

5 Tips for Helping Group Members Who Struggle with Doubt

How to turn their doubt into deepened faith.

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As small-group leaders, we're in an excellent position to help people who are struggling with doubt. We can speak love, grace, and truth into their lives while walking alongside them. We can provide a safe place to land with hard questions. And we should never underestimate the importance of that—many people have few places to turn when the questions creep in. When group members doubt their faith, follow these five steps to help them turn their doubt into deeper conviction:

1. Recognize the Signs of Doubt

Most people who struggle with doubt have trouble brewing in other areas of their lives. Rarely does a person have their best day and end it wondering, *Where is God?* We're much more likely to ask the big questions when we're disillusioned or feeling despair. That's exactly when we need clear thinking the most, and unfortunately, our emotions often make it hard to remain rational. This provides an opportunity for small groups—and small-group leaders—to offer objectivity, love, and grace. But we must be able to recognize the signs of doubt in order to help. If your group has become a safe place for honest discussion already, you may find group members naturally open up about their doubts and questions. This is the best case scenario. Once they've admitted their struggle, you and your group members can begin moving forward.

Often, though, it won't be that obvious. Learn how to pay attention to your group dynamics to see if something is off. You may notice body language that reveals discomfort, a sudden reluctance to share, or a change in attendance. Be on the lookout for signs of emotional heaviness, which often accompanies doubt. Listen for any negativity group members may express about life, relationships, or faith. You'll also want to watch for sudden life changes—changing jobs, new relationships coming and going, the loss of loved ones, or experiencing a tragedy. These changes could prompt difficult faith questions that lead to doubt.

Everyone handles doubt differently. When I began struggling, I shared my questions with my family. Though I was embarrassed and felt like a failure, my family provided a safe place to talk and express my concerns. When my brother started doubting, though, he withdrew from us. We noticed that he was nervous and agitated, and he began moving quickly through jobs and relationships. We knew something was wrong, but he wasn't ready to talk. His reluctance required that we show him

constantly how much we cared, continue asking him how he was, and create a safe place for him to share his struggles when he was ready—and eventually he did open up. It's important that we make room in our groups for the different ways people handle doubt, making it a safe environment without pushing them beyond what they're ready for.

2. Create a Safe Place for Confession

One of the saddest things I encounter when I speak is the number of people who confide in me because they're afraid to confide in others. Whether or not intentional, the faith community they are part of has created an atmosphere of unrealistic expectations. They're reluctant to appear vulnerable by sharing their concerns and doubts. I become a safe person because I've also experienced doubt. But because I'm leaving on the next flight, I'm the wrong person to confide in. I can't walk with them through their struggle like a small group can.

I wonder how church became a place only for the shiny, happy people whose lives appear all together. Jesus invested in much messier circumstances, and as small-group leaders, we need to reassure people of this. After Jesus spent time with what some felt were unsavory people, the religious leaders of Jesus' day questioned the company he kept. But his heart was for the people who saw their need. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" ([Mark 2:17](#)).

3. Make It Clear: Doubting Is Not a Sin

Doubt can be caused by a multitude of circumstances, life choices, or even physical ailments—my doubt started with an undiagnosed heart condition that shot adrenaline through my body. Asking questions, doubting our faith, and wondering if God really exists aren't sinful. That said, doubt can cause turmoil in our lives if we refuse to address it.

4. Understand the Root Cause of Their Doubt

Sometimes doubt is simply a sign of a mind in use. On some level, everyone questions their faith. Some do it more dramatically than others, but unless we check our brains at the door, we all need answers that speak to why we believe in Jesus or in God's Word.

Doubt can also fester as the result of physical or emotional fatigue. When we're tired, questions can enter our mind that we may never have struggled with before. Fatigue puts us in a vulnerable place, and doubt often thrives there.

Doubt can also emerge from the lingering effects of sin. A classic example comes from David, who committed adultery and then attempted to cover his tracks by having his impregnated mistress's husband killed. Before dealing with his sin through confession, David endured the oppression of guilt and doubt.

Though his situation was serious, it was far from hopeless. He had committed some serious sins—adultery and murder—and had rationalized his behavior so efficiently that by the time the prophet Nathan confronted him, he was in complete denial. It took someone else completely, the prophet Nathan, to make David recognize his sin, confess it to God, and receive forgiveness. As small-group leaders, we sometimes need to take the role of a gentle Nathan to help group members see the unresolved sin in their lives that's causing their doubt.

5. Explain How Doubt Can Strengthen Their Faith

Doubt does not necessarily signal the end of faith; instead it can be just the beginning—the perfect opportunity for faith to be strengthened. Stephen Board of InterVarsity made a statement many years ago that has stuck with me: Those who've never really doubted have never really believed. Many Christians, myself included, have found that doubt has led to a strengthening of deep convictions, not the loss of faith that we fear.

It's easy to grow comfortably complacent in the things we believe. Thinking requires effort, and sometimes we're simply not up to the task. But in the same way that an athlete trains for an event, followers of Christ grow in their faith by being stretched. We like the idea of being mature and complete and lacking in nothing, as James puts it, but we're not sure we like the idea of what it takes to get there.

Reared in a great Christian home, I began taking Christ for granted. But in my third year of college, God stopped me in my tracks and got my attention with a mysterious panic disorder. I now refer to that experience as my time in the desert. Like the Israelites' desert journey, my wilderness lasted too long for my liking—I struggled for over a decade. But when I emerged from the wilderness, I was no longer the same person. My convictions are stronger, and God is using me in incredible ways, including public speaking—which doesn't make sense for someone who's struggled with panic attacks.

Doubt no longer frightens me the way it once did. It will occasionally rear its ugly head, but I've learned to recognize its source and deal with it at the root. For me, it's often an emotional trigger: the pain of disappointment, the fear of rejection, the

disillusionment of regret. Because I've done the legwork, though, trusting God and allowing him to work through my doubt has become second nature.

As leaders, we must remind our group members who are struggling that though they feel weak, God loves to use weakness as an opportunity for flourishing. We, like Paul, must learn to courageously submit our weaknesses to God who says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)).

—Ann C. Sullivan is the author of [Permission to Doubt](#) and a speaker who is passionate about challenging and encouraging people in their faith.

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