



Small Group Leader Suggestions

Small groups are a powerful place for people to heal, especially when it is safe to be honest and when others in the group have experienced similar issues. People find comfort in knowing they aren't alone in their struggles and they gain hope from seeing other people find solutions. They also get insight on their own issues by hearing other people share about themselves. The combination of biblical and practical material on relationship and life issues and a healthy small group is a powerful catalyst for healing.

Small group leaders hold the key to keeping a group healthy and strong. If a group isn't run well, people will stop coming or people will be afraid to share honestly. The following suggestions will enable you to keep your group strong and healthy:

1. Use some type of structured material for your study and use discussion questions to guide your small group time.
2. Be vulnerable and real. Share your own struggles in a way that shows hope. Be relaxed and personal to set the tone in the group.
3. The leader can start by answering the question first to get the discussion going in the group. Don't monopolize the time by sharing too long or by re-teaching the material.
4. Enforce the rules in your group and follow the group rules yourself.
5. Deal with people that over-talk. Have a time limit that each person will have to share. I recommend 3 minutes per question and then allow them to go over 1-2 minutes. If someone monopolizes the time, wait for a break in a sentence and then say something like: "Thank you for sharing." "We need to move on." "Sounds like you have a lot you are dealing with." "Those are great comments/insights/thoughts/ideas." "I appreciate your honesty." Then say the next person's name to move to the next person. Be careful of making comments that elicit an answer or the person will continue talking. If someone repeatedly talks too long, you can talk privately after the group and ask her/him to take less time, but always do it in a positive way that emphasizes the group needs.
6. Make sure participants that haven't shared get the chance to share. Call on them by name, if they haven't shared. It is best to go around the circle with each question, so each person has a turn to share and not allow sharing out of turn. Anyone who doesn't want to share can pass. This minimizes dominant members from monopolizing the discussion time.
7. Know the principles/material your group is studying. Direct the participants to apply the principles/material. You may want to occasionally comment on something someone has shared by showing how they are applying a principle or how they might want to apply it. (For example, detaching or speaking the truth in love.) You want the members to use the principles/material in their lives.

8. Follow the no cross-talk rule, but balance it with the group's need to interact. You have to find your comfort zone as a leader and decide how much interaction you can allow and still keep the group focused on the material. Always keep the best interest of the group as your priority. Don't let one person dominate or tangents divert the group from staying focused. If you have a group that gets off track easily, you will have to be stricter with the no cross-talk and no talking out of turn rules.

9. Make sure you are doing your homework and you always come prepared.

10. Be affirming and validating of the emotion shared and the experience. Watch judgmental comments and comments that try to fix or give advice. Remind the members not to fix or tell others what to do and make sure you don't either. You can give suggestions, if you feel comfortable and have the experience, but anything directed to one group member in particular should be said directly to that person after the group discussion is over.

11. If you can't get through all the material covered in the homework, pick the things that are best for your group each week. Listen to the sharing and if the members are already answering a question that is coming up, then make adjustments and go to another question.

12. Watch the body language of the people in the group when others are sharing. You will be able to tell when they are really bothered by someone who is talking too long or if they are engaging compassionately, which will allow you to be more lenient on time. Because relationship problems can be intense and heart-breaking, it is tempting to focus on a group member that is really hurting or struggling and want to help that person. The group cannot fix this person's problems and it is in everyone's interest that the group stays focused on the material. Don't let one person's problem take up the group time. You can always say, "I'll talk to you after group."

13. Let people cry. It is therapeutic to have others accept all our emotions without having to fix them.

14. Deal with your own codependency issues by being aware of how you are reacting to the problems the members have. Are you wanting to fix, solve, avoid, comfort, lecture or force change? What makes you really angry and wanting to tell others not to do it? These reactions point to your own issues. You need to detach from the group members and let them work through the problems in their own way and time.

15. Email the members during the week to encourage them. Depending on how much time you have, you can call to check in with the ones that are struggling that week. You can also stay after class to talk, if you like, with people that need additional support.

16. Refer those with serious situations to professional counseling. This includes marriages with abuse, members with depression, and any other problem that is at a crisis stage.