

BOUNDARY GROUP GUIDELINES

The Long Form

1. *Confidentiality* How do we maintain confidentiality at all times in all areas having to do with the group and its members?

We do not repeat anything that anyone shares in the group outside the group. What is shared in the group stays in the room and locked away inside our hearts and minds in a sacred trust. We do not share those things with our spouses, friends, counselors, pastors, or others who may know the people and what is taking place in their lives. We let each person be responsible for deciding what to share, with whom, and when. We may share our lives outside the group and offer a general testimony about the way the group is helping us. But we cannot reveal the details of what others share in the meeting without their permission.

We do not identify any member of the group to anyone outside the group. We avoid talking about the group when others may be listening and could identify persons as belonging to it. We may choose to identify ourselves as being in the group. That confession is often a part of our testimony and confirms the work that God has done in our lives. But each person must determine when to take that risk.

Be careful in talking with persons who may know that an individual is in a group and may ask you questions. The intent is usually well-meaning and one of concern, but you must maintain confidentiality. A good general response is, "It seems that you're really concerned about ___. Why don't you ask her how things are going? I'm sure she'd appreciate your interest. Obviously, confidentiality is vitally important to a support group, and I'm not at liberty to talk about people in the group or what they are sharing. I'm sure you understand." Most people will be understanding, and you will have encouraged them to talk directly with the person most in need of their concern and support. If they do not understand or have other motives, you have set a healthy boundary that they must respect.

We do not talk about other participants or what they have shared during the group at any time outside the group unless they are there or we have their permission. When we are with other group members outside the meeting, any sharing should focus on our issues and relationships, not on persons who are not there or what they may have shared in the meeting. If we have issues with other persons in the group, we go to them and include them directly. To do otherwise is to engage in gossip, which is a sin against them and against God. That does not mean we cannot express general feelings toward a group member with others within the group. The only exceptions would be an individual's checking things out with a sponsor to prepare for a direct confrontation or to make direct amends, or group leaders' discussing group members in regard to an individual confrontation or a group conscience about a guideline violation.

2. *Responsibility.* How do we each take personal responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, behavior, and recovery, and speak only from our personal experience?

We do not blame others by allowing their actions or behavior to control the choices that we have made or need to make. We make our own choices. Our choices and actions are the result of our thoughts and the meaning that we attach to what others have done or not done and the resulting feelings that we have about ourselves. We then act according to our thoughts and feelings. We determine; others can only influence. We blame because we do not want to look at ourselves and feel any sense of responsibility. We are afraid to be ashamed. But if we blame, our lives are controlled by others, and we are victims. Victims are helpless and cannot change. *We are not victims!* We have choices regarding our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. We can realize and accept that we live in an imperfect world full of imperfect people, including ourselves. We do not focus on changing others or circumstances that we cannot control; we focus only on changing within ourselves and our circumstances those things necessary for our recovery, well-being, and serenity.

It is a waste of time and energy for us and the group to try to change those who are not in the group or may not be willing to change. We concentrate on those things that God is showing us that we can and need to change in ourselves.

With all of the time and energy available to us that we have freed up by letting go of others, we can recover, grow, and change. Regardless of what happens with others or circumstances, we can detach ourselves from feeling responsible for it and being driven to try and control it. We can experience serenity in the midst of things that we cannot control through surrendering the need to be in control to God. We can discover the secret that Paul learned about how to be content regardless of circumstances (Phil. 4:11—12).

3. *Acceptance.* How do we offer one another the same unconditional love, acceptance, grace, and forgiveness that God has shown to us through Jesus Christ?

We do not discount, minimize, or in any way criticize another person's thoughts, feelings, or experience. We accept one another unconditionally. Each person must be free to honestly bring thoughts, feelings, and behavior out into the light so that they can be exposed to the truth of God's Word and will revealed in the lives of others. People are accepted at whatever point they may be in their lives. People are allowed to determine when they are ready to share and change. They have the right to pass at any time when they are unable or unwilling to share. We trust God to bring about the changes that He desires in the lives of each of us. No one is shamed for being human and imperfect. God's kindness, revealed to us through the acceptance of one another, leads to repentance and change. Our responsibility is to listen to others and offer our experience, strength, and hope when it is our turn to share.

We do not confront others when their ideas, attitudes, or behavior differs from what we have experienced or our expectations for them. We do not set ourselves up as others' higher power by determining what they need or how they should be. We do not put God in a box and manipulate Him by insisting that He work in other people's lives according to our will. People do not change through confrontation. They change through acceptance and encouragement.

Direct confrontations are not allowed in a support group. We are all confronted indirectly when we honestly look at our own lives and face the truths that we learn from sharing our experience, strength, and hope. If someone in the group has an issue with another group member, that should be addressed outside the group meeting, privately and directly according to biblical guidelines for reconciliation and making amends.

The guideline governing confrontation applies to the sharing relationships within the meeting. It does not apply to individual relationships that we choose to enter into outside the group with a sponsor. We choose a person as a sponsor based on identifying with that person and experiencing a sense of acceptance. We allow that person to be a mirror for us, reflecting those things in our recovery process that help us change and grow. But even that confrontation always takes place within the context of an unconditionally accepting relationship in which we feel valued and supported.

We do not judge or try to convict one another of sin or shortcomings, knowing that we are all learning, growing, and changing together as God's Holy Spirit convicts and gives us the wisdom, desire, and courage to change. There is no room for judgment in a support group. We show one another the same acceptance that Jesus showed the woman caught in adultery. We do not cast any stones at what anyone else is doing. We allow God's Word and His Holy Spirit to convict. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation to God, others, and ourselves. We are graceful in our words and actions toward one another. We are quick to offer forgiveness as we have been forgiven by Christ, and to encourage others to be forgiving of themselves. We trust in the faithfulness of God to cleanse us and free us from all unrighteousness, and we show that same acceptance and faithfulness to one another when we sin or fail.

4. *Respect.* How do we treat one another with the utmost respect and value one another as individually and uniquely created by God, deserving of being heard and understood?

We do not interrupt one another or engage in side conversations when someone is sharing with the group. To interrupt someone is to indicate that what we have to say is more important. To not listen fully and attentively to what someone is sharing is to minimize the importance and value of what is being shared. It does not respect the risk that is taken whenever anyone shares openly and honestly. It is a violation of the trust that we place in one another to be supportive of the risks that we are taking by listening to and accepting what is shared unconditionally. If we have questions, we wait until the person has finished sharing before asking them. We ask questions that indicate a desire to know and understand a person better rather than questions that interrogate, attack, or judge.

We do not sermonize, moralize, or spiritualize, or tell one another in any way how or when to change. We leave that up to God and to the individual. Sermonizing, moralizing, or spiritualizing and giving quick, easy, general answers imply that others are doing something wrong, that there must be sin in their lives, and that they just don't have enough faith if they are still struggling.

This guideline does not mean we cannot share the truth of God's Word that He has revealed to us and that is setting us free. We can offer it only as our own experience, strength, and hope and allow others to accept it as God reveals it to them. We cannot force truth on others, nor should we get frustrated or impatient when they do not receive or believe it.

We do not monopolize the time and attention of the group while sharing our experience, strength, and hope so that all group members may have the opportunity to share and be heard. Sharing should be brief and concise. We limit our sharing to three to five minutes. By doing so, we respect the need that others have to share and the value of what they have to offer the group. If a person has a greater need for support than the group can offer in the meeting, we encourage the person to talk to someone after the group meeting, to seek out a sponsor to talk with outside the group, or to consider the need for individual counseling.

5. *Honesty* How are we committed to rigorous honesty as a way of life and a fundamental principle in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship with God, ourselves, and others?

We do not present ourselves to be something that we are not or expect perfection in ourselves. We fearlessly search out and face truth as we grow and change. We know the danger of maintaining pretense and denial in our lives. The truth, not denial, sets us free. The only people that Jesus directly judged were the religious leaders for the sin of hypocrisy. He accused them of maintaining an exterior image that covered up interior disorder and decay. After David was confronted with his sin of adultery and murder, and the elaborate schemes of pretense and deceit to cover them up and protect his image, he realized that he had learned a great lesson. God desires and requires truth in the inmost being if we are to receive the wisdom to overcome and recover (Ps. 51:6).

We are honest with ourselves and our imperfections. We accept that we are perfectly imperfect and that we are acceptable to God because of what Christ has done to save us from our imperfections. We are all in the process of choosing each day to allow God's grace to work in us and give us power and forgiveness.

We do not deny, repress, or run away from our feelings. Buried feelings do not die; they are simply buried alive. They continue to express themselves in other, more destructive ways.

In our meetings and in our interactions with one another, we are inevitably going to trigger feelings in one another, some of which may be quite intense. Our imperfections are going to grate against the imperfections of others. We want to be responsible for directly and honestly presenting our feelings to one another in a moderate and appropriate manner. We seek to be truthful and honest with our feelings so that we can then be reconciled to ourselves, God, and others.

A man asked Jesus to heal his son. Jesus wanted to know if the father believed, and the man confessed honestly, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" The Bible indicates that Jesus responded to the man's honesty and ministered to the boy (Mark 9:17—29). We are to have that same honest faith

as we approach God for understanding and strength to deal with those things in our lives that we cannot understand. We are to be willing to share that faith with others instead of pretending to have all the answers.

6. *Openness.* How are we to be open and willing to gain new awareness and insight from the experience, strength, and hope of others, and to risk making positive and healthy changes in our attitudes and actions?

We do not present ourselves as experts on anyone other than ourselves or pretend to have all the answers, knowing that in His time God will provide insight and direction and that they often come through others. We must remain open and flexible to whatever way God chooses to work in our lives. We must not limit Him or His resources for us to certain sources; we must not insist that He work in the lives of others in the same way that He works in our lives. We are called upon to abide in Christ Jesus and His word and will for us.

We do not judge what others feel or express, nor do we feel threatened when others ask questions to understand us better or to help them with their recovery. Our need to protect ourselves and avoid any sense of shame about our thoughts, feelings, or behavior often causes us to overreact to things that are expressed, take them personally, and become defensive. Often, because we have been criticized by so many and have become self-critical, we may perceive interested, concerned questions as interrogative and judgmental. We must stay open to group members and be willing to distinguish between what we feel is happening and what is really going on.

We do not criticize or get impatient with the imperfect results of recovery efforts by ourselves or others. We help one another learn from mistakes. Recovery requires changing old attitudes and actions. We must be willing and open to taking the risk of trying, knowing that imperfect results usually follow initial efforts. It is the effort that is important; the results will come with consistent effort.

7. *Encouragement.* How do we seek to build up and affirm one another at all times: motivating one another to believe that positive change is possible, encouraging one another to persevere in new directions as God leads, and recognizing our achievements as we overcome and become new creations in Christ Jesus?

We identify with and relate to one another's experiences, struggles, and needs by responding to and affirming one another when we share in group. Whenever any group member takes the risk of sharing and being honest about thoughts, feelings, and actions, we want to encourage the person to continue to bring things out into the light.

We acknowledge and support the risks that we take and the small steps that we make in recovery. We may get impatient with the process of recovery or become discouraged because we do not see change or we are not making changes perfectly. When that happens, we remind one another that if we keep taking steps in the right direction, we will get there eventually. We point out to one another the things that have changed and the steps that we have already taken rather than obsess about the steps that lie ahead.

We celebrate and applaud the changes that we are making and the successes that we are experiencing one day at a time as we recognize together the accomplishments that each brings to the group. Some groups have special tokens that celebrate and mark significant moments in a group member's recovery journey. Twelve-Step groups frequently mark the taking of various steps in recovery with a symbolic chip; different colors mark various periods of growth. Some moments may be marked with a ceremony, a party or even a special after-group activity. Whatever form it takes, we must mark significant moments of change and growth with a celebration of our accomplishments, expressing gratitude to God for the opportunity to become new creations in Christ.