



one anotherSM
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Five Conversations for Healthy Relationships
FACILITATORS' GUIDE

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About One Another Project

One Another Project's very clear purpose is to develop and deliver materials and programs that help improve relationships between people. We approach this challenge recognizing that in a post-Christian society, many are not engaged with or have left the Church. One Another Project addresses relationship issues head on, illustrated with stories that represent some of the most challenging relationships in recorded history—from the Bible.

The truths in scripture have been tried and found true for over 2000 years. This introduces participants to the scripture in a way that is relaxed and relevant, regardless of whether or not they are in a faith walk. We offer programs that meet people where they live. If participants decide through this experience they would like to take steps toward Christ, we see that as a welcome development.

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About Five Conversations for Healthy Relationships

Our objective through the Five Conversations initiative is to present a clear pathway to deepening any relationship(s) and to create a safe and friendly environment that encourages participants to learn, to discuss, and to practice that pathway with others in similar life circumstances. Though healthy relationships are much more a journey than a destination, we believe that relationships can become measurably deeper and more meaningful after several weeks of practice of the conversations we reference here. This initiative favors a “peer group” model to accomplish this.

WHO DEVELOPED THIS MATERIAL?

Blake Coffee is the founder and Executive Director of Christian Unity Ministries. Over the past 20 years, he has counseled thousands of church leaders in hundreds of congregations around the world regarding relationships. He has also authored several books and other works on the topic of Biblical interpersonal relationships.

Kelley Kimble is chairman of the board for Christian Unity Ministries and has spent the past 20 years as a Texas District Family Court judge. Having presided in over 75,000 cases across that time span, she has observed first hand the damage and the dynamics of broken relationships.

WHO IS THIS PROJECT FOR? AS A FACILITATOR, WHO ARE MY PARTICIPANTS?

This is an “arms wide open” peer group program specifically designed to reach outside the walls of the church to families experiencing various, sometimes difficult, life circumstances. The groups are typically formed around those life circumstances. Examples include: single parents, blended families, co-parenting from separate households, grandparents parenting their grandchildren, parenting aging parents, one parent incarcerated, one parent deployed, parents of special needs children, etc. A Five Conversations peer group could be formed around virtually any life circumstance.

WHAT ARE THE CONVERSATIONS?

What's Good: Two of the most loving and healing words you can say are “well done.” Learning to share positive thoughts is the first step toward building strong relationships.

What Could Be: Seeing a good and real path for someone, and then cheering them on is always helpful. Discussed in a positive, honest way, these conversations will make any relationship stronger.

What's Hurt Them: When someone “blows up” at you, they have pain that has not been talked about. Finding the pain, talking about it, and saying, “I’m sorry, will you forgive me?” starts healing the relationship.

What's Hurt Me: When you’ve been hurt in a relationship, you need to get the other person to talk with you about it. Saying “ouch” to them and discussing it, not letting the pain grow and cause more harm, is an important step towards healing.

Where Our Hope Is: Hope is a stronger motivator of people than even fear or love. The best and deepest relationships have conversations that find where each other’s hope is.

IS THE MATERIAL SEQUENTIAL? IS ONE CONVERSATION A PRE-REQUISITE TO THE NEXT?

Think of a relationship in terms of its depth. These five conversations do tend to move in order from surface to deeper and deeper levels. So, though any relationship will include a great deal of moving back and forth from one conversation to the next and back again (and though a Five Conversations group may do likewise from one week to the next), there is at least a “depth” to each of the conversations as it relates to the others, and this creates a general direction toward deeper, more meaningful relationships. It also gives a sort of “roadmap” for the journey.

IS THERE A WRITTEN CURRICULUM?

There are rich online resources currently available and more are added regularly. These materials function as the curriculum for the program, rather than a single written curriculum or workbook for Five Conversations. The teaching of the material is via video and there are written listening guides and note prompts accompanying each video. But the only “homework” to be done between group sessions is actual practice of the conversations in the relationships that matter most to a participant. Much like riding a bicycle, these conversations are learned much more by doing than by reading.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COVER ALL FIVE CONVERSATIONS?

As for the individual participant, this journey is very much self-paced. Again, transformation of relationships is much more a journey than it is a destination. These five conversations will change and grow dramatically over the lifetime of any given relationship. As for any particular Five Conversations group, it will be up to the group facilitator(s) to set the pace for the group and to determine how often to cycle through all of the conversations. However, in the typical group, a participant should expect to have at least been exposed to all five conversations over the course of approximately nine weeks.

HOW DO PARTICIPANTS JOIN AN ONGOING GROUP? IS THERE AN INTRODUCTION OR “ON RAMP” EXPERIENCE?

By design, a Five Conversations group has neither a “starting point” nor any particular “ending point”. Anyone can join a group at any time and can stay involved as long as they find it helpful. For that reason, we have an “on ramp” experience for new participants. The web based “on ramp” resources will help a participant become acquainted with the culture, the vocabulary, and the overall roadmap of Five Conversations for Healthy Relationships. Joining a group, therefore, is as simple as showing up.

About the “Peer Group” Model

We believe a small group of friends is an uncommonly strong, transformative vehicle. For any given participant, this journey is most effective when taken with a reliable, weekly gathering of friends who share some life circumstance, or “affinity.” These friends gather to learn about bettering the relationships in their lives, and that promise is likely what draws them to the group in the first place. But what keeps them coming back to the group is the safe, loving environment and the genuine friendships they forge within the group. We observe that the inherent accountability of these groups naturally causes the friendships within to deepen. We also see encouragement between one another pressing them forward in the important relationships in their lives.

WHAT IS IT PATTERNED AFTER?

In the development of this initiative, we have been inspired by two fairly common models of community groups:

- The neighborhood fitness gym, and;
- Support/recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous

A Five Conversations group resembles a fitness gym insofar as the content is constantly varied, but there is an overarching roadmap. There is no pre-determined length of participation, as it is more a lifestyle than a program. Nobody feels alone, because everyone is learning and doing together. It is like a support/recovery group insofar as there is typically some life circumstance that everyone in the group shares in common, so there is common ground with the rest of the group (and therefore a level of safety and trust) from the very beginning. Every person there identifies herself or himself as having relationships in their lives in need of going deeper.

WHY THIS MODEL FOR TRANSFORMATION?

The love, acceptance, accountability, convenience and reliability of the small group make it one of the most effective vehicles for life transformation. Learning the art of conversation as a tool for driving relationships deeper is very much like learning to ride a bicycle. You can read about it and watch videos of it, but you won't really learn it until you start doing it. This peer group setting provides the best environment for both the learning and the doing and sharing in each others' successes and failures as they put it into practice.

WHEN DOES THE GROUP MEET? WHAT HAPPENS IN A TYPICAL GATHERING?

Most Five Conversations groups will meet weekly. A typical group meeting will be 60 to 90 minutes, which includes some “gathering and ice-breaking,” a 10-minute video teaching segment, 30 to 45 minutes of facilitated group discussion, and a closing reflection/prayer time. The participants themselves drive the group discussion. The discussion may center on the video, or it may pertain to others of the conversations, or it may pertain to some other problem or issue common to the group. It may include reports from participants on conversations they attempted during the week. The atmosphere in the group makes it a safe, judgment-free place to talk about the relationships that matter most to them.

WHO DOES MOST OF THE TALKING?

The role of the facilitator is merely to maintain the environment and to keep the conversation going. Therefore, it is the participants doing the talking. If “life transformation” is the objective, then we must always keep in mind that “the person doing the talking is the person doing the changing.” Facilitators, therefore, are not teachers and are not therapists; rather, they are merely initiators of discussion, always prompting others to do the talking.

IS IT A PROBLEM IF A PARTICIPANT MISSES A WEEK OR WEEKS?

Missing a week in a Five Conversations group is like missing a workout. While it clearly is not ideal, it doesn’t mean having to start all over again either. Since it is neither a “class” nor a “curriculum”, there is no make-up to worry about. A participant who misses a week or even weeks just picks up wherever he or she left off.

WHAT ARE THE “FACILITIES” REQUIREMENTS FOR A GROUP?

The group needs a room where they can gather and sit and talk together. Depending on the “affinity” or life circumstance of the group, there may be privacy or security needs as well. The atmosphere should be conducive to open and honest discussion all together. There is a video teaching segment, so there will need to be technology available to either stream an online video or to download the video and show it. Having a screen large enough and sound adequate for all improves the value of the videos. Long term availability of the room at the same time each week is also a consideration.

HOW LONG DOES A PEER GROUP STAY TOGETHER?

There is no rule here. How long does any group of friends stay together? As long as the group meeting is beneficial to the participants, they will likely stay together. And, with this peer group model, the group would always stay open to new participants. Many of the participants who will be drawn to a Five Conversations group will be hurting, and the reliability of the group will therefore be a huge consideration for them. There is no specific length of time for which a commitment is required. However, participants should be encouraged to be patient and to give the Five Conversations a fair chance to begin to make a difference. For a participant who is truly working the conversations into a relationship, we would expect them to begin to see measurable transformation within nine weeks.

About the Role of the Facilitator

If the Five Conversations peer group experience is a journey, the facilitator is a loving guide for that journey. Indeed, the single most important “skill” of a facilitator is to love people well. To the extent your Five Conversations group is based on a certain life circumstance (for example, single moms, deployed spouses, blended parenting, caring for aging parents, etc.) it is important that you as the facilitator have shared that experience. You don’t need to have all the answers, but it is helpful if, like a guide on a mountain climb, you are just a few steps further up the mountain (but still very much in view). Because forging meaningful friendships within the group is so important to a participant’s experience, you and your co-facilitator become critical pieces to that experience.

I’VE NEVER DONE THIS BEFORE. WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

You should love people well. Nothing else will matter nearly as much as that. You will be called upon to facilitate discussion and, as you deem appropriate, to pray. Your faithfulness to the group and to the meetings will be important.

WHAT AND HOW LONG IS MY COMMITMENT?

Your (and your co-facilitator’s) commitment is to arrive early and prepare the space for the group’s needs, and then stay late, making sure every participant leaves safely. It is important that the group be reliable (meeting regularly, no matter what), so you or your co-facilitator will always need to be there for the group meeting. We recommend that each facilitator have a pre-determined length of time (e.g., 3 months, 6 months, etc.) he/she will serve and then rotate off for a break. This will help you avoid burnout, which will hurt you and your participants. Consider staggering your “terms” with other co-facilitators, so that only one facilitator rotates off at a time.

IF NOT A THERAPIST AND NOT A TEACHER, THEN WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A FACILITATOR?

You are a gardener, taking full responsibility for the environment in which your plants will grow. You come to know your plants and their needs and you provide a safe place for them to thrive. You are a lover of people; and an encourager and a cheerleader. You are a facilitator of discussion, using your skills to draw people into the discussion as active participants. You are neither a problem-solver nor a fixer, except as the problems may have to do with the environment for the group. You are not responsible for a participant's growth; only for the safe environment.

WHY IS IT RECOMMENDED THAT I WORK WITH A CO-FACILITATOR?

Having a co-facilitator helps ensure that there is always a facilitator there for the group. It also increases the leadership eyes and ears, which makes you more sensitive to the needs of the participants. As co-facilitators, you are each other's safety net for any challenging circumstances that may arise. You and your co-facilitator have the benefit of meeting together before or after the group to compare notes and to make sure each participant is getting what he/she needs from the group.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT I FIND FUTURE FACILITATORS? HOW DO I DO THAT?

In order to keep the group going well into the future, there must be a rotation of facilitators. The most likely source for your future facilitators is the group itself (i.e., your current participants). You should be watching their progress and encouraging them to encourage one another. Participants who make that turn (toward helping others) are good candidates as future facilitators. The long-term reliability of the group (and its availability to others in the community who need it) will depend upon your ability to find new facilitators.

WHAT KINDS OF "BOUNDARIES" SHOULD I HAVE AS A FACILITATOR?

Your personal boundaries with your participants will depend on the life circumstances and the community in which your group is formed. For example, participants whom you are likely to see in other settings throughout the week may warrant slightly different boundaries than you would otherwise employ. As you work to discern the right boundaries, keep in mind that it is always easier to lower boundaries previously set than it is to put them up later in the relationship.

Whatever the circumstances, and whatever boundaries you seek to maintain, you will always want to be cognizant of the right balance between giving grace and speaking truth into their lives.

AS A FACILITATOR, WHAT DO I NEED TO DO EACH WEEK TO PREPARE FOR THE GROUP?

You will choose a video teaching segment each week, download and print the two-page listening guide for that segment for each participant (if you choose to use listening guides for your group), and give some thought to any ice-breaker that might be needed, especially if there are new participants who have not yet forged friendships within the group. As you deem it appropriate, you will pray for your participants and for your time together.

HOW SHOULD I LEAD THE DISCUSSION TIME?

The listening guides for each video have some discussion questions with them. That is certainly one possible starting point. If your group is fairly new, you may need to spend more time just asking everyone to go around and tell a little about themselves or about the relationships in their lives. Eventually, as the group dynamics normalize, your role will become much less about initiating the discussion and much more about listening and guiding. You will always be watching for life transformation to be happening, remembering, “the one doing the talking is the one doing the changing.”

HOW DO I HANDLE THE OVER-TALKER? HOW DO I HANDLE THE ONE WHO WILL NOT TALK?

You will want to create a culture from the outset where everybody values everybody getting to talk. That said, you will also want to be sensitive to the possibility that some nights may just need to be about one or two people who are struggling more than usual. You can develop hand signals or vocal signals that will help over-talkers know it is time to stop. In extreme cases, you may even need to have a conversation with them before or after the group to help them be more sensitive to the needs of the group. In the case of the participant who does not talk at all, you will want to be sensitive to the fact that some people just take longer to warm up to a group than others. But eventually, you will want to ask them questions and find other ways to encourage them to speak into the discussion, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of the group.

HOW DO I HANDLE WHEN SOMEONE GETS VERY EMOTIONAL?

Emotion is nothing to fear in a peer group discussion. These discussions will often revolve around the most important relationships in participants' lives. They are bound to evoke emotions ranging from anger to sorrow and everything in between. Expect it. Be prepared to be an encourager and a good listener and to both model and expect these same responses from the rest of the group as well. If a participant feels a need to leave the room and consolation needs to take place outside the group, this is the perfect scenario for why co-facilitators are so important. One of the facilitators can stay with the group while the other consoles the participant outside the room.

WHEN ONLY ONE PERSON IN A RELATIONSHIP ATTENDS, HOW DO WE ASSIST IF THE OTHER PERSON IS NOT RESPONDING?

This will be the case most of the time. Your participants will be thinking and talking in the group about relationships which exist outside the group. In that sense, then, we are able to impact the relationship from only one side of it. You can encourage participants by helping them to see two truths:

1. They are not responsible for the other person's responses (i.e., for the other half of the relationship); and
2. They can still greatly influence the relationship even from only their side of it.

WHAT IF I SUSPECT SOMEONE NEEDS "PROFESSIONAL HELP?"

You are not called in this group to be a pastor, a priest, or a therapist. It is important to recognize when you are "out of your depth". You may want to familiarize yourself with therapists or counselors in your community and perhaps even have a pre-printed list you can give to participants when necessary. In that event, it is strongly recommended that you give a list of possibilities, rather than merely referring the participant to a single resource. And if you **are** in fact a pastor, priest, counselor or therapist, recognize that as a very different role from this facilitator role, and keep it separate both in your own mind and in the minds of your participants.

SHOULD THERE BE A TIME FOR PRAYER IN THE GROUP MEETINGS?

A big part of the friendships created in a Five Conversations group is sharing one another's burdens. But you will have to be intentional about learning each participant's comfort level regarding how that process takes place. We recommend, at or near the end of each group session, you set aside some time (maybe 10 minutes) for each participant who wishes to do so to share current burdens with the group, i.e., struggles or significant events coming up that same week. This will allow the rest of the group to "remember" (or "think about" or "pray" or "reflect on"...depending on their preference) them and to check back with them the following week. How you handle that time will depend on your participants on any given week. We would remind you of these considerations:

- Christians will often prefer to call this "prayer" and will understand it as a critical part of the healing process for broken relationships;
- Some participants may have a less embracing view of "prayer" for a variety of possible reasons;
- You will always need to be sensitive to every participant with this issue and especially the first time participant, who could come into the group at any time;
- Even participants who may be comfortable with the idea of prayer may not be at all comfortable with actually praying out loud themselves;
- Confidentiality is critical (everyone understands and commits to "what is said in the group stays in the group");

This issue, probably more than any other issue, will require your most sensitive and informed judgment as a facilitator.