GRACE ALLIANCE
HEALTHY SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR MIND

FACILITATING ONLINE GRACE GROUPS

From Grace Group Leaders for Grace Group Leaders!
This is a support document full of practical tips and information curated from the experience and knowledge of other Grace Group leaders.

All Grace Group experiences are unique and diverse.
We, at the Grace Alliance, enjoy seeing the unique diversity and expression from so many different groups. At the same time, there are some overarching principles that will be helpful for the function, environment, and flow of your online Grace Group experience. Use this to learn and improve your online Grace Group experience.

This is a support document, not a policy and procedures document.
You may use any of these helpful points for your official Grace Group experience (leadership and/or participants). Again, use these principles to help you fine tune your overall structure and process, not as the official policy or procedures document.

This document will provide:

1) Grace Group Etiquettes (general principles for all participants) Pg. 2

2) Online Grace Group function, Environment, and Flow (an in depth/detailed review behind all the etiquettes). Pg. 5

ONLINE GRACE GROUP ETIQUETTES

1. **LEARN THE ONLINE PLATFORM.**
    We want to make this an easy online experience for everyone. Make sure your computer, tablet, or smart phone is compatible with the online platform. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the software. In some cases, Grace Group leaders will offer a special walk-through session to familiarize the group on how to use the online platform.

2. **RESPECTING EVERYONE'S SECURITY, PRIVACY, AND CONFIDENTIALITY.**
    We desire for all participants to feel confident with their online attendance.

    +   Make sure you are signed up or registered to attend the Grace Group.

    +   When logging into meetings only use your first name (in sign-in and/or referring to yourself).

    +   You agree to respect all participants privacy and confidentiality, including no recordings or screen shots, sharing any dialogue information, data, or contact information of all participants.

    +   Only Grace Group leaders will have your contact information to contact you with meeting links or information related to meetings.

    +   In Grace Groups it is common for many to find wonderful community relationships. In this case, any communication with other participants is voluntary and your responsibility.

3. **THIS IS A SIMPLE AND VOLUNTARY SMALL GROUP.**
    We know this group experience can have a lot of positive benefits! You understand that your participation is voluntary and understand that this Grace Group experience is not a clinical support group, therapy group, or intended to replace any medical and professional mental health counsel, diagnosis, and/or treatments.

4. **HAVING GOOD FOCUS AND TIME.**
   We all want good attention and timing for all. Always try to be on time for meeting times. In addition, try to not attend the meeting while you are involved in other activities such as eating dinner, driving in a car (which can be dangerous), working on other projects, doing errands, or trying to do personal exercise or walking around.

5. **USING THE GROUP MATERIALS.**
   We want all participants to have access to the encouraging curriculums. Grace Groups follow helpful curriculums so please be prepared with your workbook copy or discuss with your Grace Group leader on how access to the workbook or materials.

6. **CREATING A FRIENDLY ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR YOU AND OTHERS.**
   We want all attendees to feel comfortable while on camera. Please dress like you would attend an in-person small group. Make sure you have proper lighting, sound, and your background is not distracting to others (e.g., messy room, spinning ceiling fans, distracting posters or artwork, etc.).

7. **CARE AND RESPECT FOR THE CONVERSATIONS.**
   We want the conversations to feel private and confidential. If available, try to use headphones so that others in your environment cannot hear the other participants. In addition, try to find a private location for you to be able to converse freely in discussions without others in your environment being able to hear.

8. **PARTICIPATING WITH COMFORT AND GRACE.**
   We want everyone to feel comfortable with what we are learning, from the good and difficult. As a participant, be patient with others by providing validation, comfort, and encouragement – not trying to fix anyone's emotions or problems. Grace Group leaders will provide general guidelines and they will always help guide the group with God's grace and comfort.

9. **WILLING TO LEARN.**
   We want everyone to feel comfortable learning how to interact online. The online Grace Group experience is different than in-person, so be willing to learn along the way on how to engage and interact in discussion and other dialogues. That means be patient with yourself and others. In addition, feel free to communicate with Grace Group leaders with various ideas you might have that would help the online group experience.

10. **HAVE FUN.**
   We want this to be beneficial and fun experience. Online can be limiting socially, however we do not want this to be intimidating for anyone. As you are willing to learn try to have fun with the whole experience.

FUNCTION
(helping your group learn and use the online platform)

a. **ONLINE PLATFORM**

Agree on which (free or paid) online platform you will use for your online Grace Group or Thrive Group (e.g., Zoom, Cisco, Skype, Google, etc.) and make sure their computer, tablet, and smart phone is compatible with the software.

Also, make sure they always check for their specific platform's updates. These updates often have new security upgrades and other technological improvements.

Here are some helpful pointers:

+ As you have time available, conduct a special session (practice session) to have all the members explore using all the features of the platform.

   For example, have everyone practice together how to use:

   - **Audio button** (test microphone and how to mute on/off) and discuss how to mute yourself when you're not talking and to unmute when you want to talk. Express to everyone that all microphones pick up background noise, typing on your computer, tapping, background music or talking, eating, etc. As well, inform members if there is a lot of background noise coming through their mic, the leader has control to mute them (e.g., Zoom) – or leader will ask participant to mute themselves.
   - **Video** (how to turn on/off)
   - **Video camera** (how to position camera for best video positioning)
   - **Security** (Leader – know how to lock meeting after all attendees are present)
   - **Break out room** (if you are using on Zoom or similar on other platforms)
   - **Share screen** (Leader sometimes will share screen for information)

- **Chat button** (to make comments and how to read) – discuss when to use this, especially when leader or someone wants to pass on a helpful website link.
- **Emoji button or button to "raise hand" to ask a question or talk.** Discuss how to creatively use these buttons when you want to let the leader and others know you want to share or talk next.
- **Highlight other features of your program.**

Remember – be patient and graceful for the learning process: This is a learning curve for many, so each meeting you will need to help people remember various features and functions. For example, you may need to remind participants that you will mute their mic if there is too much background noise coming through their microphone. Or, asking a participant to unmute themselves if they're trying to talk and they're unaware their microphone is off.

b. **SECURITY, PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY**
   Understand participant's general concerns about online security and privacy.

   + Make sure you understand and address the security features for your preferred online platform (e.g., if using zoom, each meeting will have a new link).

   + Whether your group is closed or open to join anytime, ensure security and privacy by providing a pre-registration process or procedure to join the group. This ensures that anyone trying to join the group without prior approval will not be allowed into the group and must follow proper procedures.

   + Address that all data and contact information will be private and only used for communication about group meetings, scheduling, links, and/or pastoral care and encouragement. To further protect data and contact information, Leaders will send emails with all email addresses under the BCC (blind carbon copy) where no recipient can view other people's address.

Participants are solely responsible for sharing their contact with other Grace Group members, the Grace Group leader is not responsible or liable.

+ All participation in the Grace Group is voluntary and the leaders and all participants agree to the general guidelines, including the confidentiality of other participants – in all dialogues, data and/or contact information.

+ Encourage participants to only use their first name or if the platform asks for a name to only use their first name.

+ Whether in written guidelines or communicating at each meeting, ensure that all group sessions are not being or allowed to be recorded and/or taking screenshots or screen captures without permission from all participants.

+ ***If you are facilitating the group with your church – please check with and follow your church's online policies and protocols.***

c. **LIABILITY CONCERNS**
Help all participants understand they are participating in a simple, faith-based small group meeting and all participation is voluntary.

+ Grace Groups can have positive mental and emotion wellness benefits; however, Grace Groups are not clinical therapy support groups.

+ Grace Groups are not intended to replace any professional medical or mental health advice and services for the diagnosis and treatment of any medical and/or mental health condition. All participants are encouraged to seek out professional medical and mental health services for their ongoing health challenges (physical, mental and emotional).

+ Grace Group leaders and participants can encourage each other to seek out professional medical and mental health services, but are not responsible or liable for making referrals (e.g., referring from their church's official referral list and/or referring to other professional services in their community). In

addition, any specific referral made within the Grace Group are all voluntary and the sole responsibility, and at the risk, of the participant who chooses to use those refereed services, products, and/or resources.

+ Grace Group leaders will try to provide compassionate understanding, encouragement, and/or pastoral care as needed and available, but are not responsible or liable for the overall physical, mental, and emotional wellness of participants (see part 2 "environment"). In addition, Grace Group leaders are not liable, but encouraged to contact crisis intervention teams, or authorities, when a participant is clearly communicating plans to harm themselves or others.

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ENVIRONMENT
(learning tech-body language and tech-room dynamic)

a. AUDIO DYNAMICS
Create a controlled and comfortable audio experience for all participants.

+ **Avoid competing background noise.** To avoid extra noise competing with whoever is talking or sharing, remind participants to keep their microphone muted until it is their turn to talk.

+ **Headphones or private room/location for privacy and confidentiality.** All Grace Group conversations are respected and confidential to the group, so, please encourage participants to use headphones and have a private and secure location where others around them cannot hear them and/or the other Grace Group participant's dialogues.

For example, some participants are able to have their spouse or family member leave the house for a designated time while they attend the online

Grace Group. Or, they have a special room or location in their home to participate in the online Grace Group, without interrupting or disturbing others within their home.

b. VIDEO DYNAMICS

Create a controlled and comfortable video experience for all participants.

+ **Appropriate attire.** Ask participants to make sure they come to the online meetings dressed as they would for an in-person group meeting. Even though they are in the comfort of their own homes, it's not respectful to be dressed in pajamas or other clothing attire that would not be appropriate for an in-person group.

+ **Be mindful of home environment and video distractions.** Sometimes finding a private location for the online meetings can be difficult or secluded to a personal bedroom. However, please ensure that their camera background is a clean environment, non-distracting posters, paintings, or other images that would be a distraction to other participants. Also, try to explain to them on how to position their camera away from any spinning ceiling fans, moving around, or constantly moving their camera (e.g., walking with smart phone or table, walking with your computer to other parts of the house, etc.) as these movements are very distracting and the movements with the camera are uncomfortable to the other participants.

+ **Be mindful of video position and lighting.** These computer cameras and front-facing tablet and smart phone cameras are not high quality and are sensitive to focus on lighted areas, darkening other areas of the image. As well, the darker the image, the more pixilation or grainy the image will appear.

Consider the following tips to help create appropriate video quality (and encourage participants with the same if possible):

- **Level camera position:** Try to position or prop up the video camera to be straight and face level, instead of having to look down. Also, focus the camera to capture at least from mid-chest and/or shoulder up to top of the head.

- **Get good lighting:** For the best video quality secure a well-lit room and/or use an extra lamp to help brighten your video image and quality. Avoid, bright lights in the background as the camera will adjust to the bright light while darkening other images in the frame. For example, do not use a bright, sun-lit window as your background. The camera will overcompensate to adjust all the bright light and will cause your image to be an unrecognizable dark silhouette. Instead, use the window to place in front of you to brighten your image quality. Again, if you're not getting good image quality use extra lights above or in front of you to brighten your video image and quality.

c. **AN ENVIRONMENT OF EMOTIONAL CARE AND COMFORT**
Depending on the situations or environment surrounding participants, some topics and discussions can cause participants to experience both joyful and sad feelings. It's important for Grace Group leaders to help create an online environment that builds encouragement and care for all participants.

+ **GRACE GROUP LEADERS PROVIDE A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT.** Whether the Grace Group is in-person or online, all participants usually take their responsive ques (emotional tone) from the leader(s). In addition, the in-person groups provide full facial and body language to communicate a supportive tone, but online groups are only limited to facial expressions. Thus, as the scripture encourages us to, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15)*, while on video, always try to have a positive facial expression that matches the tone of what the participants are sharing. Even when the group is having a neutral discussion, try to always maintain a positive countenance with smiles, positive nodding of the head, etc. This helps communicate to

participants, not only that you are listening, but that you are affirming whatever they are sharing. Overall, try to have very expressive responses to show validation, affirmation, encouragement, and care.

+ **GRACE TO PAUSE FOR EMOTIONAL MOMENTS.** In the case of a participant sharing with more emotional tears and sadness, leaders should respond with prayer and support (as discussed in the Grace Group training). Afterwards, the leader can do two things.

> 1) Leaders can suggest and allow the person to turn off the camera and microphone to allow them time to find some comfort, calming, and time to recompose themselves. Let that participant and others know that you will continue with the group and let the participant rejoin when they feel comfortable. Express this with respect and grace for them.
>
> For example:
> *"…….. we all understand this was difficult, so please feel free if you would like or need a minute or so off screen. We will continue with the group and please rejoin us when you feel comfortable. Or of course you can stay on – we just want you to feel respected with the room you feel you need."*
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> 2) Co-leader can suggest they leave the meeting to further talk through and work down the emotions. Co-leaders can use a break-out room feature (Zoom) and/or connect by phone or separate online call. If time remains, then they can rejoin the group. Sometimes this is a better option if you can tell they are very upset and are unable to self-soothe, calm down, or getting more worked up.
>
> *PASTORAL NOTE*
> As a Grace Group leader, you are not only pastoring the person in the moment, but also modeling pastoral care to the whole group. It is okay to affirm the person to the whole group by expressing hat these type of emotions are not wrong or a problem, rather that they are actually

healthy and normal emotional responses. You can further explain that the Grace Group is a place where we understand by providing validating comfort, not trying to fix them or have solutions.

Remember as a Grace Group leader you are helping them with a comfort response to work-down to safe, emotional closure, not further open up the issue with more questions or probing into the situation. In private, recommend these challenges be handled outside the group with proper follow-up with a highly qualified professionals and/or therapy.

d. **CO-LEADERS AND PRESENT AT ALL TIMES.** It is always important to lead with a co-leader. This allows for the co-leader to leave the meeting to address more pastoral comfort when needed (above points). That way the group and participants always have a leader present throughout the meeting. If you are leading alone and a situation arises that you need to leave to care for another member or other situation, it is best to end the meeting and not leave the group unattended. Simply explain the situation, ask for understanding and grace, and reconvene the group at the next schedule meeting time.

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FLOW
(Confident to lead through the online awkwardness)

a. **CREATE A FUN AND JOYFUL ENVIRONMENT**
Topics that are often related to mental and emotional health (and mental illness) tend to feel intimidating and carry a more serious tone. As a Grace Group leader set the tone to be more fun and joyful to help lower the intensity, intimidation, and nervous feelings. It doesn't mean the meeting cannot be more serious when it needs to, however the joyful presence and environment becomes a foundation for the group experience and the base where to start and end.

+ **ALLOW FOR RELATIONSHIP BUILDING.** Just like in live in-person groups, people often use the time before/after the meeting to personally connect with other participants. In the same way, consider allowing extra time before the meeting (log on early) or afterwards for participants to connect with one another if they would like. It's best you explain to the group that you will either allow the meeting to be open 10-15 minutes before/after to allow any extra time for the participants to connect. This time before/afterward is often the time when the relationships are deepened. Though it can be short, that time often carries the same weight of value as the full group experience. Remember, this is voluntary and exchanging any contact information is their sole responsibility.

+ **CONSIDER STARTING OFF WITH ICE BREAKERS.** Consider using creative ice breakers to help the online group lower the intimidation and ease into the group with others. This is also a clever way to help them use various buttons (e.g., emoji buttons on Zoom) to show their response.

+ **ALLOW FOR PRAISES AND PROBLEMS.** After a creative and fun way to start the meeting you can move to reading the group guidelines and then allow participants to share how their last week has been. Guide by asking how they were able to apply, if it all, the last topic discussion and tools, and/or share what praises they have had or if life has been more challenging.

b. **DECIDE ON HOW TO USE THE GRACE GROUP CURRICULUM**
Decide beforehand how you will use the Grace Group curriculum. If ordering physical workbooks allow for proper timing to receive workbooks before starting the online group.

We encourage participants to have their own workbook as many of the topics have tools and various points that they can review on their own outside the group meetings. As well, they can make additional notes in their workbooks (or

use PDF functions to make notes on the digital copies – or use a journal alongside their workbook).

+ **SHARE SCREEN.** Some Grace Group leaders will have the curriculum in a digital format and will share their screen for participants to read along.

+ **DIGITAL OR PHYSICAL WORKBOOKS.** Participants can purchase either a digital or physical Grace Group workbook from the [Grace Alliance Store](). If purchasing a digital workbook, after the purchase is made they will receive an email with a link to download the workbook (link only active for 24 hrs. after purchase). Physical workbooks will take 5-7 business days in the U.S. / Canada (allow for longer shipping time for overseas locations).

c. **GRACE GROUP LEADERS FACILITATE OTHERS TO KEEP THE FLOW.**
Like all Grace Group experience, participants are encouraged to read various sections with the prompting questions. This allows for participants to engage in a small way. However, the online Grace Group experience removes a lot of the social ques (body language) when someone wants to volunteer to read – so there can sometimes be an awkward silence. As a leader, go ahead and ask specific people you think would not mind reading portion aloud. Over time, as the group becomes more comfortable and get through the tech learning curve – group participants will probably volunteer more freely.

d. **GRACE GROUP LEADERS FILL IN TO KEEP THE FLOW GOING.**
As well, being online, people are still trying to learn when it's okay to talk and when not to – so people tend to be more hesitant. The reason for this is because when questions are presented to the group, because of the limited social ques, people don't know when it's okay to talk or not. So, you will have to probably initiate more to keep the group flowing in discussion. Again, as mentioned above, as the leader you may also want to call and ask someone to provide their thought/discussion. Always ask to participate not tell them. In some cases, you may want to share your thought to help kickstart the dialogue –

but remember keep your comments shorter so they have more time to express more of their learning and self-discovery.

> *For example, "John, would you like to share your thoughts to the question or would you like someone else to comment first?"*

e. **ADJUST THE FLOW FROM FEEDBACK (LEARNING TOGETHER).**
Make it clear to all that this is a new and learning experience for everyone – even you as a leader. Make sure to ask for feedback along the way, to make sure people are able to express their challenges with the group. A lot of creative innovation comes from the honest feedback (growing as a leader and improving the overall Grace Group experience).

f. **KEEP LEARNING FROM OTHER GRACE GROUP LEADERS.**
Got questions? Ask them on the Facebook Page for Grace Group Leaders. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience there! You'll be surprise how other leaders are probably having the same thoughts, same questions, and have found their own creative way to navigate the challenges (or express what's working really well for their online group). Also, other Grace Group leaders have already created some of their own online group trainings, guidelines, and other helpful procedures or processes. Take advantage of the incredible resources and experience they have.

Lastly, you can always reach out to The Grace Alliance and set-up a time to brainstorm and work through your specific needs:

ggleaders@mhgracealliance.org