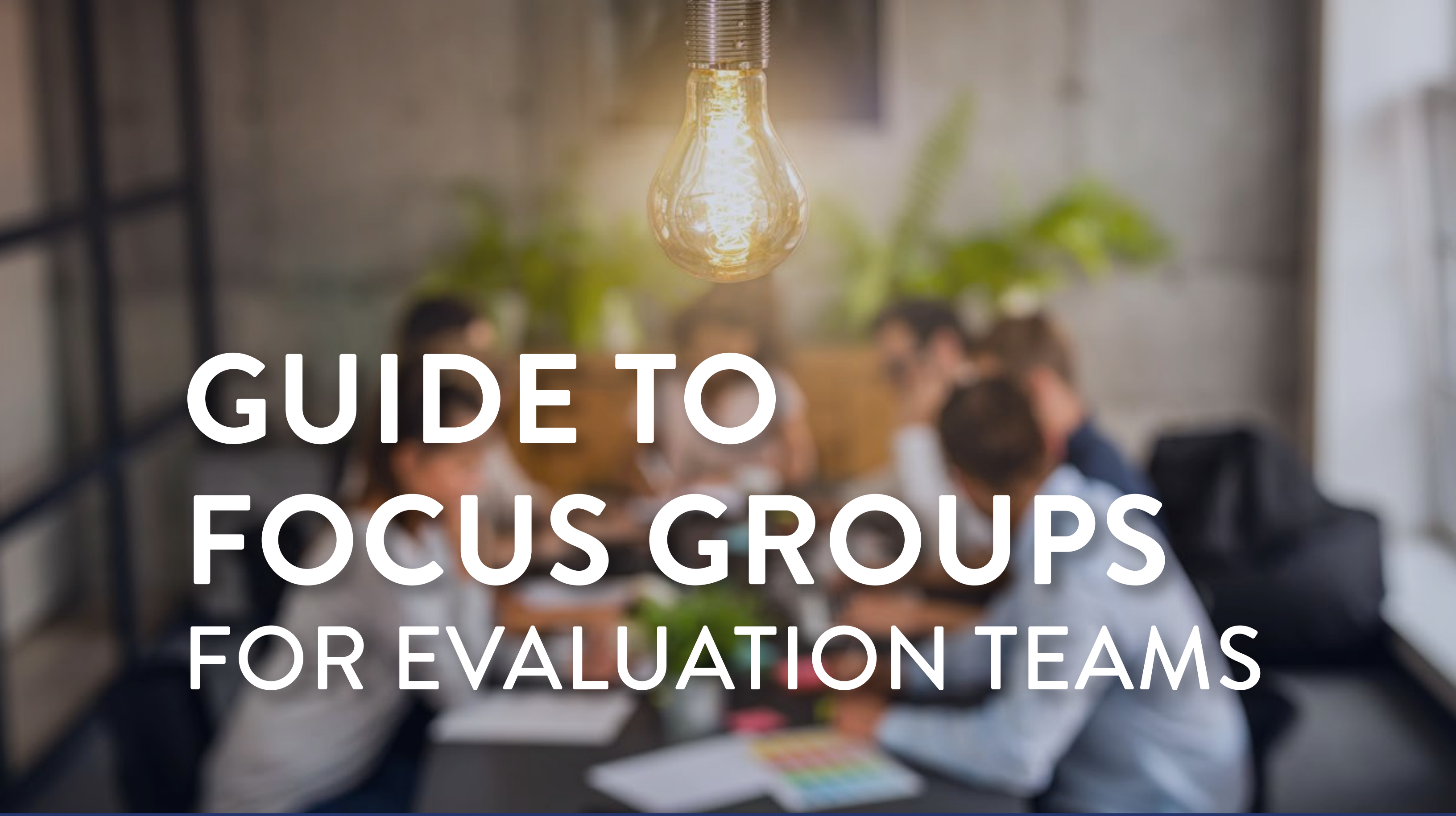

GUIDE TO FOCUS GROUPS FOR EVALUATION TEAMS

Everything you need to know about facilitating in-person and virtual focus groups

AKA

Allyson Kelley & Associates PLLC

You may have heard the world is made up of atoms and molecules, but it's really made up of stories. When you sit with an individual that's been here, you can give quantitative data a qualitative overlay.

— William Turner

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PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups bring together a diverse group of people to participate in a guided discussion about a particular topic. Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method that is widely used in public health to obtain knowledge, perspectives, and attitudes of people.

Focus groups are effective tools for both research and evaluation and can be used to:

- **Understand behavior, attitudes or knowledge**
- **Obtain in-depth information on concepts, perceptions, and ideas of a group**
- **Determine what people think as a group**
- **Examine health related issues and solutions**
- **Explore barriers and promoting factors for a program or intervention**
- **Generate ideas**
- **Inform program development and evaluation**
- **Answer the "Why?" questions**

Focus groups emphasize the interaction among participants instead of the facilitator asking questions. Participants are encouraged to communicate with one another, exchanging ideas, experiences, and other points of view through a guided discussion.

Examples of Focus Groups in Public Health

+ Assessment of adolescent's attitudes toward smoking
+ Identification of commonly used local terminology of symptoms or diseases
+ Diabetes care and education needs
+ Understanding of sexual abuse and associated factors
+ Wellbeing needs of LGBTQI+
+ Identification of psychosocial issues of patients
+ Exploring the effectiveness of an environmental protection programs

GUIDE TO FOCUS GROUPS

This guide highlights examples of how to use focus groups to support your evaluation efforts. Here we outline considerations, best practices, tips, techniques, checklists, and resources that will help you plan and facilitate the best focus groups for your evaluation. While focus groups are also an effective tool for research, there are a few key differences that require a different approach when used for research. This guide will explore focus groups only for the purpose of evaluation.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

You will need a discussion guide as a framework for the facilitator. The discussion guide would include questions and prompts that will be asked during the focus group. The questions should be general, open-ended, unbiased, and nonthreatening. In developing questions and prompts, it is important to ensure that you do not ask any leading questions.

Pilot-test your discussion guide before the focus group to refine questions and prompts.

For pilot testing, review the discussion guide first with the evaluation or program team to ensure the instructions, questions, and prompts are clear and interpreted as they are intended. Pilot testing does not need to occur in a group setting. After the evaluation team reviews, review the discussion guide with individuals who are similar to the group that will be participating in the focus group. Observe how they respond to the questions, encourage them to share aloud their thoughts, and note any confusion or questions that arise. As needed, revise the discussion guide before implementation.

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Usually, participants are recruited based on their experience or involvement in the topic of interest.

This is known as purposive or selective sampling and is a technique where the participants are chosen based on specific criteria. For example, if an evaluation aims to explore the needs of patients with diabetes within a local health program to inform a new program, the evaluation team would identify and outreach to patients with diabetes that actively utilize the local health program for medical care.

Once you define the eligibility for who can participate in the focus group, you can begin outreach and recruitment. Participants can be recruited through hospitals, health programs, workplaces, occupations, community centers, or more. They can be hand selected by the evaluation team if they are knowledgeable on the specific topic or recruited through other methods – such as a community flyer, email list, or word of mouth.

SIZE OF THE GROUP

Most focus groups have between 6 to 12 people.

You want the group small enough to ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate while making sure it isn't too small to lack adequate representation of perspectives and opinions. Ultimately, the number of participants depends on the topic. For example, if you want to engage individuals that have intensive experience to share on the topic, it is recommended to limit the size from 4 to 6 participants.

NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

The number of focus group sessions can depend on the topic, how much diversity is needed, and how much information you are getting.

For example, if you want to engage adults between 18-24 years of age that have a cancer diagnosis, you may only need to conduct one or two focus groups. This would be considered a homogeneous group, or a group of individuals that are similar to each other in specific ways. On the other hand, if you are looking at collecting data to inform a community strategic plan and want to engage local youth, adults, and elders in focus groups you likely will need to host several focus groups to gather a representative sample.

One guideline in qualitative methods is to collect data until you reach saturation or a point where there is a repetition of themes, and no new information emerges. For more information on themes, review the Analysis section of this guide. Remember, time, money, and availability factors can impact how many focus groups you conduct.

SETTING

Focus groups can take place in person or virtually (online). Each requires a slightly different setup. If hosted in person, the venue needs to be comfortable and conducive to discussion. For example, it is ideal to have participants sit in a circle format rather than in an auditorium-style room where they do not face each other. Focus groups are often recorded to transcribe or review the information later and tape recorders can pick up the background noise. Whether focus groups are in-person or virtual it is important that the surrounding environment is quiet to avoid background noise or distractions.

ROLES OF FACILITATOR AND NOTE TAKER

Typically, two people conduct a focus group, one facilitates and the other takes notes.

A facilitator, also referred to as a moderator, guides the focus group discussions, asks questions, and engages participants. Sometimes it can be hard to get people to share, simple techniques to use during the discussion are highlighted in the Techniques for Facilitators section of this guide. Be clear on the assigned roles of the facilitator and note taker.

The note taker captures what is said and expressed, the tone of the discussion, key statements or themes that arise, and non-verbal cues. Non-verbal expressions can describe a lot about a situation so it is helpful to have a note-taker pay attention to these throughout the discussion. A note taker can sketch the room set up and where participants are seated, which can help with transcribing information and identifying who said what, and understanding the context around the discussions.

GATHER CONSENT FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS

Consent is often necessary for all forms of formal data collection, such as focus groups, surveys, and key informant interviews. Consent informs the participant of their rights, what they will be part of, and who to follow up with if they have any questions. Depending on the design of the focus group, participants can provide consent through a signature, verbal response, or other recorded methods.

Consent form basics:

+ Informs participants about the project
+ Shares the risks and benefits of participating
+ Gives the necessary information for the individual to voluntarily decide whether to participate or not
+ Allows individuals to ask questions before committing to participation
+ It is recommended that you share and collect consent forms with all recruited participants BEFORE the focus group begins.

FACILITATE A FOCUSED DISCUSSION

Once you have developed the discussion guide, defined your eligibility criteria, recruited participants, scheduled the focus groups, and obtained consent you can begin the focus group! The focus group should begin with a welcome and an introduction by the facilitator and note taker. It is important to provide a brief overview of the topic of discussion and objective of the focus group, discuss the ground rules, remind participants of their rights outlined in the consent, allow participants to ask any follow-up questions before beginning, and then begin the discussion. At the start, it is common to have participants introduce themselves to break the ice and help everyone become more comfortable. Focus group sessions typically last between 45 and 90 minutes.

At the start of the focus group, review the consent, request signatures if not already provided, remind participants of their rights, and answer any last questions. If applicable, tell the participants the focus group is being recorded.

Ground rules set the tone and ensure all participants and the facilitator are on the same page. Examples of ground rules often include:

- **Participation in the focus group is voluntary**
- **Share only the topics that you wish to share on**
- **There are no right or wrong answers – everyone's input and opinion are valuable**
- **Respect the opinions of others, even if you disagree**
- **Try to stay on topic; we may politely interject to keep us on the topic to cover all the questions**
- **Avoid revealing detailed or confidential information about an individual or organization**
- **Protect everyone's privacy and keep what was shared at the focus group within the group**

Focus Group Facilitation Flow

+ **Begin with a welcome and introductions of focus group facilitators**
+ **Provide an overview of the focus group purpose and objectives**
+ **Review the ground rules**
+ **Remind participants of their rights as outlined in the consent (requested signatures if still needed)**
+ **Allow participants to ask follow-up questions**
+ **Give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves**
+ **Remind participants the focus group is being recorded**
+ **Facilitate the focus group using the discussion guide!**

GENERAL TIPS FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

- Ask open-ended questions
- Balance participation among participants
- Politely redirect conversations back to the questions
- Confirm with participants to understand their sentence
- Avoid taking sides on what has been said
- Focus group questions are a guide, you can go off script to further explore concepts as necessary
- Do not challenge what participants say, they are being asked to come to share their thoughts, knowledge, and experiences in a safe space
- You do not need to read questions verbatim; encourage a conversational style and less formal delivery to guide the discussion

TECHNIQUES FOR FACILITATORS

PROBING TECHNIQUES

Sometimes people are hesitant to share, and you will need to prompt them to get more information. Some probing techniques could include asking...

"Can you tell me more?"

"Can you further elaborate on what you shared?"

"Would you give us an example?"

TECHNIQUES FOR REDIRECTION

At times, one or two people can dominate the conversation.
You can use certain statements to give someone else a chance to talk.

“Thanks for your input. Does anyone else have anything to say or think the same/ differently?”

“I appreciate those ideas, let’s bring this into a larger group discussion.”

I can tell you are passionate about this topic, anyone else want to respond or have other thoughts?”

For a focus group to flow and fit within the time frame, you will sometimes need to redirect when it gets off-topic. To redirect participants politely you could say...

“Okay that is a great point (then ask a question relating to the focus group topic)...”

At times it is helpful to summarize or repeat back what a participant has shared to ensure you understood them correctly. For example...

“Before moving to the next topic, I want to make sure I understand what you are sharing, you shared...”

IN-PERSON FOCUS GROUP CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to guide the development and implementation of your focus group.

BEFORE THE FOCUS GROUP

- ☐ Define the purpose of the focus group.
- ☐ Develop the discussion guide
- ☐ Define focus group selection criteria
- ☐ Develop the consent form
- ☐ Create outreach materials.
- ☐ Conduct outreach to engage participants. Define the location, date, and time of the focus group(s).
- ☐ Share consent forms with participants prior to the focus group and record their consent (e.g., signature, online form, verbal consent during focus group).
- ☐ Set up the room for the focus group and put up signs to guide your participants to the location.

AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP

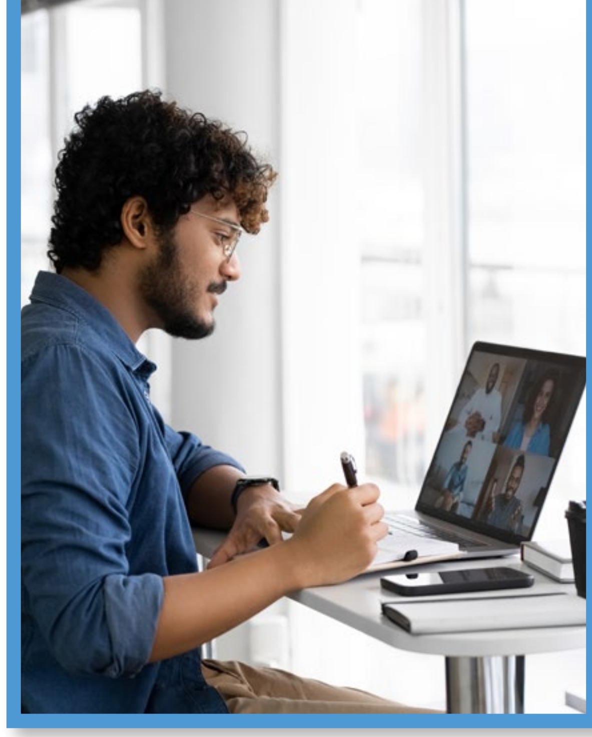
- ☐ Debrief as an evaluation team (facilitator, note taker, and any project staff that observed the focus group)
- ☐ Transcribe the data and analyze
- ☐ Report findings and be sure to share findings with the participants!

DURING THE FOCUS GROUP

- ☐ Start the focus group session.
- ☐ Introduce yourself, the note taker, and any evaluation assistants for the focus group.
- ☐ Briefly review the consent and remind participants of their rights in the evaluation or discussion.
- ☐ Share ground rules and allow time for questions from participants before beginning.
- ☐ Begin recording and start the focus group!
- ☐ Have all participants introduce themselves to "break the ice"
- ☐ Guide discussion.
- ☐ Once all questions have been covered, or the time is up, please stop recording devices. End the discussion by summarizing the main points. If time allows, invite participants to reflect on the main points and ask if they have anything further to share.
- ☐ Thank participants for their time. Describe the next steps in the study or evaluation and how the results will be shared with them.
- ☐ Provide incentives (if applicable) for their time and ensure they have the project's contact information to follow up if they have any questions after the focus group.
- ☐ Collect and save all notes and recordings.

VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are a great tool to use in-person or virtually to gather information. A virtual focus group may be the only feasible method or be the best method to engage busy individuals who might otherwise be difficult to get together in person. While virtual focus groups are not that different in structure than in-person ones, they do have several important planning considerations.



BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS:

- Easy to organize and ensures convenient time and place for participation
- Eases discussion of some sensitive or personal topics
- Allows for a more diverse range of participants
- Lowers the cost of data collection
- Increases participant and evaluator safety in some situations

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS:

- Technology, internet access, literacy, and tech support may be necessary
- Facilitator difficulty making eye contact and connections, observing non-verbal communication, and queues
- Diminished focus and engagement due to distractions
- Discomfort with being recorded on a video or virtual platform

VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUP CONSIDERATIONS

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE

It is important to ensure representation and equal opportunity to participate in the focus groups so that low-resource populations are not excluded through the virtual format. It should not be a requirement for participants to have a good internet connection. Rather, it is important to identify solutions that include making technology accessible for anyone interested in participating. This could include providing a hot spot, allowing participation through phone, purchasing cellular data, or making accommodations for participation.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

It is important to share links, resources, and consent documents prior to the focus group. Therefore, you need to ensure participants either have working emails or identify other means of sharing the information (e.g., Chat function on Zoom, text message sharing).

USE FAMILIAR TECHNOLOGY

Make sure you yourself are familiar with the technology you are using and that it is a platform that is commonly used. For example, if a university uses Microsoft Teams and you are looking to conduct focus groups with university staff, this may be the best method since they are already familiar with the functionality.

VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUP CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to guide the development and implementation of your focus group.

BEFORE THE FOCUS GROUP

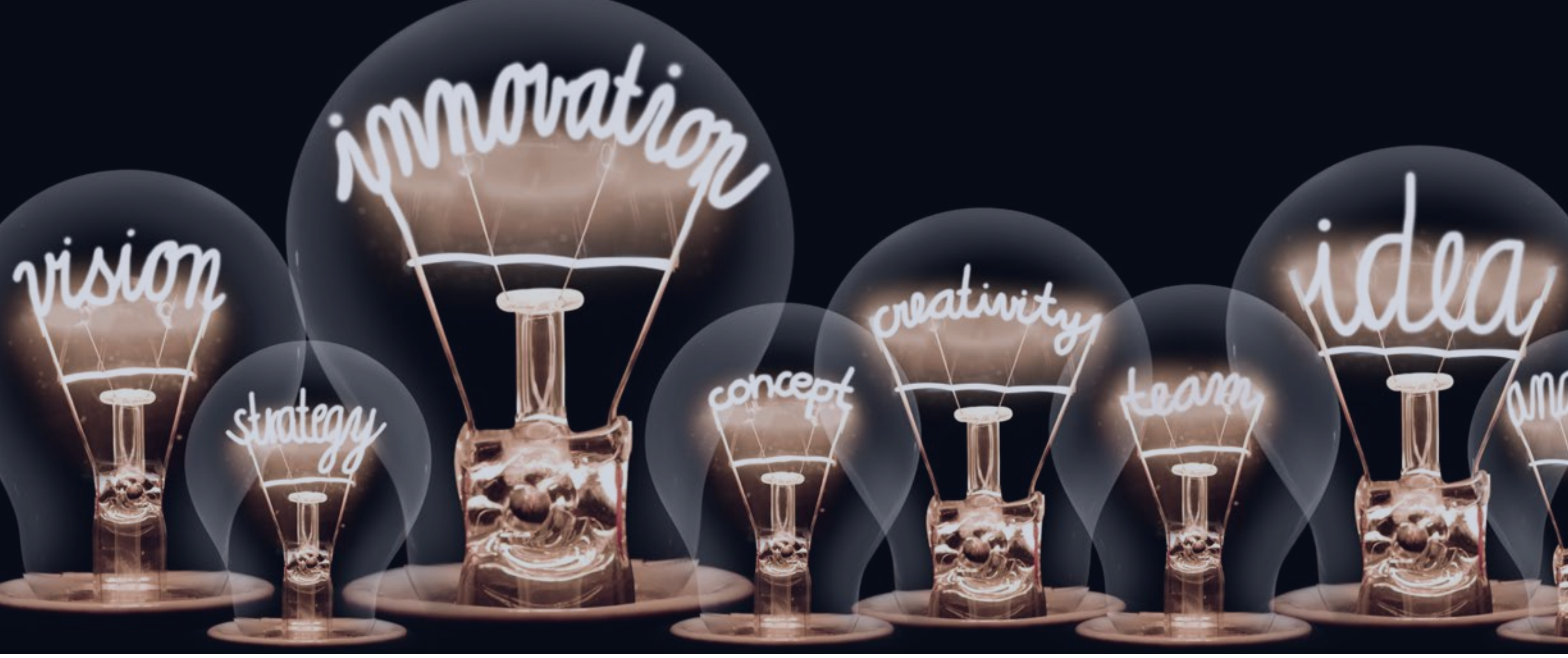
- ☐ Define the purpose of the focus group.
  - ☐ Develop the discussion guide
  - ☐ Define focus group selection criteria
  - ☐ Develop the consent form
  - ☐ Create outreach materials.
- ☐ Identify the online platform and ensure it is accessible by all participants (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.). If it is not accessible by all participants, identify workarounds to support participation.
- ☐ Make sure all participants have a laptop, tablet, phone, or desktop, webcam, and audio capabilities.
- ☐ Share consent forms with participants prior to the focus group and record their consent (e.g., signature, online form, verbal consent during focus group).
- ☐ Advise participants to find a quiet place to participate in the focus group to avoid background noise.
- ☐ Encourage participants to use their webcams and set their screens up for "gallery/ grid view" so they can see all participants.
- ☐ Ask participants to log on 5-10 minutes early to troubleshoot any technical issues before beginning.

DURING THE FOCUS GROUP

- ☐ Start the focus group session. Turn on cameras and audio and remind all participants to do the same.
- ☐ Introduce yourself, the note taker, and any evaluation assistants for the focus group.
- ☐ Briefly review the consent and remind participants of their rights in the evaluation or discussion.
- ☐ Share ground rules and allow time for questions from participants before beginning.
- ☐ Begin recording and start the focus group!
- ☐ Have all participants introduce themselves to "break the ice"
- ☐ Guide discussion.
- ☐ Once all questions have been covered, or the time is up, please stop recording. End the discussion by summarizing the main points. If time allows, invite participants to reflect on the main points and ask if they have anything further to share.
- ☐ Thank participants for their time. Describe the next steps in the study or evaluation and how the results will be shared with them.
- ☐ Provide incentives (if applicable) for their time and ensure they have the project's contact information to follow up if they have any questions after the focus group.
- ☐ Collect and save all notes and recordings.

AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP

- ☐ Debrief as an evaluation team (facilitator, note taker, and any project staff that observed the focus group)
- ☐ Transcribe the data and analyze
- ☐ Report findings and be sure to share findings with the participants!



POST-FOCUS GROUP DEBRIEF

We recommend that the facilitator and note-taker and any other program involved staff debrief shortly after completing an in-person or virtual focus group. This is a great opportunity to discuss themes that arose and begin the analysis process of understanding the information shared by participants across focus groups.

ANALYZE AND REPORT FINDINGS

After focus groups are complete, analysis and reporting begins. As a facilitator or note taker, you may lead the analysis process, or another member of your evaluation team may do so. Often analysis of qualitative data from focus groups involves transcribing the data verbatim from an audio recording and analyzing data for common themes. Qualitative software programs like Atlas Ti or NVivo are often used to analyze data, in other cases hand coding works. In both approaches, the data is often sorted and assigned to categories and themes. This is referred to as thematic analysis and is commonly used to identify patterns of meaning in qualitative data. During the analysis process, you may find that certain responses or themes occur repeatedly, this relates to the concept of saturation mentioned previously in this guide. There are several other forms of qualitative analysis that are used by evaluation teams such as content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and more.

There is much to learn and share about how focus groups are used as a tool to collect data. This guidance document will get you started. Check out the resources section at the end of this guide for more information.

RESOURCES

+ Better Evaluation, Focus Groups
+ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Field Epidemiology Manual, Qualitative Data
+ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Healthy Youth Evaluation, Focus Group Evaluation Brief 13
+ Qualitative Research: Introducing Focus Groups by Jenny Kitzinger
+ University of California San Francisco Qualitative Research Guide
+ World Health Organization: A manual for the use of focus groups by Susan Dawson and colleagues