

Life Group Preparation Notes:

Emotionally Healthy Relationships

Session 2 - Pre-Session Reading

Stop Mind Reading and Clarify Expectations

God has given us an inner guidance system to move through life—thinking and feeling. It is essential that we pay attention to our feelings. But then we must think about what to do with them. Knowing when to follow our feelings and when *not* to is indispensable if we are to grow up into spiritual adulthood in Christ.

God is omniscient—he knows all things about all situations. And God alone knows what is going on in the minds of other people. Yet, we routinely play God when we make assumptions about another person or interpret a certain behavior without verifying the facts. These assumptions unleash much needless pain and confusion. In fact, the application of these two simple skills hold within them the key to preventing large-scale faulty thinking in your family, workplace, and church.

Imagine your husband, who usually calls you while at work, doesn't call one day. You begin to wonder if he is angry with you. You did have an argument last night, but you thought it got resolved. You assume the worst. All day long you stew over his apparent immature behavior. How dare he give you the cold shoulder!

You choose to ignore him when he arrives home and go to bed without saying good night. He remains at the kitchen table doing paperwork, not asking if anything is wrong. This confirms your hypothesis about his immaturity. Things are even worse than you thought.

"Who knows what tomorrow will bring?" you mutter to yourself in resignation as you turn off the light. The truth, you learn later, is that he did not call because of an emergency at work. Yet you created an intricate scenario in your mind that was not true.

Imagine you are part of a church ministry team planning a big event. As director, you are exchanging quite a few emails with the rest of the team. You notice that one of the team members, Ken, who used to be warm and friendly, now shoots back terse replies. You interpret this as passive-aggressive behavior and assume he must be upset with you for something. Two can play at that game, so you fire off a few short, curt emails in return.

Soon thereafter, you speak to Ken on the phone. He is warm and engaging. You realize you wrongly “read his mind” in interpreting his emails negatively. You caused yourself unnecessary angst and murdered him in your heart.

In both scenarios, you spiral downward by negatively interpreting the behavior of another and making assumptions about what they’re thinking. These turn into hidden landmines in relationships. Slowly, you build up resentments. You hurt yourself. You build invisible walls to keep others out. And worst of all, you quench God’s Spirit within you.

Think of a person with whom you might be mind reading or about whom you are making assumptions you have not verified. At an appropriate time, ask them the following question: “May I have permission to read your mind?” or, “Can I check out an assumption I have?” or, “Do I have permission to check out my thinking with you?”

Once they say yes, consider the examples below for ways to check out your thinking and stop the mind reading . . .

- “I think that you think I’m responsible for the Christmas shopping this year. Is that correct?”
- “I’m wondering if you think that I think you are a bad person for not remembering my birthday. Is that correct?”
- “I noticed that you didn’t return my phone calls for a few days. That’s unusual for you, so I’m wondering if there is something wrong.”
- “I’m puzzled that you gave Jane and Richard big hugs but passed me over. I’m wondering if I said or did something to upset you.”
- “I noticed you didn’t call me from work today. Is everything all right, or is there still some lingering tension after our disagreement last night?”

The stories we tell ourselves have an enormous impact on our feelings. Consider the difference of what goes on in your mind when a friend, who agrees to meet you for dinner, is forty minutes late. How different are your feelings when you tell yourself, “Maybe he had an accident driving here,” or “This relationship is clearly more important to me than it is to him!” Each interpretation generates a different feeling. Why? Because our feelings are closely related to the story we tell ourselves about the things going on around us.

To quit faulty thinking and maintain good emotional and spiritual health, we must make an intentional decision to stop mind reading and to verify our assumptions by talking to people—*in person* instead of in our heads.

—*The Emotionally Healthy Woman*, pages 184–187, 189

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