

Facilitating the Emotional Responses Group Process

Introduction

This is a facilitated process we use in many different types of group work as a way of helping individuals understand that everyone responds to critical situations in different ways. In a crisis, one individual may experience a range of different emotions some of which may conflict significantly with each other. This process can create deeper acceptance and understanding between team or group members and also provide greater self-awareness for those who participate.

NB: It should not be used when the group is still in significant trauma. Members need to be safe and secure and a step removed from the adverse situation before it is helpful. Like other processes used too soon, it can re-traumatise individuals if it is attempted too close to highly impacting events. Used at the right time it is very helpful for participants.

Ensure you have adequate space for this exercise. It is appropriate for small groups under about 12. Sit everyone around in a circle with space to lay out the 'emotion' words on A3 or A4 pages or cards on the floor or on a low table in the centre of the group.

Steps in Facilitation

1. Always introduce the process¹ by outlining to the group the three reasons that participating exercises like this are helpful. Then invite people to participate.

Say something like.... "We would like to invite you to participate in this exercise for three reasons:

- You will gain some insight into your own emotional responses to [the event, issue, situation, crisis] and put some words around how you personally might be thinking, feeling or responding. This will help in giving you greater self-awareness.
- You will also hear how others, that you care about in the [team, group, organisation] are feeling and responding, that may be different to your experience. This will help giving you some insight into how to support, work with them and relate to them in this situation.
- By participating, everyone, including ourselves as facilitators, will get a 'feel' for the emotional impact the events have had on the group as a whole. This is important for you all so that an appropriate collective or systems understanding can be formed and responded to."

2. Invite the group to openly name the emotions they have experienced or see in and around this event or crisis. These can be written and put down one word on each page and placed in the centre of the group. There are usually around 15 to 30 that commonly come up depending on the nature of the situation being

¹ This introduction may be been already given if this exercise is one of several being used in a meeting.

processed.

E.g. The common emotion words include:

Fear, anger, betrayal, loss, grief, frustration, relief, guilt, numbness, hurt, despair, helplessness, trauma, surprise, disgust, love, admiration, determination, hope, upset, settledness, unsettledness, resolution, confusion, pride, withdrawal, peace, support, loneliness, anxiety, concern, pain, shock, (and many more). It may be appropriate to prompt a few of these if they do not come out. This is important, particularly if you sense there is an emotion present within the group that has not been articulated. A facilitator can say something like “in others times this exercise has been facilitated we often have the word placed out on the floor so I might just add that one to our collection.

3. Invite the group one at a time to select 2,3 or 4 of the emotions. Each one first picks them up from the floor/table and reflects on them for 3-5 minutes. When each person concludes they place the emotions they have chosen back on the floor/table so they are available for the next person.
4. This exercise allows the emotions that people have experienced to be named and externalised. There is something quite powerful about picking them up, owning them, speaking to them and then placing them back down again. This can be a challenging process and some care needs to be taken as people share very personally and deeply about what they are experiencing or have recently been through. Thanking each person for their contribution is important in validating each emotional response. Remember these may be complex and at times highly contradictory – people might be feel betrayed, relieved, hopeful and confused all at the same time.
5. It is usually appropriate as each individual concludes sharing to stop for a moment and have someone pray for that person.
6. It is usually best to allow someone to start and then indicate we will move around the group in order from the starting person. Some may not be ready to share and can be given the opportunity again at the end. The other method is to let people share as they feel ready.
7. At the close allow the group to reflect on what they observed or learned about themselves, or about the group as a whole and the common themes that come out.
8. Reflections on what might assist the group moved forward can be gathered from the group.
9. This exercise can be used by itself or as part of a broader meeting process in times of crisis, recovery or conflict.
10. As always in facilitation, if possible have 2 or 3 facilitators on hand, so that any individuals who need one to one support have someone who can step out of the meeting process to be with them without stopping the meeting altogether.