

Facilitating Lifeblood Discussion Groups



Five Stone Media

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What is a Lifeblood Discussion Group?

A Lifeblood group is a safe & confidential place where people who have been affected by incarceration can gather to; receive emotional support, make positive influence connections, share experiences, encourage one another, find solutions to common problems, and grow spiritually, all in an effort to gain insight into dealing with the challenges of reentry and life transformation. Weekly Lifeblood meetings start with announcements, optional prayer & worship, and a video presentation focused on one of the nine Lifeblood themes of Family, Influence, Hope, Power, Who Am I, Another Second Chance, Loyalty, Do The Right Thing, and Transformed. Following the video presentation, participants break-out into gender-specific discussion groups led by volunteer facilitators using established Group Guidelines and Lifeblood Discussion Guides.

What's your role?

The primary role of a Lifeblood Facilitator is to serve others by ensuring that group participants have a safe, comfortable setting to connect with other people to give and receive support. This guide will provide information on how to facilitate a safe, comfortable group, as well as provide tips for some common issues or concerns that arise in typical support groups. A Lifeblood Facilitator is also a participant in the group. It's very helpful for the leader (you) to be able to model "good" participation by; learning the names of group members, arriving on time & staying till the end, following group guidelines, sharing openly about your own experiences, be engaged and actively listening, having safe boundaries, & showing respect and support for others.

You don't need experience with incarceration to lead or attend a Lifeblood group, just the heart for transformation and a desire to help others. We all have struggles of some kind in our past and we are all in the process of spiritual growth & transformation. None of us have arrived in life. Because we all have been tempted and struggled, we can all provide a valuable contribution to the group discussion and experience.

Do I lead or facilitate?

Some people have a problem with the word leader when it comes to support groups. We don't really care what name you put on this role as long as you are doing it for the right reasons. We believe that if you have a healthy Lifeblood group, sometimes you'll be facilitating a discussion and at other times you'll be leading your group.

Facilitating your group means that you are acting in a neutral way. You create or encourage a process that allows a group to discuss, learn, or grow. In your role as a facilitator you provide the important but simple work of helping the discussion stay on track by making sure the group follows the agreed upon guidelines. A facilitator conducts a group without trying to direct the group in any particular direction. Facilitating a Lifeblood group is generally directed by the Discussion Group Guidelines, The weekly theme-based Discussion Guide, and any policies or procedures set up by your church host/leadership team. If you have specific questions or run into problems facilitating your group please consult the person who leads Lifeblood at your location. Questions can also be addressed to contact@lifebloodreentry.com

Leadership is about serving, so your primary concern is the welfare, personal and spiritual growth of individual group members. Leading your group requires that you are helping group participants move from one place in their reentry experience to another (they are progressing). Since Lifeblood groups are all about transformation, it follows that participants should be encouraged to move from past behavior and damage to a new healthier and happier identity. Leading in a lifeblood group can take the form of an encouraging, "thank you for being willing to share.", to a gently probing question to elicit further exploration (this requires some familiarity with the participant), to encouraging group members to work on the "Take Action" section of their discussion guide.

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NOTE: Directive Leadership (telling others what to do, or trying to control individual actions) does not work in shared-experience support groups and should be avoided. Heavy-handed leadership of this kind can destroy a healthy support group.

One of the best things you can do to lead your group members is to help them grow in comfort and knowledge of God. Some participants come to Lifeblood groups with little experience or knowledge of the Bible. Helping them understand what the Bible is, the difference between the old and new testament, or simply how to read a scripture reference are common ways you can encourage growth. Be prepared to answer deeper spiritual questions or be prepared to refer these questions to a more knowledgeable source (another leader or pastor). Another highly valued development is learning to pray (or to pray out loud). Some people were brought up with no religious exposure (or a different one) and they don't know that it's okay to talk directly to God.

So when do I facilitate and when do I lead? The

simple answer (and probably too general) is to facilitate when you need to and lead when you can. Facilitating is sort of the nuts and bolts of making a group run effectively without too much excitement (you generally want to avoid excitement in support groups). Lead when some gentle direction is needed or when you feel that a participant would be helped by digging a bit deeper (more on this later).

Who's in charge around here anyway?

The safe answer to give participants is to say that no one person decides what happens in a group, rather the shared discussion dictates the content, depth, & flow of a group. From a practical standpoint, there needs to be one person who kick things off, and is the final voice in terms of enforcing group guidelines. It is generally appreciated by participants to have one recognized voice "directing traffic", and keeping the discussion on topic. An effective leader/facilitator is ideally positioned to make necessary decisions and call out when a participant strays from the agreed upon guidelines, (see *Lifeblood Discussion Group Guidelines* form).

In Our Experience

In no particular order here are some random tips and thoughts on leading a discussion group. Note that every group (like every participant) is different and will develop its own personality.

- Don't be afraid of silence. Someone who is silent may be trying to find just the right way to say the thing they've been waiting a long time to say.
- Give group members the time they need to be vulnerable. We had one group member who sat silently listening for twelve group sessions before blurting out "I killed my brother. How do I make amends for that?"
- Allow for fun in your group too. Dealing with the messes we've made can be tiring and upsetting. Sometimes your group members will just need to talk about their social life, movies, music, etc. Don't let this take over the group but be flexible enough and aware of your groups emotional needs.
- Acknowledge participants individual struggles. Validate because they may be feeling that they are the only ones who struggle with this.
- Empathize if you can empathize but it's okay to not have the same experiences and tell them you don't.
- Hearing their story is more important than sharing your story.
- People will test your trustworthiness by sharing a bit of their story and then watching to see how you react and what you do with it before they jump in further with full vulnerability
- Be aware of healthy boundaries between you and group members and between group members and each other. Over time you'll get to know your group members well and that can create the illusion of a close relationship (for either party). As a lead it's important to not over step boundaries or allow group members to become deeply attached to you or others in an unhealthy way. If you need a good guide on creating and maintaining healthy boundaries, we recommend the book *Boundaries* by Dr. Henry Cloud & Dr John Townsend.
- Be prepared to suggest strategic connections when the opportunity arises. Maybe there's a great resource that you know of, or the current message series at church is an appropriate suggestion.

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- When connecting two individuals who may have a shared experience or who you think could otherwise help each other, always seek permission from both parties before sharing personal or contact information.
- Unrelated men and women should not be placed in situations where they are alone together.
- Some group members will avoid digging into some aspects of their past or reentry process. People naturally want to avoid suffering but they miss the benefit of suffering. Occasionally remind your group that suffering is where Jesus shows up. It's hard to ask someone to embrace their suffering but it's important that we acknowledge our own struggles so we are living in reality.
- Want to be a really good group leader? Pay attention to names and use the first names of group members when addressing them in group and at other times. (name tags are a huge plus).
- Want to be a really good group leader? Pay attention to specific needs, struggles, family members, or life events that group members share and incorporate these into your prayer time at the end of group (it's okay to take notes). If you do this make sure to somehow include all group members in your prayer request.
- Come to your group prepared to serve and care for them. Feel free to steal the prayer I say before every group I lead, "Father, show me how to love these people."
- Some group members will be unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with praying to God. Model good casual and intimate prayer and suggest some good "universal" prayer requests, i.e. wisdom or connection.
- Your Lifeblood group members may be seeing Christian Community for the first time. Make sure they have the experience that you would want to have. Better yet, pretend that Christ is sitting in your group and have the experience that you'd want Him to have.
- Support groups are naturally a place where tension can happen. Lean on scripture when/if conflict arises . *If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.* Matthew 18:15-17

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- Multiply vulnerability. Pride is the enemy of an effective support group. A great support group is one that is filled with humble and vulnerable participants. As a leader, you can help your group by modelling these traits for your group. Get really good at sharing your own story for the purpose of encouraging others.
- Watch your language. Avoid use of churchy words or other language that may not be inclusive of all levels of learning and cultures.
- You may have group members who have a speech impediment, are afraid to read aloud, can't read or have difficulty reading. Make sure everyone in your group knows that it's okay to not read aloud and that anyone can just say "pass" without explaining themselves. If you do have a group member that you know could use help learning to read, you can suggest resources for them (in private) if you think they would feel comfortable speaking about it with you.
- Prayer – Each Lifeblood church will have its own policy regarding prayer. We encourage praying out loud as part of the discussion group experience. Generally this can be handled by the group leader and in some cases group members may be asked to pray if they like. Praying out loud should not be mandatory for any group member. It is recommended that if group members are asked to pray in groups, that all Christ-following group members be given the opportunity (to take turns) to pray if they desire and this task not be dominated by any one group member.
- Self-help – It's completely okay to be motivated **in part** by the desire to be fed emotionally, spiritually or socially yourself.
- Outside Resources – Each Lifeblood Meeting should have a designated Resource Volunteer who is responsible for having access to a list of or online source for a variety of reentry related resources. Find out who your Resource Volunteer is.

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- We recommend the practice of “leading up”. You should always have an identified person who is responsible for leading the leaders. Whoever oversees the groups area of Lifeblood at your location is the person you should “lead up” to in cases of; conflict that can’t be resolved between you and another person, conflict that had been brought to you by other parties that you are unable to resolve, or if someone comes to you with a question that can’t be answered, or in circumstances where anyone’s safety or well-being is threatened. When in doubt, lead up!
- At the end of each Lifeblood group invite members to return next week and tell them what the upcoming topic will be.

Things You Might Experience

Bashing others – Remind them that this is a time to look at your own experiences and struggles. There may be others who need to do their own work in terms of relationships or past damage but you are the only able to control your own thoughts, decisions, words and actions. The most important progress to be gained is in self growth.

Won’t share – As stated earlier it usually takes time for people to feel comfortable sharing and being vulnerable. For some the comfort come quicker than others. There are people who are happy to just show up and listen to others and digest the information internally without sharing themselves. Eventually the group leader should address this in private, letting the participant know that it’s just fine to attend the group and listen but that just as they are finding help by listening to others, expressing their own experiences would be beneficial to the others in the group. Remind them that the health and energy of the group increases as it’s members grow closer in relationship and trust.

Friends, spouses or other relatives speaking together or into each other’s situation – Suggest separate groups, This include your family/friends too.

Judgmental language or comments – While this is rarely a problem, it's important to mention that it's possible to have a group participant verbally (or otherwise) judge others as they share in group. It's important to call this out as soon as it happens in a gentle way. The offender's emotional intelligence may not be highly developed and they may simply have made an error in judgement. It's also possible that a group member may mistakenly feel that they've grown close enough to the other so that they feel permission to speak into the others situation.

A group member is visibly emotional – Someone who is crying, angry, or otherwise visibly upset (but not in crisis) may be expressing the natural result of looking at some difficult aspects of life or even progress. Emotion isn't necessarily a bad thing and it can inspire bonding and empathy in group members. But, if too much emotion is expressed or is expressed to frequently, some group members may feel uncomfortable and may wish to stop coming to group. If a group member has a particularly emotional experience during group, acknowledge the experience and celebrate the opportunity for that to happen in a supportive environment. Thanks other group members for their understanding and support. If you need to talk to a group member who is bringing too much emotion to the group experience, do so privately and suggest alternative ways for them to deal with the heavy work they are doing. Your church or resource volunteer should have a list of local counsellors or pastors who can meet the group member's needs.

Dominator – Unlike the crisis situation which you may never see, you will probably run across a group member who always wants to start the conversation, takes the most energy or time, expects others to remember his/her situation, needs to be the one who prays, reads the discussion guide, etc.. You can go a long way towards avoiding this specific issue if you are very clear in your group guidelines in terms of time-limits and the need for the leader to interrupt. If you have a member who habitually crosses the line, seek them out either before or after group to discuss, in a gentle way the need to have them limit their sharing time or content to allow fair involvement for all group members. Most people in this situation are simply unaware of these characteristics and will be quickly guided to change.

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A group member is in crisis – If a group member is in crisis (expressing needs that clearly can't be met by the group or leadership, or is in danger of harming themselves or others) the leader should step in to respond to the urgent needs of the group member. Ideally you will have discussed such a situation with the Lifeblood leadership team at your location and you should have a plan in place to respond to a group member in crisis. Your Lifeblood groups supervisor or a church staff member should be identified as the person to go to for assistance when needed. It's important to stay calm in order to respond effectively. First things first, Make sure that you and those around you are safe. In the vast majority of situations a person in crisis will not be a danger to others but you should measure any such risk before proceeding. If a physical danger exists, don't hesitate to call 911 (or have someone else do so). In most cases dealing with a person in crisis simply requires suggesting that you and the group member in question step into another space away from the group where you can talk privately. If possible engage the person in a constructive and de-escalating conversation. Depending on the person it may be helpful to pray over them (with their permission) or to involve another leader, pastor, friend or family member that may be present. In most cases the person in crisis will feel embarrassed and that they have suffered another blow to their self-esteem. Be sure to gently reassure them that what they are going through is natural and that they aren't alone. Simple understanding, care and listening will provide the needed support for most group members "in crisis".

Trauma - Rarely a group member may be triggered to relive or otherwise recall a past trauma. This can be a serious and dangerous problem. It can also be hard to spot. You should be listening for sensitive or graphic descriptions in your group and pay attention to members reaction. Feel free to step in and ask if anyone is uncomfortable with this (without necessarily singling anyone out) or who needs to leave the room. If they need to be escorted or need help be sure that they receive help from someone of the same gender.

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Over-sharer – Let's face it, sometimes we can get too much of a good thing. If you have a group member with an under-developed filter, you can attempt to move the group discussion along by deflecting to other group members ("Let's ask John if he's had any similar experiences."), or simply state that you need to move things along and let someone else have some sharing time. Rarely, this problem needs to be dealt with personally, preferably before the meeting. If you show authentic care and compassion for the individual they will probably be open to some constructive criticism. Let them know that, while their experiences are valued it would be helpful and appreciated if they left out some of the details to help save some time and to be courteous to group members who might not have experiences like theirs.

Leader Attachment - It can be very flattering to be seen as a valued or important person. Rarely, a group member may decide that you should be their personal role-model, mentor, and Guru all rolled into one. Exhibiting healthy boundaries and not showing favoritism will generally prevent these issues. If you have a group member attempt to cross your boundaries. Gently let them know that it's nothing personal but that as a group leader you can't become involved with a group member or give the appearance of having a "special" relationship with anyone in groups. If you need to take such steps it is wise to share this information with your leader/supervisor.

Remember that you always have a *Lifeblood Site Leader* to whom you can bring any issues.

Discussion Group Resources

The Group Guidelines The standard Lifeblood Discussion Group Guidelines are an essential element of a healthy and safe support group. It's very important to make sure that these guidelines are read at the beginning of each group session.

The Discussion Guide Elements

1. STARTER QUESTION – An easy, non-threatening question that:
 - everyone can answer safely
 - Puts people at ease
 - If possible allows them to share something about themselves
 - If possible gets them thinking about change and the future
2. STORY SECTION
 - Presents the main points/questions from video
 - Validates personal perspectives, & struggles
3. HOPE & HEALING
 - Relevant open-ended discussion questions that
 - Encourage vulnerability & honesty
 - Lead to self-exploration
 - Provide opportunities for empathy and trust-building
 - Demonstrates why we're doing all of this work
 - Opportunity to share and celebrate progress
4. CHANGE
 - Provide Action Steps to take in the next week that lead to hope, healing & change
 - Action that looks back and helps deal with the past
 - Action that provides proactive forward movement in this area
 - Relevant scripture
 - Bible characters or stories for exploration

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Each weekly discussion guide follows a weekly video that is focused on one of the nine Lifeblood themes of *Family, Influence, Hope, Power, Who Am I, Another Second Chance, Loyalty, Do The Right Thing, and Transformed*. Lifeblood Discussion Guides are designed to give everyone a chance to participate on his or her own terms. These discussions can be fun and light-hearted, and they can be very serious and bring up painful memories. There are 3 unique discussion guide for each theme providing 27 weeks of new discussion group content. Each discussion guide contains the following elements

NOTE: It's okay for participants to talk about anything in the discussion guide beyond just answering the questions. All's fair as long as the discussion is productive and centers around the weekly theme.

At the bottom of each Discussion Guide is an invitation to, and instructions for joining a closed Lifeblood Reentry Facebook closed group.