Transformed Groups

Leader’s Guide

HHCI
Hope and Healing Center & Institute
Transforming Lives, Restoring Hope

Gateway To Hope
The Hope and Healing Center & Institute (HHCI) is a comprehensive mental health resource dedicated to transforming lives and restoring hope through education, research, training and supportive services.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a Transformed Group Leader</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Information</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Structure and Flow</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading Step by Step</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to Expect</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Do’s and Don’ts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling Difficult Symptoms</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for Distress</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Your Group</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with a Group Member</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Things</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vision

It is known that individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to seek help from clergy or ministry staff before any other professional group. Research has shown that only a small portion of churches are supportive of those dealing with mental health difficulties. This results from a lack of education and stigma. No church has all the answers for the numerous challenges of a broken world, but most church leaders desire to see their people rise up and be a part of helping overcome negative attitudes and statistics.

**support |ˈsərpo|**
1 to bear all or part of the weight of; hold up:
2 give assistance to; enable to function or act.

One simple way you can help is by starting and facilitating a Transformed Group in your area. Transformed Groups are designed to provide an ongoing support structure that helps individuals hold one another up and give each person practical skills and tools in order to regain their lives and rebuild their families. All of this is done in a Christ-centered environment with a clear focus on the necessity of God’s grace for life transformation.

Transformed Groups focus on the positive, where the goal of each meeting is to end with a greater understanding of one’s self in regards to mental health difficulties. While the group does allow some time to share pressing difficulties, the emphasis is on learning how to filter difficulties through God’s grace and implementing the many practical skills and tools presented during the meetings.
Being a Transformed Group Leader

To be a group leader, you **DO NOT** have to be a licensed mental health professional. However, if this is your background and experience, you will have greater insight into the topics.

**Transformed Group leaders possess the following qualities and characteristics:**

- They have completed both the *Empower* and *Transform* training offered by the Hope and Healing Center & Institute.

- They are a passionate advocate for those with mental health difficulties and/or are a leader in the church (even if they do not have a diagnosis or loved-one with a diagnosis).

- They are in a healthy place to be able to effectively give to others. If they are a peer, they have recovered from a mental health difficulty. If they have a loved one struggling with a mental health difficulty, they have successfully navigated the stages of grieving (either for the loss of a loved one or the loss of who that loved one used to be).

- They are motivated to serve others and recognize the importance of helping those living with mental health difficulties.

- They feel confident leading small groups and organizing gatherings, and have committed to leading the group through the entire workbook.

- They are an active member of the church, walking in devotion to Christ and living a lifestyle aligned with the truths of the Bible.

- They routinely incorporate good self-care (some techniques could be the ones taught in these lessons) in their lives to be able to continue leading in a setting that can become challenging at times.
General Information

Who Can Attend the Group?

This group does not focus on any specific mental health difficulty, but addresses common topics that are helpful for most. Here are factors to help understand who will benefit from attending each group:

Families Transformed Group

a. Any spouse who has a wife or husband experiencing mental illness.

b. Any parent (or grandparent) with a son or daughter with any type of mental illness. Typically these are the parents of adult children with a mental illness, but parents of adolescent children are also welcomed. Not all, but many of the situations of adolescents and adults will crossover in parenting dynamics.

c. Family members, who are 18 years or older, who have a sibling or a parent(s) with mental illness.

d. This is not a group for meeting benevolent needs (e.g., food, finances). If requests are made, they need to be directed through the pastoral leadership of the individual’s church. Many churches and organizations have a benevolence ministry/program that can provide help. Do not feel swayed by anyone’s requests; it can lead to enabling behaviors. You can instead respond by offering prayer for the need at the end of the group and then directing them to their church’s benevolence ministry after the group. Always consult with your church or organizational leadership.

Minds Transformed Group

a. Anyone diagnosed with a mental health difficulty or disorder by a licensed mental health professional.

b. This is not a professional clinical therapy group. Anyone can attend as long as their condition does not overwhelm the leader and the whole group each time. The participants should have a good degree of stability without causing ongoing distractions from the topic and/or being harmful towards others through negative comments and behaviors. This does not mean they are not allowed to vent their frustrations, but rather venting within appropriate boundaries without consuming the meeting.
c. **Those who are having extreme psychological distress** are welcomed, but if they are causing problems that consume all the attention of the group leader, group participants, and the group time, these individuals most likely will need leave the group for a while and focus on receiving additional professional intervention and treatment. Once the person gains a greater level of stability they should be welcomed back into the group.

d. **This is not a group for meeting benevolent needs (e.g., food, finances).** If requests are made, they need to be directed through the pastoral leadership of the individual’s church. Many churches and organizations have a benevolence ministry/program that can provide help. Do not feel swayed by anyone’s requests; it can lead to enabling behaviors. You can instead respond by offering prayer for the need at the end of the group and then directing them to their church’s benevolence ministry after the group. Always consult with your church or organizational leadership.

Hearts Transformed Group

a. The Hearts Transformed material is used for **individuals who have experienced trauma** (e.g., natural disaster, rape/sexual assault, exposure to combat).

b. **Individuals who are victims of rape/sexual assault or combat veterans** should be placed in separate groups where everyone in the group is dealing with the same traumatic issue. This will allow the group to focus the topical discussions each week around their shared traumatic experience.

c. **This is not a group for meeting benevolent needs (e.g., food, finances).** If requests are made, they need to be directed through the pastoral leadership of the individual’s church. Many churches and organizations have a benevolence ministry/program that can provide help. Do not feel swayed by anyone’s requests; it can lead to enabling behaviors. You can instead respond by offering prayer for the need at the end of the group and then directing them to their church’s benevolence ministry after the group. Always consult with your church or organizational leadership.
Prepare and Review

Take time to review the topic, reading over any associated worksheet(s). Follow the notes given for each topic focusing on the Lesson Summary and Key Point. Take time to read the Bible verse from your own Bible and the overall summary on the topic sheet. Get a good understanding of the connection between the scripture and the topic. You don’t have to be an expert on the material, just familiar with the topic.

Prayer

Taking time to pray prior to the group is important. First, ask God to refresh you to serve and guide the group well. Second, pray for the group asking God for overall care, growth, and renewal of life.

Length

An hour and a half is a reasonable length of time to which most people can easily commit. Depending on the group, some may desire shorter or longer meeting times. Regardless of the set time, some will stay afterwards for more prayer and/or fellowship. You and your group can decide the time frame that works the best for the majority of your group.

Location

Meeting in a house creates a more comfortable feel, but groups can also be hosted at a church, organization or business meeting room/office space. There is no expectation to provide food or drinks at the meeting. Please communicate this to all group members. It is okay if someone wants to provide snacks and drinks, but it can become burdensome and expensive to always have this expectation. On the other hand, there are often some in the group who have a more hospitable nature and would like to do this.

Communication

Create a sign-up sheet to collect everyone’s contact information (email/phone) for communicating meeting times/places and group announcements. Announce the group meeting time and location a few days in advance each week. This contact information can also be used as a prayer chain for group needs and emergencies.
COMMUNITY AND DISCOVERY: Each Transformed Group session allows for sharing and relationship building. While the group works together through each topic, personal discovery is encouraged. Group members will each want to have their own workbook to make notes and as a personal resource to review the various topics and tools.

FOR ANYONE AT ANY TIME: While the Transformed Group follows a weekly curriculum each group topic stands alone allowing visitors to come at any point.

WEEKLY MEETINGS: The group is designed to meet weekly OR can be divided up into two separate sessions with a break in the middle (e.g., fall, break for holidays and continue in spring).

HOW THE GROUP WORKS

1. FAITH

   Includes a scripture that looks at a Biblical story related to the topic. A general overview of the scripture is given.

   Read the scripture together, the short commentary, and then have a discovery discussion.

   Note. Leaders should always bring their Bible and encourage the group to do the same.

2. FACTS

   Lists specific facts related to the topic to be used for discussion. Read the fact and then use the questions for group discussion.

   Many of the topics come with additional information and practical tools.

   Follow the instructions listed in each activity section.

3. FUTURE

   Gives practical suggestions and tips individuals can immediately apply in their daily lives.
Leading the Group Step by Step

1 INTRODUCTION

Connect [10 min]: Give the group 5-10 minutes to connect and say hello. Do not worry about late arrivals, even if only one person arrives on time, you want to begin on time and not end late.

Welcome, Vision, and Guidelines [5 min]: Welcome everyone to the group, reminding them why you are meeting (important for new visitors). When you meet for the first time or have new visitors, take time to go around the room, and have everyone share their first names only. Do not ask a new person to talk about why they have come to the group. However, if at any point within the group discussion he/she would like to share more about their or their loved one’s condition, they are more than welcome.

Give a short vision of what the group is about, what the topic will be for that group session and the guidelines of the group listed at the beginning of the workbook.

“Hello everyone and thank you for coming tonight. This group is a place to find comfort and encouragement with those who share the same struggles. Tonight, our group will be looking at the topic of ______. As we get started, it’s important to remember the guidelines for our group, which are:

TO GIVE understanding, respect, encouragement, and compassionate support.

TO DISCOVER hope, tools, and to learn from one another’s journey.

TO NOT FIX anyone’s challenges with immediate advice and solutions, but rather offer our story and what has worked for us.

TO NOT DEBATE the right or wrong doctrine or theology.

TO RESPECT and maintain one another’s confidentiality.

... we have some new folks here tonight, so let’s go around the room and say our first names.”
**Testimonies of Praise and/or Sharing of Difficulties [10 min]:** Take an opportunity for 1-3 people to share about how they’ve seen God working in their lives during the past week, how they were able to incorporate the last group topic and tools, or any difficulties they are experiencing. Having a good balance of praises and stories of difficulties can help build faith and bring encouragement. When problems and difficulties are shared, this portion can easily take up the whole group time if you are not careful. How to handle difficult stories will be discussed later.

**Opening Prayer [1 min]:** Affirm the testimonies of praise/difficulties and transition to prayer. Some may feel uncomfortable with prayer, so keep it simple.

> Father, thank you for being with us and understanding our journey.
> Give us wisdom to discover helpful insight and tools for each of our paths.
> Thank you for giving us hope, grace, and Your steadfast love for better days to come.
> In Jesus name, Amen.

**CONTENT**

**Topic and Discussion [30 -40 min]:** Use the topic intro pages **Lesson Summary** and **Key Point** sections to briefly review the topic of the session before reading the scripture.

As the leader, you want to make sure everyone has the opportunity to read and discuss (unless you know they are uncomfortable reading or discussing). You should only have to read if the group is uncomfortable reading out loud (which is typically the first two group sessions). By doing this you are letting the group gain ownership of the group and you only have to help direct / facilitate through the material.

a. After reading the scripture, read the **FAITH** portion and then the questions to allow for discussion.

b. After a spending a few minutes on the scripture discussion, read the **FACTS** portion and questions for discussion. To keep people engaged, take turns going around the room with different members reading each point and question.

c. Some topics have an **ACTIVITY** worksheet that you will look at during the **FACTS** portion.
d. Read the **FUTURE** points of discussion. Again, take turns within the group, reading them out one by one. This should be done with just a few minutes left in the group, right before closing.

---

**3. CLOSING**

**Prayer [~10 min]:** The last 5-10 minutes is used for group prayer. This is one of the most important times of the group because it facilitates connection into each other’s lives. It’s in this setting that people will open up more about their difficulties and receive encouragement from others. This is not about everyone trying to be a minister and offer answers, but rather providing comfort and prayer.

Some participants may feel very uncomfortable praying. If this is the case, have 2-3 in the group pray aloud and you close in prayer. Encourage them by saying that their prayers do not need to be long and eloquent, they just need to come from the heart. As well, encourage them that prayers can even be a short sentence or even one word (i.e., “thanks”).

> “Thank you for everyone participating in today’s topic (and practicing the tools). Now, we are going to close our time by praying as a group. Please do not feel you need to pray long and eloquently, just pray from your heart. If you only one sentence or one word, like “thanks,” in this group that is fine. The point is that we want to connect with God and ask Him to continue the process of healing and recovery in our lives.

Depending on the person’s mental health difficulty—their level of anxiety and other symptoms, they may not be able to pray or share in the group. As a leader, you will have to be aware of what the members can and cannot handle. You should allow them to leave at any time or before prayer if this is too difficult to process. This is a very rare situation, but be aware and sensitive.

**End with Relationship [variable]:** This is the time after the group has finished praying. Many of the group will take some extra time for fellowship and conversation. Some may stay longer in prayer or discussion. As the groups finishes, people will have an opportunity to initiate more deeply into each other’s lives; exchanging phone numbers, emails, and setting up other times to talk or meet outside the groups. Those that have finished are free to leave.
What to Expect

Painful Situations - You’re Not Responsible

Mental illness often is associated with many painful stories that range from trauma, abusive relationships, and rejection by others. This group will allow others to share their journey, which helps everyone to feel safe and protected. Be prepared to hear these painful journeys.

In addition, this will cause a mercy response and you may feel inclined to help with their circumstances. It is important to remember that you are there for support and are not be expected to fix their problems. If you involve yourself in trying to remedy their situation, you will find yourself overwhelmed. Many of the topics in the group will empower the members to work and improve their own situation.

If you feel a group member needs immediate service, always consult with your church leadership for a team approach to providing extra support. If you or other group members get involved, it should always be with prayer and simple ways to help. You must maintain boundaries even when serving others. You have to keep reminding yourself, “I am not responsible.” Your role is to be present in the group and to support them in their journey through teaching and promoting self-care and healthy coping skills.

No “Thank You”

As a leader, you will have to remind yourself that your reward and gratitude comes from Jesus! God alone is your encourager, source of approval, and acceptance. He is the one who appreciates everything you do to serve the body of Christ. Every way you love them, you are ministering and loving Jesus (Matthew 25). With the struggles of mental health difficulties, many of your group members may not take the time to show you any gratitude for the life and love you have poured out for them. At the same time, there will be others who will show ongoing thanksgiving for what you are doing. This is often not a very popular ministry and you will not get much (or any) recognition for your time and effort. This is all done unto Jesus, and He alone is your encourager and reward (Romans 15:5, Hebrews 6:10, Hebrews 11:6).

Be Pastorally Available

Take time to pray and contact members of the group. Do not burden yourself; find creative times and simple ways to pray for others in the group. Email, call, or visit to encourage them. Sometimes members will call you for advice or help. Do not feel that you have to be an expert or feel responsible for fixing their problems. Mainly, just listen and respond the best you can. Simple encouragement is always effective and beneficial.
Group Dynamics

Group Members at Different Levels of Experience

As noted earlier, please know that people are at different stages of treatment, recovery, and grieving. Some are going through crises with much pain, while others may be seeing good progress. No one has to be perfect to attend. This is a great setting for each person to understand the pain associated with mental health recovery and to find hope.

Members at Different Levels of Faith

Your group may attract people from churches that have different doctrinal beliefs. The group is not tied to a particular denomination, but rather to the truth of the scriptures with an interpretation geared toward mental health difficulties. Some members will have greater faith and extensive church backgrounds while others will have less. Most importantly, there may be some people who do not have a relationship with Christ. You can share the gospel with them and ask if they want to give their lives to Christ (if you have trouble with this, ask for help from your church leaders). Do not force this upon them, let them dialogue into the decision. Remember the goal of the Transformed Group is to relieve suffering and reveal Christ. A participant’s level of spiritual maturity or church background is not important.

• **Avoid theological discussions during the group meeting.** Stay focused so that you can get through the topic. Some participants may express hyper-religious views (which can be a symptom of some disorders), but do not get into dialogue about who is right or wrong.

• **Respect others no matter their level of spiritual maturity or understanding.** No one has arrived at the full revelation of Christ’s love towards those struggling with mental health difficulties.

• **Many questions will arise; do not feel intimidated if you do not know the answers.** You are just facilitating discussion, not trying to answers every possible question.

Active Listening and Response

When any member is upset, it is important to fully listen and respond. Active listening means you are completely focused on listening to the person speaking, without thinking about what your response will be. When actively listening, you are able to accurately verbalizing how he/she is feeling.
Use an active listening approach to defuse tension. It takes time to learn to not react with anger, but to respond with grace, despite accusations or presumptions made toward you. Review this approach below. **Validate, Affirm and Reconcile:**

1. **Validation**

Really listen to what the person is saying and identify the emotions associated. Do not focus on your defense or opinion, only listening intently. Listen and look past the issue to identify and validate the specific feelings behind the situation or their particular struggle. As you validate their emotions, try to keep emotional words simple, since some negative words imply more intensity. For example, “upsetting instead of devastated” or “sad instead of depressed.”

“I can see how that situation would make you feel sad, angry, discouraged, etc.”

“I am so sorry that was so hurtful and I can see why you are upset ... that would upset me, too.”

2. **Affirmation**

This is listening and looking past the situation to see how they are enduring and/or finding grace within the challenge. Affirmation will reframe the situation and help them move their emotions in a more positive direction.

“I’m amazed how in this challenge you rely on God, how you’ve endured, it says so much about you.”

“I know this has been so challenging and I can see how you are being courageous in pursuing what you need.”

3. **Reconciliation**

Reconcile means “to restore harmony or peace.” You do not have to have the solution for them, rather the reaffirming security of presence as you walk through this process together.

“I know we don’t have all the answers right now and I will walk through this with you and discover the answers along the way.”

“I know we need some space right now and I am committed to you and whatever process is best.”
Communication Do’s and Don’ts

What NOT to do:

• **Correct or discount.** This is when one focuses more on someone being right and the other wrong. This makes for a very defensive conversation. Try not to focus on correcting or discounting their thoughts and feelings.

• **Reason.** This is focusing on using facts to prove your point or convince the other you are right. As a group leader, try not to reason or logically convince them that their reality is off. There might be some factors not fully being understood, however it makes it worse by trying to push them further into “being sick.” The spiritual topics can be challenging, but never try to use scripture to prove your point or fix each other. The truth is love and grace, not punishment or judgment.

• **Raise your voice.** Do not raise your voice in an attempt to control the situation. By learning communication tools, you can defuse intense emotions and de-escalate the situation.

• **Silent treatment.** Do not use the silent treatment out of frustration. Try not to shut down and ignore what the group member is saying. This only angers the individual more and communicates rejection or abandonment.

• **Give ultimatums.** Try to not use words that indicate punishment, judgment, or some course of retribution (e.g., “If you continue acting this way in the group, we are going to ____”). This minimizes their feelings and leads to greater anger due rejection.

• **Become fearful.** Do not become fearful from what they are saying and feeling, as it can lead to a reaction rather than a purposeful, thought out response.
What to do:

- **Aim for the heart and then the mind.** Intense situations and communication can lead to poorly processed thoughts, and reactive emotions and responses. This reaction comes from feeling strong emotions or feeling physically unsafe, threatened, and powerless. In heightened emotions, appeal to the other’s emotional state through validation, affirmation, and reconciling. Even if they are being irrational, cursing, or hurtful, try to not take it personally and stay focused on this method. This is only their venting method for their internal distress, NOT their full opinion on the matter. After creating safety through empowering communication, the situation will calm and allow balanced thoughts to form.

- **Use “AND” instead of “BUT”**. When you are responding, try to not use the word “but.” When you use “but,” it negates everything you said before. You want to build to what you are saying, not negate it.

- **Scripture.** If you choose to bring up God or scripture, it should be simple and the dialogue short. Use references about God’s character and our identity in Christ that lead towards rest, grace, and hope. Do not use references that imply expectations, obedience of spiritual disciplines, or discipline as that will imply works and performance to appease God’s goodness to help.
Handling Difficult Symptoms

Hyper-Religiosity

Although this is a common symptom for those who may be experiencing hypomania, mania, or psychosis, others in your group may struggle with hyper-religiosity as well. The individual may share exaggerated religious comments, “words” from the Lord and performance-related faith ideals. Their comments are likely to be confusing and distracting to the group. These thoughts may be directly correlation with their symptoms (emotional instability). Trying to correct them will only cause increased anxiety.

What to Do

Do not react impulsively to these strange thoughts or get into a long discussion to correct their logic, doctrine, or philosophy. Affirm him/her by allowing the thoughts to be shared (don’t react negatively to them). These thoughts may upset others in the group, so you will want to de-escalate the situation. You may also need to talk to individuals in the group afterwards if anything was directed specifically to them. In order to de-escalate the situation, start by validating (V) what was said and the basic truth of the comment (what they are feeling). Then affirm (A) his/her faith and gently add in a comforting perspective for the whole group to reconcile (R). A way to do this is to default to God’s grace for all of us. God is not intimidated by how someone misperceives the truth; once stable, these thoughts and ideas will subside.

“(V) Thank you for sharing your thoughts on ... I can see that this is very important to you. (A) It is so great that you are exploring and growing in your faith. You are clearly seeking to know Jesus and follow him, which brings Him honor. We are all growing to know Him, wherever we are in our journey. (R) Even if someone is struggling with anxiety and is unable to read the Bible due to difficult symptoms, God understands and has grace for us all to grow. Again, thank you for sharing. Let’s look at the next bullet point.”

Healing

It is common for participants to look through the lens of miraculous healing. For instance, when they read a particular passage of Scripture they tend to gravitate toward the topic of healing even if the main point of the passage is not related to healing. The rest of the group will often join in this type of thinking.

What to Do

The symptoms they are dealing with can be very difficult, so the desire for healing is understandable. Do not go into a deep theological discussion on why God heals some and not others or whether or not healing is for today. These are questions that cannot be easily answered. Instead, validate (V) their desire to be relieved of
these difficulties. Affirm (A) them in their faith so they do not think they are not being healed because of something they are or are not doing. And reconcile (R) that God has given us different strengths and abilities to be able to manage the symptoms we have until the day comes when we are all healed.

“(V) I want to affirm you in your desire to be healed by God. Chances are that many people in this room can relate to having that desire. (A) Just being here in this group shows that you care about your recovery. (R) It is true that we don’t know why some are healed immediately and some are not. But there are many aspects to healing and one of them is that God can use the methods of the day (doctors and therapy) to bring about the process of healing.”

Negative Comments

Some members may want to vent about their medication, doctors, therapy or others who are trying to help them. This may stir others to be very negative and can create a toxic environment within the group.

What to Do

It is okay to let them vent their initial thoughts and feelings. Be sure to validate (V) and affirm (A) their difficult emotions. If this goes on for a while, you will want to interject so that the whole group does not end up focusing and projecting these frustrations onto their own lives. If this happens and everyone starts venting, it can be very difficult to regain the group. One solution is to offer prayer, whether as a group or on an individual basis. Another solution is to offer some time with the individual after the group to discuss those feelings further. Remember, these individuals deal with negative thinking or moods all day, so this meeting is a great opportunity to practice (and model) learning how to counter these negative emotions with healthy thinking and coping mechanisms. You want to give them truth, because even though their body and mind are affected by a mental health difficulty, their spirit is being renewed day by day.

“(V) We all understand these challenges. They are so difficult and everyone here can identify in some way with what you shared. (A) You are valuable to God and as a member of this group. (R) Would it be okay if we took just a minute to pray about these challenges? God’s grace and love is for us, and He encourages us throughout the Bible to cast our cares upon Him, and promises to help us in times of need. God longs to be gracious to us.”

Misperceived Actions and Accusations

Some members may take things said in the group, whether by you or the group, incorrectly and/or personally. Understand that one of the most common difficulties experienced is a feeling of disconnection or rejection from others. Many of the members have been hurt or rejected by others who did not understand them; this reinforces the negative perceptions (see case example below, “Bitterness and Inability to Forgive”). Other times, these symptoms may cause someone to misunderstand even innocent comments or gestures.
What to Do

Do not worry or feel the need to defend yourself or the group. However, you do want to respond to any inappropriate actions towards yourself or the group. Always respond with grace and humility. If this happens within the group, simply address the issue right then and there. Validate (V) that difficulties can feel overwhelming. Affirm (A) that everyone is a valued member and the group is a safe place wherever they are in their personal journey. Reconcile (R) that these difficulties can cross the line, so we need to deal with these offenses to strengthen the community. You will need to follow up afterwards with the individual to ensure he/she is at peace and feels heard.

(V) “I can see that you are upset and that is understandable. That was a difficult comment and I know you are frustrated. (A) At the same time, let’s remember that we are valued members who need to respect and support one another as best we can. (R) That’s the beauty of grace; we can all grow with one another through difficulties. We’re here for one another and we all understand.”

Case Example: Outside the group setting, a member misunderstood the leader and accused her of misguided leadership and methods of ministry, even complaining to the leadership of the church. The leader responded with humility, validated their emotions and affirmed them as a person. The leader simply explained her heart and apologized if that member felt offended in any way. That facilitated the group member to open up about negative experiences with other professionals and churches that had mistreated and rejected her in the past. In addition to past troubles, that group member was dealing with unsettling symptoms. This person had a hard time trusting Christian leaders and was feeling the same way towards the group new leader. The leader responded with validation, affirmation (acceptance), and was patient through the person’s misperceptions. This brought about a healthy reconciliation, allowing this member to trust and heal. The individual continued to thrive as a faithful group member.

Delusional or “Loose Thinking”

Someone at this stage may not be able to participate well in a group setting and may cause many of the previously mentioned problem dynamics.

What to Do

If you have this in the group, remember to Validate, Affirm, and Reconcile. You want to validate (V) any truth in their statements, affirm (A) the person’s value or faith, and then reconcile (R) by expressing that the heart of the group is to accept and understand each other, no matter the different challenges. The beauty of God is that even in a very confused or delusional state, some of the most profound biblical truths can be expressed and bless others. These are heroes of the faith; they are afflicted with mental health difficulties, yet still choose to have a heart devoted to Christ in its simplest form. As a leader, you will be surprised how much refreshment they can bring to you. When the comments are upsetting and uncomfortable, you want to intervene to regain control of
Thank you for sharing your thoughts on ... I can see that this is very important to you. It is so great that you are exploring and growing in your faith. You are clearly seeking to know Jesus and follow him, which brings Him honor. We are all growing to know Him, wherever we are in our journey. Even if someone is struggling with anxiety and is unable to read the Bible due to difficult symptoms, God understands and has grace for us all to grow. Again, thank you for sharing. Let’s look at the next bullet point.”

Anxiety

The most common symptoms associated with mental health difficulties are anxiety related. Depending on the person, just sitting in the group may be overwhelming and very uncomfortable. It may be therapeutic for the individual to come to the group, even if he/she is unable to participate. Be aware that merely sitting in with the group could be producing major anxiety.

What to Do

At the beginning, take time to personally affirm them for being able to come. During the group session, do not require them to participate. Rather, let them be quiet and just listen to the dialogue. Often times, listening is the best way for someone to participate. Someone can listen to everything discussed and it can be very comforting. For some, anxiety might be overwhelming and they may need to leave the room to regain composure. This is okay. Let them come and go as needed. Afterwards, validate the individual by recognizing the challenge of attending the group, given the experienced anxiety. Affirm them as a valued member of the group.

Bitterness and the Inability to Forgive

The topic of mental health difficulties always has some level of associated hurt or pain. Whether from rejection by the church, family, friends or others, you will hear many painful stories. In other cases, these may be tied to serious personal issues such as neglect, abuse or trauma. As noted before, these issues stem from negative self-judgment and a pattern of thinking that is part of the mental health struggle. If this topic comes up, it will be very easy for the group to identify with these painful stories, so you want to be careful to not let yourself (and the group) justify this pain for harboring resentment, bitterness, and unforgiveness. Many people have suffered due to painful experiences, but these negative thoughts and emotions need to be managed and not allowed to fester.

What to Do

As the leader, you will have to remember to Validate, Affirm, and Reconcile. Guide them to understand grace and mercy for others. Validate (V) their pain and be sympathetic that any hurtful action committed toward them is wrong. Affirm (A) that they are valued and special. If we give into the fear, rejection, and hurt, we only
reinforce the misunderstanding. When it is related to painful events, reconcile (R) an individual to the group by explaining that God is our Healer and there is grace for learning how to receive His love for us. Communicate that we do not need to be held back by other’s hurtful behavior. God longs to be gracious with us so that we might live life abundantly.

\[ Related to Stigma: (V) \] “I’m so sorry you had to go through that; it must have been so painful. Please know that you are special and valued. What they said/did was absolutely wrong! (A) God’s grace is all about learning to have life. We can trust that God will be our Healer in these painful situations. (R) As for feeling misunderstood, many do not truly understand these struggles. When people see your stability, it will dispel their stigma and misunderstanding. God has grace for us to continue to grow ... and God is patient with them to grow, too.”

---

**Flashbacks**

For members who have experiences trauma, memories of abuse can be triggered by certain visual cues or conversations. The flashback may cause them to start having a panic attack, unsettling emotions, or even faint.

**What to Do**

Remain calm and communicate to the group that everything is okay. If appropriate, very gently and slowly, remove the person from the room, and help him/her calm down (have a co-leader or faithful member continue with the group).

1. **Establish Safety:** In a soft voice, express to the individual that they are safe and that they are experiencing a flashback. Remind them that they are with you at the Transformed Group. Express that the situation is in the past and it is not happening right now. If you have a pillow or small soft cushion, you can have them hold this to help them feel comforted.

2. **Breathing Techniques:** Use the breathing techniques discussed in the Relaxation, Rest, and Joy topic. Instruct the individual to breathe, listening to your voice as a focal point. This is not the time to ask all sorts of questions, only use words like “breathe in” and “breathe out” until they are able to calm down.

3. **Grounding and Orientation:** If they are stable, you can take them outside to have them try snapping their fingers, clapping their hands, and try focusing on a tree, a car, or a spot on a building or wall. Establish a feeling of safety by orienting them to their current and safe surroundings. You can ask them what day it is, what year it is, what they had for breakfast that morning, etc.
4. **Dizziness and Fainting:** Overwhelming anxiety causes changes in the nervous and circulatory system inducing a drop in blood flow to the brain, which results in dizziness and fainting. Try to have the person lie down with legs slightly propped up to increase blood flow to the brain; do not prop the head up. Make sure they are breathing appropriately and that nothing is obstructing their breathing. The person should regain consciousness within a minute or two. Call 911 if they are not breathing comfortably or regaining consciousness.

---

**Co-dependency**

Everyone needs relationships; we need community. Unfortunately, many people who have experienced trauma or struggle with mental health difficulties have experienced a lot of rejection due to misunderstanding and related stigma. They often feel isolated and have no one to talk to and share life. Because of their symptoms, some may come across as very needy and not understand proper boundaries of relationships, which can become overwhelming. This can happen with the leader or with other members of the group.

**What to do**

You do not want the needy person to scare others within the group or overwhelm you as a leader. You will need to address the appropriate boundaries of healthy relationships with the individual. Use the model outlined above to Validate, Affirm, and Reconcile with the person and the group. Always affirm that this is not rejection, this is creating a healthy way of giving and receiving within a supportive community.

“(Name), we value you as part of this group. You share and participate with great friendship. I am so grateful you want more relationship and community, which is so healthy. So, let’s talk about how you and I, and the group, can have a health and growing relationship. We need to discuss how much you want to spend time or talk to everyone in the group. You are cared for and are enjoyable, but others and myself may not have as much time as you may have. So, we need to limit the phone calls to maybe 1-3 times a week instead of 4 or 5 every day. If the group or I are not able to answer or return your call that day, we are not rejecting you. We are just trying to work or do other things, as we have many responsibilities and commitments. We will call you back and find other times to visit. We support you and want to help; we just need to discover the right pace so that everyone can grow together. So, what do you think you could do to help provide a good balance in relationship?”
Caring for Distress

The Emotional Situation

There will certainly be some difficult emotional moments. Expect individuals to share experiences that will end in pain and tears. Here is how to handle the situation.

1. **Give them time to console themselves**, let them share and see if they are able to console themselves enough to move on. They probably just needed to share with others. Validate what they shared and that the group will pray for this at the end of the session (or beginning if shared during opening share time). Then, move on with others sharing or the next topic point.

If you intervene in the middle of their story to begin praying, you are cutting off their own emotional process for comfort. It also teaches the person and group that this is how emotional distress is addressed in the group sessions. Be patient and only intervene when they are unable to console themselves.

2. **If they are unable to console themselves and continue crying**, follow this procedure:
   
   a. **Validate (V)** pain: “We can see this is very difficult and painful.”
   b. **Affirm (A)** strength/safety: “We can see you are relying on God’s grace despite this challenge, and we admire that. This is a safe place for you to share this with us.”
   c. **Reconcile (R)**: “We are here to support and walk with you as you are in this journey.”
   d. **Ask permission for Ministry**: “Would it be okay if we prayed for you at this time?”

      *Don’t force prayer, be gentle and ask: Some may not want prayer and at that point may pull themselves together and be able to move on with the group. Some may receive prayer and that will be comforting enough for them to continue with the group topic.*

3. **If the person is unable to stop crying and compose himself/herself**, have your co-leader (or one of the people of the same gender that you feel confident can handle the situation) take the individual into the next room to give more time to listen and counsel. Continue the group for everyone else.

Someone who is emotional needs comfort, not answers or solutions. At that moment, they feel safe enough to share their hurt and receive comfort from the group. Deep down they know that things will get better in time, so they don’t need to hear people saying, “Here is what you do...” or, “Don’t worry, it’s going to get better.” Lead the group in providing comfort. Take a few minutes to let the group minister to the person. After the group, others can provide more specific assistance to the situation.
“I’m so sorry this is going on. We know this is so hard for you. We really feel for you and can imagine how difficult this must be. (A) We value you and appreciate your sharing this with us. (R) If you don’t mind we would like to just surround you with comfort and prayer.”

**Closure and Landing**

In some cases, you’ll need extra time after the meeting to bring a sense of closure. Closure is finding peace and rest for individuals who feel emotional ambiguity from something that happened during the meeting. This follow-up is NOT a time for deeper ministry or pastoral counseling. You are only looking for a sense of closure for the moment (being able to “land” emotionally). Be aware that trying to process these intense emotions can cause more disruptive emotions and is best handled by a trained mental health professional. Here are some simple steps and examples to help bring closure:

1. **Validate / Listen / Validate**
   
   “I can see you were very upset this evening. From what you shared, it’s right to feel that way. It’s good that you’re able to cry and express the pain. How are you doing now?”

2. **Affirm**
   
   “We so appreciate and love you in this group and we’re here to support you as best we can.”

3. **Coping (Calm)**
   
   “Let’s take a few deep breaths so we can relax and feel comfortable again (breathing technique).”

4. **Safety**
   
   “Right now, you do not have to try to figure everything out or try to make sense of it all. It was enough to share and cry. This is a safe place and what you shared is okay. We understand.”

5. **Hope / Prayer**
   
   “We all know this is a process and we can take this one day at a time. We have each other for support and in time it will get better. Tomorrow will be a new day. Would you mind if I prayed for you before you go home?”

6. **Coping (Rest)**
   
   “As you go home, don’t focus on this. Relax and get some sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow to check in.”

7. **Follow-up**
   
   *Call the next day to check on them. Offer more comforting prayer and encouragement.*
Managing Your Group

Start/End on Time

You have to respect and honor people’s time. If you have a tendency to allow the group to go late, time-conscious personalities will be frustrated or not want to come. If the group is progressing well and it looks like you are going late, stop and ask the group if it is okay if you go a few extra minutes. While doing this, also express to those that must leave on time that it is okay to go. The group should end on time most meetings, with running over being an uncommon occurrence. Keeping on time maintains the structure of the group.

Stay on Track and Stay Focused

These topics can bring up much dialogue and information. Reassure the group that each of these topics can be discussed at great length, but you are trying to achieve a basic, yet helpful, dialogue related to the topic, and you can always discuss more afterwards. If you consistently let the group veer off topic, they will feel that they are not on course and the discussion will suffer.

It’s okay to allow comments that bring up other discussion topics, but be prepared to refocus the group back on the week’s topic. Start and finish well. Affirm the person and their thoughts, but bring the group back to that week’s material.

“That is great! It’s so useful for us to hear your experience/knowledge...thank you for sharing. It’s helpful. So, let’s look at the next point of information outlined here...”

The Talker

Not all groups have one, but some groups may have one person who likes to share or talk more than others. Often these folks can veer off the topic into another or run down multiple rabbit trails. These are wonderful people who love to share details, which to them is an important part of the story or situation. They have so much to say and we want to help them not take over the group, which keep others from getting to share. Here is an example of how to handle this situation in love:

Listen for a point where they need to take a breath or finish a thought; kindly and gently enter a comment of affirmation, recognize the time, and get them to the point. By doing this, you’re not cutting them off completely, but letting them come to a conclusion. In some instances, you may have to interrupt them.
“That’s really interesting and maybe afterwards we can hear more, but just so we can honor our time and dialogue, what was the end result or conclusion?”

If you are “the talker,” it’s because of your vision and enthusiasm for everyone. You may also have more training and people may want to ask you all kinds of questions. You may have more to share, but keep your comments bite-sized. As much as possible, condense what you have to share and return quickly to the week’s topic. You may have to literally stop yourself saying, “Wow, this is all great and we can talk so much more about this, but let’s stay focused. We can talk more later.”

The Quiet Group

This is normal at first, but sometimes, it can be very awkward. Don’t be intimidated or disappointed; it is not you. They may literally have nothing to say, as discussing these kinds of topics may be very new to them. The remedy for this is to ask questions and simply call on different individuals to answer them. Even if you go around the room with questions, it helps get the group started in discussion. If no one shares, simply share your story and thoughts on the matter and move on to the next topic point.
Conflict with a Group Member

If there is a group member who is negative, critical, or seems rude and hurtful to others, you will have to make some time outside the group to help them. Outside the group, share with the person that you notice they seem to make comments that are negative or hurtful. Affirm them as a person, and ask if there is anything going on that might be bothering them.

“I’ve noticed in the group at times you share things that come across blunt or negative. I know you are a caring person, and I appreciate you so much. I just want to understand if there is something else causing some stress or difficulty.”

After they share, affirm them: “That helps me understand so much more, and I can see the stress. I really believe in you and our friendship. Let me know how I can better help you so you can avoid taking out those frustrations within the group.”

NOTE. If there are other problems they disclose to you that you feel require extra counseling, do not take that on. Talk to them about getting their family or someone to help them to review the stress in their life, pursue professional psychotherapy, and check if their medication is effective and/or producing bad side effects. Reaffirm to them that this is normal, and all individuals living with mental health difficulties go through this. A simple review with professionals and their support system can bring more help.

For conflicts that are unresolved, damaging interactions with others, inappropriate behavior, or concern for others in the group, here are simple steps to follow:

1. **Contact and Consult**
   Work with your church or organization’s leadership about your specific situation. You can contact the Hope and Healing Center &Institute for leadership support and extra counsel.

2. **Have the Difficult Talk and Be Specific**
   Explain to the individual that you have tried to address the problem and be helpful with his/her difficulties, but the situation has continued without change and is causing difficulties within the group.

3. **Cancel with Hope**
   Let them know that you feel it is best that he/she take a break from coming to the group and work on getting further help from professionals and their support system. Affirm that once they acquire more stability they can return to the group.

NOTE. These are very rare situations. Your overall goal is to protect the group as a whole and prevent any one person from damaging the whole group. A situation like this can add extra stress to everyone and can be very destructive and hurtful.
Last Things

1. **Don’t focus on size, serve the ones that come** – even if just one, God will bring them.
2. **Don’t worry if you run out of time** – it means they are comfortable and share a lot; the group works!
3. **Don’t be afraid of making mistakes** – just learn from them and adapt to what works.
4. **People see love, not perfection** – the group will thrive because they see your love.
5. **You always have the Hope and Healing Center & Institute’s support when you need it!**