Mad Tea and Calm Tea

Idea In Short

When a group needs to hear many perspectives quickly, use Mad Tea or its online counterpart, Calm Tea. Prepare open sentence stems tied to the shared challenge, then invite participants to complete each prompt briefly with a partner or in a whole-group chat. Mad Tea uses two concentric circles and rotating pairs; Calm Tea uses a quieter online format. The pace encourages participants to respond before over-editing and to hear several different views. Keep prompts open, clear, and relevant. Close with a short reflection on what participants noticed and one idea that deserves a slower conversation. Use participant questions to guide what the group explores next.

Some meetings take so long to get started that participants have already settled into familiar roles before anyone shares a new idea. Mad Tea and Calm Tea offer a fast, playful way to hear many perspectives on a shared challenge. Participants complete open sentences, briefly share their responses, and then move to another partner or prompt. Mad Tea uses energetic movement in person; Calm Tea adapts the exercise for online groups. The practice can loosen habitual thinking and help people notice what others see. It reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity.”

Use prompts that invite possibility

The facilitator prepares unfinished sentences connected to the group’s challenge. A prompt might ask participants to complete “A change that would help our work is...” or “The question we are avoiding is...” Open stems encourage participants to respond in their own words rather than answer yes or no. The invitation should be specific enough to create focus and broad enough to produce different responses. Avoid prompts that steer toward a preferred conclusion or require personal disclosure beyond what the group can safely hold.

In Mad Tea, participants stand in two concentric circles facing a partner. One person completes the sentence while the other listens; after about 30 seconds, they switch roles. A

signal tells participants to move to a new partner and respond to a new prompt. The group can repeat the sequence for up to twelve sentences. The rapid pace helps people share a first thought without turning every exchange into a debate.

Adapt the energy to the setting

Mad Tea works best in an open space where people can stand and rotate comfortably. The host needs to explain the movement, demonstrate a round, and make sure participants know which direction to move. A clear signal keeps the group synchronized. The structure recommends at least twelve participants for the face-to-face version, allowing enough movement and variety in pairings.

Calm Tea adapts the method for online use. The host can display an open sentence in the chat and invite participants to complete it briefly. The online design uses the whole group rather than rotating pairs, and can work with a smaller number of participants. A facilitator should make the response rules explicit: whether people write at once, whether they speak in turn, and how long the group will spend on each sentence. The format should preserve quick contribution without making the technology itself a source of confusion.

The names signal differences in energy, not a hierarchy of quality. Mad Tea is lively and physical; Calm Tea creates a quieter online rhythm. A group can choose based on the space, accessibility needs, and the kind of attention the challenge requires. Participants who cannot move around should have an equivalent way to take part, such as remaining in place while partners rotate or using a visual chat response.

Let many voices be heard

The short exchanges distribute attention across the group. Participants hear from people they may not usually speak with and encounter ideas outside their immediate work circle. The exercise is especially useful at the beginning of a workshop, when a team wants to surface a range of perspectives before choosing what to explore. It can also serve as a transition between topics or a quick way to generate questions.

The fast pace has limits. Responses are initial reactions, not considered commitments. A facilitator should not treat a room’s quick enthusiasm as evidence that a proposal is feasible or widely supported. After the rounds, give participants time to reflect on what they noticed.

Ask which response stayed with them, where opinions differed, or what new question deserves attention. A slower structure such as 1-2-4-All or What, So What, Now What can help the group examine the themes.

Keep the prompts and boundaries clear

Prompts should fit the group's relationship and the level of trust in the room. A team that has not discussed a conflict may need a lower-stakes prompt before moving toward more difficult topics. The host should make passing possible and should not demand that participants explain their response. If the prompt asks about a challenge, focus on the work and its conditions rather than encouraging blame of individuals.

The standard session takes about 20 to 25 minutes, including the invitation, setup, instructions, rounds, and brief closing. The host should prepare sentences in advance and display them clearly. Each prompt should be short enough to understand quickly. If the group gets energized, the facilitator can capture ideas for later review rather than letting the sequence expand without limit.

Mad Tea and Calm Tea can support team launches, retrospectives, planning sessions, and community conversations. They are most useful when people need to hear one another and shift from passive listening into active contribution. Research on psychological safety and group interaction emphasizes conditions that enable participation, while creative facilitation practice uses structured prompts to generate divergent ideas. 1, 2, 3

Turn energy into a next step

At the close, ask participants what patterns, surprises, or questions emerged. The host can group related responses and identify which ones deserve more investigation. If the session is part of a larger process, explain how the ideas will be used and when participants will hear back. This connection matters: otherwise the activity may feel lively but disposable.

Mad Tea and Calm Tea use movement, short prompts, and quick listening to make room for many voices. Their value comes from the range of perspectives they surface and the curiosity they create. When the host follows the fast rounds with reflection and clear next steps, the energy can become a starting point for meaningful work.

- 1Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams
- 2Why brainstorming works better in small groups
- 3The role of play in adult learning

Summary

Mad Tea and Calm Tea use brief sentence completions to bring different perspectives into the room at speed. The lively face-to-face version creates movement and energy; the online version offers a calmer way to hear from a group. Both depend on good prompts and a clear time signal. The facilitator should frame the challenge carefully, invite everyone to contribute, and avoid treating fast responses as fully considered decisions. Use the exercise to discover patterns and questions, then choose a slower structure to explore or act on what surfaced. A short debrief helps participants turn playfulness into useful insight. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.