

## Practical tips for True Intimacy (S.P.A.C.E.)

### ***What does a SPACE group look like?***

Although SPACE is an "experience of intimacy," some people love to formalize this experience as a formal ongoing "accountability group." I suppose it's a bit obvious to say that a SPACE group is going to have "prayer, accountability, and confession." But, every SPACE group is ultimately going to look slightly different based on the needs of the group. For example: Some groups are basically an addiction/recovery type group for alcohol, food, or porn. Other groups focus on Bible reading or exercise. Still others look more like prayer groups. But it's important to clarify this aim right off the bat with the people involved. Let's face it: We all want / need accountability for different things. Some people might not be ready for the intimacy that you're ready for. And, if you utilize a SPACE "*Group*" format, the healthiest groups usually get everyone's desires on the table from the outset. And then, as a regular part of healthy maintenance, the group re-evaluates these needs every couple months.

For example, one group I was in had a "rotating focus" from week to week. I.e., the topic of the group changed based on a four week rotation. For example, week 1 is focused on "heart-sharing," confession and/or goal setting. We all go around and share how well we are reaching our individual goals for our marriages, our physical bodies and our spiritual lives. Week 2 is reading an entire book of the Bible or watching a sermon podcast together. (And so on). I.e., the focus can change from week to week. But, one thing is for sure: If a person isn't getting anything out of the group, they're not likely to stay in it. Thus, a good group is one that constantly reassesses the style of the group: "*What are we wanting to grow in? What are we going to do to achieve these goals?*"

### ***What types of people do I want to look for?***

Keep in mind, the goal of this group is to have complete authenticity with a few other people. Not every participant is looking for the same level of authenticity. Thus, when people are looking to confess vulnerable addictions (a.k.a., a closet smoking or drinking habit, masturbation, or a gambling problem), healing isn't going to happen if your group is filled with the wrong people.

Confessions are serious things. It can be threatening to do this when your group is filled with self-righteous or big-mouthed people who are just pretending to want change. Emotional maturity is a must for this type of intimacy. Much like marriage, a higher level of intimacy requires a higher level of scrutiny. And, again like in many marriages, the "dating process" might be extra mellow-dramatic if you pick the wrong people.

Some of my pastor friends feel that their position in the church poses certain challenges to SPACE. Thus, many pastors and leaders prefer to have SPACE with Christians outside of their churches. But, whatever you have to do to get comfortable, it will certainly be worth it. SPACE groups will give you a significant advantage in resisting the power of sin.

It's generally smart to look for people who are in a similar season of life with similar issues. Of course, this doesn't always have to happen between people of similar ages or similar taste. Rather, look for "divine chemistry" – a divine connection on certain relationships to achieve certain goals. And when you have it, it's wonderful because, you feel like you could share anything with them.

However, not everyone is equally available or equally stable. Over the years, I've found chemistry with people who simply aren't available. Of course, you can beg and plead for these people to start a group with you; but, sometimes it's simply better to look elsewhere. And this is especially important if you are struggling with some mild addictions. These type of SPACE groups require a higher level of intensity. And many people simply aren't looking for that type of commitment. Sometimes you need a true addiction recovery group for these types of things. So, be honest with yourself. What types of goals are you trying to overcome? What kind of accountability will you need to achieve that sort of growth?

### ***How much time does it take to find or assemble a group?***

I always tell people to take time "dating" for a SPACE group. You see, a good group is a lot like a good marriage. If you don't take your time finding the right people than you could end up with a "SPACE-divorce."

So, the best way to avoid a bizarre SPACE experience is to avoid getting into a weird one to begin with. So, I always recommend a "ramp-up strategy." I.e., Don't just "marry" the first person who says "Yes." (I realize that a dating metaphor sounds strange). But, start dating. Go steady. Get engaged. *Then* get "married" by becoming a consistently meeting group.

For example, once you find a good group of people, try hanging out a few times as a totally informal group. Throw a party. Play cards. Go shopping. I.e., Make sure that you have chemistry with each other. Ask yourself critical questions like: "Does this person have the ability to be vulnerable? Is this person a good communicator or do they constantly make assumptions about other people?" Ultimately, if you don't enjoy hanging out with this person, then you certainly won't enjoy confessing your sins and holding each other accountable!

Also, some people are looking for totally different things. Some people are "needier" than you (often b/c they're looking for an addiction recovery group, when *you* simply wanted someone to help you work out more!) Other times, people are looking for a best friend (who'd vacation with them three times a year) when you were simply looking for a little more motivation for reading your Bible. But the only way to assess everyone's expectations is to simply spend time together and talk. After a few weeks of "dating", do you still want to meet on a weekly basis? Do you have divine chemistry?

### ***What if I'm having a hard time finding a SPACE group?***

Realize, this process can take time. Even the most lovable people sometimes have a difficult time finding "available" people with whom they also have chemistry. Sometimes, however, the issue is a deeper problem. Over the years I've met a good number of insecure domineering people who couldn't understand why people wouldn't want to share their deepest darkest secrets with them. You see: there are many character flaws that can scare people away: You're a big mouth. You're cynical. You filter very few of your criticisms. Or, you share virtually nothing that's vulnerable. It could also be something as simple as, you live too far away; or, they're simply too busy to commit to such a group with you. The problems aren't always personal. But, to be sure, check out our "Troubleshooting Guide" to fellowship posted online. You may need to work on a few of your own personality quirks before you're able to experience this level of intimacy with other people.

### ***How many people can be in a SPACE group?***

In all my years of SPACE, I've never seen a group work when it has more than six people showing up. Generally, 3 to 5 people works best. This way, you can truly get to know one another. The larger the group, the more superficial it can become. My groups have always been "closed groups." I.e., Group members can't simply invite people. The group needs to "vote on them." And this only happens after a few informal hang-outs are scheduled. But keep it small. Or birth new groups over time. Some groups meet as families. And at a set point in the event, guys go-off with other guys / gals with gals. This format is quite common in home-churches. However, these types of groups tend to get funky quickly because, more people usually equals more complication. And quite often, there's a self-righteous or invulnerable person who ends up messing up the dynamic. Such groups usually end up being less of a SPACE group and more of a "fellowship onramp" to SPACE – which is often a great place to start.

### ***How long of a commitment should we make?***

SPACE groups are always evolving. Relationships are always changing (and they should). As a single guy, I had totally different needs & problems than I did as a married father of three. My single friends didn't have a whole lot of insights for me on marriage and parenting; thus, I knew it was time for me to mix things up a bit.

Also, there were seasons of life when I had a huge amount of time on my hands; thus, a SPACE group that met for prayer every other day was just great. But, at other times, even just once a week was a stretch for me. Of course, other people's needs are also changing. So I generally recommend that every SPACE group has a finite time commitment between 3 & 4 months with a month off. Then, if people want to do another 3-4 months, then give it a go.

Of course, the benefits of this are endless. First of all, if you feel like you're being held hostage in a SPACE group from hell, the semester end gives you an "easier-out." Having an infinite commitment group is often a set-up for someone to feel "rejected." Many Christians end up demonizing each other in order to find justification for change. But when a group has a clear finite commitment time, no one has to scrounge up a negative reason for leaving. Of course, if all is going well in a group, simply "sign-on" for the next semester.

Over time, I've also found it necessary to split up a group in order to birth a new SPACE group. I once had a great SPACE group in which we mutually agreed that we needed to "birth another group" in order to welcome more men into our delightful experience. And that's another benefit of a semester system. Semester transitions end up becoming a logical time to birth new groups.

We've used the same process for having new people join the group. Generally it's a good idea to have a "no random visitors" policy to your group, unless it's uniformly agreed upon at a previous group. I once had a friend who'd spontaneously invited weird people into our group. Consequently, the group's intimacy died in a heart-beat.

### ***What to do if a SPACE group becomes oppressive or weird?***

The best thing to do is simply "bow out" with little fanfare. If you're hating a particular group, chances are, your SPACE-mates are probably also hating to have you there too. That's the wonderful thing about being a part of a larger church. People can constantly transfer into different groups that can better meet their spiritual needs. Of course, we don't want people "running away from their character"; yet, we also know, relationships are constantly changing.

Most SPACE groups get weird because, they have no "reset" points or "semester turn-overs." Sometimes, a dominant member tries to steer the group in a direction that only meets *their* needs. Other times, the group breaks down because one person is immature or insecure – and they don't see how their character flaws are sabotaging the group dynamic. But, whether you fight it out or break up, we simply ask that you stay full of the life-giving nature of Christ. Gossip, politicking, and character assassination are never a godly response. Even Paul and Barnabus in the book of Acts had "sharp disagreements." Yet, the greatest mark of a person's character is how we respond to another person's sin. If we respond with life, than the innocence and peace of God will continue to flow through our lives. Such is the goal of anyone that chooses to experience SPACE here at Substance.

### ***What are the best times and locations for SPACE groups to meet?***

This can only be answered by your group. Some groups meet for breakfast every Monday. Others meet at houses in the evening. When to meet and *how long* is going to change from group to group. Personally, I don't want to meet any longer than 90 minutes each week. The more you get into the busyness of middle-aged life, even an hour a week is a huge commitment.

I love to have intense prayer AND/or confession. So, my SPACE groups usually avoid coffee shops where other people can easily listen in. But others tend to emphasize different values. So, if a restaurant is good for you: go for it.

Also, a lack of consistency can easily kill any small group. At one point in time, my wife had a four hour SPACE group that met once a month at someone's house. It worked great for a season; but, you only needed to miss one meeting before you felt like you were totally out of touch with your SPACE-mates. So, the best time is usually the one that's easiest for everyone.

However, no matter what time you choose, it will always be an inconvenience to prioritize it every week. After doing SPACE for over a decade, commitment is the foundation of any growth process. So, you'll get out of this process what you put into it. If people don't prioritize the group even when it's inconvenient, then, it's not very likely that the group will produce fruit. But, choosing an optimal time will generally affect commitment more than anything else.

### ***What if someone asks to join your SPACE group?***

Over the years, I've had numerous people ask me: Can I join *your* group? Of course, I always tell them: Well, it's not really up to me. But, I can ask my group. So, once you get a group running well, it's important to talk about how your group plans to manage this.

Sometimes, it only takes one new person to screw up the dynamic of a good group. So, I always recommend that there be "group agreement" before this happens. Some groups will slowly "date" this person by throwing a few parties and then voting them in. Often times, one group member wants to pull the new person in more than another; so, you can either can birth a new SPACE group (out of your primary group) or, in some cases, many people simply simultaneously attend two different "SPACE groups."

### ***Miscellaneous Cautions:***

Over the years, I've watched a lot of people stop coming to church, saying things like: "*This is my church!*" As a result, they become one of those classic self-centered home-churches. In the book of Acts, we see that a church in revival has both "big and small" (Acts 2:42). They met together in the temple courts and devoted themselves to the Apostles teachings; but, they also met house to house. In the same way, I encourage people to make sure that their group interacts with a larger network of believers. Healthy communities need to have a variety of programs, targeting a variety of people, with a variety of Biblical purposes. There is no "one size fits all" for making disciples of all nations. And when you or your family's needs change (and they will), you don't want to find yourself isolated in some small funky dead-end church.