

the forgiveness handbook

A Simple Guide to Freedom of the Mind and Heart



Suggested Guidelines for Book Discussion Groups

Book Discussion Groups (sometimes called Book Study Groups or Clubs) are communities of people who come together to read books, discuss topics of interest, share ideas, exchange information and learn from the experience of one another. For anyone interested in coaching, training or leading/facilitating groups, they are also a great way to:

- Enhance your confidence.
- Refine your presentation skills.
- Hone your ability to connect and listen fully.
- Practice making or explaining distinctions.
- Gain a more thorough understanding of a body of material.
- Train yourself to trust in the process and rely on the larger wisdom.
- Establish yourself as an ‘expert’ in a particular kind of work.
- Learn about group dynamics.
- Create a supportive community of like-minded people.
- Generate a referral base for obtaining clients and filling presentations.

The size of groups can be variable, there is no ‘perfect size’ for a book discussion group. It all depends on wants and needs of you and the other group members. If you choose to lead a book discussion group, the following suggestions and practices will give you a place to start:

1. **Create a Purpose or Intention**

For any group or organization to sustain itself over a period of time it needs to have a purpose or intention. This vision should address the purpose of the group and what it aims to accomplish in the world. Here are some questions that can contribute to the creation of a purpose/intention.

- A. What do you want to have happen as a result of the book discussion group?
- B. What will it contribute to the members and the community in which you reside?
- C. How will it promote the work of forgiveness and emotional education?

2. **Choose to be a Leader**

Groups need leaders. In order for a discussion group to come together and function well, it must have someone to organize, facilitate and otherwise be responsible for it. If you truly choose to be a powerful and influential presence in the world, the discussion group setting is a great place to get practice and experience in a relatively safe and low risk environment.

- A. Leaders enroll people in the broader Vision and provide support and direction for the members of the group.

- B. Leaders listen to the needs and desires of potential group members in order to expand or refine the group purpose/intention. Interacting with potential group members also helps each of you become clear whether or not the group is a fit for them.

3. Find a Space to Gather

A. Whether you choose to use your home or a public space, it's important to have a regular meeting place. For small groups or those just in their infancy, using your home as a meeting place is fine. Alternately you may find public spaces that can accommodate either small or large groups. Be creative and see what kind of inviting space you can locate and use. Some suggestions for public spaces:

- 1) Bookstores often provide space for book discussion clubs.
- 2) Churches can also be a great venue for spiritually based groups.
- 3) Libraries and even businesses will sometimes make rooms available to non-profit or volunteer type groups.

4. Schedule a Regular Meeting Time

Changing times from week to week or skipping weeks in between meetings makes it more difficult for people to schedule and stay on track with the result that attendance can suffer. Ideally you would choose to meet once per week on the same day at the same time. Allow at least one and a half to two hours per meeting. Less than that may not be sufficient to allow good discussions to develop. More than a couple of hours can get to be too long.

Experiment a bit to see what works for your individual group. As the discussion group leader, make sure that the chosen time:

- A. is one that you can commit to on an on-going basis – it's important that as the leader you have a consistent presence.
- B. is one that will accommodate the greatest number of potential participants.

5. Establish Ground Rules

Ground rules are important to help create a safe and supportive environment in which everyone can participate and benefit. The rules address and define what each group member can expect and how they interact within the group. Generally, the larger the group, the more important it is to have good clear guidelines for participating in the discussions. However, even smaller groups can benefit from a having a good structure and ground rules.

Whatever ground rules you decide upon for your group, they should emphasize mutual respect and openness to the ideas and opinions of others. In addition, they should encourage participants to share in ways that are fairly concise and to the point. Here are a few sample ground rules that you may consider using: These were adapted from the book "Living in the Heart" by Paul Ferrini.

- A. We agree that each group member should be treated with love and respect.
- B. We agree to keep everything that is said in the group confidential and not divulge anything that is shared with anyone outside the group.
- C. We agree that this group is a forum for sharing and exploration, not for judging, analyzing or fixing one another.
- D. We agree to share from our hearts and be honest about what we are thinking and feeling.
- E. We agree not to interrupt anyone's process. We will give the person sharing our undivided attention. We will not engage in crosstalk.

- F. We agree to allow everyone the opportunity to share and be heard. We will yield the floor to others in the group who have shared less than we have.
- G. We agree to make "I" statements, not "You" statements. We will take responsibility for our own experiences and respect the experience of others. We will not assign "our" meaning to something someone else has said.
- H. We agree to stay in the present moment. We will not bring up the past or future unless they are happening for us here and now.
- I. We agree to honor silence, knowing that it offers us an opportunity to become more deeply present to ourselves and others.

6. **Spread the word.**

Groups must have members in order to persist. As you go about inviting and enrolling people to attend, remember that it's valuable to have people with a common interest that relates to the vision of the group, yet with diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

- A. Set an intention for the number of people that you'd like to have involved with the group on an on-going basis. 6 – 10 is a great number to begin with, but don't limit yourself.
- B. A good place to start in recruiting members is in the communities with which you are already involved.
 - 1) Invite friends, co-workers and even family members if they have a common interest in personal and spiritual growth work.
 - 2) If you belong to a church or synagogue, invite members of the congregation and interested others.
 - 3) Think about the communities where you already have contacts or influence and extend yourself to them.
- C. The website Meetup.com is another great way to gather a group of people together for a specific purpose like a book discussion. Go to www.meetup.com and follow the instructions for how to start and promote a *Meetup* group.
- D. Check for bulletin boards in local bookstores, health food stores or other community gathering places and post simple but professional looking notices.
- E. If you're ambitious, you might even try submitting to local newspapers and radio stations for a spot in their public service announcements.
- F. Follow your inner guidance and talk to people whom you happen across in stores, cafés, parks and coffee shops. Notice what desires they express and how deeply you connect.

7. **Begin Meeting**

Set a specific start date, do any necessary follow up with your potential group members, and then show up at the appointed time! On the following page is a *Sample Format and Practices* with additional guidelines and suggestions you can use to get started.

Sample Format and Practices for Discussion Group Meetings

Following is a format and practices that have worked for many others in leading discussion groups. You can try it as a place to start and modify it as you and the group see fit.

1. **Greeting and Welcome (2 – 5 minutes)**

In groups that have been active for a while, it's useful to go through the following steps each time to help hold and maintain the integrity of the group. This is especially true if there are visitors or new members present.

- A. Officially begin the meeting and welcome everyone.
- B. Introduce yourself as the leader, and emphasize for the group that although you are the group facilitator, you are not the “teacher.” Your job is to invite forth the ideas, insights, opinions, experiences and thoughts of each member of the group.
- C. State the purpose of the gathering and affirm the vision.
- D. Make it clear that the purpose of a discussion group is to draw on the collective wisdom of everyone present.
- E. Review the ground rules of the group to give people an idea of what to expect.

2. **Open with a Short Centering or Presencing Exercise (2 – 5 minutes)**

- A. Spend a few minutes leading the group in a centering exercise or simply a time of silence and stillness. This time of connection will help to get them into a relaxed mental and physical place that will allow them to participate with clarity and focus.
- B. Introduce this as a way for members to collect themselves from the day and get ready for the sharing that is to follow.
- C. At or near the end of the Exercise ask a short question or introduce a simple contemplation that can be answered in one or two words or a sentence at most.
 - 1) A very simple example might be to have everyone allow a word to come to mind that describes how they feel right in that moment.
 - 2) Another example might be to ask to come up with a word or two to identify their intention (what they'd like to experience, have happen or gain) for the evening, then to share what that is.

3. **Group Introductions and Sharing (5 – 10 minutes)**

- A. The purpose of the group introductions is to stimulate some sharing from each person and create a foundational level of relatedness for all members. It also allows people to disclose something a little personal about themselves in order to facilitate bonding between group members and deepen the sense of connection in the community.
- B. The smaller the group size, the more in-depth the sharing can be at this point. In the case of a small well-acquainted group you might ask everyone to briefly describe one place in which they were able to apply a concept discussed in the previous week.

4. **Reading and Discussion (60 – 75 minutes)**

- A. This is the time to get into the concepts and practical applications of the book. Start from the beginning of the book and work your way through, chapter by chapter or section by

section as appropriate. You may find that it takes a couple of sessions to get through one chapter, or you may find that you're able to cover a chapter a week.

- B. You can have someone read a few paragraphs aloud, then stop and discuss. Alternately, you can read silently as a group for a specific number of paragraphs and then go back and discuss the key concepts. We tend to recommend the format of reading aloud because it keeps everyone focused and moving at the same speed through the material. In addition, in slowing down the pace of the reading, it provides space for new thoughts and insights to come up.
- C. Ideally, everyone will have their own copy of the book and have read through the assigned chapter or section previously. Then in the discussion group setting, you can go through the material in more depth. Go with the flow and character of the group, while at the same time maintaining some structure. Most important, approach the entire experience from a perspective of natural curiosity and fun!
- D. As facilitator, you will set the tone and quality of the discussions while allowing each member's innate wisdom to emerge. Experience has shown that the more a facilitator gives way to the wisdom of the group, the more everyone gets out of process. We recommend that you have an intention for how much material you will cover in one evening, and use the following suggestions to facilitate discussion:
 - 1) After the group has read a few paragraphs, pause and ask first if anyone has comments, questions or relevant experiences to share. Merely the invitation to speak will often start the discussion going.
 - 2) If no one shares, then ask a question pertaining to a specific idea or concept from the reading just completed. Approach your questions and facilitation from the perspective of a coach or transformational leader. Some suggestions are:
 - a. What do these concepts mean to you?
 - b. How can these be practically applied to create change in your lives?
 - c. What experiences have you had that might demonstrate the effectiveness of a practice or application of a principal?
 - 3) (*Optional Advanced Practice*) Listen to what people have to share and allow them to speak, but also listen for the filters, preconceptions or judgments they may be speaking through. Use your facilitation skills to redirect sharing or stories (for example someone simply complaining or venting) to a more empowering focus if needed. Some suggestions are:
 - a. What might you have to learn from an experience?
 - b. What is the gift or value of the situation?
 - c. How might you shift your perceptions or interpretations to transform your experience?
 - 4) If someone asks a specific question, set aside the impulse to give an answer without first redirecting the inquiry back to the person or the group. Remember that you are there as a facilitator of each person's process and not as a teacher who has "the answers" to share. Give the group members the opportunity to find the divine wisdom and understanding that exists within each of them. This, more than anything else, will encourage rich and enthusiastic interaction and allow people to gain the greatest amount of value from the process.
 - 5) As the discussion wanes and each point is covered, move back into the book and read a few more paragraphs. Continue in this manner until the section, chapter or allotted time is complete. Be aware to keep the discussion and conversation moving along without being pushy or domineering (Though occasionally you may have to interrupt

a share that is rambling, inappropriate or otherwise out of alignment with the agreements of the group. This can be done with a re-directing question as mentioned above.). Stay in integrity with the time agreements of the group so that members feel good about returning week after week.

5. **(Optional) Breaks/Social Time (10 - 15 minutes)**

Although a 90-minute to two-hour meeting doesn't necessarily require a break, ten to fifteen minutes or so in the middle can provide some time for members to socialize and connect. If you're meeting in a place with food or beverages, this also gives people a chance to refresh coffee, tea or get a snack to help keep their bodies happy. Alternately, some social time can be set at the beginning or end of the actual book discussion session.

6. **(Optionally at beginning) Announcements and Upcoming Events (5 – 10 minutes)**

It's may be helpful to have a time to clear up any of the business of the group so that people know there will be a chance to do so and need not be distracted with logistical questions or concerns during the rest of the meeting.

A. Handle any scheduling issues or make announcements of relevant activities or events.

B. Allow group members to make any announcements of their own as appropriate.

1) In general, announcements should be limited to those activities or events that are in alignment with the purpose and vision of the group.

2) For example, personal development or community oriented activities may be appropriate, while political or 'business opportunities' may not.

7. **Closing (2 – 5 minutes)**

At the end of the appointed time, bring the discussion to a close in a graceful yet firm manner.

A. You may choose to offer an activity or assignment of some sort – something for members to notice or practice during the week. If so:

1) The activity or assignment should be directly related to the concepts and ideas read and discussed during the session.

2) The activity or assignment should be focused on providing people with some practical application of the information to their lives so that can experience tangible results from their studies.

3) The gradual shifting of their consciousness and the resulting changes in their experience of life is what will keep members enthusiastic and coming back.

B. Prior to dismissing, it works well to take a few moments to pause and either:

1) Ask everyone to take a moment to reflect on what they've learned or gained through the discussion and acknowledge themselves for their participation.

2) Or simply offer a closing prayer or blessing.

C. Then thank everyone for their participation and say Goodbye for now!