

Sample Focus Group Moderator's Guide

Cancer and the Environment Moderator's Guide for NCI/NIEHS Focus Groups

A. Introduction (3 minutes)

Good evening, my name is _____, and I'll be your moderator this evening. Welcome to our focus group discussion tonight.

A focus group is a small group discussion that focuses on a particular topic in depth. Tonight we will be talking about various health issues. I'm not an expert in the topics we'll be discussing tonight, and I'm not here to give you information. I'm here to listen to your ideas and thoughts on these issues. It's also important for you to know that I'm an independent consultant and do not work for the sponsors of this discussion.

In a focus group, there are no right or wrong answers, only opinions, and I'd like to hear from all of you about equally. It's important that I hear what each of you thinks, because your thoughts may be similar to those of many other people who aren't here at this table tonight. Your ideas are extremely important to us, and I'm interested in your comments and opinions. Please feel free to speak up even if you disagree with someone else here. It's OK to disagree, because it's helpful to hear different points of view. I'm also interested in any questions you may have as we go along.

We have a lot of ground to cover in the next two hours, so, for the sake of time, I may jump ahead to the next topic from time to time, but please stop me if you want to add anything.

We're audiotaping and videotaping our discussion. Everything you say is important to us, and we want to make sure we don't miss any comments. Later, we'll go through all of your comments and use them to prepare a report on our discussion. I want to assure you, however, that all of your comments are confidential and will be used only for research purposes. Nothing you say will be connected with your name. Also, if there are any questions you would prefer not to answer, please feel free not to respond to them.

There are also some colleagues of mine behind the one-way mirror who are interested in what you have to say.

B. Warm Up (10 minutes)

[While participants are in the waiting room, they will be given magazines and asked to tear out a picture by which to introduce themselves to the group.]

1. I'd like to begin by having each of you tell us your first name and a little about yourself—and show us the picture you chose to introduce yourself to us.
2. What are some of the health problems that you personally worry about (not necessarily health problems you have, but are concerned about getting)?

C. Perceptions and Beliefs About Cancer (25 minutes)

1. Now I'd like to talk specifically about cancer. If I had never heard of "cancer" before, how would you describe it to me? What is it?
2. [Draw stick figure on easel] This is Pat, and all we know about her/him is that she/he has cancer. I'd like to talk about how she/he came to have cancer. What do you think are some of the reasons why she/he might have gotten cancer? [List on easel]
3. Now that you've told me some possible causes of cancer, how do you think cancer actually develops in a person? How would you describe what happens inside the body? How do the things on our list actually cause cancer? (Probe: gene mutation/gene malfunctioning)
4. Do you have any idea how scientists know what causes cancer and what doesn't? How do they go about finding out?
5. How concerned are you about cancer on a scale of 1–10, where "1" is "Not at all concerned" and "10" is "Very concerned"? How much do you think about it? When do you think about it? [For older groups] Did you feel differently about cancer when you were younger? [If yes] How so? [For younger participants] Do you think you'll feel the same way about cancer when you're 50? How do you think you'll feel then?
6. Is there one particular type of cancer you are most concerned about? Why?

D. Cancer and the Environment (25 minutes)

1. [Drawing exercise] Now we're going to be discussing cancer and the environment. On the sheet of paper in front of you, I'd like you to take a couple of minutes and draw or write something on the theme of "Cancer and the Environment." You can draw or list anything that fits with this theme; then we'll talk about it in a couple of minutes. [After 2–3 minutes] Now let's talk about what you drew or wrote on this theme. Who would like to start?
2. Are you familiar with the word "carcinogen"? If I didn't know what that meant, how would you describe it to me? How many cancer-causing agents or carcinogens do you think there are? (A few? Many?)
3. I've heard some people say, "Everything is a carcinogen." What do you think of that statement? Do you think that any substance/chemical can cause cancer if the dose is high enough?
4. Which is of greatest concern to you—carcinogens out-of-doors, in the workplace, or at home? (Probe: concern for selves versus concern for children) In general, are you more concerned about carcinogens in the food you eat, the water you drink, or the air you breathe?
5. What specific environmental agents/chemicals are you most concerned about? [List on easel] (Probe: fluoride, gasoline, electrical power lines, food additives such as aspartame or other sweeteners, dry cleaning solvents, fat in the diet, meat, air pollution, radiation, glass wool insulation, talc, pesticides, prescription drugs)
6. Are any of the items we listed (above) of particular concern to you here in your local area? Which ones? How concerned are you about them?

7. What are your thoughts about people having a genetic predisposition to cancer? Are some groups of people more prone to cancer from the environment than others? Which ones/why? (Probe: children, elderly, women, specific races, smokers) What have you heard about childhood cancer and the environment?
8. Can people do anything to decrease their chance of getting cancer from the environment? How well do you think these things work in preventing cancer? Do you personally do anything now to decrease your chances of getting cancer? (Probe: cancer screening for early detection, diet changes, dietary supplements, organic food, exercise, immunity boosters like antioxidants or vitamins C & E)

E. Information Needs (10 minutes)

1. Has there been any environmental cancer concern in the past few years that you've tried to find information about? How did you go about it? Where did you find the most valuable information? Did you get enough information (or enough good information)? Were there any questions you couldn't find enough information about?
2. In general, do you have enough information to protect yourself and/or your children from cancer-causing agents? If no, what kind of information do you need?
3. If you *wanted* to find out more about something that is suspected of causing cancer in your local area, or at home, or at work, where would you look for information? (Probe: newspapers, magazines, Internet, TV news, books that list carcinogens, etc.)
4. Do you know of any organizations or government agencies that try to protect the public from things in the environment that might cause cancer? Which ones? How would you get in touch with them if you had questions? Do you think you would get in touch with them?

F. Developing a Brochure (45 minutes)

1. The sponsors of this focus group want to develop a brochure about cancer and the environment. We want your help in telling us what you, the public, want to know. Imagine that we are the committee charged with the task of developing this brochure about cancer and the environment, and we want to give people information they would be interested in having about this topic. Let's brainstorm for a few minutes about what type of information should be included in this brochure. [List suggested information on easel] Is there anything else that should be covered in our brochure?
2. Now, let's go a step further. If you could have any questions answered about cancer and the environment in this brochure, what questions would you want answered? [List questions]
3. Now I'd like to show you a draft outline for a new brochure and get your reactions. [Pass out NCI/NIEHS outline with introductory paragraph]
 - a. What's your general reaction to this draft outline?
 - b. Is there anything you especially like about it?
 - c. Is there anything you especially dislike?
 - d. Is anything confusing?
 - e. Which parts would be most useful to you?
 - f. What would you do with a brochure with this information?

4. In the time remaining, I'd like to show you a booklet about cancer and the environment that was produced a while back. Please take about 5 minutes to examine the booklet as a whole, and then pick one question/answer to read thoroughly. Once you've looked over the booklet, I'd like to talk with you about your overall reactions. [Give participants 5 minutes to review booklet]
 - a. What are your general reactions to this booklet?
 - b. Was there anything you especially liked?
 - c. Was there anything you especially disliked?
 - d. Was anything confusing?
 - e. Was anything missing that you would have liked to see included?
 - f. What did you think about the Q&A format?
 - g. What did you think about the tone? Level of detail? Amount of information?
 - h. How useful would a booklet like this be to you?
 - i. What question/answer section did you pick to read thoroughly? [Take tally]
 - j. Why did you pick that section? What did you get out of it? Did you want to know more?
5. A number of you told me that you hear conflicting information about what does and doesn't cause cancer, and that this information changes from week to week. How do you think we can make sense of this for the public in our brochure?

G. Close (2 minutes)

1. We've come to the end of our discussion. The sponsors of this focus group are the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS). Both these organizations are part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which is part of the Federal Government. [If time permits] Are you familiar with either the National Cancer Institute or the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences?
2. Do you have any additional comments you would like to make on tonight's topics?
3. On behalf of NCI and NIEHS, I want to thank you for your participation. Your opinions tonight will be very valuable as they create and develop materials about cancer and the environment for the public. Please stop at the front desk on your way out.