

## Focus groups

A focus group is a form of group interview with a small number of people [102]. It is used to gather information on people's knowledge, experiences, and views about a specific topic [101,102]. A facilitator guides the discussion around the particular topic [101]; however participants contribute more than just answers to the facilitator's questions [102]. What is important is that the facilitator establishes an environment where there is interaction between the group members so they feel able to say what they think and respond to the views of others [102].

Focus groups can be used:

- › for generating and exploring a range of ideas and attitudes [101]
- › for gaining an in-depth understanding of an issue [101]
- › for assessing health messages [102]
- › for exploring people's knowledge and experiences [102]
- › with people who may have difficulty completing written questionnaires [101]
- › to identify group norms and cultural values [102]
- › when there are time and money constraints [101]
- › for generating ideas and identifying priorities [23].

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups before using this method to collect information:

Advantages of focus groups	Disadvantages of focus groups
They can generate more critical comments than one-on-one interviews [102]	There is a risk of bias when people agree with others instead of expressing their own views [101]
They do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write [102]	They are not representative of all older people [101]
The group may encourage those who are nervous or anxious about talking to contribute [102]	Group norms may silence others who do not agree [102]
They gather more detailed information than a survey [101]	They generate a lot of complex information that has to be recorded, summarised and analysed [101]
They collect people's attitudes and reactions [101]	The presence of others can inhibit comments and prevents anonymity [101]

## Organising a focus group

### Selecting participants

When selecting people for your focus group, consider your topic because the type of demographic required often depends on the issues being explored. For example, there may be instances where it would be appropriate to have all male or all female focus groups. Differences in group member characteristics (eg. age, gender, occupation) may provide a larger range of opinions or views than a group of individuals with similar characteristics [101].

The recommended number of participants for each group is between six to ten people. You may need to invite 15 people to actually get sufficient numbers to run the focus group [101].

### Getting people to attend

Some people attend focus groups because they are interested in the topic, however most market research companies offer incentives for attending a focus group, such as payment in the form of vouchers. When you invite participants to your focus group, be clear about the type of reimbursement participants can expect to receive eg. parking, travel and refreshments [101].

## Duration

Try and restrict the length of the session to no longer than two hours, including a 15 minute break [101].

## Number of focus groups

Because the people in any one focus group cannot fully represent the views of the whole community, it is best to run more than one focus group. Ideally, focus groups should be conducted until little or no new information comes out of the discussions. The number of focus groups that can be conducted will depend on availability of participants, timeframes and resources [101].

## Preparing for the group

You will need the following to run a focus group:

- › a quiet room
- › table and chairs (a semicircle or circle formation encourages discussion) [17]
- › two people (a facilitator to keep the session on track and ensure each person gets a say and a ‘scribe’ to write down information and, with consent, record the session) [101]
- › a question guide (a list of open-ended and non-leading questions to ask the focus group participants)
- › tape recorder, digital recorder and tapes, or video recorder and tapes (depending on consent from participants)
- › name tags
- › project information sheets
- › consent forms
- › notepads and pens
- › tissues
- › refreshments eg. tea, coffee, water, snacks
- › reimbursements for participants.

The most important aspect of focus group preparation is the development of the question guide. Start with easy broad questions, working your way to more specific or difficult questions. An sample question guide used in a focus group to test print resources (eg. a checklist) is provided below.

### Sample question guide for testing print resources (eg. a checklist)

#### Let's talk about your thoughts regarding the front cover of the checklist.

1. Overall, what do you think of the front-cover of the checklist?
2. What do you think about the photographs on the front cover?
3. What do you think about the key words that are overlayed on the photos?
4. What about the overall size of the document?
  - a. How would this influence your thoughts about initially picking it up?
  - b. How would this influence the likelihood that you would complete the questions?

#### Now, looking at the inside of the checklist.

5. Overall, what were your first impressions of the layout of the information?
  - a. What about the size of the text? Is the text easy to read?
  - b. How do you find the colours?
  - c. What do you think about the icons used next to the questions and tips?

#### I'd now like to talk to you about the layout of the checklist questions.

6. What were your thoughts about the question and answer format?  
ie. the 'If you answered yes' tip under each question.
7. What are your thoughts about the sections that allow you to write down your action steps? ie. 'I plan to take action by...'  
(PROMPT: How do you think this influences the useability of the checklist?)
  - a. Did you complete the action section too? If not, why?
8. Did you complete the checklist?
  - a. If no, how far did you get?
9. Thinking about the language used, how easy was the checklist to read?

**Now, I'd like to talk about the topics covered in the checklist (PROMPT: medicines, foot care, vision, etc).**

10. What were your initial thoughts regarding the topics covered in the checklist?  
(PROMPT: Did you think all of these topics related to falls?)
11. Was there any new information for you in the checklist? If yes, what was it?

**Finally, I'd like to discuss whether the checklist encouraged you to take any action.**

12. Would you do any of the tips provided in the 'If you answered yes' sections of the checklist?
13. Is the information relevant to you?
14. How useful did you find the information in this checklist?
  - a. How useful did you find the tips?
  - b. How useful did you find the information about other organisations?  
How likely are you to use the information about these organisations?
15. Would this checklist encourage you to discuss these issues with your health professional?
  - a. If yes, would you make a separate visit just to discuss falls related issues?
  - b. If yes, would you take the checklist with you to see your health professional?
16. Would the information in the checklist change what you do in your everyday life?
17. Since reading the checklist have you been inspired to do any of the suggestions or tips? Which ones?
18. Any other comments or suggestions you would like to make?
19. Do you have any suggestions about how we can distribute the checklist even further?

## Selecting a facilitator

In a focus group, the facilitator guides the conversation and handles the dynamics of the group [17]. When selecting a facilitator, consider the following tips.

- › You may choose a person who is not associated with your organisation (external facilitator) if you want to address issues that could be sensitive or controversial, or if you are testing written materials, education sessions or an intervention your organisation has developed or delivered. Focus group members may feel more comfortable discussing how they honestly feel about a particular issue if they know there is no risk of their remarks causing offence to the facilitator [17].
- › Consider the bias that can be introduced by having someone from within your own community, who may be extremely influential, facilitate the group [101].
- › It is best if the facilitator is familiar with the topic area, but they do not have to be an expert [17].

## Leading a focus group

In general, facilitators should not express any opinion, agreement or disapproval about what participants say, either verbally or non-verbally (keeping a ‘poker face’). Facilitators should show their interest in what group members have to say and appear keen to hear more about their ideas and opinions [101].

### At the beginning of the session

At the start of the session, facilitators should introduce themselves, explain their role, thank participants for their attendance and briefly outline the purpose of the focus group.

#### For example:

Thank you for attending today’s focus group to review the Queensland Stay On Your Feet® checklist, which looks at personal health and hazards in and around the home.

To create rapport within the group, participants should also be asked to introduce themselves.

On a practical level, the facilitator should advise participants of:

- › the way a focus group works
- › the purpose of the group [101]
- › how long the session will run for and when there will be a break [101]
- › any issues relating to reimbursements
- › where emergency exits and bathroom facilities are located.

Facilitators should seek the consent of all participants to record the session so there is a true and accurate record of ideas and comments [101]. A written consent form should be used.

Before discussion begins, the facilitator should outline any group rules to ensure the group's conversation flows well [17].

#### Sample group rules

- › There are no right or wrong answers [101].
- › Everyone has the right to contribute and say what they think [101].
- › Every comment is valuable [101].
- › Please refrain from negative comments about other people's ideas and suggestions [99, 101]. Differences in opinions and perceptions are encouraged [17].
- › Only one person is to speak at a time [101].

### During focus group discussions

After the ‘housekeeping’ is complete, the facilitator can begin the general discussion using the first broad question on the question guide.

During the discussion, the facilitator should try to ensure all participants are given the opportunity to express their views [101]. If one person is dominating the conversation, others should be encouraged to join in by having the facilitator:

- › direct the ‘conversational traffic’ by making space for someone less inclined to interject [101]
- › nod at other individuals who look as if they also wish to speak [101]
- › ask if anyone else has the same or a different comment to make [101]
- › ask individuals by name if there is anything they would like to add [101].

Flexibility is important in a focus group. The facilitator should be open to opportunities as they arise and not break the flow of the discussion each time a question is asked [103].

At the end of the focus group, remember to thank people again for their participation [101].

### Online focus groups

Teleconferencing, videoconferencing and Internet chat rooms provide an opportunity to reach members of the community using technology. Using an Internet chat room for a focus group has advantages and disadvantages.

#### Advantages include:

- › cost effectiveness due to reduced travelling costs [99]
- › discussion transcripts can be printed for analysis, saving the lengthy process of typing up the group’s comments [99]
- › easier to coordinate as there are no room bookings, catering, equipment or set up required [99]
- › people can be anonymous when involved from their home computer [99]
- › you can reach people from a wider area (possibly internationally) [99].

### Disadvantages include:

- › technology being a hindrance if people cannot easily post discussion points [99]
- › not being able to see participant's facial expressions [99]
- › people can be anonymous when involved from their home computer [99]
- › not having the same atmosphere as that created by a live group of people [99].

By working in partnership with an organisation that teaches older people to use computers, you may be able to conduct trial online focus groups with their students.

### Reporting focus group results

The data collected from a focus group is called qualitative data, and provides insights into people's thoughts, ideas, and their reactions. The data is not numeric, and cannot be interpreted simply with numbers. When reporting focus group results, gather and report the whole range of views, even if only one person mentioned a particular opinion [23]. In pure research, the session is audio taped and transcribed verbatim [23]. Notable quotes, common threads and themes are written up as the results and findings in a formal report [23]. Direct quotes should be acknowledged with quotation marks but reported anonymously.

Use the focus group information to make decisions when developing your project/ program and its resources. Consider communicating focus group results at meetings, through newsletters and the local community newspaper. This shows you are involving and listening to the community, and provides clear reasoning for the decisions made.

#### For example:

When a focus group was asked if they gained anything from the information in the Queensland Stay On Your Feet® checklist, one participant said:

*'Personally, I could not think of a clear particular benefit in terms of information, but I definitely did gain from the fact that I was now thinking about my home, habits, footwear and so forth much more in terms of safety and falls prevention.'*

**Citation:** Health Promotion Unit. 2007. Focus groups. Queensland Stay On Your Feet® Community Good Practice Toolkit. Division of the Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health.

The information in this section is based, with thanks, on *Health Promoting Schools: A toolbox for creating healthy places to learn, work and play (Booklet 6) – How to gather information*, produced by Public Health Services, Queensland Health 2001. It has been made relevant to preventing falls and promoting healthy active ageing in older people, and updated with additional references.