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# How (and Why) to Get Students TALKING

78 Ready-to-Use Group Discussions About Anxiety, Self-Esteem, Relationships, and More (Grades 6–12)

Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

free spirit PUBLISHING®

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**Updated Edition**

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A previous edition of this book was published in 2011 as *Talk with Teens About What Matters to Them: Ready-to-Use Discussions on Stress, Identity, Feelings, Relationships, Family, and the Future.*



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# Dedication

To those who taught me about adolescent development—students and clients in many places, my siblings, and my children, Sonia and Nathan

# Acknowledgments

This is a book about process—the process of development. The discussions within are primarily intended to help students make sense of their experiences during adolescence, certainly a complex life stage. However, development continues across the lifespan, and I have found that the topics in this book usually also resonate with adults, since many of the themes continue to be important.

I recognize that experiences and people continue to influence my own development. I have been educated by a multitude of individuals in my life. By example, my mother taught me that teaching is a worthy profession, and my father showed me that meaningful work may not feel like "work." Both demonstrated that community service is important for both self-development and progress and that process, not product, is where the fun is. A liberal arts education, a long and varied teaching career, and a multifaceted life have instructed me further. Nicholas Colangelo, Volker Thomas, and John Littrell steered me in important professional directions along the way, and I am grateful for the wisdom of longtime friends. My husband, Reuben, continues to provide unwavering and crucial support for projects like this one as we continue to develop together.

Important in eventually directing me toward counseling and group work with adolescents were school administrators who gave me autonomy and helpful guidance. They supported experimentation with teaching methods and content and encouraged my professional growth. I worked with several fine principals along the way, but I am particularly grateful for Jack Lauer and Fred Stephens in the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, area.

As I became acquainted with students, I grew more and more interested in adolescent development and, eventually, in counseling. My enduring friendship with college roommate Norma McLane Haan, who has had a long career as a therapist, has had a consulting dimension. I appreciated her guidance as I dealt with complex issues in the discussion groups that were an important part of a program I directed. She inspired me to pursue graduate work in counseling, which moved me into a new career.

Early in my teaching career, I began to regularly attend workshops, conferences, and in-service sessions dealing with social and emotional development. I took notes, added my thoughts to filed materials, consulted with mental health professionals, and read books. As an English teacher, I brought in community experts to help students understand context and themes in literature. When I coordinated a program for gifted students, I organized an ongoing weekly lecture series featuring medical, business, and mental health experts, as well as college and university speakers. Therefore, when I began to facilitate discussion groups, which eventually led to my first books, I had much to draw from. The background information for many of the sessions in this volume is based as much on the information, materials, and thoughts I accumulated during these experiences as on formal coursework and training.

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***(Downloadable PDFs are available online. See page 289 for downloading instructions.)***

# Preface

It has been many years since much of the material in this book was originally published in two volumes called *Talk with Teens About Self and Stress* and *Talk with Teens About Feelings, Family, Relationships, and the Future*. During this time, dramatic societal changes have occurred, yet the basic needs and concerns of teens remain. It has been said that adolescents express the pain of society, and I have seen evidence of that. All students are likely to experience confusion, pressures, and distractions, but many also lack a nurturing environment at home. Employment insecurity and low wage levels continue to affect families, family structures continue to change, and a mobile society means relocations and loss of support from extended family and trusted peers. If parental control depends on heavy-handed, harsh, or unpredictable discipline, adolescents may feel a low level of personal agency and be uncomfortable and fearful when around adults in authority. They may act out their tension in ways that preclude comfortable connection with significant adults in their lives. Currently, probably more than ever, adolescents need to be able to set healthy personal boundaries, and they need to develop skills in conflict resolution, including the ability to perceive others' intent accurately. They need to be able to communicate discreetly, directly, tactfully, and effectively. They need to consider the perspectives and well-being of peers. They need to self-reflect. Online social media and complex electronics have greatly changed the social landscape, as well as vulnerabilities related to them. This updated edition addresses many of these realities.

Facilitating more than 1,600 small-group sessions with adolescents has convinced me that all young people can benefit greatly from small-group discussion about growing up. All adolescents need opportunities to interact with peers in the presence of a nonjudgmental adult, to make connections, and to be known as unique, interesting individuals with special strengths. Adolescents at all ability levels, at all socioeconomic levels, and in all cultural and ethnic groups are challenged by universal developmental tasks. They experience these tasks in the context of cultural norms, economic and educational levels, and family structures. They all are probably more resilient than adults might think, but they need information, a safe place to ask basic or awkward questions, vocabulary and skills related to oral expression, and opportunities to develop social skills.

*How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* is an updated version of *Talk with Teens About What Matters to Them*, which was a combination and restructuring of three earlier volumes. Throughout these revisions and updates, new topics reflecting current issues have been added, and the sessions have been made easier to use. The content has remained appropriate for all adolescents, but more sessions have been geared toward middle school students and students at risk for poor educational outcomes. These changes are the result of my own continuing direct and indirect work with students. I included more suggestions for hands-on activities, but learned that physical activity sometimes detracts from developing oral skills and can exacerbate hyperactivity. Therefore, I have retained the emphasis on oral-expressive skills—skills important for future relationships and not attended to adequately in schools. Currently, ubiquitous electronics appear, too often, to have replaced nuanced face-to-face conversation with peers and family regardless of context, making an emphasis on oral communication even more important.

The base I drew from, and continue to draw from, is my own and my graduate students' experiences in schools with adolescents. This updated volume continues to focus on semistructured, development-oriented, prevention-oriented small-group work. Such groups can be facilitated by degreed counselors as well as by laypersons who have studied the introductory material and conscientiously adhere to the "semistructured, development-oriented, prevention-oriented" aspects of this approach. The introduction continues to offer rare guidance for this kind of group work.

Research studies attest to the effectiveness of this approach (see page 283). Michelle Lorimer and I studied the implementation of a small-group curriculum in a private middle school. Students and teacher-facilitators both gained confidence about discussing social and emotional concerns, and both believed the groups had a positive effect on the school. In a 2017 study of using this approach with culturally and internationally diverse middle and high school students in a residential summer program, young-adult counselors observed gains in their own confidence as facilitators, and 93 percent of the 101 campers interviewed spoke positively of their experience and reported gains in self-confidence and expressive language, more openness with peers, deep cross-cultural communication, social contact extending beyond group sessions, and insights about the universality of developmental challenges. Finally, the Peterson Proactive Developmental Attention Model, of which the approach detailed in this book is the most common application, was formally introduced in scholarly literature in 2018.

If the guidelines and admonitions explained in the thorough introduction are followed conscientiously, you are likely to see the benefits.

I remain open to suggestions for new topics and for new ways to address "old" topics. You can email me at help4kids@freespirit.com.

**Jean Sunde Peterson**

# Introduction

## About This Book

### Description and Benefits

*How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* helps adolescents to "just talk"—to share feelings and concerns with supportive peers and an attentive adult. These guided discussions have evolved over many years of working with students and listening to them.

I have facilitated hundreds of small-group sessions with adolescents, with many of the discussion series lasting a semester or full school term. Most have been in various kinds of schools, such as public and private schools for the general population, alternative schools for students at risk for poor personal and educational outcomes, and schools for high-ability students. However, some single-session and short-term groups have been in residential and outpatient treatment facilities, community centers, YMCAs and YWCAs, and faith-based settings. The suggestions, activities, and written exercises in this book, as well as the semistructured-but-flexible format, have been thoroughly tested. You can use these materials with confidence.

I have witnessed the benefits of guided discussions for individuals of many ages, ability levels, cultural backgrounds, and family circumstances. Such groups can accomplish the following:

- produce inspiring outcomes in both well-adjusted students and those with significant risk factors, including when these students are mixed in groups
- help students lower stress levels, normalize "weird" thoughts, and sort out personal conflict
- give students who are cynical and negative about school an experience that makes it "not so bad"
- help group members learn to anticipate problems and find support for problem-solving
- help them become comfortable with others and allow their "real selves" to show and be validated
- serve a preventive function by improving self-esteem and social ease
- allow educators and counselors to make the most of their time, since the sessions give them an opportunity to interact about social and emotional development with several students at the same time
- allow helping professionals to facilitate interaction about social deficits and disadvantages that, arguably, are at the root of many of the concerns that come to the attention of counselors—such as depression, bullying, and other social aggression—or that drive school violence

**A Note from the Author About This Update**

For this updated and retitled edition, I have refreshed the content to better support you in your work with groups of adolescents. The updated introduction offers best practices for group leaders, and new sessions address issues of adolescents in today's world. Updated sessions reflect current language and information and include more specific recommendations for noncounseling professionals leading discussion groups.

### Genesis

For twenty-five years, I was a teacher in public schools. For nineteen of those years, I taught English literature, language, and writing to middle and high school students in Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Germany. My years in the classroom tuned me in to the social and emotional worlds of adolescents. When they wrote essays, interacted with me during yearbook meetings, worked with me in club activities, and lingered after class, they taught me about adolescent development.

I learned that they had common concerns, but with idiosyncratic dimensions and complexities. I also saw that my students wanted to *be known*—to be recognized for their individual worth and for their uniqueness. They readily accepted my invitation to respond in writing to the literature we were reading. In fact, we did not discuss literature much orally; instead they wrote in journals about what they were reading, and I responded in the margins. We used class time for acquiring vocabulary and background information so students could understand the contexts of what they were reading.

There were many reasons for this teaching approach, and some of them relate to the discussion groups I later developed. Namely, students need information, and they need to develop skills. I wanted my students to learn to express themselves on paper and to become self-reflective, independent thinkers. I wanted to hear from everyone equally, not just from the highly verbal and assertive. I used an interactive approach to foster immersion in learning, employing hands-on classroom activities, media and community resources, vocabulary-in-context exercises, and classroom dialogue. We learned together, and the students became more and more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. Some of these strategies are similar to those I recommend for the development-oriented discussion groups that are the focus here.

Some students stayed after class to talk about difficult personal matters. Experiences like these are not uncommon

for teachers. Adolescents are hungry for acknowledgment and nonjudgmental listening. Through these interactions, I learned that there were many important things students did not discuss with their peers, and some students likewise did not have a comfortable enough relationship with a parent to ask tough questions or express concerns or anxiety.

My students were typical. They fought with siblings, had "crushes" and breakups, and were scared about the future. Some struggled with the hypocrisy of the adults around them and the sad state of the world as they saw it. They responded to these and other issues with sadness, problematic behaviors, frustration, irritability, lack of motivation for schoolwork, and sometimes depression. They had difficulty managing their complex, fragmented lives. Sometimes they felt like exploding from tension. They needed someone to talk with. They needed affirmation. They needed to have their feelings and experiences validated.

Eventually, in another high school, I considered creating an extensive small-group program for students. Group work had never been done there. I thought back to the adolescents in my classes who had let me know them. I certainly had seen a need for support and attentive listening.

The discussion groups did not catch on immediately, but by midyear, after more than one carefully crafted invitation, I had three groups, with eight to ten students each. The following year there were six groups, and then ten the next, with two groups per day during a two-period lunch schedule. Usually once each year I invited an administrator, a student teacher, or someone from another district to observe the groups—in order to acquaint others with this proactive approach to working with teens. Group members were eager to demonstrate their group. I was careful to choose a topic for those sessions that would not require a great level of trust and would not compromise privacy (for example, "What do you wish teachers and administrators understood about teens these days?"). Almost invariably, observers commented that they had never suspected that students had so much to deal with.

The students faithfully attended the group meetings, even though attendance was voluntary. Group members bonded through steady, undramatic weekly contact, and when there was a personal or institutional crisis, the groups were a ready support system. The students taught me, they taught each other, and they learned about themselves. The topics were not particularly heavy, but they resonated. The students responded. They relaxed and "just talked." This book includes many of the session topics I used with those groups.

In other locations, I continued to form middle and high school groups with various populations. Concurrently, I finished degrees in counseling and counselor education, became a licensed mental health counselor, began university-level teaching and research, and worked part-time in one or more venues, including private practice, school counseling, a mental health agency, alternative teen facilities, and substance abuse treatment centers. For several years, I directed a program in which my graduate students and I facilitated as many as twenty weekly groups in various kinds of schools, with students in grades five to twelve, most of whom were in challenging circumstances at home or at school. In addition, the interns I supervised were regularly involved in group work. These direct and indirect experiences all informed me about group work—and about adolescents.

## Purpose

The purpose of the guided discussions in this book is to support the social and emotional development of adolescents. Whether in small- or large-group discussion, students become increasingly self-aware, and that in turn helps them make better choices, be better problem-solvers, and deal more effectively with their various relationships. They learn to self-affirm their complexity and make sense of their emotions and behavior, and they feel more in control of their lives.

This support is a result of encouraging group members to express themselves. Most students need practice putting concerns and feelings into words. As much as some of them talk socially, they may not be skilled at communicating feelings clearly, genuinely, and effectively. That skills gap is not new, but electronic communication may currently be further limiting oral, face-to-face expression. Learning to talk about what is important to them and to listen attentively to others can enhance students' current and future relationships. Adolescence is a good time to learn these skills. Small groups, if trust and comfort develop, offer three important opportunities that may be lacking elsewhere:

- a noncompetitive environment where no grades are given
- a social context where everyone is fairly equal, since there is a relative absence of hierarchy when the focus is on social and emotional development
- a safe place to talk with peers about the experience of adolescence

According to the feedback groups and trainees have given me, the topics included in this book are often not otherwise discussed with peers, siblings, or parents. In end-of-year written assessments, students told me that they were grateful for guidance in important areas of their lives and for having a safe, supportive environment in which to talk about concerns. Many indicated that their group helped them feel connected to others, deal with stressors, and realize they were not alone in dealing with the challenges of growing up.

Fundamentally, group members gain social skills through group interaction. Often, social discomfort contributes to, and is exacerbated by, poor functioning in school. In terms of school accountability, small-group work may be viewed as a strategy for improving student learning. When considering aggression and violence against school peers, students' learning what they and others have in common, learning to listen, gaining experience in initiating and responding respectfully within conversation, and

becoming aware of peers' concerns can improve social ease, self-esteem, and perceptions of others. Becoming acquainted with even just six to eight peers in a small group can help students feel more connected and comfortable in school, thereby avoiding negative academic and personal outcomes.

The format of this book is not designed to teach specific group skills or to acquaint adolescents with the vocabulary of group process. However, many such skills and some aspects of group dynamics will likely develop and become familiar. With guided group discussion, process is more important than product, and one goal is to enhance the skill of articulating social and emotional concerns. The focus, objectives, and suggestions for content and closure contained in each session provide a framework for good, solid, invigorating group experiences.

It is important to understand that the purpose of these discussions is not to "fix" group members. Even though the questions are designed to provoke reflection and introspection, the emphasis is always on articulating feelings and thoughts in the presence of others who listen and care. These groups are not meant to be therapy groups. Yes, group work in any form has potential therapeutic value, and some noticeable changes in attitude and behavior often occur in the kinds of groups promoted here. However, even when it appears that these changes occur because of the response and support of a group, other factors, such as changes at home, the healing effect of time, or developmental leaps, may also have contributed. Nevertheless, a group might be crucial in helping a student navigate a difficult year. It is important to note here that mental health professionals can use many of these sessions and activity sheets in group and family work to foster communication and personal growth.

As is the case whenever adults stand firmly and supportively beside adolescents, establish trust, and participate in students' complex lives, you will serve your group best by listening actively, with the focus fully on them, and offering your nonjudgmental presence as they find their own direction.

## Meeting ASCA Standards

The national standards for school counseling programs, developed by the American School Counselor Association, focus on academic, career, and social-emotional development. The focused discussions outlined in *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* address standards in each of these three areas, with particular attention to specific elements.

In relation to academic development, various foci help students develop positive attitudes toward school, toward teachers and administrators, and toward learning. Group members become more aware of their learning preferences. Topics related to postsecondary options help students think about the future, and group activities help them connect school to the world of work and to life in community with others.

Related to career development, almost all discussion topics are intended to enhance self-awareness, including of personal strengths and interests. A basic premise of the book is that bringing teens together in small groups helps them make comfortable interpersonal connections—through listening and responding, supporting and being supported, and appropriately expressing feelings and opinions. They break down cultural and socioeconomic stereotypes and learn about the perspectives of others. Interpersonal skills and sensitivity to others will enhance working relationships in the future. In addition, several sessions focus on the world of work and postsecondary education. Group members reflect on the work attitudes modeled by significant adults in their lives and are encouraged to imagine themselves in future work contexts. They also learn about postsecondary educational settings and are able to ask questions and receive important information. Group facilitators are provided suggestions for organizing career-oriented experiences outside of school as well.

Most important, this book focuses on social-emotional development—on simply "growing up." Session topics encourage self-reflection about identity, feelings, and peer, family, and community relationships. Members develop skills in a social microcosm, interacting with peers and with a nonjudgmental adult, potentially enhancing their lives in the present and after the school years. In addition, group members learn about emotional and physical vulnerabilities related to technology, high-risk social situations, relationships, and stress, and they consider ways to be social without putting themselves at risk.

## Assumptions

The format and content of *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* reflect the following assumptions, which you may want to keep in mind as you lead your own group.

1. All adolescents have a desire to be heard, listened to, taken seriously, and respected.
2. Some who are quiet, shy, easily intimidated, or untrusting often do not spontaneously offer comments, but they, too, want to be recognized and understood as unique individuals.
3. All adolescents need support, no matter how strong and successful they seem.
4. All feel stressed at times. Some feel stressed most or even all of the time.
5. All are sensitive to family tension. Some are trying hard to keep their families afloat or intact, perhaps even using problematic behavior to keep their parents focused, involved, and together.
6. All adolescents feel angry at times.
7. All feel socially inept and uncomfortable at times.
8. All worry about the future at times.
9. All, no matter how smooth and self-confident they appear, need practice talking about feelings.
10. Everyone wears a facade at times.

# The Nuts and Bolts of Group Work

## Group Members

The guided discussion sessions in *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* are appropriate for the entire age range of adolescents, including a number of special populations (for example, students new to school, at risk for poor personal and educational outcomes, diagnosed with mental health disorders, or lacking appropriate social skills) and students with a wide range of ability levels, including high ability. However, especially when groups include preteens, topics should be selected according to students' developmental level. Adjustments in vocabulary, session length, and content can be made as needed. A few topics might be best suited for older teens, but being selective with the suggestions in these discussions may make them appropriate for younger teens as well. Behavioral concerns and parental cautions vary from community to community and should guide topic selection. Because it is important that older adolescents not feel "talked down to," the language used in the suggested questions and activity sheets is generally and intentionally "up."

Ideally, group membership does not change after the group begins. Each time someone is added, a group must focus again on developing trust. Group dynamics also change, of course, when a member leaves. Group organizers need to consider school attendance patterns for the target population when determining group size, since only two regular attendees, for example, in a group of five is not optimal.

## Group Settings

The session structure of *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* is appropriate for both small-group and whole-classroom or other large-group discussion. Groups with a developmental emphasis can be formed in a wide variety of settings:

- school counseling and advisory groups
- regular classrooms
- athletic and academic teams
- music groups
- school clubs
- youth service organizations
- leadership programs
- faith-based settings and youth groups
- peer counseling groups
- family therapy groups
- treatment facilities
- retreats
- at-home discussions involving parents and adolescents
- homeschool events or series

Because the topics are developmental in emphasis and often applicable throughout the lifespan, some sessions are appropriate for women's groups, men's groups, and adult support groups. I have often used them in teacher workshops focused on listening and responding skills, with personal benefits apparent beyond the skills training. In addition, because drug use can arrest social and emotional development, and because addiction does not preclude a need to connect with others, most sessions can be useful in centers focusing on substance abuse.

## Length of Meetings

Ideal meeting length varies depending on group members' ability level and behavior. Students who are hyperactive and distractible, who do not enjoy verbal activity, or who have low cognitive ability may do well with thirty-minute meetings in grades six and seven. However, if hands-on activities are included, having adequate time is essential. Eighth graders and high school students usually appreciate a full class period, although thirty minutes also can suffice. Short meeting times work best for groups with only three or four members. I recommend that "lunch-bunch" groups be allowed to leave class a few minutes early, so that they can get their food before classes are dismissed and maximize the time available for discussion.

## Small Groups

### *Group Size*

For small-group work, ideal group size varies according to age level. For middle school students, a group size of five to seven seems to work best, given the usual length of class periods and students' ability to articulate thoughts, attain depth, and feel heard adequately. (If fifth grade is included in a middle school, I recommend four or five students per group.) I do not recommend more than eight, regardless of students' age or ability. These are general guidelines. My counseling students and I have experienced successful small-group discussion with as few as three students, who bonded well and developed trust after other members moved away. I have also had success with groups of ten high-functioning and articulate students in full-hour meetings, but that number can preclude close connections and adequate time for each member to feel heard and understood. The level of personal concerns might also be a factor when considering group size. Feeling heard is always important. When working with high-risk teens, I sometimes limit a group to six to ensure adequate time for individuals to talk and respond to others.

### *Meeting Location*

For small-group work, I recommend a small room (instead of a classroom), especially for group members who have problems with attention or hyperactivity. Such a space is also more likely to be private and uninterrupted, have

fewer visual distractions than a classroom, and promote a sense of intimacy and safety. I also prefer to have a table to sit around, not only to contribute to comfort but also since many of the sessions involve brief writing.

## Large Groups

*How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* can be useful in large-group settings as well, such as the regular classroom, community youth groups, and teams. Weekly discussions, or a daily series of discussions limited to a week or two, can be part of the curriculum in health, family and consumer sciences, life skills, social science, or language arts, among several possibilities. Discussion is particularly meaningful for adolescents when it deals with the self. Homeroom or advisory periods or community time, when designed to foster positive interaction in a school, can use an activity sheet or other discussion catalyst effectively if the time allowed is adequate (at least twenty minutes).

Group dynamics differ, of course, depending on whether a large group has thirty members or ten, but the focus and most of the strategies work with both sizes of groups. Since a discussion of an activity sheet can easily take an hour with a group of eight verbal students, adjustments must be made when activity sheets are used with larger groups. Classes can be divided into small groups (three to five members) for sharing, for example, with supervision and appropriate directions.

## Group Composition

I have found that the best groups are often those where members do not know each other well outside of the group. Members seem to feel free to share, and they do not have to preface all comments with "Well, someone in here has heard me say this before, but . . ." On the other hand, I have had effective groups where most members knew each other well—and learned to know each other better. Even best friends may not typically discuss topics like those in this book.

Depending on the size of the student population you draw from, you may not have much choice about whom to group together. If some or all members of your group know each other well, it is important to move the group beyond the natural division of friends and nonfriends. Having a focus, with specific activities and written exercises, helps to ensure that students who are friends do not dominate or irritate the others with "inside humor." Encouraging members to change seating each time also can be helpful, although it is important to make this a group norm at the outset, since groups—especially middle school groups—may be resistant to it later.

Groups can break down barriers. In broad-population discussion groups, I prefer a balance between achievers and underachievers, members at risk and not at risk for poor outcomes, members highly involved and not-so-involved in other activities, and students of varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The mix indirectly challenges stereotypical thinking as group members discover common ground.

If, as a counselor, you form a group because members share a common concern or to have a specific purpose and agenda, you can still use these guided discussions with confidence, since they deal with common adolescent challenges. I offer two cautionary guidelines, however. Homogeneous grouping of students who struggle with depression, hyperactivity, substance abuse, disordered eating, or severe behavior problems, for example, potentially creates groups with too many "problems" and no positive peer models. Especially in schools, I believe it is unethical to group by pathology, since privacy (regarding having the "problem") is inherently compromised. Nonetheless, anyone can benefit from connection, support, and learning about self and others. *Discussion does not need to focus on the common major problem.* Struggling teens can benefit from the developmental emphasis and a chance to connect to peers.

If several groups are being formed at one time, distribution can be accomplished by initially compiling a list of all students who accept the invitation to participate and then sorting the list. Of course, recruitment needs to target those least likely to feel welcome. In some cases, the highest-functioning students may be the most reluctant to join, fearing that the groups are geared only to "problems" and that participation will somehow stigmatize them. However, underachieving students and those with other risk factors may think they are the only ones with stressors, vulnerabilities, fears, and problematic performance or attitudes. They can benefit from realizing that everyone has developmental concerns. All social groups have a great deal to learn from each other, and the group setting is an ideal environment for mutual learning.

Mixing genders is also good, even though it is not always possible and might not be advantageous or appropriate for certain topics. However, it is important for students with differing gender identities to learn about each other in a safe and nonjudgmental environment, outside of the regular classroom and apart from usual social settings. It is also important for all students to learn how to communicate with, and in the presence of, each other. Granted, students representing various gender identities may differ greatly in physical, social, and emotional maturity, particularly in middle school. Still, a late-maturing boy, for example, can gain from hearing about the concerns of the early-maturing girls he is around daily, and vice versa.

A discussion group can provide a chance to have contact with the other gender and with peers who do not identify exclusively with either gender. Regardless of whether teens are shy or highly social, a group can raise awareness of gender and gender-identity issues and enhance students' ability to function effectively in complex social relationships now and in the future, including in marriage and other partner relationships, in employment, and in corporate leadership.

On the other hand, same-gender grouping also has advantages and is particularly appropriate when the issues are gender-specific, especially troublesome and gender-related, or perceived by students to be unsafe for

discussion with more than one gender identity represented in the group. Same-gender groups can sometimes empower members in ways that mixed groups cannot. Gender homogeneity may be desirable in an addictions-recovery or sexual-trauma-recovery group in a treatment center, for example. Obviously, decisions about grouping depend on the goals and purpose of the group. I have had good success with same-gender groups in middle schools. The all-male small groups talked just as much and just as openly about social and emotional concerns as the all-female groups did. I also have had mixed results, possibly related to purpose, special population, or grade level, with mixed-gender small groups in middle schools. With high school groups, I routinely mix genders.

Because the sessions are geared to social and emotional development, not to cognitive or academic concerns, having group members of approximately the same age is optimal. Sixth graders are developmentally different from and have different concerns than eighth graders, for instance, and even seventh and eighth graders may have difficulty connecting with each other about social and emotional concerns. Tenth-grade issues are usually different from eleventh-grade issues. Seniors are usually looking ahead in ways that younger students are not. Relationship issues differ along the age continuum, from grade level to grade level, and it is beneficial when students can communicate with others in their own age group about these concerns—even though group members' social experience and physical development might differ.

It is your responsibility, as a group facilitator, to ensure the physical and psychological safety of each group member. Behavior management may be a particular concern in some groups, as well as teasing and name-calling. When forming a group, I suggest some basic screening, since individuals who have great difficulty in all or most social situations (because of an emotional or behavioral disorder, for instance) may be not only disruptive, but also psychologically harmful to other group members.

Treatment centers for behavioral disorders are likely to use group work as part of a treatment plan for addressing severe problems. In schools, by contrast, even though ideally all students should have an opportunity to discuss development with peers, group leaders should keep in mind that severe behavioral problems are difficult to deal with in groups. Group goals may be difficult to achieve when a great amount of time is focused on behavior management and when impulsive, negative behavior and harshly critical statements are intended to harm either the group or individual members. However, I don't consider a group member's initially being unwilling to talk, or even being unwilling to sit within the group space, as being critical of others or as being severe negative behavior. Someone who is untrusting and uneasy with talking about development may need a few, or even several, meetings before interacting verbally. I typically use this nonjudgmental approach: "It's okay if you want to wait. When you're ready, just join in—even if it's a few weeks from now." Eventually, such situations are often resolved quietly.

I recommend providing teachers with a rationale for the group experience and a checklist and encouraging them to take social functioning in the classroom into consideration when recommending students. If group members cannot function at somewhat the same level, have significant problems controlling negative impulses, or are rude and disruptive, the group may not experience the benefits associated with depth of discussion about developmental concerns. Similarly, students who detest each other, or who have significant personality conflicts, should probably not be put into the same small group. A treatment center might be able to use group work to break down such barriers, but putting those students into a new and potentially intense situation like a small group in a school is not as defensible. If attendance is voluntary, other members may even choose not to attend.

Disruptive students deserve attention to developmental challenges, but if it takes nine or ten sessions to move beyond persistent disruptions, all other group members have then lost out on potential gains from an extremely rare opportunity. One suggestion is that if a group member has not settled down by the third or fourth meeting, perhaps that individual should not participate further. Facilitator and student should talk, one-on-one, about that possibility after the second meeting and then again if the decision has been made not to allow participation. Group members should have an opportunity to discuss their feelings about this loss at the next meeting, since they may have mixed feelings, including guilt.

## Inviting Students to Join a Group

In a school, the best way to encourage students to join your group, if membership is voluntary, is to invite them personally. In any event, I recommend that you not call it a "counseling" group when describing it to prospective group members—even if you are indeed a counselor, but especially if you are not—since then there are extra liability concerns. In addition, some students are automatically turned off and turned away by the counseling label. Later on, if someone asks if it is a counseling group, explain that "counseling" basically means "talking and listening" with someone trained in that process. In that regard, if you are a trained counselor, your group could be called a counseling group. However, for recruitment purposes, "discussion group" is both accurate (because of the purpose) and appealing, without potentially negative stigma attached.

"Support group" is appropriate when there is a common, specific agenda or a shared problem area. However, if the group is largely preventive, with self-awareness and personal growth as goals, then "support" is probably too problem-oriented for many students. "Discussion group" is my preference.

In schools, I have contacted students individually to explain a proposed group, and I have gathered together a few students or full-size discussion groups to hear the plan.

In either case, you need to assure students that joining the group involves low risk, with potentially big benefits. The advantage of calling in the group as a whole is that students can see who else will be attending. On the other hand, some might decide against joining for that very reason, without giving the group a chance. When meeting with students individually, you might give them the names of a few prospective members—but *only if they ask* and only if it is possible to share names in advance. If a student wants to ensure that friends will be in a group, I prefer to say, simply, "I encourage you to come and be surprised. It's good to get to know new people, and sometimes it's even best *not* to know anyone else well at the outset. If you decide later that you are not comfortable with the group, you have the option of not continuing." If you decide to meet with all prospective members together, be prepared to do at least a typical, brief activity from the book (perhaps the "Warm-Up" on pages 21–22) to demonstrate what the group will be like.

Be sure to emphasize both the social and the emotional purposes of the group. Students respond well to the idea of meeting new people and getting to know current acquaintances and friends in new ways. They also can relate to the idea of talking about adolescent stress. In fact, I routinely mention stress as an example of the discussion topics. You can explain that, beyond pursuing general goals, the group will determine its own unique atmosphere. That much of an explanation usually suffices. If students want to know more, show them the table of contents for this book. The session titles are varied, and students usually find them interesting—and unexpected.

If you use this book with high school students, it helps to tell them that once you get to know them better through the group experience, you will be able to write more complete and accurate job, college, or scholarship recommendations for them. Explain that you also will be a better and more informed advocate for them if they ever need assistance.

## How to Approach Students Who Have Significant Risk Factors

As a school counselor, you may wish to form a support group to serve students with a common concern. When a particular phenomenon, such as one of those listed below, is affecting several students concurrently, a counselor can utilize development-oriented sessions in this book, without necessarily addressing the common problem directly, to help those students stay connected to school and to supportive peers, a worthy purpose in itself. The problem may come up spontaneously, of course, and then the facilitator's professional expertise is crucial. Otherwise, staying focused on selected developmental topics can generally be beneficial.

- family disruption
- parental or student substance abuse
- school tragedy affecting several families
- family tragedy
- pregnancy
- sexual or other kinds of abuse
- victimization by bullies
- bereavement
- terminal illness in a family member
- potential for dropping out of school
- frequent family moves
- poverty
- parental military deployment
- being new in school

Bringing teens together to "talk about growing up" can offer support and connection during a difficult time without labeling the group. An informed layperson who carefully follows the topic-oriented, development-related discussion format of the sessions in this book can facilitate that kind of discussion. However, *only degreed counselors or other degreed helping professionals should facilitate groups focused on any of the first nine situations in the previous list* because of the need for special expertise and because of risk, including risk of retraumatizing. In addition, as mentioned earlier (see "Group Composition"), privacy is inherently compromised when the facilitator names the serious common concern as the reason for organizing the group. Privacy is a concern during any major life challenge, and school and mental health counselors, counseling and clinical psychologists, and social workers are guided by and trained with ethical codes related to privacy.

Students may not be eager to join a group. If attendance is voluntary, I recommend that you first meet with the high-risk students individually. Explain that you will be leading a discussion group for students who are dealing with stress and you are inviting them to participate. If a student has difficulty with authority, is underachieving with high ability, or has been suspended from school more than once, for example, you don't need to mention those concerns. Instead, simply say that you are looking for interesting, complex students who can help to make a good group. Say that you are looking specifically for students who express their abilities in unusual ways, because you do not want a group that is afraid to challenge and think and you do not want students who always do only what is expected of them. Reframing characteristics usually considered troublesome in this positive way may surprise students and encourage them to participate.

However, no matter what a particular student's behavior might be, always present the group's purpose honestly: to provide an opportunity for students to talk about concerns that are important to adolescents. Be sincere, accepting, and supportive in your invitation. With students in distress, as with all prospective group members, take care not to frighten them away by sounding (or being) invasive or too personal. Give them time to warm up to the idea of interacting with others about growing up. Even traumatized teens

can benefit from *non*-therapy-oriented discussion groups that are not focused on "fixing." Many life situations are not "fixable," and uncomfortable feelings can be purposeful and associated with the long process of healing.

## Sessions for Special Populations

*How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* is appropriate for primary prevention, in the form of focused, development-oriented discussion meant to prevent problems and enhance adolescent development. It is also appropriate for secondary prevention, for use by counselors when there appears to be potential for problems. For the latter, the sessions are appropriate and potentially beneficial for a variety of special populations in either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups:

- students at risk for poor academic outcomes
- students with behavior problems (including students on probation)
- students experiencing difficult family situations or transitions
- students having difficulty with adult authority
- teenage parents
- underachievers
- students labeled "gifted" who are at risk for stress-related disorders, severe underachievement, disordered eating, self-medication with substances, or depression
- students returning from treatment for substance abuse or an eating disorder
- students with poor social skills
- students new to a school
- students who have learning difficulties

Underachievers and students who have behavior problems, difficulty with authority, or poor social skills often are best served when group membership is mixed (that is, perhaps half of group members have at least average skills, behavior, or achievement).

Although the sessions are arranged in a purposeful progression for long-term series, they may certainly be rearranged to create a short-term program or to have a particular focus. Feel free to choose sessions that are most appropriate for your group.

Following are sessions that would be especially helpful for some special populations.

**Individuals experiencing major family transitions** can benefit from any session in the Stress section. They may also find affirmation and be able to express uncomfortable feelings in some sessions in the Identity section (for example, "Giving Ourselves Permission," "In Control, Out of Control"). Some of the family-oriented sessions in the Relationships section (for example, "With Parents, Guardians, and Other Caregivers," "Gifts from People Who Matter") may also be helpful, as well as some in the Feelings section (for example, "Disappointment," "Anger," "Fear, Worry, and Anxiety," "Coping with Change, Loss, and Transition," "When Parents Divorce," "Dealing with Holidays and Family Gatherings") and the Future section (for example, "When and If I'm a Parent").

**Teens at risk for poor personal or educational outcomes** might benefit from these sessions:

- "Stuck!"
- "Does the Stereotype Fit?"
- "Learning Styles"
- "What Defines Us?"
- "Risk-Taking"
- "In Control, Out of Control"
- "A Prisoner of Image"
- "Feeling Free"
- "Coping with Change, Loss, and Transition"
- "Sadness, Depression, and Dark Thoughts"
- "Encouragers and Discouragers"
- "Influencers"
- "Responding to Authority"
- "Getting Our Needs Met"

**Group members who are feeling sad or depressed** often find some of the sessions on stress to be helpful in addition to these:

- "Three Selves"
- "In Control, Out of Control"
- "Having Fun"
- "Being Alone versus Being Lonely"
- "It's Complicated"
- "Getting Our Needs Met"

Students returning from or currently in treatment for substance abuse or an eating disorder may also find these sessions helpful.

# Leading the Sessions

## Facilitators

Since these sessions are designed to be used in a variety of settings, group facilitators may be the following:

- school counselors
- teachers (including those who work with specific populations)
- leaders of youth groups or summer-camp activities
- counselors in community agencies, treatment centers, or private practice
- social workers

- probation officers and others involved with corrections
- coaches

Parents might use sessions for weekly family discussions, and homeschool organizations and groups can use them as catalysts for social interaction.

## Are You Ready to Lead a Discussion Group?

Especially if you are not accustomed to dealing with group discussions in an informal setting, and even if you are, you may find the following suggestions and perspectives helpful:

- For teachers, the social-emotional dimension involves more personal risk-taking than the academic. Discussion related to social and emotional areas is much less "controllable" than academic, philosophical, intellectual, or debate-like discussion.
- Significant adults in students' lives might have focused more on behavior than on feelings, more on academics than on social-emotional needs, or more on performance than on personal development. Some adolescents are eager and immediately grateful for the emphasis on the social and emotional. Some might be uncomfortable with the developmental focus at first; some might even be frightened by it, especially those whose families guard privacy at extreme levels, or where emotional expression is discouraged. Regardless of response, your concentrated attention on social and emotional concerns will probably be a new experience for them. Discomfort may even generate problematic behavior initially.
- If you are careful to focus on social and emotional issues, there will be little opportunity for group members to play competitive, "one-up" verbal games. Social and emotional concerns are not likely to be debatable.
- Be prepared for a wide range of verbal ability, learning preferences, personalities, and behaviors in small groups. Consider the format for each session carefully in that regard.

You may also want to consider your own motives for establishing groups for students, as well as your sense of security around various personalities and behaviors. Consider these questions:

- Can you view adolescents as simply (and complexly) "developing"?
- Are your self-esteem and self-confidence strong enough to stay on firm footing in the midst of negative behavior?
- Can you stay poised and focused on the social and emotional, no matter what comes up?
- Can you deal with students simply as human beings with frailties, insecurities, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, regardless of their behavior and/or school performance?
- Can you avoid needing to "put them in their place"?
- Can you accept their defenses, including bravado, and give them time to let themselves be socially and emotionally vulnerable?
- Can you recognize that they may not take risks socially, academically, and/or emotionally, and that they might benefit from encouragement to take appropriate risks in these areas?
- Can you look honestly at some of your own stereotypes or negative feelings that might interfere in your work with various student populations, and can you put them aside for the duration of the group experience?
- Can you let group members teach you about themselves without judging them?
- Can you avoid being too interested in ferreting out details about students' families and personal lives?
- If you are a teacher, can you move from an evaluative to a supportive role?
- Can you move out of an adult-expert position and accept that teens know themselves and their world better than you do—and that *you* need to learn from *them*?
- Can you enter their world respectfully?

If you can answer all or most of these questions in the affirmative, don't worry. You're ready to take on a roomful or small group of adolescents. If your answers were mostly negative or unsure, perhaps you should consider other ways to work with students or should (if you are not a counselor) consider co-facilitating a group with a counselor, at least initially. Such co-facilitation may help you develop listening and responding skills and move toward a nonjudgmental posture.

## General Guidelines for Group Facilitators

The following general guidelines are designed to help you lead successful and meaningful discussion groups. You may want to review them from time to time over the life of a group.

1. Be prepared to learn how to lead a group by doing it. Let the group know that this is your attitude. If you are a trained counselor, you may need to become comfortable with *focused, semistructured* discussion intended to facilitate connection, not to "do therapy." In addition, even if you lead groups regularly, reviewing basic tenets of group work can be beneficial. If you are *not* a trained counselor and are not able to co-facilitate a group with a counselor,

you might ask a counselor for information about group process and about listening and responding. However, if you study this introductory material, keep the guidelines in mind, and use the questions provided, you will likely behave appropriately.

2. Don't think you have to be an expert on every topic. Tell the group at the outset that you want to learn with them and from them, and that you want them to learn from each other. Most of the content will come from them. It is usually better to be "one-down" (unknowing) than "one-up" (expert) in relationships with adolescents. They will respond to that approach. For most sessions, having information is not the key to success. Trust your adult wisdom, since that is one thing you have that group members do not. It will serve you well. But recognize that your job is largely to facilitate discussion, not to teach and not to "fix" or change kids.
3. Monitor group interaction and work toward contribution from all members without making it an issue. Remember that quiet individuals can gain a great deal just by listening and observing. You can encourage everyone to participate, yet not insist on that. Sharing about written exercises and activity sheets provides quiet group members a comfortable opening. Even uttering a simple phrase from a sheet can feel huge for a shy person and may represent significant risk-taking.
4. Keep the session focus in mind, but be flexible about direction. Your group may lead you in new directions that are as worthwhile as the stated focus and suggestions. However, if they veer too far off track, especially with only one or two students dominating, use the focus as an excuse to rein in the group.
5. It is probably best to go into each session with two related sessions in mind, since the one you have planned might not generate as much response as expected. You can always unobtrusively guide the group into the second direction. However, try several of the suggestions before dropping a topic. It might simply require some "baking time." Ask questions confidently, leaning slightly forward, with your face expectant.
6. Be willing to model how to do an activity, *even though that is usually not necessary.* The activity sheets are fairly self-explanatory, but on rare occasions you may need to demonstrate a response. If you are not willing to self-disclose, your group may wonder why they should be expected to reveal their thoughts and feelings. However, your doing only one small, discreet, carefully selected self-disclosure early in the life of a group may suffice for an entire series of meetings. Your modeling should be only to clarify something in an unfamiliar activity. Too much from you, too often, can actually inhibit group response. Attention should be focused on group members, not on you. The group is for students' benefit, not yours.
7. Every now and then, especially after the group has established a rhythm (perhaps after five or six meetings), ask group members how they are feeling about the group. Is there anything they would like to do differently or change? Are they comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns? What has been helpful? Have they noticed any problems that need addressing, such as discussions being dominated by a few members, not enough flexibility in direction, a personality conflict within the group, or too much leader direction? Processing group dynamics provides an important opportunity for members to practice tact in addressing group issues.

   Incorporate members' suggestions that fit the overall purpose of the group. If you do not yet feel comfortable as a facilitator, and if students are being negatively critical, tell them you are still learning about groups, and they are as well. Be aware that some students may press for "no focus" for a long time. You may want to review the rationale for focus outlined on page 13 prior to your first request for feedback. *Depending on group composition, you may also choose to delay questions about format until the benefits have become fairly clear.* Or simply be prepared to explain the purpose of the format while emphasizing that the format is flexible. Support the group and give guidance as they make progress in overcoming group challenges. Above all, try to be secure in using the focus. If you seem unsure and ask too frequently about the format, you may experience mutiny, especially if there has not been sufficient time for the group to bond and appreciate the benefits of some structure. I often ask for feedback midway and also late in the life of a group, otherwise relying on students' level of cooperation to inform me sufficiently about how the group is functioning. If lack of cooperation is a problem, I process that (see #9 below).
8. If group energy consistently or increasingly lags, discuss that in the group. Let the members help you figure out how to energize the discussions and/or deal with group inhibitions. However, *do not readily reject the idea of maintaining a focus for each session*. Perhaps you need to alter your questioning style (see page 16) or more deftly follow some directions that come up spontaneously. Or perhaps you need to be more selective when choosing your topics. The written exercises and activity sheets often encourage sharing. Being creative, especially in incorporating physical movement into the activities, might help to engage some group members. Matching activities to your group's preferred learning style and personalities can improve interaction.
9. Anything can be processed in the group—crying, interrupting, disclosing something unexpected,

being rude, being sad, belching, challenging the facilitator. That is, group members can discuss what just happened—in the present. A facilitator can say, "What was it like for you to challenge me just now?" or "How did the rest of you feel when she challenged me?" or "How are you feeling right now, after he disclosed that?" or "That comment was a surprise. How is it affecting us?" *Then wait for a response*. Processing what happens in a group gives members a chance to reflect on their own feelings and on the group's interaction and to learn skills in expressing emotions.

## Making Adaptations for Your Group

Group facilitators often do not adapt the format to their particular groups as much as they should—and as much as I would expect. I encourage you to approach the topics creatively, responding to each unique group. At the very least, time constraints may mean that some written exercises need to be shortened. Depending on the group's level of cognitive development, context, and purposes, some vocabulary might need to be changed. In addition, some of the suggestions provided for each session might not fit your setting or your group's level of ability. In that case, ignore those or devise your own approach to the topic. You will need to examine the individual sessions to determine which ones might be most helpful, enjoyable, and appropriate for your group's developmental level. However, beware of underestimating group members' awareness of the world or need for information based on their age or ability. In addition, be aware of, and respect, community sensitivities. For example, parents and other members of the community might object to discussions related to sexual orientation, sexuality and sexual behavior, gender roles, gender identity, and family roles. Even discussions about depression, disordered eating, or cutting might not be deemed appropriate.

## Ethical Behavior

Your ethical behavior as group leader is extremely important. Sharing confidential group information in the teachers' or agency lounge, with parents, or in the community is not only potentially hurtful, but may also ultimately destroy the possibility of any small-group activity in your school or other place of employment. Trust is quickly lost, and it is difficult and sometimes even impossible to reestablish.

If you plan to conduct groups in a school setting, but are not a counselor and are unfamiliar with ethical guidelines for counselors (including those specifically related to group work), get a copy of such guidelines from your school counselor or through the website of the American Counseling Association (www.counseling.org) or the American School Counselor Association (www.schoolcounselor.org) and read the guidelines carefully. Be aware that counselor training may have an entire course focused on ethics and professionalism. Be especially aware of your responsibilities regarding confidentiality. Familiarize yourself with situations in which confidentiality must be breached, such as when abuse or neglect is suspected or when someone is in danger or may be a danger to others. The "informed consent" aspect should be addressed by discussing purpose, format, content, confidentiality, and your responsibilities at the first meeting.

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group. You can explain to your group the actions you will take to protect confidentiality, but you should emphasize that you can guarantee the behavior only of yourself, not of group members. The ethics of confidentiality and privacy apply regardless of whether a leader is a degreed counselor. However, since trust is so essential for comfortable group discussion, you should strongly encourage students not to share, outside of the group, what is said in the group. Tell group members that not keeping comments "inside the group" can destroy the group and even prevent *any* groups from existing in the school or organization in the future due to of lack of trust. Avoid the word *secrets*, however, since it may raise unwarranted concerns and because it may be frightening to students whose families remind them often about not sharing personal information. Any discussion about confidentiality should be matter of fact, not threatening and not overblown. You might remind a group, now and then, about respecting member and family privacy (for example, "How are we doing with respecting privacy after we leave this room each time?").

You may wish to address these issues in a letter to parents asking their permission for their children to attend the group. For a sample letter, which you may modify, see page 19. Please note that this letter is appropriate for groups not designed to address a specific problem area. Feel free to adapt it when necessary.

## Group Members Who Are Quiet or Shy

Earnest (but nonstrident) efforts to ask students who are quiet or shy for at least one or two comments during each meeting can help them to feel included and gradually increase their willingness to talk. Although listening can be as valuable as speaking in finding commonalities and gaining self-awareness, it is important for reticent individuals to be heard by their peers, even if only at modest levels. The value of communicating with peers during meetings, in contrast to communicating with you, the facilitator, should not be underestimated. Group members' feedback has indicated, to me, that quiet members gain as much as, or more than, assertive members.

Groups can actually help to validate and support quiet personal styles through discussing personality differences in general and by overtly recognizing quiet members' listening and observation skills, which gregarious members may not have. Even small talk between a leader and a shy student while everyone is arriving may contribute to comfort and ease, which eventually might generate spontaneous comments. In addition, using the activity sheets gives

everyone, including shy members, a chance to have low-risk attention in the group and be heard.

## Group Members Who Dominate

One strategy for dealing with verbal dominators is to revisit the group guidelines (page 20) as a group, with no one the target. Processing group discussions after the fact can also be used to raise awareness (for example, "How does it feel to be in the group at this point? How are we doing in making sure everyone gets a chance to talk and no one dominates?"). If you notice someone rolling eyes when a dominant group member talks, call attention to that (for example, "I was just noticing something nonverbal in the group—an expression on someone's face. [Name], would you be willing to share with the group what's on your mind? It might help us be a better group.").

## Counseling Individual Group Members

I have found that when trust has been established among members and between members and facilitator, individuals with pressing needs sometimes, understandably and appropriately, seek consultation outside of the group if the facilitator is accessible. A trusted facilitator, sought out during a crisis, may indeed play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of a group member.

If you will not be on the premises every day, it is important to tell the group, at least at the outset of the group series, about when you will be available. I do not recommend giving out your phone number or email, since it is easy for particularly dependent students, and those with poor boundaries, to abuse such access. On the other hand, it may be possible (though not easy) for you to model boundary-setting if the email or phone calls become invasive. Anyone can usually find contact information on the internet if persistent enough, of course—another reason for not giving it out to the group. I don't recommend that you participate with group members on social media, not only because oral communication is a focus of the discussion groups, but also because modeling good social and emotional boundaries is important. Keeping track of what is said, and by whom, becomes even more complex when social media are involved, and group members may be less discreet when not face to face. A small group can be a rare setting for getting acquainted in new ways. Moderation, good boundaries, and appropriate caution are all important here.

It is important to note that too much emphasis at group sessions on outside conferencing can turn off members who do not want to connect the groups to "counseling" and might also encourage some to steer their communication away from the group inappropriately in order to have a special relationship with the facilitator. Facilitators should certainly not refer to outside conversations in group meetings. In addition, if members complain about the group to the facilitator between sessions, they should be encouraged to bring their concerns to the group, putting responsibility on the group member and giving the group an opportunity to gain skills in resolving conflict.

## Handling "Bombs"

Most students, including those in early middle school, are appropriately discreet in what they share in small- and large-group meetings, especially when the facilitator does not pry for private information. However, you can probably expect a few highly charged moments to occur along the way, such as when someone suddenly drops a "bomb" after deciding that the group is trustworthy.

What happens when something shocking is revealed, when someone cries, or when intense conflict erupts within the group? No one can predict these events, of course, since every group has unique dynamics, and groups are generally full of surprises. However, with some basic admonitions in mind, you will learn to trust your instincts. With time and experience, you will be able to anticipate—and perhaps avert—most crisis situations. If they occur, you can be prepared.

Have tissues handy for the student who cries, and simply convey a silent request to a group member to pass the box to the person who needs it. It is important that you affirm the emotion with a compassionate facial expression and perhaps a slight head nod and accept the tears with poise. In fact, your empathetic composure will model for group members that it is all right to cry and express emotions genuinely, that others do not have to rush in to "fix" the situation, and that it is important not to be hyperreactive to others' discomfort, since objectivity and the ability to help may then be lost. When appropriate, ask the individual what, if anything, is needed from the group. Overt support? Just listening? Nothing at the moment? It may be helpful to process an outburst after the fact, asking questions like, "How did it feel to have someone express emotion through crying?" or "Is there anything you would like to say to (name of student who cried)?" and perhaps then (to the student who cried), "What was it like for you to hear that?"

If a student makes a dramatic revelation, immediately put your hand out at arm's length, palm forward, and remind the group about the importance of confidentiality. You might say, "Let's pause a moment. It probably took courage for (name of student) to share that. She/he trusted you as a group. Remember, what was said should stay in the group. If you are tempted to share this information with someone outside of the group, bite your tongue. That's very important. We want to protect our group." Beware of exaggerated responses, both nonverbal and verbal, which can reinforce the idea that a particular revelation is "too much to handle." The sharer might, in fact, have been testing that belief.

If you work in a school and are not a counselor, you should consult with a school counselor or administrator to learn what to do in specific situations. For example, if a student makes a comment (or even just hints) about abuse or suicidal thoughts, you should know how to follow up (see the session "Sadness, Depression, and Dark Thoughts,"

page 153, for some guidelines). Your school or organization likely has guidelines specific to these issues, and it is best to know them ahead of time. If students contact you independently about a personal concern, remind them that you are not a counselor, but you will certainly listen, and you may subsequently want to encourage them to see a school counselor, depending on what the concern is. If you are a counselor, it is of course important to follow a revelation about abuse or neglect with a one-on-one meeting with the student to determine if the revelation was made seriously and genuinely, to validate the experience through supportive comments, and then, if appropriate, to call the appropriate child protection agency. Regardless of your professional status, you can quietly ask the group member to hang back as the group disperses so that you can meet for a few minutes to help you decide what to do.

Groups are ideal settings for practicing conflict resolution. You can help those in disagreement to listen carefully to each other. Group members can offer supportive thoughts and guidance. You might also pursue helpful material on conflict resolution in your school library. If you are not a counselor, ask a school counselor for strategies your group might use to deal with disagreements or ask the counselor to conduct mediation. Be aware that you yourself might have some resistance to dealing with conflict. Your own fears, discomfort, or emotionality about conflict may actually prevent group members from handling the situation in a healthy manner.

### Announcing the Session Topic

If your group is voluntary and a session topic is announced in advance, some individuals may decide not to come if the topic does not sound interesting or relevant to them. You want group attendance to be consistent; it is distracting and can prevent trust from developing when all eight students show up one week and only two the next. Therefore, I recommend that you use a "trust me" response when students ask about the next session's topic. Suggest that they show up and be surprised. Remind them that one can never anticipate the interesting directions a particular topic might take. Besides, many topics are more complex than they first appear.

### Journal-Writing

Journal-writing can add a dimension to a group experience. When adolescents have an opportunity to put their thoughts into writing, they can articulate, clarify, expand on, and sort ideas and issues that are important to them. They might then remember ideas and issues they want to bring up in their group and may feel more confident about expressing them. However, since an important goal of the group experience is learning to articulate thoughts and feelings orally in order to enhance relationships, especially important when social media are often the default modes, I strongly advise keeping the focus of groups on oral communication.

In general, I prefer to use the entire group time for open, semistructured discussion, since time available for middle and high school advisor-advisee or homeroom meetings, for instance, is already probably less than optimal for group discussion. Adding discussion related to journals diverts time and attention away from the new focus, as journal entries are likely to relate to preceding, not present, topics. In addition, some schools use this book as a guidance or advisee curriculum and encourage multiple classroom facilitators to deal with sessions at the same time and in the same sequence. If journaling is indeed done, it is important to consider if and how it will be attended to in group sessions, including how much time will be available for each new focus, and how much time will be required for you to read and respond meaningfully to journal entries. *Fundamentally, it is important to remember that the emphasis in this approach to group work is on building skills through oral expression, with present and future relationships in mind.*

## About the Sessions

### The Focus

Why have a focus for each session? Development is the common denominator for the sessions—not a particular issue, behavior, need, or goal, as may be common in group work in treatment centers or agencies. Nevertheless, working with an explicit focus or theme is worthwhile, since it provides a starting point for discussion and an excuse to curb negative and unproductive group behaviors. It also insists on addressing important, developmentally appropriate topics that might be somewhat uncomfortable to talk about. In addition, all adolescents are not as flexible as they may appear, and product-oriented members may quickly tire of "not really doing anything." Others need structure to contain their anxiety and impulsivity. On the other hand, some are quite flexible and, especially if they are verbal and spontaneous, may prefer a loose format. In fact, they might say, "Just let us come in here and talk about whatever we want to talk about."

The structure that is recommended here can benefit a wide range of personalities and meet many needs. Even individuals who resist structure often find the variety of semistructured approaches interesting and worthwhile. It will be important that you consider carefully how much structure is warranted. Complaints may initially reflect only apprehension about addressing developmental concerns and exploring emotions. In addition, be reminded that the recommended format helps to keep discussion oriented to prevention, development, and connection, which are appropriate territory not just for laypersons as facilitators, but for degreed counseling professionals as well, regardless of setting.

Individuals who like order and structure and who are uncomfortable when there is no "map" or clear purpose usually want group time to be worthwhile in specific terms. If there is no "felt focus," and if group membership

is voluntary, students may choose not to attend when something else seems preferable—like finishing homework or eating with friends. They may also object when assertive members set the pace and direction each time. Group members with new and dramatic needs each week can quickly dominate, and others may then defer and listen, or they might leave, frustrated that their own issues are not addressed. Discussion groups should not be just for "natural talkers."

On the other hand, group discussions need not be rigidly programmed. Although *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* proposes a focus for each session, sometimes with several sessions building on a theme, there is great potential for nimbly changing direction during discussion. A flexible facilitator can accommodate strands that emerge, yet still gently steer the group to closure, overtly acknowledging that the focus inspired unexpected directions. Especially with topics that members view as intimidating and difficult, the focus is an excuse to persist with tough questions and deal with issues and problems, not just gripes and frustrations, gossip, and banter.

Also important is the reality that a focus helps group facilitators in schools communicate with administrators, parents, and teachers about groups, which need advocacy and protection in today's educational climate. Those adults might assume that discussion groups are for teacher-bashing, airing family secrets, or simply "hanging out." Being able to say, "We've been dealing with stress for the past four weeks," or "We're focusing on self-awareness this semester," or more specifically, "We've been talking about bullying" helps to lessen anxiety and suspicion. Listing even a few topics underscores that these groups deal with significant issues and are worth the energy required to resolve daunting logistical challenges associated with group work in schools.

I have found that focusing on "self-esteem," "motivation," or "friendship," per se, for a full meeting is often not productive in small-group work. That is not to say that enhancing these is not a worthy goal. However, meaningful discussion, connections with peers, new social skills, and information about development can all potentially enhance how teens view themselves, peers, and schoolwork. Self-esteem and motivation can be affected by developmental challenges, and friendship skills can be improved through making connections *about* development during small-group discussion. Therefore, focusing on development-related topics makes sense if general goals include improved sense of self, motivation, and peer relationships. (The one session focused entirely on self-esteem, for example, looks at that concept from several angles, including developmental.) I also believe that focusing on strengths (a hallmark of counseling), rather than on limitations, deficits, or pathology, is key to helping teens stay on, or move to, solid ground during adolescence—including socially and academically.

## Background Information

At the beginning of most sessions, a few paragraphs of background information are provided. These are designed to help you prepare for the session and think broadly about the topic at hand, to provide basic information that might be useful during the session, to inspire further reading, to anticipate student concerns, and to assist you in determining a possible direction for the discussion, according to the needs of your group. *Usually, it is not appropriate to read this information to the group*; in only a few sessions are you directed to do that. A section at the end of the book provides trusted resources for additional background on some topics as well as some resources that are appropriate to recommend to students who request additional information.

## Objectives and Suggestions

The objectives listed for each session tell you what to work toward and what to expect if the general suggestions are followed. They may also help you communicate purpose and content to administrators, parents, and teachers who wonder what your group is doing. You may want to prepare a list of objectives for parent conferences, for example. However, *the objectives are not meant to be read to group members.*

The suggestions are just that—suggestions. Use all, some, or none of them, and adapt those you use to address the needs of your group. Time limits, ability level, and group temperament are among many factors to consider when selecting suggestions and activities. The suggested questions provided are generally open-ended and likely to generate conversation.

## Activity Sheets

Several of the sessions include activity sheets that may be reproduced for group use. They are also included in the digital content for this book (see page 289 for downloading instructions). In my experience, these written exercises do not make discussions too structured, and most adolescents do not resist them. However, receptivity depends on how the sheets are used.

Especially when activity sheets are not used too often, groups have told me they appreciate the handouts as an opportunity to think quietly and focus at the outset of a meeting and to write, objectify, and edit their thoughts. The sheets also give everyone a chance to be heard. Quiet or shy members can share, in turn, without having to compete with assertive peers. Discussion can involve only a few or all items on a sheet. Activities using paper, pencils, markers, index cards, masking tape, string, or other items provide opportunities to consider thoughts and may even help teens express strong feelings and opinions without the pressure of eye contact. However, with some teens, those items easily become paper airplanes, something to "rattle," and a distraction. If group members can curb impulses to throw them, soft balls, bendable plastic sticks, and small stuffed animals can give students something to fiddle with and

may provide safe distraction when topics evoke uncomfortable emotions—especially early in the life of a group, before members develop trust and establish a rhythm.

Group members who have learning disabilities (affecting reading and writing abilities and general comfort in the classroom), have physical disabilities (affecting writing), or are hyperactive may have a more difficult time than others with settling in. Discomfort and anxiety can be expressed through disruptive behavior. You may need an extra layer of patience and perseverance as these students learn to relax and enjoy the group experience. I recommend responding calmly and quietly to disruptions, not taking negative behavior personally, and not immediately assuming that the discussion format is inappropriate. With that said, however, more creative and quietly kinesthetic approaches to the topics may be helpful. Students with classroom difficulties (in learning and/or in behavior) often believe that "teachers don't like them." Your holistic, nonjudgmental interest in them and your focus on strengths and "normal development" may be new and welcome. If you have organized a small group, being able to work with smaller numbers is your advantage.

You may want to keep a file folder for each student in the group and, for the sessions utilizing activity sheets, have group members put the sheets into their folders at the close of each session. You can then return the folders to a secure place, ensuring that personal information will not end up on the classroom floor or circulating through the halls through carelessness. You might also gather the sheets (with names) at the end of a session and file them in students' folders yourself. I recommend that group members look over the accumulated stash during the final group meeting and then shred the sheets themselves during that meeting. At the time they were filled out, the sheets provoked self-reflection and were private. Personal "editing" could occur even when information was shared with the group, with some information withheld if considered too private to share. *Looking the sheets over, at the end, reinforces that the group experience was broad and complex*. As always, the *process* of glancing over the sheets, rather than the content, is the key—and is sufficient. Shredding the sheets reinforces the right to privacy, affirms the developmental challenge of establishing a separate identity, and confirms the respect of the group leader for both of these elements. Another option is for you to simply dispose of the set of sheets at the end of each session by shredding them.

*Under no circumstances should the sheets be shown to any school personnel.* However, because you have been clear at the outset that abuse, neglect, and danger to self and others must be reported (see page 11), group members who share that kind of information on the sheets will be aware of your responsibility. Meet individually with students who indicate a threat to safety, remind them of your responsibility, check out the seriousness of the situation, encourage contact with an available counselor (if you are not one) or accompany them to the counselor's office, and follow through, if appropriate, with a report to child protective services. In the case of suicidal ideation, make sure you or a counselor contacts the student's parents and provides appropriate guidance or, if parents are unavailable, ensures the safety of the individual.

### Session Closure and Series Ending

Each session includes a suggestion for closure. It is always a good idea to end a session with a summary, whether you provide it yourself or solicit it from the group. Inherent in closure is the reminder that the discussions are purposeful, that members have common concerns, and that members have been heard. Even if an important new thought is introduced in the closing minutes, it is still good to have some kind of deliberate closure, perhaps also suggesting that the group continue with the new idea next time. However, I normally recommend that session topics not be continued into the next session. Each is meant to stand alone or be combined with another topic for one session. The purpose is to learn through process, not to cover content. It is fine to conclude discussion on a topic before it feels "done." You will have provoked thought and provided an opportunity for discussion and skill-building in that session, and that is the value.

If you complete the session and the closure and time remains, you might use it to begin the next writing activity, ask questions designed to encourage thinking about the next session or focus, or just chat with the group.

## Getting Started

### How to Begin

Begin the first meeting by letting students know how pleased you are that they will be part of the group. Remind them that the purpose of the group is to "just talk" about various topics related to growing up. Their contribution will be to share feelings and concerns and to support each other.

Explain your role in the group. If you are a teacher or other professional without counselor training, tell the students that during group meetings you will not be a "teacher" in the usual sense of that word. Instead, you will be a discussion leader or facilitator, and the focus will be on them. It will be *their* group, developing uniquely. You will be their guide, listening carefully, sharing insights when appropriate, and helping them to connect with each other. Emphasize that you will all learn from each other. If you are a counselor, explain that the group is not a typical counseling group with a focus on a particular problem. The purpose of the group is the same no matter the facilitator: making connections through talking about growing up.

Move next to introductions and a generative get-acquainted activity, such as the "Warm-Up" (pages 21–22), that sets the tone for the group experience. Tell the group to read through all the sentence beginnings silently and slowly, writing responses to complete the thought. Then invite them to read their responses—either to one sentence at a time across the group or with each member,

in turn, reading the entire sheet all at once. Or, if you prefer, go directly to another session you have chosen to start the group. During your first meeting, since it is important that group members experience what "being in a group" will be like, avoid becoming bogged down with rule-setting and warnings. Instead, conduct an activity that generates interaction and gives them an idea of who is in the group. Then explain that at each meeting the group will similarly talk and do things together. Thank them for getting the group off to a good start.

At some point during your first or second meeting, you might choose to hand out copies of the "Group Guidelines" (page 20). Go over the guidelines one at a time, with volunteers reading them. Ask if anyone has questions or if there is anything they do not understand. Tell the group that everyone—including you—is expected to follow these guidelines for as long as the group exists. Explain that although they may not know how to do all of these things and behave in all of these ways right now, they will be learning and practicing these skills over the life of the group. Stay positive and optimistic, indicating that the guidelines are simply common sense.

Be aware that optimal group behavior can become established by complimenting members when it occurs. Adding a comment like, "That kind of behavior helps make a good group," can also help to "norm" group functioning positively.

## How to Proceed

First-year groups, particularly at younger ages, often need more structure than more experienced groups. It also takes a while to establish ease and fluidity in discussion, even when members are well acquainted outside of the group. Groups of older students are usually able to deal with abstract and personal topics with little introduction, and they are also likely to be more patient and tolerant regarding experimentation with format. Groups of older adolescents usually attain depth more quickly than younger groups, although the presence of even one or two spontaneous, forthright middle schoolers can move a young group quickly into significant interaction.

Follow the suggestions in each session for introducing the topic, generating discussion, and managing the activities. There are usually more suggestions than you will need for a session. Teachers and counselors who have used earlier versions of this book have told me they appreciate having several suggestions to choose from; therefore, I have continued to include multiple options here.

You may find it difficult to follow the printed text while leading the discussions. Rather than reading anything word for word to your group, it's best to familiarize yourself thoroughly with the content of a session before your meeting. Then you'll have a general direction in mind and some ideas for pursuing various directions, while keeping an eye on the session materials, if necessary.

Sometimes your group may generate a good discussion for the entire session on only the first suggestion. This is not unusual or "wrong." The more flexible you are, the better. Never think you need to finish everything suggested. In fact, as mentioned earlier, move to a new session focus at the next meeting, regardless of whether you have applied all suggestions.

Be aware that even when students in a school enjoy a group, they can forget to come to meetings that are not part of the regular classroom schedule. If your group is voluntary, you may need to remind them for several weeks about meeting times and places. Eventually attendance may become a habit for most. However, I have found it worthwhile and beneficial to groups to send a reminder to everyone (a "pass" sent to a homeroom or a group email or text) about every meeting. If paper passes are used, students can simply fill them out for the next week at the outset of a meeting, including the name of the teacher who will distribute the passes.

## Tips to Keep in Mind

1. Remind the group, now and then and as needed, that anything said in the group stays in the group. Confidentiality is especially important when sensitive information is shared.
2. Ask open-ended questions, not yes-or-no questions, to generate discussion. Questions beginning with *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *what kind* are preferable to closed questions beginning with variations of *is*/*are*/*were*, *does*/*do*/*did*, and *has*/*have*/*had*, since the former require more than a yes-or-no response. However, for reluctant contributors, closed questions such as, "Was it a sad time?" offer low risk, and such questions are also appropriate in conjunction with open-ended questions when a point of information is needed. In general, however, discussions can be facilitated entirely without using questions. Statements often can be more facilitative than questions (for example, in response to a group member's comments, "Middle school can be challenging," "You've had a rough week," "I can hear that it was very upsetting.")
3. When a member offers a comment that begs for more detail, respond with, "Tell us more about . . . ," "Put words on that feeling . . . ," "Help us understand . . . ," "Can you give an example of . . . ?" or "What do you mean by . . . ?"
4. Always allow group members to pass if they prefer not to speak. This guideline applies to any group activity, including activity sheets, checklists, and group discussions. Make it clear from the beginning that nobody has to speak, even though you hope you can get to know all of them and that they can become acquainted with each other.

5. Don't preach. Students probably hear enough of that already. This experience should be different.
6. Don't judge. Let your group "just talk," and accept what they say. Feel free to say, "Wow," or "That's an interesting view," or "Pretty risky, huh?" if they share experiences related to unwise decisions or behaviors or make comments that are not smooth or are potentially inflammatory. In responding calmly, *without judgment*, you are establishing a climate where students can explore developmental challenges with an adult present.
7. Take them seriously and validate their feelings. For some group members, this might be a rare or entirely new experience. Paraphrasing ("You felt she didn't understand," or "You had a long, difficult day"), checking ("Did I hear you correctly? This happened a week ago?"), asking for more information ("I don't think I quite understand; tell us more about that"), acknowledging feelings ("I can hear how frustrated you were," or "It makes sense that you felt angry"), or simply offering an "Mmmmm" in response to a comment shows that you are listening and thinking about what was said.
8. Relax and let the group be more about process than product. It may not always be apparent that something specific has been accomplished, but as long as members keep talking thoughtfully, you're probably on the right track.
9. Beware of sharing your own personal experiences too often and in too much detail. Always remember that the group is about *them*, not about you, and that every time you self-disclose, you take attention away from them. Group members will feel that shift and may quickly tire of your talking about your family or adolescence. Your personal experiences are also likely not as helpful or pertinent to their situations as you think. I rarely fill out the activity sheets myself, and therefore I do not participate in a "go-around" with the sheets. Having a policy of limited self-disclosure from the outset establishes an appropriate facilitator posture. If someone asks you a personal question, consider saying something like this: "This group is for you, not for me. Discussions in groups like this should be among peers. I'm just the leader. I want to be careful to do my part well."
10. Be alert to moments when it is wise to protect members from each other and themselves. For example, if a group member begins with something like, "I've never said this to anybody—it's about something pretty bad that happened to me," you may want to encourage a pause before continuing. To do that, reach out one hand toward the speaker, palm away, and ask, "Are you comfortable sharing this with the group?" Then ask the group, "Are you ready to be trusted? Remember what we said about confidentiality." Then go back to the speaker: "Do you still want to share this with the group?" In doing this, you give the student time to reconsider (especially if the student has too quickly assumed trustworthiness), and you also have reminded the group about their responsibilities. After the speaker finishes, you might process the telling with the group: "How did that feel to be trusted with that information?" The focus remains on feelings and support.
11. In situations where members of the group verbally attack each other, another kind of protection is needed: facilitator intervention. In addition, the group can process what has happened by sharing their feelings about the conflict. In fact, processing the experience can, in itself, defuse conflict. When there is conflict, ask, "What is/was that like for us to have conflict in the group?" This is an excellent time to talk genuinely about strong feelings and experience conflict resolution.
12. If a student reacts emotionally with momentary discomfort or tears, offer verbal support, a tissue (which should be handy), or touch (a pat on the arm, perhaps, if in proximity). Group members may follow your lead. However, be aware that some may not want to be touched. In fact, beware of assuming that a hug is "best." A hug may meet facilitator needs more than student needs. Touch, for some, understandably means danger and discomfort—or is simply not common culturally.
13. Listen carefully to the student who is speaking, but also be sure to monitor nonverbal behavior in the entire group. Be alert to those who are not speaking. Are they showing discomfort (averted eyes, moving back, facial tics), frustration (agitation, head-shaking, mumbled negatives), or anxiety (uneasy eyes, unsteady hands, tense face)? Depending on the situation and the student, you may want to ask sensitively about what you are noticing.
14. Be sincere in your comments and compliments. Watch for and act on opportunities to compliment group members ("You put words on a very complex feeling," or "You explained that very well"). Avoid insincere, noncredible comments about members' strengths, but be on the lookout for demonstrations or descriptions of courage, compassion, kindness, wisdom, common sense, responsibility, and problem-solving abilities, for example. All adolescents are hungry for positive strokes, and whatever genuine positive support you give them will be taken seriously.

## Endings

How to end a series of group meetings should be carefully considered, since members might have become quite attached to the group. It is wise to wind down

purposefully. "An Informal Assessment" (page 275) can be used to conclude a series of meetings.

Most important in the final session, or sometime during the last few sessions, is to invite members to talk about what they have experienced in the group. I have found that asking them to write a few simple sentences or paragraphs during a final session is helpful. Sometimes, when group attendance was voluntary, I have asked, "Why did you keep coming to the group?" At other times, I have simply invited members to talk about what they have gained in personal insights, what they have learned about adolescence in general, what common ground they have discovered, and if and how they have changed over the period of time the group has met.

All groups, regardless of size and duration, need to prepare for the time when the group will no longer meet. Most participants will miss the group when it is done and feel a sense of loss. Especially if they have become dependent on the group for support, they may feel anxious about facing the future without the group. If they have become well acquainted through the group, and if they have made friends, they may wonder if they will lose touch once the group disbands.

A few sessions prior to ending a series, mention casually that there are only a few meetings remaining. Continue to do that until the next-to-last session. At that time, mention what you have in mind for the final session, or ask the group for suggestions. You might plan a party, have food brought in, and/or take a group photo. Be aware, though, that changing the "mode" of the group may create discomfort at a time already stressful because of the ending. After all, the focus until then has been on discussion. Even the addition of food or music changes group dynamics. Everyone must interact socially in a new way, with no "topic" and little time to become comfortable with it. With that said, however, use your own judgment. You know your group.

Be sure to leave time at the final session for them and you to say good-bye. If it is possible that they will not have much future contact with each other, provide a way for them to share home and email addresses and phone numbers and to wish each other well. Be aware that you will be modeling strategies for ending what has likely been a profound experience. For many people—adults and students—that is a difficult process.

## Evaluation

It is not always easy to "read" a group and know whether it is moving in a positive direction. Individuals who readily and frequently give feedback cannot speak for everyone. Quiet members may be gaining insights that they are simply not sharing. A session that seemed to generate an indifferent or poor response might, in fact, have made an impact, but the effects may not be apparent. Groups are complex, and members' needs and what they respond to differ. Therefore, it is wise (in a long-term group) periodically to have group members fill out an evaluation. An evaluation is particularly important at the end of a group experience.

On page 278, you will find a "Discussion Group Evaluation" form to copy and use. Or you might choose to create your own form, tailored to your group and to what you hope to learn. Feedback provided on such evaluations can be invaluable when assessing past groups and planning for future groups. To administrators, teachers, or funders, evaluations can also help to defend group work as part of a general school curriculum, as part of a school counseling program, or as a program at some other facility.

# A Note for Parents

*How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* can be a valuable tool for parents in getting to know their children. It can help parents access what their children are thinking and feeling, the issues that are important to them, and their problems, hopes, and thoughts about the future.

Parents and adolescents often have difficulty sustaining conversations. Both middle schoolers and high schoolers may become increasingly reticent and private at home. Sometimes it is hard for parents to know what to talk about besides schoolwork, family members, video games, chores, and food. They often do not know which subjects are "safe" and which are taboo with their children. Sometimes all subjects seem to be off limits. *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* provides a potentially intriguing way (to both students and parents) to break down barriers.

By scanning the background information and suggestions, parents can find possible topics and conversation starters. They can also discover insights into developmental issues that they and their children may be wrestling with. It is easy to forget what adolescence felt like, and the background information can help parents understand the complexities of adolescent life today.

Most of the sessions—especially those in the Identity, Relationships, and Family sections—can help to generate family discussion. Some students I've worked with have asked to take the activity sheets home for their parents to fill out. Many personal issues persist into adulthood and are good to discuss even with young adolescents, who are beginning to be aware that these are their issues too. Such sharing can be helpful to adolescents as they forge their own separate identities and prepare to be launched into the next developmental stage.

Several of the sessions in the Stress section are also worth discussing as a family. Expectations, coping strategies, procrastination, and sources of stress are particularly good subjects for family sharing. We are never "done" with such concerns in our lives, and it is good to admit our humanness to growing children. Such nonauthoritarian "realness" can help create dialogue, especially if adults do not dominate the conversation and if they communicate genuine interest (without judgment) in students and their world.

# Permission for Student Participation

Dear Parent/Guardian/Caregiver,

I have invited your son or daughter to participate in a discussion or group. The purpose of the group is to provide an opportunity to talk about growing up and to improve skills in talking and listening. Such skills are important to students now in relationships with peers, teachers, and parents—and later with spouses, partners, coworkers, and children. In general, the groups offer support to teens as they deal with the challenges of adolescence and prepare for the future.

Adolescence can be a stressful time in even the best of situations. Not only are there physical changes, but there are also new emotions and new expectations. There are new activities to be involved in, academic choices to be made, and the future to think about. Social relationships are probably also changing.

Our discussion group will focus on such concerns. Even though we may discuss academic concerns now and then, the group will be different from the often competitive school world. Students will relax with each other and find out what they have in common, including the challenges of adolescence. They will learn how to support each other. They will become acquainted with classmates—for the first time or simply better than before.

If your child participates, you may soon notice positive changes both at school and at home. Communication may improve. Talking about stress, developing strategies for problem-solving, gaining a clearer sense of self, feeling the support of trusted peers—all of these group experiences may improve self-esteem and satisfaction.

The group will begin very soon. If you give your permission for your child to be involved, and if your child decides to participate, please sign below and return the form to me as soon as possible. If you have any questions, please contact me at _____ .
(email and phone)

_____
(Signature of facilitator)

_____ has my permission to participate in the discussion group.
(Name of student)

_____ _____
(Parent signature) (Date)

# Group Guidelines

*The purpose of this group is to "just talk"—to share thoughts, feelings, and concerns with each other in an atmosphere of trust, respect, caring, and understanding. To make this group successful and meaningful, we agree to the following terms and guidelines.*

1. Anything that is said in the group stays in the group. We agree to keep things confidential. This means we don't share information outside of the group. We agree to do our part, individually and together, to make this group a safe place to talk.
2. We respect what other group members say. We agree not to use put-downs of any kind, including words or actions. Body language, facial expressions, and sighs can all be put-downs, and we agree to control our own behavior so that everyone feels valued and accepted.
3. We respect everyone's need to be heard. We agree that no one will dominate the group. We also understand that just because someone is quiet or shy doesn't mean the person has nothing to say. We also know that listening and keen observation are valuable skills.
4. We listen to each other. When someone is speaking, we look at the speaker and pay attention. We use supportive and encouraging body language and facial expressions.
5. We realize that feelings are not "bad" or "good." They just are. They make sense, under the circumstances. Therefore, we don't say things like, "You shouldn't feel that way."
6. We are willing to take risks, explore new ideas, and explain our feelings as well as we can. However, we agree that someone who doesn't want to talk doesn't have to talk. We don't force people to share when they don't feel comfortable sharing.
7. We are willing to let others know us. We agree that talking and listening are ways for people to get to know each other.
8. We realize that sometimes people feel misunderstood, or they feel that someone has hurt them accidentally or on purpose. We agree that the best way to handle those times is by talking and listening—to the group and to the people involved. We encourage assertiveness.
9. We agree to be sincere and to do our best to speak from the heart.
10. We don't talk about group members who aren't present. We especially don't criticize group members who aren't here to defend themselves.
11. When we do need to talk about other people, such as teachers and peers, we don't refer to them by name. For example, we may want to ask the group to help us solve a problem we are having with a particular person, but the person will remain anonymous.
12. We agree to attend group meetings regularly. We don't want to miss information that might be referred to later. Most of all, we know that we are important to the group. If for some reason we can't attend a meeting, we will try to let our leader know ahead of time.

# Warm-Up

Name: _____

Complete these sentences:

**1.** I've heard that groups like this are _____

_____

**2.** I hope the group will _____

_____

**3.** Probably the most interesting thing about me is _____

_____

**4.** Something I have that is very special to me is _____

_____

**5.** I'm good at _____

_____

**6.** I've never been able to _____

_____

**7.** A really dramatic moment in my life was when _____

_____

**8.** I'm proud that I _____

_____

**9.** Probably the biggest accomplishment in my life is _____

_____

(continued)

# Warm-Up (continued)

**10.** I like people who _____

_____

**11.** I'm probably most myself when I _____

_____

**12.** You probably wouldn't believe that I _____

_____

**13.** The time of day I feel best is _____

_____

**14.** I'm looking forward to _____

_____

**15.** I can imagine myself someday _____

_____

# FOCUS

# Stress

# FOCUS Stress

## General Background

Mention the word *stress* to a teen, and you will have begun a serious conversation. Starting at an early age, most young people become well acquainted with the stress of living in an increasingly complex world. Parents bring home the stress of the workplace, or they suffer job loss, both having a ripple effect on the family. Ours is a mobile society, and dislocations and relocations contribute to stress. There are pressures at school, with some children coping well and some not so well with the demands of the classroom and activities and the inherent social challenges. Illness, accidents, or other life events can have dramatic physical and emotional repercussions for months or years. Having a learning difference or physical disability can contribute to stress. Being taller, shorter, heavier, or thinner than most peers may be a stressor—or having interests that differ from those of peers. Facing difficult classes and assignments can stress both young and older adolescents. Being in a cultural minority may be stressful as well.

Stress is part of life—growing up, growing old, facing change, being ill, working, and caring for family members. Pessimism, multiple responsibilities, trying to respond to everyone's needs, and isolation all can heighten stress levels. Being tensely and intensely connected through social networking, with little quiet and unengaged time to step back and contemplate feelings and perceptions, may also contribute to stress.

Consciously or unconsciously, families teach children coping skills. Some adolescents have learned healthy and effective ways to cope with life's stressors. They talk about the stress they are experiencing, step back and gain perspective on stressful situations, and apply problem-solving techniques. They release tension through a healthy level of exercise, socializing, relaxation, diversion, or a deliberate change of pace and pattern. Others learn unhealthy ways to cope with stress, trying to escape or deny stress through alcohol and other drugs, overeating or other unhealthful eating behaviors, workaholism, moving to a new location (the "geographic cure"), sleeping, daydreaming, or watching too much television. Some resort to tantrums or abusing those around them. Others cope by blaming, scapegoating, punishing, or accepting a victim posture. Some experience depression. More and more have anxiety.

The sessions in this section of *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking* give students a chance to think about their stressors and to begin sorting them into two basic categories: those they can do something about and those that probably cannot be changed. Within the safe, supportive environment of the group, they can discuss their coping styles and perhaps begin to deal with stressful situations more effectively.

Simply having a chance to talk about stress can be valuable. Your primary responsibility as group facilitator is to listen carefully, hear what group members are saying, communicate that you have heard them, and commend them for their openness, genuineness, and willingness to articulate complex issues and feelings.

## General Objectives

- Group members learn about stress.
- They learn to talk about stress and stressors and to sort out stressful situations.
- They consider various ways to cope with stress.

# FOCUS Stress

## What Is Stress?

### Objectives

- Group members increase their understanding of stress.
- They discover similarities within the group regarding stress and stressors.
- They find out that people respond differently to similar stressors, depending on their personality, how they interpret various situations, and what kinds of coping strategies they have learned.

### Important

All of the other sessions in this section depend on group members having some understanding of stress and stressors. Be sure to present this session before any of the other sessions on stress.

### Suggestions

**1.** Introduce the topic by asking the group to define the term *stress*. If necessary, provide a few synonyms: *anxiety, pressure, tension, worry.* Then ask volunteers to tell what they know about stress. Afterward, introduce information from the following that has not been brought up in the group discussion.

~ Stress can be good and helpful. It can lead to high productivity, a good level of competitiveness and performances, and high alertness. Some people even seek out stress, loving the adrenaline rush and performing better when the pressure is on.

~ Excessive stress can cause problems if people do not cope with it effectively.

~ Physical responses to stress can include accelerated heartbeat (as the body prepares for fight or flight), cold extremities (as the capillaries constrict to make more blood available at the center of the body to protect the major organs), tight muscles, tense shoulders, a pressure headache, dry mouth, clammy hands, and/or stomach or intestinal discomfort, among several possibilities.

~ Prolonged periods of stress can lead to significant physical problems. Medical professionals see many illnesses that may have origins in stress. When they see patients with pain and distress for no apparent physical reasons, they might conclude that the symptoms are related to stress.

- ~ Emotionally, stress can affect concentration, sleep, safety, and appetite. It can cause irritability, extreme reactions to normal problems, self-blame, tearfulness, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and debilitating perfectionism. Sometimes it can lead to addictions.
- ~ Most people react to excessive stress in a particular way. They may develop colds, diarrhea, stomachaches, headaches, skin problems, or tense neck and shoulders, for instance.
- ~ Stress can result from having to do something new or do something differently from before—for example, move to a different home, change schools, adjust to a divorce or a new family, deal with a physical problem, adjust to a new baby in the home, use new and complex technology, start new kinds of school assignments, or adjust to a loss.

**2.** Encourage group members to describe their own physical and emotional responses to stress. Ask, "What tells you that you are under stress? How do you behave? How do you feel? How does your body react?" (You might consider copying an outline of a human form and inviting members to color, with crayons or markers, where they typically feel stress physically.)

**3.** Ask group members to tell about stressful situations in their lives. Every so often, as a way of supporting those who are sharing, ask the group, "Does this sound familiar? Has anyone else experienced something like this?" Depending on the situation, respond with something like "That does sound stressful" or "Wow, that's tough" or "That's certainly a huge change for you."

**4.** Ask, "What kinds of things in your life are stressful? Raise your hand if you feel stress in connection to

- ~ competition in a talent area, including sports
- ~ getting along with others your age
- ~ doing well in your classes
- ~ feeling uncomfortable in school
- ~ having to work faster than you'd like to
- ~ trying to please everyone."

**5.** Consider inviting an expert to speak with your group as a follow-up session. This might be someone from a stress clinic or an expert on biofeedback, meditation/relaxation, or yoga.

**6.** Consider making "stress balls" as a group, carefully considering whether your group is likely to react favorably or unfavorably to a hands-on activity, whether hyperactive members would be engaged or overly stimulated, whether the group would have difficulty settling down afterward, whether they would expect physical activity at every meeting thereafter, and how much spilled sand might be a problem. Materials

needed include a tray of fine sand, a funnel, something to pour sand into a funnel with, and two balloons per member. Directions to the group, broken up into partners, follow here:

~ One partner stretches the neck of the balloon while the other partner uses a funnel (or spoon) to pour in an amount of sand equal to what could comfortably be gently squeezed in the hand.

~ Someone ties a knot in the stretched balloon neck.

~ Someone clips off the end of a second balloon. One partner stretches the neck of, and rolls down, the second balloon while the other partner eases the filled balloon into it, with the tied neck in first. The outside balloon is then rolled out around the filled balloon (pantyhose-style).

The students are to take the stress balls home to use while watching television, doing homework, feeling stressed, or settling down after vigorous activity—as a stress reliever. They should not throw them or otherwise cause commotion with them at school.

**7.** Ask group members if there is a specific stressor they need help coping with. For the various stressors mentioned, ask the group for suggestions.

**8.** For closure, invite volunteers to summarize what they have learned, felt, or thought about during this session.

FOCUS **Stress**

# Sorting Out the Stressors

## Objectives

- Group members learn that it can feel good to talk about the stressors in their lives and related feelings.
- They hear about the stressors of other group members, which helps to put their stress into perspective and also helps them to feel less alone in their struggles.
- They evaluate various stressors and determine which ones are short-term and which are long-term, as well as which can be remedied and which cannot.
- They learn that focusing on the present, as opposed to looking anxiously to the future—or vice versa, if present circumstances feel overwhelming—can alleviate some stress.
- They explore whether making adjustments in their lives might enable them to concentrate on themselves in healthy ways and relieve some stress.

## Suggestions

1. Introduce the topic with references to the preceding session, "What Is Stress?" Be sure that session precedes this one. Briefly share any other relevant information you have learned about stress and stressors, perhaps from recent newspaper or magazine articles. You might say that businesses and educational institutions often offer stress-reduction programs to their employees because stress potentially affects performance, production, absenteeism, health, and ultimately medical insurance rates.
2. Hand out the "Stress Boxes" activity sheet (page 32). Instruct the group to write the name or description of a specific stressor in each of the boxes on the left. (Examples: "School" is not specific; "third period math class" is. "Family" is not specific; "my little sister invading my privacy" is. "Noise" is not specific; "dogs barking when I'm trying to sleep" is.)

   When all group members have finished, ask them to draw a squiggle on the line connecting each stress box to its paired box. The density of the squiggle should indicate how much stress they associate with that particular stressor. (The more stress, the more dense the squiggle.) Then, in each empty box on the right, direct them to write a large "X" if the box is connected to a short-term stressor (one which probably will not be a concern after a few weeks or months), an "O" if the box is connected to a long-term stressor, which might be with them for many years, or a "+" in each box paired with a stressor they could do something about tomorrow if they chose to.

Important

During this activity, be alert for group members who seem unable to discriminate among their stressors, or who have drawn dense squiggles for all of them, since they may be feeling overwhelmed by many significant stressors. Rather than calling attention to high-stress individuals in the group in this regard, make a general suggestion at the end like, "If you had a hard time sorting out your stressors, since they all feel huge right now, I encourage you to talk with a caring and trusted adult, including the school counselor (if you are in a school), to sort through them and get a handle on them." If you sense that a particular student is highly distressed, seek him or her out privately at your first opportunity and ask, "Should I be worried about you?" If the answer is yes, ask if the student would like you to call a parent and/or if he or she would be comfortable talking with the school counselor. If you are the school counselor, extend the conversation to determine the seriousness of the situation.

**3.** Encourage students to share their stress boxes. One way they can do this is to list stressors in order of intensity, and then explain which ones they could do something about if they chose to, which one are short term, and which ones (if any) might be long-term.

**4.** The first three suggestions often take up an entire session. The process of naming and describing stressors, and sorting them out, can be a powerful and valuable exercise in itself. While I do not encourage moving into problem-solving for this session, if time allows and group members express an interest, the discussion might shift to how the stressed students have tried to resolve situations that were described as potentially resolvable. Then, if appropriate, you might also ask the group for suggestions for coping and resolution. Here are some sample stressors and suggestions from adolescent groups:

~ Short-term stressor: Too much makeup homework. Suggestions: Try harder not to miss school; complete assignments on time; work on organization (use an assignment notebook) to remember assignments.

~ Short-term stressor: Can't find anything in my room. Suggestion: Clean the room and get some storage boxes.

~ Short-term stressor: A big project that's due soon. Suggestions: Start working on it today. Break it down into smaller steps and finish one today, continuing with small steps.

~ Short-term stressor: Single parent is recovering at home from surgery and cannot do any housework. Suggestions: Focus on what you need to do at home to survive, including being organized about homework and chores. Check in with the school counselor. Take a walk or exercise in another way.

~ Long-term stressor: Working on a joint project with a peer who doesn't do his or her share. Suggestions: Be more assertive. Set limits. Talk to him or her directly about the problem.

~ Long-term stressor: No privacy at home. Suggestions: Set limits. Be assertive about asking for what you need. Hide the diary.

~ Long-term stressor: Constant family fights. Suggestions: Ask parents to set up a family meeting to discuss problem-solving. See if the family will agree to a "count-to-ten-before-you-yell" rule. Break the pattern by not responding in your usual way.

~ Long-term stressor: Worries about the future—starting high school, graduating, and leaving home, in particular. Suggestions: Talk to a school counselor. Talk to someone who is currently in high school or who attends the type of school you are considering for after high school or who works in the field you would like to work in.

To conclude this part of the discussion, you might say something like this: "We can't (and wouldn't want to) eliminate all stressors from our lives, since stress can be beneficial, but we can learn to cope with those that bother us, and we can alter the way we respond to them. We can also make sure that we take care of our health, so that during negatively stressful times we can cope well and be less likely to feel overwhelmed."

**5.** Some teens would probably benefit from focusing more on the future. However, some could deal with stress more effectively by living more in the present, particularly those who seem intensely absorbed in what comes next (a habit which can become lifelong). You might encourage students who are stressed about the future to try not to be preoccupied with it, even though there are decisions to make and goals to set. If they mention stress related to others' expectations, turn the discussion to the importance of paying attention to their own needs as well. That doesn't mean they should ignore the values or wishes of their parents and others, but they also need to reflect on what they are comfortable with and what their dreams are.

**6.** For closure, ask the group to comment on what the experience of this session was like. As they leave, remind them to keep sorting through their stressors. Doing that may help them to feel more in control of them. Dispose of the activity sheets or add them to the group folders.

# Stress Boxes

*Name* _____