

# Starting a Spiritual Sharing/Spiritual Conversation Group

## Introduction

A group exists for a Task and goes through a Process.

Either can be important, but we must decide whether Task (what the group is going to do) or Process (how the group conducts itself) should be the most important.

There is no right way to run a group, as all groups are different.

There are different needs, different styles, all participants are different, and all leaders are different.

Starting or joining a group needs a good deal of thought, commitment and often hard work!

Here are some basic guidelines to consider and agree on that may be of help.

You can choose which of these may be appropriate for your own group.

- Part One**     Getting Started
- Part Two**     Group Guidelines
- Part Three**   Problems Arising
- Part Four**     Leadership Styles
- Part Five**     Group Evaluation

## PART ONE: GETTING STARTED

### Questions to discuss with members:

- a) **Motive**                      Why do we want to set up this group?  
What are we here for?
  
- b) **Task needs**                    What do we want to achieve?  
Clarify purpose and goals.  
How do we want to go about it?  
Being specific can definitely contribute to success.
  
- c) **Individual needs**            What are my expectations?  
Ground rules agreed by members  
Concerns?
  
- d) **Maintenance needs**        Is a group possible?  
Venue, frequency of meetings, costs etc.  
Agree to arrive and leave on time.  
Job list – who will deal with: room booking, being the key holder,  
refreshments. money, heating, wheelchair access, seating etc.

## PART TWO: GROUP GUIDELINES

### Introduction

Once we have started up a group, we can now begin to think about some group guidelines. There are many different kinds of groups: peer group, leader-led group and anything in between.

- Boundaries are very important.
- Ground rules are agreed by all member .
- Decisions are made about what the group aims to achieve - reason for being in existence.
- Confidentiality - what we say here is confidential. What is mentioned in the group, stays in the group.
- Respect ourselves and each other. Let people finish what they have to say without interrupting.
- Members of the group need to agree to start and finish on time.

### Who?

Do you want a closed or open group?

Do you want to make a minimum / maximum number for the group?

### How?

How is the group to function? Peer group or leader-led group?

If a Peer Group, someone needs a timekeeper to keep within the constraints of time at each meeting.

What will you do if people do not observe these boundaries?

As an example, here are the **group agreements made by the *LivingSpirituality* Journeying Together Group:**

- Not to pressure anyone into sharing any personal information that they don't want to share, but allowing those who want to share personal things to do so.
- To keep the information shared in the group sessions confidential.
- To respect people's different needs and perspectives. To go with the majority view if there is a choice between different themes.
- To maintain a balance between heart and head. When looking at theological topics, aiming for them to have relevance to people's lives, and to be presented in an open-ended way.
- To distinguish between sessions that involve the discussion of ideas and those where personal sharing is invited. When there is personal sharing, people need to listen and leave a space without responding unless the person requests responses.
- Where possible to let people talk at the length they wish to but make use of agreed timings if there is a danger of some people not having a chance to speak.

## PART THREE - PROBLEMS ARISING

### Introduction

When problems become evident in a group, it is important to know if the problem is clearly understood. Don't avoid conflict.

These are some pointers that may be helpful in finding an agreed solution and action taken.

Difficulties that can arise may be due to:

- conflict and disagreement
- anxiety to criticism and rejection
- apathy, boredom, non-participation
- intrusion of religious or political views, if bringing too much tension
- inadequate decisions; no clear answers arrived at
- bid for leader/power struggles
- attacks on a personal level
- monopolisation with a few people attempting to dominate.

The most common problems are due to:

- 1) lack of communication
- 2) lack of proper administration
- 3) lack of attention to detail. The group becomes too woolly!

### Helpful suggestions

- 1) Make an effort to understand each other's point of view.  
eg. "When you ....., I feel ..... Because ....." (Owning Problem)  
NOT saying "You make me feel ....." (Direct accusation)
- 2) One person speaks at a time.  
Contributions are brief and to the point.  
Be specific and don't generalize.
- 3) Don't avoid conflict.  
Conflicts should not be hidden or unacknowledged.  
Often the group guidelines are only considered when there is a conflict/upset.
- 4) Interventions of the leader are on two grounds.
  - a) to save/protect oneself or another from some real or perceived danger/hurt.
  - b) to move the group to be more in line with achieving the goal.

## PART FOUR - LEADERSHIP

### Introduction

There are several different types of leaderships. e.g. leader/facilitator-led; co-leaders; and peer groups.

The different type depends upon the occasion, the aims and personalities of group members.

### Group leader/facilitator

- 1) There is nothing wrong in having a leader or facilitator if they have the right aim. It helps the group to feel they belong and are in a safe space to explore and share different ideas and differences of opinions.
- 2) Listen.  
Observe without judgment.  
Enable and include.
- 3) It is easier to deal with questions rather than statements eg. encourage members to question – "What would happen if ..... ?".
- 4) If a situation becomes difficult, then having the guidance of outside supervision will be helpful and supportive.

### Peer groups

- 1) Are we able to listen to each other and exchange ideas freely, even if we disagree with them ourselves?
- 2) Do we feel involved in the decision-making process and take on our share of roles and responsibilities?
- 3) Can we learn something from each other?
- 4) Recognize our likenesses and clear differences within the group members, yet accepting decisions without necessarily agreeing.
- 5) Differences of opinion will occur. Therefore, at the establishment of any peer group it is important that a process is agreed on how to resolve differences.

### Difficult members

- 1) It is important to encourage all members to share what they see or feel.  
Encourage participation, not dominance
- 2) Check out assumptions being made of a member's behaviour to avoid misinterpretation.
- 3) It is better to stop a person whose comments are disruptive, explaining why, than to allow such comments to continue.

- 4) If a group becomes dominated by unresolved conflict or tension this may lead to members leaving and not returning to the group, which may be unavoidable.

## **An Example**

A spiritual sharing group of 5 people, held in a private home.

### **Format**

We meet once every two months. 12.0pm - 3.0pm

12pm - 1pm – We have a 'catch up' of what has happened in our life since we last met two months ago.

1 pm - 2pm – Lunch, to which we each contribute soup, cheese, salad etc Conversation is usually continued from the previous 'catch-up'.

2pm - 3pm – Then we each have the space to share our individual thoughts on the topic that has been agreed upon at previous meeting. This can then develop into general conversation around what is brought up.

Finally the next theme/subject is volunteered and a date is agreed for next meeting.

### **Topics**

Topics we have covered that were brought by different members have included:

- First introductory session – introducing ourselves: home, family, job etc
- Where we are now on our spiritual journey
- William Blake's poem 'The Poison Tree'
- Gratitude – The best gift I have ever been given
- Befriending the dark
- Transition experience
- New Beginnings in later life
- Healing
- Creativity and chance
- How would it be best to spend the remaining years of our life, given the health to do so?
- How does the Divine manifest in your life?
- Do I know or believe that God exists?

The idea began after several years of having one-to-one 'spiritual' talks with separate friends, who did not know each other. Although I never deliberately set out to hold a group from scratch, it seemed a good reason to gather together, to share a common interest and things would develop from there. The group is developing organically and we feel that 5 members are the maximum number within the time constraint.

We each take it in turns to bring a subject of personal spiritual interest and say why we have chosen it, and then go around having the space to react to the subject in our different ways.

### **Some feedback from members**

"The reason why I enjoy and look forward to our meetings is because as a group we listen well, and care about what we hear. This gives us a freedom to talk about any current anxieties and to share in the interchange of views following individual responses to what has been disclosed.

From a spiritual point of view though we come from different Faith backgrounds, I think we share a common attitude of service. It is wonderful to have the opportunity to discuss with others of like mind whether this habit of service is always helpful!"

"I love the bonding that occurs slowly and gradually deepens as we continue to meet. It becomes less about our outer selves and more an experience of our inner selves coming into union."

"Through the Spiritual Sharing Group, I am learning to listen to others in a safe place, as we travel together on the spiritual path."

This seems to be a very valuable and appreciated space for members to be able to share their deepest experiences in confidence. Although I've had many years of running groups, it is not a therapy group as such. But I do feel it helps if one person 'holds' the group to make it feel safe. We feel it important that no one person 'teaches the Truth', but each person respects another's beliefs and owns their own personal essence. ("I feel ....."etc). J.S.

## **PART FIVE - GROUP EVALUATION**

### **Introduction**

Evaluations can be helpful, but are not always necessary.

An evaluation can help to look back and forwards as well, to confirm whether changes are needed or not.

Groups change, members may come and go and their needs may change.

Some questions may need an answer in detail, others require a simple yes/no/partly answer.

Some questions you could ask/share with the group:-

### **Goals**

Why was the group started?  
Is the reason for it existing, still the same?  
Do we need to change our goals?  
Are our aims still what we want to do?  
Has the group changed? How and Why?

- Meeting needs**      What do members want from the group?  
Are individuals needs being met?  
Are the group leader's needs being met?
- Membership**      Are we happy with the size of the group?  
Do all group members feel welcome?
- How well does  
the group work?**      Is the group happy with the leadership style?  
How well do we communicate in our group?  
How much trust and openness in the group?  
Are group members happy with the decision-making process within the  
group?

One of the important aspects of an Evaluation might be identifying different ways of working in the future, to ensure the group doesn't drift.

Evaluating yourselves will bring satisfaction - you may be surprised at what you have done!

(We would like to thank Jenny Sandler for writing this document for *LivingSpirituality*.)