Alzheimer Society
BRITISH COLUMBIA

# Sensitive topics: Guide for facilitators

Staff and volunteers can be caught off guard when highly sensitive topics arise unexpectedly in support groups, on the phone, or in education sessions (e.g. abuse in facility care, suicide, end of life etc.). The following points are intended to provide some suggestions around managing group discussion when these topics arise.

## Tips for managing discussions:

- Focus on and acknowledge the emotion of the person asking the question or raising the topic.
- Recognize that it is okay for people to think about this topic, e.g. "These are important questions about a topic that each of us may have very personal opinions on."
- Refrain from sharing your personal opinions, judgements and values and guide group members away from expressing judgement or blame.
- In support group, remind members of the Ground rules for discussion (i.e. "Respect the opinions of others, even if you do not share them"). In other programs, remind the group to respect that other people in the room may not share their views.
- Guide the discussion away from the specific situation and toward the general issue (i.e. end of life planning, coping with changes, loss and grief).
- Check in with the group to make sure they are comfortable continuing the discussion.
- A support group or education workshop is not an appropriate space for philosophical debates—always bring the focus back to underlying feelings (i.e. sadness, anger, fear).
- If you are triggered by certain topics, have strategies to manage your emotions in case those topics arise. If you are not comfortable managing the discussion, it is okay to let the group know and then debrief with your supervisor. If the topic is of interest and may come up again, there may be an opportunity to have your supervisor step in when that topic arises.

## Example responses:

Specific cases

Often topics come up after intense media coverage of a specific issue or case. If you are asked to comment about a particular case, you can use the Society's standard responses.

*"As Alzheimer Society of B.C. staff/volunteers we are unable to speak to specific cases."*

*"We cannot talk about specific cases. We do know this topic brings up a lot of emotion for people, so let's talk about that."*

*"Many of us have strong opinions about this topic, but this isn't the place for that discussion. Let's take some time to share how you're feeling."*

Alzheimer Society of B.C.'s position on end-of-life care

End-of-life care is often a topic of interest to our clients, but can be a sensitive and controversial subject. If you are asked for the Society's position, you can respond with *"Alzheimer Society of B.C advocates for person-centered care, better palliative and end-of-life support and services. We encourage people with dementia and their families to plan ahead at the earliest possible stage of their dementia journey."*

Focusing on/acknowledging emotions and feelings

*"This is a topic that we may have passionate and opposing opinions about. What feelings does this topic stir up for you?"*

*"This is something important that we all think about. What feelings does it bring up for you?"*

*"I'm hearing that this brings up a lot of _____ (feeling) for people."*

*"I can see this brings up a lot of emotion for you. Can you share that with the group?"*

Checking in

*"I realize we've strayed from our typical discussion format, so I'd like to check in with the group about how you're feeling discussing this topic?"*

*"We all come from different situations so I want to remind everyone of the guidelines for discussion and the need to be respectful of differences."*

*"I realize some of you may not want to discuss this, so can I do a quick check to gauge your thoughts on talking about this?"*

Refocusing

*"We're not going to come up with solutions today, but I appreciate all the feelings this brings up."*

*"We're getting into waters that we can't navigate in this group. I'm mindful of the time and I think we need to move back to our regular discussion now."*

*"This is an important topic. We're not going to have time to discuss this at today's presentation, but I'd like to suggest that you follow up with me afterwards." Or please call the First Link Dementia Helpline to talk?"*

Facilitator is not comfortable

*"I'm not comfortable addressing this topic; I'll talk to my supervisor and follow up with you."*

*"Our time is limited and I'm not feeling equipped to lead a discussion on this topic."*

Client brings up challenging personal issue

*"That is a tough issue. It takes a lot for you to share this with the group. Let's you and I talk after the meeting or set up a 1-1 appointment with a staff member to talk about this."*

**Factsheet about sensitive topics:**

Below are factsheets that provide more information on topics that you might find to be sensitive. If another sensitive topic is coming up, reach out to your staff supervisor to see what other resources are available.

Progression: End-of-life

Decision-making: Respecting individual choice

Treatment options

Medications

Dementia, Intimacy and Sexuality

Dementia and living alone

Dementia and driving