

# Sample Guidelines for Hosting Online Small Groups, Forums, or Video Conferences

*Feel free to adjust to your community needs. Depending on your audience, you may want to consider a more casual tone.*

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We're excited that you have decided to join our online small group/discussion forum. To make this a positive and safe environment for all, please consider the following guidelines and recommendations that will help us get the most out of our shared experience.

- **Confidentiality:** What's said in group discussions, stays in the group. This is the most important ground rule. No one wants to find out that he or she has been the subject of gossip or well-meaning "[prayer discussions](#)." Always ask permission before sharing personal or sensitive information about another person. Do not publish, post, or release information that is considered confidential. This includes private medical information without direct approval from the person or their family. Follow federal requirements such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996 and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).
- **Be honest and transparent:** Please maintain integrity and honesty to help foster trust in the relationships we develop within our online group.
- **Timing:** To be respectful of those with tight schedules, we ask that participants join live chats or video conferences on time. You are a big part of making this an interesting and fulfilling group!
- **Vocal participation:** Everyone should commit to participate as a listener and as a speaker.
- **Preparedness:** Please do your best to complete readings and research ahead of time so you can get the most out of our discussion sessions, but also feel empowered to contribute.
- **Minimize distractions:** When utilizing video conferences, as much as possible, please limit background noise and distractions, turn off or silence your mobile device, do not take separate phone calls during discussions, and put your speakers on "mute" if you're not speaking.
- **Be respectful and remember your manners:** We recognize and value diversity of opinion within our online community. Therefore, we ask that you please always seek empathy first, and do not interrupt when others are speaking. Be tolerant towards others' viewpoints; respectfully disagree when opinions do not align. We encourage comments that are reasonable and related to the topic being discussed, as long as they are presented in a manner that is constructive, polite, and respectful, honoring the dignity of others in the process. Avoid putdowns of any kind. Treat others online as you would treat them in real life. Be encouraging of one another. Everyone is in a different place spiritually; do your best to be understanding and supportive.
- **Tone of voice:** We want to welcome all into our community and create a place for open and honest discussion. Let's make sure our tone of voice is friendly, positive, welcoming, and uplifting, as though we are speaking to each other in person. This is especially important in comments or text, as lack of speech inflection and body language can make the meaning seem harsher than what was intended. Avoid condescending language. Strive to be open, empathetic, and engaging. Let's be a community that is committed to encouraging people with different experiences and perspectives to share their ideas in a productive manner, building a bridge of empathy, understanding, and respect. We are all at different places in our spiritual journey; let's strive to be supportive.

- **Posting frequency:** We would love for everyone to commit to posting regularly, but we understand that some may feel more comfortable just following the conversation, especially in the beginning. For those who want to contribute directly to the discussions, remember that quality of content is more important than quantity. Stay engaged in the conversation, but don't post too much and overwhelm or take over the conversation. We all want to and should be heard. Let's commit to respecting others' perspectives and desire to share. It's important to listen more than we speak and to create space for everyone to contribute.
- **Share your story:** Be human, have fun, exchange ideas, and connect with others. Let's allow our lives to act as powerful witnesses of God at work, as well as an encouragement to others. Humbly sharing our walk of faith, our doubts, and the challenges we face involves a great deal of vulnerability. This vulnerability can be our strength as we remove the masks we all wear and create a community of support through real connections based on authenticity, shared values, and goals.
- **Content:** We encourage comments that are reasonably related to the topic being discussed, as long as they are presented in a manner that is constructive. Refrain from posting advertisements, political statements, sales promotions, or spam. Do not share inaccurate, irrelevant, or misleading information that is off-topic or self-serving. This also means that your multi-level marketing posts will need to find another home.
- **Protect yourself and loved ones:** Be careful about what personal information you share online, and regularly check your privacy settings. Never publicly share your home address, social security numbers, login credentials to ANY account (especially passwords), credit card information, security question answers, complete birth date, etc.
- **Act responsibly and ethically:** Be honest, be professional, and be kind. Always verify questionable content with credible sources before sharing information and remember to honor others' privacy. Respect the intellectual property rights of others and always give credit where credit is due.
- **Images and language:** Do not post sexually explicit images of yourself or others. Do not use insulting, demeaning, vulgar, prejudiced, racist, threatening, or violent language or profanities. Avoid gossip, mean-spirited comments, mocking or shaming others, bullying, making false statements against others, and any other behavior that causes emotional harm or distress. Members who attack other members will be removed from the group to maintain a safe environment.
- **Avoid conflict:** Avoid publicly discussing controversial topics and politics where emotions can run high and result in inflammatory or inappropriate discussions. Take it offline, have a private discussion, or simply do not respond. Always show respect for others' opinions. When dealing with complex or emotional issues is necessary, frame responses in a positive way that seeks to bridge the divide. God loves all His children, and His children are a diverse people.

#### **Consequences:**

Appropriate action will be taken when these guidelines are violated. A warning may be given but is not guaranteed; in severe cases, violations can mean removal from the group. Community members should voice concerns and report behavior that violates the guidelines to the administrator via private message. The administrator reserves the right to remove inappropriate comments or content without notice.

#### **Agreement:**

By joining this community, you are considered to be in agreement with the terms and conditions listed above.

**As the mediator/leader for this online group, I commit to:**

- Follow the conversation and actively participate. Check daily for comments, questions, and messages, and respond in a timely and meaningful way. Seek to understand and meet the expressed needs of the community.
- Delete any spam posts and offensive comments immediately. Constructive feedback will be taken seriously as an opportunity to listen to and respond to the needs of our community.
- Remove advertisements, political statements, or sales promotions immediately.
- Making sure that our community is uplifting and safe. Therefore, any member who attacks or bullies another member will be removed from the group.
- Reflect our community values at all times and frame every response with the spiritual and emotional health of members as a priority. Be diplomatic, professional, and empathetic.
- Redirect members to proper resources when needed or desired. Always follow up to make sure members received an answer or help with their question.