



UNITE RESOURCES

Facilitating Dialogue: A Toolkit

BC MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE SERVICES



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“To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. . . The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. . . To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other’s opinion. . . We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine

conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation.”

—**Hans-Georg Gadamer**

DIALOGUE IS NOT a method but a way of being oriented to being-with that involves openness and a willingness to push beyond the discomfort of differences and uncertainties. There is no leader, no specific agenda or strategic plan in dialogue. Nonetheless, there are a variety of tools and activities that a facilitator of dialogue can use to help create the setting for dialogue where participants can build trust and explore together.



Basic Tools of Dialogue

STIMULUS-QUESTIONS

Presenting a stimulus and posing some good questions is a direct way to start a dialogue. The stimulus can be almost anything—a storybook, a video clip, a newspaper article, a poem, or a painting. The facilitator uses the stimulus and poses a good question to start the conversation and encourage the participants to engage in an open discussion. The facilitator may have a series of questions in mind that may or may not be needed to keep the discussion going. Whether individually, in small groups, or as a large group, the participants have a chance to critically think about the topic, cultivate multiple dimensions of the questions, and express their thoughts and feelings. For crafting good questions, see *Asking Good Questions*.

TALKING CIRCLES

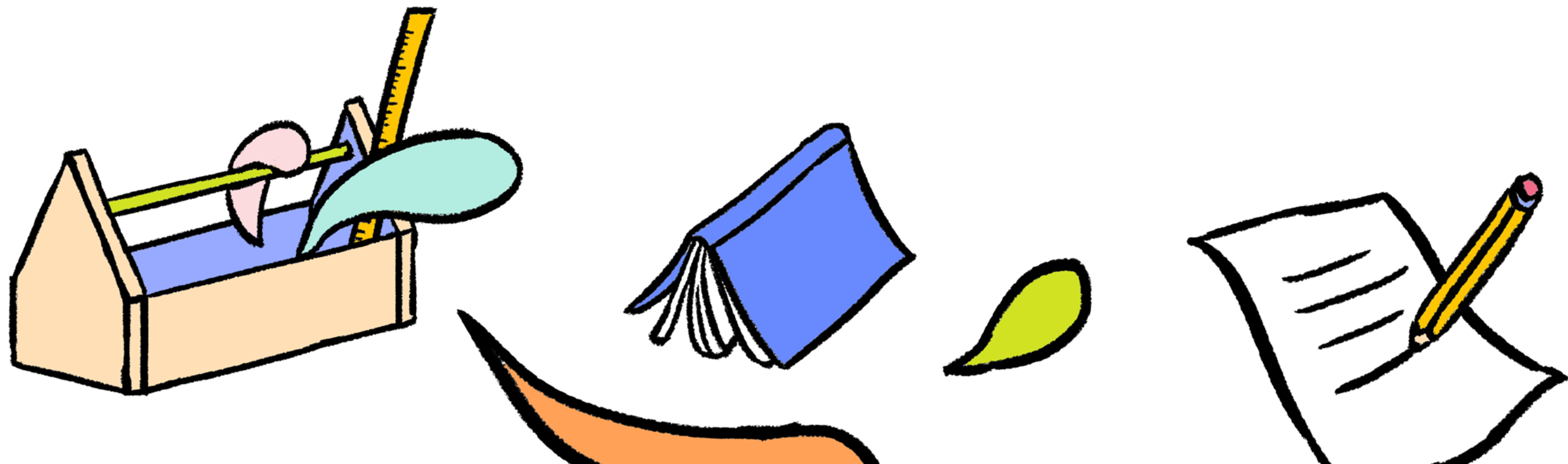
Some First Nations communities have used talking circles to address important topics in the community. Participants sit in a circle, and a talking object (e.g., a ball, stick, or feather) is introduced and passed clockwise in a circle. In order to promote deep listening, participants are encouraged only to speak once they receive the object. The speaker may share a perspective or pose a question. The object can rotate multiple times through the circle as participants deepen their thoughts and respond to others. Used alone or in conjunction with other activities, a talking circle is an activity that can be used in the exploration of any topic.

SILENT DISCUSSIONS

This low-threshold tool provides an opportunity for everyone, especially those less likely to speak up, to contribute and have their ideas heard. Stations are created with the intent to explore multiple questions on a given topic through collaboratively writing on a shared sheet of paper. As participants rotate through the stations, they have an opportunity to not only personally reflect on the topic but also build on the ideas of others. The activity may end with a debrief of participants' experiences. This activity can be used to identify varying perspectives and to encourage participants to engage with the ideas of others.

PORTRAITURE

This tool is a creative way to work with art and images symbolically and begin to understand each other. Using the outline of a silhouette of a head or body, participants can fill in the space with visual indicators or collages (e.g., words, drawings, magazine photos, narratives, etc.) creating a self-portrait that reflects their own thoughts and feelings on the topic of discussion. Upon completion, participants share their creations with the group. Depending on the comfort level of the participants, this activity could morph into a deeper discussion of the topic.



Developing “Us-ness”

GENUINE DIALOGUE REQUIRES that we approach each other in what Martin Buber calls an I-You relationship. An I-You stance demonstrates a sense of “us-ness” involving mutuality and reciprocity. This contrasts with our tendency to approach the other from an I-it stance in which we see the other as an object to be fixed or helped or as a representative of a particular social role. The following activities may help in establishing that sense of “us-ness” and building connections among participants.

REFLECTIVE LISTENING

This simple activity provides an opportunity to practice listening. The goal of the activity is to listen deeply in order to understand the meaning of what is being said. The activity involves participants pairing up to share something of significance with each other. One participant begins by sharing a story of some experience or their perspective on some issue. The other person’s role is to simply listen, attempting to understand what is shared, and then to reflect back what they heard in their own words. They might then seek clarification as to how well they understood the other. Then the roles reverse. Early in a dialogue process, this activity can be used simply to develop listening skills, using any topic. Once sufficient trust is built, this activity can also be used to explore different experiences of common contexts in which stigma or discrimination may be present.

TRAINING THE EYES

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way.” The tree is unchanged. The difference, according to William Blake, is “in the eyes” of the beholder. Encourage participants to pick any item in the room and write two descriptions: first, thinking of the item as an object; second, considering their relationship to the item. Share these descriptions and discuss as a group how our perspective changes when we move from what Martin Buber called the I-it (being to object) stance to the I-You (being to being) stance. This activity helps us see how we can change the way we interact with people.



Embracing the Knowledge of Not Knowing

DIALOGUE CALLS US to a radical commitment to “the knowledge of not knowing” – embracing our own finiteness and fallibility. Only when we approach each other with a sense of humility that comes with recognizing our own limitations and with an openness to the other as a resource for introducing to us new possibilities and new ways of thinking can we truly engage in dialogue. The following activities encourage participants to recognize their own limitations.

THE DIALECTIC OF QUESTION AND ANSWER

In small groups, invite the participants to discuss and share ideas in response to an initial open question. The participants are encouraged to share an idea in response to the question and then to end with another question that grows out of the previous question and the ideas shared. Subsequent participants can speak in response to any previous question but always end with a related question that emerges for them. This discipline of always ending with a question helps participants avoid the belief that they have the ultimate answer. Before engaging in this activity, it will be helpful to spend a bit of time exploring *Asking Good Questions* to ensure the questions posed are genuine questions.

PERSPECTIVE SHARING

This activity provides an opportunity to reflect on our own ideas and deepen our understanding of each other’s ideas. The purpose is not to reach an agreement but to perceive alternative ways of seeing. To do this activity, pick a topic about which participants may have a range of opinions. Depending on the level of comfort within the group, this activity could be used simply to build capacity in recognizing the legitimacy of other perspectives–“Where in the world would you most like to visit and why?”–or it can be used to build awareness of multiple legitimate perspectives on the topic of interest–“How do you experience life in the clinic?” In small groups of 4 or 6 (an even number), each participant provides a one-sentence answer to the question. Participants then pair up with someone whose answer is quite different than their own and take turns sharing and exploring their different perspectives. Each person tries to put their own ideas and beliefs in suspension to truly understand the other. After exploring one perspective, the listener tries to state, in their own words, the most sympathetic and supportive case they can for the other person’s perspective.

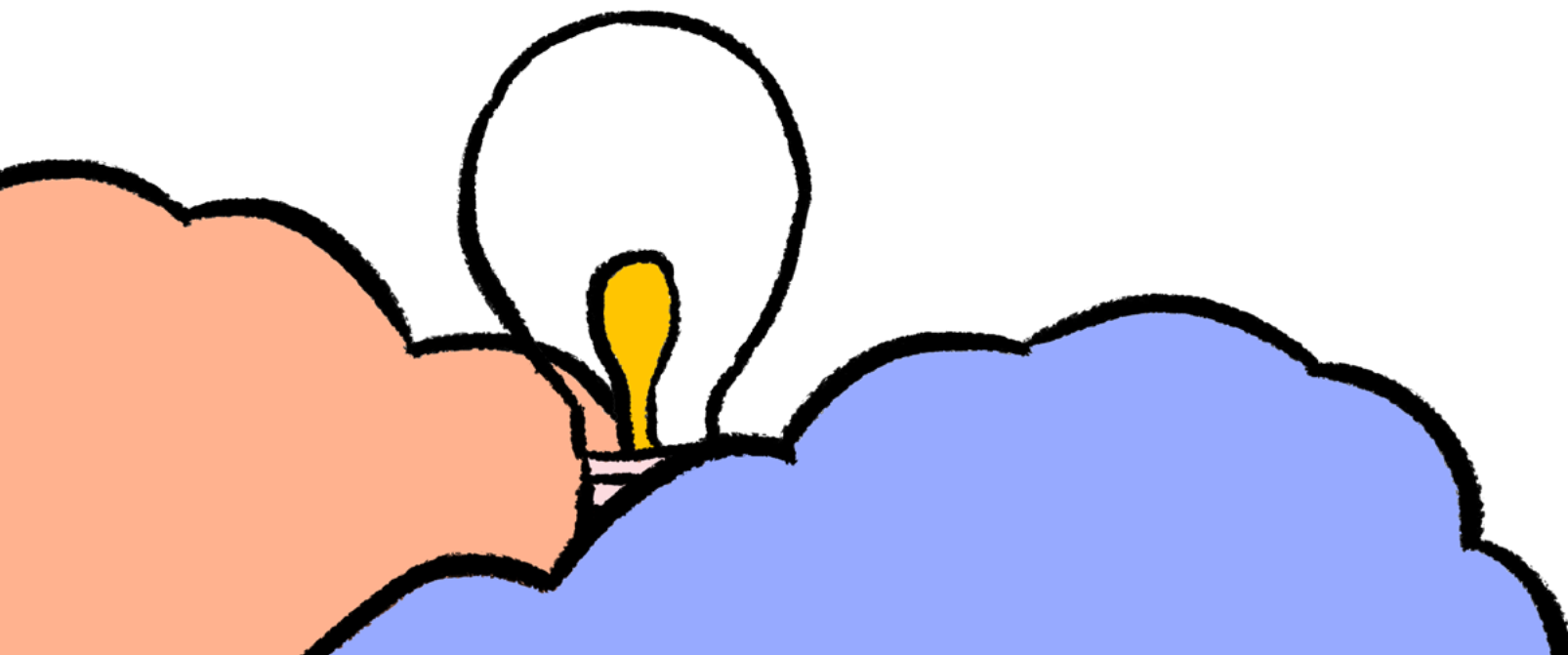
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

The aim of this activity is to acknowledge the limitations to the very perceptions that inform and influence our thinking. It demonstrates that there are often multiple ways of seeing things. Present the group with each of the following images one at a time and ask participants what they see (duck/rabbit; vase/two faces).

The following questions provide an opportunity for the participants to explore the issues more deeply.



- Why do we see things differently?
- Does it matter? When might it matter?
- What does this experience suggest about how we should respond when we see things differently?



Building Awareness of Interdependence

AS HUMANS, we are social creatures. Our identity is not formed in isolation, but in negotiation with others (such as parents, siblings, friends, classmates, colleagues, etc.). Recognizing this interconnectedness can help us better understand ourselves as well as others. It also helps us approach others with curiosity rather than judgement. The following activities help explore and appreciate our interdependence.

BACK-TO-BACK DRAWING

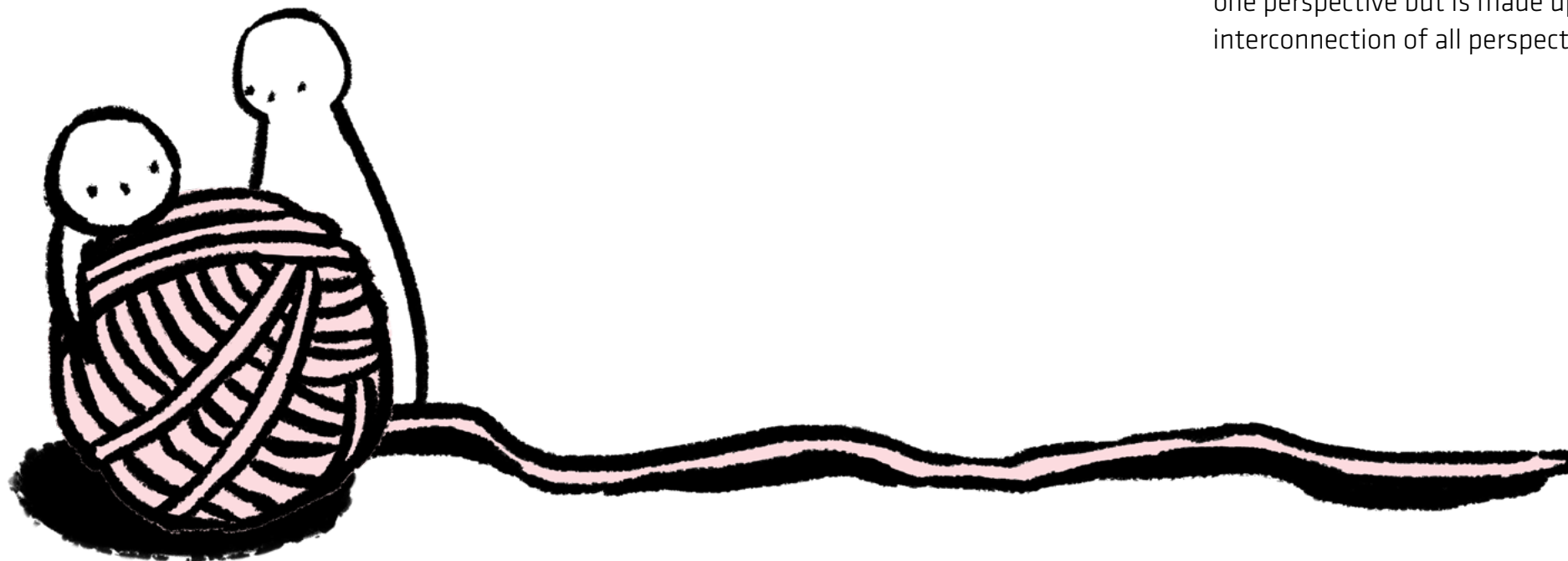
Divide the group into pairs. Have each pair sit with their backs to one another. Give one person a relatively simple image to describe to their partner (without naming the image as a whole). The partner is given a pencil and blank piece of paper and should reproduce what they understand the other to be saying. Once done, they switch roles and start with a new image.

COLLABORATIVE DRAWING

This is a creative way of harnessing the wisdom and capacity of groups of any size. Collaborative drawing allows all participants to contribute their experiences and ideas into a larger whole that reflects community thinking and working together. Roll out a large sheet of paper on a table or post it on a wall and encourage all participants to contribute images in response to a question. This activity can involve all participants working on the sheet simultaneously and having participants move to other parts of the paper at intervals, or participants can make contributions to the image during different opportunities throughout a longer event. The final product does not represent one perspective but is made up from the interconnection of all perspectives.

WEB OF REFLECTION

This is a simple, but inspiring activity that can be used at the end of a dialogue session to remind us of our interconnectedness. Using a ball of yarn or string, construct a web of reflection by inviting the participants to stand or sit in a circle and toss around a ball of yarn or string while each continues to hold onto the yarn. When tossing the ball to someone else in the group, each participant can be encouraged to share something they learned or are taking away from the dialogue. This continues until everyone in the group has become part of the web. A variety of endings can be used to explore how we are dependent on each other and how disconnection impacts the whole.



Developing Mutual Responsibility

A SENSE OF interdependence suggests mutual responsibility. Even as my identity is worked out in conversation with others, so too do my attitudes, words, and actions shape others. This mutual impact comes with mutual responsibility. None of us is totally responsible for our own situation. Neither are any of us mere victims with no ability to influence ourselves and others. We are in this together. The following activity helps develop empathy and mutual responsibility.

LIFEWORLD

Our past experiences (from within our personal, social, and cultural contexts) influence the way we see, interpret and understand things, ourselves, and others. This knowledge is not only of value to ourselves but can help others as well. Likewise, the experiences of others can broaden our own horizons and allow us to interact more effectively. The following activity may help build the capacity for mutual sharing. Describe a particular setting and, together with participants, identify the various stakeholders within that setting. Then encourage participants to imagine themselves in the role of these different stakeholders, thinking about what contribution they can make to the whole and how they might benefit from the perspectives of others. Then have participants share and discuss some of the insights they gained through this mental exercise.

