TuNidito
Your Place for Grief Support

Facilitator Tips:

THE SKILL OF INTERRUPTING

As a child, you likely learned that interrupting is rude and a sign of bad manners. So, here you are as an adult, with years of politeness training, being asked to interrupt others. And not just anyone either, you're asked to interrupt people who are talking about devastating losses. Interrupting people, particularly when they are expressing deep and difficult emotions, goes against all we are taught about how to be considerate and kind.

So why interrupt? Why put ourselves through the anxiety and distraction of figuring out the when, how, and why of stopping a child, teen, or adult in group from continuing to speak? Wouldn't it just be better to hold our breath and silently plead with the person to stop talking? While that might look easier on the outside, it drains our mental energy, especially when the person talking is possibly creating discord or an unsafe situation. In most cases, the benefits of interrupting outweigh the effort and risk that go into overcoming years of programming to be polite. The facilitator's role is to create a physically and emotionally safe space. When someone is breaking the rules by giving advice or monopolize time, it isn't a supportive space. Other group members may opt out of attending if they feel like someone is constantly giving them advice or if only one person gets to speak.

Perhaps one (or more) of these scenarios is familiar to you:

1. Eight-year-old Brandon is the fourth child in Opening Circle to talk. After quickly sharing that his dad died from cancer, he launches into a detailed explanation of the new video game he got for his birthday. Five minutes go by and while he's still talking about Norks and swamp creatures, the other children begin to roll their eyes and grow restless, or at least more restless than usual. You notice your thoughts swaying between, *"Did I remember to get vegetables for dinner tonight?"* and *"Why won't he stop talking?!"*

2. When it gets close to 14-year-old Sarah's turn, you find your jaw clenching in anticipation of another story about how her friends are fake and about that one kid who always ruins things for her and her boyfriend, who have broken up and gotten back together five times in the last two weeks. The thought running on repeat in your mind is, *"How can anyone talk that much without seeming to take a breath?"*

3. Julie, whose partner died from substance use, is new to the young adult group. She's the third person to talk and her story is almost 20 minutes long, leaving only 10 minutes for the other six participants to share. You're torn between feeling

gratified that Julie felt safe to share on her first night and guilty that the other people in the group don't have much time left to talk.

4. Steve, a father whose partner died from cancer, jumps in on another group member who is talking about the struggles she has with settling her partner's estate. Steve says, *"All lawyers are full of it, you should go to this website I found — it's way better than dealing with their lies."* Stunned, you freeze, unsure of what to say, and find yourself relieved when another participant changes the subject.

Before we dive into suggestions for how to respond in these situations, let's look at ways to set the tone and intention for group to make it gentler if/when you need to interrupt:

- **Guidelines:**

When reviewing the guidelines, emphasize those that address sharing, listening, and advice giving. You can let the group know that there may be times when you as the facilitator will interrupt to either ensure that everyone has a chance to share or to stop any unsolicited advice. This helps create awareness of the guidelines and your role in the group. It's also good to encourage people to speak from "me and not we," to minimize participants sharing in a way that assumes everyone thinks and feels the way they do.

• Give an overview of group:

At the beginning of each group give a brief review of the plan for the session. Even if your group follows the same structure each time, it's helpful to remind people of the different steps, so that they won't be surprised when the time comes to move to the next element. Here's an example, "Tonight, we'll briefly go over guidelines. Then we'll do quick introductions and open it up for discussion. When there are ten minutes left, we'll wrap up the discussion and go to Closing Circle."

• Be a transparent timekeeper:

Giving participants a sense of how much time is left helps keep things on track. It also gives you as the facilitator a good setup if you need to interrupt and ask someone to wrap up so others have a chance to share. With these strategies in place, you have a good foundation set for interrupting or redirecting. Here are four suggestions for indirect and direct ways to do so:

1. Redirect with gratitude, reflection and a question to the larger group:

In the case of someone talking for a long stretch of time, like with Julie, you can jump in and say, "Thank you Julie. You mentioned carrying a lot of guilt, I imagine that might ring true for others here tonight. Who else in the group has dealt with feelings of guilt or regret?" You could also try, "I see a lot heads nodding. Who else has felt this way?" *Note: you might have to talk over the person to do this, especially if they don't pause as they speak.

2. Interrupt with thanks, reflection and a question to the person:

If someone is straying far from the topic at hand, as with Brandon, you can interrupt by asking, "You really love this new video game. Which ones did you play with your dad?" If Brandon jumps right back into details about the game, you can use a more direct

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approach, “Brandon you really know a lot about this video game. I’d love to hear more during free time.”

3. Provide a timekeeping reminder:

Before time gets too tight, you might say, “Just so people know, we have 20 minutes left and four more people to go, so everyone has about five minutes to share.” Then if someone begins to take most of the minutes, you can follow up with, ““Whew. Let’s all take a breath together. Thank you for sharing your story – that sounds hard. We’re running short on time and still have two people, so we’ll come back if there’s any time left over.”

4. Start strategically:

If there is a participant like Sarah that you know tends to have a lot to say, you can start the circle with the person sitting next to her and then direct the sharing so that she will be the last to go. It helps if the person sitting next to her is a facilitator so you can call on them to start things off and then they can invite the person on the other side of them to go next.

5. Clarify about advice:

If someone starts to give advice, like in the situation with Steve, try not to put pressure on Heather to advocate for herself by saying something like this, “Hang on Steve, let me check something — Heather, were you looking for suggestions or were you just wanting to share about your struggles?” While gentle, this does put a burden on Heather to advocate for herself, so it is better to say, “Thank you Steve. It sounds like your experience wasn’t positive, but that sounds like advice, and we want to make sure we’re sticking to the guidelines. Could you talk about what it was like for you to deal with lawyers instead?”

These are just a few ways that you can interrupt and redirect when participants are sharing for long periods of time or veering into the land of giving advice. There’s a good chance that no matter how long you’ve practiced, you might still feel like you’re being rude or ill mannered. Hopefully, knowing that interrupting can lead to a safer and more equitable group experience will be the inspiration needed to override years of politeness training. Try these out and share your experiences with your fellow facilitators. Permission to (gracefully) interrupt granted!