Accessible Virtual and In-Person Events: A Tool Kit for Event Organizers

Part 3: Equitable and Anti-Oppressive Facilitation
A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector

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About this Guide

Effective meetings and other events help people connect with each other and share ideas. However, power dynamics, privilege, and oppression often cause certain voices to be suppressed. This is the case for a variety of groups, such as women, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, queer, trans and gender non-conforming people, and disabled people.[1-4]

If you are not intentional in providing a platform for diverse voices and perspectives, the impact of your other efforts to host an inclusive and accessible event will be diminished. One important component of this intentional approach is the use of an equitable and anti-oppressive event facilitator.

An equitable and anti-oppressive event facilitator ensures all voices have a platform. They also hold the presenter(s) and participants accountable for adhering to the principles of equity and anti-oppression.[5]

This guide provides an overview of the following topics:

- Characteristics of a good facilitator.

- Principles of equitable and anti-oppressive facilitation.

- How to embed these principles into event facilitation.

We based the content of this guide on an environmental scan of resources on facilitation and the authors' own collective experiences. We also obtained input from subject matter experts with extensive facilitation experience and lived experience.

This resource is intended to guide facilitation of events, such as a presenter series, knowledge mobilization and system planning events, and partner engagement sessions within the mental health and substance use sector. This includes events where people with lived or living experience of mental health and substance use challenges might be present. Out of the scope of this guide are clinical events, such as group psychotherapy.

This document is a companion to the following resources:

- Equity Considerations for Inviting Presenters to Events: A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector

- Planning and Hosting Accessible Online and In-Person Events: A Good Practice Guide for the Mental Health, and Substance Use Sector

Equitable and Anti-Oppressive Facilitation 101

The Facilitator Role

A facilitator ensures that the event will run according to plan, engages everyone to enhance participation, and addresses accessibility and technical issues. At an online event, they keep track of time, monitor participant comments and questions, and read the questions aloud.
At in-person events, they also ensure the roving microphone is passed around.

An equitable and anti-oppressive facilitator goes even further. They work to prevent bias and harmful comments, mitigate harm when harmful comments are made, and provide a platform for underrepresented voices and perspectives. In the case of a panel discussion, they ensure members have equal time to speak. The table on the next page outlines the characteristics of an equitable and anti-oppressive facilitator.

Given the variety of tasks and responsibilities, it is often a good idea to have at least 2 co-facilitators with diverse experiences and identities working together. For example, for events focused on race and/or racism, cross-racial facilitation can increase relatability for presenters and participants and bring in different lived experiences.[6] It can also be a way to model interracial cooperation, shared vulnerability, productive conflict resolution, and solidarity.[6]

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> **Table 1. What Makes an Effective Equitable and Anti-Oppressive Facilitator?**
>
> - Listens actively and asks questions.
>
> - Reflects back what was said and identifies themes without taking up space.
>
> - Uses their own energy and positivity to enhance the participant experience.
>
> - Creates a safe environment by being attuned and responsive to power dynamics.
>
> - Draws presenters and participants into the conversation and stimulates interaction.
>
> - Uses their observation skills and intuition to analyze the general mood of participants.
>
> - Adapts to shifts in the discussion.

Effective facilitation takes practice. Facilitating discussions can be a great opportunity for students, new staff, and people with lived experience to build their skills. However, note that discussions about sensitive or controversial topics, public events, or panel discussions require a facilitator with more experience.

To create a positive and inclusive experience for all, it is a good idea to follow the principles of equitable and anti-oppressive facilitation described below.[5]

Principles of Equitable and Anti-Oppressive Facilitation

To foster events that are accessible and free of injustice it is important to ensure everyone is held accountable for following the principles of equity and anti-oppression. These principles are informed by the values required to advance equity, anti-oppression, and antiracism in the health and social services sectors.

The principles of equitable and anti-oppressive facilitation are more than simply a set of instructions. They describe a philosophy of facilitation that requires ongoing learning, reflection, mentorship, practice, and humility that you can embody more fully over time.

1. **Positionality and introspection**. Take the time to reflect meaningfully on your own social identities and personal experiences of privilege and oppression, and how they influence your worldview.

2. **Antiracism**. Recognize the existence of systemic racism and actively work to identify, reduce, and remove inequitable dynamics, outcomes, and power imbalances between ethnoracial groups.

3. **Anti-oppression**. Recognize and work to dismantle systems of oppression (eg, colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, sanism, classism, heterosexism, cissexism) that lead to individual and structural inequalities for certain groups.

4. **Lived experience**. Recognize and value each person's lived experience as valid expertise and evidence. This includes the experience of living with or having lived with mental health and/or substance use challenges, as well as experience of racism and other forms of oppression.

5. **Intersectionality.** Understand that experiences of oppression differ for different people, times, and geographies. Recognize that a person's experiences of simultaneous systems of oppression will intersect to form a unique point of view that is different from any single identity alone.

6. **Nonhierarchical.** Reflect on the role that unequal power distribution plays in a hierarchical structure. Work to decentralize power by promoting transparency, open communication, autonomy, and a commitment to finding an equitable solution through collaboration.

Tips for Equitable and Anti-Oppressive Facilitation.

It takes commitment to uphold these principles. Below are some practical tips to get you started.[7,8]

Create a safer space

- Create a supportive and accepting environment to ensure all participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

- Create a group conduct agreement to help foster increased safety and shared expectations.

- Allow space for emotional expression. Normalize emotions as a part of rational, professional conversation.[9]

- Provide the presenter(s) and co-facilitator(s) an opportunity to debrief, process emotions, and discuss what worked and what could be improved.

- Work with the presenter(s) and audience to create a group agreement for shared conduct expectations (if the event organizers did not already do this ahead of the event).[5,9]

Enhance accessibility

- Ask the event organizers if there are participants who require accommodations.

- Inform everyone as to the timing of breaks and let them know that they can step out at any time.

- Ask/remind people to say their name and pronouns when they start speaking so that people with vision impairment or low vision know who is speaking.[10]

- Give periodic time check-ins to the presenter(s).

- Redirect the conversation if it goes off topic, and signal any topics that may be explored at another time.

  - Tip: You can use the concept of a "bike rack" to set aside issues that are off topic but related, for later discussion or for follow-up after the event.

Communicate with presenter(s) and co-facilitator(s)

- Meet with the co-facilitator(s)/helper(s) to review the agenda and clarify roles and expectations (including who will be responsible for time keeping and who will address any harmful or discriminatory comments).

- Meet with the presenter(s) to review the agenda, the group conduct expectations agreement (if created), and the process for addressing participant questions, accessibility needs, and other facilitation logistics.

- If a presenter will be speaking about their lived experience, have a private discussion with them ahead of time about their question

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boundaries and how they want you to respond if an audience member asks a boundary-crossing question.

- If introducing multiple presenters, ensure that presenter biographies are of similar length to avoid overemphasizing the accomplishments of one presenter over another. If the presenter(s) will be introducing themselves, ask for specific information (eg, name, pronouns, and affiliations).

Balance air time

- Ensure you give equal time to diverse perspectives. Make space for ideas and opinions that go against commonly accepted ways of thinking.

- Make an effort to prevent anyone from consciously or unconsciously dominating speaking time. If necessary, interrupt to remind them about the group conduct agreement (if applicable) and gently ask them to step back.

- Be aware of power dynamics that may cause some participants to speak up and others to stay quiet. Try using any of the following:

    - "Thank you to X for their in-depth comment on this topic. Y, do you have anything to add?"

    - "I'm sorry to interrupt but I'm noticing the time and want to make sure we have space to hear from…"

    - "Does anyone else have questions for Z?" or "Z, could you expand on your point about…"

    - "Thank you, Y. You have two minutes before we move on to Z."

- Summarize key points and themes, and connect the dots across diverse ideas and perspectives, including lived experience.

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Address bias and harmful comments

If an attendee or presenter is disruptive or makes a discriminatory or disparaging comment, speak to or message them directly to remind them about the conduct expectations agreement (if applicable). You can also gently call them out publicly to hold them accountable, especially if such comments are repeated. You might try any of the following questions:

- "Where did you hear that?" Or "What is your evidence for that?"

- "What did you mean by that?"

- "That language suggests…. It does harm to X community and is not in the spirit of our group agreement. Please refrain from using it/please use Y instead."

- Monitor group dynamics, body language,

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and tone, and check in privately with anyone who seems upset or frustrated by the conversation, or have a co-facilitator do this (if you have one).

Learning and growing as a facilitator

- After your event, reflect on what you feel went well and what you could improve upon. What did you learn? What might you do differently next time? What do you need to follow up on?

- Ask for feedback from co-facilitators, presenters, and/or participants informally or as part of your debrief session, and reflect on this feedback.

- When attending other events, use the opportunity to learn by observing the facilitator. What might you try or emulate? What might you want to do differently?

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Final Thoughts

We hope this resource will help you facilitate events that are equitable and anti-oppressive. Facilitation can be instrumental in rebalancing power dynamics, making space for people who are less comfortable speaking up, tying thematic threads together, and embedding equity, anti-oppression, and anti-racism principles. You can build these skills through practice, feedback, and learning from mistakes and challenging conversations.

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Glossary

Equity: "Unlike the notion of equality, equity is not about sameness of treatment. It denotes fairness and justice in process and in results. Equitable outcomes often require differential treatment and resource redistribution to achieve a level playing field among all individuals and communities. This requires recognizing and addressing barriers to opportunities for all to thrive in our society."[11]

Accessibility: The ability of products, devices, services, or environments to be free of barriers for disabled people so that they may participate fully in all aspects of life).2 Accessibility "implies conscious planning, design and/or effort to make sure something is barrier-free" (OHRC, n.d.). The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act outlines the principles of accessibility as independence, dignity, integration, and equality of opportunity.[12]

Positionality: The position "where each one of us is located in relation to our various social identities, which include lived and learned experience, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, socio-economic status, geographic location and socio-political history."[13]

Ableism: The "attitudes in society that devalue and limit the potential of persons with disabilities. People with disabilities are assumed to be less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and take part, and of less value than other people. Ableism can be conscious or unconscious and is embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society." [14]

Sanism: Also known as mentalism.[18] Coined by Mortin Birnbaum, it refers to the systemic oppression of people who have been labelled as or are perceived to be mentally ill. [15]

Cissexism: Systemic discrimination or prejudice against trans, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and two-spirit people that is rooted in the belief that trans people's genders are inferior to and/or less authentic than those of cisgender people (those whose gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth). [16]

Systemic racism: The oppression of a racialized group through policies and practices within private and public institutions (eg, norms, regulations, and standard operating procedures) that lead to racially biased outcomes and experiences. [17]

Intersectionality: A term coined by the Columbia Law School professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, which "considers how systems such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination overlap and interact with one another to advantage some and disadvantage others at an individual and social-structural level." [19]

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