

Structured Discussion By Gabriel Bégin

A format designed to facilitate healing and growth in relationships, families, communities, and beyond

Background

I created this discussion format to address certain themes I found reoccurring in my relationships. I often experienced difficulty sustaining and growing healthy connection with important people in my life. People like family and close friends that I knew well, loved, and trusted. Despite our bonds, certain unhealthy patterns of relating would repeatedly surface that were frustrating and disheartening. This format provides a way to consciously address these types of patterns, to hold space for them so that they might be healed, and to nurture love and support in relationship.

I have only been working with the format for a short time, and the results have been very encouraging. I encourage anyone interested to try the format out with their partner, family, friends, or any group they feel might benefit. If you have any questions or comments, or you would like guidance please contact me at:

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Overview / Structural Elements

The format progresses through three stages with an optional fourth stage. Before getting into those there are some important points to consider.

Roles

To provide the structure and maintain it throughout the dynamic discussion process certain key players are need:

Moderator / MC (master of ceremony)

The moderators role is to preside over the discussion. They explain the discussion and how it works both in the beginning and as it unfolds, offering context and keeping things on track. A good moderator should have / be:

- Well developed emotional intelligence
- Neutrality
- Articulate
- A good capacity to “read the mood”
- A good capacity to step out of “the thick of things” and see things from a high level
- Strength and Discernment to enforce boundaries and offer emotional sensitivity / support as needed
- Recognition from the participants that they are the right person for the job

Depending on the situation the moderator can participate in the discussion as an active participant or operate from a neutral position purely in a moderating role. In the latter case this would mean not actively taking a turn in the sharing stages. In some cases the moderator may need to model a sharing in which case they can judge how to navigate that while remaining neutral.

Assistant

The assistant's job is to support the moderator in offering structure and to help people address any physical needs they might have such as water, using the bathroom, lighting, temperature / warmth etc. Typically the assistant can be a participant, in some cases the moderator and the assistant can be the same person. For larger groups it is recommended to have multiple assistants. For certain situations it is better to have a neutral non-participating assistant or assistants. Some things to keep in mind for the assistant in how they can support and care for everyone present:

- The overall discussion environment is clean and inviting
- Comfortable seating
- Providing water and / or tea
- Ensuring easy access to bathroom(s)
- Comfortable temperature (some participants may have different needs)
- Comfortable lighting environment
- Comfortable ambient noise levels
- Supportive decorative / beauty / sensual elements such as fresh flowers, art, aromatherapy, incense etc

Participants

The participants are anyone actively participating in the discussion. Everyone present should be wanting and /or willing to show up for the discussion and participate. It is not recommended to have any people present that are not participating nor acting as assistant or moderator.

Preparing for the Discussion

It is recommended that everyone present prepare for the discussion by following some basic guidelines:

- Be well rested, fed, and hydrated
- Be appropriately dressed to feel comfortable for the length of the discussion
- Not eat anything at least 30mins before starting (1-2 hours recommended).
Why?: Sometimes these discussions can bring up strong emotions that interfere with healthy digestion.
- Take 5-15 minutes to be in a relaxed way with a minimal activity before start time

Time

Two hours is a good target time to try to for one's first time. This is defined as the time from the formal opening to the formal closing which will be explained in detail later below. Everyone participating should be aware of the time needed. If we include

arrivals, greetings, wrapping up, and departures a total time of three hours is a good initial estimate for participants.

Number of People

This format can be used with as little as two people and as many as a large group of 20+ people. It is important the moderator and the assistant keep the group on track to finish on time; especially with larger groups.

The Discussion Process

Introduction & Sharing Format

Once everyone is seated in a circle and quiet the moderator opens the discussion by welcoming everyone. Depending on the group it may be appropriate to offer an appropriate prayer to establish a sacred space for relating. Whatever the case, the moderator should set the tone for a group that this is a special time and place to see, hear, and speak with one another.

Before getting into the main part the moderator explains key points:

- After explaining each section the moderator will model a sharing or ask someone to begin the section with their own sharing
- Each participant is encouraged to share for every section, time allowing. Participants should never be coerced, only invited / encouraged
- One person speaks at a time
- There is a physical object that represents “who is speaking” in the center of the circle for example a piece of wood or a crystal. Whoever is sharing holds this physical object or places it in front of them. When they are done sharing they return it to the center of the circle.
- The moderator will keep a physical object on hand to let participants know they need to wrap up their sharing. For example a standing sign that says “Wrap up please :)” or a large yellow feather. The moderator explains about this object and when it will be used, and they let participants know they are low on time by placing this object in the center of the circle
- After a sharing the moderator asks the sharer if they are open to feedback
- the person who has spoken can refuse or invite feedback. If they refuse feedback the discussion proceeds to the next participant. If they invite feedback they can qualify what kind of feedback they are open to: feedback can be reflective, empathetic, or constructive
- Feedback should be directly related to or relevant to the most recent sharing - please refrain from going into one’s own process when offering feedback
- If they invite feedback the moderator opens the floor to anyone who’d like to share feedback. The speaking object remains in the center while the moderator directs the sharing process

- Once feedback has been fully explored the moderator invites the next sharer to begin their sharing by physically taking the speaking object
- The process proceeds like this until everyone person present has shared or passed on sharing.
- The moderator wraps up the section and checks in about people needs for bathroom etc before proceeding to the next section

Opening - 1 minutes or less per person per person.

Each person takes turns sharing how they are feeling and what kind of space they are entering the discussion from.

Part 1: Airing Out - 3 to 7 minutes or less per person

Each person takes turns airing out any complaints, grievances, or things they are finding challenging. Things that have been coming up for them recently that they would like to air out. Priority is first given to things that relate directly to the humans at the table, followed by more general things in a person's life they may wish to air out.

Guidelines to Remember

- Use I statements, e.g. "I feel xxxx lately", "I felt yyyy when hhhh said this on Tuesday"
- Focus on one self and one's own feelings
- Honesty and Vulnerability is encouraged
- Check in with your body and how it feels before sharing. Scan your body with you awareness as you prepare to share; look for any difficult or challenging feelings in your body. Once you have identified in your body the quality and location of these feelings, feel into that and let the right words come to you. When you are ready to share speak to those feelings as part of the sharing.

Examples

- My throat feels contracted and my belly tight. I am remembering the time last week when _____ yelled at me when I came home at 2am.
- I felt annoyed today because you said you were going to clean the bathroom yesterday and you didn't
- I feel lonely lately and I don't know why
- I find myself wanting to spend more time with _____ and feel like _____ isn't reciprocating my desire
- I feel angry because so much injustice seems to be happening in the world right now

Part 2: Witnessed Affirmations - 2 to 5 mins per person

Each person takes turns sharing a positive memory relating to someone else seated at the table. Participants are encouraged to share at least 1 thing relating to each person present, time allowing.

Guidelines to Remember

- Check in with your body before speaking; look for good feelings in your body related to the memory you want to share and focus on these good feelings before speaking. Once you have identified in your body the quality and location of these good feelings, feel into that and let the right words come to you. When you are ready to share speak to those feelings as part of the sharing. My heart felt really warm the time you surprised me with that birthday getaway and I had such a good time that weekend.

Examples

- My heart feels warm. I am remembering the time you surprised me with a birthday vacation getaway trip and I had such a good time that weekend.
- I feel grateful remembering the time my mom made me a cake to cheer me up after I separated from my partner
- I feel supported. I am remembering the time _____ encouraged me to go after that _____ job I wanted but didn't feel confident about.

Part 3: Celebrations of Victory - 2 to 5 mins per person

Each person takes turns sharing a moment victory they experienced (preference given to recently). Something like a challenge they met or a way they were able to help or honor someone.

Guidelines to Remember

- Focus on things that celebrate not just you personally, but you in the context of being an integrated part of the partnership, family, community, or group you are doing this discussion with. See examples for context

Examples

- I caught the biggest wave of my life yesterday, rode it beautifully, and surfed it all the way to the beach. I felt so good! I was stoked that I had time to go surfing and that my partner _____ would have dinner ready for me when I got home
- My boss asked me to do a bunch of extra work last minute this past Friday; more than I could do before I had planned to finish work that day (and was scheduled to). I had already made plans to go out that night. I was able to communicate why it wasn't good for me and we negotiated a compromise where I was able to help with the time I had and still honor my plans to have fun that night
- The grocery store clerk who served me last night seemed pretty down. I asked them how they were feeling and listened. When I left with my purchases their mood seemed noticeably brighter

Part 4: Statements of Intent and Commitment (optional)

- 2 to 4 mins per person

This last section is not necessarily recommended for your first go through of this process. This section is designed to help participants intentionally create what they want more of in their life. The idea is to come up with an intention to put some directed energy and action towards something they want in their life, for example:

- More time with loved ones
- More relaxation and / or recreation
- Tackling forgotten or unfinished projects
- Have a difficult conversation with someone

It could be anything; ideally it is something they haven't accomplished easily on their own and want to be witnessed and supported in their intention. Once the area to be focused on has been established participants can formulate concrete statements of intent with specific stipulations of commitment and a deadline. For example:

- I intend to thoroughly clean my garage by May 31st
- I intend to speak to my partner within a week of today about having two date nights per month and come up with a plan for following through and having those date nights
- I intend to take a little time each morning to really savor my coffee before I start doing anything
- I intend to turn my phone off at 7pm and stop using electronics after 8pm 5 days a week for the next two weeks
- I intend to start thinking about Christmas cards, gathering supplies and writing them. I will finish three Christmas cards ready to mail by November 22nd.
- I intend to plan for own food needs better. Every Sunday for the next 4 weeks I will take 1-2 hours to intentionally plan and prepare for feeding myself well during the coming week

This section is designed for relationships or groups that have committed to having these discussions on a recurring scheduled basis to create continuity between sessions. Me and my best friend for example did 4 consecutive weeks of structured discussions every Thursday and each week we would formulate these statements and then hold each other accountable

By the time the group arrives at this section the energy should have opened up and feel more free flowing and dynamic. The moderator can feel into a more open way of having people share, receive feedback, and concretely formulate, state, and record their statements of intent and commitment. The assistant will write these statements down and keep track of them to be assessed in this section of the next structured discussion.

Closing

The moderator formally closes the discussion by offering some closing remarks and thanking everyone involved for participating. Time allowing, they can open up the floor for brief comments on how people are feeling at the end. Depending on the group it may be appropriate for the moderator or someone else to offer a formal closing prayer or song; whatever the case it is good to try and create a solid feeling of “completeness” for everyone before formally ending and returning to a normal space / parting ways.