

How to Handle Emotions in Your Small Group

When groups value authenticity, it's only a matter of time before we face a highly emotional moment.

Jon Noto

Would you opt into being a Bible study leader if you had absolutely no knowledge of the Bible? Your answer is likely "no." It's certain that any discussion would require some familiarity with the Bible, and you'd want to be prepared with at least a baseline level of knowledge.

In the same way, we need to be prepared—at least at a baseline level—to engage with people at a deep heart level if we desire authenticity in our small groups. When our groups hold the value of authenticity, it's only a matter of time before we'll encounter high emotions, including passion, pain, or fear.

Moments of high emotion can actually be great turning points for groups. But you'll need to plan proactively how you might handle these situations. As with most group dynamics questions, the answer involves a combination of three things: your leadership style, the maturity of the group, and the group's vision for the future (often described in the [group agreement](#)). Below you'll find six ways to minister to group members in the midst of emotional moments.

Ask Questions

A great way to honor a group member and give the group additional perspective of what that person is going through is to investigate and ask gentle, open-ended questions.

John, a small-group leader at our church, is masterful at this technique. When a person ventures into a vulnerable area in their life John maintains eye contact, leans in with a desire to understand, and says, "Tell me more." These three words are some of the safest, healthiest words a small-group leader can say. "Tell me more" sends the message that the subject is important and the surface details are not enough to honor the topic. It's also a non-directional statement. Instead of the group leader asking one specific question, it allows the group member to determine exactly what is most important to tell.

Leaders often fall into the trap of feeling like we have to immediately have an answer. Pay close attention to Jesus in his interaction with people during his ministry, though. He was a master question asker. It wasn't because he didn't know the answers! Jesus asked questions to serve those around him.

Encourage Sharing

If we're striving to create safe, authentic environments, we should not only welcome the presence of emotion but also encourage it. Encouraging someone after they've shared deeply does two things. First, it affirms the person who has taken the risk. That person realizes that they're okay just as they are. They get to experience God's grace through you as a leader. Second, it tells the group as a whole that it's a safe and healthy place to speak candidly and fully.

Encouragement comes in many forms. I've seen a small-group leader quote 1 Samuel 16:7, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." The leader then told the group member that he had given the group a gift by giving them a small glimpse into his heart.

Another powerful encouragement tool is thankfulness. Kyndra, one of our seasoned leaders, was recently leading a group session I attended. A couple shared something that was uncomfortable and painful but very heartfelt. After we had a chance to process what they'd said, Kyndra thanked the couple profusely for giving us an opportunity to talk about an important topic. We're called to carry one another's burdens, which "fulfills the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), and Kyndra brought attention to the fact that they were allowing us to do that for them. We talked about what that looked like in our group, and we all thanked them for their vulnerability and for giving us an opportunity to live out this specific command of Scripture.

Minister Through Touch

Some leaders don't feel comfortable reaching out and touching members of their group. Some leaders give everyone they meet the disclaimer that they're a "hugger." Neither is right or wrong, but appropriate physical touch is a very healthy way to respond to high emotion in a group.

I was at a ministry fair several months ago when a woman new to our church came in. She began telling me how she and her husband were in the process of divorce and that she was feeling lost and hopeless. The look in her eyes told me that the situation was still raw and new.

My friend Julie, who used to lead our divorce recovery ministry, happened to walk in. I flagged her down, and she joined us in the conversation. The woman began to tell her story to Julie and was only two sentences in when Julie simply said, "I am so, so sorry" and embraced her.

I was a little taken aback by the abruptness of the action as the woman started to cry hard into Julie's shoulder. I later realized that Julie, having been in this woman's shoes before, knew exactly what was needed. She knew in a way I might never know.

Intelligent words were not what the woman needed in that particular moment. She was not seeking counsel. She might not have used these specific words, but she had come to church seeking comfort and safety. Julie created that for her in a profound way.

Could someone be coming to your group in the same condition or with the same spiritual need? Could this be what is behind a display of emotion during one of your sessions? A hug may be appropriate, or you may simply put your hand on a person's shoulder. Consider, though, how touch might minister to your group members in the midst of high emotion.

Turn to God in Prayer

It should be no surprise that an intense moment in a group would lead to [prayer](#). It especially makes sense in a time of high emotion. Emotion is the unedited expression of a person, and it makes sense to communicate these emotions to God through prayer.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" ([Matthew 26:37](#)). In this time of deep pain and sorrow, Jesus expresses his emotions to God the Father and humbly accepts God's response. What a great model to follow in our small groups.

And while we Jesus prays for himself, there is also value in praying for one another, what we call intercessory prayer. When someone is in a time of great need or pain they can benefit from being prayed with or prayed over. Sometimes a group member will not be capable of speaking the prayer that's most needed for their situation in the moment. Their mind might be wandering or they might be feeling overwhelmed. Interceding for another person in such a time is a chance to be "Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" ([2 Corinthians 5:20](#)).

Follow Up

In [Luke 15](#), Jesus shares three parables about lost items of increasing importance. These are rich stories that bring us closer to God's love for us. They demonstrate that God's love is not passive or waiting on us. Rather, he seeks us out and celebrates communion with us.

One leader I know named Jeff modeled this well in his group. He put it to me this way: "When one of the flock is wandering off, whether for a good reason or a bad one, it is my job as shepherd to go after them." This small-group leader went on to tell me how a member of his small group revealed something particularly vulnerable in a group setting. The group responded positively, but the member didn't return. No one knew why, and the group wondered what could be motivating him to stay away. Jeff called the man until he got a response and got coffee with him. His main purpose? Show the man God's love by seeking and finding him. This small-group leader got an opportunity to go above and beyond to show God's level of care and grace in such a situation and it powerfully impacted the small-group member.

Provide Additional Help

Finally, as a shepherd of a small group of individuals, it's important to be mindful of the limitations of the small group. Sometimes our group members need help and resources beyond the small group's ability, means, or mission. If a member, for instance, dominates the conversation to express high emotions every week without showing any movement toward healing, you need to assess whether it's a healthy pattern—both for the group member and the rest of the group. If a group member's expectations for how a group can serve them don't match how the group is intended to operate, it can create challenges for everyone.

In this case, group members may need to seek out a counselor to work with alongside their engagement in the group. If they're in a particularly rough season, group Bible study might not be the best use of their time right now. People find God in deep, meaningful ways through recovery programs, Christian counseling, grief support, and divorce recovery programs when they need this kind of focused work. Check with your coach or small-group pastor to see if they have a list of recommended counselors, programs, and resources.

On the other hand, you and your group may simply need to establish clear boundaries so that the needs of one group member don't burn out the rest of the group members. If you sense this may be the case, reach out to your coach or small-group pastor sooner rather than later. Establishing healthy boundaries takes time and care.

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Consider:

1. How do I naturally respond when we experience high emotion in our group? How healthy is this response?
2. What are a few healthy ways to handle high emotion from group members?
3. When you've expressed deeply and vulnerably with a group, what kind of response were you hoping for?
4. What are your group expectations when it comes to helping one another? Would it be helpful to craft a specific agreement or covenant?
5. What can your group do to create a safer environment for sharing?

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