

# VIRTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS

## BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATORS

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### PREPARING FOR YOUR GROUP

- 1. Set your group parameters and goals.** These will determine the how you facilitate, how you advertise, and what sort of ground rules and follow-up you set. Consider:
  - **Attendees:** Is this for survivors only? Loved ones too? What ages? Open to your healthcare system patients or foundation members only? Or to anyone in the world?
  - **Type:** Is it for social, support, educational purposes?
  - **Identify:** Target outcomes and takeaways
  - **Facilitators:** Who will run the group? Is this a mental health (lead) environment, purely peer support, or a hybrid? (Be sure to advertise clearly as these are very different experiences)
    - Plan for recruiting facilitators and training them for virtual settings.
  - **Style:** Is the group conversation-based only? Will you include any icebreakers, virtual activities, discussion points (such as an article sent ahead of time), etc.?
  - **Logistics:** What are the minimum and maximum numbers of participants you can accommodate?
  - **Virtual Platform:** does your organization require an encrypted platform?
  - **Considerations:** Legal and other parameters. Does your organization dictate guidelines (such as privacy, legal considerations, or chart documentation) that you must follow?
- 2. Advertise where the people are.** Tell them many times, many ways, with many reminders.
- 3. Structure your group flow and have a plan for:**
  - **Co-facilitator roles:** This makes it easier to watch multiple participant screens. Designate who manages tech issues and who begins conversation flow/facilitation, who manages sidebar if someone has a tech or trigger issue.
  - **Safety (triggers and beyond):** Have a plan in place for participants who might need additional support during or after the group. Verify participants' physical address/location (could be different than past registration or info in medical record).
  - **Conversation flow;** Who will set the tone? (Welcome, ground rules, first person to share—such as a veteran survivor).
  - **Sharing your Screen:** Display a welcome document that includes ground rules
  - **Using your technology:** Familiarize yourself with capabilities like tile/all participant view; typed messaging function (to troubleshoot, assist as needed, deal with group dynamics); disabling participant-to-participant chatting option; using the mute button, etc.
  - **Your welcome email:** Include group description, what to expect, technology/access details, ground rules.



## DURING YOUR GROUP

- **Visual welcome:** Share a document, such as group ground rules onscreen.
- **Greeting:** As participants enter, greet by name, ask for webcam on, private message if location address is needed.
- **Begin group:** Ground rules shared onscreen/what to expect.
  - Show and state rules exactly the same way every time. In healthcare, this includes stating that facilitators are an extension of the medical team and will update providers on anything brought up in group that pertains to medical care. (Participants should be informed in these situations.)
- **Conversation kickoff:** Guest survivor, reading shared ground rules, or other ritual.
- **Introductions:**
  - “Please briefly introduce yourself: your name, where you are from, and share what brings you to this group and the most challenging part about that right now.”
  - Note that there will be more opportunities to share, and this should be a brief introduction.
- **Watch for body language cues.** This will help you be responsive to participants who want to speak, are distressed, etc.
- **Conversation flow**
  - A theme or themes will emerge from the group and information can be given during the group regarding how to deal with grief and trauma symptoms, intrusive questions, etc. (Name the theme, normalize the experience, mention resources)
  - Invite group members to speak (generally, and by inviting individuals by name if needed)
  - Use the typed message function to check in with individual participants if needed/if appropriate with group style.
  - Call attention to the supportive environment (reference smiling faces, heads nodding, etc. to build group cohesion and perception of support).
  - The instillation of hope is an essential part of a trauma group. Members do this for each other as well as facilitators utilizing teachable moments about shifting thoughts, relaxation breathing, etc.
    - Focus on coping and healing. Refer back to guest survivor, Phoenix SOAR peer supporter, or another group member. Ask questions such as “What was this process like for you now that you have some distance?” or “If you could name one positive strategy or one way you coped, what would it be?”
    - Normalize and repeat the ups and downs and unique process each trauma survivor will go through.
- **Begin Closure/Wrap Up:** About 15 minutes prior to end, go around the group and ask people to briefly state their take aways.
- **Next Steps:** End with additional opportunities, next steps for support if needed, intentions for remaining connected. Refer to additional resources such as Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors.



## FOLLOW-UP

Send a follow-up email with relevant resources (such as Phoenix Society's [Resource Center](#)), next opportunities to stay connected (cross-reference other groups), and a feedback survey.

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## ADDITIONAL TOOLS

### General Welcome Script

(Repeat periodically if additional participants join)

We are so glad you joined us for support! This group is for adult survivors and loved ones. In order to honor their support needs, we ask that all participants identify within these categories. We have basic ground rules to create a supportive setting. We also ask that everyone acknowledge understanding that this group is focused on peer support, and is not a substitute for local emotional support. Everyone deserves support. Can you (all) agree to identify a specific person (friend, family member, counselor, spiritual leader, etc.) and a specific plan for how you will connect with them if you are feeling down or distressed? (Pause for agreement/acknowledgement from each participant.)

*If you have not received participants' physical address/location from the registration process, have each participant enter their physical address via your sign-up process or during the meeting via direct message to facilitator in case of emergency.*

### Opening Ground Rules

#### 1. A safe place for feelings and unconditional presence.

- All feelings are okay and honored. None are shameful, good, bad, etc. Group is a safe and judgement-free environment. We will not rescue, stop, or judge anyone's feelings.
- What is shared in the group stays in the group—this includes telling people's stories even if you do not share their name.
  - Please understand that we are not able to monitor group members adherence to confidentiality and remind everyone that this is an honor system.
- Everyone deserves a support system. Have a plan for where else you will get support next. Identify a specific person (friend, family member, counselor, spiritual leader, etc.) and a specific plan for how you will connect with them if you are feeling down or distressed.
- Communicating in various ways: There are multiple safe ways to community during virtual groups. If you want to say more than your current voice (strength) or confidence is allowing, please feel free to type into the message box and ask the facilitator to speak it out for you.



## 2. Respect for boundaries.

- We will work to facilitate **equal airtime** for all participants. To do this, we might ask you to share a shortened version of your story, narrowing down on a specific event or feeling that you're looking to get support for. We will help guide the conversation to allow everyone to have time to speak.
  - Please use your mute button when you are not speaking.
  - If multiple people seem to want to speak at once, please raise your hand/arm/prosthetic to signal the facilitators.
- **Open to giving and receiving:** You will hear others' perspectives, but we are not here to give one another advice or "should"s.
- **Step back:** If you know you are often the first to speak or offer, please be mindful to step back to allow for other's perspectives and needs.
- **Respect for spiritual boundaries** requires that the group be accepting of and a safe space for diverse re-ligious and spiritual belief systems.
- Please do not try to sell products or services during group.

## 3. Confidentiality.

- What is shared in this virtual gathering, stays in this virtual gathering. It is not okay to share other people's stories or details of their life that they might choose to reveal in a support group.
- Please note: the facilitators are bound to being a link in getting you help if needed. If someone discloses self harm, suicidal thoughts, or that they are being harmed or harming someone else, the appropriate au-thorities required by law will be contacted. Again, this for your safety.
- Respecting **continued privacy**. Do not give out personal information, or invite or solicit individual connections during group.

*This resource was adapted from [Creating Emotional Safety in Support Groups](#), by Megan Bronson, PMHCNS-BC. Find more Phoenix Society resources for leaders in the burn community on the following page.*



## MORE RESOURCES

### Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors

Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors is the leading national non-profit supporting and empowering anyone impacted by a burn injury. We offer support at each stage of the healing process to help survivors and their loved ones thrive.

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### Resource Center

Explore resources by the burn community, for the burn community. Find information and inspiration through this growing collection of articles, survivor stories, online courses, e-books, and more.

- [Introduction to Phoenix Society Services](#) (course w/ nursing contact hours)
  - [Support Groups for Children and Teens](#) (fact sheet)
  - [Coping with Current Events: How to Stay Calm and Connected](#) (article)
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### Peer Support

Nothing heals people like other people. Phoenix Society's national network of peer supporters offers hope and healing to survivors and their loved ones. Online peer support opportunities make that connection accessible to anyone, wherever they are, whenever they need support.

- [Phoenix SOAR \(Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery\)](#)
  - [Peer Support Chat](#)
  - [Virtual Support Groups](#)
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### Connect with Phoenix Society

**Phone:** 1-800-888-BURN

**Email:** [info@phoenix-society.org](mailto:info@phoenix-society.org)

**Website:** [www.phoenix-society.org](http://www.phoenix-society.org)

**Facebook:** [@PhoenixSocietyforBurnSurvivors](https://www.facebook.com/PhoenixSocietyforBurnSurvivors)