

# Ethics for Facilitators

*There are a number of ways that the role of facilitator can get out of hand or be used unfairly. Often this happens without either the group or the facilitator realizing it. It is your responsibility to prevent abuse of your position as a facilitator. Maintaining your integrity is significantly easier if you have thought through the following responsibilities.*

- 1. It is not enough that you yourself are striving for equality and cooperation.** Most people are accustomed to participating in groups where one person acts as a leader and is treated as someone important, someone with special power and wisdom. Unless the group understands your role, they will probably perceive of you as an authority and allow you to influence them too much. It is important for you to demystify your role by explaining exactly what a facilitator does, why they do it, and that when you intervene in the group's process it is not because you dislike or are angry with someone, but simply that you are doing your job. This is called the facilitator's disclaimer, so that when you do interrupt someone, you have a reference point to remind people that you interrupted in your role as a facilitator.
- 2. Even though you explain your role, you may find that people depend on you** ("You're such a good facilitator ... I know I could never do that."). They may give some of their power to you and look to you to make decisions, define situations, solve problems, etc. This is one of the strongest tests – whether you accept and use this power or reflect back to the group the need to take responsibility for its own decisions. The temptation to use the power members give you to fill your own needs (increased self-esteem, manipulation of an issue for your own benefit, even the simple desire to finish with an issue and move on) will be strong. The fact that the group gave you their power is no excuse for you to accept it.
- 3. A similar potential for abuse comes from the fact that facilitators perform a subtle, non-directive role.** The passive, friendly, well-meaning facilitator can manipulate people in ways that an aggressive, forceful leader could never get away with. The difference between manipulation and dictation may only be a matter of whether or not the group is aware that they are being controlled. It is your responsibility not to use the techniques of facilitation to control the group.
- 4. There are few external standards or governing bodies that ensure quality for peer support facilitation.** There are also many types of facilitation; not all facilitators are peer support facilitators. Some people may call themselves a facilitator without any experience, skills or understanding of peer support and how groups work. (Note: On the job training, lived experience, formal and informal education are all valuable forms of skill and knowledge building.) Some people may also charge groups high fees and leave them with nothing of value. When charging others for facilitation,

consider the participants' ability to pay and your cost/ability to run the group. Be fair and ethical. Additionally, make sure you get fair pay for the value of your work.

5. **Being a facilitator does not make you qualified to be a psychotherapist, either with a group or one-on-one.** Because facilitation involves focusing on human values, emotions, and personal experiences, facilitators are often seen as resources for personal psychological challenges. Group members sometimes reach out to facilitators, directly or indirectly, with their emotional needs. Be clear about your boundaries and what you can and cannot help with. Remember peer support facilitators provide support and resources; they do not diagnose or do therapy. Lack of resources is often a barrier so do your best to support peers in navigating the healthcare system in order to get what they need.

6. **As a facilitator be wary of any expectations you may have to get your own emotional needs met by working with groups.** The nature of peer support fosters mutual growth, however it is important to have your own self-care and self awareness so that group members don't feel like you are relying on them. Often in groups people develop one-sided perceptions of one another, resulting in intense interactions. If you as a facilitator become particularly involved with one or more participants, you may neglect others, or worse, be seen as an advocate of those you are involved with. This can be detrimental to the whole group. If you become more involved with one or more members in your group, maintain your neutrality during group meetings and carefully explain the difference in your behaviour to those who may be expecting you to act the same in-group with them as you do outside of the group.

7. **It is the facilitator's responsibility to make sure the group understands what you are doing with them:** what your purpose is, how you expect to meet their needs, what you can give them and how you are going to do that. It is your responsibility to present yourself fairly, to be open to feedback from the group (you are there for their benefit), and to consider altering your approach to meet the group's purpose and goals. It's the group's right to hold you accountable for what you do with them, just as it is your role to ensure that they too take responsibility for their actions in making the group a successful experience of everyone.

*Adapted for use in peer support groups: <http://www.spunk.org/texts/consensu/sp000763.html>  
III. Code of Responsibilities: Ethics For Facilitators, July 11, 2011.*