

# Safe Space Essentials

## Safe Space

Mental health can be a difficult subject. When planning a club, initiative or event, it is important to understand that others will be bringing unique personal experiences to the event, and sometimes the subject matter can be difficult or triggering. They may have personal lived experience with a mental health challenge themselves, know a friend or family member who has been affected, or have been touched by mental illness in another aspect of their lives. Creating a safe space at the beginning so others feel safe and comfortable having a discussion about mental health is incredibly important. A good place to start is with a Community Agreement for working with a group. This is where everyone involved has the chance to provide input into what the safe space will look like and decide on the group norms. This agreement outlines how your group will be and act together - and could include things like respecting everyone's privacy, listening to understand, respecting pronouns and whatever else your group comes up with. The Community Agreement should be written and visual and available for everyone to review each time you get together. It can also be helpful to include an example of what is meant by each of the concepts you come up with. Some principles might include:

- respect
- open-mindedness
- compassion
- understanding
- Non-judgement
- confidentiality

As an example, you can find community agreements from an event and an online meeting below.



An important part of creating a safe space is confidentiality. Group members should feel confident that what they share will not be shared outside of the group. An exception to this is if there are safety concerns, they would need to be addressed and reported as needed. Let participants know at the beginning of the conversation what kinds of concerns would need to be reported. Information that could be helpful to others can be shared with permission or by making details anonymous or non-identifiable.

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## Supportive Listeners

Anytime you are getting people together to talk about mental health, it is important to have supportive listeners. The importance of having supportive listeners is the same reason it is important to create a safe space - discussing mental health can touch on personal experiences and bring forward strong emotions for those participating. Supportive listeners are individuals identified as safe and available to speak with and support anyone who may be triggered by the events of the day, feeling overwhelmed, or just needing somebody to talk to. Supportive listeners can be school staff (school counsellors or trained staff), community resource representatives, or other individuals from the community who are trained and comfortable supporting others. It is important to identify your supportive listeners to others, should they want to reach out to them.

## Speaker Support

Sharing lived experience with mental illness or mental health challenges is both difficult and courageous, especially when speaking to a group of your peers. It's also meant to be a positive experience for the individual sharing. To ensure that happens, providing proper speaker support for someone looking to share their lived experience is necessary and important. You want them to feel safe, supported, and confident when their moment arrives.

Speaker support isn't a straightforward process, so for a more detailed and in-depth look at best practices we suggest you refer to the [Mental Health Commission of Canada \(MHCC\) Headstrong Toolkit for Training Speakers](#). To get you started, here are a few important principles of speaker support from the MHCC Headstrong tool-kit and our experience with Balancing Our Minds:

- The health and wellness of your speaker is the main priority – don't rush them to speak until they are comfortable and ready to go.
- Speakers reserve the right step down from a speaking engagement at any time if they do not feel comfortable speaking. It is important to communicate this from the start.
- Let your speaker know the lines of communication are always open.
- Building trust between yourself and your speaker is a large part of speaker support.
- Don't rush the process! Individuals reach milestones at a different pace and that should be celebrated. Speakers will be ready when they feel ready.
- Remember to debrief. Support doesn't end once the speaker has presented – debriefing is an important step in supporting your speaker and bringing the experience full-circle.