Recommendations for Thinking for a Change Groups during COVID-19 pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, T4C facilitators are facing unprecedented challenges. Since this is an extraordinary time and situation, NIC is providing our recommendations to help the continuation of programming and services to your group participants. If your agency/organization has made the difficult decision to postpone in-person groups to help reduce the further outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, NIC has a few guidelines for T4C facilitators and group members.

If possible, you can facilitate the groups through telehealth/telemedicine platforms and/or web conferencing platforms. The recommended platform would need to include video conferencing to allow for group members' role-plays and other activities, and for facilitators to provide real-time provide modeling, coaching, and feedback. Also, your agency/organization will need to consider methods to disseminate T4C assignments via email, file upload, or other digital sharing method. All T4C facilitators with approved T4C 4.0 online curriculum access must abide by Federal copyright when sharing T4C materials.

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Now, transitioning from the classroom or group rooms to virtual/online facilitation groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, you may be feeling a bit nervous about how to facilitate programming online. Here are 4 useful tips for facilitators and T4C group members to make this transition smooth and successful.

4 Tips for Creating a Successfully Online Learning Experience

(For T4C Facilitators)

1. Creating your space is essential for success and your comfortability as you are beginning virtual facilitation. Whether you are conducting your session from your office, classroom, or home, configuring your space is important.

- Choose your location carefully. Look for a plain, distraction-free backdrop. Avoid standing or sitting in front of a light source. Clear the space around you of everything that is not a part of your current lesson.

- Check the framing and volume of your video before you begin. Be sure the camera is steady and is recording what you want seen.

- Consider making your virtual sessions password-protected and only to be utilized by participants from your T4C group.

- Clarify ground rules/group norms for online interaction in the given space, including how to treat each other respectfully.

- Monitor the space frequently, including all chat forums/discussion boards.

- Establish set times when you will be online and available for real-time interaction after each T4C session for the group members' virtual T4C assignment questions and help. Stick to those times if possible, and if you must change the times, provide as much notice as you can.

2. Many of us want to feel that we are a valued member of a group. As a virtual facilitator, break down the feeling of anonymity and strive to include everyone in the session.

- Arrive early to your online session. Create a warm, friendly online learning environment that welcomes people.
    - Consider virtual classroom Icebreakers like Tic-Tac-Toe on a virtual whiteboard, Two lies, One truth/Two Truths, One lie in chat/discussion board, etc.
- Use people's names when you read or debrief chat comments. If the group size is small enough, invite people to elaborate on their chat comments by having them unmute their phone lines and talk with each other.

3. It's tempting for any participant to lurk in the background. To make it safe to participate actively in your virtual classroom, spend time prior to the session orienting people new to your web conference platform in the use of the online interaction tools.

- Make sure everyone is comfortable using chat, emoticons, annotation tools, web cameras, and polls.

4. You may have some participants with a need to feel appreciated or recognized often, as they engage in helping activities during the online session.

- Of course, this is OK as long as they don't monopolize your attention. The path of least resistance is to acknowledge them with a genuine "thank you." If someone is volunteering to share an example for the third time, you might say, "Gabe, thank you so much for sharing your experiences. I really appreciate it because we all benefit from your examples. I'd like to open this discussion to people who haven't shared their examples yet."

Online Learning Pre-Cautions & Other Considerations

Virtual facilitation sessions can be a valuable tool. However, you should keep in mind the fact that there may be participants without in-home online access. Consider alternative learning options to ensure that these group members are not entirely left out of the learning process. Additionally, in many homes (due to work and school closures from COVID-19) participants may have to share their online access with spouses, children, siblings, parents, or other house guests. Learning assignments and tasks should have both online and offline components to accommodate those who need to share their computer (such as providing lesson materials; i.e., skill cards, homework assignments, and handouts beforehand).

However you choose to conduct your virtual group sessions, your group members' attention spans will be considerably shorter than usual without your physical presence to engage them in the lesson. Also,

try to stay on top of the assessment and evaluation process. Prepare a screening tool so that when your agency/organization decides to resume live classroom/group activities, you can easily assess the T4C group members' understanding of lessons covered during the distance-learning period.

4 Tips for Creating a Successfully Online Learning Experience

(For T4C Group Members)

1. Treat your online group like a real group.

- It is easy to forget that an online group session is a real group session if you are used to traditional classrooms. While you are on your online learning journey, you should remember to think of your virtual session as a real group. This means you need to show up for group, engage with your facilitators and fellow group members, and complete your assignments on time.

- View all presentation slides or videos the facilitators uploads in the session. Think of these as the facilitators in front of the room facilitating the lesson. You wouldn't chat on your phone while the lesson is going on in front of you, so don't do it while you are viewing the lesson online.

2. Create a positive learning environment.

- Your virtual group will likely have an area for discussion in which you can directly ask questions of the facilitators and your fellow group participants. Use these discussion boards and chat to stay engaged. Keep up the contact and discussion with your group mates and facilitators. The more you communicate, the better your understanding will be.

3. Keep Moving.

- The advice to keep moving may sound counter-productive for a virtual group setting, but it is imperative. The human body does not work well if it is immobile for too long. Make sure you are getting up for a movement and water break (and a rest for your eyes) every 45 minutes or more frequently if needed. Your body needs to move!

4. Create Your Space.

- To create your learning space, make sure that you have your computer or online learning device in a well-lit area that has few distractions. Consider having music playing at a low volume if you need the slight noise to help you focus.

- While you do need plenty of light with enough room for your device and your T4C materials, you want to beware of a glare on your screen. Trying to concentrate on online instruction with a glare on your screen can cause a headache, which will definitely deter your learning session.

- Make sure you are sitting comfortably with good posture. Poor posture while working online will lead to back pain and hamper your learning session. Stand if you need to. Remember, your body needs to move!

Hopefully our recommendations, guidelines, and tips are helpful for you as you considering transitioning to leading virtual T4C groups.

If you are interested in general information and resources responsive to the COVID-19 pandemic please be advised that the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has launched a Coronavirus Information page on its website (www.nicic.gov/coronavirus). It contains COVID-19 information from multiple sources, including guidance from the White House, a number of links to pages from federal government agencies (including the Centers for Disease Control), as well as information compiled by professional associations serving the field of corrections.

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