

Potential Small Group Openings

Goals:

- Allow group members to bond as a supportive group.
- Create "safe space" for sharing and open new ways to relate to one another.

Some helpful tips from learners over the years:

Introductions with icebreaker (helps to specify order at the beginning of group)

Ground rules up front can be helpful

Role modeling - set stage for intros by doing it yourself first in the way you'd like it done

Specify the goal of the group: why are we here, and do we have a charge?

Specify how much time you have up front

"Taking temperature" of group: seeing what people bring

Summarize people's intro comments - an inclusive maneuver

Allow expertise in the group to come forward

Pose a question / opinion of the group - avoid "factionalizing"

Slower pace, if possible

Step back: let silence happen

- 1. Appreciative Inquiry** - pose a question to begin an inquiry that the group plans to explore during their time together. Ask participants to interview each other in pairs around some key questions the group decides are important to learn about each other. Then have each group member present their partner to the group along with their reflections about what they learned about that person.
- 2. "The 3rd thing" approach** - have people bring some object that is meaningful from their life to place in the center of the room and discuss its meaning. In the center one builds a symbolic repository of collective meaning. One can also use stones or sticks from the immediate area that "speak to" participants - this decreases the pressure of having people bring the "perfect" object or the guilt if people don't remember.
- 3. Name origin** - explain the origin and meaning of your name and discuss how you feel about it. Have the group say your full name out loud before you reflect on the origin and meaning of it.
- 4. Stepping Stones** - invite people to reflect quietly for a moment about the path that has brought them to this moment, both personally and professionally, and to choose about 5-6 of the "stepping stones" on that path to discuss. These may be people, decisions, accidental things, difficulties, anything that was important along the way. People are then invited to share some of those stepping stones (in pairs, or in groups of 3-4) depending upon the setting and the amount of time allotted. If time allows, have each participant introduce their partner to the group.
- 5. Deepening understanding** - Start with the question "Please share something with the group about yourself that you would like us to know." A variant is to ask group members to share something about themselves that might surprise the others. Another variant is to ask each participant to say their name, and specialty or area of work interest plus answer the question "If you were not in medicine, what would you like to do?"
- 6. What have you left behind?** - Share the story of the decision to attend the course, what one has left behind or sacrificed to be here, and expectations for learning. Round two, done later, one can share any general or specific learning wishes / expectations, satisfactions and disappointments.
- 7. Empathic Silence**
 - Divided into pairs, give each person 5 minutes to talk uninterrupted while the partner provides empathic silence. At the end of 5 minutes, the listener paraphrases what they heard both in terms of content and feelings. The partners then switch.
 - Pair up to interview each other and present your partner to the group; or focus the interview on a specific task (what are you most anticipating? Or concerned about?)
- 8. Crossing the Line** - Identify commonalities in a group by asking questions out loud and having patients raise their hands or cross a line marked on the floor (eg - "who's from the South, North, the Coasts, Mid-Country" "who is an MD, nurse", etc). Then ask progressively more intimate questions. Allow time to debrief at the end. Ask for a list of questions, as well as set up and debriefing instructions if you want more detail.
- 9. Reflective listening exercise** - In pairs, designate one person as the "speaker" and the other as the "listener." The speaker will talk about a topic, such as "what do you love about your work?" The listener can respond with empathic comments, statements, and nonverbal utterances, but is not allowed to ask any questions. After a 3-5 minute time frame, speaker and listener switch roles. At the close of the exercise, all are asked to reflect on what it felt like to be in both roles.

Potential Group Closings

1. Review the week's **memorable quotes** that you have tracked on a flip chart.
2. Ask participants to state **what they are taking home** from the experience. You may want to write the lessons learned on a flip chart.
3. **Read a poem**, eg The Thread by William Stafford
4. **Appreciative debriefing**: at the end of a program, people are invited to name or describe things that people said or did that they found to be particularly useful or engaging. People always have the option to pass... This can also be done in a systematic way such as: "Please turn to the person on your left and tell them about something that you appreciate about their being in the group."
5. **Closing with intention** - "Please share with the group one thing in your work (or life) that you intend to do differently as a result of today's experience." Consider giving the group members 5 minutes to think about this question before answering.
6. **Creative visualization** (everyone closes their eyes and goes on a "journey" using guided imagery)
7. **Telling the story of the group**: a way to look back and witness what the group co-created during the course. Ask group members to take turns summarizing in their own words the story of what happened in the group. One facilitator leads off by saying, "On the first day," and then allows participants to chime in about their memories, impressions, lessons learned, confusions, etc. Each participant should be allowed to speak without interruption. Participants may also pass if they prefer. The set-up should clarify whether participants' remembrances are more literal or allegorical (either can be effective, but they are difficult to mix).
8. **Angel wash** - (works only with larger groups, say, more than 8-10) Participants stand in two lines facing each other. Orient the group to the exercise. A facilitator selects one participant from the head of the line and asks her to close her eyes; the facilitator begins by whispering appreciative comments, adjectives, or memories in the participant's ear and then physically guides her to the next person or people in line, who in turn whisper appreciations or silently support the participant down the line. This process repeats for each participant and facilitator.
9. **Closing circle** - from Rachel Remen's "Healer's Art" Course

Introduce the exercise as follows: take a few minutes to explain the closing circle exercise. Discuss ritual as a way to build community - remind them that their support matters to others and that just knowing you have the support of others is helpful - suggest we try out a simple use of ritual. Offer the experience lightly. During the silence, participants may silently wish others well, pray for them, believe in them, use imagery to see them whole or whatever way feels natural for that participant. Allow 45 seconds to a minute of silence for each person.

Give participants clear and simple instructions.

1. Tell them that this exercise is done like meditation with eyes closed
 2. Tell them you will make a sound with a bell.
 3. After the sound, ask the participants to begin with themselves. Ask them to take slow, deep breaths, to focus on their breath and recognize the wholeness within themselves. Just as they should strive to do with others, they should focus on giving love and support to themselves while withholding judgment and blame to the best of their ability.
 4. After a short interval, ring the bell again. The person to your left will then say their name aloud.
 5. In silence the group focuses their attention on that person, offering silent support to that person, encouraging them to remember their wholeness. Participants may: wish others well; pray for them; believe in them; use imagery to see them whole; use whatever ways are natural for the student.
 6. After a short interval, ring the bell again.
 7. The next person to the left says their name aloud.
 8. The group will focus their attention on this person in the same way.
 9. Continue until every participant has had a turn to receive the silent support of the group.
- End the exercise by saying your name and receiving the support of the group.