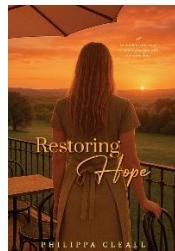


GUIDELINES OF SAFE GROUP FACILITATION FOR PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE RECOVERING FROM ABUSE



RESTORING HOPE – BY PHILIPPA CLEALL

Facilitating groups in any context requires wisdom and experience. When participants have experienced trauma or abuse, it is especially important that groups are facilitated by leaders who are skilled in trauma-informed care and who understand therapeutic group dynamics.

This guide provides principles to help facilitators determine whether they have the necessary experience to lead a Bible study group for women healing from intimate partner violence or abuse.

PRINCIPLES OF SAFE GROUP FACILITATION

1. Establishing Group Rules

In the first session, invite participants to create a group agreement together that supports safety and wellbeing for all members. This process of *contracting* allows everyone to take shared responsibility for maintaining a supportive and respectful space.

Group rules should be generated collaboratively (you might write them on a large sheet of paper as they are suggested). Examples include:

- Maintaining confidentiality: what is shared in the group stays in the group.
- Listening respectfully.
- Avoiding judgment of others.
- Respecting time when sharing.
- Being aware of diverse experiences.
- Doing no harm when responding to others.
- Being mindful that Bible verses may have been misused in the past — interpret scripture carefully and respectfully.

- Inviting everyone to participate but allowing anyone to pass if they prefer not to speak.
- Giving full attention to whoever is speaking.
- Allowing space for different opinions and experiences.

2. Group Formation

Building trust and safety takes time. While individuals with shared experiences may bond more quickly, every group will include members with different personalities and stages of healing. The facilitator should remain observant of each participant's emotional wellbeing and of the overall group dynamic.

3. Responsibility for Self-Care

Although the facilitator holds responsibility for maintaining a safe environment, each group member is ultimately responsible for their own emotional and mental wellbeing.

Encourage members to:

- Be self-aware during and after sessions.
- Let the facilitator know privately if something feels overwhelming.
- Contact their support network (e.g., counsellor, psychologist, GP, trusted friend, or family member) if issues are triggered.

Explain that participants are free to take breaks when needed. If someone feels unable to stay for the whole session, ask that they let the facilitator know before leaving and check in afterwards.

4. Avoiding a Leadership Power Imbalance

Because participants may have experienced control and coercion, it is essential that the facilitator leads through service rather than authority. The facilitator's role is to create a safe, respectful space for sharing and to protect the group from harmful dynamics.

Avoid sharing personal experiences that might unintentionally shift focus or create a perceived power imbalance.

5. Silences

Silence can be meaningful. It gives participants time to reflect and gather their thoughts. If a question is met with silence, pause for a few seconds (count slowly to four) before moving on.

If silence continues, you might say:

“I wonder what might be making this question difficult for us to talk about. What do you all think?”

To balance participation, gently invite quieter members with phrases like:

- “I wonder if anyone who hasn’t spoken yet would like to share.”
- “I’d love to hear from someone with a different perspective.”

6. Not Grading Answers

While it can be natural to affirm someone’s courage in sharing, strive to remain neutral so that all participants feel equally valued. Neutral responses might include:

- “Thank you for sharing with the group.”
- “We appreciate you trusting us with your story.”

Maintain consistent tone, eye contact, and body language with everyone to model equality and safety.

7. Maintaining Awareness of Distress or Dysregulation

Be attentive to nonverbal cues that suggest distress (e.g., closed body language, disengagement, fidgeting). As a facilitator, you should:

- Notice signs of dysregulation or discomfort.
- Intervene gently if a participant’s trauma response leads to conflict or withdrawal.
- Acknowledge and name the emotion in the room (“I sense this is feeling heavy for us right now; let’s pause for a moment.”).
- Offer short breaks if needed and check in privately with affected participants.
- Work collaboratively to restore calm and safety.

8. Safety and Support Resources

At the start or end of each session, remind participants that the group is a supportive space but not a replacement for professional care. Have available:

- Contact details for local domestic violence hotlines or crisis services.
- A list of counselling and pastoral support options.
- Church or community resources for ongoing support.

“Our goal as facilitators is to create a space where women can safely explore faith, healing, and hope. We are serving them in this role to encourage them to recognise that God is safe and to see Him as their ultimate healer as they walk as companions together toward wholeness.”