

**FACILITATOR'S GUIDE FOR ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS**

**WITH TEENS**

# **YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH**



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# GUIDE OVERVIEW

This facilitator guide serves as a comprehensive framework for guiding meaningful, respectful, and productive roundtable discussions with teens on topics related to youth substance use, including its connection to mental health. As a companion document for the *Free Mind* campaign, partners can engage their community by facilitating roundtable discussions and sharing campaign resources. This document can also be used by communities and organizations to promote discussion of youth substance use and mental health and to develop prevention activities.

Roundtable sessions aim to foster open communication, address harmful attitudes, and build understanding. Partners can identify appropriate facilitators by evaluating who is trusted by and relatable to teen audience members, familiar with the topic area, emotionally intelligent, and experienced in creating a space where individuals feel safe navigating complex conversations.

By emphasizing best practices, this guide contextualizes the environment and audience, offering expert strategies for effective facilitation in both in-person and virtual settings.

# PRINCIPLES OF FACILITATION

A roundtable engages community members who are interested in a discussion, enabling them to contribute their perspectives, personal experiences, and ideas to the conversation. The primary objectives for roundtables are to:

- Facilitate engaging dialogue.
- Raise awareness about important issues like youth substance use and mental health.
- Understand and share perceptions among roundtable participants.
- Glean insights into solutions that roundtable participants believe are helpful.

**Roundtables differ from focus groups because they involve facilitated, yet participant-led, discussions on pre-identified topics.** This allows participants to directly share information about their experiences instead of providing feedback on stimuli presented to them. Many roundtables begin with a short educational presentation followed by the facilitated discussion. An educational presentation can be as simple as reviewing a fact sheet, presenting a slide deck, or watching a video about substance use and mental health and should take 5 – 10 minutes. Roundtables should be small group discussions, ideally with no more than ten participants, to allow time and space for all participants to engage.



## Clarify Objectives:

- Begin each session with a clear understanding of the goals. Ask yourself: “What do we want to learn from our roundtable participants?” and “What do we want roundtable participants to learn from each other?”.
- Use questions as tools to guide the conversation naturally, allowing participants to explore ideas freely without feeling constrained.



## Create an Open Environment:

- Create a judgment-free space that respects and values all voices and invites participants to share their own observations and experiences.
- Encourage dialogue by being adaptable and flexible. Let the conversation guide you rather than rigidly adhering to a script.
- Avoid the persona of an investigator or researcher. Be present, responsive, and empathetic, emphasizing genuine interest in participants’ contributions.



## Engage the Group:

- Use non-verbal cues to gauge comfort levels and adapt accordingly.
- Pay attention to body language (in-person) or participant engagement (virtual) to assess understanding and comfort.
- Summarize key points periodically to maintain clarity.



## Facilitator Demeanor:

- Authenticity is essential. Teens can detect insincerity. Be yourself and prioritize building trust over trying to fit a persona.
- Emphasize active listening by reflecting on participants’ contributions, ensuring they feel heard and valued.

# Engaging Teen Participants in Virtual Roundtables

Virtual settings require **intentional strategies** to ensure engagement. Facilitators should use **interactive tools** and **structure discussions effectively**.

## Tips for Virtual Engagement:

- 1 Use **breakout rooms** for smaller group discussions on sensitive topics.
- 2 Encourage **peer-to-peer responses** rather than direct, facilitator-driven conversation.
- 3 Monitor **participants' engagement** through verbal responses, chat contributions, and reaction buttons.
- 4 **Directly invite** participants to contribute ("[Name], what are your thoughts on this?") to ensure balanced engagement.
- 5 Mix in **polls, word clouds, and ranking exercises** to keep energy levels up.

## The Art of Facilitation

The hallmark of an effective roundtable is creating an environment that liberates participants to speak freely without feeling confined by direct questioning or rigid facilitation styles that interrupt or stifle the flow of conversation. Strategies that help you ask and answer questions, bridge conversation topics, and capture key moments can not only result in meaningful discussions but foster trust and promote engagement.

## The Art of Questioning

### The Best Questions Are the Ones You Don't Have to Ask

A successful facilitator fosters a space where participants naturally arrive at insights or explore areas of focus through organic dialogue rather than by asking a specific question.

⇒ **Example:** Instead of asking directly, "Why do teens turn to vaping when stressed?", consider starting a conversation about coping mechanisms. When participants mention vaping, follow with reflective prompts like, "What about vaping makes it appealing in stressful situations?" or "How do you feel about its effects?" This approach encourages deeper, self-guided exploration.

This is particularly critical as teens are perceptive and often wary of overt questioning. Frame topics softly or use indirect methods, such as storytelling or hypotheticals, to navigate sensitive issues without triggering defensiveness.

### Comfort with Going Off Script

Facilitators must embrace flexibility, understanding that sticking rigidly to a script can hinder organic discussion. Unlike focus groups, roundtables thrive on adaptability, with the facilitator guiding rather than directing the conversation.

- **Key Practices:** Prioritize keeping the conversation flowing. Minimize long pauses and transitions by being ready to pivot based on participant responses. Adapt your “game plan” in real-time.
  - ⇒ **Example:** If a discussion about mental health naturally evolves into substance use, seize the moment rather than redirecting to your next planned question. You can always circle back and/or find another opportunity to ask a question that you were planning on asking in that specific moment.
- **Flow of Conversation:** When responses address topics scheduled for later in the session, integrate those naturally. Avoid re-asking questions that participants have indirectly answered through organic dialogue. Celebrate these moments as wins and don’t feel confined to the run of show you had in mind before entering the space.
  - ⇒ **Example:** If a participant mentions using a substance to manage stress during a mental health discussion, follow up immediately: “Does anyone else relate to using substances as a way to cope?” This keeps the conversation dynamic and relevant.
- **Momentum Matters:** Read the room. If participants dive deeper into mental health, allow the discussion to continue in that direction rather than forcing a pivot to substance use. Flexibility ensures the group’s engagement remains high.
- **Have Go-To Probing Questions:** If the discussion slows, have a few open-ended prompts ready to use that can help to keep the conversation going.
  - ⇒ **Example:** To encourage deeper engagement with a question, ask: “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What are other perspectives on this?”.
- **Reframe or Clarify Questions If They Don’t Land:** If a question doesn’t get much response, try rewording or providing an example.
  - ⇒ **Example:** If a question on mental health gets no response, you could ask: “Instead of asking about mental health, let’s think about a time when you felt stressed or overwhelmed. How did you deal with it?”.

## Bridging Conversations to Maintain Momentum and Guide the Discussion

Facilitators can easily lose momentum in a discussion if they pivot too soon or too abruptly, or if conversations drift too far from the essential topics. Instead, use bridging techniques to keep the conversation flowing while steering it toward key focus areas without disrupting engagement.

### Best Practices for Bridging Topics:

- **Identify Key Bridging Moments:** Look for comments that naturally link back to where you need the discussion to go. Someone will eventually say something that connects different aspects of the topic—this is your chance to pivot.
- **Use Bridging Questions:** Ask follow-ups that steer the conversation smoothly without making the shift too obvious.
  - ⇒ **Example:** “That’s an interesting point about peer pressure. Does this tie into what we discussed earlier about how social media influences teen decision-making?”
- **Keep the Flow Natural:** Rather than abruptly shifting topics, introduce them as extensions of the current conversation. Use language like “This connects to...” or “Building on what we discussed earlier...” to seamlessly guide the discussion.

## Best Practices for Capturing and Remembering Key Moments

A crucial best practice for effective facilitation is actively tracking key moments throughout the discussion. While keeping the conversation flowing is important, capturing major insights, meaningful connections, and participant contributions ensures a roundtable remains dynamic and impactful. You can achieve this through both physical note-taking and mental tracking, depending on the setting. You should also plan to have up to two members of your team supporting you by taking notes that capture important moments and key observations so you can remain focused on facilitation.

### 1 Identifying Key Contributions:

Facilitators should focus on moments that provide deep insight, connect different topics, or spark strong group reactions.

#### What to look for:

- **Bridging Topics:** When a participant naturally connects two themes, use it to transition smoothly.  
⇒ **Example:** A teen mentions vaping to cope with stress, leading to a conversation on substance use as a coping mechanism.
- **Shifting Perspectives:** If someone challenges a common assumption, highlight it for group reflection.  
⇒ **Example:** A participant notes that fear of judgement at home prevents conversations about mental health.
- **Strong Engagement:** If multiple participants react strongly to a statement, expand on it.  
⇒ **Example:** “It looks like many of you relate to that. Can someone share why?”

### 2 Balancing Mental and Physical Note-Taking

Facilitators should capture insights while maintaining engagement. In virtual settings, taking notes is easier, while in-person discussions may require mental tracking. As noted, having one or two team members assist with note-taking helps ensure that all key moments are captured.

#### Strategies:

- **When You Can Take Notes:** Use shorthand for key themes and participant initials to reference later.
- **When You Need Mental Notes:** Assign mental tags to themes like coping or peer pressure.
- **Use Repetition to Reinforce Recall:** Summarize key points aloud to help both facilitators and participants retain critical insights.

### 3 Keeping Conversations Connected

Tracking responses helps facilitators circle back to earlier insights and maintain discussion flow.

- ⇒ **Example:** “Earlier, Alex mentioned social media’s effect on mental health. Do you think it influences substance use perceptions?”



# CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR OPEN DIALOGUE

Facilitators play a crucial role in challenging misconceptions, promoting understanding, and fostering a safe space for discussion. Addressing harmful attitudes, creating safety, and addressing concerns about disclosure all require intentional framing of conversations, reinforcing positive language, and encouraging participants to reflect on their own perceptions.

## Key Approaches to Promote Empathy

- Encourage non-judgmental dialogue by setting the expectation that all perspectives are valid and valued.
- Challenge myths and misconceptions by providing accurate information and personalizing the issue through real-life examples.
- Reframe the conversation from blame and personal failure to understanding, support, and prevention.

## Examples of Judgmental Language and How to Reframe:

- **Instead of:** “People who use drugs are just making bad choices.”  
⇒ **Use:** “Substance use is often linked to stress, trauma, or mental health struggles.”
- **Instead of:** “Just say no to drugs.”  
⇒ **Use:** “What do you think makes it hard for some teens to say no?”

## Addressing Harmful Perceptions in Teen Discussions

Fear of judgment can prevent teens from fully engaging in conversations about mental health and substance use. It’s essential to challenge misconceptions and create an open dialogue.

Begin your roundtable introduction by addressing harmful perceptions about mental health and substance use—their impact and consequences, particularly that judgmental language can be a conversation blocker. Provide relatable examples to make the concept tangible.

- **Facilitator Strategy:** Encourage **teens to set their own ground rules**, emphasizing respect, confidentiality, and personal perspectives. This helps foster **trust and openness** in discussions. Prepare ground rules in advance, just in case the teen participants miss any important ones.

## Addressing Teen Concerns About Disclosure





### Sensitivity to Fear of Retaliation and Peer Repercussions

Teens often worry about acknowledging substance use because they fear unintended consequences such as social alienation or parental retaliation. A common question facilitators might encounter is, “You’re not going to tell my parents about this, right?” This indicates that we must address a fundamental trust concern with sensitivity.

By proactively addressing these concerns and adapting facilitation techniques, facilitators can create an environment where teens feel safer engaging in meaningful discussions around mental health and substance use.



## Best Practices for Facilitators:

- **Establish Clear Confidentiality Parameters Early:** At the start of the discussion, outline the limits of confidentiality. Use reassuring language and explain that while the session is a safe space, there are exceptions, such as immediate safety concerns.  
 **Example:** “This is a place for open conversation. We’re not here to judge or report back to anyone, but if someone shares that they are in immediate danger, we do have to make sure they get the right help.”
- **Use Generalized or Hypothetical Framing:** Instead of asking directly about personal substance use, phrase questions in a way that distances individuals from their own experiences. This allows participants to engage without feeling exposed.  
 **Example:** “How do you think teens your age view substance use?” or “What have you heard about the ways people deal with stress?”
- **Normalize the Concern:** Acknowledge their fear without making them feel defensive.  
 **Example:** “It makes sense that talking about this can feel risky. A lot of people worry about that, but our goal here is to understand these issues better and support one another.”
- **Encourage Group Input:** If one teen expresses hesitation, turn to the group. This shifts the focus to shared experiences rather than singling anyone out.  
 **Example:** “Does anyone else feel that way? Why do you think these conversations can feel tough to have?”
- **Create Alternative Ways to Participate:** Allow for written responses, anonymous polling, or online engagement tools (e.g., Mentimeter) to collect input without putting teens on the spot.

# TIPS FOR TEEN ROUNDTABLES

Implement these best practices for effective, open, and engaging roundtable discussions that help teens navigate mental health, substance use, and prevention strategies.

- **Creating a supportive environment:** Establish a relaxed, inviting setting and use circular or semi-circular seating to foster openness and encourage peer-to-peer engagement.
- **Use natural transitions:** Frame substance use discussions around coping mechanisms and stress relief.
- **Encourage open, judgment-free conversations:** Challenge misconceptions and normalize different perspectives.
- **Leverage technology for engagement:** Use breakout rooms, live polling, and other interactive features to facilitate discussion.

## Using Mental Health as an Entry Point to Discuss Substance Use

Many teens find it easier to discuss **mental health** than substance use. Using this as an entry point helps create a **natural, low-pressure transition** into discussions about substance use and prevention.

### Example Discussion Flow:

- 1 **Start with Stress & Coping:** “What are some ways you or people you know deal with stress?”
- 2 **Segue into Substance Use:** “Some people work out or listen to music, but others use substances like vaping or alcohol. Why do you think that happens?”
- 3 **Encourage Reflection:** “Does using substances actually help in the long run? Why or why not?”

### Why this works:

- Keeps the focus on **coping behaviors rather than substance use itself**.
- Encourages discussion **without making teens feel exposed**.
- Helps facilitators transition into prevention-related conversations organically.
- The focus is on **why people turn to substances**, not whether someone personally uses them.

## Final Thoughts

Effective roundtable facilitation hinges on flexibility, empathy, and creating a safe, inclusive space for dialogue. By tailoring discussions to the specific needs of teens, facilitators can guide meaningful conversations that build understanding and promote positive action in addressing mental health and substance use challenges. These discussions have the potential to foster trust, collaboration, and long-term impact within communities.