A Focus Group Guide

How to Use this Guide

This Focus Group Guide was developed by Papa Ola Lōkahi to guide the collection of information about health issues from consumers and providers. We would like to express our appreciation to Dr. Kathryn L. Braun, JoAnn Tsark, and the staff of the former Pacific Diabetes Today Resource Center of Papa Ola Lōkahi for developing this guide in 1999, which has been adapted for use by many other groups.

This Guide provides step-by-step instructions for collecting data, and includes the data collection tools. Please read this Guide prior to conducting a Focus Group, and refer to it as you gather data.

What Is a Focus Group?

A Focus Group is a "talk story" session. It is a valid process that is especially useful when:

- You want to find out **how** and **why** something happens.
- You want to understand how people think about or approach an issue.
- You want to find the message that change people's knowledge or opinion.

This method of collecting data allows individuals to freely express their thoughts and feelings. Because it is a non-judgmental approach to collecting data, participants should feel less inhibited to share their honest opinions and more comfortable explaining their answers than they would on a survey.

This guide has been used to guide focus group research about:

- Diabetes
- Cancer screening and cancer care
- Healthy aging
- Worksite wellness
- Tobacco cessation
- Long-term care needs and preferences
- Other topics

You can adapt the materials in this guide to conduct Focus Groups on your topic. If you do adapt them, we would love to hear from you. Contact either JoAnn Tsark at umilani@gmail.com or Kathryn L. Braun at kbraun@hawaii.edu.

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Organizing Focus Groups

Talking in a group is not easy for everyone. Generally speaking, it is best to have Focus Groups that are made up of individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences.

Invite individuals that can help you answer your questions. It is easiest to include individuals 18 years of age and older, because they can consent to participate as adults. If you conduct a Focus Group with individuals under age 18, you will need to get parental consent, as well as youth assent.

Size. Ideally, Focus Groups consist of **6-10** people. If you have too few members, you will not get much information or interaction. If you have too many, some people may not have time to talk, and they might get bored or frustrated. However, exact size depends on the topic. You can invite more people to talk about a general topic, like marketing a new product. You should invite fewer people to talk about personal topics, like understanding the experiences and needs of cancer patients.

Timing. It takes about 2 hours to hold an in-person Focus Group. However, some groups may enjoy a longer session, while other groups (like a group of physicians) may only agree to a 30-minute session. If you hold the Focus Group on Zoom, a 60-minute session works best.

Inviting Participants. When inviting people to participate, explain the purpose of the group, give an example of the types of questions you will ask, and let them know when and where the group will be and how long it will take. A sample Script for Recruiting Participants is provided on page 7.

Forms

- For those who agree to participate, you will need to have them sign a consent form. If you are affiliated with the University of Hawaiʻi, use this template to develop your consent form [457-MCF_Template_Focus_Grp_Adults_Final_Rule_changes.docx (live.com)]
- Collect enough demographic data on the participants so you can describe the participants. An example of a Background Information Sheet is provided on page 8.

Pre-Registration. Sometimes, it is helpful to pre-register the participants. This means talking with them before the Focus Group to review and have them sign the Consent Form. This also is a good time to have them complete the Background Information Sheet. Even if you pre-register participants, some people may come to the Focus Group without their forms having been completed. Be sure to have extra Consent Forms and Background Information Sheets for them if you meet in person. If you meet on Zoom, designate a helper to assist them in a break-out room.

Preparing for a Focus Group

Space. For an in-person Focus Group, meet in a quiet and comfortable room with a table that is just big enough for your participants. A small round table is best. Having a table gives you somewhere to place audio recording equipment, and it gives people a place to write, put name cards, refreshments, etc. Of course, your individual setting may vary. Be creative! Any quiet and comfortable place is fine.

Zoom. If you hold your Focus Group on Zoom, ask participants to keep their cameras on and to post their names. Also ask them to mute their microphones when they are not speaking.

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Food. It is customary to serve food at in-person Focus Groups. We recommend serving it before the meeting, because it is welcoming and gives people something to do while waiting for others to arrive. This is a good opportunity to provide nutritious foods, like fruits and vegetables. But avoid anything crunchy that can interfere with the recording. For example, it's better so serve bananas than crunchy apples or carrot sticks. Chips, especially those in small crinkly bags, are really noisy!

Name Cards. For in-person Focus Groups, each person should be provided with an 8 1/2 x 11" paper to fold into thirds and write their name in BIG LETTERS on one of the sides. Unfold the paper until it looks like a triangle from each end. This shape stands on the table by itself in front of the person. This way, the group leader can read each person's name easily.

Writing Supplies. For in-person Focus Groups, pens or pencils should be provided. Magic markers are needed to make name cards and for recording data on posted paper.

Audio Recording. If the group agrees, audio record the data. This should be mentioned in the consent form. Also tell them what you will do with the recording, how you will use it, and how long you will keep it. For in–person Focus Groups, use 2 digital recorders, one at each end of the table. With Zoom, you can record the session to your computer or the cloud.

Conducting a Focus Group

You should create a script for your Focus Group. An example of a Focus Group Script and Questions is provided on page 9. Here are some general suggestions for conducting Focus Groups.

Make people feel welcome. As people arrive, greet them warmly and thank each person for coming. If in-person, offer them some refreshments, and help them find a seat, fix their name cards, and complete the Consent Form and Background Information Sheet if they have not done so already. On Zoom, you can send participants to a break-out room with a helper if they need to complete their research forms.

Getting Started. Begin by thanking participants for taking part in your Focus Group. Remind them of the purpose of the group. Introduce yourself and all staff that are assisting you.

Cultural Protocol. We encourage you to include appropriate cultural protocol to set the right tone. For example, some groups may want to start with a prayer or with a greeting from an elder. This is an important consideration when inviting people to share their voices and experiences.

Review Key Points from the Consent Form. After the welcome, please remind participants of these things:

- the purpose of the Focus Group
- that their participation is voluntary and they may leave for any reason without explanation
- that the discussion will be audio recorded
- that their answers will be included in a report, but that no one's name will be used in the reports to maintain confidentiality

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Set Some Ground Rules. It is important to set ground rules so that people feel free to share and that you hear from everyone.

- Let group members know that there are **no right and wrong answers**.
- Let them know that you want to **listen** to everyone's thoughts.
- Let them know that you may **call on people** who are quiet, and may ask talkative ones to "hold that thought" to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak.

After this, you may proceed to the first question.

The First Question. The first question serves as an "ice-breaker" or warm up. This question should:

- be easy to answer
- be non-threatening
- allow everyone to introduce themselves
- disclose some fun, non-threatening information
- help people become comfortable in talking

For example, we have had success with these icebreaker questions, as they have tended to put participants in a good mood:

- Tell us your name and where your family is from on the islands. (We often use this question in Focus Groups with Native Hawaiians.]
- Tell us your name and one food you like that's good for you and one that's bad for you. (We often use this question when our Focus Group is related to nutrition, lifestyle, or health.)
- Tell us your name and one thing you like best about [something relevant to the Focus Group]. (For example, in Hana we ask what participants liked best about Hana. With students, we ask what they liked best about their school.)

The Second Question should also be easy and general, but related to your topic.

Going from the General to the Specific. Once people are warmed up, questions should go from the general to the specific. In this way, you can better "hear" how people feel about and prioritize issues without biasing their responses with your personal agenda. Seven to 10 questions are enough.

Listen for the Long Answer. The purpose of holding a community Focus Group is to get people to talk. So your questions should be open-ended. That means that they can't be answered by a "yes" or a "no." We're listening for a longer answer.

Prompts. If you are not getting a long answer, or if participants seem stuck, you can always give them a prompt. For example, if the room is quiet after you ask "What is the best way to get this health message to adults in your community?" then you can follow up with prompts like "What about television?" or "What about social media?" or "What about at the doctor's office?"

Be Interested. Don't Pass Judgment. It is important for the facilitator to be nonjudgmental and interested in what each person has to say. A good facilitator responds to each participant with statements like, "very good," "how interesting," or "thank you for that contribution." Do not correct the speaker!! You can take time at the end of the session for an educational presentation or to talk personally with someone to correct a misperception.

Ask "How many?" The facilitator can also try to get a sense of how prevalent an issue is by asking, "Several of you have mentioned _________, how many others feel that way?" Then the facilitator should summarize the answer for the group (and the recorder) by saying something like "oh, I see all of you are raising your hands or nodding" or "about half of you" or "not many of you."

Close. Ask for any last thoughts. Thank participants again.

- If you have included **cultural protocol**, a specific closing may be part of this protocol.
- A gift of appreciation is often given to someone who has shared something of value with you. If your funding comes through the University of Hawaiʻi, it is usually easier to give a gift related to the research (e.g., a water bottle for a health-related Focus Group) than cash or a gift card (which may require you to collect Social Security Numbers). Check with your fiscal officer before deciding.
- Remind the group about the usefulness of the data.
- Ask them how they would like to receive a summary of findings from the Focus Group. This can be done through a follow-up meeting or a mailed or emailed summary. Be sure to budget for whatever mechanism you use.

Recording the Data

Recorders are responsible to make sure people's thoughts and feelings are written down. It is best to have a small team to oversee the recording tasks.

- **Consent and Background Information Sheets.** Someone will need to collect and store the Consent Forms and Background Information Sheets.
- **Posted Paper.** For in-person Focus Groups, someone should be assigned to write information shared by the participants on posted paper. The paper should be prepared ahead of time with the proper headings that correspond with the facilitator's script. This person also can also help record "how many" people agree with certain answers.
- **Audio Recorder.** The entire discussion should be recorded using digital recorders (if in person) or the Zoom recording function.
- **Observation.** Ideally, one of the researchers can make a seating chart and write down the first sentence said by each speaker. This way, the person checking the transcription can correctly link the person's words with the person. It is important to know who said what to distinguish between an opinion mentioned by one person numerous times vs. the same idea or opinion mentioned by at least once by many different people. Remember, you cannot link words with specific names in your reports; the identities of the participants must be protected at all times.

Analyzing and Reporting the Data

Debriefing. The first step in the analysis is the debriefing session held with the Focus Group team after the Focus Group is finished. In this session, team members talk about their impressions of the group and the key things learned. This is to make sure all the important information and impressions are recorded. It is also important to talk about what went well, what went wrong, and how the Focus Group questions or the facilitator's approach might be improved. In Focus Group research, it is OK to refine your questions and your approach after the first Focus Group to make sure you're getting the data you want. A Focus Group Summary Sheet on page 10 may be helpful at this stage.

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Cleaning the Transcripts. Audio recordings need to be transcribed before you can analyze them. There are a number of options for transcription, e.g., Rev.com (which has a human transcribe your recording) and programs that use a computer-based language recognition software, which as Temi, Otter, or Zoom. However, the research team will need to review the transcripts, especially if the conversation contains Hawaiian words and place names or if participants use Pidgin or speak English with an accent. For example, Zoom translates “kūpuna” as “coupon-ers.” It can take 4 hours to review and correct an hour of transcript.

Creating Themes. Team members should individually read the correct transcripts and determine the key themes. Then the group should come together to compare findings. From here, a codebook of themes can be developed to guide the review of all the transcripts. Each transcript then should be coded by at least 2 members of the team, and these 2 individuals should meet to check their level of agreement with each code. When reporting the data, try not to have more than 7 themes, and illustrate each theme with relevant quotes from participants.

Background Information Sheets. These should be analyzed to help you describe your participants. For example, you may want to report how many participants were male vs. female or how many were from this island or community vs. another.

Institutional Review Board Approval. If the intent of the Focus Group is to generalize and/or publish the information, then you need approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to collecting data. If you are affiliated with UH, please file an IRB application through e-Protocol, at this link: [IRB Application Forms | Office of Research Compliance (hawaii.edu)]

Planning. Most projects are conducted on a timeline. You can use the Focus Group Planning Timeline on page 11 to help you accomplish all the tasks involved in planning, conducting, and interpreting the findings from Focus Groups.

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SCRIPT FOR RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Aloha, Mr. /Ms (________________). This is (your name), and I'm calling on behalf of (your agency or group).

We are hosting a Focus Group of about 10-15 people to talk about ___________. Our focus group will take about 2 hours, and participation is voluntary.

The purpose of the Focus Group is to hear your thoughts and opinions. Examples of the questions we ask include:

- ____
- ____
- ____

All information that would identify you would be strictly confidential. Audio recordings and written records from this Focus Group would be kept in a locked file and destroyed after the project is over.

Is this Focus Group something in which you could participate?

___ NO Then I want to thank you for giving me your time. If you have any questions later about this or would like to know more about what our agency provides, please call me at _________. Thank you for your time.

___ YES (Continue below) Thank you very much for agreeing. The date for this Focus Group is:

DATE: ______________ Time: _______________ Location: ______________________

I will be calling you a few days before the Focus Group to confirm details. Even though you've said "yes" today, you are under no obligation. Even if you join our focus group and don't want to continue, you can to withdraw from the discussion without consequences.

So I will call you again a few days before the Focus Group to confirm details. Thank you for your time.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET

1. What is your date of birth? _______________

2. Gender: ❒ Male ❒ Female

3. What was the last grade or year of school you completed?
   - ❒ 8th Grade or less
   - ❒ Grades 9 through 11
   - ❒ High School Graduate or GED
   - ❒ Some College or Technical School
   - ❒ College Graduate
   - ❒ Other_______________________

4. Are you currently.....
   - ❒ Married
   - ❒ Divorced
   - ❒ Widowed
   - ❒ Separated
   - ❒ Never married

5. Are you currently....
   - ❒ Working for wages
   - ❒ Student
   - ❒ Homemaker
   - ❒ Self-employed
   - ❒ Retired
   - ❒ Unable to work
   - ❒ Not Employed

6. If you are employed for wages or are self-employed, what kind of work do you do?

   (Please write in)________________________________

7. What kind of health insurance do you have?
   - ❒ Medicare
   - ❒ Kaiser
   - ❒ Med-Quest
   - ❒ HMSA
   - ❒ Other (write in) _____________________________________

8. What is your ethnic background? ___________________________

9. More CLOSE-ENDED questions about your specific topic….

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FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT AND QUESTIONS

<u>Introductions</u>

- Thank you for coming to this group. We are ______________________.
- Purpose: We are interested in learning about __________, so we are talking to you and other _______.
- Remember:
  - No right or wrong answers
  - Want to hear from each of you; will call on quiet folks and ask talkative folks to "hold that thought."
  - Everything you say is confidential, although we are recording it [how?]
  - Data will be aggregated and reported to ___________________
- Because this is "research," we will ask you to sign a consent form (explain)
- Because we need to describe the group, we will ask you to complete a "background sheet."

<u>Q1: Icebreaker</u>:

<u>Q2:</u> General Question

<u>Q3:</u>

<u>Q4</u>:

<u>Q5</u>:

<u>Q6</u>:

<u>Q7:</u>

<u>Q8</u>: That is the end of our questions. Is there anything else you'd like to share on this subject? Or perhaps you have questions for us. [Take questions]

Wrap up

- We appreciate your help.
- We are holding ____ more focus groups; ___ altogether.
- Our report will be written in ____; happy to send you a copy or come back to your group to report
- If you have questions or would like an update, please call _____________.
- Thanks again.

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Focus Group Observer's Sheet

Facilitator • Welcoming • Led the group well • Got everyone to talk • Non-judgmental • Covered all the questions • Prompted when necessary • Sought "counts" • Aware of recorder	
Recorder • Legible • Able to "keep up" • Recorded "counts" and agreements	
Focus groups questions • Understandable • In the correct order • Got us the data we wanted	
Focus group setting • Conducive to discussion • Sound issues • Logistics	
Focus group participants • Comfort with each other • Diversity of opinion • Size and composition • Non-verbals	
Content • Key points • "Change" buttons	

FOCUS GROUP DATA SUMMARY FORM

Topic of focus group:

Audience (# and brief description):

Key Points in Response to the Focus Group Questions

- Current perceptions, beliefs, and practices

- Ideas for changing perceptions, beliefs, and practices

Key Points on the Focus Group Process

- Problems with and ways to improve FG recruitment and setting

- Problems with and ways to improve with FG questions

- Feedback for the FG leadership
    - Facilitator
    - Recorder

Other Points or Ideas

FOCUS GROUP PLANNING TIMELINE

Task	Due date	Person responsible	Comments
Finalize focus group questions			
Finalize background information sheet			
Finalize consent from			
Finalize recruitment plan			
Recruit focus group participants			
Hold first group			
Debrief first group and revise tools if needed			
Hold at least 3 more groups			
Hold last group			
Analyze data			
Present data and get feedback			
Write report			