

Group Discussion Guide

Dear Friend, עמו"ש

Your interest in starting an Energized Living group is exciting news for me 😊

I'm excited because more awareness of Hashem's Presence means more of His goodness experienced in the world. And our world needs the goodness!

This discussion guide is a developing project – in a short while, I'll be editing it based on your feedback of what works and doesn't work for you and your group.

The following attachments can also be helpful to you: (If they aren't attached; please email to info@energizedliving.org)

- Sample mission statement
- Sample schedule format for discussion group
- Sample group policies
- Choice of concluding questions
- 12 Principles in two different print-ready formats
- The 12 Principles in Transformative questions
- Proactive Connections – a list of ideas for daily practices of connection with Hashem

Before we get into the details of how to structure and lead a group, let's address some of the frequently asked questions about it.

1) If I want to be a group leader, do I need to be fluent in the content of the book?

Not at all. In fact, the focus of the group is not about expertise in knowledge. It's about sharing experiences. The common goal of the group is for each person to experience life differently because of Hashem's Presence – and because of His investment within us. This goal is an ongoing effort; every day is an entirely new learning experience.

2) What qualifications are needed to be a group leader?

If you're thinking of leading a group, you're probably qualified to do it 😊

The group leader's primary role (after establishing the group) is to cultivate the group's atmosphere by modeling respect for every group participant and by gently (and consistently) upholding the group's meeting guidelines.

Every group leader brings their own personal strengths and experiences to the position. In addition to those qualities, there are a few that are necessary for every group:

- Personal investment in the group's goal – personally learning, growing awareness and stretching to experience Hashem's Presence in your life.
- Respect for every individual in the group and for the group as a whole.
- Willingness to be authentic about your process and your experiences as related to the group. Some experiences may be too private to be shared, but most can be shared,

sometimes with adjustments, such as leaving out or even changing certain details. The idea of sharing experiences is not about relating dramatic or private stories; it's about relating the way you move from your Otherness, to Awesomeness. It's about how you stretch beyond your impulsive thought patterns, to take on a perspective that's more consistent with the truth about Hashem's exclusive Power and your unstoppable dignity and empowerment. Sharing experiences is the most valuable ingredient in a successful group, so if you're not willing to share, group leadership is not (yet) for you.

3) Can I establish a group with the people who attend my weekly class? Can I establish a group with my block's Tehillim group?

The answer depends on what you want to accomplish with your group. The goal of an Energized Living group is to share experiences and wisdom gained by connecting with Hashem and with our Neshoma, our Awesome Self. This goal is different from "let's learn something interesting." In the Energized Living group, at least half of the group needs to contribute for it to be a successful group. There will always be people who come initially as observers and eventually become more active in their participation. By contrast, your existing group may already have a style of more passive learning – "Inspire me, please, while I sit here relishing my coffee..." – which is also valuable, but different.

If you are already part of an active learning group, a group which studies a different topic / book every year, have a discussion with your group's participants about their interest or willingness to try something different. Or use the book in the way you'd use any other material – teach the ideas and discuss them.

4) How many people are needed to start a group; how many are needed to form a strong group?

Two people are already a group. The quality of the group depends not so much on how many people are joining, but on how many of the people you can count on as *active participants*. Active participants are individuals who are coming to the group, ready and willing to share as well as learn from others' experiences. They are consciously forming a connection between the material they're reading / learning about and their own lives. They read the book, think about what they've been reading, make an effort to do the "homework" – and they use the space of the group as their anchor for continued growth.

It's easy to confuse people who speak up with active participants. When people are willing to speak up in front of the group, the group benefits. But week after week, the most valuable contribution to the group comes from people who are consistently working to form a connection between what they're learning and how they're living. Those people may not be your most outspoken group members, but they are the most important to the group's long term success.

Regardless of how large or small your group is, invest effort in recruiting at least a small percentage of people who will actively participate. They're the key to your group's success. Beyond that, open your group to anyone who may be interested.

5) Should people pay money to join a group?

In my experience with Energized Living groups, I noticed that whenever there is no financial investment, there is less of a personal investment in the work. When people are paying for

something, they automatically feel more invested – they take it more seriously, and they get better results. From that perspective, charging a small fee is helpful.

I've also noticed that there's a beautiful closeness amongst the group members (and the group leader) when there are no strings attached. I currently don't charge any fees for my groups, partly because I feel that to put a small price on it would make it feel "cheap," and I don't want to put a price on it that would prevent people from joining. My goal is for this to become something that everyone does, and I don't want money to get in the way.

If you are a professionally trained group leader and you're bringing your expertise to the group members, the dynamic of the group will be different, and it is understandable that you'll charge a higher fee.

Getting Started: The Pre-Meeting

What's the first step towards getting your group started? Start by reaching out to people who may be interested in joining. Share your idea – and your enthusiasm about it. Where does that take you? How are people responding? Hopefully, you'll generate enough interest to get a few people to join a founders' meeting.

The goal of the founders' meeting is to formally establish your group.

Here are some important topics to discuss at this meeting:

1) Your drive; your vision... in what way is it a shared vision?

Begin by making a "sales pitch" to the people who come to the meeting. Share what's driving your enthusiasm for creating the group. Talk about your vision for what the group could be for yourself and others. Ask others around the table to share their thoughts about what you're presenting and their personal vision for the group.

2) Focus and clarity... What will this group be about?

It is too easy for a developing group to move in different directions. To ensure the quality of your group, take a few moments to write a mission statement together – start with the attached mission statement; use it, tweak it or rewrite it according to your discussion. The goal of writing a mission statement is to ensure strong focus and clarity in your group's functioning.

3) Establishing commitment... Who will be your founding committee?

Hopefully, most of the people you've invited to the meeting will be willing to join your founding committee. As founders, it is up to them to help spread the word, encourage people to attend, or do other tasks associated with the group.

4) Getting down to the details... Who, when and where?

The next important task, which can be done at the same meeting, is to establish the time and place for the meeting. Also, decide on an opening date *and a closing date* for your first series of group discussions. Ideally, the series should be between 4 and 10 weeks long. Less than 4 weeks

doesn't allow enough time for the group to develop a real connection. And longer than 10 weeks is not recommended because it is hard to maintain a strong level of energy for so long.

Living as we do in a world that contradicts and denies Hashem's reality, we can each benefit a lot from a weekly point of connection and strength. Still, having a short break between series of group discussions is worthwhile because:

- At least three times a year, your group gets the refreshing energy of an all new start.
- The break enables you to tweak the meeting format for the new series.
- Every new start is a new opportunity to promote the group and welcome new participants. (New participants may join during a series, but when it's a "first week," there can be more of an effort to invite new participants and special attention can be given to newcomers.)

Supplies for weekly meetings

The following are suggested supplies for the meeting:

- 1) Place all standard group materials into a binder and have it available for reference during meetings. (Your group's mission statement, group policies, phone numbers of participants, etc.) At the opening session of each series, read the mission statement, group policies and any other important information. At the closing session of the series, read the mission statement and then go around the table with each person sharing: In what ways have I benefitted from being part of this group?
- 2) Photocopy any materials you will be reading
- 3) Tzedoka box – for people to give tzedoka during the meeting
- 4) Refreshments (or at least water)
- 5) Pens / highlighters
- 6) Large 1-minute and 3-minute sand timer (optional)

The first weekly meeting

The first meeting is often a "test run" for tentative participants. Give it your best shot while recognizing that not everyone who comes to the first meeting will continue joining your weekly group. Having your founders there means that your group is already off to a strong start. The first meeting is different in that you're laying the groundwork for the upcoming series. Open the meeting by talking about the following ideas:

1) Your drive, your vision... Let people connect with it.

Open your first meeting with sharing your personal reasons for starting the group and the story of how this group came to be. Also share your vision of what the group can be for everyone who comes and participates. Talk about how sometimes people just ride in the backseat of their lives, where life happens to them – other people and circumstances write their stories vs. the ability to get into the driver's seat and write our own stories. Talk about

our ability to gain personal awareness of what's driving our behavior, grow, make more conscious choices and experience more goodness in our lives and our relationships. Invite discussion.

2) A note of thanks – another connection

Thank your founders as well as everyone who assisted in creating the group. Thank everyone for coming.

3) A shared vision and mission

Read the mission statement. Invite discussion. Have your mission statement printed on a paper and allow participants to sign it.

Go around the table and invite everyone to share their personal vision / drive for their participation in the group. (If you're having everyone sign the mission statement, they can speak when it's their turn to sign it.)

4) Policies make a group functional

Talk about the need for policies and read the policies you wrote up. Invite discussion and be willing to consider adjustments to the policies. Also talk about your plan / style of how you'll be upholding the policies.

5) What participants can expect – and what is expected of them

Talk about the weekly structure / how the meeting will work.

What can participants expect at each part? What is expected of participants?

Discuss... We don't become physically fit by signing up at the local gym; we become fit when actually exercise. So too, the more we actually do the work of spiritual exercise, the more we benefit.

Make it safe for people to come and invest as much or as little energy as they want: Unlike watching other people exercise, just showing up at the group and listening without sharing is already a spiritual exercise. (This doesn't contradict the fact that the more we invest, the more goodness we experience.)

6) A taste of a regular meeting.

- Share one personal experience showing how your story changed when you were more anchored in Hashem's reality. Alternatively, read or tell about one part of the book that was personally meaningful to you.
- Read / discuss the list of proactive connections.
Ask participants to think about one way they will proactively connect with Hashem. They can share their decision with the group or with a friend.

7) Closing

Ask participants to share one idea / thought that was meaningful to them... One idea / thought they will remember during the week ahead.

Structure / format of weekly meetings

The following are suggested components of the meeting. Tweak according to what works for your group.

1) Opening with Torah: read the 12 Principles (5 - 15 minutes)

Download the attached pages with the 12 Principles; print on hard stock paper. Laminate or place into sheet protectors. If you're printing out each Principle on its own page, place a page or two at each person's seat, so it's there when they come in. (If you have larger group, place one at every second seat.)

Go around the table and each person reads their Principle. Preferably, they can read the Hebrew words, the translations, as well as the "action step" that's included. The reader then shares what this Principle means to her today. Some people may not want to share; accept that. Some people may talk for too long – if you expect this to happen, use the 1-minute timer for each person. This way, the timer, and not you, can hold everyone accountable for respecting the time limit.

2) Message of the week (5-10 minutes.)

It's important for every meeting to have at least one idea taught and shared. Teach an idea from the book in your own words or read the summaries of selected chapters.

Alternatively, if you're not using the book, share a message from a Torah source centered on the Parsha or the Jewish calendar. The common theme of every message, every week, is how Hashem's reality is the defining, energizing center of our lives and our relationships. After sharing the message of the week, describe how it supports the group's mission statement. Conclude by reading the mission statement or a part of it.

3) Victories and Struggles (20 minutes)

Go around the room and allow each person (or whoever wants) to share a "moment" about their experience with this work. The story may be one of joy or struggle. It may be one of victory or failure.

In the beginning and throughout the weeks, you may need to keep reminding the storytellers to be respectful of everyone – including people who are not in the room.

Remind group members that the meeting table will never be a place for any form of people-bashing. When speakers digress, gently encourage them to keep the spotlight on themselves – on their thought processes, experiences and choices.

After a person shares, ask if they're open to hearing feedback. If they're open to it, invite other group members to join you in validating the struggle and sharing encouragement *without sharing advice*.

When someone shares a positive experience, I love doing something like, "Raise your hand if you think _____ (name) is Awesome!" Celebrate the victory. Notice what is so meaningful about it; share what you are learning from the experience.

Similarly, but in a different way, when someone is sharing a struggle, try to broaden the lens to include the group. You might say something like, “Thumbs up if you know the struggle of _____!” (Name the struggle, for example: holding onto your dignity in an undignified situation; controlling your impulse; redirecting your mind; being misunderstood; being rejected; being disrespected...)

It is so validating for the person to see that she is not alone in her struggle.

These are just some ideas of how to respond to sharing.

The most important thing is to be authentically respectful of each person and their process... and notice and magnify all the good.

One rule that is very important to establish as policy is about sharing advice. I recommend that no advice should be shared during the group meeting. When group members share advice, it is often counterproductive. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, the person who is sharing may not really be open to advice and secondly, it is inevitable that some of the advice will be unhelpful or even damaging.

In addition to validating the emotion, group members may offer encouragement and strength. It may feel uncomfortable or counterintuitive to allow a struggle to sit there on the table without fixing it... But it’s the safer, more wholesome way forward for the group. We may think we need to smooth out every challenge as it appears, but by sharing strength and encouragement, the person who shared is likely to come back the next week and report on her own work – and the clarity she discovered.

What can and should be shared in the face of a struggle is:

- Group leader can express understanding of the struggle – giving it words in a theme: identify it as a struggle to maintain dignity; a conflict of interests; a desire to be liked; a fear of rejection... etc... (Different people understand a struggle differently.)
- Group members can validate the emotion or the difficulty
- Group members can express their faith in the person’s strength and in the process – when you keep doing the work, you will certainly gain more clarity and strength... Things will shift for you / within you.

Note: For the first few weeks, use the 3-minute timer to protect the time limits for each person who shares. Afterwards, discontinue its use if it’s not needed.

4) Transformative questions (3 minutes)

Each of the first six Principles have a page of questions that we call transformative. They’re transformative because when we ask ourselves these questions, they lead us to powerful introspection, insight and growth.

Every week, read one set of transformative questions. (Also read the introduction to all the questions.) If your message of the week is based on the 12 Principles, read the questions connected with the Principle you discussed in your message.

Offer a personal note of encouragement to people to proactively connect with Hashem and write their stories from the perspective of His Presence, His Personal empowerment and His Purpose.

5) Conclusion (10-20 minutes)

Ask the group to share one thing they are taking home from the discussion. They can choose from any of the following questions (or any of them combined):

- From all that was said today, what is one thing that was personally meaningful or inspiring to you? What do you want to hold onto?
- As you were listening to all that was said today, what insight did you have about your own life?
- What is one thing about the group that was most useful to you today?
- Based on all that was said, what will you try to do differently this week?
- What are you feeling more grateful for today?

This is often the most powerful part of the group experience; it's where everyone is wrapping up what they've just acquired. Unlike the personal victories or struggles, this is a part where every participant could be encouraged to share something.

Use the 1-minute timer.

Follow-up of weekly meetings

The follow up of each meeting is just as important as the preparation.

Following your weekly meeting, it is always helpful to talk about your experiences with at least one other person – or with the group of group leaders. What worked well? What was personally inspiring or meaningful to you? What didn't work well? What are you concerned about?

Share your thoughts on the group leaders' discussion whatsapp group or with a friend.

Thinking about what is going well and keeping your eye out for what needs to be tweaked will help your group gain strength.

Also, sometimes things happen in the group that need some follow-up action. For example, a group member might say something unpleasant or disrespectful to another group member. Or a group member shares something that's too private, or which makes everyone else feel uncomfortable. Sometimes a participant might say something that makes you concerned about her wellbeing.

While such occurrences need in-the-moment intervention, they often need follow-up as well. In the above example about a group member saying something hurtful, you might immediately say something about the need for respectful behavior... but then, in the days after the meeting, it would be helpful to have a conversation with both individuals who were involved. Apologize on behalf of the group to the person who was insulted or hurt; and with the other person, ask what made her do that, it's so out of character, etc... Let her know that you expect her to communicate respectfully to everyone in the group. In the second example, you may interrupt the person who is sharing... and then after the meeting, have a conversation to smooth things out between you and her. (One of your policies needs to set limits to how and what people are sharing.)

One very important thing to look out for is abuse and dysfunction. If a person shares things that are concerning to you, don't ignore it. Reach out and invite her to a personal meeting – share your concerns and if your concerns are valid, encourage her to get outside help to address whatever the concerns are. Ask if it's ok to follow up in a few weeks and do follow up.

In Conclusion...

Dear Friend, שתחי'

After reading all of this, you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed. "I thought I could do it, but it's a lot!" Yes, it is indeed a huge undertaking. But you can do it. And whatever you give of yourself to the group becomes yours in a much deeper way. Plus, from my own experience as a group leader, I can tell you that just thinking about my responsibility as a group leader transformed my entire week – I needed to live the values I was promoting. I couldn't get lost in the foggy shadows of golus... I needed to show up as my Awesome Self. When I slipped and fell, it was my responsibility and my work as a group leader that pulled me up.

Wishing you much blessing and success in this worthwhile endeavor!

Looking forward to connecting on the WhatsApp group. Save the Energized Living number as a contact. The number is 718-576-0338. Message "subscribe to leaders' group discussion" and you'll be connected to the group chat.

This concludes the group discussion guide. For now. I'm looking forward to including your questions as well as your advice in future versions of this word document 😊

All the best,

Shterna