



Group Key Themes

Part of every group is spent discussing issues that specific group members might have—related to something they wrote on the check-in board (e.g., life change, high emotional intensity), asking for time, or simply sharing something within the group. Any issue is fair game for discussion, however the discussion ultimately needs to be overtly viewed through at least one of the themes listed below. The themes listed below can be considered to be the filters through which the group material is viewed through. The themes can also be used to help generalize a specific situation to everyone in the group. They can also be used to flag more general discussions. Discussions that don't ultimately tie into at least one theme listed below are off topic and should be quickly contained, redirected, or ended.

What is abusive & controlling? For every interpersonal interaction a man engages, he should ask himself whether he has been abusive and controlling in that situation. Likewise, the group should practice listening for abusive and controlling in any situation another man describes. There are three goals: to become increasingly clear on what is abusive and controlling, to make it habitual to examine oneself for any abusive and controlling behavior, and to significantly reduce the incidence of abuse and control.

Examples: Monitor a situation for specific abusive and controlling behaviors. Flag them or ask group members to flag them.

Accountability Each person is fully responsible for the choices he makes. This most obviously applies to abusive behavior, but it also applies to every other area of his life. To be accountable means to understand that he, not others, is ultimately responsible for his emotional state and well-being.

Examples: Point out how the man is responsible for his own choices in a given situation. “What are you going to do about it?”

Assertiveness Part of practicing being accountable for their well-being is men speaking up and advocating for themselves in a manner that is respectful of others. To what extent is a man being appropriately assertive in any specific situation?

Examples: Consider how he did or did not advocate for himself. How might he have advocated for himself?

Beliefs (global) The foundation to enduring change is helping men shift their world view in a variety of domains. Their world view is defined by a variety of beliefs (e.g., power over, definitions of masculinity). What global beliefs is a man using to view and deal with any particular situation? Is he aware of his more general beliefs? Are those beliefs that are helpful and conducive to personal success (as well as non-violence)? What are alternative beliefs he could seek to embrace?

Examples: Point out the more general presumptions he made about the situation. Ask him what his general stance was about the person/situation.

Cognitive Awareness To what extent is the man aware of his internal thinking process—both his self-talk as well as his more general beliefs? What presumptions is he making about the situation in which he is in? Are those helpful presumptions? Help facilitate insight and self-awareness into his thinking process. This is meta-awareness.

Examples: Have him explicitly share his self-talk during the situation. Point out, for his consideration, his presumptions about a situation by quoting back the words he used to describe it.

Defense Mechanisms Everyone has mental techniques to avoid dealing with uncomfortable feelings. What, if any, specific defense mechanisms is a man using in any particular situation? Is he aware of those? Point out the defense mechanisms he is using and help him shift into a more honest space.

Examples: Look for and name the specific defense mechanisms he was using. Ask other group members to identify his denial.

Emotional Awareness To what extent is the man able to notice and own the emotions he is experiencing? Part of this is to move away from anger (which is typically driven by blame) to the underlying emotions (without the blame). To what extent is he able to articulate, out loud, how he is/was feeling? This alone tends to lead to significant de-escalation relative to being angry and blaming of others.

Examples: Ask him what he was feeling during the situation. Ask him what he is feeling right then as he is talking.

Emotional Management To what extent is the man able to appropriately manage any emotions he is experiencing in the situation? To what extent is he able to self-soothe and appropriately contain and express his emotions?

Examples: Ask him how he could have handled himself differently in the situation.

Gender Socialization There are strong social expectations for how males and females are supposed to act. While males are not born this way, they are pressured to conform to those expectations. Some of these expectations (e.g., to be emotionally disconnected), coupled with discouragements from acting “feminine” (e.g., to not be relational) are the primary causes of abusive behavior. However, if he is honoring himself, each person is his own unique mixture of masculine and feminine qualities of varying degrees. We need to encourage the men to be true to themselves, particularly their non-masculine facets while also pointing out the social forces present pressuring them to conform to more traditional gender roles.

Examples: Point out how a certain behavior is very consistent with the cultural messages around masculinity. Challenge sexist or narrow presumptions about what men are supposed to do or how to act.

Humility Within this context, humility refers to an awareness that one’s own needs are not the only thing in play. It’s about realizing the limits of one’s own power. To what extent was the man practicing humility in the situation and to what extent is he practicing it as he talks about the situation?

Examples: Ask him what he can truly control in a particular situation. Remind him that the world does not revolve around him and his needs. Remind him that he is not the only one in the room.

Internal vs. external focus To what extent is he externally focused on others—what they did, said, thought, etc. in terms of how he was affected? To what extent is he blaming others or emphasizing how others caused him to feel what he did? To what extent is he, therefore, trying to change others, control others, or manage others to help himself feel better and reach his goals? Anger and related emotions are often reflective of an external focus. On the other hand, to what extent is he internally focused—attending to his own emotions, thoughts, behaviors, wants and needs? To what extent is he able to name his underlying emotions, including behind any anger? To what extent is he able to talk about himself, his own wants and needs and how he might meet them, independent of what others are saying or doing?

Power Over/Personal Power Examine each interaction a group member describes in terms of whether it is coming from a power over/combatative perspective (and related qualities) or from a personal power/collaborative perspective. Point this out to the individual, particularly if they are coming from power over.

Examples: Point out when a man is articulately a Power Over perspective. Point out how he is coming from a “one down” perspective.

Being relational The goal is to be consistently aware and thoughtful of others in the situation. Abusive men can get caught up in the outcome or other goals and lose sight of the other person/people. To what extent is the man noting and taking care of his relationships in any given situation?

Examples: Draw his attention to his impact on others. Encourage him to view the situation from the other person’s point of view. Have him put himself in the other person’s shoes.

Self-care Another part of accountability is taking good care of oneself. This includes both acute self-care (i.e., meeting basic and immediate needs in the moment) as well as striving to lead a more balanced, pro-active life. To what extent does the level of a man’s self-care play a role in the situation he is describing?

Examples: Review what men have listed on the board and ask those with particularly high or low scores to explain the basis for their score. Consider what role the man’s self-care might have played in the situation being discussed and ask questions related to that.

Self-Compassion Self-compassion involves more than simply being aware of oneself, it is feeling that one deserves to be seen, that one’s desires are legitimate (but no more legitimate than anyone else’s), and that one’s needs deserve to be met. To what extent was the man practicing self-compassion during the situation as well as while he is describing it in the group?

Examples: Provide examples of self-compassionate self-talk he might have had during the situation being described. Listen for self-talk that is self-dismissive and self-demeaning and challenge it as unacceptable.

Skill Sets /Tool Box How well did the man handle himself in the situation? What skills did he or didn't he use? What additional skills might he have used? This becomes an opportunity to do skill-building and education about specific skills (e.g., communication, parenting, conflict resolution).

Examples: Have him role play what he could have said differently in the situation. Ask him how he is working his program.