



GUIDANCE FOR VIRTUAL SCHWARTZ ROUNDS® DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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We know that Schwartz Rounds® offer a unique forum for convening and supporting each other. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of you have asked us about convening **Virtual Schwartz Rounds sessions** on meeting platforms such as Zoom, WebEx, etc., until we can again convene in person. The Schwartz Center team has put a great deal of thought into the potential risks and benefits of offering Schwartz Rounds in this context. We recognize that Virtual Schwartz Rounds do not and cannot replicate our in-person Schwartz Rounds sessions. However, **Virtual Schwartz Rounds may provide us and our colleagues with an interim opportunity for connection, community and engagement** in the midst of this crisis and the myriad challenges it entails.

That said, there is research in the [trauma literature](#) that suggests that debriefing models -- such as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing -- that focus on detailed deconstructing of experiences and emotional processing during or immediately after traumatic events, have mixed results and, in some cases, may increase emotional arousal and traumatic stress. Of course, this is a unique situation and Schwartz Rounds have never been tested under such circumstances. We ask that you **please review and consider the facilitation guidance below carefully.**

We know that our Schwartz Center member community represents a wide range of organization types, locations, sizes, and -- most importantly -- needs. We know that no single set of guidelines or 'tips' can account for the variability of the situations you all find yourselves in right now. However, we also know that **our Schwartz Rounds leaders are committed, compassionate, and willing to do whatever it takes to ease the burdens faced by our healthcare colleagues.**

What are Virtual Schwartz Rounds?

Virtual Schwartz Rounds are remote convenings that take place online using virtual meeting platforms. They provide a forum for connecting with healthcare colleagues facing challenging experiences while trying to care for themselves and others. As with in-person Schwartz Rounds, they are opportunities to connect with one another about difficult or uplifting experiences, to offer and to receive support, and to decrease our sense of isolation.

Virtual Schwartz Rounds are not intended to replace our standard, in-person Schwartz Rounds, but to provide our member teams with an additional support mechanism for healthcare staff that may be offered in this time of crisis.

Goals and Principles

- Support compassion for self and others
- Encourage mindful self-care
- Share coping strategies
- Foster connection and community
- Avoid re-living details of traumatic experiences

Planning Your Virtual Session

- **Roles & Responsibilities: We advise you to partner with a co-facilitator for Virtual Schwartz Rounds.** No matter the size of your group, having a co-facilitator on hand can help foster conversation and keep things moving. Ideally, this person -- or a third person -- can help manage any technical issues and the chat function (see “Making Technology Work,” below). Depending on staff availability some of these roles can, of course, be combined.
 - **Facilitator:** Prepares introduction, discussion prompts for session; introduces and sets tone for session, explains guidelines for participation, offers discussion prompts and reflections during session, invites participation, closes session with intention; offers follow-up and additional support resources during session.
 - **Co-Facilitator:** Assists Facilitator with above; helps identify “discussion boosters” (see below) to prompt and model participation in discussion; offers additional reflections and discussion prompts during session.
 - **Chat/Technical Moderator:** Prepares introductory slides and shares screen during session; monitors and responds in writing to hand-raising, comments, and questions on chat; in partnership with Facilitator and Co-Facilitator, may call on participants to speak during session. Dismisses any participants who are disruptive to the session.
 - **Coordinator:** Arranges for technical support from IT prior to session; coordinates communication and marketing of session.
- **Size: Variable.** The size of your Virtual Schwartz Rounds sessions will vary depending upon your comfort level as a facilitator, your goals for the session (i.e., whether you’d like everyone to have a chance to speak), the availability of individuals to facilitate

sessions, and the needs of your organization. Organizations with greater need or fewer facilitators may wish to consider having larger sessions, while teams that are able to offer more sessions may wish to limit the size of those sessions to allow more participation. Participation seems to be more robust in smaller groups and perhaps with facility in managing the technology that helps participation.

- **Duration: 45 to 60 minutes**

- **Topic:** In Virtual Schwartz Rounds we recommend **selecting a theme** for your Virtual Schwartz Rounds, rather than focusing on cases. Examples of themes may include:
 - Coping with uncertainty
 - Appreciating colleagues
 - Remembering a moment of compassion during the pandemic
 - Managing anxiety in ourselves and our families
 - Finding our best selves in stressful times
 - Sustaining empathy and compassion without proximity
 - Coping with quarantine and/or social isolation
 - The complexity of “silver linings”
 - How it feels to be “heroes”

- **Working with Panelists:** Prepping panelists for your Virtual Schwartz Rounds is just as important as it is for your standard sessions. Meet with your panelists -- together if possible -- a few days prior to your session so that you can:
 - Introduce yourself and establish a relationship of trust;
 - Ensure the panelists understand the purpose of the session and their role in the session;
 - Help the panelists hone the story they’d like to tell during the session;
 - Clarify any “off-limits” topics or questions the panelists would like you to help safeguard when they present; and
 - Answer any questions or concerns the panelists might have.

- **Discussion Boosters:** We recommend reaching out to one or two participants ahead of time and asking them to serve as discussion catalysts, prepared to help kick off the discussion and to model productive contributions to the session.

- **Evaluation:** We’ve developed an evaluation template (on the member website) that you can use as is or adapt for your online platforms to garner qualitative and quantitative feedback about your VSR sessions. Please consider sharing your VSR evaluations with

our team so we can learn from your experiences by sending it to rounds@theschwartzcenter.org.

Making Technology Work for You

- Suggest participants log in from a private, quiet location if possible.
- Gently request that if possible, participants use video during the session. This seems to foster a sense of connection and may increase participation.
- All participants should mute themselves when not speaking.
- When participants wish to speak, they can use the ‘raise hand’ function on the meeting platform. (In a smaller group, they can of course simply raise their hands.)
- Consider using the “breakout groups” function on your virtual meeting platform to enable smaller-group conversations preceded by welcoming remarks and followed by closing remarks for the larger group.
- The “chat” function can be used to invite comments from participants as well, which can be helpful especially for larger groups. You may wish to consider limiting chat functionality so that participants can comment only to the hosts or to the entire group, rather than to one another. You may wish to offer explicit guidance on how to use the chat productively, i.e., to make only supportive remarks, to avoid use of emojis/gifs/etc., and to avoid provocative or emotionally charged language.
- Your chat moderator or co-facilitator can read comments from the chat to help keep the conversation going.

Safety Considerations for Virtual Schwartz Rounds

- We strongly advise you to include a mental/behavioral health or pastoral care colleague or others with expertise in trauma-informed care for support in each Virtual Schwartz Rounds session to provide additional guidance and support and to follow up with anyone who appears to be in distress. Keep in mind that online, it’s harder to sense the emotions of the group, and for a facilitator or team to directly support someone who is having a strong reaction to the content.
- Share additional EAP/behavioral health/other support resources in every session.
- Acknowledge at the beginning of each session the impossibility of ensuring confidentiality on virtual meeting platforms. If available, use HIPAA-compliant platforms and/or password-protected Zoom functions. Ask participants to respect the guidelines for standard Schwartz Rounds:
 - “What’s said here stays here.”
 - Avoid using proper names of patients and family members during Rounds, and the names of colleagues when discussing the Rounds later.

- Please do not record or allow participants or hosts to record the sessions. Let people know at the beginning of each session that it will not be recorded.

Facilitating Virtual Schwartz Rounds

Facilitation in Virtual Schwartz Rounds during the COVID-19 pandemic should focus on providing a forum for participants to share support and coping strategies. During the discussion, help participants access, within themselves or with others, some of the **five evidence-based factors that people need to recover from adversity and stress**¹:

- Sense of Safety
 - Many caregivers serving on the front lines of the pandemic are not feeling safe in the current circumstances.
 - Encourage them to reflect on the fact that they are safe right now, in the present moment, in the virtual “room” they are sharing.
 - *Ask participants: What is helping you feel safe right now?*
- Calming
 - Help people reframe their assumptions from “losing everything that’s familiar and comforting” to -- for instance -- “What can I learn about myself?”; “How might I grow from this experience?”; and “What can we learn as an organization about how to work and be with each other?”
 - *Ask participants: What helps you feel calm?*
- Connection
 - Reiterate that even as we practice social distancing, we do not have to practice social isolation. We can be and are together.
 - *Ask participants: What are you doing to stay connected to friends and family. In what ways do you feel connected with your colleagues?*
- Self-Efficacy
 - Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to succeed in specific situations, or to accomplish a task.
 - *Ask participants: Who is one person you feel comfortable turning to for questions and advice? If they are being assigned new roles, ask: What has helped you gain*

¹ Hobfoll E, Watson P, Bell CC, Bryant RA, Brymer MJ, et al. Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence. *Psychiatry*; 2007;70(4):283-315.

confidence in the tasks you are now performing?

- Hope
 - Remind clinicians that many of them have conversations with patients about realistic hope, including with patients at the end of life. Helping others find hope may not be unfamiliar territory. There is always something to hope for, a moment of sunshine, a FaceTime call with children that makes them smile, time off.
 - *Ask participants: Where do you find hope? What helps you sustain optimism in dark days?*

Managing the Narrative Flow of Schwartz Rounds

- Setting the Tone
 - Welcome everyone and acknowledge the significance of the current events in your organization and globally, express appreciation and gratitude to all present.
 - Consider reading a brief reflective quote or poem, or take a moment for a few deep breaths and enter the space together.
 - Explain the Virtual Schwartz Rounds safety guidelines with attention to confidentiality, offering empathy and compassion, focusing on creating a shared experience of support, honoring and appreciating the courage and presence of others during this shared time.
 - Remind participants that this is a time for collective restoration, not a time for problem-solving or addressing the many systemic and national challenges we face.
 - Ask that everyone approach the conversation with kindness and consideration for the range of emotions and experiences participants might be facing.
 - Consider establishing a “Parking Lot,” a figurative place where systemic issues can be set aside for other groups or task forces to resolve.

- Opening the Discussion
 - Explain the theme and introduce panelists.
 - Following panelists’ stories, invite participants to share a story or experience related to the theme:
 - What resonates as they listen to others speak?
 - What’s uppermost in their hearts and minds as it relates to the theme?
 - What are they thinking or feeling right now?
 - If you know in advance who will be participating in the Virtual Schwartz Rounds, you might invite one or two people to serve as discussion catalysts and model participation in the Rounds discussion.

- Building the Discussion
 - Stress engenders many different psychological and emotional reactions including frustration, anger, sense of moral duty and moral distress, anxiety and grief.
 - Convey the message that while our common humanity and the challenges of the pandemic unite us, each of us responds in unique ways to stressful events.
 - Reflect in clear, brief statements what you're hearing from participants, selecting words and phrases that moderate or reduce their emotional intensity, (e.g., "These are challenging times for us all," rather than "We're facing the apocalypse!").
 - Acknowledge, validate and support the emotions expressed (e.g., "You are not alone in feeling this way.")
 - Express and reinforce expressions of compassion, respect and appreciation.

- Managing Digressions
 - If participants raise issues related to systemic or organizational challenges, acknowledge the frustration you hear.
 - Respectfully note that Virtual Schwartz Rounds is not a forum to resolve these issues. You might say, "Let's set that aside in our 'Parking Lot' for others to address later if they wish."

- Deepening the Discussion
 - Summarize overarching themes as you go.
 - Acknowledge differences in perspectives if they are expressed.
 - You might ask participants to share an experience in which such differences were resolved with positive intentions.
 - You don't have to help the group resolve their differences, but ask participants to maintain a respectful tone.

- Supporting the Community
 - Ask participants to voice how they find support and solace for themselves. Who do they turn to?
 - How have they found support in the workplace? What has helped?
 - How have they supported others?

- Closing the Discussion
 - Summarize key themes that have emerged from participants' comments.

- Thank those present and any co-facilitators, acknowledging the unique context of the moment and the diversion from the usual format of Schwartz Rounds, and for making the session work.
- Close with whatever rituals you generally use. This will help people feel a sense of continuity with the past.
- Consider offering a closing reflection, poem or brief meditation if there is time.
- If you can, let participants know when the next Virtual Schwartz Rounds will take place.

Debriefing

- Please take time to debrief the Virtual Schwartz Rounds with your co-facilitators or member(s) of your Schwartz Rounds Planning Committee.
- Although there is no formal evaluation for Virtual Schwartz Rounds yet, we welcome your feedback on this guidance. Please send your reflections and comments to the Membership Team so we can help troubleshoot any problems and learn about how Virtual Schwartz Rounds are functioning in your organizations.
 - [Stephanie Adler Yuan](#)
 - [Casey Kudesia](#)
 - [Kathy Scopin](#)

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