



one anotherSM
p r o j e c t

Five Conversations for Healthy Relationships
ON RAMP E-BOOK

The purpose of this On-Ramp is to offer anyone joining a One Another Project group an overview of how the program is designed, what it's like to be in a group and the materials that will be covered. If you will spend some time going through this, you will be find that participating in a discussion group will be easy and enjoyable.

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There is a Place for You Here

The movement we call One Another Project is all about the important relationships in your life. It is aimed at helping you take any of those relationships and drive them deeper, to a point of meaningfulness and health. And so, it is important that you know two things about those relationships:

1. None of them are beyond help and none of them have yet arrived at perfection; in other words, it is never too late to be intentional, even strategic, about healing broken or damaged relationships and it is always possible to drive healthy relationships even deeper; and
2. You can impact any relationship in your life even though the other person in that relationship may not be here in a “Five Conversations” group with you.

Indeed, most of the participants in One Another Project are using these conversations to work on relationships outside their group.

Relationships: The “Cells” of Life

One of the hard lessons life has for all of us is about how fragile the human body is. For some, the lesson comes early, and for others this lesson may be a good 50 years in development before it hits. But it does come.

Our physical bodies face a world of obstacles and injuries and illnesses, some more painful than others. The worst are those that attack our bodies at the cellular level. Human cells, you see, are the very building blocks of our physical life. Any disease that causes those building blocks to break down is especially troublesome to us. Cancer is such a disease. Alzheimer’s is as well. And Ebola. Any of these diseases can wreak havoc on even the most physically fit person.

Just as there are cells that form the foundation of our physical life, there are also “cells” that form the very foundation of our emotional and spiritual lives. We call them “relationships”. Just like our physical bodies, even the most emotionally or spiritually fit person can fall victim to broken relationships in his or her life. That brokenness can cause all kinds of problems. In so many ways, it is the most painful thing we face emotionally or spiritually.

The trick with a disease like cancer or Alzheimer’s is that it often gets misdiagnosed because the symptoms are so varied. Diseases that strike at the cellular level show

themselves in many different ways. Often, the actual underlying disease is found only after exploring other more surface issues. Similarly, with emotional or spiritual brokenness, we often overlook the relationships at the heart of the problem and get way too focused on the outward symptoms. We think the problem is finances, or living arrangements, or unfairness at work or at school, or that people in authority positions are evil, or that our teenager is just rebellious, or that life is just unfair, etc. In so many cases, if we can look past the surface issues and address the broken relationships beneath them, the surface issues have a way of working themselves out. It is a simple rule: fix the relationships and the other issues suddenly get smaller and become manageable.

This, then, is the aim of the One Another Project: to acknowledge the pain or brokenness of the world around us and to begin to focus our attention on the key relationships (the “one anothers”) creating that brokenness in our lives. Think about this question: what if those key relationships in your life were to be changed into relationships that build each other up and actually help you thrive, even in the middle of your difficulties? What if, rather than draining you of life and energy, those relationships actually became a source of encouragement and hope? Would that hope be worth your time and efforts?

The One Another Project is designed to show you how to breathe life into relationships. Its purpose is to take any relationship in your life, no matter how new or how old that relationship may be, and no matter what level of brokenness that relationship may be in currently, and help you begin to build that relationship into one which is healthy and positive to you both. Because healthy relationships make a healthy life.

When we finally discovery a cure for cancer or for Alzheimer’s, it will be because we discover how to repair the damage they do to human cells. In that same way, any cure for emotional or spiritual brokenness will require our abilities to repair broken relationships in our lives. We have much to learn!

Genuine Health is Never a Quick Fix

Like with physical health, there is no quick fix for healthy relationships. Oh, there are ways to lose weight quickly. And there are emergency measures that can be taken for certain injuries, illnesses, or circumstances to bring the body back into some manageable place. But genuine physical health comes as a result of a lifestyle (i.e. a series of right choices over a long period of time, choices that are hard at first but which eventually become second nature.)

People who are committed to good physical health spend time each day thinking about those choices. We consider what we will eat, when we will eat, and how much we will eat. We do the same thing with exercise. It is intentional. We make a plan to set aside time each day and we commit to that plan. And because we are human beings, we sometimes fail. We make some poor choices in terms of eating and in terms of exercise. And we forgive ourselves for those poor choices and move on to the next right choice.

Healthy relationships require nothing less. They require planning and commitment. They require good choices not only in terms of what we talk about, but also in terms of when we talk and how we talk. The conversations that create healthy relationships are not always the kind of conversations that happen naturally. They usually require thought and commitment. They are hard work, just like diet and exercise can be hard work.

Physical health as a lifestyle is not something we can achieve and check off as “done”. In that sense, then, real physical health is not a particular destination but is rather the journey itself, and so it goes with emotional and spiritual health as well. If physical health is about a lifestyle of right decisions about diet and exercise, then emotional and spiritual health is about a lifestyle of right conversations in particular relationships.

One Another Project endeavors not only to introduce you to that lifestyle, but also to start you well on your way in it. This is not so much about reaching some particular destination. It is much more about giving you a clear direction with regard to relationships, and showing you steps in that direction. This is a journey on which you are welcome to join us for as long as it is helpful to you.

Making this Journey in Community with Others

We were not designed for aloneness. We are all hardwired for community. All of us live better and do better when we have friends who know us and love us “warts and all”. This journey is no different. As a matter of fact, because this journey toward healthier relationships requires hard work and dedication, we all could actually benefit from the accountability of some close friends who:

1. Know something of what we are going through,
2. Are on the same journey with regard to growing healthy relationships in their lives; and
3. Will be there for us on the journey, as our cheerleaders and encouragers

The work of healthy relationships is, after all, filled with difficulties, distractions and, to be blunt, failed attempts on our part. All of us will fail from time to time in these efforts. And all of us will become discouraged. And, when that happens, all of us need friends who will not let us quit or give up, but will encourage us to try again (and again and again and again), because the benefits of healthy relationships are too great. Giving up is never the right option. And we need a community of friends to remind us of that.

We also benefit from a community of friends because they will be an important source of wisdom for us. They will help us see things about ourselves we would otherwise miss. They will have ideas and approaches we would never come up with on our own. We need that!

For all these reasons, One Another Project is designed for you to make this journey along with a small group of such friends. Does that mean you cannot do it on your own? No. It just means that to do so would rob you of a huge benefit and lower your chances of success significantly.

Words Can Be Cheap

Words are cheap. You have probably heard that before. What it means is that words may or may not reflect what is truly in someone's heart. For example, it is one thing to say the words, "I love you", but it is another thing altogether to actually demonstrate it. Anyone can say the words — they cost us very little to just say them. And cheap words may even have a positive impact, but that positive impact will be measured in terms of minutes or hours, not decades or lifetimes. Cheap words that cost us nothing are like that.

On the other hand, while the positive impact (if any) of cheap words may be limited, the damage done by cheap words can be much more significant. Cheap words which turn out to be lies or half-truths, for example, make future positive words less and less meaningful. More importantly, lies tear the very fabric of healthy relationships, dissolving that fabric (and that relationship) from the inside out. So, even positive words which turn out to be lies do much more damage to a relationship than may be apparent at first.

But negative words that are cheap are different. Negative cheap words, though they may cost us little in saying them, can have serious long-term impacts. Negative words spoken out of anger, for example, are cheap. They require very little of us, other than letting them loose. They come to us quickly and easily. They are cheap that way. But once out, they can do damage for a lifetime. They have the power to destroy a relationship. They may be felt so deeply and so widely that the relationship cannot be fixed.

Cheap words (whether positive or negative) are words that cannot be tested at the time they are spoken. They are words shared under circumstances that keep the hearer from being able to search behind them or test them or otherwise learn of their cheapness. Like a drive-by shooting, they are fired off by someone who has no intention of sticking around for those words to be further examined or, worse, for any return fire. Even cheap words that are intended to have a positive impact will have little impact at all under these kinds of circumstances.

The best way to use words to have a long term, positive impact (the best way to use them to heal broken or damaged relationships) is under circumstances where the hearer can immediately test them and see if they are cheap or not. The hearer must be on equal ground (a level playing field) with the speaker and must feel the freedom to ask questions and to poke around under and over and behind the words to determine that they are in fact not cheap at all. There must be questions and answers and clarifications and illustrations and word pictures. In other words, there must be a conversation.

Conversation, you see, is very different from reading a book or a blog or a social media post. It is very different from looking at a work of art or a photograph. Conversation is much, much riskier (more “costly”) in that it places words out on the table for a full examination. It invites the hearer to test the words, to clarify them, to weigh them and to determine their actual value. It requires both the speaking of words and the listening to words at the same time. In that way, conversation is an art to itself...and a gift. And it is the only way to use words that will actually heal a broken relationship.

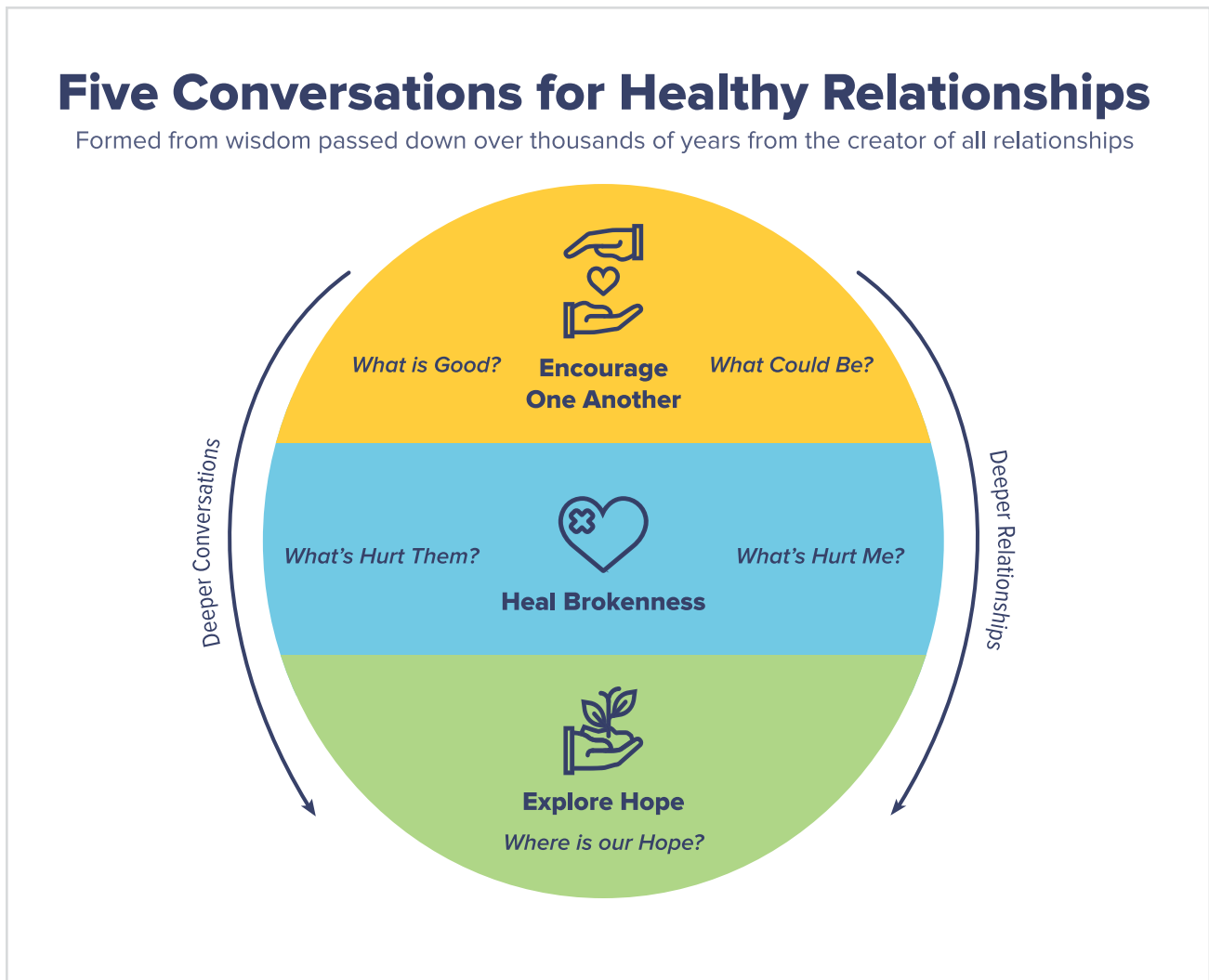
It stands to reason, then, that actual face-to-face conversations create the most effective environment for growing a relationship and for driving it deeper in order to make it more meaningful. Conversation (done well) is powerful that way. But make no mistake, it is not easy. It is an art form. It takes lots and lots of practice, which means you will want to carve out time and space for it on a regular basis.

Truthfully, that may be the hardest part. Our fast-paced, busy culture leaves us with very little margin (time margin or emotional margin) with which to work. Finding a time and place and circumstances in which to have regular face to face conversations in the relationships that matter most to us is a challenge. For some families it is the dinner table. That’s a wonderful routine to have and to keep for those who can do it. It is a perfect place for genuine conversation. For others it may be during a common hobby or pastime. Some may prefer a routine cup of coffee for a particular relationship.

The bottom line is this: conversations prevent words from becoming cheap, so they are a worthwhile investment in any relationship. For those relationships that you consider most important in your own life, it will be up to you to figure out how, when and where real conversations can take place.

Roadmap for The Five Conversations

There is the art of conversation and then there are topics of conversation. Perhaps it goes without saying: in terms of topics, some conversations matter more than others. As important as it is to learn the art of conversation, if we want to breathe life back into damaged relationships, and if we want to grow stronger relationships, making them meaningful sources of life for us, there are particular conversations upon which we must focus: conversations that encourage one another, conversations that heal broken relationships, and conversations that explore hope.



CONVERSATIONS THAT ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

1. Conversations about What is Good
2. Conversations about What Could Be

Relationships in our lives exist as a result of perceptions — perceptions we have of ourselves and perceptions we have of the people on the other side of our relationships. Conversations have a great deal to do with those perceptions. Therefore, conversations that deal specifically with who I am and who I am becoming, and conversations that deal with whom you are to me and whom you are becoming are critical conversations. In that same way, the relationships which we perceive are encouraging to us are the ones to which we are drawn. They are the relationships we allow to shape us and mold us. We allow ourselves to be influenced tremendously by these relationships. In many cases (even when we wish it were not so), these relationships include family.

You can see, then, that learning the art of conversation, as a means of encouraging and being encouraged is important. Healthy relationships depend on it. You might think of these conversations as preventive medicine in terms of relational health. You should also see these particular types of conversations as “foundational” to driving a relationship deeper. These are primary. Without these, the other conversations (below) are very difficult. But as we get better and better at encouragement, the harder conversations about pain and about hope become much more natural.

CONVERSATIONS THAT HEAL BROKENNESS

3. Conversations about What’s Hurt Them
4. Conversations about What’s Hurt Me

Despite our best intentions and efforts, relationships still get damaged. Feelings get hurt and connection gets broken (or at least damaged). When that happens, conversations that encourage are of little help. In fact, they can actually be even more damaging until the brokenness is repaired. That task (repairing broken relationships) requires a different kind of conversation. It requires meaningful conversations about pain.

When we have been wounded in a relationship (such as family), we must learn how to express that pain in healthy ways. We literally must learn to say “ouch!” in a way that actually helps conversation instead of in a way that ends the conversation. And when the person on the other side of our relationship feels wounded, we must learn to have

conversation about his/her pain that helps us to see it, understand it, embrace it, and actually speak healing words into it. These conversations are important to a family's health, because these are the conversations that take broken relationships and put them back on track to begin healing. Without them, relationships can stay broken for years or decades or even lifetimes. When it comes to relationships, you see, time does not heal all wounds. But artful, honest conversations can.

CONVERSATIONS THAT EXPLORE HOPE

5. Conversations about Where Our Hope Is

Whether it is intentional or not, whether we are even aware of it or not, every family has a system of values that provide an underlying frame of reference for every meaningful conversation. Call it a "worldview" if you like, or a way of being, or you may just think of it in terms of priorities/values. No matter what you call it, how you answer life's most basic questions such as "Who am I?" or "Where do I find my purpose?" greatly informs all your meaningful conversations. Even the family whose value system chooses NOT to answer these questions is a value system in itself. There simply is no escaping this reality.

That frame of reference has everything to do with how you see yourself in this world, how you give and receive love in a relationship, how and under what circumstances you trust in a relationship, and why you enter into relationships in the first place. That frame of reference provides your basic foundation for right and wrong, for good and evil and for what is important and what is not.

Most importantly, that frame of reference determines your understanding of truth and how it is known. Truth, in turn, is foundational to any healthy relationship. Therefore, conversations that deal with these most foundational questions are dealing with the very fabric of a family's entire frame of reference.

This makes this category of conversations the deepest category of all. It also makes these particular conversations cover a much broader range of specific topics and truths. In a sense, all the other meaningful conversations mentioned above (conversations that encourage and conversations that reconcile) not only flow out of these foundational values, but also then lay the pathway for driving us back to these deepest conversations time and again.

In 5 Conversations for Healthy Relationships, the Bible (the Holy Scripture) provides the wisdom against which all these values and ideas of truth are measured. We have come to see that God's story as told in the Bible provides clear answers to these foundational questions: Who is God? What does He do? Who am I? What do I do? Conversations that honestly and genuinely explore our faith and the answers to these questions are therefore important to family relationships because they are essentially all about hope, and hope is critical to healthy relationships.

THE ORDER OF THE CONVERSATIONS

These conversations do not exist independent of each other. In other words, there is a sort of "sequence" to them in terms of the depth of any given relationship. Meaningful relationships have encouraging conversations (about what is right and about what could be) at the first and most surface level. As we move to push a relationship deeper, that process begins with these particular conversations. Until we begin to establish some rhythm of encouragement, we will find it difficult to gain any traction with the deeper conversations, such as reconciliation and hope.

However, if we do succeed in establishing that rhythm of encouragement, then we can begin to work on rhythms of conversations about pain. Learning to say "ouch" and learning to express regret and learning to forgive, all happen much more easily in a relationship where encouragement is already happening. So, these conversations tend to move in a progression. Similarly, after we have begun to live into a culture of encouragement in a given relationship and then begin to add to that a culture of repairing (conversations about your pain and about my pain), then and only then have we laid a foundation for the most intimate and important conversations of all: meaningful conversations about faith and where our hope comes from.

THE SOURCE OF OUR EXAMPLES AND INSPIRATION

Any time we open the Scripture and begin to embrace its teachings, there is an almost immediate feeling of disappointment and guilt (and perhaps even shame). Honestly, the ideals set forth in scripture are very high! All of us fall short of them, and all of our families fall short of them. For some of us, we read these ideals and hold onto some hope of one day reaching them, however long that might take. For many of us, on the other hand, the mere possibility of ever reaching these ideals has long since passed, and we feel we will never be able to reach them. The question, then, is what to do with them?

One temptation is to do away with them altogether. After all, if I and those near me have no chance of ever measuring up to the ideals of scripture, why not just redefine the ideals, what's "normal" for me, so that I don't have to live with the guilt of falling short all the time? That, it seems, is the world's way of dealing with scripture. In any and all ways scripture fails to conform to the world's most current standards, it is seen as culturally irrelevant or "out of touch" and those ideals are then forever written off. Frankly, it is the easiest way to match our reality with any sense of "ideal".

But we see this as a mistake. When confronted with the "normal" of our culture, we must continue to hold to the wisdom of scripture. This wisdom has proven itself across every cultural line and across every season of time. But, at the same time, we should refuse to condemn anyone for failing to meet those ideals. We must get comfortable living in the tension between the ideal and the reality of our day.

We do not write about these conversations as ones who have mastered them, nor as ones who have finished the journey and are now here to help you make it. Rather, we write as ones who have struggled in the tension between these ideals and our own realities for a lifetime. We have failed often, and have learned from those failures. Maybe, just maybe, we can help somebody avoid making some of the mistakes we have made!

But even in the midst of all our own failures and frailties, we are grateful for a God who does not condemn us for them. One who rather encourages us to pick ourselves up and try again. And who loves us in the meantime.

So, as we embrace the ideals contained within scripture for our relationships, we can feel the pain of how far our reality may be from those ideals, but we can also be thankful for the grace of God that spares us from condemnation for this same failure on our part where those ideals are concerned. We still honor the ideals, we still allow them to press us forward, and we embrace the grace God offers us all along the way.

What You Can Expect in Your Group

5 Conversations groups are safe places to come and talk about important relationships in your life. It is safe to ask questions, safe to share struggles, and safe to ask for help with those struggles. Chances are good you will have some life circumstance in common with most of the other participants in the group, so there will be friends there who will understand where you are coming from. Nobody is there to “fix” you (or to be fixed by you). It is just friends gathering together and sharing their struggles, learning these conversations together, and encouraging each other all along the way

GATHERING WEEKLY

Most 5 Conversations groups meet weekly. That has proven to be a great rhythm for learning and for practicing these conversations. Come when you can. Don't stress if you cannot. But make no mistake, your benefit from this group will be tied to your level of commitment to it. There is no beginning to the class and there is no particular end. It will make sense to you no matter when you come into it. You are encouraged to keep coming back to the group as long as you feel like it is helpful to you.

VIDEO TEACHING SEGMENT

Once the group arrives and gets settled each week, there will be a short video (10-12 minutes in most cases) to watch. It will include a teaching segment as well as a real life struggle from a real person like you. These lessons use wisdom and illustrations that have been around for thousands of years: the Bible. We make no apology for that. This means these lessons are not “trendy” or new-fangled self-help methods. Rather, they are lessons that have been tried and found true and helpful by hundreds of millions of people for a long, long time.

GROUP DISCUSSION

The philosophy of learning followed by Five Conversations groups is that we all learn new things best when we talk about them. That's how most of us begin to internalize the lessons. That is how the lessons begin to move from our heads to our hearts. The lessons do me little good unless and until I begin to struggle with how, exactly, they will work in my own relationships. Obviously, you don't have to talk at all in the group. Nobody is going to make you talk. But you will understand when your facilitator asks you if you care to share or otherwise gives you an opportunity to talk. It is the culture of these groups. We come to discuss, to share our struggles and to listen respectfully when others do the same.

Because the aim of the group is to give everyone an opportunity to share and to speak, the culture discourages any one person from taking up all or most of the available time. You will want to share, but also to give everyone else the opportunity to do so as well.

PRAYER/REFLECTION

Different groups will handle “prayer and reflection” time differently, depending on the facilitator and on the participants. At the end of the session, there will be an opportunity for each participant to talk about specific things in the week ahead for them that they are anxious about, so that their friends in the group can remember that this week and can share that burden with them. There may be a closing time of prayer or reflection or thinking about each other. The very last thing anyone in a “5 Conversations” group wants is to make anyone else feel uncomfortable in this regard. You should feel absolutely free to share with your facilitator your comfort level with this time and how it is handled.

FRIENDSHIPS

No matter what reason you may have for going to your first 5 Conversations group, eventually, the reason you will keep going will be because there are meaningful friendships there. Most people report that those friendships are the real benefit of the group for them. You will never be pressured to forge friendships you don’t want to have, but it is the culture of these groups to create an environment where genuine friendships exist. As you go to your first few sessions, we encourage you to give that some thought and take a risk or two on some friendships. You will be surprised how helpful that is!

What Are You Waiting For?

Every life-changing journey has one thing in common: a brave first step. In every single 5 Conversations group, every person in the group took a brave first step when they walked in.

When you take your brave first step, you will already have that in common with everyone there. They will remember their own fears when they took their step, and they will be there to encourage you in yours as well.

Haven't you waited long enough? Isn't it time to make a plan for the important relationships in your life? Welcome to "Five Conversations for Healthy Relationships." We're glad you are here!