

Regular Group Health Check Up For Maintaining Your Group's Vitality

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UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Fall 2006

To keep your group vital and dynamic, consider periodically doing a “group health check up.” This is a great way for the group facilitator(s) and the group members as a whole to check in with each other on how your group is going, to celebrate your strengths as a group and to figure out what you can do to make the group even stronger. You may want to spend a meeting doing this instead of having a regular session.

This approach focuses on **maintaining the health** of the group and **on preventing problems** from taking a hold. The group health check up is an opportunity for the group members to **revisit the group's purpose, format and ground rules**. It's a **chance for honest discussion among members about how you each feel the group is working**.

For ongoing groups, it may be helpful to do a group health check up about every six months. For a new group, it's a good idea to do the initial health check up about three months after you start. Usually during the first meeting or a very early meeting, when we develop group ground rules together, I let members know this will be happening. I usually say something like “Let's give these ground rules a try and come back in about three months and revisit the ground rules and the group's overall functioning and see how we feel it's going.”

There are many benefits to a regular group health check up. It helps members take responsibility for the group **and develop a strong sense of ownership and shared leadership**. It helps keep the group on track. It provides concrete feedback to the facilitator (or co-facilitators) about the health and vitality of the group. **It helps identify leverage points to strengthen the group. It avoids having to schedule a special meeting to address a concern** (because the health check up is scheduled regularly already). It helps keep the group vital and functioning before a concern gets too big to handle easily. Following are some items that you may want to discuss in the regular group health check up.

1. Revisit the group's purpose. The purpose of a Small Group Ministry Program is usually “Intimacy and Ultimacy,” in other words,

friendship and deeper spiritual exploration. Is the group meeting these needs for members?

2. Revisit the group's ground rules. Having an agreed upon covenant or set of relational ground rules is an essential component of a healthy Small Group Ministry Program. Usually members set ground rules during an early meeting, if ground rules are not set by the Steering Committee or other leadership team. These ground rules might include items such as sharing the time fairly, listening respectfully and deeply, ending and starting on time, etc. During the group health check up, redistribute a copy of the ground rules again to each member and read them over. Are they working? Do they need to be modified or fine tuned? Can all of you agree on needed changes in the ground rules? If so, type and redistribute them, and read them again at the beginning of the next few meetings as a reminder.

3. Revisit the meeting format. A strong, healthy group has all of the components of the meeting format (i.e. opening, review of the ground rules and group purpose, short check-in, content/topic of the meeting or session, provocative questions on the topic, discussion, check-out and closing. (See page 4 for more info on the meeting format). Is the meeting working? Are you leaving out any component? What if any changes are needed in the way you flow through the format of the meeting? For example, a common problem with the meeting format, is that members may feel that the check-in has gotten too long and thus there's not enough time left for the actual topic and discussion. Get clear in your group health check up discussion on how you're going to address these needed changes you've identified.

4. Check on how the group is doing on service projects. Service is an essential component of a healthy Small Group Ministry Program (see www.smallgroupministry.net for back issues of the SGM Quarterly for discussion on the importance of and ideas on service projects). Has it been a while since your group has done a service project? Is your group feeling stale or static? (This may have come out in the discussion of group purpose in item 1 above). A service project can help revitalize a stagnant

group. If there is resistance to doing a service project, consider doing a session on “Service.” (For sample sessions on service, see www.smallgroupministry.net). As a group, brainstorm ideas for what kinds of projects are of interest to group members. Can you agree on a project and a timeline for doing it? Plan also for a group meeting to share about the service project once it’s complete.

5. Check on how you are doing on welcoming new members. Having a way to welcome and integrate new members is another essential component of a healthy, dynamic Small Group Ministry Program. Some groups use an empty chair as a symbol and reminder of this component of the program. SGM Programs that overlook or are weak on a way to welcome and integrate new members become cliquish and are separated from the congregation and the ministry of the congregation. (If you’ve just had a new member join, this might not be the time to address this question because it may make the new member feel uncomfortable). In the group health check up, discuss how are you doing on welcoming new members? Are there concerns or fears about having new people join? If so, you may want to do a session on “the empty chair.” Is your group clear on the process in your congregation for attaining new members? Check with the Steering Committee or other leadership for clarification.

6. Check on what topics group members want to discuss. Brainstorm ideas for topics. Members are more likely to feel involved and have a sense of ownership of the group if they express the kinds of topics which they’d like to cover. In some congregations, members develop their own group sessions on specific topics. If this is the case in your congregation, see who in your group is willing to write a session or find a session on-line for the specific topics which the group would like to cover (Visit smallgroupministry.net for sample sessions and info on how to write effective sessions). In some congregations, the Small Group Ministry Steering Committee or the minister(s) develop the sessions. If this is the case in your congregation, send the brainstormed list of desired topics to the Steering Committee or minister.