

# discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership  
Leader's Guide

## LEADING SMALL GROUPS

### LESSON 4: FOSTERING HEALTHY SMALL GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

#### INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Leading Small Groups. The purpose of these lessons is to equip the developing leader with skills and understanding in order to successfully lead a small group. A small group may be a Bible Study or Discipleship group, or any other small group used for discipleship and ministry. The focus is on building strong communication skills and positive relationships, accompanied by an attitude of love and service. Equipping yourself to be a better small group leader will enhance your ability to disciple and teach others, and at the same time, create a more enjoyable experience for everyone. This module is designed for those who are currently in church leadership, small group leadership, or a member of a small group. Hopefully members of a small group will one day take on leadership responsibility of such a group.

#### INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is emerging leaders who are preparing for specific ministry within the Church.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at [www.discipleshipessentials.org](http://www.discipleshipessentials.org).

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# LEADING SMALL GROUPS

## LESSON 4: FOSTERING HEALTHY SMALL GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this lesson is to learn how to create a healthy small group by strengthening relationships, and providing tools to deal with interpersonal issues that may arise.

### LEADER'S NOTE

The Bible tells us that 'iron sharpens iron' – meaning that people around us can help us become better people. This is the strength of small groups – but it can also be a weakness. Without 'give and take', relationships can be unhealthy and lead to conflict, fear and loss of security in the group. The most important thing is that we carry one another's burdens and love each other. This will nurture a healthy group and help to accomplish the purposes for which it came together. This lesson deals briefly with counselling unhealthy group members. You may need to explore other resources, possibly professional Christian counsellors, to counsel someone with deep hurts or mental health issues. By proactively building a strong and healthy group, you will see much fruit from your time together.

## INTRODUCTION

*Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.*

- ❖ Who are your closest friends? What have you been through together that has led to this closeness?
- ❖ What allows you to trust another person? When you trust someone, how does it affect what you talk about in their presence, or your behaviour around them?
- ❖ What makes a healthy relationship? What does an unhealthy relationship look like?
- ❖ What are some of your interpersonal and intellectual goals for being a member of a small group? (In other words, what types of relationships do you hope to create, and what do you hope to learn?)



## STUDY

*Instruct the group on the following points.*

### TEACH

- ❖ **Fellowship with Others** : The example of the early church in [Acts 2:42](#), indicates that the disciples devoted themselves to four things:

1. Apostles' teaching
2. Fellowship
3. Breaking of bread
4. Prayer

It is easy to see why they devoted themselves to God's Word, prayer, and communion – but fellowship is a little harder to understand. What does the word mean?

- True Christian fellowship is the cultivation of relationships in community. It is a unified group of Christians, equal in rank, sharing something in common.
  - It involves sharing experiences and emotions, carrying others' burdens, working together for common goals, and putting the welfare of the group before our own.
  - Fellowship is cultivating friendships with the members of your church community, and treating them as if they were family.
  - As a church body grows, it is difficult to maintain close relationships with everyone. Being part of a small group brings us into closer fellowship with part of the church congregation.
- ❖ **Healthy Relationships**: A small group can be an enriching part of our spiritual life, but only if those relationships are healthy ones. We are more receptive to correction from one another when we know it is done in love. As we get to know people on a deeper level, we can learn from their experiences, as together we strive to follow the example of Jesus Christ.
- Much of the Bible talks about our relationships with others. The following is just a small selection that demonstrates healthy relationships:

- |                                       |                                      |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| o <a href="#">Hebrews 10:24-25</a>    | o <a href="#">Colossians 2:2</a>     |
| o <a href="#">Ecclesiastes 4:9-12</a> | o <a href="#">James 5:16</a>         |
| o <a href="#">Proverbs 27:17</a>      | o <a href="#">Galatians 6:10</a>     |
| o <a href="#">John 17:21-23</a>       | o <a href="#">1 Corinthians 1:10</a> |
| o <a href="#">Colossians 3:16</a>     |                                      |

- ❖ **Unity of Believers**: A small group will be successful when the group genuinely enjoys one another's company. This unity and happy fellowship can be purposefully cultivated by the leader. Consider the ways in which the following can be part of a small group setting:



- **Shared Work:** (Hebrews 13:16) Any activity or goal you have in common will bring the group closer together. Some ideas of shared work are:
  - Helping a mission or ministry (improving a building, sharing in their service)
  - Ministering to your community (visiting the sick or imprisoned, making meals, distributing clothing, caring for widows or elderly people)
  - Improving your Church facility through painting, decoration, or building
  - Facilitating or assisting a ministry program (camp, outreach event, fundraiser)
  - Engaging with one another in planned evangelism
  - Memorizing a book of the Bible
  
- **Adversity:** (James 1:2-4) When we share in adversity, we feel closer to one another. If social or political forces make it difficult for Christians in your community, you are already facing adversity. There are other ways you can share in the adversity of fellow Christians:
  - Praying for persecuted Christians around the world
  - Sharing burdens and prayer requests with the rest of the group
  - Providing practical help for members who are experiencing illness, loss, or other burdens
  - Supporting missions and ministries that care for the suffering and those in danger
  
- **Celebration:** (1 Corinthians 10:31) When we celebrate with one another, we connect through our joys. We should celebrate the lives, talents and blessings of each of the members in our group. Consider:
  - Celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, births, graduations, etc. as a group
  - Observing national or religious holidays together
  - Sharing meals together on occasion – individuals can practise hospitality at their homes, or the meal could be shared as each person brings a dish
  - Participating in a fun activity to get to know one another better! You could visit an interesting attraction close by, engage in a sports activity together, or learn a new skill (or hobby) someone in the group can teach.
  
- **Appreciation:** (1 Thessalonians 5:11) Each of us needs to feel appreciated, and we need that from those in our small group. It is important that we recognize one another and lift one another up with encouraging words.
  - Thank one another for their contributions to the group (leading a lesson, praying, bringing food, extending hospitality).
  - Recognize and encourage the gifts each has, and allow them to use those gifts to serve the group.
  - Create opportunities to verbally share what each person appreciates about the others. Speak encouraging words as you notice their growth in a specific area, their love for the Word of God, or their quiet strength in serving.



- ❖ **Give and Take:** In all healthy relationships there is give and take. This should be an overall equal exchange – sometimes we talk and the other listens, but then we must listen while they talk. Sometimes they supply a need that we have, but later we will have opportunity to provide something for them.
- When someone is going through a difficult time and has increased needs, a healthy group is happy to give more during such times.
  - We can become emotionally drained by people who take far more than they give. While we must love each other especially in difficult times, we should encourage balance in relationships when possible.
  - A strong group will be characterized by healthy attitudes to one another, and expressions of trust and grace. For instance, members of a vibrant group will be display the following behaviours:
    - Be honest about what they think
    - Listen patiently to others
    - Share struggles and confess weakness and sin
    - Give and receive forgiveness
    - Receive correction without being defensive
    - Love others in practical ways, and welcome their love and concern for you
    - Submit to others
    - Demonstrate dependence on God
    - Be held accountable, keep others accountable
    - Take risks, try something new
  - When relationships are not balanced with give and take, they can turn unhealthy quickly. This may result in a group member becoming a source of stress, fear, or constant opposition. If this happens, it might be time for the group leader to step in and encourage a different behaviour.

## TASK

*Attached is a chart outlining a few potentially unhealthy behaviours for a small group setting, and some ideas on how to manage that situation. Use a creative method to discuss these issues with your group. You could illustrate the behaviour through role play or storytelling, and allow the group to brainstorm ideas for working through the situation.*



<b>MANAGING UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SMALL GROUP</b>		
	Description	How to Manage This
<b>The Shy Person</b>	This person never speaks within the group, may arrive late and leave early and resists getting to know others.	While it might sound harmless, this behavior actually damages trust in the group. They receive from the group without contributing. The group may feel judged, criticized or scorned by silence.  Privately engage this person and explain why it is important that every member contributes, asks questions and shares. Reinforce that it is okay not to have the answers, and that they are among friends!
<b>The Chatty Person</b>	Some people will never stop talking if given the opportunity. They are said to 'monopolize' conversation, or bring each discussion around to their favourite topics.	This person can cause friction and anxiety in a group, and demands a lot of attention. At the same time they find it difficult to give a listening ear to others. They may have a great need to feel appreciated and recognized, or may just be a naturally talkative person.  Privately engage this person and remind them that while their contributions are valuable, they must allow others to share also. During conversation, acknowledge their ideas and then ask someone else for their thoughts on the topic.
<b>The Needy Person</b>	For various reasons, some people have greater needs than others. They may require attention, or constantly demand time or resources. Sometimes needs are more severe and can drain the group or become a burden. Every group meeting becomes about their needs or problems.	We should all try to carry one another's burdens, but sometimes the needs of one person are greater than the group can support. This is when it is wise to bring in another leader, a pastor, or counselor to help support this person. You may have to remind them of healthy boundaries and the purposes of the group. They likely have real needs that should be met, but your group may not be equipped for this. A person who constantly drains the resources of everyone else, no matter what their life circumstances, will not foster healthy relationships.
<b>The Argumentative Person</b>	Do you have someone who argues with every point you make, or with the comments of others? They often challenge a point even when no one else is interested in a debate. There may be anger or misdirected emotions present that can cause others to be fearful.	This person can cause some people to be afraid to speak their mind or answer questions. Instead of exploring the Word of God and growing together, meetings turn into debates and defending our beliefs. You will have to remind this person that the purpose of this group is to learn together and that differences of opinion are allowed. Privately discuss how their behaviour can be harmful to the learning environment in the group. They may have anger issues connected to another area of their life which might require professional help. If their behavior persists and is destroying the group, you may need to ask them to leave.
<b>The Critical Person</b>	Sometimes you will have one very negative individual who cannot agree on any issue, and criticizes people and plans. They may have a negative view of God's Word or the church and voice these positions which can be very toxic.	This type of subtle or not so subtle negativity can be very destructive to the trust and security of a small group. While disagreements are allowed, constant criticism stops people from wanting to participate. The critical person may not be aware of how their attitude is affecting the rest of the group. This is an attitude God will have to work on in this person's life. Privately counsel them on choosing patience and joy, and being careful of their tongue.



## TEACH

- ❖ **Coping with Unhealthy Relationships:** If someone is causing unhealthy relationships within your group, as the leader you have the responsibility to try to intervene. Remember that those exhibiting unhealthy behaviors need to be loved, and are likely hurting in other relationships as well.
  - **Some Signs you have an Unhealthy Relationship:** Your goal is to help foster positive relationships where people can learn and grow in an environment that feels safe. When that safety is at risk, the group dynamic is disrupted. Watch for these signs:
    - Group members avoid one member.
    - Group members are reluctant to share their personal opinion or contribute ideas.
    - Group attendance is diminishing.
    - Group meetings seem to be about one person and their problems, rather than the purposes for which you originally began to meet.
    - Discussion times regularly become arguments and debates.
  - **Counseling:** Sometimes it is necessary to confront the parties causing the unhealthy relationships. When it is clear they are taking more than they contribute, or are upsetting the health of the group, it is best to meet with them privately.
    - Pray for them.
    - Confront the issue using questions rather than accusations.
    - Identify consequences of their behaviour.
    - Identify healthy limits.
    - Look for Biblical solutions to their problems.
    - In extreme cases, refer them to someone who has the skills to help them.
    - Support and encourage them when you see improvement in their behaviour.
  - **Making the Hard Decision:** As the leader, you must be concerned with the health of the group as a whole as well as the individuals within it. However, when it is clear that the group can no longer function because of one individual, there may come a time when you must ask that person to leave the group. This should happen **ONLY** after attempts to accommodate, counsel, and support have failed, and it is clear they are not willing to change. (For instance, if they continue to argue against the truth of the Bible and show no intention to change, it is no longer productive for them to attend your Bible Study.)
- ❖ **Feeling Secure and Significant:** In order for us to experience fellowship with other believers, we must feel secure and significant. This feeling will allow us to reveal our true selves and the issues we struggle with. It is easy to pretend sin is not a pervasive issue in our life when we are alone, but as soon as we meet regularly with others, our patience and willingness to love sacrificially is tested! A small group is an ideal place to grow in our Christlikeness and in our knowledge of God. Cultivating a healthy environment for this growth will produce much fruit!



## DISCUSSION

- ❖ A healthy group is marked by healthy attitudes towards others. Which of the following actions are difficult for you? What steps could you take to overcome them?
  - o Be honest about what you think.
  - o Listen patiently to others
  - o Share struggles and confess weakness and sin.
  - o Give and receive forgiveness.
  - o Receive correction without being defensive.
  - o Love others practically, receive love and comfort.
  - o Submit to others.
  - o Demonstrate dependence on God.
  - o Be held accountable, keep others accountable.
  - o Take risks, try something new.
  
- ❖ What activities could your small group participate in together to strengthen relationships and build trust among members?
  
- ❖ Why is it necessary for people to be truthful in a small group? Why is truth necessary for understanding and applying the Word of God?
  
- ❖ Why should we be a part of a small group? What do we gain by learning alongside others that we cannot do alone?

## PRAYER

*Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that each person who will lead small groups will have wisdom, compassion and love for each member. Pray that the members will develop healthy relationships of authenticity, trust, and mutual accountability. Pray that they would support each other in times of adversity, and in doing so, would grow together and be united. Thank God that He has not left us alone, but that the Holy Spirit is with us, helping us have fellowship with one another and with God.*