

Group “ground rules” and difficult situations

Ground rules

Lay out rules for discussion: conversations are to remain within the group and people are to be respectful of others (it’s best to go over these rules at the beginning of each session)

- Create a safe space by showing mutual respect for all
- Always affirm people without judgment. Sharing is never forced. Let others talk, remember the facilitator’s role is to guide the discussion. Listening is important.
- Confidentiality matters.
- No one has to talk, but time should be allowed for all who want to speak.
- Never force sharing but invite.
- Only one person talks at a time (no side discussions)
- Be prepared including having technology ready.
- Model humility.
- Remember silence is OK. It gives people time to think and reflect.
- Respect time & boundaries.

Difficult situations

- When groups wander off-topic, redirect the whole group. Use phrases such as:

“Thank you for sharing that” / “That took a lot of courage to share that...” / “I never heard that before” / “That was really powerful...” / “That’s interesting...”

- When the discussion goes off topic

Key in on an emotion, word, or topic of the person who is off subject and gently guide them back using the list of questions for the week. You could say, “That leads me to our next question...”

- When handling a difficult person. You could say:

“Thank you, (Name), that is a wonderful/observation/experience/feeling/thought you shared. What do the rest of you think about that?”

Overcoming challenging small group situations

1. The dominant member:

- Try not to make eye contact with the person.
- Sit next to them rather than opposite.
- Politely interrupt the person with statements such as: “What do the rest of you think?” “Let’s hear from some other people, too.”
- Look directly at and gesture toward the other guests.
- Talk to them privately about giving others a chance to share.
- Be affirming when talking with them.

2. The person who “shares” too much:

- Clarify their comments.
- Express the fears/reactions other group members may be experiencing.
- Talk to them privately and affirm their knowledge but asking for their help in letting others share.

3. The quiet member:

- Talk to them. Ask, “What do you hope to get out of the course?” “What sorts of questions do you have?” “Are we meeting your expectations?”
- Affirm them and their contributions.
- Remember that sometimes quiet people are so used to being quiet that they just accept it. If the facilitator asks their opinion, it may show that the group values their input.
- Accept people where they are at.

4. The quiet group:

Be proactive;

- Get them to write questions down. (Take home a question sheet)
- Have an icebreaker every week.
- Don’t be afraid of silence.
- Don’t fill silence with your voice then they’ll always stay quiet!
- Ask if your question makes sense (Rephrase if necessary)

- Avoid right/wrong questions or “threatening” questions.
- Ask questions to which you don’t know the answer.
- Ask questions that allow or encourage “negative” responses:
 - “What do you find the hardest about praying?”
 - “What is the thing you fear most about sharing your faith?”

5. The chaotic group:

Remind the group it is best to have only one conversation going at a time.

- Address topics that are raised, but don’t stay off the topic too long.
- Suggest some reading and come back to the subject next time.
- Continue having fun, don’t clamp down on the group too much.
- Aim to ensure a degree of helpful discussion and information.

6. The person who concentrates on personal problems:

Be interested, sympathize and listen to them, but after a while:

- Steer the conversation back to the topic or toward others.
- Offer to meet, talk, or pray with them during the week
- Direct them to counseling or an appropriate small group.
- Don’t sit opposite them.

7. The person who becomes the group “project”:

- Deflect attention from the person to their question/issue. Rephrase if necessary.
- Find ways to affirm his/her contributions: don’t let them always get “corrected” or “straightened out.”
- Direct questions to other people.