

Human Knot

Description of Icebreaker, Name Game, & Teambuilding Activity

Human Knot

- a get-to-know-you icebreaker
- involves close physical proximity
- can be used as a name game
- helps a group learn about how to work together
- can also focus on group understanding of communication, leadership, problem solving, teamwork, trust, persistence, etc.



Equipment: None.

Time: ~15-20 minutes

Brief Description: Standing in a circle, group members reach across and shake hands - use hand connecting to a different person.

The group then tries to unravel the "human knot" by unthreading their bodies without letting go of each other people's hands.

How to Run a Human Knot Session

[Set up & instructions \(1st round\)](#)

[Facilitator notes](#)

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Set up & instructions

- Be aware that the activity involves close physical proximity and touch potentially in sensitive places! It can be used as a first activity in an adventurous program with volunteers (e.g., the start of an Outward Bound program). However, if the program is less adventurous, or group members potentially will have significant problems with such proximity, e.g., due to culture, or social or psychological problems, then Human Knot could be introduced later in a program.
- Ideal group size is approximately 10, but it can be done with anywhere from about 7 to 16. Much higher or lower and the task doesn't really work. The more in a group, the more difficult the task, partly because of the complexity, and partly because there is physically less room to move.
- If there are two or more groups doing the task simultaneously, have the groups reasonably spaced out, so they don't feel distracted by a sense of competition.
- Ask participants to form a circle, shoulder-to-shoulder. Encouraging/urging participants to all stand closer can be a subtle way of helping to prepare them for what is about to come.
- Ask participants to each place a hand in the middle of the circle and to grasp another hand.
- To emphasize learning of names and get a bit of fun going, ask participants to introduce themselves to the person they are holding hands with.
- Then ask participants to put their other hand in the middle, grasp a different person's hand, and introduce themselves.
- Don't let participants let go of hands - some will be tempted to think the activity might then be over - but it is only just starting.
- Explain to participants that what you'd like them to do is untangle themselves, without letting go of hands, into a circle.
- There will be a mixture of reactions, often including nervous laughter, fun amusement, excitement, trepidation, strong suspicion that it can't be done, and others who may view the task as a somewhat sadistic or inappropriate joke. Often some group members will have done the task before, but this doesn't really matter, each time the task is unique.
- Participants may change their grip so as to more comfortable, but they are not to unclasp and re-clasp so as to undo the knot.

- If you want name-learning emphasized, then explain that whenever the group is talking to someone, or about someone, that the person's first name must be used. This usually requires supervision and reinforcement by the instructor, but once enforced, is excellent for learning names. It also usually helps the group to work together and find solution, because their communications are more accurate with names involved.
- Stand back and see what happens.
- Be prepared to see little progress for quite some time (up to 10 minutes). However, once the initial unfolding happens, the pace towards the final solution usually seems to quicken.
- However, because each occasion is unique, there are also odd times when a very fast solution falls out - too easy. In such cases, you ask a group to try the task again - it's usually a bit harder second time around. Occasionally, the task seems too hard and participants seem to make almost no progress. Let them struggle for about 10 minutes, then you can offer the group one unclasp and re-clasp - they need to discuss and decide what unclasp-reclasp would be most useful.
- Most of the time a full circle falls out, but occasionally there are two or even three interlocking circles. So, really the task is to sort the knot out into its simplest structure.

Facilitator notes

- A switched-on facilitator can get a lot of information about participants in a short space of time with this activity. For this reason, the activity is commonly used in group-based selection processes for jobs which involve closely working with others.
- Stay at a moderate distance, allowing the group to handle the activity with feeling like they're being too closely observed; but maintain good hearing contact and be ready to step in to help answer questions or change the direction of the activity quickly when appropriate.
- Slowly wander around the circle, moving in and out as appropriate, e.g., if you want people to use names in every communication, then this needs to be reinforced in a friendly, but firm way, several times.
- It is relatively easy to notice who's talking, who's not, who seems comfortable, who doesn't. Also note that sometimes the natural leaders are not in a good position to lead - do they try to dominate inappropriately or do they sit back appropriately and just do what they can. Sometimes, a new leader emerges from being in an opportune position in the knot. This can offer this person a significant boost. Also, almost everyone gets a positive sense of having played his or her part. Some people have difficulty enjoying the activity due to their uncomfortableness physically (e.g., obese, very tall, or inflexible people may find the activity particularly awkward).
- It is important to provide appropriate help if the activity proves too difficult. This might be encouragement that it can be done (some groups lack confidence and would give up too early), helping a couple of people communicate to find a solution to part of the knot, etc. Or this might be allowing an unclasp-reclasp. How much to give is a fine balancing act. The task should be challenging, but especially as an initial activity, it should give the group some initial confidence and momentum in being able to work together to solve problems.
- Often this activity speaks for itself as an icebreaker. However, because it can be quite challenging, and people will often have been pulled in all sorts of directions (literally), be prepared to have at least a short debrief, e.g. by asking "How well did you think the group worked together?" and "What could have been done differently?" or "What do you think you've learned from this activity which can be applied in future activities?"