

THE FACILITATOR'S FIELD GUIDE · EDITION 2026

Group Sessions, Done Well.

A large-print, university-grade handbook for psychology students and practitioners running group workshops — in the room and online.



SOP · RULES ·
ONBOARDING

For Psychology Students & Clients · 9 Chapters ·
Read aloud · Print at A4

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CHAPTER ONE

Why group work matters

A group reaches places one-to-one work cannot. Your job is not to teach — it is to build the conditions that let the group teach itself.

8_{–12}

MEMBERS IN A
WORKING
GROUP

90 min

THE RIGHT
SESSION
LENGTH

6_{–8}

SESSIONS IN A
CLOSED SERIES

2

FACILITATORS
PAST 10 PEOPLE

The six forces that do the work

Irvin Yalom named them. Learn them, and you stop performing and start facilitating.



Universality

"I thought it was only me." The single most common thing members report from session one. It lands harder in a group than any words from you.



Hope

Someone four weeks ahead of them is visibly doing better. No explanation from you beats that visible proof.



Cohesion

Belonging to the group *is* the treatment. Protect it fiercely and attendance holds through the hard weeks.



Altruism

Helping another member rebuilds self-worth faster than being helped does. Members are healing while they help.



Interpersonal learning

Members repeat their outside patterns in the room, where you get to work with them live. This is the gold.



Information

Plain teaching, delivered once, to twelve people. The most efficient hour in your practice week.

"The group is a social microcosm. Whatever a person does with others outside, they will eventually do inside the room. That is the treatment."

— After Yalom & Leszcz, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*

CHAPTER TWO

Choose your group format

Four formats. Four different jobs. Not interchangeable. Start on the left of the table and move right as your supervision and experience build.

FORMAT	BEST FOR	SIZE	LENGTH	RISK
Psychoeducational You teach one bounded topic. Disclosure stays shallow by design.	First group. A funnel into one-to-one practice.	10 – 20	1 – 3 sessions	LOW
Skills group One skill per week: CBT, DBT, ACT. Homework matters more than teaching.	Measurable change. Score at week one and end.	8 – 12	6 – 8 weeks	LOW–MED
Support group Shared situation: grief, caregiving, new diagnosis, new motherhood.	Recruit via hospital, school, community centre.	6 – 10	8 weeks or open	MEDIUM
Process group The group itself is the material. What happens between members is the work.	NOT a first group. Needs weekly supervision.	6 – 8	12+ weeks	HIGH

How to choose in one minute

Never run a group before? Start with a **psychoeducational workshop**. One topic, short series, low risk.

Want measurable outcomes? Pick a **skills group** with pre-and-post scoring.

Members share one life situation? A **support group**, ideally through an institution that vets attendance.

Deep interpersonal work? A **process group** — but only with supervision, group training and a co-facilitator.

CHAPTER THREE · STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

The 90-minute session

Write this plan before session one and keep it the same every week. Repetition is doing work — members settle faster when they know the shape, which frees their attention for the material.

**0 – 10 MIN · ARRIVAL & CHECK-IN**

One round, one sentence each, no discussion yet. Moves people from the car park into the room and shows you who arrived heavy today.

"One word for how you have arrived this evening."

**10 – 15 MIN · RULES & TODAY'S AIM**

Thirty seconds on confidentiality, then name what this session covers. Short, and never skipped — this is what makes the room safe enough to use.

"Same agreement as always. Tonight we work on the thoughts that show up before sleep."

**15 – 35 MIN · TEACH THE IDEA**

One idea, twenty minutes, concrete examples. No more than that. If you need a second idea, it belongs in a second session.

"This is the pattern. Watch where it starts."

**35 – 55 MIN · EXERCISE IN PAIRS OR THREES**

Members apply the idea to their own material in small groups. Move between them, listen, say very little. The room gets loud — that is the sign it is working.

"In threes. Ten minutes each way. I will call the time."

**55 – 75 MIN · BACK TO THE WHOLE GROUP**

Take what surfaced in pairs and work it in front of everyone. Watch airtime here — the same two people will fill it if you let them.

"Who found something they did not expect? Anyone who has not spoken yet."

**75 – 85 MIN · TAKEAWAY & THE TASK**

One sentence each on what they are taking. Then one small task for the week, written down before they leave — not sent by message afterwards.

"Write the task on the card now. Bring the card back next week."

**85 – 90 MIN · CLOSING ROUND**

Go round once and close the room. Check nobody is walking out still opened up. If someone is, hold them back for two minutes.

"One word to close. Sameera, stay behind a moment."

CHAPTER FOUR

Online sessions — rules & regulations

Running the group over video is not the same as running it in a room. The rules change because the environment changes.



The video room is a real room. Treat it that way from the moment the invite goes out.

The seven online ground rules

Send these with the joining link. Read the first four aloud at the top of session one.

1. **Private space, headphones, camera on.** No members at a café, no members in a shared car, no members on a bed with a partner in the next room. If a member cannot secure a private space, they do not join that week.

2. **No recording, no screenshots, no note-sharing.** Not by you, not by them.
Recording (if used for supervision) is agreed in writing at onboarding and stored per the platform's rules.
3. **Mic muted while another member is speaking.** One voice at a time. The facilitator unmutes people in order for round-robins.
4. **Display real first name only.** No handles, no last names, no pictures of children in the avatar.
5. **Log in five minutes early.** Late arrivals interrupt the check-in. The waiting room stays on for the whole session.
6. **If your connection drops, come back.** The group continues; do not text an apology. You will be caught up in a private message after.
7. **Emergency plan on file.** You hold each member's address and one local emergency contact, verified at onboarding. This is non-negotiable for online work.

NON-NEGOTIABLE SAFETY FACTS FOR ONLINE GROUPS

- **Never run an online group without location data.** If someone dissociates, harms themselves on camera, or goes silent unexpectedly, you must be able to send help to a real address in a real city.
- **Use a healthcare-suitable platform** your regulator accepts. In the UAE that generally means an end-to-end encrypted, business-tier account (not a personal free tier). Verify with the health authority for your emirate.
- **Two-facilitator online** starts at eight members, not ten. One leads the material, one monitors the chat, mic, and any private distress signals.
- **Have a written crisis pathway** per member — GP, nearest emergency room, and the named contact — printed and to hand.

Platform & setup — the SOP

ITEM	STANDARD
Platform	Business-tier, end-to-end encrypted, waiting-room enabled, recording disabled by default.
Link delivery	Unique per session, sent 24 h before by email, never posted publicly, never re-used across cohorts.
Waiting room	On for the entire session. Admit by verified first name only.
Camera	On for everyone. Backgrounds allowed; blurred backgrounds allowed; virtual backgrounds allowed.
Chat	Facilitator-to-all only. Private chat between members is disabled.
Screen share	Facilitator only. Members are given permission per exercise, then it is revoked.
Session duration	75 minutes online (shorter than in-person; screen fatigue is real).
Aftercare	Two-line email 24 h after: the takeaway, the task, and the crisis number.

CHAPTER FIVE

Communication — the facilitator's voice

Your voice sets the ceiling of what is safe to say in this room. Warm, unhurried, specific. Never sarcastic, never rushed, never surprised.

Four principles that hold every session together

1. Name what is happening in the room

Do not smooth over silence, conflict, or a shift in tone. Name it, plainly. *"The room has gone quiet. Something moved just then. Anyone want to say what?"*

2. Route questions back to the group

A member asks *you* what they should do. You ask *the group* what they would do. This is how norming becomes performing.

3. Protect airtime

The same two members will fill 80% of the time if you let them. Interrupt kindly and turn to the person who has not spoken. *"Layla, thank you. Priya, you have not been in yet — what is landing for you?"*

4. Hold your own reaction

When a member says something that startles you, breathe once before responding. Your face is the room's thermostat. Curiosity, never alarm.

The prompts to keep in your pocket

SAY THIS

- "Say more about that."
- "Who else has known this feeling?"
- "What would you want a friend to hear right now?"
- "Let's pause. That was a lot. Take a breath."
- "Pass is a complete answer."
- "We have ten minutes left. What do you want to leave with?"

AVOID THIS

- "I know exactly how you feel." (You don't.)
- "You shouldn't feel that way."
- "At least it's not..." (Never rank suffering.)
- "Let's move on." (When someone is mid-disclosure.)
- "Everything happens for a reason."
- "You need to..." (Advice, uninvited.)

Silence is not a problem to solve. Silence is the sound of people thinking. Count to ten before you fill it.

CHAPTER SIX · STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

Onboarding — from enquiry to first session

The six steps below stand between you and a group that falls apart in week two. Do not skip step three, ever.



Onboarding is a contract. Warm, clear, and written down.

☐ Step 1 · Enquiry received (Day 0)

Applicant fills a short form: name, age, one line on why this group, one line on any current treatment. Auto-reply within one hour with the fees, the dates, and a link to book the screening call.

☐ **Step 2 · Information pack sent (Day 1)**

One-page PDF: what the group is for, what it is *not* for, the six ground rules, the cancellation policy, and the safeguarding statement.

☐ **Step 3 · Screening call — 15 minutes, one-to-one (Days 2–5)**

This is the gate. Never skip it. Use the criteria on the next page.

☐ **Step 4 · Consent & payment (Day 6)**

Signed consent form covers: confidentiality and its limits, recording (if any), data handling, no-recording rule for members, cancellation, and the emergency contact.

☐ **Step 5 · Welcome message (Day 7, and 24 h before session one)**

Two short messages. First warms them to the room. Second confirms the joining details, what to bring, and what to expect in the first ten minutes.

☐ **Step 6 · Session one — the arrival ritual**

Doors open ten minutes early. Facilitator greets each member by name. Water, tissues, and a printed name-card on each seat. The room is set before anyone walks in.

The screening call — the gate

TAKE THEM IN WHEN...

- They want the group (rather than being sent).
- They can tolerate hearing difficult material.
- Their goal matches what this group is for.
- They commit to every date in the series.
- They can name a local emergency contact.

REFER OUT (THEN REVISIT) WHEN...

- Active suicidal risk or self-harm needing one-to-one containment.
- Acute psychosis or untreated mania.
- Substance dependence needing medical detox first.
- Live domestic violence — safety planning comes first.
- Anyone in crisis this week.
- Your current one-to-one client, into a process group.

THE CONSENT FORM MUST COVER — IN THE MEMBER'S LANGUAGE

1. Confidentiality and its limits (risk to self, risk to another, risk to a child).
2. What data is held, where, and for how long.
3. Whether any part of the session is recorded, by whom, and why.
4. Cancellation and refund policy in plain terms.
5. The member's right to leave at any time, without justification.
6. Named emergency contact and their consent to be contacted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Subjects to handle

Ten topics that run well as short group workshops for psychology students and clients. Each row includes the format that fits, and the one thing you must never forget when running it.

SUBJECT	BEST FORMAT	THE ONE THING
Exam & academic stress	Psychoeducational (3 wk)	Teach a technique they can use in the exam room the next day.
Anxiety at work / social anxiety	Skills group — CBT (6 wk)	Behavioural experiments beat insight every time.
Sleep & rumination	Psychoeducational (2 wk)	Track a sleep diary for two weeks before you teach anything.
Grief & bereavement	Support group (8 wk, closed)	Do not push meaning-making. Sit with what is.
Emotion regulation	Skills group — DBT (8 wk)	One skill per week, rehearsed <i>in</i> the room, not just taught.
Relationship patterns	Process group (12 wk+)	Only with supervision and group training. Not a first group.
New motherhood / parenting	Support group (8 wk)	Recruit via a clinic or school, not open advertising.
Body image & disordered eating	Skills group with medical support	You do not run this without a doctor on the referral pathway.
Trauma stabilisation	Psychoeducational + skills	Stabilisation only. Trauma <i>processing</i> is one-to-one work.
Peer supervision (for students)	Process-style, closed cohort	Rules and confidentiality are exactly the same as with clients.

FOR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS SPECIFICALLY

Groups for students-in-training carry two extra responsibilities:

- **The dual role must be named.** A tutor cannot be the facilitator of a personal-development group for their own graded students. Bring in a facilitator from outside the teaching team.
- **Attendance is separated from assessment.** What is said in the group never enters a grade, a reference, or a case discussion.
- **Signposting is compulsory.** Every session ends with the university counselling service's number on a card in their hand.

SUBJECTS THAT NEED EXTRA CAUTION — DO NOT RUN THESE AS AN EARLY-CAREER FACILITATOR WITHOUT DIRECT SUPERVISION

Active suicidality · complex trauma with dissociation · psychosis · addiction in the withdrawal phase · domestic violence with an active perpetrator · court-mandated attendance without informed consent. Each needs a specialist pathway, not a general group.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The five stages every group walks through

Tuckman mapped this in 1965 and it still holds. Week three usually feels like failure. It is not failure — it is storming, and a group that never storms never gets to the useful part.

Stage 1 • Forming

In the room: Polite, careful. Everyone watching you instead of each other. Long pauses.

Your move: Structure hard. State the aim, set the rules, run a low-risk opening round.

Stage 2 • Storming

In the room: Someone dominates. Someone goes quiet. Someone questions the point of it. A member drops out.

Your move: Do not take it personally. Do not smooth it over. Name what is happening and hold the frame.

Stage 3 • Norming

In the room: Members answer each other instead of routing everything through you. Private jokes start.

Your move: Step back. Bounce questions aimed at you back to the group.

Stage 4 • Performing

In the room: Real disclosure. Honest feedback between members. Visible change. The useful weeks.

Your move: Light touch. Protect airtime so the quiet ones get their share.

Stage 5 • Adjourning

In the room: Endings stir up old losses. Attendance slips, or someone picks a fight.

Your move: Flag the ending two sessions ahead. Close with a proper ritual and hand out referrals for continued support.

Storming is not a sign the group has failed. It is the sign the group is real enough to disagree in.

CHAPTER NINE

Launch checklist & closing

Ten things before session one. Work down the list. Nothing here is optional.

☐**Pick one topic and one audience**

— narrow enough to name in six words.

☐**Choose the format**

— sessions, length, closed or open, in-person or online.

☐**Confirm your licence**

covers a paid group. Verify with the regulator for your emirate; carry professional indemnity for group work specifically.

☐**Book the room**

— chairs in a circle, no table in the middle. Or, online, set up the platform, waiting room, and permissions.

☐**Write the one-page flyer**

— who it is for, the dates, the price, how to apply.

☐**Run a 15-minute screening call**

with every applicant, without exception.

☐**Sign the consent form**

— confidentiality and its limits, cancellation, recording, emergency contact.

☐ **Write every session plan**
before session one — not the night before each.

☐ **Book your own supervision**
for the whole run. Weekly for a process group.

☐ **Print the feedback form.**
Give it at session one and at the last session.

Closing note — read this before you begin

A group is not the sum of the people in it. A group is what happens between them, once the room is safe enough for something to happen at all. Your job is that safety — the rules, the rhythm, the containment, the voice.

You will run groups that go beautifully, and groups that feel like a car crash. Both are normal. Take both to supervision, take neither personally, and come back to session one of the next cohort with the same warmth in your voice.

"The facilitator's chair is the smallest chair in the room. The group is bigger than you. Get comfortable being small."

Sources. Stage model from Tuckman, *developmental sequence in small groups* (1965). Therapeutic factors from Yalom & Leszcz, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. Session structure, screening criteria and onboarding SOP reflect standard group-work practice rather than any single published protocol. Licensing notes are a prompt to verify, not legal advice.

Use. This guide is for a trained practitioner or supervised student. It does not replace your own training, your supervisor, or the rules of the body that licenses you.

— End of guide —