

Techniques to Stimulate Small Group Discussion

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How is it that some group meetings have vibrant discussions while others fall flat? A good group meeting is when biblical truth has been fleshed out and admired by the members, each person has contributed in some way to the flow of discussion, and real life applications are shared with authenticity. First-rate meetings have a healthy atmosphere of wrestling with Scriptures that challenge and make us uncomfortable, yet result in submission to truth.

The group facilitator plays a key role in stimulating or strangling group discussion. How? The leader who maintains she's a fellow learner on the lifelong journey as a disciple is able to bring out the best of her members. Skilled leaders are other-focused, positive, and keen listeners.

- Put the group at ease with a warm welcome. Set a tone of enthusiasm for the topic or text being studied, and build anticipation of how the group will grow as each one shares.
- As much as possible, keep your eyes on the person talking rather than your lesson. Listen attentively with engaged body language. This technique enables you to focus on others instead of what you'll say next.
- As women engage, keep the pace lively. When there are lulls, ask probing questions such as "Who else wants to comment?" "What challenged you in these verses?" "What else does anyone want to add before we move on?" Demonstrate confidence that there will be eager discussion. God's Word is never boring or dull.
- Here's a way to coach a member who tends to be quiet, and feels uncomfortable about when to speak up. Encourage her to denote one or more favorite questions

in advance with a star. When those questions come up for discussion, she'll be prepared and more confident to jump in.

- To stimulate discussion, keep your responses short, positive, and encouraging:
 - Thank you.
 - Good insight.
 - Interesting thought.
 - You gave that question a lot of thought.
 - I appreciate your thoughts.
 - That's a challenging application.
 - Most of us can relate to that.
 - Thanks for sharing from your heart.
 - Thanks for being open.
 - That's a good example to follow.
- Practice and creativity will enable positive encouragement to roll off your tongue naturally. Always be yourself. Mechanical responses are insincere.
- Refrain from saying:
 - That's wrong. *Insensitive; gently guide the group to truth.*
 - That's right. *Suggests answers will be graded as right/wrong.*
 - Okay. *Neutral response which doesn't encourage further participation.*
- Personalize as you respond to comments by using group member's names.
- When the discussion gets off onto a related, but unnecessary tangent, gently but firmly bring the group back to the meat of the Word. "That's a fascinating discussion which we won't have time to explore just now. Let's get back to the lesson because I don't want to miss any truths the Lord has for us today."
- Clarify as confusion arises, but remember you're not expected to be an expert. It's okay to say, "I don't know" when further investigation is required. It's not okay to fake it. Consult with a pastor as necessary. Then follow up with the requested information in a timely fashion.
- Resist the urge to embellish or add to each person's contributions. Too much talking by the leader puts the focus on you.
- Continually pray for vibrant and balanced group discussions, and for the Holy Spirit to lead through you.