

Discussion Leader Guide

Congratulations! Agreeing to lead an infertility group is a big commitment, but also a wonderful opportunity. As leader, you set the tone, guide the discussion trajectory, and insure that each gathering is a meaningful one for all involved.

A portion of your success will depend on being organized and attentive to the group's needs. However, the real blessings couples experience through participation in your group will result from God's grace and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. That's good news because it means no pressure; just make an offering. Bring what you have – in terms of insight and understanding, compassion and humility – and invite God to use it in the lives of those who are joining you to read and discuss *Pregnant with Hope*.

You'll be amazed at the results.

Overview

Pregnant with Hope was written as a self-contained study. So, you have everything you need in every copy of the book. Still, some discussion leaders prefer more detailed “instructions” on how to make each discussion substantive and meaningful. The information below will help those of you who fall into this category make the most out of every group meeting.

Getting Started

If you've agreed to take the lead, where do you start? First, if you haven't already, take the time to read *Pregnant with Hope* from beginning to end. The chapters are arranged in a particular order for a reason. As you read, try to get a sense for the way in which each lesson sets the stage for the next. That way, when you lead discussions, you will be able to anticipate where you're heading – and what your group will experience along the way.

If you don't have time to read the book start-to-finish before your group begins meeting, read at least the first several chapters. That will give you the advantage of knowing what's around the next turn, and enable you to steer the group in that general direction.

How will you use the book as a curriculum guide? This is an important question to answer. You may want to discuss it with the group at the first meeting. This gives couples something impersonal to discuss (since they are often strangers at that first meeting, and frequently ill-at-ease), and it enables everyone to feel invested in the way in which meetings are structured. Or, you may prefer to make the decision unilaterally – especially if you have a limited number of meetings – so that you can use your first meeting for your first lesson.

What are the options for how to use the book? More than you might imagine. For example, you could:

1. Delay reading: Outline the key points of the chapter and discuss them during your meeting, setting the stage for everyone to read the associated chapter and couple's story at home during the following week.

2. Read together: Have individuals read excerpts from the chapter you intend to discuss aloud to the group. Highlight key points between paragraphs or readers. Or, identify key messages after all reading is concluded. Read remaining portion(s) of chapter & couple's story at home.
3. Pre-read chapter: Have everyone read the chapter before the meeting, then arrive ready to discuss questions, insights, points of disagreement or confusion. Read the associated couple's story after class to see how the messages of the lesson translate into one couple's "real life" experience.
4. Pre-read chapter & story: Have everyone read the chapter and couple's story prior to meeting, then arrive ready to discuss "text-to-self" (i.e. What of this chapter and story relates to me? What did I learn? What surprised me? What did I struggle to understand or accept? How am I like or unlike the couple in this chapter? Is my perspective changing, in the same ways theirs did? What evidence do I see? Etc, etc.).
5. Pre-read chapter & story, and dig deeper: Have everyone read both chapter & story prior to gathering *and* search for related scripture (verses, stories, messages) or generate additional discussion questions. Then, come ready to share this additional thinking with one another in order to dig deeper and uncover additional insight into God's word.

What are the pros and cons of each study method? They require varying amounts of preparation time, Bible knowledge/familiarity, and self-exposure/vulnerability. They also require varying amounts—and different types—of active leadership from the discussion leader. Your goal should be to choose the method that will enable your group's participants to stretch and grow, without feeling completely overwhelmed or intimidated. Move them out of their comfort zones, but don't expect so much that they don't want to return next week.

Your First Meeting

The first meeting is the most anxious one, for everybody. Couples arrive wondering what to expect—hoping for the best, and anticipating the worst. Because many of them are stretched so thin emotionally, it is not uncommon to see (nonverbal) signs of self-protection: arms crossed, legs crossed, gazes averted, faces tense or grim. You may even see a few tears.

How should you respond?

Do all you can to create a warm, welcoming environment. Provide something to eat and drink – even if it's just cookies & juice or donuts & water. Put out nametags, and ask everyone to take one and wear it during the meeting. Pass around a clipboard to gather names, emails and phone numbers (this gives anxious attendees something to do while they wait for the meeting to begin). As they write down their contact information, reassure them that everything in the room is confidential. "What's said in this room, stays in this room. No exceptions."

Put chairs in a circle if you haven't already, and use an ice breaker to get to know one another. The leader goes first. Offer a sentence or two on why you chose to lead the group and how you hope it will help others. Then, tell a short story on how you met your spouse, or where you went on your first date, or the craziest advice anyone's ever given you for getting pregnant. Choose a topic that is relevant to being a couple and/or getting pregnant, but something fairly upbeat or lighthearted. The goal is to put smiles on a few faces and give people a chance to relax as they begin to learn about each other.

Go around the room, inviting each couple to tell a similar story. No one should be compelled to speak if they don't want to or if they don't feel able to for any reason. If a couple does "pass," ask if they'd like you to circle back (so they have time to think, and can participate). If they decline, let it go.

Once every couple has had a turn, begin the meeting with a brief prayer. What should you pray? Pray your heart. Speak aloud what you are thinking and feeling about this opportunity to come together as a group and seek God's help. Still not sure what to pray? Try this:

- Thank God for calling each couple to the group.
- Thank the Holy Spirit for knowing already the needs and hurts in every heart.
- Acknowledge the group's desire to growth in faith and wisdom.
- Claim the promise that "those who seek, find."

Then, begin your first discussion! Confirm that every couple (ideally, every participant) has a copy of the book and understands what reading will be done when – before, during or after class. Then, regardless of whether couples have had a chance to prepare, draw them into a discussion of the first chapter you plan to cover.

Each Meeting

Once you've chosen a study method and made it past your first meeting, you're ready to get into a pattern. Expect couples to arrive wanting to chat and compare notes prior to the start of your discussion. Continue to provide name tags and snacks; both are signs of hospitality. If you see a couple or individual sitting apart from the group, or looking less animated than others, approach them and ask gently about how they've been doing since your last meeting. Very often, the response will include disappointing news of some kind. Listen patiently and compassionately. You do not need to solve the problem; in fact, you cannot. But simply by being fully present, you give the gift of compassionate attention. That alone can enable healing to begin.

When you're ready to start, open with prayer. Don't expect participants to volunteer to do this. Many people experience praying in public as pressure-packed, and these couples are under enough pressure already. If it seems comfortable, ask couples to gather in a circle and hold hands. If not, invite them to take the hand of their spouse while you pray for God's blessing on your time together.

As you look for ways to keep group discussions active and engaging, consider the following:

His/Hers groups – Have the men go to one side of the room, and the women go to the other. Give each group an excerpt to read or questions to discuss. Move from group to group to insure that both are working well. After a set time, ask the two groups to reassemble and compare notes. *Primary benefit:* Share perspective on the experience with others who see it similarly.

Fishbowl – Have one sex sit in a small circle in the center of the room, and the other stand back (in a larger circle) to observe. Give the small circle a topic to discuss or question to address, and lead the discussion just enough to keep it lively. Afterwards, ask the observers what they learned by listening silently.

Primary benefit: See that perspective often varies by sex, and realize that listening to the same words from another person's spouse enables you to hear your own spouse better.

Couple pairs – Ask couples to break into mini-groups of 2 (at most, 3) couples. Discuss the chapter or couple’s story in “text-to-self” format. Have couples compare their stories, struggles, experiences. Return to the larger group ready to share new insights.

Primary benefit: Realize you are not alone, and feel safer sharing more intimately.

Guest speaker – Invite a special guest to address/talk with the group about common issues, struggles, strategies and resources. Worth considering: a professional counselor, infertility “alumni” who are now parents, an adoption consultant, a fertility expert, an ethicist, a minister. Poll your group for particular interests/desired speakers.

Primary benefit: “Experts” sometimes add credibility to a particular message or topic.

At the end of each group meeting, ask for prayer requests. These can be voiced aloud or written on small pieces of paper which are passed around the circle, then left in a basket on departure. Close in prayer. This can be a simple prayer of thanks for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, for the insights and revelations of the day, and for God’s promise: “Do not fear; I will help you.” Remind everyone of the preparation required for the next meeting. Also confirm the time and location (if that varies).

Prior to the next meeting, send everyone in the group an email recapping prayer requests and reminding them that praying for others is both selfless and generous. Thinking of others’ problems encourages us to (temporarily) cease obsessing over our own—a good discipline and a thought-full gesture.

Extracurricular Activities

There are two types of worthwhile extracurricular activities: one reinforces the lessons, the other reinforces new relationships. Both add value.

To enhance the impact of a given lesson, look for ways to extend it into the “real world” (i.e. outside your group meetings). For example, Chapter 7 addresses the ways in which thoughts affects attitudes, actions and outcomes. After discussing the concept of taking negative thoughts captive, review the list of verses that redirect thinking to align with God’s perspective. Then, challenge each group member to think of three ways they will incorporate the power verses into their week. For example:

- I will tape the verse I most need to remember to my dashboard
- I will memorize the verse that talks back to my self-pity
- I will remind my spouse of the verse about God’s faithfulness when he/she worries

As another example, Chapter 8 addresses the way in which media messages combine with societal expectations to make infertile couples feel like failures. After discussing strategies for healthy boundaries and good self-protection, challenge each group member to list three things they need to Stop, Start, and Continue. For example:

- I will **stop** reading *People*, *InStyle* and *Us* because all those pregnant celebrities induce grief, and because I can’t afford the clothes I see and want since we’re spending money on infertility treatments.
- I will **start** reading the PregnantWithHope blog, Job, and a devotional book because I want to think about God’s faithfulness and renew my hope.
- I will **continue** being mindful of what images & messages I feed my mind.

The other type of worthwhile activity is to schedule time for your group's participants to socialize outside the class. Meet for dinner at a restaurant or potluck at someone's home. Go to a ballgame, an uplifting/lighthearted movie or an inspirational concert. Many, many couples have commented that these outings are a blessing. They afford an opportunity to build relationships with new friends, but do so in a venue that doesn't require them to discuss infertility. As one man explained in *Pregnant with Hope*:

"I knew that every one of those guys was experiencing the same thing I was. And it's funny... We didn't have to talk about it all the time to know that we had that in common. Sometimes, we could talk about sports or a totally different subject, and yet know that we were on the same wavelength."

For couples who have felt painfully isolated from everyone and everything "normal," the opportunity to be normal with other couples who understand the infertility experience is a great gift. Create opportunities for this to occur.

Your Last Meeting

The last meeting is often, ultimately, the hardest one. Even though lifelong friendships have been formed, you have reached the end of this stage of the journey. So, this meeting is both a hopeful send-off and a sad goodbye.

Every couple longs to move on, toward a future of happy parenthood. But most are still apprehensive about confronting the uncertainty of the future without the security your group represents. As you wrap up your last gathering, it is important to affirm several truths to each of the participants:

- You will miss the familiarity of this small community; still, it is time to move on, equipped with renewed hope and a faith-based expectation that joy awaits.
- You can claim Jesus' promise, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" [John 8:31-32].
- That promise gives every couple a road map to the deeply-desired moment of joy.

Encourage couples to identify and sustain those practices that have been beneficial: prayer/meditation, quiet reading, contemplative time, selfless action or service, worship/praise, etc. Also encourage them to make use of available resources (see [PregnantWithHope.com Resources](#) for ideas).

A Last Word

If this input has not given you enough guidance, please do [contact us](#). Susan Radulovacki is available for seminars, lectures, email correspondence, blog communications, and much more. Let us help you make your discussions a great success.