On-line facilitation in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

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Please contact the PS Centre should you wish to translate or adapt any part of On-line facilitation in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support.

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This guide builds on experiences with conducting participatory on-line MHPSS training at the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support. It is written to encourage the use of on-line trainings that enhances the learning outcomes for participants combining technical skill with social-emotional learning.

There are many obvious advantages in moving to on-line formats both during the pandemic and beyond. The key questions we asked ourselves at the beginning of the pandemic was how to transform our participatory and scenario-based face to face trainings to a digitally inclusive experience.

This guide describes MHPSS trainings where participants have a good internet connection. Other modalities that rely on using for example mobile phones and are more inclusive of those with further needs will be explored in the future.

Much is different when moving to an on-line format. If participants are not required to be on camera, on-line presenters may not know if participants are listening or not. It can feel like talking into the void and even more so if no questions are asked or no comments appear in the chat.

In trainings and webinars, many - trainers and participants alike - have had the experience of being the only person in a break-out room as others are logged in but away from the event.

Building and managing supportive interaction and relations are the most important skills in MHPSS work. Thus, on-line MHPSS facilitators have to create an environment and an ambience that encourages learning and bonding between participants as well as a sense of belonging to a community during – and possibly also after - the training. Participants also need time to reflect on their personal uses of knowledge and skills, their interactions with others, and their learning progress.
Relation to space and scenery

The pandemic has changed our relationship to space. Think for example of how physical distancing is practiced in public spaces and how chance meetings when bumping into others rarely happen anymore. A facilitator working from home with participants who are also at home changes the concept of a training space completely and can feel like being on a mutual house call. As a consequence, the professional role of going to a training venue and being the facilitator is now merged with roles from private life. Furthermore, creating a division between training hours and time off is challenging without the change of scenery and of clothes.

Facilitators should ensure that the home space as seen on camera is professional. Discuss confidentiality with participants so it is known if anyone else is in the same room as a participant and whether this is suitable. Think about how to manage risks for other breaches of confidentiality if an on-line topic or conversation is on a challenging topic.

Boundaries

The shift to an on-line format changes boundaries and perception of boundaries. As already mentioned, many are not mentally present when in an on-line meeting, webinar or training as they maybe checking mail, news or mobiles, or respond to immediate demands on them in the home environment whilst participating. For a successful MHPSS training, participants must be aware that they need to be both virtually and mentally present as much as possible. At the same time, facilitators should be flexible to special needs, such as training participants with care responsibilities. Ways to respect other participants while meeting care responsibilities or interruptions that can occur in the home environment can be discussed in a pre-training meeting.

A pre-training meeting replaces the ritual of arriving at the training venue and being excited about seeing the trainers etc. In a pre-training meeting facilitators should go over the programme, and allow time for talking about needed equipment, tools, and IT programmes and they establish the tone for a warm, inclusive, and fun environment. Safety and privacy issues are covered - e.g. no screenshots or recordings without consent and explain GDPR rules if relevant.

Interaction

Studies on on-line teaching during corona support the notion that professional learning and the social learning and milieu in class are interdependent. Professional learning can create well-being and well-being creates access to the learning.

Surprisingly, interacting on-line can come pretty close to feeling like face-to-face interaction. It takes the same facilitation set of skills to create group engagement and cohesion plus a lot of extra planning for ways to make interaction, engagement, exchange, and bonding happen during the training. The facilitators need to open the doors to the topic and to the participants, and this is best done by engaging with them. Motivation is about exploring the topic and feeling at ease in the training, therefore, a participant must have the attention of a facilitator during sessions. Even though there may be less social conflict, the risk of social exclusion is present in on-line training as participants may be excluded.
in the discussion in break out rooms. Conduct check ins and check outs every day and visit breakout rooms regularly to gauge the level of inclusion, participation, engagement and learning as well as development of skills of the participants.

**Time**

Things often take longer in an on-line training. Mute, unmute, mute, unmute, Can you hear me?, We can't hear you, You forgot to unmute yourself. Can you see my screen?; all of this takes time. There may be connection fall-outs, the facilitator may inadvertently press a leave button, latecomers must be included if they had a hard time to link up to the training etc. Things or instructions can be lost in translation online due to not being able to see body language, poor connectivity and sound or visual quality, or mental overload by using new technologies.

Timekeeping is difficult in on-line trainings, yet it is important to respect participants by keeping to the agreed time while also allowing some flexibility.

An aspect that may come up and take time is how the pandemic has impacted the lives of participants, the loss of life as it used to be, or loss of relatives and friends. It is important to be prepared for this and either allow adequate time for discussions, or be prepared in advance to respectfully put this discussion to the side during the training.

**Screen fatigue and body amnesia**

In a physical training, the facilitator moves, notes on a board, points to a model on a flipchart or whiteboard, looks at the different group members and interacts with one participant at a time while the rest observes or chips in, and moves from group to group during group work.

In an on-line training, all of this is moved to the screen and consequently many complain about screen fatigue. Avoid screen fatigue by:

- Create conditions for the gaze not to be in constant stare and strain mode by using activities where participants make notes, drawings and show these, as they would in a face to face training.
- Use hand-written agendas, key words, instructions, or maps to assist participants’ understanding. Write each step of an instruction and point to where you are when explaining an instruction, show a floor plan of a scenario to take place in breakout rooms.
- Use heavy paper or a clipboard to keep the paper stable when showing it.
- Change between activities: Limit presentations to no more than 15 minutes and move to polls, quizzes, break-out discussions, exercises in groups, chat, plenary discussions, and Q & A.
- Allow for comfort breaks at regular intervals. Should a session be longer than one hour give participants a break of ten minutes, and lead or have participants lead a stretch or relaxation exercise.
- Move, blink, stretch, stand, sit to avoid body amnesia from developing. Be aware that exteroception overrule interception, meaning that the inner and outer senses function in a way that makes it easy to get caught up in what you hear and see on the screen and to not notice inner bodily signs telling you to change position, blink, stretch, take a sip of water etc.
- A lot of the short energizers can be done on-line as for example:
  - Stand up and ask participants to do a Simon says, please or Simon says exercise. The facilitator does a simple movement saying “Simon says” or “Simon says, please”, and participants only copy movements if the facilitator says “Simon says, please”.
  - At regular intervals, encourage participants to turn their attention to their body and notice how they are doing or to take deep breaths. The IFRC PS Centre has a wealth of such body mind exercises in the IFRC PS Centre’s Facebook feed and in the resources for teachers to use in class.
To ensure active participation, engagement, interaction, exchange, and bonding in on-line trainings, the Hobfoll principles help identify what to do to ensure the basis for a good on-line training:

**Safety**

Any MHPSS training has to be and feel safe; one reason being that participants will discuss personal topics and share personal stories. Facilitators must be respectful towards those sharing stories.

Giving information about the training in the invitation/announcement, hosting a pre-training meeting, ensuring accurate information and firm rules about recording etc., and explaining the learning methodology create safety. Develop house ground rules or group charter with participants based on how to make the on-line training safe, fun, and inclusive. Reminding participants of the rules agreed to, models safety in practice. Building in a feedback and complaint mechanism to quickly address any concern further increases the sensation of safety. Let participants know they can contact the facilitators privately should there be a need and reach out to those who seem to have such a need. Share some mistakes made in other trainings - as forgetting a key prop or the programme at home - can reduce participant's fear of not being perfect.

A buddy system helps create a safe environment where participants practice sharing learning progress and reach out for support with professional and personal needs. All of the above will ensure the environment is safe to play, experiment, make mistakes and learn!

A way to have fun is to do the 'Yes I made a mistake' exercise in pairs in break out rooms and to ask pairs to discuss what can be learnt by making mistakes.

Each pair will count to three by taking turns in this way: A will say one, B will say two and A says three, continuing without any pause B will say one, A two and B say three.
Whenever a mistake is made, ask the pairs to say Yes! throwing hands in the air to celebrate having made a mistake.

Add movements for agile users as in the below example or use other movements of your liking:

- Counting one - clap hands together
- Counting two - bend the knees
- Counting three - jump

**Calming**

Brain breaks are needed for learning as are time for calming activities. Spending time at the pre-training meeting on the technical requirements can avoid some experiencing cognitive overload for example if participants are not familiar with some of the tools used. Setting time aside for this is calming. Reducing performance anxiety can restore a sense of calm, which positively influences the group’s well-being. If using daily buddy talks, these become an oasis where participants feel watered and at ease. Using simple breathing exercises and stretches to come to the senses and take care of the body are other ways to promote calming. Recent research has shown that being in touch with body sensations and the sensorial system, makes it is easier to be and feel empathetic. Embodying understanding and having a kind disposition towards others also furthers calming.

Making the sessions shorter than usual can be a useful tool in calming and in avoiding cognitive exertion.

Ask participants to make a drawing of what they do to relax and calm themselves. Next they show their drawing and tell what calming activities they prefer. The different activities may range from dancing, singing to breathing can inspire facilitators for encouraging participants to lead such exercises during the training.

Before a break, ask participants to notice their body for a few seconds and think about what they need to do for themselves. Do they need a stretch, a deep breath, or to talk to others?

Adding “The programme is indicative; changes are to be expected” to the training programme shared in advance allows for needed flexibility as online training does not always go to plan due to technical or other issues. Knowing this in advance can make participants feel more at ease.

**Self and collective efficacy**

Building capacity and efficacy should enable the group and its members to act in a way that improves their competencies and skills. This can be supported by many different small interventions as for example having participants set goals for the training and asking buddy pairs to reflect on and evaluate their learning progress against the aims for the training. It is very important that all instructions for exercises are clear and well explained using different modalities. Ensure participants are given achievable goals, participants try different roles and responsibilities during the training and give tasks suited to their capacity, as all of this increases a sense of agency and self-efficacy. Time dedicated to sharing of experiences and for activities to increase the sense of common goals also models how to build a sense of community efficacy during a large-scale crisis. Allocate time on how to apply the topics outside of the training at the end of the training. All of the above helps participants practice problem solving skills to be used in the field or the on-line field.
Connectedness

Strongly interconnected groups are necessary for mutual care taking and for caring for others. Creating a training community will make participants more resilient and help them feel supported. Forming attachment, bonds and being connected are the most basic of human needs and humans rely on each other. Studies during corona times have shown that most have missed their social life and learners of all age groups have missed their peers as well as the individual attention from their teacher/trainer.

Valuable steps in creating connections are:

- Announcing that facilitators will sign in ten to fifteen minutes ahead of time
- Greeting everyone as they join
- Leading small talk before the daily session begins

In each session, the facilitator has to connect with each participant by giving them individual attention and to the group as a whole by for example tying a nice string around it by commenting on how it has contributed or what it has achieved. Creating mixed teams where participants of different backgrounds work together will also foster the humanitarian connection. By stressing the importance of the relational strength building, participants will hopefully bring this back into their daily lives.

A follow up after the training can be arranged to support the connectedness among group members; this can be in the form of for example a Q&A session or supervision meetings and by encouraging group members to share stories of their successes on the group’s chosen channel.

To give participants the best options for connecting, the tasks for group work in breakout rooms need to be extremely clear. The process of connecting should be eased by everyone knowing the task, the time frame, how to work and the expected outcomes. Give instructions in several ways verbally, in writing in the chat and on a worksheet so lack of clarity does not stand in the way of building relations.
Hope

The sense of belonging to a group that is inclusive, feels safe and can be relied on can prevent feelings of isolation for participants who may be the only MHPSS person in their context. It gives a sense of hope and hope inspires action. In times of corona, allow hope to grow by focusing on good things done, experienced, or learned even if the future seems uncertain and unpredictable. Sharing positive stories can also help restore faith in regaining a sense of normality and thriving in the near future. In the context of on-line training, hope can also be linked to the transfer of knowledge and skills into practice. Discuss what participants hope to be able to do, and how they will use the learning after the training in their own contexts.

Conducting rounds of: What do you plan to do in your home MHPSS context and when? Who will it affect positively that you have been in this training? Another inspiring question during or at the end of the training that taps into the same idea would be a round of What remote help can I offer to others during/after the training? Should anyone need feedback on a programme for a session or training, it will be supportive to have such offers of remote help.
Before the training

When participants apply for a training, it is wise to include questions on why they wish to be in the training and who in their organization will benefit from their participation in addition to background questions to assess their experience and knowledge.

**Pre training meeting**

In the pre-training meeting the facilitators and participants are introduced to one another, the plan for the training, the training set up and the IT tools being used. Facilitators ensure interaction and ensure a warm and encouraging ambience during the meeting.

Inform participants:
- That the training will be interactive using different methods.
- That they will need paper, pens, markers, and props.
- That the camera will be on during most of the training.
- About the digital tools and programmes they will use during the training, try these and give links on where to find tutorials.
- About rules of confidentiality, GDPR rules if applicable, and that no one may record the session, take screen shots unless agreed with all participants and that in such cases written consent is needed.
- If the training is recorded by facilitators, when giving consent, participants need to know who will be given access to the material and for which purpose.
- That facilitators will visit break out rooms during group work.
- To write to the tech facilitator directly in case of technical problems and not to the entire group.
- That a WhatsApp group or a group using another platform will be created for the training.
Practical tips for facilitators

- Position the laptop camera or webcam at or a bit above eye level to look straight at it for longer talks to increase the connection with participants and to avoid unflattering images of chin or ceiling.
- Put a sticker next to the camera to remember where to look for participants sensing you are looking at them.
- Use a big screen if at all possible and the large gallery display function to be able to see up to 20 to 22 participants at the same time depending on the program used.
- Place the laptop on a stable foundation to keep the keyboard still when typing.
- Good light is essential for participants to be able to see you. Place a soft indirect light source behind the screen and avoid sitting in front of a window.
- Angle the screen so it is parallel to the face when hinging from the hip joint and leaning slightly forward when sitting.
- Ensure enough distance from the camera to avoid staring-people-right-in-the-eye fatigue. Thus, your arms will be somewhat extended when typing.
- Use an artificial background if you don’t have a natural background without clutter.
- Using a digital background will unfortunately interfere with showing materials to the participants as everything is blurred and participants cannot see what is shown, so currently this is not good to use when presenting.
- Use a headset with a microphone.
- Wear lipstick for easier mouth reading if this is suitable for your gender identity.²
- Tell others in your home environment that you are not to be disturbed or place a huge DO NOT DISTURB note on the door to ensure being undisturbed.
- Should unexpected noises be heard, explain these to participants (as having a Bulgarian choir practice next door, as the author has!).

² The online conferencing and webinar tool Zoom has a function which digitally applies lipstick on the participant.
Training tips for a participatory approach

- Go on-line ten to 15 minutes before the agreed starting time. Greet participants when they enter and small talk with those present before the training begins. Be aware that small talk acts as social glue in building and maintaining relationships ... and use it.

- Turn the camera on as when seeing each other a good ambiance is created, connections are forming, and the well-being hormone, oxytocin, can work its magic even though meeting on-line. Oxytocin also makes a person kinder by the way.

- Agree on hand signals for applause etc. as it is an easy way to transmit messages of for example appreciation in the group.

- Use an anonymous feedback and complaint mechanism every day to ensure that wishes, suggestions, and complaints from participants are addressed without much delay. Use the chat function, a poll, or on-line post its for plusses for what is going well, minuses for what can be improved and a wonder wall/fridge/parking lot for what participants would like to spend more time on.

- Create a WhatsApp group or use a similar platform for the training that will be used for different kinds of communication during and for follow up with and between participants after the training.

- For openers use one that relates to the training: What hidden talent do you have that you can share in the training? Or set a positive tone: Name a good thing that happened to you in the last week? An option is to ask the participants to describe the room they sit in.

- For check-ins at the beginning of the day or a session, use any method you fancy: weather or smiley reports, drawings, or one word in the chat to gauge how participants are doing. After a check-in, say a few words about the group as a whole. “It seems all had a pleasant evening and are ready for the day. That's great!”

- Check-ins to involve participants during the training can be done by asking questions in the chat as you would in a training: Are we going too fast or too slow? Is anything not clear yet? Anyone not ready to go on? Anything that surprised you in the session?

- For check-outs use ball throws where participants say a short sentence for example on what surprised them, what was a lightbulb moment, or what they liked most during the day.

- Use ball throws where participants answer the same question with one word that comes to mind.

- Use the buddy system for an emergency-oriented training for participants to experience the usefulness and outcomes of having a buddy.

- Pairs - as buddy pairs - can be formed by using an electronic memory game.

- In rounds, name the next participant, and ask everyone to point to where this person is on their screen. This generates smiles as the pictures of participants are not placed in the same way on everyone’s screens.

- Open a session or theme with a quick poll or quiz to gauge participants’ knowledge. A vote can also be used to involve participants by asking in which order to do the next topic/ session.

- Delegate summing up after sessions to a rotation of participants.

- Begin a session with a brainstorm on the topic. Or ask participants to note down a few thoughts about the topic to be addressed or questions they wish answered during a session.
Ask yes or no questions and get nods and headshakes.

As questions as “Raise one finger if you know how to take care of yourself on a daily basis and do it”, and “Raise two fingers if you know how to take care of yourself on a daily basis and don’t do it”.

Announce the use of popcorn answers where anyone can speak when they wish just like corns popping in no special order.

Use a name list if doing a round where all have to chip in as not to forget anyone. If using an alphabetical name list, begin at different letters. Such rounds are difficult to use if there are more than 20 to 22 participants.

Do on-line continuum exercises by explaining that one end of the continuum is 0 and the other end is 5 or 10. Ask participants to note or hold up fingers according to how much they agree with a given statement as for example: “Do you agree that MHPSS should be mainstreamed in all responses without exception” or “How ready are you to be deployed to the on-going xx disaster to lead MHPSS interventions?”

Use printed or hand-written PowerPoints, a flipchart or white board to show for example a model. Ask participants to copy the model and make notes on it during the presentation. When participants ask questions, they can show their version of the model and point to the section they are asking about. This serves a learning purpose of fixing the knowledge more securely, engages motor skills and minimizes staring at the screen and finally when asking questions makes everything more concrete.

Ask participants to note down how what they have just heard about applies to their context as for example working in a National Society.

When using breakout rooms, show the written instruction with the time frame before participants break-out. Task the group to assign a time taker. The first time in a room, allocate one minute for each participant to introduce themselves, next they choose a timekeeper and an eventual note taker or presenter to the plenary. Also, if a countdown function is available on your online platform it can act as a helpful reminder to participants on how much time is left.

For reporting to the plenary, give a set time for each group ensuring that the next group only mentions what the previous have not mentioned. Groups can show drawings, on-line boards, role plays, games etc.

Use fishbowls, where only those talking have their camera on.

**Fishbowl**

In a fishbowl the facilitator asks a group of participants to talk to each other on a given subject and the rest listen. Its an option to turn the tables and the listeners next discuss a subject and the fish listen!

Change name on the screen to get into the roles when role playing as for example: Sonia, 35, disaster manager or Imran, 57, community leader.

Use props for role plays, as toys, t-shirts, hats, vests, coats, and scarfs.

Use other items to bring the analogue into the digital classroom as for example LEGO bricks. Use bricks to create models for participants to work with.

Should participants be very talkative, suggest they put a pencil between their lips to keep quiet. Explain that the side effect is that they will keep smiling and this improves the mood.

Call for a treasure hunt to bring something back to show in an exercise on how to use items from a normal household in a game in a Child Friendly Space.
- Arrange a participatory ceremony where participants create a handmade certificate that they hand over and show when concluding the training. The official certificate will be sent after the training.
- Go over how participants are to provide feedback to each other, to make it a positive learning experience for both the giver and the receiver of feedback. The SOFA model is easy to understand, harder to practice and works well, when learnt.

### The SOFA feedback model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Situation</strong></th>
<th>Describe the situation, so the receiver knows what the giver is talking about.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observation</strong></td>
<td>Describe a concrete observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feeling</strong></td>
<td>Describe what it made the giver feel, in short, the giver takes responsibility for the observations and avoids ascribing motives or intention to what was observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advice</strong></td>
<td>Give a concrete piece of advice that is easy to follow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Situation**: When you began your presentation after having greeted us....

**Observation**: I observed that you looked at the paper for quite some time when talking...

**Feeling**: I felt a bit forgotten and lost as I couldn’t signal if I needed clarifications.

**Advice**: I would advise you to check in with participants once the introduction is done. Maybe just ask them "How are you today?" Or "Are there any questions?"
The communication channels created for the group can be used in the following months where relevant information can be disseminated, achievements shared, and where questions about materials etc. can be posted.

A follow up meeting for coaching or supervision can be arranged should this be required.

Participants gain most from a training when they apply what they have learned in their own context soon after the training. To be able to transfer knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into practice, the on-line facilitator should ensure that:

- Participants are engaged in planning the content of programmes, that they actively participate in setting their own learning goals. Do this during the registration where participants are asked questions as: What do you expect to learn, Who in your team will benefit from you having attended the training, or How will you bring the learning to your National Society and during the pre-training meeting. When setting personal goals, the learning outcome is known to increase.

- Participants are encouraged and believe they can make use of the life skills they have learned. This will strengthen their confidence in their own abilities. This can be done by having a session on how participants can move forward with MHPSS in their National Society.

- Activities allow participants to practice and get feedback on the new set of skills and behaviours they are practising. This can be done by using a format for feedback after role plays that ensure feedback is constructive for example by using the SOFA model.

- Activities are similar to everyday life situations. This can be done by creating scenarios and role plays that build on the participants’ own cases.

- Participants have the opportunity to reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it. This can be done by allowing time for reflection and by scheduling buddy talk times twice a day.

- Life skills are immediately used in daily life as this fixes the transfer more securely. This can be done by having time at the end of the training for discussion on when to do what, with whom, and how.
On-line training materials on Psychological First Aid during COVID-19 are to be found on the PS Centre's website.

**Online training materials:**
- Online PFA training for COVID-19
- Online PFA training for COVID-19 – additional module: Remote supportive communication
- Online PFA training for COVID-19 – additional module: Loss & Grief
- Online PFA training for COVID-19 – additional module: PFA for children
- Online PFA training for COVID-19 – additional module: Caring for staff and volunteers

**On-line training videos:**
- Psychological First Aid for COVID-19
- Psychological First Aid for COVID-19 – Caring for staff and volunteers
- Psychological First Aid for children during COVID-19