



## THE FIRST NIGHT

**Big Idea:** *the first night is the best opportunity to set the tone and set expectations.*

**The Win:** *provide an opportunity for people to feel welcome, safe, and clear on what they can expect for the next 3 months.*

You may have heard the saying, “First impressions are everything.” While there is some truth to this, it is not absolutely true. The only Absolute Truth is Jesus Christ. So, there is no need to put undue pressure on yourself for creating the “perfect night” for your people. Just relax. Even if you have the worst first night ever, God is still sovereign, and if he can redeem sinners from hell, then he can surely redeem a **#firstnightfail**.

With that said, the first night is the best opportunity to set the tone and set expectations for the semester. That is the win for the first night: set the tone and set expectations.

### WIN #1: SET THE TONE.

What do we mean by “tone”? Tone is another word for mood, atmosphere, feel, or culture. Ask yourself this question, **“If I was someone coming to my group for the first night, how would I want to feel?”** While we all have particular nuances to how we want our group to feel, there are a couple things *every group should feel*:

**Every group should feel welcoming.** A welcoming group is one that makes sure everyone knows you are glad and grateful they are in the group. Everyone should feel that their presence is wanted and desired. How do you do this?

- Give each person a phone call welcoming them to the group, telling them how excited you are to meet them and what they can expect. Communicate regularly throughout the week leading up to the meeting: give them clear instructions (what to bring, address, etc.)
- Clean the house a bit, have light background music, and light a candle (or essential oils if that’s your thing 😊) to provide an inviting scent.
- Provide some basic snacks and refreshments readily available.
- Greet every person who walks through the door, being sure to introduce new people. Give clear direction on what to do as they walk in.
- Consider having conversation starters for people to discuss as they wait for everyone to show up and begin the discussion.
- Express how grateful you are for their presence at the beginning and end of discussion time.

Remember: some people are walking into a house they have never been, filled with people they have never met. That can be intimidating for people! How can you serve them?

**Every group should feel safe.** A safe group is one that makes everyone feel they are a part of a group of people who don’t wear masks. When they walk through your door, they should feel that they have entered a “shame-free zone.” How do you do this?

- Have a light discussion time together for the first night full of laughter and smiles. I will provide icebreaker and intro questions for each group to use.
- Do not call out new people on the spot right off the bat to introduce themselves!
- After each new person introduces themselves and talks for the first time, say out loud to them, **“Thank you for being here tonight. We are so glad you are in this group.”**
- Provide clear discussion rules:
  - “What’s said in the group, stays in the group.”
  - “Seek to understand before you seek to be understood.”
  - “There is no such thing as a stupid question in this group.”
- When you pray together at the end, set clear guidelines:
  - No one will judge you for how you pray in this group.
  - We all need to grow in prayer, and no one is alone in that.
  - There are no professional prayers in this group.
  - Just pray simply and honestly from the heart.
- Optional: initiate “shame-free stories” into your weekly meetings. Have each person share their story to the group. The leaders should always share first, starting either the first or second week.

Remember: many people feel intimidated spiritually and fear being seen as spiritually ignorant or immature. Do everything you can to make people know it is a “shame-free zone.”

## **WIN #2: SET EXPECTATIONS.**

We all need *some* structure. We were not made to do life “on the fly” or “off the cuff.” God is a God of order, not chaos. Thus, you need to make sure everyone understands clearly what they can expect from the group and what is expected of them. ***One of the main sources of frustration in leading a Growth Group is unclear/unstated expectations.*** For example, if you expect people to bring their Bibles each week, but you don’t tell them, they won’t know to bring them. So, how do you set expectations?

***Say them out loud to everyone sometime after the icebreaker introduction.*** This may seem obvious, but you can never be too clear with expectations. People need and want at least some structure and guidelines. The purpose for saying expectations *after* the icebreaker is because it is a bit abrasive to launch into guidelines before people have warmed up to each other.

***Let people ask questions for clarification.*** You never want to assume that people understand you if you have not confirmed with them. Just give people opportunity to seek as much understanding as possible.

### **What expectations should *all* groups have?**

1. ***Show up on time, every time.*** With the exception of illness and work demands, it should be expected that everyone commits for the entire semester to be present.
2. ***Participate with humility and authenticity.*** If you are going to be a part of the group, it is expected that you contribute to group discussion but do so with humility and authenticity. The essence of humility is the consideration of others more important than you are. The essence of authenticity is laying down your shields and taking risks to share how you are really doing.
3. ***Have patience with the group.*** Friendships take time to develop. You do not get comfortable and authentic with people in one week. Tell the group to have patience as you grow together in friendship.