



Safe Spaces Guidelines

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If you are interacting with someone one-to-one, facilitating an online group, a pastors' wives retreat, a table group at a larger retreat, a prayer group, or any small group, these guidelines may be helpful for you. There are numerous ways to lead and facilitate, the purpose of this document is to help you implement guidelines to create a safe space for all participants, including leaders. Use what works for you and the type of group you're leading.

The following are some guidelines to help you create a safe space:

- Establish ground rules for the gathering.
- Communicate expectations to participants at the beginning of the gathering.
- Highlight the importance of confidentiality (when necessary).
- Express the value in respectful listening. Everyone's voice is valuable.
- Affirm that validation and encouragement are pillars of safe connections.
- We aren't here to fix each other. Keep advice to yourself, unless asked.
- Determine in advance how to navigate a breach of safety with team members (and, when applicable, with participants).

Establish ground rules for the gathering

Confirm start and end times prior to and at the beginning. It's important to respect everyone's time. As the facilitator, discreetly keep an eye on the clock to keep the group moving along. Ask for agreement on these few ground rules to assure everyone is willing to participate.

You might say, "It's important to me to respect your time, so we will begin and end on time. I will keep track so you can share freely."

If you'll require everyone in the group to share, you might inform them of the amount of time each person has to share.

You might say, "Since there are six people in our group and everyone is encouraged to share, let's keep our personal sharing to about 5 minutes each since we only have one hour together. This will allow time for introductions, announcements, or prayers" (or whatever else needs to be done during the time frame).

Communicate expectations to participants at the beginning of the gathering

Let the group know the purpose, focus, or goal of the gathering. If there is a particular topic (prayer, book discussion, conversations about racism, aging faithfully, etc.) it's important the group stay on course to maximize the time together. Saying this at the beginning allows everyone to see that those in the room (virtual or in-person) are making a pact to stay on course throughout the gathering. This helps set boundaries to help contain those who like to talk a lot. You can then remind them of the agreement to stay on topic.

You might say: "Welcome to this gathering, we're so happy you've joined us. It's important to stay on topic. Some of you may have more experience, insight or expertise on this subject, so be mindful of others who may have questions or comments to enhance our conversation."

For the one who talks too much, you might say:

"Thank you for all you're sharing. I'm glad you're so passionate, knowledgeable, experienced, etc., but remember it's important everyone has the opportunity to share during this time we have together." Then call someone by name and invite them to share their thoughts.

Highlight the importance of confidentiality (when necessary)

Some gatherings will require confidentiality as a priority, especially when sharing intimate and vulnerable thoughts and experiences. People will generally follow a vulnerable leader, so feel free to be an example by trusting the group with something intimate that is related to the focus of the gathering.

You might say, "This is a safe space. Everyone is welcome to share whatever they'd like with the confidence that it will not be spoken of outside of this group time. If you are asked what was discussed, you may share what you spoke to the group and what you gleaned from your time in the group. Don't refer to anything anyone else said. Please leave out any names or identifying details of people or events shared in the group."

Express the value in respectful listening

Every person deserves a safe space to express their perspective, including unpopular and difficult thoughts, opinions, or experiences. The action of speaking allows us to hear ourselves. Often, we can sort things out just by saying them out loud. We all want to be heard. As listeners, we don't need to agree with them, we don't need to respond. This isn't the time to share scriptures or Christian disciplines to help the person. Just be still and listen.

You might say...nothing besides a clarifying question such as "I'm not clear about something you said. Could you help me understand?" Describe specifically what you're not clear about. This isn't a counseling session so we don't necessarily need to draw out more from a person. Affirm the person who spoke and move to validation and encouragement.

Affirm that validation and encouragement are pillars of safe connections

Remind the group what it has felt like when they've been listened to, understood, validated, and encouraged, especially after sharing vulnerably. A key value of a safe space is validation and encouragement, not explanations, assessments, or teaching them something, even if it's from scripture. When sharing vulnerably, we must be assured we are in a safe space.

You might say, “I hear how painful/important/joyous/devastating that was for you. Thank you for trusting us enough to share that with us.”

We aren’t here to fix each other. Keep advice to yourself, unless asked.

Few things feel more invalidating than having someone offer advice when you’ve just unloaded big, emotional thoughts and feelings. Please listen to encourage, not to offer solutions. Unless someone asks, they probably aren’t seeking advice.

Before offering advice, you might say, “May I offer some advice?”

Along the same line as not offering advice, try to not share your story that relates to whatever she has shared. When we are experiencing deep pain, shame, questions, health, or relationship issues, it is hard to listen to someone else’s. Comfort comes in being heard and validated. Giving them a safe space to speak.

Determine in advance with team members how to navigate a breach of safety (and, when applicable, with participants)

This is an important step to accomplish PRIOR to the gathering. Unity among team members creates the foundation for a safe space. The team members are like the tent poles, with Christ as the group covering.

Discuss how you will redirect someone who over-shares, thank and move on from one who gives advice, or when the group veers off-topic state plainly the need to get back on course.

If there becomes a breach of the ground rules and someone in the group feels unsafe, pause the discussion, and address the concern immediately. Do this with gentleness and sensitivity to both the offending and offended parties. Sometimes an individual hurts someone and doesn’t realize it at the time. First, to the person who is upset or offended, seek to understand her pain, and offer comfort. Give her space to describe her experience. To the one who said something hurtful or offensive, invite that person to reconcile the issue. If this proves too time-consuming, validate the concern, and let them know you’ll meet with them individually outside the group time.

You might say, “I can see you’re (person #1) upset and that you’d (person #2) like to be heard. Let’s take a moment and see if we can resolve the issue now. If it takes more time than we have now, I am willing to meet with you individually after our time together here.”

Return to the group discussion by picking up where you left off or ask a new question and invite someone else to respond.

You might say, “We can see there has been hurt feelings, but let’s proceed with grace. I’m willing to listen to your concerns outside this gathering time.”

It’s important as a leader to reach out to anyone who is in pain in any way. Feel free to do this the following day and let the person know you are willing to support them in whatever way is within your time and ability to do so. You are not obligated to become anyone’s personal therapist or best friend. You are a group facilitator, and your job is to create a safe space for all participants to gain the most benefit from this specified time together.