



Navigating Small Group Challenges

Stonecroft small groups are created to include women from all faith backgrounds and to give them an opportunity to explore Jesus and learn how to share Him with others naturally. As a leader, you can cultivate an authentic community where women discover more about themselves, their relationships, and the God who deeply loves them through Jesus. At the first gathering, set the tone by communicating that the group is a safe place, meaning what is shared stays confidential. This will help you navigate future challenges. Remember, Jesus will give you the courage and compassion to lead well, no matter what happens.

Below are suggestions for navigating different challenges that can occur in small groups.

RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES

1. Welcoming people from diverse backgrounds

An easy way to help everyone feel welcome is to acknowledge that there may be different perspectives expressed in the group. It's helpful to say this during your first gathering and then give a reminder at each gathering. Say something like: *"We want everyone to feel welcome, no matter what your faith or cultural background. This is a place to explore and share openly in our discussion about Jesus."*

2. The person who never talks

It takes some people a while to feel comfortable sharing in a group. You might talk to a person like that outside of the group and ask her what she thought about the discussion, affirm the value of her contribution, and encourage her to share. It can also be helpful to ask: *"Would someone who hasn't responded yet please share?"* This opens up the conversation without putting anyone on the spot. You could also break into pairs and let people respond to questions in that setting; this can help people feel more comfortable to share if they are intimidated to speak in large groups.

3. Someone who monopolizes the conversation

This same question – *"Would someone who hasn't responded yet please share?"* – also can help you deal with a woman who talks too much during the meeting. This question can subtly remind the excessive talker to give time for others to share. If the problem continues, speak with this person outside of the group and thank her for her contributions. Gently, yet directly, ask if she would allow time for others to share so everyone can contribute to the discussion.

4. The high-drama sharer

Your group might have a woman who dominates the conversation with her problems. It would be insensitive not to address those, but focusing on her problems during the entire meeting is inconsiderate to the group. It's one thing for someone to have a rough day. It's another for someone to continually point the conversation to themselves and their problems.

Acknowledge what that person shares. Be kind, yet direct: *"That sounds (intense/sad/difficult). I'm sorry to hear about what you've been going through. Can we take time to talk about this together after we finish our meeting?"*

If it seems appropriate, bring this discussion back to the others. *"If anyone can relate to what she's shared, would you talk with her about it personally after we finish our meeting?"* You can

also offer to stop and pray for this person and then move on to your discussion after the prayer. Toward the end of the meeting, sometimes someone may bring up something that is off-topic such as a difficult issue or a theologically challenging question that might require extra time and thought to respond. Offer to talk with that person after the meeting or pray with her.

5. A woman who needs professional help

Small groups are places where people share vulnerably, so it's natural for painful things to surface. While everyone has struggles, sometimes a woman needs professional help. Abuse, addiction, or self-harm are situations when a professional counselor should be sought. While the group can be a place of support and encouragement for the woman, you as a leader can help her find the help she needs while still including her in the group.

Meet with her privately and learn if she has sought any professional help. If she hasn't, offer to help her find the type of support she needs. Talk with your pastor about any suggestions for appropriate professionals who could help with this situation. Another idea is to suggest she meet with a pastor.

AWKWARD MOMENTS

1. Dead silence

Some people need to see things first before they feel comfortable participating. As a leader you can model what kind of answer you're looking for by saying something like: *"I'm happy to answer first and then have you all jump in."* If the group is still quiet after you share, there may be other reasons for the dead silence. Are the questions you're asking clear? Do people need more space to process? Do they feel they can open up in the group environment?

Here are a few ways to deal with this dynamic if it continues: Ask the group members what they need. For example: *"Do you need more time to think about this? Does the question make sense? Do you need an example of what I'm asking about?"* Asking people in the group what they need to share in the conversation will give you insight as a leader. And it will help group members begin to feel comfortable participating.

2. Staying on the surface

If a tone of vulnerability hasn't been established in the meetings, it may feel scary to bring up something significant without knowing how people will respond. Crossing the threshold for people to trust each other and open up is crucial to the health of your group. Before people begin to share openly, they need to know that what they share will be kept confidential and understand that it's a place where others are learning and growing.

You can model vulnerability by answering first and sharing at a level you want the participants to have. This shows that you are willing to take the same risks you are asking them to take. It also fosters an environment of empathy. Many women feel alone in their struggles and hesitate to share. When the leader goes first and demonstrates vulnerability, group members realize they aren't alone. You can't make anyone share but you can invite participants to go deeper with each other. Keep modeling vulnerability and ask follow-up questions that invite participants to share openly.

3. Distractions

The small group needs to meet in a welcoming place free of distractions to allow people to connect well. Meeting in a crowded coffee shop or restaurant where it's hard for people to hear or where cell phones keep ringing won't foster the kind of intimacy you seek. Choose a place that's comfortable. Find out if anyone in the group has food or pet allergies, then make any arrangements necessary to accommodate them. Team up and have another woman host the meeting so you can focus on facilitation.

If you meet in a place where kids are present, decide together how they will be cared for so the participants can focus on the discussion and connect. Ask a friend to consider watching the kids or have everyone chip in money to pay a babysitter. If interruptions from children continue to be

a problem, bring it up. You can say something like: *“It’s hard to focus on our discussion and listen to each other when Billy keeps loudly zooming his cars around the room.”* Ask the participants what would best serve them in caring for the kids and decide together how you’ll move forward.

4. Extra Grace Required (EGR) people

Awkward moments will happen because of awkward people. Following Jesus means extending grace to people who may irritate you, bring up inappropriate or strange topics, or have rude personal habits. Pray that God will give you and the others patience, love, and grace in the situation. If the issue or person becomes a distraction or deters people from wanting to participate, talk and pray with the individual about the situation outside of the group.

5. Tangents and God moments

A hilarious story or an interesting comment can get people laughing and sharing – which is fun, until it takes up all the time for discussion. Try to keep your group on track by reminding people to stick with the topic you’ve agreed to discuss. You can say something like: *“I loved that you shared about _____. Can we talk more about that after we end the discussion?”* If the problem persists, you can be more direct by saying something like: *“I know it’s been fun to talk about _____, but I want to honor the time people have taken to participate in our discussion.”*

Sometimes tangents can lead to God moments, a process that involves discernment and prayer. It can be frustrating when the Holy Spirit is moving, but a leader is so focused on keeping the discussion on track that she misses the moment – and a participant feels unheard or ignored. If someone opens up about something significant, shares an area of pain, or shows vulnerability, take a moment to acknowledge that to the person and to the whole group. You can say something like: *“I know this is off our topic, but what is being shared is really important. If it’s OK with everyone I’d like to take a little time to pray for _____ or let her continue sharing.”* Small groups aren’t just about sharing information; they’re about growing closer to Jesus and each other. Creating space for the Holy Spirit to draw people to Jesus is always a good tangent!

6. Disagreements and conflicts

When diverse people gather, you’ll find a wide range of ideas and opinions. By providing ground rules at the beginning, you can set the tone for how your group will handle conflicts. When conflicts arise, you can also refer to when your group members agreed about how these conflicts would be handled. Conflicts can be an opportunity for growth if you encourage a learning posture. It can become uncomfortable quickly when someone brings up a divisive or controversial issue or makes a polarizing statement. As the group’s leader, you need to address the comment or issue to let everyone know the meeting is a safe place. Point out what has been said: *“That is a really difficult issue that we could spend a lot of time talking about. You all in the group may have different opinions, but let’s take time to finish our study.”*

Often someone asks a hard question about a controversial issue, putting the leader or other group members on the spot. Again, point to the group’s purpose and invite respectful discussion after the meeting ends. You can also question the person to find out why she is interested in that issue. This can help her to feel heard, and it gives you more insight into why she is asking the question.

READY TO LEAD?

No matter what your group is going through, God will faithfully guide you as a leader and will draw women to Himself. You will personally grow in trusting Jesus as you learn to navigate challenges with love and grow in compassion for the women in your group. The Holy Spirit is faithful to draw women closer together as you help them navigate challenges individually and as a group.

We are grateful for your leadership and investment in women. Visit stonecroft.org/evangelism-tools to find more resources and training on leading small groups, dealing with difficult questions, and sharing your faith.