



**ROLE PLAY**  
**GUIDANCE FOR**  
**FACILITATORS OF**  
**MHPSS TRAININGS**

## Role play guidance for facilitators of MHPSS trainings

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## INTRODUCTION

Role plays are a powerful tool that can provide insight and depth during a learning process. However, effectively utilizing and facilitating role plays can be a challenge for even the most experienced facilitators. Role plays can also be a departure from the norm for many professionals who are unfamiliar with active, participatory methods of learning. Given these challenges, this guidance is written specifically to support facilitators in the effective use of role plays in training on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). While the use of role plays in supervision is not specifically covered in this guidance, elements of this guidance may be applicable to the supervision setting. This guidance is not intended to be a manual with prescribed steps but should be taken as a pedagogical tool with helpful tips, considerations, and recommendations for facilitators to use as needed.

## BENEFITS OF ROLE PLAYS

Role plays are well-established as a training method for MHPSS. They are an important element of the do no harm principle in capacity building. Role plays enable MHPSS practitioners to observe, acquire, and develop skills in a controlled environment before directly implementing with affected individuals and communities.

Role plays provide clear benefits for trainees. They provide realistic scenarios for trainees to apply skills and concepts in a safe learning environment. Trainees can demonstrate what they have learned and obtain direct feedback from facilitators and peers. Additionally, role plays are a form of experiential and participatory learning. They provide an experience that goes beyond “head learning.” Role plays help shift learning from knowledge to experience. Trainees experience multiple perspectives through role plays, both as helpers and service users, and gain a deeper insight into the experience of the other. Role plays also provides benefits for facilitators. They provide an opportunity for facilitators to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. Facilitators can observe whether trainees are able to apply what was covered during training and provide immediate feedback to ensure quality. This is particularly helpful in MHPSS, when live observation may not be feasible due to sensitivity or logistical constraints. Facilitators can also use role plays to demonstrate specific skills or concepts. Role plays can clarify what can often be overly theoretical or conceptual, especially trainees who are new to MHPSS.

## OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDANCE

This guidance is organized into four sections. Each section contains key considerations, including trauma-informed considerations, for the implementation of role plays.

1. Before the Role Play	2. During the Role Play
<p><b>1.1 Decide whether the role play should be conducted in the training</b></p> <p><b>1.2 Determine the objective of the role play</b></p> <p><b>1.3 Consider practicalities and logistics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Room size</li> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Room arrangement</li> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• Props or visuals</li> </ul> <p><b>1.4 Select the role play format</b></p> <p><b>1.5 Create scenarios and roles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional relevance</li> <li>• Believable scenarios and roles</li> <li>• Level of challenge</li> <li>• Cultural appropriateness</li> <li>• Written scenarios</li> </ul>	<p><b>2.1 Prepare trainees for the role play</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish ground rules</li> <li>• Provide clear instructions</li> <li>• Provide explanation of feedback structure</li> <li>• Prepare tasks for non-participating trainees</li> <li>• Prepare observation tasks</li> <li>• Provide grounding before role play</li> </ul> <p><b>2.2 Use a variety of facilitation methods</b></p>
3. After the Role Play	4. Common Challenges and Recommendations
<p><b>3.1 Show appreciation and encouragement</b></p> <p><b>3.2 Provide space for de-roling</b></p> <p><b>3.3 Prepare for feedback</b></p> <p><b>3.4 Structure of feedback</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection by role players</li> <li>• Feedback from observers</li> </ul>	<p><b>4.1 Trainee reluctance or refusal to participate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unfamiliarity with role plays</li> <li>• Feeling unprepared or unclear about the skill or task</li> <li>• Feeling that a role play is not appropriate based on professional role or background</li> <li>• Personal discomfort with role plays</li> <li>• Trauma considerations</li> </ul> <p><b>4.2 Role play goes in an unexpected direction or off topic</b></p> <p><b>4.3 Not enough time to properly debrief</b></p>

**The annexes include the following:**

- Annex A: Role Play Checklist
- Annex B: Trauma-informed Considerations for Role Plays
- Annex C: Tips on Giving Effective Instructions
- Annex D: Warm-up Activities and Exercises
- Annex E: Feedback for Role Plays
- Annex F: Tips and Recommendations for Online Role Plays

# 1. BEFORE THE ROLE PLAY

Preparation for a role play is critical; the success or challenges of role plays is often determined by the amount of preparation. Facilitators should consider the following during preparations:

## 1.1 Decide whether the role play should be conducted in the training

While role plays are a highly beneficial learning tool, facilitators should always consider the following before utilizing them in training:

- Does the role play have a clear objective?
- Is it feasible to utilize a role play? (see 1.3 Consider practicalities and logistics)
- Are role plays appropriate for the training group and their background and experiences?
- Are the challenges to conduct a role play too difficult to address?  
(see 4. Common Challenges and Recommendations)

Based on these considerations, facilitators should use their discernment in whether to utilize role plays or not. Other learning methods may be better for the objectives and training group.

## 1.2 Determine the objective of the role play

Role plays should have a clear objective linked to the training goals and topics. Facilitators should consider: Is the role play to demonstrate a specific skill? What are the core concepts or skills that should be practiced in the role play? Confusion about the purpose of the role play will detract from the overall effectiveness of the exercise.

## 1.3 Consider practicalities and logistics

- **Room size:** The facilitator should consider the size of the training room to determine what kind of role plays would be feasible.. The facilitator should consider using additional breakout rooms if the room cannot accommodate multiple role play groups. Small group role plays can become too loud if the training room is not large enough, making it difficult for trainees to concentrate or hear each other.
- **Room arrangement:** In general, a circular arrangement of chairs is recommended to create a warm and safe environment. Demonstration role plays may be conducted in the middle of the room in a “fishbowl” style of arrangement. Straight rows of chairs can create a more formal environment that may be too intimidating for trainees who are unused to an audience.
- **Accessibility:** Always ask for accessibility needs in the registration form of the training, so you can prearrange accommodations, and opt for universal design that makes spaces more accessible for all participants. Ensure that role plays, especially demonstrations, are easily visible and can be heard by observers. If necessary, this may mean rearranging the training room. If the training group is large, the facilitator may need to arrange sound equipment so that the dialogue can be heard. If there is anyone who has hearing or sight impairments, the facilitator should check with those trainees to see whether there is a specific seat in the room that would work best for them (e.g. closer to the speakers or projector screen, nearer to the role players, etc.). The facilitator should not assume that these trainees need accommodation but show intention to make sure they can participate fully.
- **Time:** The facilitator should consider time constraints and the size of the group when planning

role plays. Will there be enough time for doing the role plays and properly debriefing afterwards? What would be the most appropriate role play format to ensure maximum participation?

- **Props or visuals:** The facilitator may want to use props or visuals (e.g. the role play scene displayed on a projector). This should be prepared ahead of time, along with any other handouts or printing of scenarios and roles.

#### **1.4 Select the role play format**

Based on the objectives, the facilitator should consider the role play structure. There are many role play formats that can be utilized. The facilitator should consider what role play format would be most effective, relevant, and feasible. There is no single format that is “best”; each serves a different purpose. If feasible, it is recommended for facilitators to use more than one role play format in a training. Typically, it is helpful to start with a role play that is more demonstrative, structured, and focused on a specific skill before entering into a highly improvised form of role play. This is especially helpful for trainees that may not be familiar or comfortable with role plays.

The table on the next page outlines several role play options.

# OVERVIEW OF ROLE PLAY FORMATS

*The role play formats are organized by degree of quality control and trainee participation. Facilitators should use multiple formats to most effectively support the learning process.*

Format	Description and objectives	Quality control	Trainee participation	Example
<p><b>Demonstration role play:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitator-led</li> <li>Trainee-led</li> </ul>	<p><b>Description:</b> The facilitator and/or trainees demonstrate a skill or scenario. The “fishbowl” method is an example of a demonstration role play. Observing trainees typically have observation tasks. Demonstration role plays are often followed by more independent role plays where trainees practice the demonstrated skills.</p> <p><b>Objectives:</b> Provide a demonstration of a skill with a high degree of quality control and clarity.</p>	<p><b>High:</b> The facilitator maintains a high level of control as they are directly involved as an role player or can provide direct intervention and feedback if trainees are demonstrating.</p>	<p><b>Low:</b> The majority of trainees are not involved in the role play and primarily observing.</p>	<p><b>The facilitator and/or volunteers role play:</b> PFA in front of the training group. The facilitator takes the role of a Red Cross MHPSS volunteer who is providing PFA. Observing trainees take notes on what helping skills they observe and what challenges they noticed.</p>
<p><b>Structured practice:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small groups</li> <li>Plenary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Description:</b> Trainees are given a clear, structured task for brief role plays, usually practicing a specific skill or scenario. Trainees have a moderate degree of freedom to improvise within the assigned scenarios and roles. Structured practice is typically conducted in small groups. If conducted in plenary, small groups take turns conducting the role play in front of the full group; this is a more time-consuming option but has the advantage of full participation.</p> <p><b>Objectives:</b> Provide trainees an opportunity to practice a specific skill with a balance of structure and improvisation freedom. Trainees have the opportunity to show their mastery of a skill and obtain practical feedback.</p>	<p><b>Low/Moderate:</b> The facilitator has an element of control by setting the task and scenario, but trainees can improvise within this structure. If in small groups, the facilitator cannot observe all role plays simultaneously. In plenary, the facilitator has a higher degree of control.</p>	<p><b>Moderate:</b> All trainees are involved and participating in role plays. Trainees are limited to a specific task but get to improvise to a certain degree.</p>	<p><b>Small group:</b> Trainees break out into pairs and role play the “Listen” step of PFA. They each take turns being the Red Cross MHPSS volunteer who is actively listening to the other role player. The facilitator walks around the room to observe the different role plays, providing light feedback as needed.</p> <p><b>Plenary:</b> Trainees conduct role plays as small groups of three in front of the full group. Trainees role play the “Listen” step of PFA and obtain feedback from the facilitator and observing trainees.</p>
<p><b>Free practice (full improvisation)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small groups</li> <li>Plenary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Description:</b> The facilitator provides general goals for the role play but does not provide scenarios or roles. Trainees create their own roles and scenarios to fit their specific needs. This role play format can be useful when training a group with diverse roles and activities they are involved in. The role plays are conducted in small groups or in front of the full group. This format should be used only after trainees have a strong familiarity with role plays and have a high degree of trust within the group.</p> <p><b>Objective:</b> Provide trainees a comprehensive practice of skills and concepts. Provide trainees full freedom to tailor scenarios and roles for relevance to their context.</p>	<p><b>Low:</b> The facilitator provides a general task but does not control the scenarios and roles. Facilitator has limited ability to control in small group modality. In plenary, the facilitator has more opportunity to provide feedback.</p>	<p><b>High:</b> Trainees have a high level of freedom to create roles and scenarios but must still focus on the goal set by the facilitator. All trainees are involved in role plays.</p>	<p>Trainees are given 10-15 minutes to construct their own roles and scenarios which will then be conducted in front of the full group or in small groups. The only instructions given is that they must demonstrate PFA skills within the role play. The trainees have the option to consult the facilitator for ideas but are otherwise free to work without the facilitator.</p>

## 1.5 Create scenarios and roles

- **Relevance:** If the facilitator is creating the scenarios and roles, they should be relevant to the training topic and the trainees. The facilitator should consider the profiles of the trainees, the contexts they are working in, and what would be applicable.
- **Believable scenarios and roles:** The scenario and roles should be believable. If the facilitator bases the scenarios and roles on real events or persons, the facilitator should ensure that all information is properly de-identified to avoid violations of privacy.
- **Level of challenge:** The scenario should be challenging enough for trainees to grow from the experience. Based on trainees' level of experience and skills, the facilitator should adjust scenarios to be the appropriate level of difficulty.
- **Cultural appropriateness:** The scenarios and roles should be culturally appropriate for the training group. What are the power dynamics in the culture? Are there any potentially sensitive political or religious topics, regional tensions, etc. that should be avoided or addressed with caution? Even if from the same country as trainees, facilitators should not assume that the trainees share the same values and culture.
- **Written scenarios:** Facilitators are recommended to prepare written scenarios (printed, projected, or written on flipchart) ahead of role plays. Written scenarios should be concise and generally the length of a paragraph. Trainees should be able to read and understand the scenario within a few minutes of reading.
- **Trainees creating scenarios:** The facilitator may choose to have trainees create their own scenarios. This increases participation and engagement. The facilitator should provide clear instructions on the role play objectives, elements to include in the scenarios, and the length of the scenarios. Before entering the actual role plays, the facilitator should do a check of the completed scenarios to ensure quality and that the scenarios are relevant to the training objectives.
- **Observers:** If there are trainees who are observing or not directly acting in the role play, the facilitator should prepare clear observation tasks related to the objective of the role play. This keeps all trainees engaged and focused on the learning objective of the role play.

### Trauma-informed considerations

When preparing the objectives, scenario, and roles, the facilitator should carefully consider the trainees' experiences. If trainees are coming from an affected population and have a likelihood of having potentially traumatic experiences, the facilitator should adjust accordingly. Scenarios that are too closely linked to their recent experiences may be overwhelming and cause a high level of distress that is unproductive for the learning process. Scenarios that are less intense and more emotionally manageable should be selected. Facilitators may even choose to conduct focus groups or interviews with trainees ahead of the training to better understand their context.

### Trauma-informed considerations

The facilitator should prepare themselves emotionally and mentally for role plays. It is critical that the facilitator have the stability to manage the emotions that the trainees or even themselves might experience during the role play. The facilitator may want to consider having a peer or manager that they have touched based with prior to the training to make sure they are in the right state of mind before conducting role plays.



## 2. DURING THE ROLE PLAY

During the role play, there are many considerations to factor in, including the facilitation skills facilitators should have to ensure the effectiveness of the role play.

### 2.1 Prepare trainees for the role play

- **Establish ground rules for the role plays:** One important rule would be to emphasize that role plays are for learning, which often requires mistakes. The purpose of role plays is for practicing skills and not for being perfect. Other important rules could also include a reminder of confidentiality and creating a safe learning environment for each other.
- **Provide clear instructions for the role play:** This could be verbal or in writing (handouts, flipchart or PowerPoint slides). Instructions should include the scenario, roles, the timeframe, and the format of the role play. If the role plays will be conducted in pairs or small groups, first split the trainees into groups before providing instructions. This is because trainees often forget instructions while moving into their groups. See Annex C: Tips on Giving Effective Instructions.
- **Provide explanation of feedback structure:** Feedback is an essential but often challenging component of the learning process. Depending on their background, trainees may associate feedback with judgement and criticism. To reduce stress, facilitators should do the following before proceeding to the role plays (see chapter 3. After the Role Play and Annex E: Feedback for Role Plays for further details):
  - » Remind trainees that role plays are for practice and making “mistakes” and that the goal of feedback is to help everyone learn and grow.
  - » Provide a clear structure for feedback following role plays. This predictability will help lower anxiety and also strengthen the quality of the feedback. Give guidance on how feedback should be provided.
  - » Connect feedback to learning objectives and observation tasks: Feedback should support learning and growth. This will ensure relevance and time efficiency in the feedback process. Facilitators are recommended to utilize EQUIP (Ensuring Quality in Psychosocial and Mental Health Care) as a resource for assessing MHPSS competencies and structuring observation and feedback.
  - » Avoid general comments (e.g. “You did a good job being supportive”). Instead, provide specific observations (e.g. “When the person was crying, you found a box of tissues and listened without giving hurried advice. This really seemed to give the person a lot of comfort.”).
  - » Feedback should include both what went well and areas for further growth. Identifying what went well helps trainees understand what to continue doing. If a trainee struggled with a portion of the role play, constructive feedback is necessary both for their learning and avoiding potential harm to affected populations.
- **Prepare tasks for observing trainees:** If some trainees are not participating in the role play, prepare clear tasks for them to observe. This keeps them engaged and part of the group process.
- **Provide grounding (e.g. a few deep breaths or a brief moment of silent reflection) before role plays begin:** This initiates the mental process of entering into the role play and helps trainees focus on the task at hand. Or if the role play requires a bit of energy, the facilitator may choose to do a more active warm up with the group to reduce anxiety or inhibitions. See Annex D: Warmup Activities and Exercises.

### Trauma-informed considerations

It is normal for role plays to feel uncomfortable or challenging. However, some role plays may trigger a level of distress that goes beyond the normal discomforts of the learning process. This is especially relevant for trainees who may have been exposed to potentially traumatic events in their work or personal lives. Trainees should never be forced to participate in role plays and should have the option to step out of a role play and ask for support if they are in distress. Facilitators should make this explicitly clear before the role plays begin.

### Trauma-informed considerations

During a role play, the facilitator may notice role players becoming too distressed or going in a direction that could distress others. The facilitator should intervene and pause the role play. The facilitator could ask everyone to take a few deep breaths and do a quick check-in to decide what direction to take. The facilitator could also “rewind” to an earlier point in the role play and ask the role players to go in a different direction. Additionally, the facilitator or co-facilitator may notice observing trainees becoming distressed. The co-facilitator could make a signal to the facilitator to make sure they are aware and make it a point to follow up with the potentially distressed trainees.

## 2.2 Use a variety of facilitation methods

Facilitation approaches and techniques are highly dependent on the facilitators and their personal style, preferences, and background. There is not one perfect method of facilitation and facilitators should use the techniques that best suit them and the learning objectives of the role play:

- **Forum theatre methods:** Drawing from forum theatre methods, the facilitator could facilitate interaction between role players and the audience. The facilitator could pause the role play at specific points and ask for feedback from observing trainees at critical moments (e.g. “What do you think the role player should do or say next? What have you noticed going well so far?”). In these pauses, role players can also briefly share what they are experiencing and ask advice from their peers if they feel stuck or uncertain about how to proceed. This creates a fun, interactive dynamic between role players and observers. Additionally, the facilitator could provide direction or suggestions to the role players if they are particularly struggling (e.g. “I can see that you (the role player) are facing away from the person you’re trying to help. Try turning your body more towards them and see if this helps open up the conversation.”).
- **Character swap:** During the role play, the role players may also swap roles with observers. The facilitator may choose to repeat a scenario but swap out one or two of the role players. This increases participation while also enabling trainees to observe different approaches to the same scenarios.
- **During the role play, the facilitator should monitor the reactions and body language of the group:** If there is a co-facilitator, this would be an ideal task for them. There may be trainees who are emotionally impacted by the role play or have strong reactions. Observing these reactions should provide direction for the debriefing after the role play.
- **The facilitator should be mindful of their location in the room during the role play:** The facilitator may choose to sit with the observing trainees to reduce the power difference and place more focus on the trainees. If the facilitator remains standing near the role play, it may distract from the attention given to the role players.

- **To help manage time, the facilitator could provide time reminders or assign a trainee with this task:** Typically, this is best done silently with a written sign (e.g. “3 minutes left”). Another option may be to have a gentle noise, like a bird noise, to give a time warning for the role players. This can be helpful with structured or semi-structured role plays where there is a more limited timeframe.

#### **Trauma-informed considerations**

There is no way to predict exactly how trainees will react to a role play. Emotional reactions to a role play are normal and not something to be feared or avoided. What is important, however, is that facilitators provide the space for the group to process what they observed and provide support. Neglecting the debriefing of a role play can potentially cause harm, especially if there were particularly strong reactions. If trainees are from the affected community or in an active emergency context, it is even more crucial to debrief. The facilitator should ensure that there is clear information on available resources for counseling or support.

#### **Trauma-informed considerations**

Facilitators may themselves be impacted by the role play. Facilitators can also call for a break or spend time in grounding with the group before entering into debriefing. Facilitators are in a position where they have to hold and contain the emotions of the trainees. If facilitators are not able to do this, they should ask their co-facilitator (if available) to lead in the debriefing. Otherwise, another option may be to take an extended coffee break before debriefing.

## 3. AFTER THE ROLE PLAY

It is essential that trainees have a chance to debrief after a role play, especially if there is heavy emotional content. The debriefing provides the opportunity for feedback, input, and closure before moving on to other training content. The following steps are recommended following role plays:

### 3.1 Show appreciation and encouragement

Acting in a role play is challenging and something to be appreciated, regardless of how it went. After a role play ends, the facilitator could ask for a round of applause or create a special way of showing appreciation together with the group, such as snapping the fingers or stomping the feet. This encouragement will help create a supportive environment for other role plays.

### 3.2 Provide space for de-rolling

After a role play, it is recommended that facilitators support the trainees “de-role” from their characters and the role play. This could be as simple as “shaking off” their roles or an imaginary exercise where they “wash off” or “take off” their roles and step back into themselves. This gives mental and emotional distance from the role play and refocuses the group. If necessary, the facilitator may also add in some deep breathing or other mindfulness exercises for further grounding.

### 3.3 Prepare for feedback

Remind trainees of the feedback structure and provide them time to prepare themselves for feedback.

### 3.4 Structure of Feedback

There are many ways to structure feedback based on the trainees, time constraints, group size, and other factors. It is generally recommended that feedback begin with self-reflection by the role players before feedback provided by observers, including the facilitator. See Annex E: Feedback for Role Plays for further tips and more detailed structures for feedback.

- **Self-reflection by role players:** Give role players an opportunity to reflect on how they felt, what was going through their minds during the role play, what they think went well, what did not go so well, etc. The facilitator could “interview” the role players together with the other trainees. This ensures that role players feel understood and have a chance to explain their actions and experience. This better prepares them to hear feedback from other trainees without the feeling of judgement.
- **Feedback from observers:** Once role players have expressed themselves and had a moment to reflect, feedback from observing facilitators and trainees will be more effective. If trainees have been given observation tasks, the feedback will also be more structured at this point. Facilitators should wrap up feedback and ensure trainees understand the connection of the role play feedback to learning objectives.

## 4. COMMON CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Trainee reluctance or refusal to participate

There may be occasions when trainees are reluctant to participate in a role play or refuse to. This can pose a challenge for facilitators, and it is important that facilitators consider a variety of reasons for this.

- **Unfamiliarity with role plays:** Trainees may be unfamiliar with role plays in a training setting. They may never have participated in a role play or experienced role plays in their professional or personal lives. Some recommendations:
  - » Before a training, the facilitator may consider asking the trainees their degree of experience or comfort with role play. This could inform the role play formats selected for the training. For a low level of familiarity, the facilitator should include more demonstrations or structured role plays before doing a full improvisation role play. This gradual exposure to role plays could reduce the unfamiliarity.
  - » Provide a clear structure for feedback following role plays. This predictability will help lower any anxiety and also strengthen the quality of the feedback.
  - » Before a training, the facilitator should inform trainees that role plays will be part of the training. While this may seem simple, trainees will feel better prepared and be expecting role plays, thus reducing the feeling of surprise.
  - » Immediately before a role play (and throughout the training), it should be made clear that role plays are not about a perfect demonstration of skills. “Mistakes” are part of the learning process and not something that reflects on a trainee’s character or professionalism.
  - » The facilitator could identify volunteers who show potential or willingness for role plays before they are conducted. The facilitator could discreetly ask these trainees if they would be willing to “volunteer” for the role play later in the training session.
  - » These trainees would then be prepared and also demonstrate to their peers that there is nothing to fear.
- **Feeling unprepared or unclear about the skill or task:** Trainees may be confused about what they are supposed to do with a role play or feel unprepared.
  - » Providing clear tasks is critical for a role play. Have written instructions for the role play, especially if there are small groups or pairs. Before role plays, ask trainees if they have any questions or confusion about the instructions. While this may be simple, it can prevent much confusion.
  - » Trainees may be unsure of the actual skill that they should be practicing in role play. Give a brief overview of the skills from earlier in the training that they should be practicing. Refer to any written instructions to remind them of the specific skills to practice during the role play.
  - » The facilitator should provide time for trainees to prepare themselves for the role play. If trainees are given roles, give them some time to imagine and familiarize themselves with their character. If trainees are constructing their own roles, the facilitator should briefly check each of their roles to ensure that they are properly prepared.

- **Feeling that a role play is not appropriate based on professional role or background:** There may be times when a trainee, due to their position or professional background, feel that a role play would not be appropriate for them. It may be that they are working in a senior position or have a belief that a role play would not be dignifying for their profession.
  - » It is important that participants are fully aware of the participatory nature of the training prior to coming. While this will not prevent this issue fully, it can reduce the likelihood of it occurring. A facilitator may want to hold a pre-training call to help potential trainees understand the training methods that will be used.
  - » Facilitators have to accept that some trainees will simply refuse to participate in a role play and cannot be forced. It is recommended facilitators have clear observation tasks for non-participating trainees to stay engaged and learn from. Direct confrontations in front of a group will not be productive and may produce issues with trainees who truly do have a senior position or reputational risks for engaging in a role play. The facilitator could have a conversation during a break to understand their reasons in a gentle way before thinking collaboratively with the trainee about how they might still benefit from a role play. The facilitator could ask after a few rounds of role play if the trainee might feel more comfortable to participate.

#### 4.2 Role play in a direction that was unexpected or off topic

Role plays, especially ones with a high level of improvisation, can often go off topic and no longer be appropriate or relevant to the training.

- **Prevention:** As a prevention measure, the facilitator should make sure that instructions are clear. If the facilitator has any doubt, a simple way to check is to have trainees quickly repeat the key goals of the role play and the instructions back to the facilitator. Clarification can then be provided before role plays begin.
- **Pausing:** If a role play is still going in the wrong direction, the facilitator has the right to step in and pause a role play. The facilitator should be mindful not to humiliate or shame the role players but could instead use the pause to give helpful guidance for the role players to get back to the topic. An example would be if the role players were supposed to demonstrate the steps of PFA but instead began role playing a supervision session. The topic is clearly not the one assigned, and the facilitator should immediately step in and take the time to redirect the role play. One important item to note is that this is different from a situation in which trainees may genuinely be trying to demonstrate a skill (e.g. PFA active listening) but struggle with it or make a “mistake.” This should not be seen as a problem.

#### 4.3 Not enough time to properly debrief

Role plays can often go overtime and debriefing can be neglected in order to move on to other training topics. This can be harmful for trainees, especially if there was heavy emotional content.

- **Before role plays are conducted, there should be a clear start and stop time assigned:** A co-facilitator or trainee could play the role of time keeper to avoid the issue of losing debriefing time.
- **If the role play has already gone overtime and there is not enough time remaining for a debriefing, the facilitator may consider several possibilities:** One is to have a brief buddy check-in or small group check-ins so that each trainee has a chance to process their thoughts and emotions. Immediately after, several volunteers could be asked to report back some of the main

debriefing points. This reduces the debriefing time but still includes some debriefing to avoid unresolved issues from the role play.

- **If time is truly limited:** the facilitator could ask trainees to spend a few minutes to write down their thoughts and feedback on paper anonymously. These points could then be collected and, if time permitting, the facilitator could later address them without losing some of the key insights from the trainee.

### **Trauma-informed considerations**

As noted throughout this guidance, some trainees may find that the role play is too distressing. It may also be the case that the trainees are in an emotional or mental state where a role play is not manageable. In these situations, as before, no trainee should be forced to participate in a role play and they do not have to justify or divulge their trauma experiences. Facilitators should not dig or question if this is the case but simply check what would be manageable for the trainee and what supports they might need to stay engaged in the learning process. If a buddy system is being used in the training, it may be a good idea for trainees to do a check-in together before and after role plays to add another layer of support.

## ANNEX A: ROLE PLAY CHECKLIST

<p>Before the role play...</p>	<p><b>Determine the objective of the role play</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ What skills will be practiced in the role play?</li> <li>✓ What should trainees experience or understand as a result of the role play?</li> </ul> <p><b>Consider practicalities and logistics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Room size: Is there enough space for role plays?</li> <li>✓ Time: Is there enough time for role plays, including instructions, demonstrations, and debriefing?</li> <li>✓ Room arrangement: Can the room be arranged to accommodate the chosen format of role plays (e.g. multiple role plays at once)?</li> <li>✓ Accessibility: Is the training venue accessible for persons with disabilities? Can the role plays be arranged in a way that accommodates different abilities to participate?</li> <li>✓ Props or visuals: Are there any props or visuals that could help bring the role plays to life?</li> </ul> <p><b>Select the role play format</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Based on the objectives and practicalities, what is the best format for the role play?</li> </ul> <p><b>Create scenarios and roles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Professional relevance: What scenarios and roles would best fit the experience of the trainees and the work they are doing?</li> <li>✓ Believable scenarios and roles: While providing an interesting learning situation, are the scenarios and roles believable?</li> <li>✓ Level of challenge: What would provide the best learning challenge for the trainees without proving too difficult?</li> <li>✓ Cultural appropriateness: What is the background of the trainees? (position, role, responsibilities, activities they are involved in, culture, age, gender and sex, social background)</li> <li>✓ Written scenarios: Are complex or long scenarios written out (printed, projected, written on flipchart)?</li> </ul>
<p>During the role play...</p>	<p><b>Prepare trainees for the role play</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Establish ground rules</li> <li>✓ Provide clear instructions</li> <li>✓ Prepare tasks for non-participating trainees</li> <li>✓ Prepare observation tasks, especially for demonstration role plays with many observing trainees</li> <li>✓ Provide grounding before role plays to help trainees enter into the role play</li> <li>✓ Use a variety of facilitation methods</li> </ul>
<p>After the role play...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Show appreciation</li> <li>✓ Provide space for de-roling</li> <li>✓ Debrief the role players before feedback</li> <li>✓ Provide feedback</li> </ul>



## ANNEX B: TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSIDERATIONS FOR ROLE PLAYS

<p>Before the role play...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ When preparing the objectives, scenario, and roles, the facilitator should carefully consider the trainees' experiences. If trainees are coming from an affected population and have a likelihood of having potentially traumatic experiences, the facilitator should adjust accordingly. Scenarios that are too closely linked to their recent experiences may be overwhelming and cause a high level of distress that is unproductive for the learning process. Scenarios that are less intense and more emotionally manageable should be selected. Facilitators may even choose to conduct focus groups or interviews with trainees ahead of the training to better understand their context.</li> <li>✓ The facilitator should prepare themselves emotionally and mentally for role plays. It is critical that the facilitator have the stability to manage the emotions that the trainees or even themselves might experience during the role play. The facilitator may want to consider having a peer or manager that they have touched based with prior to the training to make sure they are in the right state of mind before conducting role plays.</li> </ul>
<p>During the role play...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ It is normal for role plays to feel uncomfortable or challenging. However, some role plays may trigger a level of distress in trainees that goes beyond the normal discomforts of the learning process. This is especially relevant for trainees who may have been exposed to potentially traumatic events in their work or personal lives. Trainees should never be forced to participate in role plays and should have the option to step out of a role play and ask for support if they are in distress. Facilitators should make this explicitly clear before the role plays begin.</li> <li>✓ During a role play, the facilitator may notice the role players becoming too distressed or going in a direction that could distress others. The facilitator should intervene and ask for a pause in the role play. The facilitator could then ask everyone to take a few deep breaths and do a quick check-in to decide what direction to take. The facilitator could also "rewind" to an earlier point in the role play and ask the role players to go in a different direction. Additionally, the facilitator or co-facilitator may notice observing trainees becoming distressed. The co-facilitator could make a signal to the facilitator to make sure they are aware and make it a point to follow up with the potentially distressed trainees.</li> </ul>
<p>After the role play...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Regardless of the preparation, there is no way to predict exactly how trainees will react to a role play. Emotional reactions to a role play are normal and not something to be feared or avoided. What is important, however, is that facilitators provide the space for the group to process what they observed and provide support. Neglecting the debriefing section of a role play can result in harm, especially if there were particularly strong reactions. If the training group is from the affected community or in an active emergency context, it is even more crucial that the facilitator provide more time for debriefing in the training schedule. To the best of their ability, the facilitator should ensure that there is clear information on available resources for counseling or support.</li> <li>✓ Facilitators may themselves be impacted by the role play. Facilitators can and should also call for a break or spend time in grounding with the group before entering into debriefing. Facilitators are in a position where they have to hold and contain the emotions of the trainees. If facilitators are not able to do this, they should ask their co-facilitator (if available) to lead in the debriefing. Otherwise, another option may be to take an extended coffee break before debriefing.</li> </ul>

## ANNEX C: TIPS ON GIVING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Speak simply and slowly

Speaking too quickly and using complicated terms can cause confusion, especially when there are multiple languages present in a training. Slow down the pace of instruction and use language that is simple. A good practice can be to take a breath between each step of instruction or key information.

### 2. Break down the instructions into steps

Complex role plays can be difficult to remember. Break down the instructions into steps, with one key action per step. Avoid having multiple actions in one step. Consider the following example:



“Gather in groups of three and decide what scenario you will practice for the role play. Assign one person to observe and provide feedback during the role play.”



“First, gather in groups of three. Second, assign one person to observe and provide feedback during the role play. Third, decide which scenario you will practice for the role play.”

### 3. Provide instructions, scenarios, and roles in writing

Written instructions, scenarios, and roles are often easier for participants to remember than verbal instructions, especially if they are complex. Participants can refer to the written text throughout the role play without having to disrupt others. It is also easier for some participants to understand writing than verbal instructions if the training language is not their native language or if they have hearing challenges. Give participants time to read the text before giving instructions. Alternatively, read the text all together before telling the instructions. This is because participants will often focus on what they see more than what they hear.

### 4. Check comprehension

After providing instructions, check if participants understood the instructions. Avoid asking general comprehension questions such as “Any questions?” or “Is it clear?” Instead, ask specific questions (e.g. what is the first step?). Ask volunteers to repeat instructions back to the group.

### 5. Provide a demonstration for complex instructions

If instructions are complex or if participants are confused even after clarification, provide a brief demonstration. While this may feel time intensive, it can ultimately save time and avoid confusion.

### 6. If an activity involves pairs or small groups

Divide participants into pairs or small groups before providing instructions. Give participants a moment to arrange their chairs and situate themselves in the room. Then show or explain instructions. This is because participants often forget instructions or get distracted while getting into their groups.

## ANNEX D: WARMUP ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES<sup>1</sup>

Facilitators should consider the background of the training group when selecting warmups for role plays. A good rule of thumb is to ask trainees about their preferences and see if any of the trainees may even be interested in leading some of the warmups to increase participation. A general recommendation is to use warmups consistently with training groups to create a sense of predictability and routine with role plays.

### 7 Acting Warmups for Actors

Warmup routines do not need to take too much time, and they can be done either alone or with other actors. Find some suggestions below:

- **Work your neck:** Roll your neck around forward, side to side, backward. Roll it around in one direction, then the other.
- **Shoulders:** Shrug your shoulders up, down, then roll them forward and backward.
- **Circle your arms:** Swing your arms in a circle in one direction, then the other, then in opposite directions.
- **Stretch your ribs:** by raising your arms above your head, then leaning to one side, feeling the tension release on your ribcage. Hold for a beat, then return to the upright position and lean to the other side.
- **Breathwork:** Assume an erect posture, inhale deeply and slowly through your nose. Exhale slowly and deliberately through your mouth. Repeat a few times to slow your heart rate down and relax.
- **Folds:** Bend forward at the waist, dropping your head, with arms extended down, holding for 10. Then come back up all the way into a slight backward bend, holding for another 10 seconds. Repeat a few times until you feel your posture has improved.
- **Shake everything out:** Start shaking your hands, then your arms, then your entire body to release any lingering tension.

### 6 Vocal Warmups for Actors

Your voice is your main instrument of expression as an actor, and warming it up will prevent damaging your vocal cords while helping you articulate your words:

- **The "Hum":** Exhale slowly, humming until you have exhaled all of your air. Repeat approximately five times.
- **The "Ha":** Stand and place your hand on your abdomen. Breathe in by expanding your stomach outward; you are now breathing from your diaphragm. Exhale slowly, uttering, "ha ha ha ha." Push your abdomen in with every syllable. Repeat.
- **Lip trills and flutters:** Roll your tongue on the roof of your mouth to make "trr" or "rr" sound.

<sup>1</sup> The listed activities and exercises are drawn from the MasterClass article "7 Acting Warmups, Games, and Techniques for Actors."

- **Descending nasal consonants:** Say the word “onion,” stretching the “ny” sound and voice it downward in pitch.
- **Tongue twisters:** Memorize a few tongue twisters, like “red leather yellow leather” and repeat them to get your mouth loosened up.
- **Yawn and sigh:** Open your mouth as if to yawn and let your voice sigh loudly from the top of your register down to its lowest note.

## 7 Acting Games and Warmup Techniques

There are dozens of theater games and acting exercises actors can use alone or with others to get themselves ready. Here’s a sampling of games taught by established acting teachers in the business.

- **Energy Ball:** Face a wall. Imagine that you’re holding an invisible ball with both hands in front of you. Now imagine that you’re gathering energy into the ball, feeling it throb and pulse as the energy grows. The energy becomes so intense you have to throw the ball against the wall. As the ball bounces back, lean in to catch it. Pitch it back forcefully. This game will focus your energy while also getting you moving.
- **Reflection:** Face your partner and try to get inside their head. Observe their movements closely. As they move, mirror their movements and facial expressions as exactly as you can in real time. Mirror their facial expressions.
- **Theme song:** If you’re prepping for a particular character, think of a theme song or music that captures their essence. Put it on while you warm up, playing it over and over again to get yourself into the character’s emotional space.
- **Speed run:** Take a scene you’ve prepared and perform it in normal time. Then repeat it, beat for beat, in double time. Then do it a third time, twice as fast again. You can do this exercise alone or with a partner if you have one.
- **Receive and pass:** This exercise is best done with a team of actors. Get everyone moving around a space. You make a clicking noise or utter a single word aimed at one of your partners. They must catch it, then pass it audibly to another person while continuing to move. Increase the speed at which the clicks pass from one actor to another.
- **Character walk:** This exercise is best done with other actors. Begin moving around the room. Observe one of your partners closely. Duplicate their walk as accurately as possible without exaggeration or parody. Feel the person behind the walk.
- **Circle work:** This exercise is a good warmup for an ensemble working on a particular production. The cast stands in a circle. Start in the middle of a line of dialogue from somewhere in the script that contains a cue for one of the other actors. That actor must play out the rest of the scene from the center of the circle. If the scene contains a cue to another actor, that person enters the circle. If not, another actor must come up with a new line with a new cue, and the process continues.

## ANNEX E: FEEDBACK FOR ROLE PLAYS

Feedback is an essential step of the learning process. Feedback has two primary objectives following role plays: 1) to support the trainees' growth and learning and 2) quality assurance. Feedback strengthens the quality of MHPSS provided to affected populations and lowers the risk of potential harm.

Depending on their background, however, trainees may fear feedback and associate it with judgement and criticism. With this in mind, facilitators should:

- **Normalize mistakes.** Remind trainees that role plays are for practice and making “mistakes.”
- **Provide guidance on how to provide feedback.** This should be aligned with the group rules or agreement for the training (e.g. respect for others). Set clear expectations for how feedback should or should not be provided.
- **Provide a clear overview of the feedback structure before role plays.** This increases predictability and helps lower potential stress around feedback.

### Feedback guidance

There is not one perfect method for providing feedback, but the following principles are recommended as the basis for feedback.

- **Feedback should be linked to learning objectives and observation tasks.** Observers should understand their role and task in providing feedback to support their peers in the learning process.
  - » Facilitators are recommended to utilize EQUIP (Ensuring Quality in Psychosocial and Mental Health Care) as a resource for assessing MHPSS competencies and structuring observation and feedback.
- **Feedback should be specific and based on observable facts.** General comments do not help growth and learning.
  - » Example: General comment - “You did a good job being supportive” vs. Specific observation – “When the person was crying, you found a box of tissues and listened without giving hurried advice. This really seemed to give the person a lot of comfort.”
- **Feedback should include both what went well and areas for further growth.** Trainees can learn from what they did well as much as what they struggled with. A simple yet effective method to achieve this is the “sandwich” or “hamburger” model where feedback begins and ends with the positive, with constructive feedback in between.

### Feedback structure considerations

Facilitators should consider the following when selecting a feedback structure:

- **Background of trainees:** How is feedback viewed in the trainees' culture(s), profession, education, position, etc.? Do trainees have a specific or individual preference of how to receive feedback (personality, age, etc.)? Is there already a structure of feedback that trainees are accustomed to in their work?
- **Learning objectives:** What is the best feedback structure to achieve learning objectives?
- **Time: How much time is there to provide feedback?** Is there enough time for all observers to provide feedback or does feedback need to be more limited?
- **Group size and participation:** What feedback structure enables trainees to participate in the feedback process? What is a feedback structure that is feasible with the size of the training group?

Feedback should begin with self-reflection by the role players before feedback by observers, including the facilitator. Feedback structure can vary, and facilitators should adapt feedback structure to their training as needed. Facilitators may consider using the following potential structures:

### Feedback structure options

1. **Feedback in plenary:** When feedback is provided in plenary, the majority of trainees will be observers. The facilitator must consider time constraints for the feedback structure, especially if there is a large group of trainees. There is most likely not enough time for all trainees to share feedback. In this case, the facilitator could use the following structure:
  - Before the role play, 2-3 volunteers from the observing trainees are identified to provide verbal feedback following the role play. The other observers will write down their feedback on paper or sticky notes that will be given to the role players. When the role play ends, the 2-3 volunteers lead the feedback. The facilitator concludes the feedback and collects the written feedback to give to the role players. If there are multiple rounds of role play, new volunteers could be identified to provide the verbal feedback.
    - » Facilitators are recommended to briefly touch base with the 2-3 volunteers before they provide their feedback. Facilitators can ensure they are on task and provide feedback in the agreed upon way. This is especially important in the first rounds of role plays.
2. **Feedback in small groups:** When role plays are conducted in small groups, the facilitator faces the challenge of not being able to provide feedback in every group. The following structure could help the facilitator ensure feedback is provided in a clear, structured manner:
  - In each group, one or more trainees play the role of observer and do not partake in the role play. They will lead the feedback following the role play (feedback should still begin with the role players' self-reflection before the observers share their feedback). The observer role is then rotated to another member of the group so that all trainees have an opportunity to participate in a role play. Important consideration for this option:
    - » This option requires clear instructions as there are many steps involved (see Annex C: Tips on Giving Effective Instructions). Facilitators are strongly recommended to have written instructions to prevent delays due to confusion. Facilitators need to keep track of time efficiently to ensure all groups are proceeding at the same pace.

## ANNEX F: TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONLINE ROLE PLAYS

Role plays online can be challenging but is not impossible. Facilitators can still create a warm and supportive environment that encourages trainees to engage in role plays. The following tips and recommendations are in addition to the overall considerations from the guidance.

- 1. Limit the size of the training group:** Avoid large groups for online role plays. Limit groups to 12-15 participants. This will reduce the likelihood of technology issues or delays. It will also make it easier to create a warm and safe atmosphere since it is more difficult to create connection between participants online than it is in-person.
- 2. Prepare technology:** Prevent technology issues as much as possible. Send instructions ahead of time to participants on how to join the online platform and other technology requirements (webcam, internet connection, charging for computer batter, speakers, microphone, headphones, etc.). Have a pre-training preparation call if possible so that any potential issues are solved before the training.
- 3. Cameras on:** Encourage participants to have their cameras on for the role plays. This will help trainees connect better with each other during the role plays. If possible, provide a warning ahead of time to participants that cameras on will be an expectation for the training.
- 4. Breakout rooms for small group practice:** For small group role plays, use the breakout room function. On Zoom, the call host can enter and observe different breakout rooms to provide feedback and support.
- 5. Demonstration role plays: virtual “fishbowl”:** For demonstration role plays, a virtual “fishbowl” can be used. In this modality, everyone except the role players will have their cameras and microphones off. This will help keep the focus on the role players who will have their cameras and microphones on.
- 6. Use the chatbox:** The chatbox can be used as method for clear communication during role plays. The facilitator can write the instructions in the chat box or observation tasks. Trainees can also write their reactions and feedback in the chatbox when appropriate. This can be an advantage when groups may be larger than usual and there is not enough time for each person to speak.



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