

The Healing Journey

Walking Out Your Redemption

A Small Group & Safe Place Guide

For church leaders, small group facilitators, and faith communities committed to
trauma-informed care

A Word to Leaders

This guide is written for you—the pastor, small group leader, or trusted friend who wants to create a space where healing can happen. You don't need to be a trauma expert. You need to be faithful, humble, and willing to learn.

Your role is not to fix people. It is to create an environment where Jesus can do His healing work through community, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit. This guide will help you do that.

If someone in your group is in crisis (suicidal, in active abuse, or severely dysregulated), know your limits. Have professional resources ready. Refer with care. Healing happens best when spiritual care and professional care work together.

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Introduction: Why Small Groups Matter in Trauma Recovery

Trauma isolates. It whispers lies: 'You're alone. No one would understand. You're too broken. You don't belong.' A well-led small group is one of the most powerful antidotes to these lies.

Small groups offer what larger church settings often cannot: consistent presence, deep listening, accountability, and the lived experience of being known and loved. When a small group becomes a 'safe place,' it becomes a healing place.

This guide will help you:

- Create a group culture where vulnerability is honored, not exploited.
- Recognize trauma responses and respond with compassion.
- Lead practices (lament, prayer, testimony) that facilitate healing.
- Know when to refer to professional help.
- Build a community where people experience Jesus' love through one another.

Part 1 — Creating a Safe Place

1. The Anatomy of a Trauma-Informed Small Group

A trauma-informed group is not a therapy group. It is a faith community that understands how trauma affects people and creates space for healing. Here are the core elements:

- **Predictability**

Same time, same place, same format. Trauma survivors' nervous systems settle when they know what to expect. Surprises (even well-intentioned ones) can trigger anxiety.

- **Consent**

No one is forced to share, pray aloud, or participate in any practice. 'You can pass' is always an option. This teaches people that their 'no' is respected.

- **Confidentiality**

What is shared in the group stays in the group. This is non-negotiable. Establish this clearly and keep it absolutely.

- **Emotional Safety**

Lament is allowed. Anger is allowed. Doubt is allowed. The goal is not positivity; the goal is honesty and healing.

- **Boundaries**

The group has clear limits: no gossip, no unsolicited advice, no spiritual bypassing ('just pray harder'), no pressure.

- **Inclusion**

People of all backgrounds, denominations, and stages of healing are welcome. Diversity strengthens the group's capacity to love.

A typical 90-minute session might look like:

- Opening (5 min): Centering prayer or breath work
- Check-in (15 min): How are you? (brief, no fixing)
- Scripture & Teaching (15 min): A passage or theme
- Practice (30 min): Lament, prayer, journaling, or discussion
- Sharing (15 min): Testimonies or reflections (optional)
- Closing (5 min): Blessing and prayer

2. Establishing Group Agreements and Boundaries

In your first meeting, co-create group agreements with the group. This is not top-down; it is collaborative. People are more likely to honor agreements they helped create.

Sample group agreements (adapt to your group):

- What is shared here stays here. What is learned here leaves here.
- We listen without fixing, judging, or offering unsolicited advice.

- We respect each person's pace. No one is forced to share or participate.
- We honor boundaries. If someone says 'no,' we accept it without question.
- We assume good intent and address harm directly and humbly.
- We welcome lament, doubt, and anger. Faith includes hard questions.
- We do not diagnose, prescribe, or replace professional care.
- We celebrate each person's healing journey, however small the steps.
- We keep phones away and give full attention to one another.
- We pray for one another between meetings.

Post these visibly. Review them monthly. Adjust as needed.

3. Recognizing Trauma Responses in Your Group

As a leader, you'll notice when someone is triggered or dysregulated. This is not a problem to fix immediately; it's an opportunity to respond with compassion and wisdom.

Common trauma responses you might see:

- Shutdown/Freeze: Someone goes quiet, stares, or seems absent. They may be dissociating.
- Fight: Sudden anger, defensiveness, or sharp words. Often a protective response.
- Flight: Restlessness, need to leave, difficulty sitting still.
- Fawn: Over-apologizing, people-pleasing, losing their voice.
- Hypervigilance: Scanning the room, difficulty relaxing, startle responses.

How to respond:

- Stay calm. Your nervous system affects theirs.
- Offer grounding: 'You're safe. You're here. It's [date/time].'
- Give options: 'Would you like to step out? Get water? Sit closer/farther?'
- Don't force processing. Sometimes people need space first.
- Follow up after the meeting: 'I noticed you were struggling. How are you?'
- Know when to refer: If someone is in crisis, have professional numbers ready.

Part 2 — Leading With Wisdom

4. Listening Without Fixing

One of the greatest gifts you can offer is the gift of being heard. Most trauma survivors have been told to 'get over it,' 'move on,' or 'just pray.' What they need is someone to say: 'I hear you. That matters. You matter.'

The posture of non-fixing listening:

- Make eye contact (unless that feels unsafe for them).
- Nod. Say 'mm-hmm.' Show you're present.
- Don't interrupt or jump to solutions.
- Resist the urge to share your own story (unless they ask).
- Don't minimize: avoid 'at least' statements.
- Don't spiritualize too quickly: 'God has a plan' can feel dismissive.
- Ask clarifying questions: 'Tell me more about that.'
- Reflect back: 'What I hear is...'
- End with: 'How can I support you?' or 'What do you need?'

What NOT to say:

- 'You should be over this by now.'
- 'Everything happens for a reason.'
- 'God won't give you more than you can handle.'
- 'Just forgive and move on.'
- 'At least it wasn't worse.'
- 'I know exactly how you feel.' (You don't.)
- 'You're so strong!' (This can feel like pressure.)

5. When Someone Discloses Abuse or Crisis

If someone shares that they are being abused, have suicidal thoughts, or are in immediate danger, you need a clear protocol. This is not a moment to be spontaneous.

Your response:

- 1) Believe them. Say: 'Thank you for trusting me. I believe you.'
- 2) Assess safety: 'Are you safe right now? Do you need immediate help?'
- 3) Don't promise secrecy if safety is at risk. Explain: 'I care about you, and I need to make sure you're safe.'
- 4) Have resources ready: domestic violence hotline, crisis line, local counselors, police non-emergency.
- 5) Don't investigate or confront the abuser yourself.
- 6) Connect them to professional help: counselor, advocate, pastor.
- 7) Follow up: 'I'm thinking of you. How are you?'

- 8) Document what they said (for your records, not to share).

Key resources to have on hand:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
- RAINN (sexual assault): 1-800-656-4673
- Local counselors (trauma-informed, Christian if possible)
- Your pastor or denominational leadership

6. Managing Difficult Moments and Conflict

Conflict will happen. Someone will say something insensitive. Someone will dominate the conversation. Someone will trigger someone else. This is not failure; it's an opportunity to model repair.

Common difficult moments:

- Someone shares graphic trauma details: Gently interrupt. 'Thank you for trusting us. I want to honor your story and also protect the group. Can we talk about this one-on-one?'
- Someone gives unsolicited advice: 'I appreciate your heart. In this group, we listen without fixing. Let's let them find their own path.'
- Someone dominates: 'I want to hear from others too. Let's make space for everyone.'
- Someone is triggered by another's story: Check in privately. 'That seemed hard. Are you okay? Do you need support?'
- Someone breaks confidentiality: Address it directly and privately. 'I need to talk with you about something. What was shared in the group is confidential.'
- Someone is hostile or aggressive: 'I care about you, and I also need to keep the group safe. Let's step out and talk.'

The repair conversation (after the moment):

- 1) Name what happened without blame: 'I noticed tension when...'
- 2) Ask their perspective: 'What was happening for you?'
- 3) Explain the impact: 'When that happened, it affected the group's safety.'
- 4) Invite repair: 'How can we move forward together?'
- 5) Reconnect: 'I value you and this group. Let's keep going.'

Part 3 — Structured Healing Practices for Groups

7. Lament as a Corporate Practice

Lament is powerful in a group because it normalizes grief and gives people permission to bring their whole selves. When one person laments, others often feel safe to do the same.

A guided group lament (30 minutes):

- Opening (2 min): 'We gather to bring our pain to God. Lament is not despair; it is faith that turns toward God in sorrow.'
- Scripture (3 min): Read Psalm 42 or 88 aloud together.
- Silence (3 min): Invite people to sit with their own pain.
- Guided lament (15 min): Use the structure below.
- Closing (7 min): A prayer of trust or a blessing.

Guided lament prompts (read slowly, pause between each):

- 'God, I bring You my pain about ____.'
- 'This hurts because ____.'
- 'I don't understand why ____.'
- 'I need You to ____.'
- 'Even in this, I choose to believe ____.'
- 'Help me trust You again.'

After the lament, invite (don't require) people to share one word or phrase that came up for them. This is not discussion; it is witnessing one another's pain.

8. Guided Contemplative Prayer for Groups

Contemplative prayer invites Jesus into painful memories. In a group, this can be done as a guided meditation where everyone prays their own prayer while you provide gentle prompts.

A 20-minute guided contemplative prayer:

- Opening (2 min): 'We're going to invite Jesus into a place of pain. You choose the memory. Jesus is already there.'
- Settling (3 min): Guide slow breathing. 'Breathe in: Jesus. Breathe out: peace.'
- Invitation (2 min): 'In your mind, go to a place where you felt alone or hurt. Jesus is there. What do you notice?'
- Listening (8 min): Silence. Soft music optional. Invite people to listen for what Jesus might say or do.
- Closing (3 min): 'When you're ready, come back to this room. Open your eyes. You're safe.'
- Integration (2 min): 'What you experienced is between you and Jesus. You don't have to share.'

After, offer time for journaling or quiet reflection. Some people may want to talk; others need silence.

9. Testimony and Story-Sharing Protocols

Testimonies are powerful, but they can also re-traumatize the speaker or overwhelm the group if not structured. Create a protocol that honors both the storyteller and the listeners.

Before someone shares their testimony:

- Ask them to prepare (not script, but think through): 'What do you want people to know? What do you want to protect?'
- Suggest they focus on: the pain (briefly), the turning point, and what God is doing now.
- Advise them to avoid graphic details. 'You can say what happened without describing it.'
- Offer a time limit: 10–15 minutes.
- Ask: 'Do you want feedback, or do you just want to be heard?'
- Arrange for support afterward (a trusted person to debrief with).

During the testimony:

- The group listens without interrupting.
- No one takes notes or records (unless explicitly agreed).
- Phones are away.
- After, offer: 'Thank you for trusting us. We're honored.'
- Don't ask questions unless invited.
- Don't offer advice.
- Don't compare stories.

Part 4 — Building Redemptive Community

10. Accountability, Confession, and Grace

In a safe group, people often want to confess struggles—coping mechanisms they're ready to change, patterns they want to break, shame they're carrying. This is sacred work. Handle it with care.

Creating a confession-safe culture:

- Model vulnerability: Share your own struggles (age-appropriate, not burdening the group).
- Normalize confession: 'We all have things we're working on. This is a safe place to name them.'
- Respond with grace, not shock: 'Thank you for trusting us. We're all on a journey.'
- Offer practical support: 'How can we help? What do you need?'
- Follow up: 'How are you doing with that? We're praying for you.'
- Avoid shame: Never use someone's confession against them or gossip about it.

A simple accountability structure:

- One person shares a specific struggle or goal.
- The group listens and asks: 'How can we support you?'
- They agree on one or two concrete ways the group will help (prayer, check-ins, accountability partner).
- Weekly or monthly, the person updates the group on progress.
- The group celebrates small wins and offers grace for setbacks.

11. Practical Care: Meals, Presence, and Tangible Help

Healing is not only spiritual; it is also physical and practical. When someone is struggling, a meal, a text, or help with a task can be as healing as a prayer.

Ways to offer tangible care:

- Meal train: Coordinate meals for someone in crisis or recovery.
- Childcare: Offer to watch kids so a parent can rest or attend counseling.
- Rides: Offer transportation to appointments or church.
- Cleaning/yard work: Help with tasks that feel overwhelming.
- Sitting: Sometimes just being present—without talking—is enough.
- Errands: Grocery shopping, bill paying, or other tasks.
- Financial help: If appropriate, offer to help with counseling costs or emergency needs.

How to offer help:

- Be specific: 'Can I bring dinner Tuesday?' (not 'Let me know if you need anything.')
- Respect their answer: If they say no, don't push.

- Follow through: Do what you said you'd do.
- Don't expect gratitude or updates: Help because you care, not for recognition.

12. Celebrating Healing and Marking Milestones

Healing is often invisible. Small steps—a first therapy session, a boundary set, a nightmare that stopped, a conversation with an estranged family member—deserve to be celebrated. This reinforces that healing is real and that progress matters.

Ways to mark milestones:

- Verbal celebration: 'I'm so proud of you. That took courage.'
- Prayer of thanksgiving: 'God, we thank You for what You're doing in [person's] life.'
- A small gift: A candle, a book, a plant—something symbolic.
- A group ritual: Light a candle, ring a bell, or sing a blessing.
- A written note: A card signed by the group.
- A special meal: Celebrate together.
- A testimony moment: Invite them to share what God did.

Milestones to celebrate:

- Starting counseling or a support group
- Setting a boundary
- Forgiving someone (or beginning to)
- Attending church after a long absence
- Sharing their story publicly
- A year of sobriety or freedom from a coping mechanism
- Reconciliation with a family member
- A job, a relationship, or a dream pursued
- Simply showing up and trying

Part 5 — Small Group Curriculum & Session Plans

13. 8-Week Healing Journey Curriculum

This curriculum is designed for a small group (6–12 people) meeting weekly for 90 minutes. It can be adapted for different lengths or formats. Each session includes a theme, Scripture, a practice, and discussion prompts.

Week 1: Foundations — Understanding Trauma and God's Presence

Theme: Trauma is real. God is present in it.

Opening (5 min): Centering breath prayer

Scripture (10 min): Psalm 34:18 — 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted...'

Teaching (10 min): Brief overview of trauma (use content from Part 1 of the first ebook)

Practice (30 min): Guided body scan meditation + journaling prompt: 'Where do I feel God's presence in my body right now?'

Discussion (20 min):

- What brought you to this group?
- What does it mean to you that God is close to the brokenhearted?
- What is one small way you've experienced God's presence?

Closing (5 min): Group blessing

Week 2: Lament — Giving Grief a Voice

Theme: God can handle your anger, doubt, and pain.

Opening (5 min): Settling into silence

Scripture (10 min): Psalm 42 — read aloud together

Teaching (10 min): What is lament? Why it matters. The structure (address, complaint, ask, trust).

Practice (30 min): Guided group lament (see Part 3, section 7)

Sharing (15 min): One-word check-in. What came up for you?

Closing (5 min): 'God, we trust You with our pain.'

Week 3: Identity — Who You Are in Christ

Theme: Your trauma is not your identity. You are beloved.

Opening (5 min): Breath prayer: 'I am loved.'

Scripture (10 min): 1 John 3:1 — 'See what great love the Father has lavished on us...'

Teaching (10 min): The lies trauma tells. The truths Scripture offers.

Practice (30 min): Lie-to-Truth worksheet (from first ebook). Write one lie you believe. Find the corresponding Scripture truth. Pray it aloud.

Discussion (20 min):

- What lie about yourself have you believed the longest?
- What truth from Scripture challenges that lie?
- How would your life change if you believed that truth?

Closing (5 min): Affirmation circle (each person says one truth about the person next to them)

Week 4: Boundaries — Love With Wisdom

Theme: Boundaries are not selfish. They are sacred.

Opening (5 min): Grounding exercise

Scripture (10 min): Proverbs 4:23 — 'Above all else, guard your heart...'

Teaching (10 min): What are healthy boundaries? Why trauma survivors struggle with them.

Practice (30 min): Boundary audit (from first ebook). Identify one place where you need a boundary. Write a boundary statement.

Discussion (20 min):

- What makes boundaries feel unsafe or selfish to you?
- Who models healthy boundaries for you?
- What is one boundary you want to set?

Closing (5 min): Prayer for courage to set boundaries

Week 5: Forgiveness and Reconciliation — Justice and Healing

Theme: Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Both require wisdom.

Opening (5 min): Centering prayer

Scripture (10 min): Romans 12:19 — 'Vengeance is Mine...' + Matthew 18:15–17 (confrontation process)

Teaching (10 min): The difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust. Why rushing forgiveness can harm healing.

Practice (30 min): Forgiveness prayer (from first ebook). Write a letter you won't send (to someone who hurt you, or to yourself).

Discussion (20 min):

- What does forgiveness mean to you?
- Is there someone you're struggling to forgive? (You don't have to name them.)
- What would help you move toward forgiveness at your own pace?

Closing (5 min): 'God, hold justice and healing together.'

Week 6: Community and Connection — From Isolation to Belonging

Theme: You were not meant to heal alone. Community is part of God's design.

Opening (5 min): Grounding exercise

Scripture (10 min): 1 Thessalonians 5:11 — 'Encourage one another...'

Teaching (10 min): How trauma isolates. How community heals. The role of this group.

Practice (30 min): Pair-share (in twos). 'What has helped you feel less alone?' Listen without fixing.

Discussion (20 min):

- What fears come up when you think about being known?
- What does safe community look like to you?
- How can we support each other between meetings?

Closing (5 min): Affirmation: 'You belong here.'

Week 7: Triggers and Setbacks — Grace for Hard Days

Theme: Setbacks are not failure. They are part of the journey.

Opening (5 min): Grounding exercise

Scripture (10 min): 2 Corinthians 12:9 — 'My grace is sufficient...'

Teaching (10 min): What are triggers? How to recognize them. Why setbacks happen.

Practice (30 min): Create your Hard Day Plan (from first ebook). What will you do when things get hard?

Discussion (20 min):

- What is a trigger you've noticed?
- What helps you when you're triggered?
- Who can you call on a hard day?

Closing (5 min): 'God, meet me in the hard moments.'

Week 8: Legacy and Hope — Your Story Matters

Theme: Your healing has purpose. Your story can help others.

Opening (5 min): Centering prayer

Scripture (10 min): 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 — 'Comfort received becomes comfort given.'

Teaching (10 min): How to share your story wisely. The difference between testimony and oversharing.

Practice (30 min): Write or reflect on your story (not to share, just for you). What do you want people to know? What do you want to protect?

Discussion (20 min):

- How has your understanding of your story changed?
- What do you want to do with your healing?
- How will you continue this journey after the 8 weeks?

Closing (10 min): Celebration and blessing. Affirm each person's courage and growth.

14. Seasonal Themes and Special Sessions

Beyond the 8-week curriculum, consider special sessions for seasons or themes that arise in your group.

Holiday sessions (grief-aware):

- Thanksgiving: Gratitude without denial
- Christmas: Longing and hope
- New Year: Reflection and gentle goal-setting
- Easter: Resurrection and new life

Thematic sessions:

- Sabbath and rest
- Sexuality and trauma
- Parenting after trauma
- Workplace boundaries
- Grief and loss
- Anger and justice
- Spiritual warfare and peace

Appendices — Facilitator Tools, Prayers, and Resources

Appendix A: Facilitator Self-Care Checklist

Leading a healing group is emotionally demanding. You cannot pour from an empty cup.

- Do I have my own counselor or spiritual director?
- Am I practicing the disciplines I teach (lament, prayer, boundaries)?
- Do I have a peer leader or mentor I can debrief with?
- Am I taking a Sabbath each week?
- Do I have clear boundaries between group and personal life?
- Am I praying for the group regularly?
- Do I celebrate small wins in my own healing?
- Am I honest about my limits and when to refer?

Appendix B: Group Covenant Template

Use this to create your group's agreements in the first meeting.

- Confidentiality: What is shared here stays here.
- Respect: We listen without judgment or fixing.
- Consent: No one is forced to share or participate.
- Boundaries: We honor each person's limits.
- Honesty: We welcome lament, doubt, and hard questions.
- Safety: We address harm directly and humbly.
- Inclusion: All are welcome.
- Accountability: We follow through on what we commit to.
- Celebration: We mark healing and growth.

Appendix C: Crisis Response Protocol

Print this and keep it accessible.

- If someone is suicidal: 'Are you safe right now? Do you have a plan? I'm calling 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline).'
- If someone is being abused: 'I believe you. You're not alone. Let's get you help. (National DV Hotline: 1-800-799-7233)'
- If someone is in acute distress: Offer grounding, water, a quiet space. Call a trusted leader or counselor.
- If someone discloses abuse: Thank them. Believe them. Don't promise secrecy. Refer to professional help.
- If someone is intoxicated or high: Ensure safety. Don't shame. Offer to help them get home. Follow up.

Appendix D: Opening and Closing Prayers

Opening prayer (sample):

'God, we gather as broken people seeking wholeness. We bring our pain, our doubt, our hope. Meet us here. Teach us to listen to one another as You listen to us. Make this a safe place where healing can happen. Amen.'

Closing blessing (sample):

'May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May He turn His face toward you and give you peace. Go knowing you are loved, you are not alone, and your story matters. Amen.'

Appendix E: Recommended Resources for Leaders

- Books: 'The Body Keeps the Score' by Bessel van der Kolk (understanding trauma)
- Books: 'Trauma and Recovery' by Judith Herman (foundational)
- Books: 'What Happened to You?' by Bruce Perry & Oprah Winfrey (accessible overview)
- Training: RAINN (rainn.org) — free resources on sexual assault
- Training: National Domestic Violence Hotline — free resources
- Certification: Trauma-Informed Care training (many organizations offer online courses)
- Community: Connect with other small group leaders; share what's working

Appendix F: Scripture Maps by Theme (for group study)

Presence in pain:

- Psalm 23
- Psalm 34:18
- Matthew 28:20
- Hebrews 13:5

Identity and worth:

- 1 John 3:1
- Jeremiah 31:3
- Ephesians 1:7
- 1 Peter 2:9

Boundaries and wisdom:

- Proverbs 4:23
- Proverbs 22:3
- Matthew 10:16
- Ephesians 4:15

Forgiveness and justice:

- Romans 12:19
- Matthew 18:15–17

- Colossians 3:13
- Psalm 37:5–6

Community and belonging:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:11
- Galatians 6:2
- 1 Peter 4:10
- Romans 12:15

Appendix G: Facilitator Reflection Questions (Monthly)

- What is the emotional temperature of the group?
- Who is thriving? Who is struggling?
- Are there any unspoken tensions or conflicts?
- Is anyone isolated or withdrawn?
- Are we honoring our group agreements?
- What practices are most helpful?
- Do I need to refer anyone to professional help?
- How am I doing as a leader?
- What do we need to adjust?

Final Word to Leaders

You are doing sacred work. You are creating a space where Jesus' love becomes tangible through presence, listening, and grace. You don't need to be perfect. You need to be faithful, humble, and willing to learn.

When you mess up (and you will), apologize. When you don't know what to do, ask. When you're overwhelmed, take a break. And remember: your role is not to fix people. It is to create an environment where Jesus can do His healing work.

The people in your group are brave. They are showing up. They are trusting you with their stories. Honor that trust. Love them well. And watch what God does.