



Toothpaste exercise –explaining confidentiality in a group

What is it and how does it work?

This is an exercise that helps people to think about what it means to share something in a group and the limits of confidentiality in these settings. It can be used in focus groups and group work sessions.

It's good because...

It is a very visual way of exploring the limits of confidentiality before group work and it's fun!

How long does it take?

About 5 minutes.

Steps

1. The facilitator explains that the group will do a quick exercise before the session starts. (*ask that if anyone has done this exercise before they don't explain it to others).
2. Ask for a volunteer (or nominate someone).
3. Hand them a sheet of card and tube of toothpaste – tell them their task is to empty the contents of the toothpaste onto the sheet of card.
4. When they have done this ask them to hand the card to the person sitting next to them. Tell that person their task is to put all the toothpaste back in the tube – but explain that they can't cut the tube and there can't be a single bit of toothpaste left on the card or their hands.
5. Ask the rest of the group to help them/ give them ideas - the group should quickly come to conclusion that it's not possible.
6. Questions for the whole group:
 - a. What has this exercise got to do with confidentiality in a group?
 - b. How is the toothpaste like information that we share?
7. The group may come to this conclusion, but if necessary explain the following points:
 - a. Once information is shared in a group setting we can never completely control what happens to it
 - b. While we are all committed to respecting each other's privacy we need to recognise that we can't guarantee that someone might not accidentally share something.
 - c. For this reason we all need to make sure we are only sharing information in a group that we feel comfortable to share.
8. Thank the volunteers and the group for taking part.

Source: Dr Camille Warrington