



Guidelines for Reflection and Discussion

These guidelines are intended to help you call together a group to explore the ideas and questions raised in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*—a group where people can share their thoughts and stories in a constructive way, having the kind of discussions upon which democracy depends.

Location: If it's possible to meet in a non-institutional space, such as someone's living room, the quality of conversation may deepen considerably. But wherever you meet, there are simple steps you can take to create a physical space that promotes open and honest dialogue.

Setup: Sitting in a circle helps foster good discussion—a circle unbroken by intervening tables or desks so that participants are not barricaded but have a sense of access to one another.

Privacy: Meet in a space where you can close the door and are not likely to be interrupted.

Timing: Be clear at the outset about the length of each gathering and the number of gatherings involved, with a firm date for each meeting. Long-term groups may eventually face the question of whether, when, and how new persons may join, which requires thoughtful consideration in groups that have worked hard on creating a “safe” space with each other.

Leadership: It is almost always helpful to have one person designated to facilitate the process. This may be the same person each time, or the role may rotate. You might want to discuss this issue as a group and reach consensus on what leadership pattern suits your group's needs. But whether the leadership role is designated, rotated, or jointly shared, its purpose remains the same: creating and protecting a free and open space for conversation, a task that must be shared by the group.

The Touchstones available as a downloadable pdf at https://couragerenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CCR_Touchstones_V5.pdf can help you establish and maintain this space. Distribute copies at the beginning of the first session, then use the Touchstones as a checklist at the end of every session, asking the group to reflect on how the process is going.

Before the session: Review the assigned chapter(s), the video and the suggested questions prior to each session. What questions and activities of your own devising might help the process?

Think about the participants individually, and ask yourself what they need to be brought into this sort of inquiry. For example, do they need a chance to reflect silently in a journal before speaking? Do they need small-group discussions followed by a large-group dialogue in order to give everyone “airtime”?

Facilitating: If “We the People” are to gather in ways that help “heal the heart of democracy,” we must be able to speak openly and honestly about our thoughts and feelings on various issues. But in these fragmented and fractious times, it may be hard for people to feel safe enough to have these discussions. It is important to create a space that is hospitable to diverse ideas, and equally important to create a space hospitable to strong feelings. Indeed, this is arguably more important: in a space hostile to feelings, it is unlikely that either intellectual or emotional truth will emerge.

One way to create hospitable space is to invite people to introduce themselves anew at each session via a meaningful but non-threatening question, such as: “Please reflect and share your first political memory.” “Tell us about an experience that helped shape your political convictions.” The more we know about each other’s stories, the less possible it is to distrust, disrespect or dismiss each other.

Another way to foster hospitality for our emotions as well as our thoughts is to emphasize the art of asking honest, open questions—questions that are responsive without being reactive. If someone says, “Such-and-such makes me so angry!”— asking a question, such as “Could you say more about what you mean by ‘anger’ and about the impact of that anger on your life?” might help the speaker explore that feeling further, and learn something in the process. Honest, open questions help “hear people into speech,” deeper and deeper speech.

As facilitator, you can also help foster emotional hospitality by modeling what it means to listen attentively, ask good questions, offer supportive words, and practice a nonjudgmental attitude. As these ways of being present take root in the group, people can express their thoughts openly without fear of personal put-downs. This does not mean that there can be no disagreement—it means that we need to deal with our differences in ways that leave no one feeling mistreated. If the space is being shut down by someone’s harsh responses to others’ ideas, remind everyone that it is possible to speak for ourselves without speaking against others.

Try to ensure that everyone in the group has a chance to participate. For example, establish a ground rule that no one can speak more than three or four times in a given hour. If that feels too mechanical, stay alert to how many people have spoken, and if a few are dominating the dialogue, wait for a pause and say, “For the next little while, let’s make space for those who have not yet had a chance to speak.”

To encourage emotional honesty, it is essential that participants commit themselves to confidentiality. The assurance that one will not be pursued, cornered, and counseled after a gathering makes it easier to speak one's truth.

As a general principle, keep this in mind, and keep it before the group: "It is more important to be in right relationship than to be right." This does not mean there is no such thing as right and wrong. It means we give priority to creating a strong relational "container" which can hold our exploration of right and wrong without blowing up. Building relational trust is the key to holding conflict creatively, so that we can be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.