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The Role Of Mentoring And Support Groups



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The Role Of Mentoring And Support Groups

Overcoming the barrier of shame is important in order to embrace many of the promises in the Word. Some individuals are convinced that “if you really knew me, you would hate me.” Such beliefs keep individuals bound in the chains of secrecy, and only when they can share the contents of their hearts and lives, and lovingly are challenged with the truth of the Word, can they then break free “into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:21) Healthy accountability and growth can occur in settings of community as we fulfil the scriptural commands to be “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5) and to “bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2)

The learning and accountability which can occur in individual and group mentoring relationships can be critical for an individual in overcoming. In general, the more severe the level of struggle, the more layers of relationship are needed. Individuals struggling to overcome should begin with individual mentoring to provide accountability (see [Keys to Accountability](#)). If no improvement is made or issues increase, then group accountability and support groups should begin to play an additional role. A support group creates an environment and structure which encourages believers to interact on such a scale that deep sharing and learning occur. This often happens more naturally in the confines of a smaller (4-8) group of “helpers” and “strugglers” than in the more public, congregate worship environment. In a smaller group, within the safety and security of committed encouragers, one can share burdens of the heart and concerns that might never be revealed under the spotlight of the public eye.

Individuals who have trouble “connecting” with other people are prone to additional struggles of life. Thus, a smaller group setting can facilitate growth in this important aspect of living, and one can find acceptance and support in the safety of a small group, which may not be possible for that person in a large congregation.

Types of Support Groups

There are many different kinds of groups which help people gain knowledge and overcome problems. For some issues and groups, it is desirable to have same-gender participation only; for others, both genders is best. Most groups can be placed into three main categories:

- **General Support Groups:** These groups are typically organized around a common characteristic of group members. While group members don’t all necessarily share the exact same problem, they have a concern for one another and offer support. These groups follow a set curriculum. Examples would include *Celebrate Recovery* or *GriefShare*.
- **Spiritual Growth Groups:** These same-gender groups are often formed to address the concerns, accountability, or growth of men or women in a local church. They can be used with or without a set curriculum (i.e. Men’s Group, Mom’s group, Bible study, *Crown Financial*).
- **Specific Issue Support Groups:** These groups are centered around a common issue. Since all members of the group have encountered similar problems, the cohesiveness of the group increases. If a local church has numerous individuals with a shared problem, it is highly preferable if the church can form its own group with a common, denominational background. When this is not an option, Specific Issue Support Groups are usually found in most communities and are open to participation from anyone. *Alcoholics Anonymous* is an example.

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Support Group Guidelines

- A suggested model for a local church is to utilize a group of 4-8 believers who meet regularly, supporting one another in overcoming.
- Group meets regularly (weekly, biweekly, monthly) depending upon the needs of the members.
- Duration of a meeting can be between one and two hours. If too short, somebody will not be heard. If too long, somebody will not come because they “don’t have time.”
- A Leader or Coordinator needs to be selected. This is not necessarily the “expert” on the topic, but rather one who can organize the meeting, be the contact person for communications, and facilitate discussion so everyone can be heard while insuring nobody dominates.
- *The group should function with the support of church leadership.*
- Rules need to be communicated clearly at the opening session and to whomever may join the group after its inception. Suggestions are as follows:
 - a. Topic: This is not a class, but an informal, heart-to-heart discussion among believers. There are no experts in the room, but we all come needing something the others can supply. As much as possible, keep the discussion to the agreed-upon topic.
 - b. Participation: Each member is encouraged to participate, but not dominate. There will often be a chance to “go around the circle” and respond to a particular point or a questions, but anyone is free to “pass.”
 - c. Respect: No interrupting, mocking, belittling or cross-talk (conversation between two people with the exclusion of the others). We seek to edify, build up, and strengthen one another.
 - d. Confidentiality: Finally, we will all practice confidentiality. What’s said in this group stays in this group. If this is not practiced, soon others will understand that what they say will be publicized, essentially ending all future discussion.

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For Leaders

| Suggestion | Reason |
|--|---|
| 1. Don't do all the talking. | Strive to keep conversation going from member to member and not just back to you. You are facilitating conversation, not dispensing information. |
| 2. Be comfortable with silence. | We are programmed to think silence is wrong. It's sometimes uncomfortable, but allow the Holy Spirit to work on people. Don't interrupt Him. |
| 3. Be a good listener. | "...let every man be swift to hear; slow to speak, slow to wrath:"(Jas. 1:19) The number one desire "of every heart" is "the desire to be heard and understood." (Laaser) |
| 4. Don't answer your own questions. | Your purpose is not to prove you know the answer, but to let group members discuss the question. Get comfortable with silence. |
| 5. Ask open-ended questions. | Open-ended questions require more than a "Yes/No" response. Use "What" or "How" or "Why" questions more than "When" or "Where" or "Did" questions. |
| 6. Begin and end on time. | People that are on time want the meeting to begin then. And everyone wants to know when they will leave. Respect other people's schedules. |
| 7. Try to involve everyone. | The group meets, perhaps, because somebody is not heard in a large group. Don't let it happen here. Seek to include the quieter member and/or put brakes on any domineering. |
| 8. Have some kind of structure. | One effective way is for the group leader to use a modified "K-W-L Chart" (What I <u>K</u> now, <u>W</u> hat I Want to Know, What I <u>L</u> earned). Group members can give themselves an assignment for next meeting, research what they want to know, then report back to the group what they learned. |
| 9. Pray. Pray often. | Ask for group members' prayer requests, and keep these before the throne of God. Make sure each group member knows these requests. |
| 10. Smaller accountability groups can be formed. | From this larger support group, a smaller subset of this group (3-5 people) can be useful if accountability is needed. (An accountability group of 6-8 people is too large.) |

Adapted from *Leading Small Groups with Purpose* (Gladen, 2013). Adapted by Apostolic Christian Counseling and Family Services. Can be freely copied and redistributed Not to be sold.

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Troubleshooting in Small Groups

Problems show up in even the best groups. But if a group is truly devoted to one another and to the group's purpose, it will work through these tensions. Here are some of the most common group problems, charted with their symptoms and some suggestions to help.

| SYMPTOM | POSSIBLE REASONS | APPROACHES |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Members come late. | Group pattern to start late. | Set definite time. Begin promptly. Discuss with group: "We're having trouble getting going. Is it too early? Are there conflicts?" Let members respond. |
| Quiet members. | Questions asked are too hard or too easy; not enough observation questions asked. Members not prepared. Lack of trust. Leaders and others not handling silence well; jumping in too quickly. | Follow sequence of observation before interpretation. Have quiet member read passage out loud. Remind members: "Verbal people need to hold back at times; quiet members need to force themselves to speak up." Direct questions (ones that others can answer too) to quiet person. |
| Overly talkative member. | Outgoing. Doesn't like silence. Sees things quickly. | Talk to privately. Mention that we need silence after some questions to think and reflect. Ask for help in drawing others out. Suggest he or she ask, "What do some of the rest of you think?" |
| Issue causing disagreement. | Verbal people "win out." Creates tangents. Members don't accept their differences. | State ground rules. Try to stick to the passage or subject at hand. Suggest they discuss problem after the meeting. Acknowledge there are differences of opinion on this; on what can we agree? |
| Always-right member. | Knows right way for everything. Knows only one interpretation of passage. | Avoid arguing right and wrong. Put focus back on passage to collect more data and summarize. Clarify facts. Help group look for alternatives and see "right" person's frame of reference, e.g. "In what circumstances might Sam's interpretation hold true?" |
| Disagreeing member. | "But" is favorite word: "That's true, but..." May hold group back from action or conclusions, causing group to stagnate. | Give feedback to disagreeing member: "What exactly causes your hesitation?" Confront group with choice of holding back (no risk) or going ahead (with risk but also growth): "How can we get around this objection?" |
| Pace is too slow or too fast. | Too much time spent on some activities. Little interaction. Question too simplistic (or too general). Full answers not sought. Application too general. | Plan specific amounts of time for each activity. Move along with good transitions. Test study questions with a co-leader: Are they clear? Are they open, but not overly general? Ask for specifics in sharing. Push for complete answers: "What else?" |
| Superficial sharing. | Leader not setting example. Application not specific. Overly focused on community building while not challenging growth as a group. | Plan community building exercises carefully for stage of group's development. Ask for specifics in sharing. Be open and specific in your own sharing. Meet one-on-one outside group for sharing and prayer. |
| Members with ongoing problems. | Problems dominate group life. Member monopolizes group. | Talk individually to the person, suggesting resources for help (e.g. counseling). |

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