

Facilitator Guidelines for Awakening Joy Support Groups

From James and Jane Baraz

Welcome!

The purpose of the Awakening Joy Support Groups is to support each person's process going through the Awakening Joy course. Each group will have its own particular identity and style. There's no one "right" way to do it. These guidelines are just a starting point to discover what format works for you. You may copy and use any of these materials in whole or adapt them to your needs.

The Awakening Joy Support Groups are about building community. Rather than the facilitator teaching the participants how to be more joyful, it works best to draw out the wisdom of the participants. Instead of looking to the leaders for answers, members see that they can access their own insights, which are different for each individual.

Setting Up an Awakening Joy Support Group

We welcome anyone who is enrolled in the Awakening Joy course to set up an Awakening Joy Support Group. We ask that each participant be enrolled in the course. We don't want finances to get in the way of participating. When you sign up you will see payment alternatives and instructions if you need additional flexibility.

It's important that the leader(s) feel comfortable and enthusiastic about the group. This should be a nourishing experience for everyone including the leaders.

Co-Leading a Group

Co-leading a group with a like-minded friend can make the experience even more rewarding. The energy between co-leaders has a great impact on the group; it's important to keep your relationship honest, kind, respectful and balanced. Make time after each session to explore each other's reactions and discuss possible modifications. Some co-leaders like to rotate leadership while others prefer to share each session. Explore in private any difficult feelings that may surface and get support from a third person if necessary. Co-leading a group can strengthen a friendship.

Getting Started – Who to Invite, How Often to Meet and Where to Meet

Membership is open to anyone taking the Awakening Joy course. Consider who you would like to have in your group. Some leaders prefer to limit their group to invited friends, women or men only, or members of a pre-existing group such as a church, meditation or YMCA group.

Ideal group size will vary depending on the leader's level of comfort. Even a small group of four can be a very nourishing experience if the level of commitment, safety and support is high. As the group becomes larger, we suggest participants engage in Awakening Joy exercises, have discussions in pairs or groups of three, and then report back to the larger group. Both large and




Awakening Joy Course Principles

Develop and increase wholesome states of mind.

Notice how these positive feelings are experienced in your body.

Incline the mind towards joy and well-being.



small groups seem to work as long as the attendance is consistent.

Groups will vary in how often they meet. Some may meet weekly, some every two weeks, some monthly. See what works for you in a way that will best provide continuity while not feeling like a burden of "one more thing to do." You can schedule your meeting times to coincide with the five-month Awakening Joy live classes or, if you prefer, work out your own schedule. The online resources are available until the end of December of each year.

You can meet in your home, the home of one of the other participants, or any other place that is comfortable and easily accessible.

Decide on the dates, time and place that best suits your needs and then send out invitations or advertise. Feel free to use the online Awakening Joy Forum to advertise your group.

Commitment to Meeting

Group commitment is important. While some leaders allow for "drop ins," closing the membership, once the group begins to settle, often enhances safety and depth. Some leaders begin with a few more than the ideal number of participants and after the first or second session, ask those participants who want to belong to make a commitment to regularly attend, unless business, travel or unforeseen circumstances make regular attendance impossible.

The leader should send out a reminder notice on the next meeting date and request that participants R.S.V.P. If a member is frequently absent, the leader might privately explore with that person whether the group is meeting his/her needs.

Fees

It is up to you whether you would like to offer your time and skills voluntarily, by donation, or if you wish to charge a fee. Consider a sliding scale.

Responsibility of the Facilitator(s)—Create a Positive, Safe Environment


The primary responsibility of the facilitator(s) is to create a good environment for open discussion to take place. A major factor toward that end is a feeling of safety for all.

Confidentiality

Since the sharing is personal, rules about confidentiality should be agreed on at the first meeting.


Flow and Balance of the Discussions

People vary greatly in their ease of speaking to a group. Some are shy, others extroverted. Make sure that everyone has a chance to be heard and that a few people do not dominate the



There are twenty people in our current group in Saskatoon using Awakening Joy with its many options to deepen our community and to find more ways to cultivate well-being. What a gift!

Jennifer Keane, Canada
Awakening Joy group facilitator




discussion. This is essential to healthy group dynamics.

Your group may decide occasionally to use a "talking stick" which is held by the current speaker without interruption. This can be helpful, particularly with the group check-in as described in the sample lesson plans found under "Designing Your Lesson Plan" on the For Members-Course Materials, Support Group Manual page of the Awakening Joy website. Besides taking a more directive role if someone is dominating the conversation, facilitators should also speak up if the group is getting sidetracked.

Some groups may emphasize personal sharing if there is a sense of trust and intimacy that develops among the participants. Others may prefer to not be as personally revealing, focusing more on general observations about their process of awakening joy. The clearer the leaders and members are on the right balance between personal and general discussion, the better the group will be. If facilitators are willing to be self-revealing instead of acting as if they "have it all together", this can be a model and a boost for intimacy.

Each session may include members who are experiencing hard times as well as those who are thriving. It is not the job of the leader or group members to provide therapy, give advice or fix those who are suffering. The key is to provide a safe, balanced space where members can be heard and understood with compassion. At times, with the consent of the group, it may be necessary to provide some extra time to a member who is suffering. Group leaders should remain aware that this is neither the primary purpose nor the intention of the group. Facilitators or members may be moved to provide supportive follow-up outside the group.



In the Finnish language, the word "joy" has many meanings; it can be everything from calmness to elation. But what it means deep inside you is the most important. Our meetings give us really good, challenging ways of sharing thoughts about joy in life.

Peter Holmberg, Finland
Awakening Joy group facilitator.

The philosophy and practices of Awakening Joy may be significantly different from what the participants experience in the rest of their lives. Encourage group members to form a buddy relationship with another member so they can email, phone, or personally get together to support each other.

Welcome Participation

Invite participants to bring a quote or a reading, or share their talents.

No Unsolicited Advice

Facilitators should discourage judgments or comments about how anyone is doing. Remind members not to give advice unless asked.

Monitor the Energy of the Group

Address any sense that the vitality and commitment of the group members is waning. Members can discuss what's needed to make the group more alive and juicy. Perhaps all members can take responsibility as "vibe watchers" – those who pay attention to the group process.

Don't forget physical considerations such as temperature of the room, physical access to the meeting room, whether people are hungry or thirsty, or need bathroom or stretch breaks.

Informed Consent Agreement Waiver

As mentioned, the Awakening Joy Support Groups are not intended to offer personal or group therapy. We ask that you distribute a waiver, have participants sign it, and keep a copy for your records. The waiver will give participants an understanding of what they can and cannot expect. The waiver can be found on the Awakening Joy website under "For Members – Course Materials, Support Group Manual".

Suggested Meeting Format

The meeting format will be influenced by how long each session will be. Decide on a timeframe that will work for as many people as possible. Groups might meet anywhere from one to three hours. Below are some suggested meeting components. You can also refer to the Detailed Sample Lesson Plans in the Appendices of the Support Group Manual.

1. Start with Silent Meditation

We strongly encourage that each meeting start with a short period of silent meditation (5-20 minutes) so that everyone can settle in and get in touch with themselves. This also leads to deeper sharing. An 18-minute guided meditation from James can be found in the "For Members" area:


<http://www.awakeningjoy.info/materials.php>.

After logging in choose "Course Materials" and then "Meditation Resources".

2. Personal Check-In


The meditation can be followed with a personal check-in by each member. The check-in is a skillful way for each person to share what's working with the monthly practice themes, the challenges, and an issue/question that's coming up, which they would like to discuss as a group after everyone checks-in.

The time spent on the check-in will vary, depending on the number of participants and how long the group meets. The group can decide how much time it wants to spend on this part and how in depth the sharing might be. For instance, the group may decide to let each person take two to four minutes to check in. It is good to have someone set a timer or ring a bell as a reminder for the person to wrap up their check-in. If the check-ins become too drawn out, remind members of how long each person should take for their sharing.



The *Awakening Joy* book and principles have been the soil from which our beautiful group has blossomed. The path of practice outlined in the book provides a guiding map for us each to follow and it acts as the meeting place for us all to come together in reflection. It offers us an opportunity to connect across departments in our organization around practices that contribute to our well-being.

Rae Houseman, Massachusetts
Awakening Joy group facilitator



3. Discuss the Practice Theme

After the check-in, the discussion of the Awakening Joy practice theme can take place as well as any issues that were brought up in the check-ins. This discussion might also include what people have been doing regarding the supportive practices (meditating, singing, exercising, journaling, other nourishing activities such as having Joy buddies, etc.). It's helpful for everyone to have a sense of how long this discussion will be.

4. Experience Awakening Joy Exercises Together

Try the experiential exercises we present in the live class or those in the homework suggestions in the letters, iPhone or iPad Awakening Joy app, or practices in the *Awakening Joy* books. Have participants meet in pairs or small groups and then invite people to share with the larger group.

5. Encourage Statements of Intention and/or What Was Learned

Before the end of the meeting, participants may want to state their intention with regard to what they think will support them in their practice between meetings as well as any ideas they will take from the group. (For example, "I plan to meditate every day for five minutes."; "I'm going to take a walk in nature this weekend."; "I intend to notice whenever I have fun with my child.").

6. Provide an Opportunity for Feedback on the Meeting

After the main discussion, take some "process time" for members to express how the meeting was for them. Often this will take just a few minutes, sometimes longer. It gives a chance for people to give feedback about what is or is not working for them in the group. That way everyone can benefit from individual observations and hear any ideas that would make the group stronger, rather than anyone leaving the meeting feeling disconnected from the group. Saying what's truthful and useful, without blame, can make for a deeper sense of honesty and mutual commitment to awakening joy.

7. End with a Song, if the Tone is Right

Finally, if your members feel up to it, why not end with singing a song together? If the meeting turns into a sing-along that may be the perfect format!

Awakening Joy Support Groups Nourish Your Practice between Meetings

The purpose of the group is to nurture the Awakening Joy practices of all members in an on-going way. Having some accountability to the group will make the course more a conscious part of your and everyone's day. By sharing your experiences, each participant will benefit from the discoveries of all the members. Have fun!

May you be happy!

James and Jane Baraz