

Focus Groups

a quick guide

Q: What is a focus group?

A: Small group conversation guided by a facilitator

Participants share their experiences, opinions, and ideas about a program, service, or issue.

- *Guided discussion with open-ended questions*
- *Participants build on each other's ideas*
- *Usually lasts 60-90 minutes*



Q: Why use a focus group?

A: To understand experiences behind the data

Focus groups understand the story behind the numbers.

Focus groups help us learn:

- *What participants think about programs or services*
- *What is working well and what can be improved*
- *New ideas from the community*

Q: Who participates in focus groups?

A: People with relevant lived experience

- *Program participants*
- *Community members*
- *Service providers*
- *Family members*



Q: How are results used?

A: To improve programs and decision-making

Insights from key themes can be used to make recommendations.

- *Highlight program strengths*
- *Identify participant barriers*
- *Suggest program improvements*
- *Inform planning and policy decisions*



Facilitating a Focus Group

A Step-by-Step Guide

1

Recruit Participants

- Invite participants with shared lived experience.
- Incentives can help increase participation.

2

Create a Protocol

- Prepare a discussion guide to structure the conversation.
- Use open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses rather than “yes” or “no” answers.

3

Gather Materials

- **Moderator** – Guides the discussion and keeps the group focused.
- **Note Taker** – Documents key points and records the session (AI tools can assist).
- **Recording Device** – Captures the discussion for later review when writing up results.

Example Question:

“Thinking about your experience with the program, what has been most helpful, and what could be improved?”

4

Set Up the Room

- Arrange seating in a circle or around a table to encourage conversation.

5

Before You Start

- Set ground rules
- Obtain informed consent for recording the session

Ground Rules

1. Respect and Confidentiality

Create a supportive space where participants feel comfortable sharing without fear of being judged.

2. Everyone Gets to Speak

Minimize “dominant” voices (those who do most of the talking). Invite shy participants to offer their perspectives.

Start with an Icebreaker

Helps participants get comfortable, lowers tension, and encourages open dialogue.

Stay Focused on Goals

Minimize off-topic conversations to make the most of time.

Encourage Constructive Feedback

Invite participants to share both challenges and successes. Ask how challenges could be improved.

Ask Follow-up Questions

For brief responses, never be afraid to say “tell me more about that”

Summarize Key Takeaways

At the end, briefly summarize the main themes you heard and invite participants to clarify or add anything that may have been missed

Thank Them!

Remind them that their feedback helps to improve the program

Pro Tip

Let them do all the talking!

A focus group is a **conversation** between participants. Ask questions neutrally and say as little as possible so participants don't feel you're looking for a specific answer. Let the conversation flow organically.

Let's go!