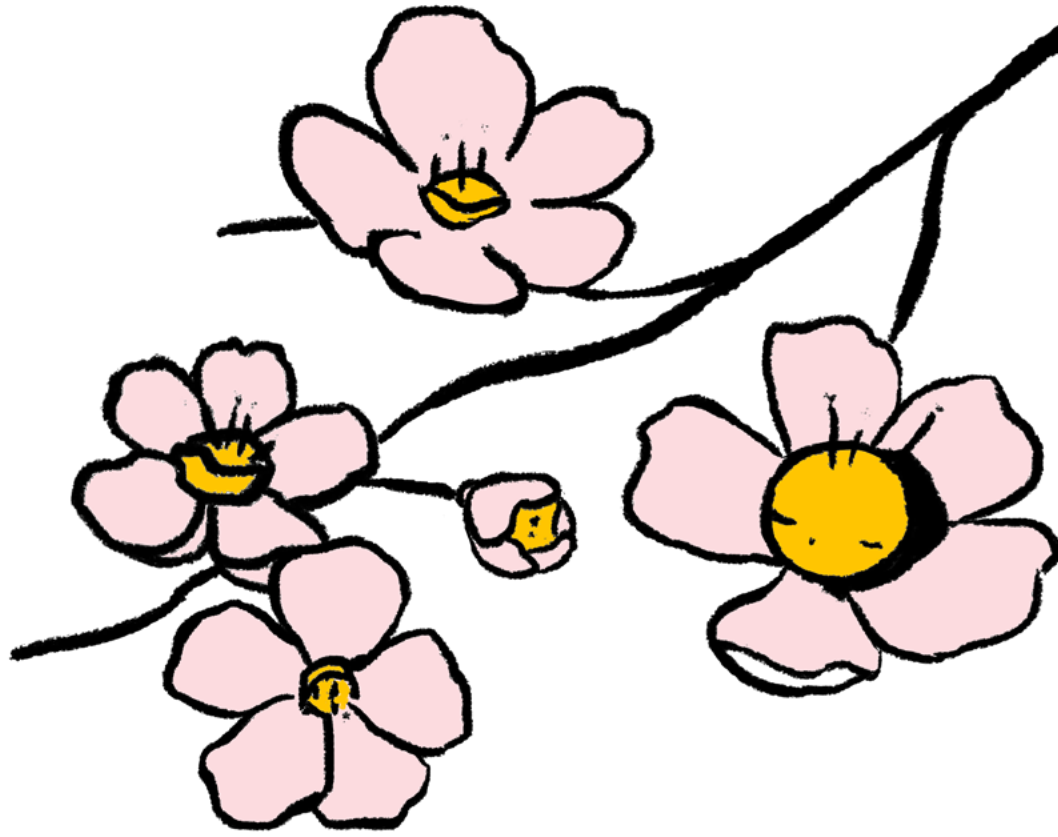


UNITE RESOURCES

Using Dialogue to Address Stigma and Discrimination

BC MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE SERVICES



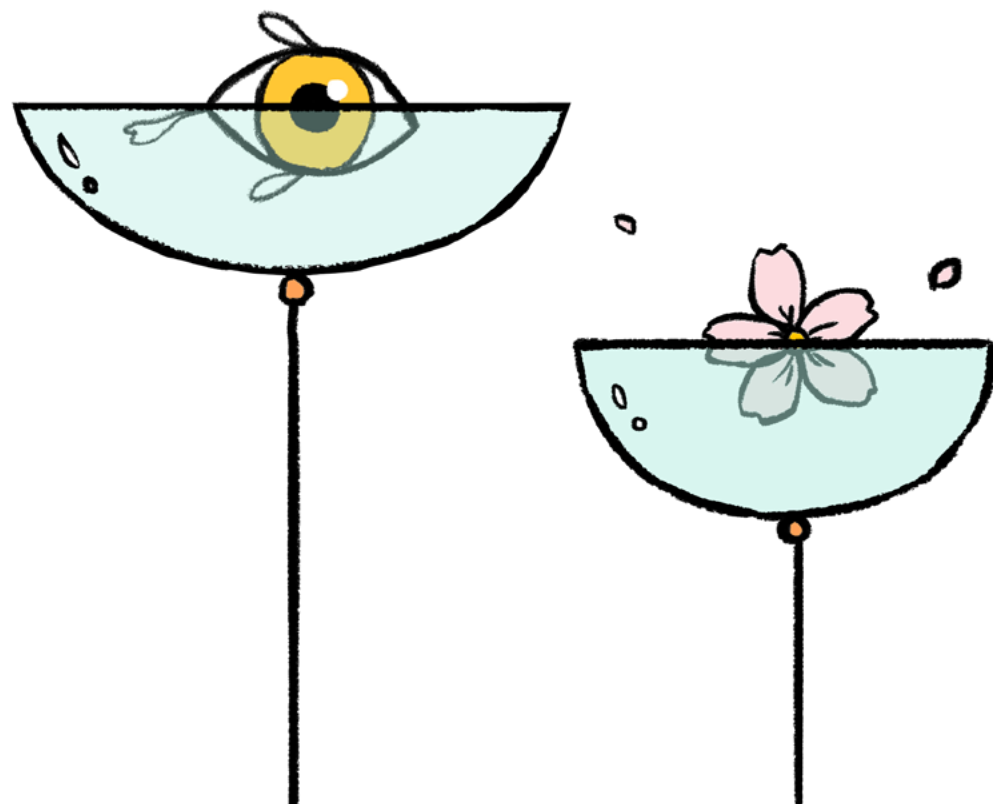


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If we are to live in harmony with ourselves and with nature, we need to be able to communicate freely in a creative movement in which no one permanently holds to or otherwise defends his own ideas.

–David Bohm

DIALOGUE ABOUT COMPLEX issues such as mental health and substance use can be difficult and uncomfortable. The facilitator's job is not to remove all difficulty and discomfort. Nonetheless, it is critical to create a safe, respectful, non-judgemental space in which participants can come together, share differing ideas, opinions, and beliefs, and engage in real dialogue. Neither is the facilitator to control the conversation but only to stimulate it and to help participants engage according to the principles of dialogue. The following outline helps facilitators understand how to create a safe space or 'container' to have dialogue, build the culture of the container, and work in the container to address stigma and discrimination.



Creating the Container

DIALOGUE OCCURS IN a space—a physical or virtual space where people come together, but also a set of non-physical conditions where everyone feels safe (respected and recognized for who one is) to interact openly. This whole space can be referred to as the container or situation for dialogue.

CONTAINER AS A PHYSICAL SPACE

The physical or virtual space of dialogue needs to be welcoming and comfortable in order to reduce any feelings of anxiety or vulnerability. Setting up the physical space so that participants sit in a circle is ideal. This enables everyone to see and hear each other, and it implies that everyone is on the same level. Other formats can also work. In a virtual space, ideally, people should have their cameras on, as seeing each other can help build trust. When this is not possible, the facilitator will need to give particular attention to ensuring participants engage in real dialogue. The critical focus is to have all participants feel they can engage as peers.

CONTAINER AS A SACRED SPACE

Dialogue is a space in which people do not “react” to each other, but “hold” each other through thinking together, connecting to each other, and building shared meaning. When people come together, they bring their set of inherited norms about how to interact, and with that disagreements and pressure can build. If the container cannot hold the pressure, people may try to avoid the issues, blame or judge one another, and resist what is happening. To keep the container safe and sacred, it is critical to focus on shared meaning and understanding rather than differences. Instead of trying to reach agreement or “getting to yes,” participants in dialogue seek to understand each other and find ways to accept each other for who each one is.

Helping Participants Engage in the Container

To build the culture of the container and help participants engage with one another and build relationships, the following elements are essential.

LISTENING TO ONE ANOTHER

In dialogue, it is important that people with different ideas and experiences feel they are heard, understood and respected. Listening is not just about hearing words. It is about being ready to hear others' ideas and positions, being open to receive new information regardless of the consequences to one's own position, and having the desire to understand new ideas and perspectives. Qualities or abilities that help foster attentive listening include:

- Concentrating completely and patiently on what is actually being said without jumping to conclusions or judgements
- Being aware of our thoughts and noticing how much our thinking arises out of a "net of thought" – a series of ready-made responses and opinions with limitations and assumptions
- Being imaginative and open to new ideas and possibilities and recognizing the resistance or emotional reactions we may feel to what someone else is saying
- Empathizing with others—trying to see/feel the world from their perspectives without being too quick to say, "I know how you feel"

but taking the time to explore how they feel in their circumstances

- Loving one another in the spirit of genuine caring and reaching out to the other and of overcoming the fear of losing oneself

RESPECTING ONE ANOTHER

Real dialogue requires that participants are able to engage in meaningful and respectful interchange. In dialogue, we encounter people with views that we may not like. But their ideas and ways of thinking or living cannot undo their legitimacy as beings. Respect means we acknowledge their ideas and welcome differences, as they may express an aspect of reality the rest of the group is not in touch with. Suspending the need to prove the other person wrong and seeing the other as a mystery that we cannot fully comprehend helps create and sustain respectful relationships.

EXPOSING ASSUMPTIONS AND SUSPENDING JUDGEMENTS

We all have assumptions and make judgements. To engage in dialogue, we must first become aware of our own assumptions and judgements and be able to suspend them when we listen to others. When we allow our assumptions and judgemental attitudes to remain unexposed and go unchallenged, we may find ourselves engaging in discriminatory

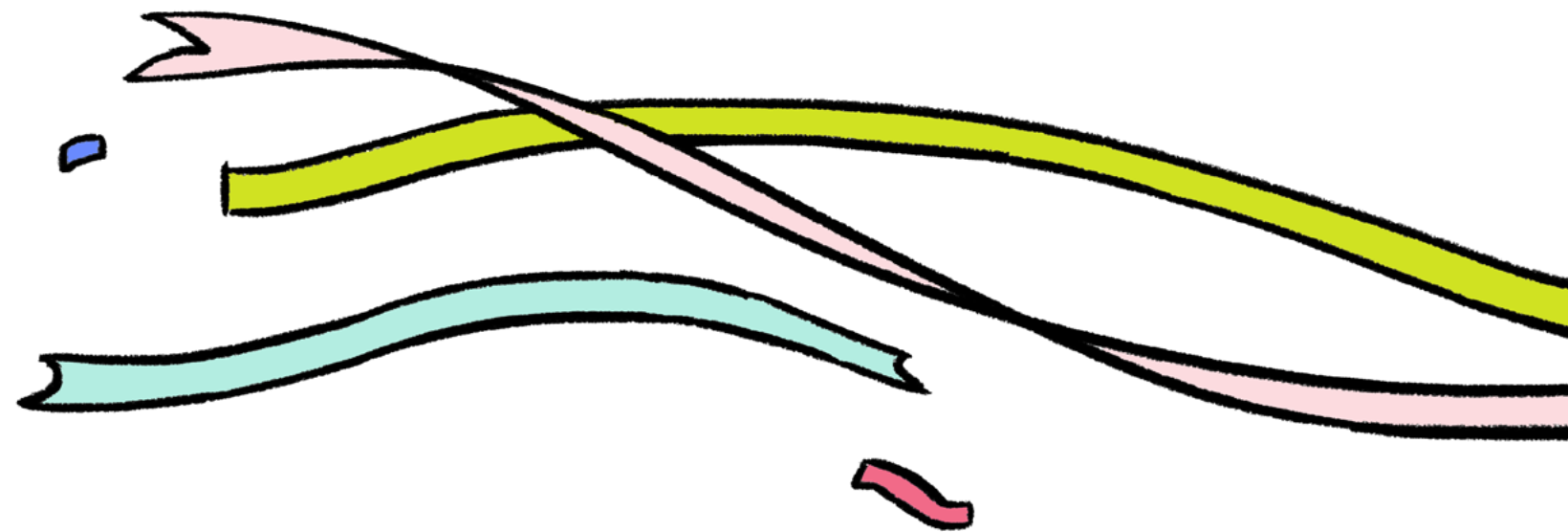
behaviours. Listening respectfully while suspending our own opinions can provide us with the space to maintain our equilibrium and not get impatiently excited or reactive.

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

In dialogue, we consider the group at the level of wholeness rather than looking at the dynamics between fragmented parts. This does not imply agreement or compromise, but we see the group like a whole cloth, woven out of different strands. Conflict can be acknowledged, but it need not be confronted or resolved. We can encounter aspects of reality that are normally avoided—chaos, complexity, or uncertainty—and welcome diverse voices.

“Dialogue is about what we value and how we define it. It is about discovering what our true values are, about looking beyond the superficial and automatic answers to our questions. Dialogue is about expanding our capacity for attention, awareness and learning with and from each other. It is about exploring the frontiers of what it means to be human, in relationship to each other and our world.”

—Glenna Gerard



Working in the Container to Address Stigma and Discrimination Together

Evidence suggests that stigma and discrimination undermine well-being related to mental health and substance use. Stigma and discrimination represent judgemental attitudes and unjust reactions to diversity and the range of human experiences. Stigma develops through stages in which people are first labelled, based on a socially selected difference. The people labelled can then be devalued by linking the label to a negative stereotype leading to a clear separation of “us” from “them.” The result is status loss, discrimination and unequal outcomes.

Dialogue is a good way to address stigma and discrimination because it undermines the above process. Dialogue requires us to question our assumptions and prejudices and give up the position of expert (power and authority) to become a learner/listener. Successfully addressing stigma and discrimination involves using dialogue not as a method but as a way of being oriented to being-with the other. Through dialogue, simplistic explanations are replaced by greater awareness of complexity, and curiosity and increased empathy for the challenges others face. There are several aspects to this being-with:

EMBRACING THE KNOWLEDGE OF NOT KNOWING

We cannot be open to the other or question our own assumptions so long as we believe we have all the answers. Therefore, dialogue requires a radical commitment to “the knowledge of not knowing” – embracing our own finitude and fallibility. When we recognize that we do not know everything and embrace our limitations, we are more open to engage in dialogue with others, to be curious, and to learn about them. Through dialogue, we can ask questions and reflect on our assumptions and prejudices to better understand both others and ourselves. People with mental health and substance use challenges as well as those who work with them all have stories to tell and insights to consider. When we listen to each other, reflect on and unpack our own myths and assumptions based on our limited experience, we open up new possibilities and new ways of thinking.

DEVELOPING “US-NESS”

We so often approach the other from an I-it stance in which we see the other as an object to be fixed or helped. Martin Buber suggests we need to shift to an I-You (intersubjective) stance that demonstrates togetherness. This relationship is pure, intimate, and reciprocal. In the context of stigma and discrimination, categorizing and classifying people and

approaching them through diagnostic or other labels can objectify them, reinforce the I-it relationship, and lead to stigma and discrimination by enhancing a sense of “groupness” and “differentness.” Even our well-intentioned actions may themselves label people based on our assumptions about a need for protection, care, “saving,” and the like. In the I-You stance, required in true dialogue, such objectification is not possible. The other is a being like me with whom I seek a relationship.

EMBRACING INTERDEPENDENCE

Our life is fundamentally dialogical. Our thoughts, words and actions are shaped through interaction with others. We do not discover ourselves, our identity, in isolation. As Charles Taylor says, “. . . I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. . .” This suggests the stance of being-with someone, which is essential to dialogue, not only has implications for how we come to understand the other, but also impacts how we come to understand ourselves. It demonstrates that our lives are intertwined and interdependent. We shape the identity of others based on how we treat them and we, in turn, are shaped by them. A relationship of trust and respect offers the possibility of positive growth.

DEVELOPING MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Living in a world in which we are all fallible and dependent on one another for our very identity, and in which we seek to build mutually respectful I-You relationships, creates a situation in which we are responsible to each other. We accept responsibility for our own behaviour and for treating others with respect, dignity and care. In turn, we expect and accept care from others. We do not make excuses for ourselves or others but we support each other in meeting our obligations to each other. We do not take on the responsibility to fix other people but we are ready to support them to thrive and see them as assets in our own pursuit of well-being. We owe it to each other to create a society in which everyone is cared for and feels supported. When the focus is on relationship and building mutual responsibility, the results can be transformative.

A facilitator of dialogue can help build the container and help participants develop a culture of dialogue within the container. But the work of dialogue to address stigma and discrimination belongs to us all. The facilitator of dialogue is also a participant in the dialogue where no one has more power than anyone else. The facilitator helps shape the dialogue by sharing ideas, asking good questions, and modelling the openness to others that is essential to real dialogue.

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