



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network

MAKING THIS YEAR HAPPIER: Session Plan
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(TOPIC READINGS start on p. 4)

OUR SMALL GROUP MISSION

These Small Group conversations are offered as a way to get to know each other better, as we explore the various topics selected by our Small Group Team, related to our life experiences, questions, joys, and challenges. We are free to share our thoughts and feelings, joys and struggles, as we choose, and are here to listen to and care about each other. (We are NOT here to be a therapy group ~ or to tackle “church politics”!)

We look forward to building closer connections with each other, as we spend this time together, and form new or deeper friendships and build our sense of community.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

As members of this Small Group of the Universalist Church, we covenant with each other to help make this experience both personally and spiritually rewarding, to nourish our sense of community, and to learn and practice right relationship.

We will try to arrive before the beginning of each session so that it can start on time. We will try to attend all of the meetings of our group unless we are ill or away, and will let the group know in advance when that will occur or by contacting the facilitator:

Facilitator Contact information:

We use these guidelines for sharing, as a pathway to a caring community:

- We will deeply listen and ask honest and open questions.
- We will respect confidentiality. What is said here stays here, unless we agree to share something outside of our group.
- We will allow others to speak without interruption.
- We will not try to fix, save, advise or correct.
- We will honor time for reflection and quietness and respect a member’s right to remain silent, as they choose.
- We will treat others with respect and without judgment.
- We will honor the diversity of thought and feeling and values among us.

CHECK IN

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, valued and understood. One of the goals of small group is to move out of our heads and into our hearts in order to deepen our connections with one other.

Authentic sharing from a place of honesty and vulnerability allows us to build a community of trust, caring, and belonging. The connections we build with one another become contagious. They grow and spread and infuse our larger church community with life and vitality.

1. WELCOME / INTRODUCTIONS :

Let's remember to **Silence cell phones! Speak up clearly, so all can hear.**

Remind folks to let us know and to remind us if they have a hearing issue or if we aren't speaking up enough, so we can be aware.

• At FIRST SESSION of the series: Let's introduce ourselves:

"Tell us a bit about yourself, for example:"

- Your name, where you live and how long you've been in this area
- How long have you been a UU, coming to our church
- Your family, what you do (or did) for work, any special passions or hobbies
(Model this by starting with yourself.)

Distribute MISSION/COVENANT/CHECK IN handout.

- **Read the MISSION statement orally - volunteers read COVENANT**
- **Remind folks to contact the facilitator if you are unable to come to a session** (if not included, give them your contact info. to add to their copy)
- **Read the CHECK-IN orally, in turn.**
- "Since time has been spent on introductions today (tonight), **we'll keep our check-in short**"; ex. **"Might you have a joy or feeling of gratitude you can share with us?"**

2. CHECK IN: (at 2nd and later sessions: repeat names again, if needed, and read the following aloud, as you choose):

Check-in is a time to deepen our connections with each other by sharing joys, sorrows, challenges, and changes in our lives. Sharing is not required. Only share if you are comfortable. What is shared in group is confidential.

Some **CHECK-IN PROMPTS:**

- *How have these past couple of weeks gone for you?*
- *Can you share some of your "highs" and/or "lows"?*
- *Has anything brought you a sense of gratitude or accomplishment? - of joy - or sorrow?*

3. OPENING: Use "chime" or bell to quiet folks; **LIGHT CANDLE:**

(3 reading choices below, you might vary this from session to session)

- *May "our separate fires kindle one flame" as we gather in this circle—bringing our stories, our reflections, our hopes and our struggles.
May our candle flame lend light and promise for our time together.*
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- *May we know once again that we are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.*  
~~~~~
- *May our time together bring learning, understanding, compassion, encouragement, and hope as we share about our life journeys and passions.*

4. CENTERING: *In preparation for our conversation, let's take a few moments to center ourselves and be thankful for this time we have together in community.*

Please get comfortable, place both feet solidly on the floor, rest your hands on your thighs and let your shoulders drop. Gently close your eyes or focus on a spot a few feet in front of you on the floor. Bring your attention to the flow of your breath.

*Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.*

*Dwelling in this present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.*

Our life's path is not one we travel alone. We are in it together, and the company of spiritual friends helps us feel our interconnectedness.

Ring the chime: *"Slowly open your eyes."*

5. DISTRIBUTE READING:

Ask for **volunteers** to **read the paragraphs aloud, in turn.** You might include a **pause after the reading,** to allow time to reflect before responding.

6. POSE QUESTIONS to prompt sharing, invite folks to respond if and as they choose; If you choose, you can **split readings into sections,** with questions/conversation as you go along (some readings are already done this way).

Encourage silent spaces between reflections; be comfortable with silence.

You might prompt: **"Take some time to think about that."** - or the like.

FEEL FREE TO ADJUST or ADAPT THE QUESTIONS PROVIDED

You may not get to all of them, or you may want to modify them slightly or skip around a bit, even make up a new question, depending on what comes up in the conversation, to keep it moving along.

KEEPING YOUR GROUP ON TRACK: If a group member should go on and on, or responds inappropriately so that **conversation needs redirection,** gently ask that they give others an opportunity to share or say something like:

- **"Let's reconsider the question"**
- **"Let's stop now and take a moment to reflect."**
- **"Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Now let's move on"**.

You can also make reference to the covenant.

(If you are co-facilitating, work out a collaboration system with your partner, such as: when the other is facilitating, feel free to help guide the conversation, step in if you see a need to redirect.)

If the conversation has slowed down, you as facilitator can model responses to help the conversation along. **Some prompts could be:**

- **What are your thoughts about that?**
- **Can you say more about that?**
- **How does it make you feel?**
- **What does it make you think of?**

If the topic is really not going well, turn it back to the group:

- **"What do you want to do with this topic?"**

TOPIC READINGS start on next page:

MAKING THIS YEAR HAPPIER

One definition of happiness: “research on the field of positive psychology and happiness often define a happy person as someone who experiences frequent positive emotions, such as joy, interest and pride, and infrequent (though not absent) negative emotions, such as sadness, anxiety and anger. Happiness has also been said to relate to life satisfaction, appreciation of life, moments of pleasure, but overall it has to do with the positive experience of emotions.

The key to these definitions is that positive emotions do not indicate the absence of negative emotions. A “happy person” experiences the spectrum of emotions just like anybody else, but the frequency by which they experience the negative ones may differ. It could be that “happy people” don’t experience as much negative emotion because they process it differently or they may find meaning in a way others have not. In fact, using the phrase “happy person” is probably incorrect because it assumes that they are naturally happy or that positive things happen to them more often. Nobody is immune to life’s stressors, but the question is whether you see those stressors as moments of opposition or moments of opportunity.

Regardless of where you are on the happiness spectrum, each person has their own way of defining happiness.

Interesting detail: 50% of happiness is determined by our genes; 10% by life circumstances; 40% by our daily activities.

~ *Sonja Lyubomirsky et al., 2005 - Professor at University of California, Riverside - major research devoted to human happiness*

“In a culture of achievement we naturally assume a path to happiness: get on it, do the work, and - enduring a baleful journey of indeterminate years - you will eventually arrive at bliss. But there is no path to happiness, only a path of happiness. In other words, happiness is a state, not a destination. You can’t “get there” from here. It can only come to you. Wherever you are. Whatever your circumstances.”

~ *David Anderson, in ‘Breakfast Epiphanies: Finding Wonder in the Everyday’.*

“I keep remembering one of my Guru’s teachings about happiness. She says that people universally tend to think that happiness is a stroke of luck, something that will maybe descend upon you like fine weather if you’re fortunate enough. But that’s not how happiness works. Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it. If you don’t, you will leak away your innate contentment. It’s easy enough to pry when you’re in distress but continuing to pray even when your crisis has passed is like a sealing process, helping your soul hold tight to its good attainments.

~ *Elizabeth Gilbert, in “Eat, Pray, Love”*

“Happiness is a choice. You can choose to be happy. There’s going to be stress in life, but it’s your choice whether you let it affect you or not.” — *Valerie Bertinelli*

QUESTIONS:

- Do these statements leave you confused? Do you think happiness a choice?
- Are there ways we can “find” happiness? - or do you just wait for it to come? Are there things we can do during these unsettled times in our country and world?

Let’s look at some things we can do!

From “**The Week**” magazine, Jan 11, 2019:

What science has discovered about lifting mood and creating a positive outlook on life

How does physical activity affect your mental state?

. . . people who exercised for at least 30 minutes most days were around 30 percent more likely to consider themselves happy compared with people who were less active. “While anything helps, a bit more is probably better,” said University of Michigan scientist Weiyun Chen.

Where can you go to be happier?

Outside, into open green spaces. And you don’t even need to go far. . . .The lead author of a 2015 study from Stanford University says that nature may change “how you allocate your attention and whether or not you focus on negative emotions.”

How else can you boost your mood?

Be grateful for the good things in your life—and keep a gratitude diary so that it becomes a habit. “The more of an effort you make to feel gratitude one day,” said British psychologist Christian Jarrett, “the more the feeling will come to you spontaneously in the future.”

So what should you be grateful for?

Plenty—but most of all, your friends and loved ones. A Harvard University study on happiness that tracked the same group of men for 80 years found that living a healthy, happy life was more dependent on good friendships than on exercise or cholesterol levels. And we fare even better if loved ones offer support in the form of hugs, according to a 2018 study by Carnegie Mellon University.

Can you just resolve to be happier?

Sadly, no. In fact, trying too hard to be happy may even have the opposite effect, causing people to become fixated on setbacks and failure. So relax, and add “Don’t try too hard to be happy” to the New Year’s list.

QUESTIONS:

- Do you find these ideas do-able? Are these things we can do without “trying too hard”?
- Have you done some or all these things already? What has been your experience?

LET'S LOOK AT SOME OTHER TIPS (by Steve Spring):

Choose Your Friends Carefully

"You are the average of the five people we spend the most time with." — Jim Rohn

Happy people know that their friends can either be a positive or negative influence on their lives. They are happy because they surround themselves with positive and optimistic people who help them reach their goals.

Follow Your Passion

Happy people have the ability to find and pursue their passions in life.

They have found a way to tailor their lives in a way that allows them to spend their time doing what they love.

Serve Others

Happy people know that there is a strong association between helping others and being happy. They have found that serving others is a great way to experience positive changes in their own lives.

Accept What You Can't Change

"Happiness can exist only in acceptance." — George Orwell

Happy people know that there are some things that are out of their control and they can not change. Instead of fighting these situations, they have learned to accept things as they are and make the best of the situation.

QUESTIONS:

- What pops out for you on those tips? Share some of your experiences.
- What new things might you try or adapt to what you already do?
- Can you think of any other ideas that would increase your positive emotions?

As CONVERSATION comes to an end, you might ask for final statements/last thoughts on the topic.

"Do you have a thought from this conversation that you will carry home with you?"

CLOSING: (you might ask a volunteer to read this)

Before you even get out of bed in the morning, you can take the time to send good wishes to yourself all the way through to the next morning. As you picture your day, take the time to fill in the details - where you are going, who you will see, what you will do - and send love and good wishes ahead to yourself, as well as everyone you encounter. It will be like arriving in a new place and finding that an old friend has sent a bouquet of flowers from back home to welcome you and remind you that you are loved. ~ Madisyn Taylor. DAILY OM

RING CHIME and EXTINGUISH CANDLE:

As our time together comes to a close, we give thanks for one another, for the chance to share our lives, and to renew our spirits in the company of friends. May we go forth enriched by our gathering, committed to living life fully, to loving life with more passion, and to supporting one another.

ANNOUNCE NEXT SESSION'S TOPIC: (unless last session)

Ask for a volunteer to bring in a CLOSING reading (if needed) for this next session (It can be something they particularly like, doesn't necessarily have to relate to the topic.)

if providing SNACKS, ask for a volunteer

And finally ~ for some ideas for you to take home:

“Scientific Proof That Happiness Is a Choice”, *by Shawn Achor, Harvard Business Review, March 2012*

I spent 12 years at Harvard researching happiness before leaving to study happiness in the real world. I have traveled to 48 countries over the last five years to study the connection between happiness and success. In doing so I discovered several ways in which happiness actually boosts success. Dopamine, for example, is a chemical released in the brain when you are happy. This drug not only makes you seek more happiness, it turns on every learning center in the brain, raising your mental focus and making you three times as creative, which, in turn, tends to lead to more and greater success.

As I've come to see it, happiness is a work ethic. You have to **train your brain to be positive** just like you exercise to strengthen your body. This may sound simple, but how easy is it to go to the gym? Happiness is not something that happens to you. Happiness is created.

5 Habits to Create More Happiness:

Want to try it? Pick one of the five habits below and commit to doing it every day for three weeks. My research shows that when we do that, we form new life habits. After just 21 days, these positive habits can become as automatic as brushing your teeth. Amazingly, neuroscientists have observed that when we create life habits, we literally change our brain chemistry. Researchers have found that daily routines decrease the cognitive costs of doing that activity, like brushing your teeth. Your brain follows the path of least resistance, so if you have engrained patterns, your brain follows those like rivers cut by decades of water flows. We can literally watch on brain scans as new habits and skills sets change your neural pathways.

1. **Write down three different things each day that you're grateful for.**
2. **Spend two minutes a day writing about one positive experience you had during the previous 24 hours.**
3. **Exercise for at least 10 minutes a day.**
4. **Meditate (or sit quietly, away from work) for two minutes,** focusing on your breath going in and out.
5. **Send one quick email first thing in the morning** thanking or praising someone in your social support network. This significantly increases your feeling of connection, which studies show is the greatest predictor of happiness.

Now go **“train your brain”** and create more happiness!

Perhaps you can tell us about something you tried at our next Check-in