

How to Host SMART Recovery Discussion Meetings:
Read the Script; Enforce the Guidelines; Do SMART Recovery

Hello! My name is Tom Horvath. I'm the volunteer president of SMART Recovery.

Thank you for learning about how to host a SMART Recovery Discussion meeting. SMART Recovery meetings make the difference between life and death for some individuals. You are helping us reach the goal of making SMART Recovery available everywhere. We're glad you're joining our community.

This podcast will review how to use the Discussion meeting guidelines, script and exercises. To summarize this podcast: Read the Script and Enforce the Guidelines. By doing so you will Do SMART Recovery.

Let's begin with the scripts for the meeting and the exercises. Please read them *as written*, no more, no less. They were carefully developed over several years. If read as written they will result in successful meetings with few problems.

A truly successful meeting is based on the participants feeling safe enough to speak very openly about themselves. We want our recovery tools can be applied to deeper thoughts and feelings, not the thoughts and feelings people express when they are afraid of being criticized. The script is designed to promote a sense of safety and acceptance. Besides providing better material for using the tools, deeper meetings also promote community and connection. People feel closer with and bond with others when deeper thoughts and feelings are discussed.

Before the meeting starts, you can set the stage for safety and acceptance. Smile as people enter, and greet them. For instance, you might say to someone who seems to be a newcomer, "Hi, I'm Tom, I'm hosting tonight's meeting. No one is required to participate. You can just listen if you want. I'm glad you're here." To someone you recognize: "Hi, glad you could make it."

Similarly, during the check-in, smile and say "thank you" or otherwise acknowledge each person's contribution. Although it takes effort on your part to acknowledge each person, you will see that effort reflected in the quality of your meeting. For instance, during check-in you might say "I'm sorry to hear about that bad news.....Congratulations on achieving that milestone....That's really unfortunate. I'm glad you made it to the meeting tonight."

During checkout, and after each person's contribution during an exercise, looking them in the eye and saying "thank you" may be sufficient. Then look to the next person, as a non-verbal indication that it is their turn.

Be careful not to mention personal information from previous meetings, or even someone's presence at a previous meeting. Revealing that information would violate the confidentiality rule: what is said here, stays here. Therefore, don't mention

someone's name until you hear the participant say it first. In some cases you will know that a participant is very open about their SMART Recovery participation, so this guideline won't apply, as much.

You also create a sense of safety by establishing routines. With routines participants know what to expect, and therefore relax more. You can sit in the same place each meeting, go around the circle in the same direction from the same starting point (usually the person on your right or left), and, of course, read the meeting script the same way each time. Even though people hear the script many times, they may hear something new, or a new emphasis, each time, just like listening to a favorite song again and again.

When it's time to begin the meeting, sit up, speak up clearly, and convey non-verbally that the meeting is beginning. Take charge of your meeting, even though you are NOT taking charge of anyone's recovery. Your job is to host a good meeting. Recovery is THEIR job. You are the host. They make the party.

I encourage you NOT to check-in or to participate in the meeting as others do. There is a different satisfaction in hosting a meeting. You can go home feeling great, knowing that you established a setting for others to create positive change. If you check-in, it can reduce the sense of safety. Participants may wonder if you are there for them, or mostly for yourself.

Find another meeting to attend for yourself. You are welcome to attend the meeting that I facilitate, online, for any SMART Recovery volunteer, including all hosts and facilitators, on the 2nd Monday of each month, at 8pm Eastern time.

The three-word overall guideline for a SMART Recovery meeting is: "Do SMART Recovery." Our meetings are lively discussions about how to use the SMART Recovery tools, to accomplish SMART's 4 Points: Maintaining motivation, coping with craving, solving other problems, and achieving better lifestyle balance.

In addition to overall 3-word guideline, "Do SMART Recovery," additional meeting guidelines are listed in the script. The primary ones for you to focus on are: No monologues, no advice, and no off-topic discussions. In most cases it will be necessary to interrupt someone in order to enforce these guidelines. Although interrupting others is not desirable social behavior, in your role as meeting host it is often necessary. In some cases it may be useful to acknowledge the interruption as you are doing it:

"I'm interrupting you because it's time to move on to the next person."

"I'm interrupting you because that sounds like advice. Can you re-phrase it as a suggestion, or just summarize your own experience?"

“I’m interrupting you because this topic is not an appropriate one for a SMART meeting. We are here to ‘do SMART Recovery.’ Would you like to make a different statement?”

In many cases, however, you do not need to name the interruption, simply make your statement, such as “it’s time to move on to the next person.”

Let’s review each guideline: First, No monologues. Say “it’s time to move on to the next person.” If someone has a particularly emotional issue (perhaps they just got fired) you may extend the time somewhat. However, generally speaking, participants can finish their contribution in a minute or less. If you are not sure whether to interrupt, look around the room. If others are paying close attention, it might not be time to interrupt just yet. However, keep the big picture in mind. A good meeting is a discussion, not just one person talking at length. Some of your participants could be described as “addicted to attention.” For them a mutual help meeting is a high-risk situation. Interrupting them and moving the discussion on may be the only way to prevent your meeting from being hijacked by an attention-seeker.

The next guideline: No advice. Say “can you re-phrase it as a suggestion, or just summarize your own experience?” We want to hear participant experiences, but each participant is free to judge the relevance of those experiences for herself or himself. Advice, like criticism, can lead people to shut down, not open up.

The next guideline: No off topic discussions. Say “this topic is not an appropriate one for a SMART meeting. We are here to ‘do SMART Recovery.’ Would you like to make a different statement?” A SMART Recovery meeting is not the place to debate addiction controversies. Is addiction a disease? Is belief in a Higher Power necessary for recovery? *Is there a Higher Power? Is AA better than SMART or vice versa? Am I an addict or an alcoholic?* These issues are up to each participant. You can remind everyone of the SMART Recovery slogan: Discover the Power of Choice.

Several off-topic discussions merit specific attention. If a participant says “I’m suicidal” immediately respond by saying “I’m sorry to hear that. Are you feeling suicidal enough that we need to do something right now?” Although I have never heard that someone in a SMART meeting is immediately suicidal, nevertheless, if you do, stop the meeting and call 911 if necessary. Otherwise say “This meeting focuses on doing SMART Recovery. I hope that by coming here tonight you will feel better, and that you will seek appropriate help later. I have the number of a suicide hotline to give you after the meeting.” If you are professional or a specific institutional setting for your meeting, you may have other options available to you. The method just described is useful for a typical community meeting.

If someone describes, during check-in, a plan to continue using or cut back on some substance (typically alcohol or marijuana), state: “I’m glad you’re here. SMART Recovery discussions support stopping, not using. In the main section of our

meeting, the discussion section, we focus on stopping. However, you are free to use these ideas as you see fit. We are not trying to control you, but we do control our discussions.”

If someone is intoxicated, simply state “You appear to be under the influence of some substance. You are welcome to stay and listen, without speaking. We hope to see you again soon.” It may be necessary to assist this person in getting home safely.

Although beginning hosts are sometimes concerned about suicide and intoxication, in fact these problems are rare in SMART Recovery meetings. If you feel stuck in dealing with an unexpected situation, you can request assistance from your participants. Collectively the group will arrive at some solution to whatever problems arise.

If unexpected *discussion* problems arise in a meeting, simply move on. “I think this discussion may not be the best use of our time. Let’s (finish going around the circle; or, begin a new exercise).” If its appropriate, have someone read up on the issue, or you can check in with your mentor or SMART Meeting Management, and report back next week.

Now let’s focus on how to select around-the-circle exercises. Initially, use the Discussion meeting exercises 1. They may keep you busy for weeks. The exercises are written to allow participation by anyone, even individuals who do not see themselves as seeking recovery. Remember, meetings are open to anyone. Sometimes you get graduate students, family members, or curious professionals. These exercises allow anyone to participate in the meeting. Full participation increases the sense of safety. If students make notes about the meeting, typically starting from the beginning of the meeting, ask them to do so after the meeting. “I know you would not be writing down personal details, but it can be uncomfortable for anyone speaking to see you taking notes.” However, regular participants can be supported if they wish to record important ideas during the discussion.

As you gain confidence, and your group gains knowledge about SMART, move into the second set of exercises. Because of the constant change in participants in your meeting, these two sets of exercises may be sufficient. Besides enforcing the guidelines, the most important decisions you will make are which exercises to use. You might select exercises based on the concerns mentioned during the check in. After check-in you might ask if anyone has a suggestion for the exercise to start with. You may simply wish to rotate through the exercises in the order given. Some of these exercises could be repeated every week with constantly changing answers.

You may develop a group of regular participants, who have been through the exercises often. Check with your mentor, or attend SMART Meeting Management, to discuss creating your own exercises, provided they are based on the tools or the 4 Points. Even better, complete the Facilitator Training, to gain a full understanding of the tools.

Our final topic is timing in meetings. Generally speaking 60 minute meetings will be better attended. Your community may wish to add 90 minute meetings later.

In many meetings only one or two exercises will be used. At the conclusion of going around the circle for the exercise, ask the question in the script: "Did anything come up that you would like to discuss?" Then stare at the floor in the middle of the room, and slowly and silently count to five. If no one has spoken, it's time to introduce another exercise. The discussion that occurs after you go around the circle may last until it is time to Pass the Hat.

If during check-in or any exercise a discussion spontaneously occurs, before the circle is complete, wait a moment to see if it dies out on its own. If not say: "Great, we have a discussion going, which is what we want. However, let's finish the circle, then come back. Because I interrupted while you were speaking, when the circle is complete I'll come back to you to re-start this discussion. Does that plan sound OK?"

Although you cannot predict exactly how long checkout will take, estimate the needed time based on how talkative everyone seems, and how many participants you have. If you start checkout and realize you are likely short on time, you could say "We only have a brief time for checkout, so please keep your checkout brief."

To summarize how to host a meeting, I'll leave you with three 3-word guidelines I mentioned at the beginning: Do SMART Recovery. Read the script. Enforce the guidelines. I'll repeat them: Do SMART Recovery. Read the script. Enforce the guidelines.

I welcome you to join us for the SMART Meeting Management meeting, in SMART Room #1 online. Check the schedule for current times. There we discuss all the challenges that can arise in meetings. We'll hope you'll join us.

Thank you for learning about hosting. We're glad you are becoming a part of our community. Let us know how we can assist you.