

# Planning a Panel Discussion

*A Guide for Planning a Safe and  
Empowering Mental Health Panel*

*Active Minds, Inc.*

# What is a Panel Discussion?

- A panel discussion is an event that features 2-5 panelists and a moderator discussing a prescribed topic or list of topics.

# What Does it Look Like?

- One Moderator
  - Introduces panelists by name and kicks off Q&A after panelist statements
- 3-4 Panelists
  - Each makes a short introductory statement about who they are and the experience(s) that brings them to the panel's topic
- The Audience
  - After the moderator asks some questions of the panel, the audience has a chance at Q&A

# GOALS AND EVALUATIONS

# Goal Setting

- What do you want to accomplish with your panel discussion event?
- Who do you want to reach?
- How many people do you want to reach?
- What topics are essential to cover?
- How will you know if the audience has learned?

# Evaluations

- Prepare an audience evaluation to determine whether your goals were achieved
  - Did the audience learn about what you intended?
  - Did people enjoy the event?
  - What did they like best?
  - What would they improve?
- Consider having an evaluation to collect panelist feedback

# PLANNING LOGISTICS

# Time Frame

- **Begin planning at least 6-8 weeks in advance**
  - Enables you to choose an ideal date and venue
  - Allows plenty of time for panelist training
  - Allows time for multi-dimensional publicity
- **Schedule the event for 60-90 minutes**
  - This is where people's schedules tend to top out
  - Try not to schedule your event against another major campus event



# Audio/Visual Considerations

- Will you be showing any videos?
- Will you be playing any music?
- Will you need to project content such as a PowerPoint presentation?
- Will the room require panelists to have/share microphones?
- Will the room require the moderator to have a microphone?
- Will the room require audience members asking questions to have access to a microphone?

# Choosing a Venue

- **Prioritize acoustics**
  - Given the conversational format, a small theater or lecture hall is the best environment
- **Be conscientious of your needs**
  - Will the room accommodate your A/V needs?
  - Is it appropriate for the audience size you expect?
  - Do you have a budget for needed A/V support?

# Panelist Recruitment

- Be diverse
  - Having a broad range of perspectives increases chances that audience members will identify with the content
  - Selecting panelists outside of your chapter membership can increase your audience size
- Substitutes
  - Recruit and train more panelists than you need for your event—some panelists may drop out

# Developing Moderator Questions

- Choose a moderator
  - Select someone who can think on their feet and manage time constraints
- Keep it flexible
  - Develop a list of questions that is longer than you possibly have time for
  - Develop equal numbers of questions that can be answered by each of the panelists

# Developing Moderator Questions

- When should I do it? (options)
  1. Completely Before Training
    - Sit down with chapter members and develop the list of questions together in its entirety
  2. Some Before Training
    - Sit down with chapter members to develop a partial list of questions; then sit down with panel members to get their input
  3. Completely During Training
    - Sit down with panelists and develop the list of questions with them

# The Advisor's Role

- The advisor or a member of the counseling center staff should be available throughout the process to handle difficult situations if they arise.
- The advisor may want to vet the moderator questions in advance for safety purposes.

# Scheduling a Professional

- **ALWAYS** have a clinician present for support
  - Panel discussions address very serious, personal topics that can be triggering no matter how safe we try to make it. We always recommend having at least one licensed clinician present at your event.
  - Appropriate substitutes might include Counseling Center trainees or trained peer counselors. Check with your counseling staff to get their advice.
  - A clinician serving as a panelist does not count as the professional support person for the event.

# Scheduling a Training

- You should always have a training with panelists because it:
  - Helps them work out their stories and understand expectations
  - Lets you hear each person's story and make sure no highly triggering language will be used
  - Makes everyone feel more comfortable with the content and flow of the event.
- Schedule the training no less than 1 week in advance



# PANELIST PREPARATION AND TRAINING

# Before You Meet

- Send out expectations for what they should include in their introductory statements and how long that statement should be.
- Send out all logistical information including times, venue, and number of total panelists.

# Before You Meet

- Ask if the panelist has a support system they can call on if the process makes them feel triggered.
  - Or have a dedicated professional (or trained student) support person

# The Training

- Introductions
  - Make sure everyone knows each other's names
  - Because of the nature of the disclosure you'll be requiring, do an icebreaker such as "Cross the Line"

# The Training

- Philosophical Overview
  - What is *Active Minds* and what does your chapter do (and why)?
  - What are your chapter's goals in holding this event?
  - What are the panelists' goals in participating?
  - Establish ground rules for listening, mutual respect, and confidentiality (and others, if needed/desired)

# The Training

- **Logistics Overview**
  - Where will the event take place?
  - What time is the event?
  - Who is available to provide professional support or assistance to panelists and how can they reach that person?
  - What will be provided for the panelists (e.g., A/V, water, etc.)?

# The Training

- **Format Overview**
  - Take panelists through the event agenda
  - Choose a presenting order
  - Present clear expectations for:
    - Content of introductory statement
    - Length of introductory statement
    - Safety (see “Common Pitfalls” document)
  - Establish limits for moderator Q&A
  - Establish limits for audience Q&A

# The Training

- Allow 20-30 minutes for panelists to develop or refine their introductory statements based on your expectations
- Have each panelist read their introductory statement to the group
  - Check for safety concerns (see “Common Pitfalls”)
  - Listeners should be encouraged to jot down any questions raised from the person’s intro statement



# The Training

- Q&A Prep
  - Simulate the Q&A experience by having each panelist take questions from:
    - The moderator
    - The trainer(s)
    - Fellow panelists
  - Panelists should never give mental health advice or advocate for a particular treatment
    - Unless panelists are licensed clinicians, they should never portray themselves as mental health experts. They are experts on their own stories ONLY.

# The Training

- Q&A Prep
  - How to safely and gracefully dodge uncomfortable questions
    - “Thank you for your question, but I prefer not to answer that in front of the group tonight.”
    - “Sorry, but I’m not comfortable answering questions about [X].”
    - “Unfortunately, that isn’t an appropriate question to ask, but it’s a common mistake to ask it. Here’s why it’s offensive....” (for those questions which are TRULY offensive to the individual—i.e. methods of self-harm or suicide attempt; questions about genitalia to transgender/genderqueer/nonbinary panelists, etc.

# The Training

- Debrief
  - Ask about how panelists are feeling now that they've told their stories
  - Ask what needs they might have between the training and the event
  - Remind substitute panelists about how and when they will be contacted to substitute for the event
  - Remind everyone who to contact with questions or concerns prior to the event and what time they should arrive in advance of the start of the event

# EVENT PUBLICITY

# Timeline

- Begin publicizing approximately 3 weeks in advance
- Majority of publicity should be concentrated in the last week prior to the event.

# Methods

- Diversify your outlets as much as possible
- Social media
- Ask groups that would be particularly interested to attend
  - Emails or Listservs
  - In-person invitations at club meetings
- Make announcements in classes
- Campus media announcement
- Listing on campus event calendar

# THE DAY OF THE EVENT

# Refreshments

- Water for each panelist and the moderator
- Confirm any catering orders
  - If the call time conflicts with a meal time, make sure you work out whether food will be provided to panelists.
- Do not serve food at an eating disorder panel
  - It may drive away the people you're most trying to reach.



# Resources & Evaluations

- Set up a resource table
- Include a chapter sign-up sheet
- Print evaluations and make sure each attendee receives one
- Prepare multiple methods for collecting evaluations

# Welcome

- Welcome the audience
- Introduce Active Minds and what the chapter does on campus
- Mention the next meeting and event with times and locations (if available)
- Encourage folks to join the chapter
- Point out the clinician in the audience as a resource to audience members
- Introduce the moderator

# Conclusion

- Thank everyone for coming
- Remind audience of counseling resources
- Instruct audience to return evaluations

# Panelist Check-In

- Make sure each panelist is doing OK
- Remind panelists to seek help if they find themselves triggered
- Thank them for their courageous participation

# POST-EVENT CONSIDERATIONS

# Evaluations

- Tabulate evaluations
- Debrief the event with the chapter
  - Use evaluation data to discuss strengths and areas of improvement
  - Collect anecdotal thoughts from chapter members
- Share data with your advisor

# Panelist Follow-up

- Send an email to each panelist
  - Ask panelists about comfort
  - Include counseling resource information
  - Ask about involvement in future panels or other programs
  - Get feedback about training and panel processes
  - Express gratitude

## **Sample Panel Discussion Moderator Questions**

### People in Recovery

What do you wish you knew about mental health before the onset of your disorder?

What do you wish you knew about your particular disorder before it set in?

Who was the first person you told that you were struggling? How did they react?

What did a friend do that was helpful to you during your illness?

If you left campus for your treatment, what was it like when you returned?

What should a friend do to show they care but that your illness isn't the only thing going on in your life?

What's one mistake a friend could make in supporting someone who is struggling with their mental health?

How would you describe how your disorder(s) felt to someone who hasn't experienced it?

What stereotypes about mental illness bother you most?

What do you do to cope and keep yourself healthy now?

What brings you the most joy?

### Survivors of Suicide

Survivors of suicide often feel guilt after their loss. Did you feel guilt when you found out about your loved one's death? If so, how did you forgive yourself?

What did you do to help cope with your grief?

What do you do now to honor and remember your loved one?

How did people in your family or among your friends react to the loss?

How did you deal with people who didn't want to acknowledge the loss or deal with it at all?



### Supporters of People who Struggle

What symptoms did you first notice that signaled maybe something was off with your friend?

How did you raise the conversation of mental health with your friend?

How did your friend react when you tried to talk to them about their mental health?

What is one thing you did for your friend that was super successful and helpful to your friend?

Once one thing you tried to do to be supportive that completely failed?

How did you find information about where they could go to get the help they needed?

How did you maintain your own mental health while supporting your friend?

## **Cross the Line**

**\*\*Note: The activity leader does *not* need to use all the question prompts listed below.\*\***

### **Instructions:**

For this activity, I will ask you to gather in a circle and face the center.

I will then read a series of statements that begin: “Cross the line if...” If the statement applies to you step forward into the open space and feel free to look around at those who did and did not step in. After several seconds, I will ask you to return to the group.

### **Safety and Ground Rules:**

In the next several minutes, we will be sharing some of our experiences and vulnerabilities with each other. Therefore, we all must feel sure that we will all remain sensitive to one another’s feelings. This requires that the following guidelines are met:

- 1) You must LISTEN. While we are generally a group of talkers, it is important to do our best to remain silent throughout the activity. The quiet atmosphere will allow us to participate more fully and experience our thoughts more fully.
- 2) You must show RESPECT. We must respect the dignity of everyone involved by keeping all things revealed confidential. Nothing that anyone offers up should leave the room.
- 3) If you decide you do need to talk to someone in the room about what is revealed, please do so on an individual and private basis by asking their permission.

Does everyone agree to these guidelines?

If, at any point, you become so uncomfortable that you cannot respond to a prompt, you may choose not to step in. However, we urge you to stay fully engaged and to participate in as many items as you possibly can in order to achieve the goal of recognizing the many differences and similarities in our group.

At some points you may feel that there is a gray area in some of the statements. Keep in mind that you define what the statement means to you. So, if you feel it applies, cross the line.

Are there any questions or concerns before we start?

## Statements

### Cross the line if...

You identify as female.

You identify as male.

You identify as a gender other than female or male.

You at any time liked to listen to Justin Bieber.

You at any time knew the words to an entire Will Smith song.

You enjoy country music.

You enjoy classical films.

You enjoy reading non-fiction books.

You enjoy doing crosswords or sudoku puzzles.

You have collected something for more than 10 years that has little value.

You have urinated in the shower.

You have brushed a dog's teeth.

You have bowled a 200 game.

You have shot whipped cream from an aerosol can into your mouth so forcefully that whipped cream came out of your nose.

You have ever baked a cake or pie from scratch.

You have spent an entire night in a hammock.

You are still friends with someone you went to junior high with.

You are still in touch with a core group of friends from high school.

You have ever walked out of a movie you paid to watch.

Your parents are divorced.

You were raised by a single parent.

You are an only child.

You have more than four siblings.

You have lost your glasses and found them on your face or head.

You consider yourself a person of color.

You know very little about your personal heritage.

You live independently of your parents and have no direct financial ties.

You have ever taken primary responsibility for raising another member of your family or caring for an elderly member of your family.

You wish you had more money.

You have smoked an entire cigar.

You have spent New Year's Eve alone.

You have ever been fired from a job.

You have won a medal.

You consider your family upper class.

You consider your family middle class.

You consider your family working class.

You have driven a go-kart.

You have a tractor.

You have failed a driver's test.

You have totaled a car.

You have kept a goldfish alive for more than 5 years.  
You have ended a serious relationship in the last year.  
You have low self-confidence.  
You feel lonely.  
You feel physically unattractive some or most of the time.  
You consider yourself a feminist.  
You have ever gone skinny dipping.  
You are “pro-life.”  
You are “pro-choice.”  
One of your parents has died.  
You have a learning disability.  
You have a physical disability.  
You have a psychological disability.  
You have felt discriminated against.  
You have a medical condition.  
You have questioned your sexual orientation.  
You consider yourself heterosexual.  
You consider yourself bisexual.  
You consider yourself asexual.  
You consider yourself homosexual.  
You consider yourself queer.  
You consider yourself pansexual.  
You have experienced the effects of drug or alcohol addiction in your family.  
You have experienced a significant loss (family member or close friend).  
You have questioned your decision to attend your current college or university.  
You have been hospitalized for more than a week.  
You have had a sexual experience that you regretted.  
You know someone who has been injured or killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.  
You have cried at least once in the past month.  
You have laughed at yourself once in the past week.  
You have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point in your life.  
You have stood in front of a judge to declare yourself guilty or not guilty.  
You have shot something with a gun.  
You have ever woken up somewhere and not been able to remember how you got there.  
You wish you could relive any part of your past.

## **Debriefing**

Reminder: This discussion is completely private and everyone will respect everyone else's right to talk. Do your best to avoid side commentary and really pay attention to what people have to say.

### **What:**

- 1) How did you feel during this exercise?
- 2) How do you feel now?
- 3) What about the exercise seemed objectionable to you?
- 4) What was good about this experience? What did you enjoy?
- 5) What was hard about this experience?
- 6) What reactions did you notice in others around you? When?

### **So What:**

- 1) Do you think this activity was beneficial for our group? Why or why not?
- 2) What did you learn about yourself?
- 3) Why do you think we decided to do this activity?

### **Now What:**

- 1) What did you learn in this activity that you may be able to transfer to the other working and personal relationships in your life?
- 2) How do you think doing this activity will affect our relationships, if at all?
- 3) Where else could you use this activity?

## PANELIST COMMONPITFALLS

There are some common pitfalls that inexperienced storytellers can sometimes fall into. As you craft your story, consider how you might avoid these common traps and feel free to ask your peers and mentors for guidance.

**STIGMA.** Storytelling is often about getting and keeping people interested in your story, so sometimes storytellers will accentuate the aspects of their stories that seem most dramatic. The problem with doing this mental health stories is that accentuating the drama can sometimes reinforce stigma.

Likewise, an audience can often tell if a mental health storyteller is embarrassed of parts of their story or is holding back. It's critical that a storyteller has had the time and space to move past their own stigma and shame regarding their story so that they can share it most effectively.

**SAFETY.** Safety is one of the most critically important aspects of mental health storytelling. Sometimes we know our stories so well, especially the details, that we forget that some of the details aren't helpful to people in the audience. Here are some guidelines for ensuring safety:

- *Avoid specificity about means.* Whether you're discussing a suicide attempt, self-injury, or an eating disorder, it's very important to refrain from talking about the specific behaviors used to self-harm or to cover up that harm.
- *Avoid talking about specific weights, calorie counts, etc.* If you're discussing eating disorders it is very important not to share numbers. Often when numbers are shared it can trigger audience members struggling with a disorder to eat less, lose more weight, exercise more, and engage in more frequent or different eating disorder behaviors.
- *If you're speaking, have a professional in the room.* When you deliver your story verbally, as in a panel discussion or solo event, try to have a counseling professional in the room to respond to folks who may be triggered by your story. No matter how much safety you building into your own story, it's hard to anticipate what could upset someone. A trigger warning to readers can be helpful in written pieces.
- *"In a better place."* This is a phrase that some survivors of loved one's suicides use to provide themselves with a sense of comfort in knowing that their loved one is no longer in pain. Although the impetus to do this is often a natural response and helpful to the survivor themselves, it's important to refrain from sharing the idea with your audience. You never know if someone in that audience is contemplating and may be looking for reassurance that suicide could be an answer for them.

**MISJUDGING COMFORT.** It is common for people to be comfortable with the idea of sharing their story generally, but to have a much harder time sharing some of the details. As a rule of thumb, if a wound from the past is still healing, err on the side of not sharing it. There may be a time in the future, once it heals, that you'll feel comfortable. However, typically if you're still getting over something, your audience is going to sense your discomfort and be uncomfortable, too.

**FAILURE TO FACTOR IN THE AUDIENCE.** Our stories are such intensely emotional and central pieces of our lives. We are familiar with every detail, feeling, and image, and all of them seem important. Yet, sometimes it's possible to get so buried in the details that we forget our primary purpose in telling the story: to impact our audience.

Learn and think about who your audience is in advance, and think about what you would like them to take away and do once they have heard or read it. Invite them into the story. If there are experiences that folks unfamiliar with mental illness won't understand, then try to use an example from every day common existence to illustrate your thoughts or feelings.

**STRETCHING THE TRUTH.** Sometimes people don't feel that their story is "extraordinary" enough to be told so they embellish their story or pad reality with some untruths to make it seem more exciting or profound. The truth is, authenticity is a lot more valuable than fabricated plot twists.

**RAMBLING.** Concise stories are the most powerful. Don't feel like you have to explain every detail between Time 1 and Time 2. Focus on the most important details and flesh them out for the audience. Choose details that are particularly applicable to setting the scene, describing feelings, or setting up the next big event.

**PUT A BOW ON IT.** Be strategic about how you conclude your story. Make it a "soft landing" for you audience that focuses on them and what they can do to help the mental health movement, your fundraising effort, or your advocacy campaign. We're not talking demands here, either. Let your appreciation for their time shine through, and reinforce how well you know that they have the power to make change.

## PANELIST TRAINING GROUNDRULES

**BE RESPECTFUL.** The journey that you're embarking on is emotional and important. Listen carefully to each other, and do your best not to interrupt.

**KEEP CONFIDENCES.** Not everything that comes up in training will be ready to be shared with the general audience. Be mindful of maintaining the confidence of your fellow trainers and trainees. Let them share the details, and only those details, they want to share.

**STEP UP. STEP BACK.** Have you been particularly quiet during the training? Step up and participate a little. There are no wrong answers in this process. Have you maybe been talking too much? Step back. Allow your peers some time and space to share their journeys with you.

**SUPPORT EACH OTHER.** Telling our stories can be really challenging. We'll put on the best and safest event possible if we commit to supporting each other throughout the whole experience.

**STOP OR PAUSE.** By being in this training you are *not* locked into anything. If you get too emotional or are triggered in any way, feel free to take a break or postpone your participation. Your health is the most important thing.



### Sample Panel Evaluation

Please complete the following evaluation based on your experience at our panel discussion and return it to the resource table prior to leaving.

I increased my knowledge of mental health by attending this event.

**Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree**

I learned something new by attending this event.

**Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree**

I enjoyed attending this event.

**Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree**

I would attend an event like this in the future.

**Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree**

What did you like best about this program?

What can we improve in future panel discussions?

Include general feedback below.