



Creating Engaging and Psychologically Safe Virtual Experiences for the Person Behind the Pixel

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What I Might Title this Now Instead:

From Outreach to Outcome:
A Framework for Virtual
Psychoeducational Group
Implementation and Facilitation

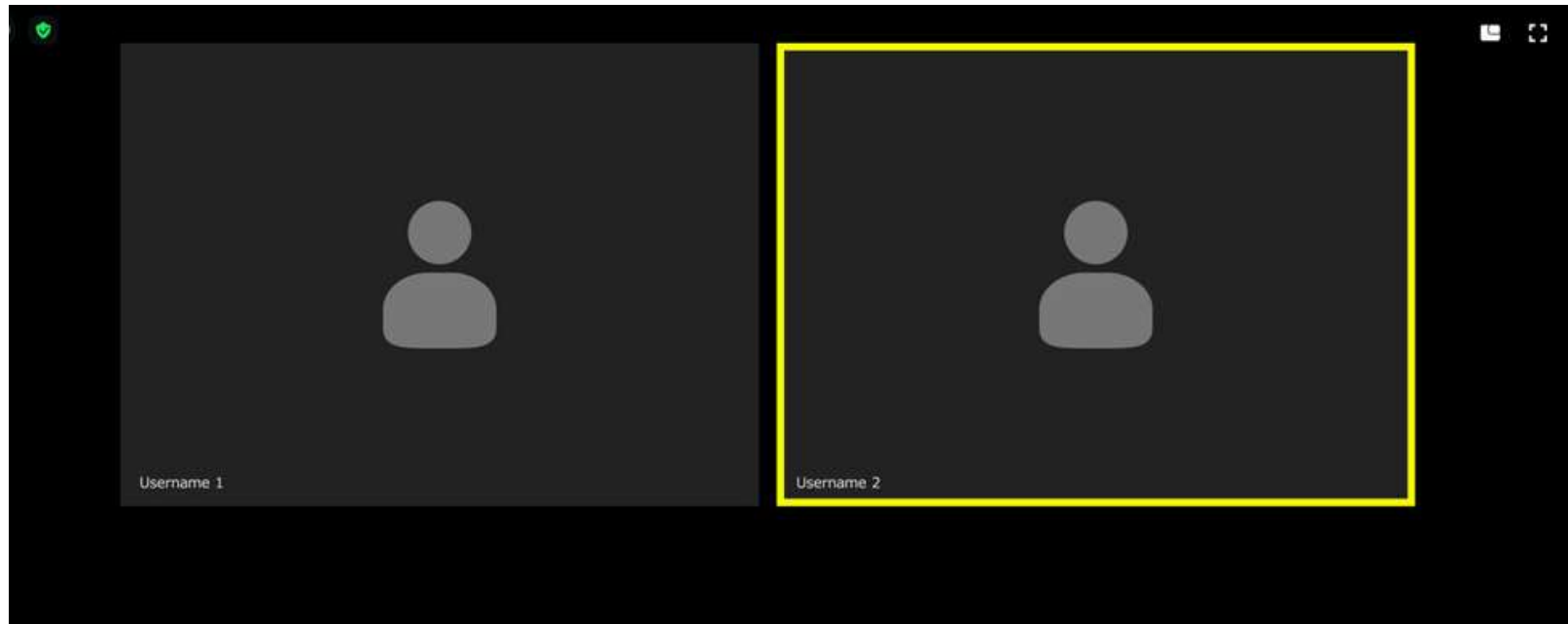


Agenda

- Setting the scene
- Discovery through delivery
- Theoretical framework
- Out-of-session touchpoints
- In-session strategies
- Post-group debrief
- Integrating back



The Virtual Reality





Autopilot vs. Deliberate

Literature focuses patient-sided barriers

- What about provider skill gaps?

Many of us moved to virtual facilitation out of necessity

- Are we operating on autopilot?
- Or, have we intentionally evaluated how we deliver virtual programming?

Best practices for virtual facilitation includes attending professional trainings

- Building relationships remotely, creating supportive online environments, and adapting communication skills



The How: Person-Centered Theory



Pre-session outreach

Congruence

Showing up as a real, prepared, present facilitator before group even begins



Between-session communication

Empathy

Demonstrating investment in each participant as an individual



Follow-up with absent members

Unconditional positive regard

Communicating that belonging isn't conditional on perfect attendance



The Why: Implementation Science

- The study of why evidence-based practices don't automatically become everyday practice and what it takes to make them stick
- Moves through four Stages:
 1. Exploration
 2. Installation
 3. **Initial Implementation**
 4. **Full Implementation**

(Fixsen & Blase, National Implementation Research Network)



Active Implementation

The iterative process of learning, adapting, and improving delivery over time



(Fixsen & Blase, National Implementation Research Network)





What the Early Groups Revealed

	2024	
	1	2
Registered	9	15
Initiated	6	10
Completed	4	6
Completion Rate	44%	40%

- Impact on facilitator and participant experience
- Desire to understand:
 - What's happening
 - When, and
 - Why



Pre-Session Outreach

Touchpoint 1: Congruence





Welcome Calls

20-minute individual video call before first session

Introduce facilitator

Discuss the program: what it is, what topics it covers, structure

Expectations: Role of facilitators, time-commitment, attendance, group agreements

Learn about participant: diagnosis, motivations/hopes for joining the group, current coping

Participant's questions

Complete registration: phone number, home address

Next steps: what communication is coming



Group agreements for safety

- Role as facilitators
- Not therapy or medical advice
- On-camera with exceptions
- Waiting room and attendance-taking
- Joining from a private space
- No photographs or recordings



Participation to Date

	2024		2025			2026		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Registered	9	15	8	9	10	8	12	8
Initiated	6	10	8	9	10	8	10	7
Completed	4	6	8	7	7	6	10	6
Completion Rate	44%	40%	100%	78%	70%	75%	83%	75%



Program completion rates

● Before welcome calls avg 42% ● After welcome calls avg 80% ---- 70% target



Created with the help of Claude





Participants' Perspectives

"Gave me a better understanding of the program, also having already met Sarah made it feel safer during the first call."

"It may put those at ease who may not be comfortable with Zoom calls! I actually believe it is the polite and professional step to take to put the participants at ease."

"It was a helpful way to learn in advance what the program would be focusing on."

"Sarah was sensitive to my questions and hesitations of how much to share with others. She put me at ease, and I ended up feeling privileged to be a participant in this group."

"Call was very thorough and helpful giving wonderful introduction and time to share my individual situation, and this was all "heard" and supported."

"It was a great way to start the program because I knew what to expect and could ask questions. I appreciate the time that was put into the Welcome Call."

"Some people don't take these workshops seriously and only show up when they want. I think the call made us all more committed to the workshop!"

"I had no anxiety starting the program as I already established a relationship with Sarah."



Facilitator Perspective

- Investing time to payoff later:
 - Decreased initial no-shows
 - Improved timing in session 1
 - Better insight into your group
 - Confirmed fit ahead of time
 - Group cohesion



Between-Session Communication

Touchpoint 2: Empathy



More than “just checking in”

- Consistent contact between sessions:
 - Reminders
 - Summaries
- Brief additions
 - Follow-up from questions asked or resources shared
 - Check-ins with individuals

What does between-session communication look like in your groups?
What gets in the way of making it happen consistently?



Follow-Up with Absent Members

Touchpoint 3: Unconditional positive regard



Follow-Up: Care vs. Chase

- Protocol
 - Timing
 - Medium
 - Messaging
 - Patterns
- What it indicates when we do versus don't follow up

What do you currently do when a member doesn't show? Is that a deliberate clinical choice or something that developed by default?



In-Session Strategies

Safety leading to sharing



Consistent Session Arc

- 1 Arrival ritual: brief, consistent, signals "we are in group space now"
- 2 Bridge from last session: honors continuity, integrates between-session experience
- 3 Content introduction: health literacy, use examples
- 4 Processing time: ties to the group's actual experiences
- 5 Closing ritual: more than the "leave meeting" button



Technical Tools

Clinically, why use which?

Polls: low-stakes entry point before verbal sharing; gives real-time data on where the group is

Chat: parallel processing space; some participants engage here who won't speak aloud; read from it to bring it into the group space

Breakout rooms: specific prompts, debrief with the larger group when return

Interactive whiteboards: let the group generate the content collaboratively



Relational Strategies

- The “Tissue Issue” without the box
 - Holding silence
 - Facial expression
 - Body language
- Tracking affect across the grid of faces
- Cameras off
- Home environments





Group Safety Green Flags

- **Participants are:**
 - Addressing each other by name
 - Responding directly to one another, not just the facilitator
 - Sharing with increasing depth and vulnerability as the group progresses
 - Returning after a session that brought up something difficult
 - Sitting with silence rather than rushing to fill it
 - Referencing something a fellow member shared in a previous session



Safety is Not One Size Fits All

- Participants arrive carrying histories that shape how safe a group space feels
- Virtual groups can sometimes lower these barriers
- But, virtual groups can also amplify them
- **Self-reflection:** What assumptions am I bringing about who feels safe in this group?



Facilitator Debriefing

After the Group Ends: Problem-solving and reinventing





Quantitative Review



Attendance patterns

From registration to initiation
From initiation to completion



Withdraws as clinical data

Who dropped off when and why?
Did follow-up contact make a difference?



Participant Evaluation

- If you're not doing post-group evaluations, start now!
- What did they find most valuable?
- What did they find to be less relevant?
- What did they think about the group make-up?
- How did they feel about the orientation into group?
- What conditions made moments of strong group cohesion/learning/behavior change possible?



Self-Reflection

- How much am I talking versus the participants talking?
- What did I notice but not act on?
- What happened in facilitation or content at moments of lost engagement or relationship rupture?
- Which tech tools worked for this particular group, and which fell flat?
- **With a co-facilitator:**
 - Where did coordination excel?
 - Where did coordination feel off?



Recognition of Barriers

Barriers

- Competing responsibilities and time constraints
- Solo facilitation

Value

- Professional development
- Feedback loop
- Improved outcomes



Debrief Outcome: Booster Session

Virtual gathering for people who have completed GO2's Mind Over Matter to continue building on the skills developed in the program

The hour included:

- A relaxation exercise
- A check-in on your wins and challenges in using the tools since your group ended
- A mini-lesson that builds on a concept from Mind Over Matter
- A chance to reconnect with familiar faces or meet other program graduates



Next Steps

Give yourself grace:

- No-shows will still happen, and not every group will reach cohesion
- Intentional virtual facilitation offers is the ability to make conscious choices rather than default ones

Think about a group you're currently facilitating or about to start:

- Name one thing you want to examine or change



Thank You!

Maureen Rigney, LICSW, Senior Director, Support Programs and Psychosocial Care

Ashley Doty, Senior Manager, Support Programs and Peer Support

Inova Peterson Life with Cancer

You, for your time and attention!

