareness and growth for facilitators committed to promoting inclusivity and equity in their practice.

The Note-Taker/Recorder

The note-taker/recorder is responsible for capturing the details and dynamics of the focus group discussion. This can be done by recording the session and/or taking notes.

Recording the Session

In today's digital age, capturing focus group data has evolved to incorporate both traditional and modern techniques. While recording sessions using audio and/or video equipment remains a reliable method, advancements in technology have expanded the possibilities for data collection. Remember, you must have participants' permission to record a focus group.

When planning to record a focus group discussion, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Test your equipment:** If conducting the focus group in person, arrive early to set up and thoroughly test your audio/video equipment to ensure that it is functioning properly. For a virtual session, familiarize yourself with the software and platform you will be using to conduct the focus group. Common video conferencing platforms offer transcription services, but it is important to note that these may not always be accurate.

- **Choose the right tools:** Opt for table-top recorders and omnidirectional microphones for in-person sessions to effectively capture group conversations. For virtual focus groups, ensure that your chosen video conferencing platform supports recording features and offers clear audio and video quality. Alternatively, consider using smartphones equipped with high-quality recording apps for both in-person and virtual sessions. Many modern smartphones offer excellent audio and video recording capabilities, making them a convenient and cost-effective option.
- **Be prepared for technical issues:** With any technology, there is a chance of equipment failure. Take preemptive measures by having backup recording equipment available, such as a second recorder or a spare microphone. Additionally, consider having a technician on standby to address any technical difficulties that may arise during the session.
- **Transcription and translation:** Recording sessions allow for full transcription and later translation if needed. While video conferencing platforms may offer transcription services, it's essential to recognize their limitations. These automated transcriptions may not always be accurate, particularly in capturing nuanced discussions or multiple speakers. For accurate transcription and translation, consider outsourcing to professional services or using specialized software designed for this purpose.

Taking Notes

You can also capture focus group data by taking notes. When taking notes during a focus group discussion, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Document all details,** including who says what, how many participants hold different viewpoints, and verbatim comments, when possible.
- **Don't overlook facilitator comments;** the facilitator will often summarize key discussion points before moving on to new questions.
- **Document non-verbal communication.** Were there questioning looks? Heads nodding in either approval or disagreement?
- **Use a note-taking form that aligns with the protocol/discussion guide.** Take notes for each question and call the facilitator's attention to any missed questions.

Ideally, you will use a combination of approaches to capture your focus group data. Even if you record a discussion, it is still helpful to have someone taking notes. By relying on a recording

alone, you may lose critical information if someone is inaudible, the internet connection is weak, or other technical issues prevent some conversations from being captured.

Combining note-taking with recording can also prove complementary, with one helping you understand the other. For example, notes can provide context for an audio recording by indicating that several participants had questioning looks—even if only one participant answered a question.

COMPOSING AND SCHEDULING GROUPS

Your research question and discussion guide provide the focus, now you need the group. This module explores three critical questions related to group composition and scheduling:

- How many groups?
- How many per group?
- How can we get people there?

How Many Groups?

Practical limitations, such as available time and resources, will ultimately influence the number of focus groups you can convene. But try to convene enough sessions to fully explore and answer your research question. This magic number will depend on:

The **complexity** of the focus group topic. For example:

- To explore a relatively simple topic like the design of a new brochure for high school students, one or two focus groups with a varied group of teens could produce the information you need.
- To explore a complex topic like high school students' attitudes toward drug use, you would want to convene separate groups for each known correlate (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, income level).

The **size and diversity** of the focus population. For example:

- If you are working in a small, relatively homogeneous community—for example, a rural town with a predominantly White, low-income population—then you might only need focus groups that vary by age and gender (i.e., the variables that differ).

- If you are working in a large, socioeconomically and culturally diverse city, you will need to convene many more focus groups—enough to represent all of the variables that differ in the community (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and income level).

Think about it this way: Unless you have a very simple question and a small, homogeneous population, you will most likely need more than one focus group.

Also, whenever possible, try to convene *at least* two groups for each priority population (e.g., if you want to hear from males and females, try to convene at least two groups with males and two with females).

You will know you’ve conducted enough focus groups when, using the same set of questions, you stop hearing new information. Once you reach this saturation point, you can feel confident that you’ve thoroughly explored your topic.

How Many Per Group?

Determining group size also takes some finesse. The optimal size of each focus group will depend on a number of factors, including the following:

- **Purpose:** If you want to explore a topic in-depth, participant numbers should decrease so each person has more airtime. If you want to test new concepts or materials, participant numbers should increase to give you a broader range of responses.
- **Complexity of the topic:** If your topic and/or questions are complex, invite fewer people to help ensure their understanding of the topic and input. Conversely, the simpler the topic/questions, the more people you can include!
- **Participant levels of experience or expertise:** The more people know about a topic, the more they will have to share. So, as participant levels of experience and expertise increase, participant numbers should decrease.
- **Participant levels of interest or passion:** The more strongly people feel about a topic, the more they will have, and want, to share. So, as participant levels of interest and passion increase, participant numbers should decrease.
- **Number of focus group questions:**

- Even simple questions take time. If you plan on covering several different questions in a single focus group session, you will need to include fewer participants to ensure that everyone has a chance to respond to each question.
- The shorter your list of questions, particularly if each question is simple and straightforward, the more people you can include!

Getting People to Come

You've got the numbers figured out, but will anyone show? To make your focus group a gathering that people will want to attend, it's important to:

- Remove barriers to participation
- Establish incentives, as appropriate, to encourage participation

Removing Barriers

When planning a focus group, make it as easy as possible for participants to attend. Scheduling a session at an impractical time of day or in a hard-to-reach location can severely limit your pool of potential participants. Similarly, hosting a remote session may present challenges for individuals who are not comfortable using technology or lack access to it. To reduce barriers to participation, involve members of your focus population in deciding your choice of time, place, and setting.

With advance planning, it's easy to remove potential barriers to participation. For example:

- Choose a setting that is easy to locate, accessible, and inviting (e.g., a place where people might typically gather).
- Select a convenient day of the week and time of day (e.g., after school/work hours, times that are free from major conflicts).
- Make sure there is ample and easy parking; provide transportation support as needed (e.g., bus/subway passes, a van service).
- Arrange quality childcare, as needed.
- Find a room that is spacious and comfortable (e.g., good airflow and temperature controls).

- Provide an online option for participants who are not able or not willing to attend in person, accommodating individuals with scheduling conflicts, transportation limitations, or health concerns.

Providing Incentives

People participate in focus groups for a variety of reasons. Some welcome the opportunity to express themselves, meet interesting people, learn something new, or contribute to the greater good. But others may require a more tangible incentive to step away from their busy lives. Incentives serve to motivate people who may have competing interests and demands and communicate to participants that the focus group—and their time and input—are important.

When choosing an incentive, think carefully about what will be the best match for your participants. Options include:

- **Money:** How much will vary across groups. For example, youth group members may be excited about \$20, but a larger sum may be required to entice busy professionals.
- **Gifts/gift cards:** These might include iTunes gift card for youth and pre-packaged family meals for working parents.
- **Food/drink:** This should be more than just light refreshments (which should be a mainstay for all focus groups).
- **Charitable contribution:** Consider offering participants the option to make contributions to a local charity

Cultural Considerations for Incentives

Understanding cultural norms and preferences can help to ensure that incentives are well-received. Recognize that different cultures may have varying attitudes towards money, gifts, and food. For example, in some cultures, offering cash incentives may be perceived as inappropriate or even offensive. Here are some factors to consider when choosing an incentive:

- **Dietary restrictions:** Take into account participants' dietary restrictions and cultural dietary practices when providing food and drinks. Offering a diverse selection of food options that cater to different cultural backgrounds can demonstrate respect for participants' cultural preferences and needs.
- **Gift preferences:** Consider cultural preferences when selecting gift options. Certain gifts may be more appealing or meaningful to participants from specific cultural backgrounds.
- **Cultural values:** Ensure that the incentives align with participants' cultural values and beliefs. For example, some cultures place a strong emphasis on community and collective well-being, so incentives that contribute to the greater good or support community initiatives may be particularly appreciated.

or cause that aligns with the focus group's purpose or the interests of the participants. This can foster community engagement and social impact while incentivizing participation.

In some cases, it will make sense to offer a combination of these options (e.g., serve a meal during the focus group *and* send participants home with small gifts). If your budget (or funding restrictions) prevent you from offering individual incentives, consider alternatives such as:

- **Participation rewards:** Offer a small token of appreciation to all participants, such as a branded item like a pen, notebook, or tote bag, as a reminder of their contribution to the focus group.
- **Recognition and acknowledgment:** Acknowledge participants' contributions publicly, whether through a thank-you letter, social media post, or mention in a newsletter. Recognizing their involvement can serve as a meaningful form of validation for their efforts. Make sure to ask for participants' consent before acknowledging contributions publicly, respecting their privacy and confidentiality preferences.

These alternatives, while not necessarily incentives, can still serve to show appreciation for participants' time and contribution.

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

You've thought through the logistics of your focus groups; now it's time to fill them! This section explores strategies for finding and recruiting the right participants for your sessions. These strategies include:

- Establishing clear screening criteria
- Selecting the right recruitment strategy
- Making a strong recruitment pitch
- Following up with interested candidates

Establishing Screening Criteria

Having clear screening criteria will ensure that the people you end up talking to are the ones you really want to hear from. Identify the specific characteristics you are looking for in a focus group participant *before* you begin searching for candidates. Compile these characteristics in a list and

make sure that everyone involved in the recruitment process knows to invite only those candidates who meet your criteria.

For example, if you want to conduct focus groups with 18- to 25-year-olds in the County X workforce to supplement data you already have on local college students, the following screening criteria would help you identify the right candidates:

- Between 18 and 25 years of age
- Currently employed in County X
- Not currently enrolled in college

Selecting the Right Recruitment Strategy

Recruitment takes time. This is particularly true if you plan to convene multiple focus groups, your community is large, and/or your focus population is hard to reach. So don't wait until the week before your first session to start searching for good candidates!

Here are some strategies for identifying potential focus group participants:

- **Work with partners.** Identify individuals or institutions who know about, have credibility with, and/or can put you in touch with people who match your screening criteria—such as well-connected individuals, a neighborhood association, or a trusted service provider. When talking to partners, emphasize how your focus groups will benefit the participants and broader community, offer to publicize their support (as appropriate), and request permission to mention the partner by name (e.g., Joe Smith from the Landon Street Neighborhood Association suggested that I contact you).
- **Use a “snowball” technique.** Ask people you've already invited to identify others who, like themselves, meet your screening criteria. You can use this approach when you first contact potential participants or at the end of a focus group (e.g., Do you know of anyone else who might want to participate?) Keep in mind that this approach tends to produce candidates who know one another, so do your best to separate these individuals when assembling your final groups.
- **Post advertisements.** Post announcements where the people who match your screening criteria live, work, spend time, and get their information—both in-person and online. Potential channels include local newspapers, public access cable stations, local radio stations, and/or online discussion areas, websites, e-mail lists, social media platforms,

community forums, and other relevant online groups. They also include libraries, supermarkets, health clinics, and community centers. The important thing is to choose the right channel for your audience, and to create announcements that are clear, compelling, and sufficiently descriptive.

- **Hold focus groups “on location”.** This approach involves screening people in public places (e.g., parks, malls, community centers) and inviting eligible candidates to participate in on-site groups held soon after the screening (i.e., before candidates leave the setting). Since this approach typically interferes with people’s original plans, incentives are key to its success.
- **Piggyback on other gatherings.** This technique capitalizes on situations where potential recruits are already assembled. For example, if you want to talk to school principals from around the state, consider arranging focus groups during their statewide or regional meetings. Be sure to schedule your focus groups carefully so as not to disturb or interfere with participation in the original gathering.

Important Recruitment Considerations

As your recruitment process unfolds, don’t forget to do the following:

- **Recruit more people than you need.** It’s always a good idea to over-recruit, as no-shows are likely. If you’re feeling confident that people will attend (i.e., the incentives are good, the time and location are convenient), then limit your “extra” candidates to two or three. But if you’re less sure about attendance and over-recruit by a lot, have a contingency plan in place. For example, consider reserving two rooms (or breakout rooms for virtual focus groups) and ensure there is a second facilitator available in case you need to convene a second group. Or be prepared to ask “extra” candidates to complete a related questionnaire and give them the incentive; many people will be perfectly happy to walk away early with an incentive in hand.

Assemble Your Groups with Care

Participants are often more likely to speak freely when they are with others whom they perceive to be like themselves—both demographically and experience-wise. For example, children of alcoholics are more likely to speak openly with others who have shared this experience. However, participants are also more likely to reveal personal/sensitive information when they don’t know others in the group, so may, for example, be more willing to share a critique of their “community” outside the presence of other community members. We acknowledge, however, that anonymity may be more difficult to achieve in smaller communities (e.g., within a single school).

- **Monitor your refusal rates.** The more people who refuse to participate in your focus groups, the more likely it is that those who do agree are somehow different from those who don't. There's no clear rule about acceptable refusal rates, but a refusal rate of 50 percent or more may call into question your results.

Inviting Participants

Extend invitations approximately two weeks before the designated focus group date: this allows participants enough time to adjust their schedules but not so much time that they'll forget the date. If you are convening multiple focus groups, consider offering candidates their choice of dates and times to increase the chances that one of the options will work well for them.

When preparing invitations, make sure to:

- **Be upbeat**, emphasizing the benefits of participation.
- **Personalize your message**, making sure each candidate feels needed.
- **Include all relevant details** so candidates can make an informed decision about whether to participate. Details include:
 - Who is conducting the focus group and why
 - Why their participation is important
 - How they were selected to participate
 - What participation will entail
 - How confidentiality will be protected
 - How they will be thanked (i.e., incentives)
 - Contact information

 [See Appendix 2: Guidelines for Conducting Ethical Research](#)

One week before the date of each focus group, send a personalized follow-up email to every individual who has agreed to participate. The email should include the following information:

- Date and time of the focus group session
- Details about incentives for participation

- Location of and directions to the focus group setting or the online video conference address
- Reminder about the importance of arriving on time and the consequences of arriving late (e.g., latecomers will be turned away)
- Contact information and signature of someone involved in the focus group initiative (e.g., program or agency director, focus group facilitator)

It may feel like nagging, but last-minute reminders (that is, the day before) can also make a big difference in keeping your group on people's radar. These emails will serve to:

- Remind people who may have forgotten about the session
- Emphasize the value of the focus group and their participation
- Provide a final opportunity for participants to ask any questions and/or air any concerns

CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

This section explores what to do on the day of your focus group, including details to consider and tasks to complete during each of the following periods:

- Before the session begins
- During the focus group discussion
- After the session ends

Before the Session: Getting Ready

Focus group staff should arrive on site approximately 90 minutes before the start of each session. This leaves staff enough time to prepare the meeting space and address any last-minute emergencies. Make sure that set-up is complete in time to welcome your participants as they arrive.

Set-up includes the following tasks:

- Arrange the room (e.g., place chairs in a circle)
- Check the room temperature

- Set up and test audio/video recording equipment
- Set up a registration table outside the room with nametags and other participant materials
- Prepare refreshments
- Identify the location of the restrooms

As people arrive, be sure to do the following:

- Personally greet participants and thank them for coming
- Have participants sign in
- Provide participants with a nametag/nameplate, with the option to include their gender pronouns (use first names only to protect confidentiality)
- Have participants complete consent forms

 [See Appendix 3: Sample Consent Form](#)

During the Focus Group: Leading the Discussion

The focus group discussion includes three phases:

- Introductions and warm-up questions
- Exploration of key questions
- Wrap-up questions and closing remarks

Introductions and Warm-Up Questions

The facilitator's opening remarks should include the following:

- Welcome comments and thanks for participation
- Introductions of focus group staff (i.e., facilitator and note-taker)
- Brief review of the nature and purpose of the focus group
- Opportunity for participants to ask any questions before beginning
- Ground rules for discussion

 [See Appendix 4: Sample Ground Rules for Discussion](#)

Exploration of Key Questions

Key questions are designed to generate a rich discussion among participants and produce the information and insights you need to answer your research question. To support this discussion, the facilitator needs to:

- **Be prepared** to run a smooth and culturally appropriate discussion. Facilitators should be prepared to run a discussion that respects and acknowledges the cultural backgrounds of all participants. This may involve adapting communication styles, being sensitive to cultural norms, and ensuring that all participants feel respected and valued (e.g., encourage sharing cultural anecdotes or traditions related to the topic being discussed).
- **Create a safe space** in which participants feel comfortable both listening and speaking to others (e.g., politely enforce ground rules, remain neutral at all times, diffuse arguments).
- **Manage the time** so that each question receives sufficient attention and the session meets participant expectations (e.g., start and end on time, gently redirect participants as needed to stay on track).
- **Encourage full participation** so you hear from everyone in the group (e.g., pause after asking a question so participants have time to think and respond, manage participants who dominate the discussion, elicit responses from quiet participants).
- **Listen actively** so participants know they are being heard and want to share more (e.g., make direct eye contact, let participants complete their thoughts without interruption, attend to nonverbal cues).
- **Ensure complete understanding** of the focus group questions as well as participant responses (e.g., use probes to clarify unclear comments, summarize/rephrase responses and confirm understanding).

 [See Appendix 5: Tips for Facilitating a Focus Group](#)

Wrap-Up Questions and Closing Remarks

When wrapping up or closing the focus group discussion, a facilitator should make sure to:

- Ask participants if they have anything else to share about the topic

- Let participants know how they can contribute additional ideas following the session
- Explain next steps (e.g., plans to share a summary report with participants)
- Thank participants for being part of the focus group

Debriefing

Once the focus group session ends and participants leave, it is helpful to:

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
- Check to ensure the recording was successful and files are accessible
- Organize and digitally store notes, recordings, and any other relevant materials
- Create a back-up of the recording, using both online and offline versions, and store it securely in a designated location

The facilitator and note-taker should also spend some time reviewing their notes, sharing their observations and initial impressions of the discussion, discussing any questions or concerns, and noting preliminary themes that emerged. Debriefing immediately after a focus group can reveal ways to improve future sessions (e.g., changes to questions or setting) and provide valuable insights for later data analysis.

 [See Appendix 6: Sample Outline for Debriefing Notes](#)

DEALING WITH THE DATA

With the focus group sessions behind you, it's time to make sense of and use the data you've collected. To do this, you will need to:

- Analyze your data
- Confirm your findings
- Write it all down
- Compare and connect
- Take action!

Analyze Your Data

Focus groups have the potential to produce mountains of data. Here are some tips for transforming your raw data into something more manageable and meaningful:

- **Get help.** Convene a team to review, interpret, and synthesize the data you've collected. Members should include your focus group facilitators and note-takers/recorders, someone who did not attend the focus groups (to increase objectivity), and (if possible) someone with qualitative research experience. Whenever possible, involve members of your focus population in this process, as well.
- **Establish a systematic and verifiable process.** Develop a clear and deliberate plan that includes instructions for reviewing the data and documenting key details and ideas. Reviewers should work independently at first, then compare their conclusions. In the end, findings should be similar across reviewers (i.e., verifiable): this safeguards against selective attention to details (e.g., memorable or compelling comments) that do not necessarily reflect a pattern.
- **Examine all relevant materials.** These include transcripts from audio or video recordings, session and debriefing notes, and any materials completed by participants, such as background or demographics questionnaires.
- **Identify themes and relevant quotes.** Consider the following questions:
 - What patterns/themes emerged within and across focus group discussions?
 - How can these patterns/themes help answer your broader research question?
 - Are there any deviations from these patterns/themes? If yes, what are they, and what factors could explain these atypical responses?

If you hold more than one focus group, compare responses across groups, one question at a time. This can reveal patterns you might miss if you look at each group separately. Identify quotes that illustrate these themes.

 [See Appendix 7: Tips for Reviewing Qualitative Data](#)

- **Document your findings.** Synthesize your key findings, along with any questions that remain unanswered. This written summary, while still preliminary at this point, will help you take your analysis to the next level.

Confirm Your Findings

Once you've compiled a preliminary report, share your findings with selected focus group participants or other members of your focus population. They can:

- Help you fill any data gaps
- Correct any misunderstandings or misinterpretations
- Offer valuable insights into the meaning of any surprising or confusing findings
- Affirm that you got it right!

Involving community members in the analysis and interpretation of your findings increases the accuracy and cultural relevance of your conclusions, and demonstrates respect for the people you serve.

Write It All Down

It's important to thoroughly document your focus group process—from start to finish—in a comprehensive report. You will return to this report time and again as you discover new ways to apply what you've learned. You also will want to share elements of this report with your focus group participants.

A final report should include the following elements:

- **Goals/objectives:** These should describe why you conducted the focus groups, including the research question that guided your efforts. Explain what you hoped to learn and how you planned to use the information.
- **Participants and eligibility criteria:** This section should describe:
 - Procedures for identifying, contacting, and screening participants, including a description of any incentives
 - Refusal/response rate
 - Evidence that the recruits represent the target population of Human subjects and confidentiality issues
- **Focus group procedures:** This section should describe:
 - Number of groups convened

- Number and characteristics of participants in each group
 - Group times, days, and setting
- Number and roles of staff
- Protocol/discussion guide
- Copies of any questionnaires (e.g., demographics) administered to participants
- Problems encountered and/or departures from protocol
- **Data analysis procedures:** This section should describe:
 - Reviewers/analysts (i.e., who contributed to the data analysis)
 - Materials reviewed (e.g., facilitators' notes and transcripts)
 - How many differences in analysis/interpretation were resolved
- **Findings/conclusions:** This section should include:
 - For each question, overall patterns/themes and illustrative quotations, as well as any differences by group or type of participant
 - For each question, how many participants shared each opinion or experience, the strength of each opinion, and links among types of participants, opinions, and experiences
 - Interpretation and implications of the findings (especially implications for your programmatic activities)

Compare and Connect

Prevention practitioners often use focus groups in conjunction with other data collection methods (e.g., as part of a more comprehensive needs assessment or evaluation). If your focus groups represent one piece of a larger data collection puzzle, then it is important to connect the pieces before taking action.

Compare and connect your findings to information collected via other methods before finalizing your conclusions, going public with your results, and making data-driven decisions. This offers many benefits, including the following:

- You can have *more confidence* in findings that are consistent across multiple sources

- Important *new questions* may emerge when findings are inconsistent across sources
- Questions may be *answered more fully* when findings from varied sources are combined

Take Action

Focus groups can be interesting and fun, but their main purpose is to produce change. What will you *do* with your findings now that you have them? For example:

- If your focus groups revealed challenges or opportunities for your programs and services, then use your findings to *improve current prevention practices*.
- If your focus groups raised new questions, then use your findings to *plan additional data collection efforts*.
- If your focus groups opened your eyes to emerging prevention needs, then use your findings to *raise awareness, build partnerships, and establish new prevention practices*.

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE PROBES FOR CLARIFYING AND ELICITING RESPONSES

Probes are follow-up comments or questions that focus group facilitators can use to obtain additional information from participants in response to key questions.

- Some probes are content-specific: facilitators should prepare these ahead of time, along with their key questions.
- Other probes are more general in nature, designed to either (1) clarify participants' responses or (2) elicit responses from quiet participants.

Below are some examples of these more general probes.

Clarifying Responses

Some participant comments are unclear or open to interpretation. Here are some sample probes a facilitator can use to clarify participant responses:

- I'm not sure what you mean by that. Would you explain further?
- Could you explain what you mean by INSERT COMMENT?
- I'm not sure I understand. Can you say more about that?
- What did you mean when you said INSERT COMMENT?
- Could you help me understand what you mean?
- Can you say more about that?
- Can you give me an example?
- Can you tell me something else about INSERT TOPIC?

Eliciting Responses

Some focus group participants are more reluctant to speak than others. Here are some sample probes a facilitator can use to elicit responses from quiet participants:

- Are there any other ideas?
- What do other people think?

- Are there any different points of view?
- Is there another way to look at this?
- How about from that end of the table?
- I'd love to hear some other comments.
- INSERT NAME, do you have anything to add?
- I'd like to hear from everyone. Does anyone else have something to say?

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APPENDIX 2: GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING ETHICAL RESEARCH

A focus group is a data collection method. As with all research methods, prevention practitioners must take measures to respect and protect participants' rights.

Obtaining Informed Consent

Candidates must fully understand what focus group participation will entail, including the content to be discussed and the manner in which the discussion will be recorded. They must also willingly agree to participate. Informed consent to participate in research activities requires the following elements:

- **Information:** Offer verbal and/or written details that fully describe and explain the research activity, including its purpose, procedures, anticipated risks and benefits, who will have access to the data, and how the data will be used.
- **Comprehension:** Present information in a way that participants can understand. Pay attention to the culture, language, and cognitive/developmental abilities of your audience and involve third parties (e.g., parents/guardians) as appropriate.
- **Voluntariness:** Make sure that participants are providing their consent willingly, free from coercion (the threat of harm) and undue influence (offers of excessive or inappropriate rewards). Participants should also know that they can ask questions and/or withdraw from the research activity at any time.

Verbal consent is acceptable in some situations, while other situations will require written consent. Find out if your agency, funder, or Internal Review Board (if applicable) have any requirements before choosing your method for obtaining consent.

Protecting Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity is optimal, but not always possible—particularly when recruiting participants from a small target community. When participants are likely to know one another, make sure they know this in advance. When participants are strangers, the following tips can help you protect their anonymity and keep their comments confidential:

- **Limit attendance:** Make sure that everyone present for the session is there for a reason (e.g., facilitator, note-taker/recorder, participants).
- **Use first names only:** Ask participants to introduce themselves and prepare nametags/nameplates using first names only.

- **Don't include identifiers in follow-up reports or products:** Assure participants that you will not attach identifying information (e.g., names, descriptions) to any comments that you include in summary reports, presentations, or other products informed by the group discussion. Instead, use phrases such as “one student,” “most of the men,” “a few group members,” or “several people across sessions.”

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APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

To ensure transparency and protect the rights of participants, a consent form is an essential component of any focus group discussion. Below is a sample consent form that outlines the purpose of the focus group, ensures voluntary participation, and guarantees confidentiality. Participants are encouraged to review and sign this form prior to engaging in the focus group discussion.

The purpose of this focus group discussion and the nature of the questions have been explained to me.

I consent to take part in a focus group about my perceptions of and experiences with INCLUDE PURPOSE. I also consent to be video recorded [IF APPLICABLE] during this focus group discussion.

My participation is voluntary. I understand that I am not required to participate in this focus group and that I am free to leave the group at any time.

I also understand that none of my comments will be shared with anyone outside of NAME unless all identifying information is removed first. The information that I provide during this focus group will be combined with information from other participants so I cannot be identified.

Please Print Your Name

Date

Please Sign Your Name

Witness Signature

Date

REFERENCE

1. OMNI. (n.d.). Toolkit for conducting focus groups. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from https://ctb.ku.edu/sites/default/files/chapter_files/toolkitforconductingfocusgroups-omni.pdf

APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION

Ground rules help to create a safe space for focus group participants by establishing shared expectations and a positive tone/structure for the discussion. There are two ways to go about establishing group rules:

- **A facilitator can prepare a set of ground rules in advance.** Then, before the focus group discussion begins, the facilitator should review the rules with participants, ask if they have anything to add, and ensure that everyone agrees to the rules before moving forward.
- **A facilitator can generate a list of ground rules with participants at the beginning of the focus group session.** This approach can foster buy-in and ownership among participants, enhancing their engagement in the discussion.

Once finalized and agreed upon, the ground rules should be placed in a prominent location that is visible to all participants. The facilitator should refer back to and politely enforce the ground rules as needed throughout the session.

The following is a sample set of ground rules for a focus group discussion:

1. We want you to do the talking.
 - Let's hear from everyone!
 - One person at a time.
 - I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
2. There are no right or wrong answers.
 - Everyone's ideas and experiences are valuable.
 - It's important to hear all sides—including both positives and negatives.
 - We will not always agree, but we must always show respect for one another.
3. What is shared in this room stays in this room.
 - We will be recording this session so we don't miss anything.

- Please keep everything you hear today confidential.
- We will summarize themes without identifying individuals by name.

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1. Eliot & Associates. (2005). Guidelines for conducting a focus group. Chapel Hill, NC: Author. Retrieved from http://datainnovationproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/4_How_to_conduct_a_focus_group-2-1.pdf
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APPENDIX 5: TIPS FOR FACILITATING A FOCUS GROUP

The facilitator is responsible for running the focus group discussion from start to finish. This means leading participants through a warm-up or opening period, an exploration of all key questions on the topic of interest, and a wrap-up or closing period. To help make the focus group a positive experience for all involved, the facilitator should strive to do the following:

- **Be prepared** to run a smooth and culturally appropriate discussion. This can involve:
 - Reviewing the discussion guide in advance and knowing the flow and wording of the questions.
 - Learning about the culture of participants, as needed, and any other characteristics that may affect the focus group discussion.
 - Adjusting facilitation plans and strategies, as appropriate, to respond to culture and other participant characteristics.
- **Create a safe space** in which participants feel comfortable both listening and speaking to others. This can involve:
 - Establishing and politely enforcing ground rules.
 - Remaining friendly and neutral at all times.
 - Pre-empting and diffusing any arguments.
- **Manage the time** so that each question receives sufficient attention and the session meets participant expectations. This can involve:
 - Monitoring the time, as well as progress through the discussion guide.
 - Keeping participants on track and gently redirecting them, as appropriate.
 - Ending on time (unless the group agrees to stay longer).
- **Encourage full participation** so you hear from everyone in the group. This can involve:
 - Allowing silences so participants have time to think and respond (e.g., pausing after asking a question).
 - Effectively managing participants who dominate the conversation.
 - Comfortably eliciting responses from quiet or reluctant participants.

- **Listen actively** so participants know they are being heard and want to share more. This can involve:
 - Making direct eye contact, leaning forward slightly, and nodding (as appropriate) when participants are speaking.
 - Letting participants complete their thoughts without interruption.
 - Attending to nonverbal cues, such as body posture, facial expressions, and gestures.
- **Ensure complete understanding** of the focus group questions as well as participant responses. This can involve:
 - Being prepared to explain or restate questions.
 - Using prompts and probes to stimulate discussion and clarify unclear comments.
 - Summarizing/rephrasing responses and confirming understanding before moving onto a new question.
- **Debrief following the session** by connecting with the note-taker and, together, reflecting on the session before anything is lost or forgotten. Specifically, you will want to:
 - Review all notes and share observations.
 - Discuss any questions or concerns.
 - Document all relevant details and initial impressions.

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APPENDIX 6: SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR DEBRIEFING NOTES

A comprehensive debriefing process can help facilitators capture key insights and reflections from the focus group session. The following sample outline provides a structured format for documenting important details, participant responses, and areas for improvement.

1. Date of focus group:
2. Location of focus group:
3. Name of facilitator:
4. Name of note-taker (Human or AI):
5. Number of participants:
6. Participants' characteristics (e.g., demographics):
7. Participants' level of engagement:
8. Any departures from the protocol/discussion guide:
9. Any problems encountered during session (e.g., fire alarm):
10. Summary of responses to key questions:
 - a. Descriptive words, phrases, and/or quotes:
 - b. Overall patterns and themes:
 - c. Sub-themes (e.g., views shared by small groups):
 - d. Relevant group dynamics or nonverbal cues (e.g., inconsistencies between comments and body language):
11. Suggested modifications for next session (e.g., to key questions, setting):
12. Additional research topics or questions to explore in the future:

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APPENDIX 7: TIPS FOR REVIEWING QUALITATIVE DATA

When reviewing focus group notes and transcripts, pay attention to the following:

- **Words:** Participants will use many different words and phrases. Consider the actual words they use, as well as the intended meaning of their words, when determining the degree of similarity across responses.
- **Frequency and Extensiveness:** *Frequency* refers to how often different topics come up during a discussion; *extensiveness* refers to how much time participants devote to each topic. Topics that receive more time and attention may be of special interest or importance to participants. Also, note relevant topics that receive little or no attention.
- **Intensity:** Participants may approach some topics with more intensity than others. Intensity may be communicated directly through the specific words they choose (e.g., “I feel strongly that...”; “It’s important for you to understand...”) or indirectly, by their tone of voice (e.g., loud, energized), talking speed (e.g., faster and excited, slower and more deliberate), or body language (e.g., leaning forward, emphatic gestures). These and other important cues may not be captured through audio/transcripts alone, so make sure to capture them through video and/or detailed notes.
- **Context:** Examine each frequently used word or intense comment in light of its broader context. What came before in the discussion? Specifically, try to identify what provoked each response (e.g., facilitator question, participant comment). What happened after? For example, did anyone agree, disagree, or make a new point? Alternatively, consider the speaker's perspective. For instance, was it an individual consistently expressing negativity or intensity on specific topics?
- **Consistency:** Were participants’ attitudes and opinions consistent? Did anyone change their minds? If so, trace the flow of conversation to try to figure out what may have caused the change.
- **Specificity:** Give more weight to comments that are specific and based on personal experience than comments that are vague, impersonal, or based on conjecture.
- **Big Ideas:** Look for ideas and patterns that emerge within and across focus group discussions. Step back from your analyses for a day or so to allow ideas to percolate. Consider asking someone who has not been involved in data analysis to review the process and confirm your key findings. Additionally, consider involving members of the focus population in the review process to ensure accurate interpretation and capture of key insights.

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