

How to Build Safety in a Group

Note: this is different from building comfort. If the facilitator and group do a good job of building safety, then the participants will frequently go out of their comfort zone in order to stretch and grow. Allowing feelings of discomfort can, therefore, be one sign of growing safety in a group.

- Allow the group to experience common ground.
- Use small groups frequently.
- Use a buddy system, or small ongoing support groups.
- Ask participants to do goal-setting and goal-sharing; check in on goals periodically.
- Give permission for a range of self-disclosure – it's OK for each person to set their own level.
- As facilitator, give warm attention.
- Show the group that you value safety.
- Give support for forgiveness, including self-forgiveness. It encourages risk-taking.
- Do "noticings" (non-judgemental, non-evaluative observations).
- Invite the group to take care of the whole group (although not to be "care-takers" engaged in rescues and fix-its).
- Model OK-ness (rather than exhibiting anxiety if a participant is angry, emoting, in crisis).
- Remember the option of going one-on-one with anxious participants, for example during break, or coaching their buddy to reach out to an anxious one.
- Design activities for an alternating rhythm of differentiation and integration. Differentiation may mean the experience of individuality or the experience of a subgroup ("We people of color," "We men," "We young adults," "We senior staff," "We new board members").
- Use structure (like precise formulations of sentence completions, or clear and concrete group agreements/ground rules), and rigor (like precise amounts of time for break, facilitator does what they say they will do, etc.).
- Invite participants to take care of themselves (group agreements like "Use everything for your own advancement," "Take care of yourself so you can be present for others").
- Acknowledge the margins as well as the mainstream of the group.