



## Navigating Participation Challenges

Total time: 32min 06sec

**Kate Hildebrandt** 00:01

Thank you for listening to this short recording which is part of a larger audio series to help explore prevention, developing and expanding our prevention efforts, and troubleshooting challenges in our prevention. In this recording, we discuss common participation challenges that we may experience while facilitating prevention work and brainstorm some strategies to navigate those challenges. Today we are joined by Sexual Assault Task Force staff.

**Meg Foster** 00:23

Hi, I'm Megan Foster. I'm the Prevention Program Coordinator.

**Carli Rohner** 00:26

Hello, my name is Carli Rohner, I'm the Campus Advocate Coordinator.

**Kate Hildebrandt** 00:29

And I'm Kate Hildebrandt, and I'm the Campus Coordinator. The challenges that we're talking about today were identified by participants in the statewide comprehensive prevention training in 2018 and 2019. So today, we're going to start by discussing some challenges related to participants and participation. Alright, so the first question we got was around fear participation around folks not being engaged, not wanting to participate, or being really checked out.

**Carli Rohner** 00:53

Yeah, this is so hard. And I think this is one of the most common things that we run up to in our presentations is how are folks going to receive the material and how are folks showing up in the room. One of the things that I like to do ahead of time before even getting into the presentation is just make sure that I'm meeting with folks from whatever organization or group or club or community that is going to be the audience for that participation. Part of that reason is to find out, what are some of the current challenges that they're experiencing? How ready is that group to be able to have some of the conversations that we're going to have that day? So for example, in the past, when I've worked with say, athletic teams, oftentimes I would meet with the captains of those teams or coaches and just talk a little bit about, What is the culture of your team? What are some of the conversations that you all are having? What are some of the things that you have talked about in relation to the topics that we're going to be covering in our training? What concerns do you have? and oftentimes that helps me navigate some of the challenges that might keep people from being engaged in the group. And so having some of that pre-conversation can be incredibly helpful.

I think it's also really important to keep in mind that once we're in that space, just the impact of violence on folks in our community is so big and just really can impact how folks show up in their engagement with you. So keeping in mind that even if somebody hasn't directly experienced violence,



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they might have a friend or family member or somebody that they love that has and they're also sitting with that reality as they're working with you in the room. So sometimes when folks are checked out, sometimes when folks are a little disengaged, not making eye contact, that kind of stuff, I like to give folks the benefit of the doubt that maybe because we're talking about hard topics, even if we frame them in a really positive way, it might just be a little too much for that person at that time. I've had experiences where those folks were actually really, really engaged and just their physical way of demonstrating it wasn't apparent until we talked after the presentation and they talked a little bit about how that hit home for them. So just keeping that in mind for folks, the wide impact of violence can be affecting how folks show up in the room.

I think the other way to help keep folks engaged and participating is making sure that if it's, especially if it's a required presentation, like folks are being forced to be in the room with you, that you're incorporating as much of their feedback and experience as possible. So asking questions, doing group work, making sure that it's not just purely lecture-based can be really helpful for letting those folks feel like they have a voice in the room and that they're able to be participants even if they were required to be there.

### **Kate Hildebrandt** 02:00

I think another thing, and this goes with what you were talking about Carli, is just the idea of changing up the types of activities in participation. Some people might feel more comfortable if they have the opportunity to write about it first or talk about it one-on-one. I think especially if you have the flexibility in your presentation and you feel comfortable doing this, being able to change it up at the last minute even or during the presentation if you see that people are really checked out/not participating/not raising their hands, maybe that's a sign that you might need to try another activity. I also try to keep in mind, exactly like you were talking about Carli, that you don't know what else has happened with people that day. Like, maybe they have all just come from a really taxing [meeting], where they had to do a lot of like participation or something, and so I always try to remember that 1) there's a chance that it has nothing to do with me, and 2) if I can change it up in the moment to make it better for them, then I'll try to do that.

### **Carli Rohner** 04:30

Going off of that, we can just ask folks in the room if I'm seeing a wide amount of disengagement, like folks are tired, maybe they did come from something that was just taxing as a group or a meeting that was really hard. I can say, "How do folks feel? Do we need a break? Do we need to come back? Do we need to switch it up?" And so sometimes if it's appropriate and you feel like folks are as a group disengaging, offering some feedback of, "What do we need to do? Do we need to take a break?" can be a really helpful way to reset that room. So I think that kind of leads us into our next area where folks sometimes show up in the room and feel like they might not have a voice or might not feel heard. And so one of the things that we got questions around were, How do we ensure that folks who are participants in the room feel heard, feel like they're able to participate and are able to fully be in that training with you?



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**Meg Foster** 05:23

Yeah, one thing I think that we as facilitators often do is we have expectations about people sharing their voices and people feeling heard and we put a lot of our expectations on other people in the room. And so I think it's really valuable to start with, what is our definition of participation and engagement? And also what are the definitions of participation and engagement that our audience has? Because we might have differing feelings and not everyone speaks. I think that's usually a measurement that people use and if not everyone speaks, people feel like people are disengaged. So, thinking critically about what our definition of engagement is, what would feel like people are engaged to us, but also making space for people in the room to talk about that.

In my experience as a facilitator, I think a lot of times people don't look like they're engaged. We were taught really to make a lot of eye contact, do active listening, create this very specific model that doesn't work for everyone. A lot of times, in classrooms or other places that I've taught in, I've had folks say, stop doing what you're doing, pay attention, do that stuff. And a lot of times those are the participants who have asked the most thoughtful questions or who say the most thoughtful things. So thinking critically about what it means to us to ensure that everyone in the room has a voice and everyone feels heard.

Like Kate and Carli mentioned, utilizing different engagement styles is really important. What kind of verbal styles can you use? Sometimes people like to do round robin where everyone goes around the room and contributes. I recommend doing that in a consent-based way. Some folks might not want to participate still. You could also do a popcorn style where people just get to talk and maybe call on -- you as a facilitator can call on different people to try and get a wide variety of voices. You can also break folks out into partners and talk to each other for a little while and then report out. A lot of times I do that when I'm first starting trainings or presentations because folks are wondering who I am and why I'm at the front of the room and not super comfortable to talk yet. So having them get to know each other, having them talk to each other and then report out on what they talked on often gets the conversation going and makes folks feel safer. You could also do group work.

But also what kind of nonverbal ways are there for folks to engage, like moving around the room or contribute in other ways? Heads up, seven up always comes to mind for some reason, but also then what kind of written opportunities are there? And I think that when we're thinking about writing, making space for a lot of, a large array of writing styles and literacy levels, making sure that we are not limiting people's ability to contribute by asking certain questions or doing things in a certain way that is beyond their writing level or beyond our ability to understand what they're saying. So thinking about all these different ways that we can engage people in these discussions in this work is really important. And, again, I go back to starting with like, "What do we mean by engaged?"

**Carli Rohner** 08:47

That's really wonderful in thinking about the different communities and spaces that we go into and some of those conversations that we can have ahead of time, with either leaders in that community or folks who are calling you in to come in and do the presentations is, how does your community usually



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engage with these presentations and thinking about the cultural differences in those that may touch on that. Sometimes we're taught to make a lot of eye contact, to make a lot of verbal participation. And so talking with folks about that ahead of time, I think can also be really helpful to identify what is that going to look like and how are folks going to show up most comfortably in the room.

### **Kate Hildebrandt** 09:27

Alright, so the next question that we got was around participant knowledge and first, kind of a couple of components around that. So thinking about when participants sometimes come in thinking that they know a lot or indicating that they already understand everything about what you're going to talk about, or when they're coming in, you have really wide different levels of knowledge in participants. Additionally, a common thing that goes along with that is not necessarily having a common language or having some assumptions where participants are telling you "Yeah, we already know all of this," and then it becomes clear that you might have to backtrack during a presentation.

### **Meg Foster** 10:08

I think that looking into when you're designing your prevention activities, creating space to clarify language in particular, even if it's, we all have a general, like we use this language regularly, we might mean slightly different things. And so doing it in a quick way of just, "Here's what I'm talking about when I say this. Is that what other folks are talking about?" and giving space for that conversation I think is really valuable. I also, in my experience, I am always learning new language when I'm presenting and facilitating and so making space to hear that new language and maybe incorporate it into the future is really valuable.

Similarly, I think it's really important to incorporate pieces throughout your programming that allows for people to speak to their knowledge level. A lot of times, there's one example I use in a lot of my programming, and I'll ask folks in the room, "How many of you have not heard of this? Or how many of you have heard of this?" And I almost inevitably, I've never gotten 100% of folks raising their hand and so that's a decision that I have to make of, do I tell the story, is it like, how useful is it to continue? Do people need to know it, is it the focus of what I'm doing? And so really thinking about all those pieces to help gauge that knowledge. Also, asking questions that you can help learn about what people do know, ahead of time, what does their work look like? What does their, the things that matter to them look like? And then learning from that and extrapolating that in our work.

### **Carli Rohner** 11:59

So one of the other areas and questions that we got was around lack of investment. So when folks are showing up, they have to be there, they might be required by their boss or the organization or their class, they may be a student and they don't get a choice about who's coming into their classroom. How can we help folks be invested in those settings?

### **Kate Hildebrandt** 12:21



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Yeah, I think that is a challenge that we've touched on in a lot of the other questions before too, and a really common one in this work that a lot of this tends to be required, or you have people who aren't necessarily opting in. Before you even get in the room, is there a space where you can figure out common values, common experiences, what capacity do you have to tailor your programs to the folks that you're going to be working with? And so some of that, like we talked about before, might be talking to leaders in the community or talking to folks who are asking you to come in: the administrators, the teachers, the directors -- whoever that was -- and kind of gauging what's going on in the classroom.

The other thing that can maybe be a luxury for some of us, but if you have a multi-session curriculum and if there's space that, you can use that first class or that first session as a rapport building session to kind of get to know your participants and learn about, what are their values, what are their interests? Why are they here? Or why don't they want to be there and then kind of tailor it to that. I know one curriculum that I used in the past, the whole session was designed around that and we were asking questions and getting more information about things that we would use later on in, for example, a media analysis class later on, we'd find out what kind of stuff they were listening to, who their favorite artists were, what they were interested in, so that we could incorporate their interests later.

The other thing in those more typically, if you get just one session or you don't have that opportunity [to check in before], something that I've often experienced is that even if you have a lot of people who aren't engaged, you might have one or two allies in the room. It's been a while since I've been in a room where there hasn't been at least one person who has some knowledge or some willingness to participate. Not saying that that doesn't happen, because I think that's definitely happened to all of us, but I think building on that and kind of those folks can be really helpful and help building on the material and helping you identify where you can build more values connection with people. Again, having the flexibility in the room [is important]; maybe there's a lack of investment in the way it's being presented or the way things are being talked about. So if you have flexibility to talk about things a different way, or move pieces of the curriculum around so you can kind of see what would be helpful in the moment. Is there a writing activity or is there something else that we could do that could move us from a space where the current material we're talking about, there's not a lot of engagement, but maybe something else there would be.

### **Meg Foster** 15:04

I also think of preventionists as navigators to connect the dots for folks. There are a lot of different dots that connect with violence, that connect with abuse, and healthy relationships and healthy sexuality. And we get to be navigators to help people connect all those dots. So whether we're in a classroom, whether we're in a community, we can help folks find their role in prevention, by navigating those dots, how is their work connected to our work? How is substance abuse work connected to violence and abuse prevention? How is mental health services connected to violence prevention? How is sexual health services connected to violence prevention? How is the local library connected to violence prevention? Right, so all of those things, part of prevention is being those connecting the dot navigators and I think it allows for a lot of creativity. But that's part of our role is helping people find their role in this work.



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**Carli Rohner** 16:04

And I think how we show up in the room is really important. Some communities and audiences that we'll go in to talk [to] have historically been told that they are either the one of the groups that has caused violence, that they are responsible for it, and they have been left out of these community conversations. And so I think a little bit of our framing when we go into these groups that might be resistant is to be vulnerable and authentic and show up in a way that allows folks to feel more comfortable within that setting in the room. So just saying, "Here's how I plan to show up in the room for the rest of the day. I invite you to be part of this with me and to have conversations," rather than just going in and being the authority to those folks in the room can also be a helpful way to build that rapport if you don't have the luxury of multiple sessions to be able to do so.

**Kate Hildebrandt** 16:57

Alright, the next question is a thing a lot of us experience, but when you have participants in a room who are sharing opinions that are problematic, or that maybe are taking you in a weird direction, or that are contradicting prevention messages, or the need to spend a lot of time validating participants expertise and when that's kind of showing up in a facilitation space.

**Carli Rohner** 17:24

Yeah, and I think we're gonna cover this in some future sections as well. One of the quick notes that I'll say for folks is that again, we're gonna keep coming back to that pre-planning piece around what types of questions, what types of activities are you doing, and what types of responses might they solicit. So one of the things that I've noticed when I put folks into small groups or into pair discussions, and then I asked for a wide variety of responses from the rest of the group, sometimes if I'm not tailored and thinking about what specific question I'm delivering or what area that I want folks to focus on, that folks can really start to take those conversations wherever they want. Sometimes that includes incorporating their personal life experience and then sharing that as fact for the rest of the group. That can feel derailing sometimes as a presenter and so one of the things that I tried to do is just really be intentional about what is the question that I'm asking. How might folks take that question? Either based on personal experience being up in front of rooms and delivering curriculum or conversations facilitating with folks, or just that I can anticipate based on the topic. So if I know that a specific question is going to elicit a lot of personal history, stories, things like that, I'll try and frame it in a way that's asking for folks to share experience but very specific to whatever topic we're covering, and then try and demonstrate some empathy coming back.

If conversations are problematic, like folks are sharing opinions that are detrimental to the rest of the group, might not be popular with the rest of the group, or just problematic in the way that they're racist, sexist, whatever it might be, one of the tools that I use and that I have found in groups that already have a very respectful learning environment within the room is to ask other participants, "What responses do folks have? How are folks feeling?", and oftentimes participants will, in those spaces where they're already being respectful, thoughtfully disagree, provide alternate examples, and I can



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build off of that. And so it keeps me as a presenter a little bit of distance from having to directly comment. If something is directly problematic for the rest of the group, I will typically say, "Here's some other ways that that might be impacting folks in the room and I invite you to talk with me offline about that." And so I try, if I know it's something that's harmful to the conversation of the group or is really going to be derailing, to address it in a thoughtful kind way, but then also say we need to talk about this at a break or offline.

### **Meg Foster** 20:06

It's really important too that whatever follow up you offer people that people want to do, whether it's, "I would love to talk to about this more with you after session," or "Maybe we can bring this back at a later session, but I'm concerned about our time today and getting through what we want to get through," whatever that looks like. I think it's really important that you follow up on that. It's not just this empty, like, "Yeah, let's talk about this later," and then not making time or space to actually talk about that. I think that again, we're tasked with modeling empathetic, thoughtful behavior. I also think that it's important that we have some of those boundaries, especially if I know a lot of folks will still set up group guidelines, and if we're not going to hold ourselves and the room to those group guidelines, there's not a point in making group guidelines. So if the group has agreed to something, those can be really valuable to point back to. Just like before, if we're not willing to follow through on those, we shouldn't say we will, we shouldn't agree to those things. So using the tools that we have. I think that it's also fair to make statements like we want to make sure that we're hearing from a lot of folks in the room or making space for everyone in the room. So redirecting for more voices to be heard if there is a resounding voice. But creating those opportunities and making sure that we follow through on them.

### **Carli Rohner** 21:42

I just encourage folks, if you're a facilitator, your job is to kind of be conducting the room. I like to think of it like an orchestra. Don't be afraid to say, just like Meg is saying, don't be afraid to say, "I want to hear from two folks I haven't heard from today" or "We're going to break into small pairs and I want to hear this specific response, like I want to hear about your thoughts related to this specific topic that we're talking about." It's okay to be a little bit more directional with folks, especially if you're worried about time management, or the types of problematic responses that you're getting. That's okay. And so I encourage folks to not be afraid to do that. You can still be kind and empathetic in the way that you're presenting that.

### **Meg Foster** 22:22

I also go back to what Kate said earlier about being flexible and willing to kind of throw out whatever structure you have for an activity and try a different structure. I also think that it's important to hold in your mind like what is your goal? And are the conversations we're having getting us closer to our goal? Are they getting us further from our goal? Is the act of having the conversation allowing folks to practice skills that are really important to their work? But I also think that sometimes, some of those comments, some of those pieces might derail the entire rest of the activity. And sometimes that's okay. Like how



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can we shift what we're doing? How can we shift our activity, like Carli just mentioned to like, give folks time to release it or respond to it, whether it's a written response, whether it's something else. But having that flexibility.

### **Meg Foster** 23:20

Similar to this, I think that a lot of us have experienced participants who are just really resistant to what we're saying. Sometimes we call this playing devil's advocate. And in particular, one of the ways that we've experienced this really coming up is like participants really questioning or challenging statistics that we share. Yeah, but navigating that resistance.

### **Carli Rohner** 23:44

Yeah, I think this comes up so often. And as a newer facilitator in the field, I was really reliant on statistics, like I need to use these as a way to build credibility, to show that this is an important topic and here's the way we're going to talk about it. And one of the challenges that I noticed in that was that that was often where the devil's advocate and the most pushback came from. And so as I've kind of grown through my career, stats have actually been something that I look at completely differently now. So I **use stats very purposefully**. I try and bring in only statistics that are going to be really applicable, one, to the audience that I'm talking to. So if I'm talking to K-12 students, I'm not going to be bringing in statistics that really involve older adults. That's not going to be maybe most apparent unless that's a specific learning outcome. So really tailoring that the statistics that I share are applicable to the community or audience that I'm using.

I also try to use them a lot more sparingly and only to demonstrate a couple of things. One being the breadth or depth of the issue. So if I'm trying to help folks connect to how many people in our communities are affected, then I might have a slide or two to talk about that. I also use [them], and we do this often in our presentations at SATF, to talk a little bit about communities that folks might not historically incorporate in their work. So thinking about underserved communities and the impact of violence on them to help highlight that for more dominant culture folks around: here's the widespread impact of violence. So doing that, and also if there's a very specific point. If we're talking about the overlap between violence and mental health, and I have a statistic that is really applicable to my audience, then helping that sometimes can help frame a larger conversation.

What I don't do is rely for all of our conversation in the group to be about statistics, and I often don't open up big group conversations around statistics, like "How true do you think this is? How does this apply to your community? How do you see that?" because oftentimes, I think that's where folks are able to pick statistics apart and be able to say, well, in my experience, I don't know anybody that's been impacted by violence, even though you say 90% of people in this specific community have. I don't want to get into that engagement and debate in a group with folks. And so I often won't do big, broad questions around that.

### **Meg Foster** 26:13





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And I think Carli touched on this, but I go back to this piece of what is your goal? I have had a lot of conversations with folks where they have said, "Oh, I really am doing this consent workshop" or "I'm trying to help folks practice good consent." And then they'll walk me through what they do, and like half of it is just defining things and throwing out statistics. I'm like, "Well, I thought you said your goal was that people were developing and practicing skills to practice healthy consent?" and if our goal is just that people have knowledge, maybe statistics help us get there. But if our goal is that people are developing and fostering skills, we want to think about the content of our programming to expand really beyond statistics as well.

### **Carli Rohner** 26:56

Yeah, absolutely. And if you have to use statistics, a couple of things I recommend is just making sure that they're the most up to date that you have available and making sure that you have the citation when applicable. I think that can also really help folks who have a very like research focus, that academia is important to them, or citations are important to them to help validate that information. So just having those two pieces and ensuring that it's current, ensuring that you have a citation and then coming back to what's the overall purpose of the training and being able to move on. Just using that to highlight specific points can be really helpful.

So our next question that we had was how, when you're in a room, a common challenge that can come up especially with certain audiences, maybe they're younger, or maybe it's a group that is not as experienced or hasn't had as much exposure to your training, to start talking about how victim blaming shows up in the room, and I know that can come up for folks in a lot of different ways. [The question is what to do when victim blaming shows up in the room.]

### **Kate Hildebrandt** 27:56

We're also going to talk a little bit more about this when we talk about working with survivors, supporting survivors, and addressing challenges related to survivors in the room and how other participants might interact with that, so stay tuned for another session as well. But [there are] a couple things we wanted to call out related to this really quickly.

One thing that I think about with victim blaming is I think in prevention, because we are often trying to.... when we're talking about real prevention, it's preventing perpetration, right? So we're trying to prevent people from acting on it, and therefore we need to get to those root beliefs and causes that exists in all of us that support perpetration, whether that's doing it ourselves or supporting others who do it. So I do think that prevention sometimes inherently brings out victim blaming beliefs. It might be a little more subtle than like, "Hey, you know, this person is at fault for their own experience of violence," but I think especially if we were talking about consent or privilege and oppression and systems and structures that sometimes victim blaming can come across in ways of thinking about how certain groups are responsible for their own oppression or how they play into that. And to me, that also gets into a victim blaming mentality that you might want to address.



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So a couple of strategies that I have used in that: before I even go into a presentation, and I think a lot of us do this brainstorming, what are the common victim blaming statements? Or what are things that I think might come up? And how can I address them? I think that's especially helpful when you're maybe first getting into facilitating or when you're going into a new community talking with the leaders of the people who brought them in, about what are the community attitudes, what have people been saying, what's been happening in the community.

The other thing that I always try to think about is to get to the root cause of the victim blaming or what's really at the root of that. For me, what I saw in a lot of groups that I'm working with is that at the root of victim blaming is fear and wanting to protect themselves. Trying to think that, well, people who experience violence are different than me, I can prevent myself from experiencing violence by just doing XYZ or being XYZ. And we can all empathize with none of us want to feel vulnerable. None of us want to feel that we might experience violence. And I think if you can identify some of those root causes, and have a conversation quickly around that, to kind of bridge the gap and then reframe for folks, I think that that can be somewhat helpful especially in prevention where we're trying to make sure that we're getting people on board and slowly broadening their horizons and we don't want to shut people down to the point where they won't engage with us anymore.

That being said, I think it's also important that we really engage in survivor centered prevention and so we remember that you do have to address victim blaming when it happens, that letting it slide is really unhelpful for folks in the room that have experienced sexual violence, interpersonal violence, or any kind of oppression or violence, really. You can really lose that community if you let victim blaming slide and you weren't clear about what side you were on in that.

### **Carli Rohner** 31:12

And that's a huge group. If we think about the amount of folks who are in our room and who might be showing up in our presentations, folks are widely impacted by issues of violence. And so if you're not being able to address victim blaming for the sake of one person, consider that you might be losing the entire rest of your audience in that example.

### **Kate Hildebrandt** 31:36

All right, that is all the questions we have for today. Thank you for tuning in. And if you have any other comments, questions, other feedback, we are really just three facilitators, three presenters. And so there's lots of other strategies that we know people in our communities have used successfully to work with these questions. So please contact us, email us, call us. We'd love to hear from you. And to be able to share that with other folks. Thanks.

## **Contact Us**

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