

Successful role-play for bystander intervention learning

Planning for a small group learning environment that is “safe” and effective

Because communication skill building requires risk taking on the part of the learner (e.g., trying out new behaviours in front of a group) the development of a safe learning environment by the educator is critically important. The most important aim for the educator is to establish and maintain a learning environment in which:

- participation is valued
- feedback is justified and constructive
- the awkwardness of learning process is normalized
- the learning process does not highlight deficiencies or embarrass learners publicly.

These aspects of a constructive learning environment are often summarized as “safety.”

Setting up the role-play

Despite the value of using role-play in communication skills training, its use can be an unwelcome part of a session for many learners. They may have experienced poorly facilitated role-play in the past. Well-facilitated role-plays begin with a clear discussion of the ground rules. These include confidentiality in the group, that time-outs will be used to highlight points for discussion, and that the learner can call a time-out at any time to ask the group or facilitator for guidance.

It is important to open with a discussion of how role-play can be a useful teaching tool and, yet, is often challenging for learners. Asking “What are your worries about role-play?” and acknowledging that role-play can feel contrived and anxiety provoking at times can help learners more readily engage.

Moving from scripts to improvised role-play

Role-plays can be constructed in several ways, all of which have different strengths that can influence the safety and efficacy of the group. Group size is a practical consideration. For a group of 4–8 learners, using a single role-play with a facilitator who solicits feedback and input from the group can be very successful because most or all of the learners can take an active role at some point, while not feeling pressured to speak when they have little to say.

In twos or threes, small groups can take it in turn to be ‘actors’ and observers in a role-play, with observers noting techniques used in the role-play such as:

- use of body language
- distraction
- humour
- “I” statements
- encouraging empathy
- using caring and friendship as a framework
- using social norms

To break the ice at the beginning of a session and to increase confidence about the skills that participants have, you may want to suggest asking participants to do a 'bad role-play' followed by a 'good role-play'. A 'bad role-play' could include:

- being hostile or aggressive towards the target person
- not listening to what the other person is saying – not giving them room in the conversation
- using humour inappropriately

Encourage participants to use examples from their own experience of situations where they would like to develop intervention skills.

Don't forget to explore the use of interventions that might include taking a decision to tackle a problem after the event, or to seek immediate external help if there is a situation where there is immediate risk to their own safety or someone else's safety.

Acknowledgements

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