TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION I: WELCOME
   OUR HISTORY
   OUR MISSION
   OUR VALUES
   OUR VISION
   OUR PURPOSE
   WHAT IS A SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR?

SECTION II: OVERVIEW OF EXPECTATIONS
   WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US
   WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU
   LENGTH OF SERVICE EXPECTATIONS
   TIME COMMITMENT EXPECTATIONS
   TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES
   AFFILIATION RESPONSIBILITIES

SECTION III: WHAT TO DO...AND NOT TO DO
   PLEASE DO:
   PLEASE DO NOT:
   IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER:
   SEQUENCE OF MEETINGS

SECTION IV: FACILITATING EMPATHY
   TIPS FOR EMBRACING EMPATHY
   ACTIVE LISTENING
   WHAT TO AVOID
   HANDLING DIFFICULT MEETINGS
   ROLEPLAYS
      Scenario 1:
      Scenario 2:
      Scenario 3:
      Scenario 4:

SECTION V: QUICK START GUIDE
   IMPORTANT POLICIES (ABBREVIATED)

SECTION VI: CRISIS RESOURCES
SECTION I: WELCOME

Welcome to Recovering From Religion’s Facilitator Training manual! We appreciate your commitment to helping others and we look forward to working with you as a valued member of our team. As facilitator facilitator, you represent this organization to the people who need us the most, and it is vitally important that you are well trained to handle the attendees who reach out to you for help. By now, you should have a copy of the Employee and Facilitator Handbook, in addition to this training manual. Please make sure you have read that manual in its entirety and that you’ve addressed any questions you may have. Facilitators are expected to abide by all policies and procedures as stated in the Handbook, as well as attend and successfully complete Small Group Facilitator training and other ongoing educational opportunities, as recommended by Recovering From Religion.

This Small Group Facilitator Training Manual is intended for employees and/or facilitators who are or will be running the small group support networks we develop in person and online around the world. This manual provides clear expectations, learning opportunities, guidelines, and other relevant information about facilitating as a Small Group Facilitator. While this manual helps set the standards of expectation for everyone involved as a Small Group Facilitator, this manual is not intended to be a contract, nor is it intended to create any legally enforceable obligations on the part of Recovering From Religion or its employee and/or facilitators. It is important that you read, understand, and become familiar with the handbook and comply with the standards that have been established in order to be successful. Please talk with your supervisor if you have any questions or need additional information, we are happy to help!

It is obviously not possible to anticipate every situation that may arise or to provide information that answers every possible question. As a result, Recovering From Religion reserves the right to modify, supplement, rescind, or revise any part of this manual from time to time, with or without notice, as it deems necessary or appropriate. The information in this manual supersedes and replaces all previous versions that may exist.
OUR HISTORY

Recovering From Religion was founded in 2009 by Dr. Darrel Ray, author of *The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture* and *Sex and God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality*. As Dr. Ray promoted The God Virus, people sought him out looking for others who felt they had also been negatively affected by religious belief. Within a year, over 25 groups had self-started, all made up of people dealing with their own experiences transitioning away from their “faith of origin.”

By 2010 Recovering From Religion had grown to require the help of Executive Directors Jerry Dewitt and Sarah Morehead, both former evangelical fundamentalists passionate about reaching even more individuals who identify as recovering from religion. In 2011, Recovering From Religion became a registered non-profit organization and is recognized as a 501c3 tax-exempt charity with the Internal Revenue Service. From 2012-2015 Morehead served as Executive Director for the organization, taking it to new heights with international group expansion, the development and launch of the Hotline Project, and Dr. Ray’s Secular Therapist Project. In 2016 leadership transitioned to Executive Director Gayle Jordan, and the organization continues to lead the way in providing support to anyone who needs our services.

OUR MISSION

Recovering From Religion is an educational, support, and resource organization committed to creating a welcoming environment for anyone questioning, negatively affected by, and/or recovering from their religious beliefs. Recovering From Religion sees religion as an unnecessary force in society and, as such, is dedicated to helping anyone exploring a life free from faith and dogma, without discrimination.

OUR VALUES

1. We value the personal and unique path everyone takes on their journey away from faith.
2. We are committed to helping anyone on their journey who reaches out to Recovering From Religion for help and/or support, from questioning believer to ardent non-believer.
3. We respect the right to explore their journey at a pace that best works for their own situation.
4. We value learning experiences beyond each person’s individual faith background.
5. We are committed to providing multi-faceted support opportunities.
6. We are dedicated to educating the public on the need for these support services, and to working with organizations who share our values and goals.

OUR VISION

The vision of Recovering From Religion is to support, equip, and empower anyone and everyone negatively impacted by religion or faith as they find their place in the warm and welcoming arms of the secular community.
OUR PURPOSE

Recovering From Religion exists exclusively to:

1. Encourage people as they address issues, problems, and concerns that exist as a result of personal or cultural religious and doctrinal belief;
2. Encourage those considering living life after faith;
3. Create connections for individuals seeking support within the secular and non-theistic community.

WHAT IS A SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR?

The Small Group Facilitator program of Recovering From Religion utilizes a peer support group model. It is not intended as group therapy, and should never be used in place of group therapy if an individual needs such a service. Local RR groups exist all over the world for people who feel negatively impacted by religion and/or who are questioning the role of religion in their lives. The RR Small Group Facilitator offers support, information, and resources to attendees facing these transitions by encouraging attendees to share and explore their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives while providing them with immediate and compassionate support combined with relevant resource referrals.

SECTION II: OVERVIEW OF EXPECTATIONS

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM US

1. We will be respectful
2. We will provide a welcoming environment in which you can work
3. We will provide resources and tools for the projects you are working on
4. We will provide a support network for you in your activities
5. We will help you understand the work required for a given facilitator opportunity
6. We will be accommodating and understanding to the best of our ability
7. We will accept and respect your lifestyle and time constraints

WHAT WE EXPECT FROM YOU

1. We expect you to be respectful
2. We expect you to be a good representative of RR and our message while facilitating
3. We expect you to act in accordance with our core values
4. We expect you to educate yourself about the projects and issues we are working on
5. We expect you to work with us to find opportunities that fit your interests and skills
6. We expect you to let us know in advance if you cannot show up for a facilitator opportunity that you committed to, and make every effort to find a replacement.
LENGTH OF SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

Recovering From Religion is heavily dependent on the many wonderful facilitators who make up our “boots on the ground” all around the world, and as such, we are deeply invested in meeting your needs. In an effort to maintain a healthy balance between the many demands on facilitator time and the need for continuity within Recovering From Religion, facilitators are asked to commit to only one year of service at a time. Approximately two months prior to your anniversary with RR, you will be asked to evaluate your year with us, as well as discuss with us your future plans with our organization. If you want to continue on for another year, we welcome you to renew your status with us and continue on as a valued team member. If you prefer to take a break after a year, or leave RR entirely, we support you and appreciate the opportunity to have gotten to know you, and appreciate as much advance notice as possible so we can work with you on an active and trained replacement.

TIME COMMITMENT EXPECTATIONS

Small Group Facilitator facilitators can expect a minimum of 4 hours a month being dedicated to Small Group Facilitator work, and possibly more at the discretion of the facilitator. All facilitators can expect approximately 8 additional hours per year dedicated to continuing education, training, and networking opportunities.

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Facilitators are expected to successfully complete all training and education opportunities provided by Recovering From Religion in order to adequately navigate their position and responsibilities within the organization.

AFFILIATION RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Please be scrupulous in keeping your other group activities separate from Recovering From Religion. RR does not promote any agenda other than simply helping people recover from the negative impact of religion.
2. We realize our facilitators are usually very active in their local secular community, but when representing RR, they must stay focused on RR and remain neutral about other groups, activities, and involvement unrelated to Recovering From Religion. Small Group Facilitator facilitators may not disclose personal or professional activities or affiliations to clients during meetings.
SECTION III: WHAT TO DO...AND NOT TO DO

PLEASE DO:

1. Maintain respect all attendees, regardless of opinions or backgrounds.
2. Be polite and courteous to all attendees.
3. Speak calmly and clearly to all attendees.
4. Convey genuine interest in what each attendee is saying.
5. Focus entirely on the meeting at hand in a quiet environment.
6. Assertively maintain boundaries.
7. Check any personal baggage at the door.

PLEASE DO NOT:

1. Argue, debate, be defensive, or display arrogance.
2. Command, order, or persuade attendees.
3. Judge, criticize, or preach at attendees.
4. Threaten, blame, or ridicule attendees.
5. Display negative emotions verbally or nonverbally.
6. Make assumptions about attendees.
7. Interrupt (unless redirecting a attendee who has lost focus).
8. Give false assurances or make/insinuate promises.
9. Multitask – this includes family interruptions, cell phones, and web surfing.
10. Insert your own worldviews, beliefs, or stories into the attendee’s situation – again, it’s all about the attendee!

IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER:

1. Small groups are led according to policy regardless of a attendee’s background, beliefs, opinions, perceived intelligence, implied intentions, or vocal qualities. All attendees and clients will be treated with dignity and respect.
2. Recovering From Religion does not provide counseling or psychotherapy. Those services are outside of the scope of the Small Group Facilitator, and individuals seeking such must be referred as appropriate.
3. Recovering From Religion is not a “deconversion program”. There are no expectations that any attendees will deconvert or relinquish their religious beliefs, nor should they be persuaded to do so. Attendees are reaching out to the Small Group Facilitator to locate resources and suggestions that enhance thought processes, which may include recent or eventual deconversion, but the attendee is responsible for making their own decisions and reaching their own conclusions.
4. Arguing and/or debating with attendees is strictly prohibited. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to maintain appropriate tone and dialogue with the clients throughout the meeting, regardless of the intent of the client or attendee.
5. Client confidentiality: Maintaining strict confidentiality at all times is of the utmost importance. Under no circumstances may any facilitator or supervisor disclose identifying information about themselves to clients.

6. RR offers facilitator meetings as a way to connect with the rest of your team and receive the support we all need to prevent burnout and maintain support of one another. No team member works well in isolation, and we find strength and community by connecting with one another.

7. Maintain sobriety while leading your meeting. Mind altering drugs and alcohol alter a facilitator’s ability to support attendees.

8. Successfully complete 6 continuing education credits per year, as offered through Recovering From Religion or pre-approved alternative opportunities such as conferences, completing RR approved books, etc. Be willing to challenge personal and societal assumptions about the impact of religion on society. Continue to develop empathy, open communication, and listening skills.

9. Small Group Facilitators are not a crisis resource and all high-risk individuals must be referred to more appropriate resources as immediately and tactfully as possible.

10. In the event a Small Group Facilitator feels threatened, the police must be contacted immediately and a full police report filed. Contact must be made to a supervisor or staff member immediately following the meeting.

11. Facilitators will not share any personal views/values or give any information that can be construed as personal, legal, medical, or clinical advice.

12. Facilitators are responsible for attending and managing their meetings monthly. If a facilitator is unable to attend their meeting, they are responsible for finding a substitute.

13. Meeting logging. Every meeting must be logged into the Volgistics system within 24 hours after the meeting. Please do not procrastinate or trust your memory to accurately log meeting details days later.

SEQUENCE OF MEETINGS

1. Opening and welcome (5 minutes)
2. Introductions (10 minutes)
3. Topic introduction or suggestions (5 minutes)
4. Group discussion (40 minutes)
5. Break (5 minutes)
6. Topic introduction or suggestions (5 minutes)
7. Group discussion (40 minutes)
8. Meeting closure and cleanup (10 minutes)
SECTION IV: FACILITATING EMPATHY

One of the most important factors in creating a positive experience for an attendee is empathy. Empathy is an accurate understanding of other people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences from their perspectives - not ours. It also involves having an accurate perception of how and why they view and interact with the world around them as they do. This is a hallmark of good interpersonal communication. Research has shown that higher levels of empathy lead to better rapport in relationships, which then tends to result in more open and honest communication between two people.

Empathy can be difficult to achieve because we constantly infuse our own perceptions with our own value judgments and biases. We each have our own unique perspectives, and it is not easy or natural to simply drop our own perspectives and readily adopt another’s. Having empathy means getting to the essence of what a situation means to the attendee and not overlaying their experiences with ours.

TIPS FOR EMBRACING EMPATHY

1. Adopt the stance that we are blank slates learning about the attendees, who are the experts on the details of their lives and are tutoring us.
2. Answer this question for ourselves during a meeting: How has the attendee’s experiences led him/her to think/feel/act/view a situation as he/she does?
3. Remember that we must be willing to change our perceptions and adapt as the attendee is presenting new information, rather than to be married to our initial impressions of the attendee or the situation
4. Accept that their points of view are relevant and real to them, even if we do not personally agree
5. Monitor our own biases, preconceived notions, and assumptions that will destroy our objectivity
6. Keep in mind how attendees’ backgrounds and experiences may have shaped their current attitudes, feelings, and behaviors

ACTIVE LISTENING

There is a difference between a Small Group Facilitator conversation and a friendship conversation. We not only need to talk differently, but we need to listen differently. We need to pay full attention to content, meaning, and the manner in which things are being said. Being an active listener is required in order to accomplish our first few goals during the conversation: increase empathy, build rapport, figure out the purpose of the meeting, and determine how we can help.

1. Have a genuine interest in getting to know the attendee and his/her concerns.
2. Monitor a attendee’s nonverbal cues, which can add depth of meaning – especially voice tone, word emphasis, and speech rate;
3. Make a conscious effort to talk less and listen more.
4. Be patient – allow attendees to tell their stories and avoid interrupting as much as possible. One trick is to consciously pause briefly or take a breath right after you think that the attendee has finished speaking, just to be sure.
5. Allow the attendee to guide the process, rather than to come up with new topics or to steer the conversation ourselves.
6. Monitor our own attitudes and reactions to what is being said
7. Easy conversation starters:
   a. “How can I help you?”
   b. “What would you like to talk about?”
   c. “What led you to join us today?”
8. General information gathering:
   a. “What are your concerns?”
   b. “What is the main issue that he/she is facing?”
   c. “How long have you felt this way?”
   d. “How have you been coping with your situation?”
   e. “What have you told others so far about your beliefs?”
   f. “What else is important for me to know?”
9. To clarify feelings/motivation:
   a. “How did it feel to do that?”
   b. “How does it feel to talk about ____ right now?”
   c. “What did you mean when you said…”
   d. “What does ____ mean to you?”
10. To gather information:
    a. “Help me to understand what is important to you.”
    b. “Tell me more about (that).”
    c. “I’m a bit unclear on the part about…”
11. Using Encouragers - brief statements that convey attention, support, and understanding:
    a. “Mm-hmm”
    b. “And then?”
    c. “What happened next?”
    d. “Go on”
    e. “I see”
    f. “Okay”
    g. “I hear you”
WHAT TO AVOID

1. Parroting
2. Overly using the phrase “It sounds like...” – common mistake that makes the facilitator sounding monotonous and inauthentic (close to parroting)
3. Reciting facts (leads to parroting)
4. Paraphrasing unimportant information
5. Being judgmental
6. Paraphrasing too early – wait until you have a reasonable feel for the meaning or purpose behind the words
7. Saying “I know exactly how you feel.” Because, we do not know exactly. Each person has a unique set of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. We come across as arrogant, uncaring, or can inadvertently minimize or trivialize the individual’s concerns.

HANDLING DIFFICULT MEETINGS

Working at a Small Group Facilitator presents its share of challenges. Some attendees may push limits, unintentionally or not. Below are some hypothetical scenarios of problematic attendees and some ways to handle them.

1. Overly chatty/off-topic attendees: These are mainly attendees who are solely focusing on small talk or frequently veer off relevant topics for long periods of time. It is important to establish boundaries by setting limits during the meeting so that attendees know what to expect. This can be done by asking questions to redirect the conversation and focus on the main purpose of the meeting. Example of redirection: “I’d like for us to focus on what’s been bothering you recently and why you wanted to come to a meeting today.”

2. Attendees who repeatedly ask for a facilitator’s personal information: Brief is better here – an appropriate reflection of the attendee’s desire for the information, followed by an immediate redirection: “You really want to know about me, but I’d like to use our limited time to focus on (the topic at hand).”

3. Attendees who are frustrated with the nondirective response style of facilitators: Example: “I’m just trying to gain a full understanding about (the issue at hand), but would never want to assume that I understand all of the variables involved. What sounds like the best option to you?”

4. Attendees who repeatedly ask for advice or treat the meeting as a therapy session” As stated previously, the Small Group Facilitator does not give advice. If they are asking you for opinions on mental or physical health issues, state that what is being asked is beyond the scope of the Small Group Facilitator, but that you can refer them to an appropriate referral source, or encourage them to seek such services locally.

5. Attendees who want to argue and debate: State that this is not the intended purpose of the meeting, and that there are other avenues to do such.
ROLEPLAYS

These roles have been designed to give trainees an experience with a wide variety of life circumstances and crises.

Scenario 1:
Jennifer, 27 from Richmond, VA. Attendee is having doubts about the faith that she is currently active in. She is single and is working a good paying, stable job.

Attendee statements:
“I’m just not sure I believe everything in the Bible anymore.” – doubt, uncertainty
“I’m worried I will lose my friends if I leave the church.” – loneliness, loss
“I don’t have anyone near me who I can talk to about my feelings” – loneliness, confusion
“If I leave the church and my faith, doesn’t that make me a bad person?” – morality, rejection

Notes:
Looking for behaviour in the facilitator that may indicate proselytizing, superiority, directiveness, or badgering.

Profile keywords:
Even-tempered, strong, exploring, doubt

Scenario 2:
Steve, 34 from Raleigh, NC. Attendee has recently left his church and is confused about how to rebuild his network of support. All of his connections are faith based and he fears losing his resolve to leave the community he has known and been used to for so long.

Attendee statements:
“I am happy that I am thinking for myself now, but I just don’t feel like I have anyone to talk to anymore.” – loneliness, satisfaction, self-confidence
“I’m worried that I won’t have anything in common with people who don’t go to church.” - isolation

Notes:
Looking for sensitivity toward the attendee’s emotions – despite it being tempting to compare the attendee’s situation with the facilitator’s own.
Looking for behaviour in the facilitator that may indicate proselytizing, superiority, directiveness, or badgering.
Profile keywords:
Decisive, rational, support

Scenario 3:
Janet, 27 from Dallas, TX. Attendee has two young children and is very dependent on her network for financial and child care support. She does not believe any longer and is trying to decide whether or not to break from the church, which will put her support network in jeopardy.

Attendee statements:
“My whole world is the church, but I feel like I’m betraying myself every time I go there and listen to the pastor.” – self-image, need to be authentic
“I don’t know how I will be able to support my kids without the church. I have a part time job and the free daycare the church provides is the only thing keeping me from losing my job.” – need to support family

Notes:
Looking for sensitivity to the emotions of the attendee.
Looking for facilitator prioritizing the situation with the daughter over the need to leave the church. Best outcome would be a way to leave the church and retain the ability to hold the attendee’s job.
Family, feeling trapped

Scenario 4:
John, 42 from Cleveland, OH. Attendee’s wife has recently left church as an atheist. Attendee is very angry and feels betrayed. While attendee is worried about her soul, he is willing to live together and get past this issue but is taking it very hard.

Attendee statements:
“I can’t believe she did this to me. How could she? After she vowed before God to serve him. How can I live with someone who would betray all she believes in.” – betrayal, trust, relationship
“I’m ok with staying together – I don’t want to leave her. But I can’t just let her condemn her soul to hell. I’m going to have to talk her into going back to church.” – manipulation, relationship status, fear
“I’m just so angry at her that I just don’t know what I’m going to do sometimes.” – anger, safety, control

Notes:
Looking for exploration about situation to ensure safety of wife – referral if danger is present.
Looking for sensitivity to attendee despite the fact that he is not the one leaving religion
Faithful, betrayal, anger
SECTION V: QUICK START GUIDE

1. Pick a time and place that work for YOU! (Consistency is everything, 1x/mo minimum)
2. Having the meeting:
   a. Give everyone a chance to just tell their story
   b. Practice active listening. You are a facilitator, not a director/leader
   c. Topic ideas: challenges of leaving religion, blog articles, God Virus, anger, grief

IMPORTANT POLICIES (ABBREVIATED)

1. Prevent Conflict of Interest: Local RR Groups may NOT be operated in conjunction with any other group or promote any other agenda. Do not use the phrase "XYZ group’s RR Group" or connect the two in any official manner. RR Groups are not a "front group" for any other local or national organizations. We will help you remove any conflict of interest with other supportive organizations.
2. Remain neutral on the existence of gods when facilitating. It is fine to say "I can’t say whether there are or aren’t gods" but you can’t say "There is no god". This is a personal journey for everyone, and people to reach their conclusions in their own time.
3. Venting about religion is fine (I-statements) but bashing beliefs ("you"/"they" statements) is not.
4. Meetings and are free, public events held in public places.
5. Zero promoting of any supernatural belief allowed under ANY circumstances. This includes "new age" beliefs. There is a fine line between "I believe xyz" and "you should believe xyz"; facilitators allow the first and discourage the second. Firmly restate the purpose of RR and ask how the “evangelizer” identifies as recovering from religion. If the behavior continues, politely but firmly ask them to leave, letting them know they are welcome to return when they will respect the rules.
6. Please be a voice of patience, guidance, and gentle reasoning, while encouraging fellow group members to do the same. Use empathy, open communication, and listening skills. Religion, for many, has been a lifelong process of indoctrination and co-dependency. It may take time for people to reconsider their approach to dealing with conflict and addressing logical fallacies.
7. Strict and total confidentiality is crucial so attendees are not stigmatized or put at risk. No exceptions.
8. Use your online RR support network to process meetings and ask questions. It is important to seek support to avoid “burn out”. RR offers volunteer hangouts to connect with the international RR family. We find strength and community by connecting with one another.
9. Maintain sobriety while on duty. Clients deserve advocates who are present and focused on their needs. Mind altering drugs and alcohol inhibit a volunteer’s ability to support others.
SECTION VI: CRISIS RESOURCES

IMAlive - https://www.imalive.org
IMAlive is a live online crisis network that uses instant messaging to respond to people in crisis.

1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433) Dedicated to suicide prevention, intervention and healing.

1-800-273-TALK (8255) A 24-hour, toll-free suicide prevention service available to anyone in suicidal crisis.

National Rape Crisis Hotline: 800-656-4673

ONLINE RAPE HOTLINE: http://online.rainn.org

National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-25-ABUSE The Small Group Facilitator is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with professional crisis counselors who, through interpreters, can provide assistance in 140 languages. The Hotline offers crisis intervention, information, literature, and referrals to thousands of emergency, social service, and support resources.

National Domestic Violence/Child Abuse/Sexual Abuse: 1-800-799-SAFE 1-800-942-6908
Spanish Speaking 24-hour-a-day Small Group Facilitator, Provides crisis intervention and referrals to local services and shelters for victims of partner or spousal abuse. English and Spanish speaking advocates are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Youth In Crisis

National Youth Crisis Small Group Facilitator: 800-442-HOPE (4673) Provides counseling and referrals to local drug treatment centers, shelters, and counseling services. Responds to youth dealing with pregnancy, molestation, suicide, and child abuse. Operates 24 hours, seven days a week.

Boys Town Suicide and Crisis Line: 800-448-3000 Provides short-term crisis intervention and counseling and referrals to local community resources. Counsels on parent-child conflicts, marital and family issues, suicide, pregnancy, runaway youth, physical and sexual abuse, and other issues. Operates 24 hours, seven days a week.