



Breathing Together

Using *Oxygen* in Groups: A Leader's Guide

By Keri Wyatt Kent

Welcome to a very different sort of devotional. *Oxygen: Deep Breathing for the Soul* is a book born out of my desire to connect more deeply with God, to experience the presence of Jesus in a profound way, to deepen my understanding of and love for Scripture. If you are longing to spend time meditating on Scripture, basking in the presence of Jesus, all for the purpose of soul transformation—you've come to the right place! If you are a part of a community that shares your desire, and you need a resource to help lead or guide your group, this on-line leader's guide is here to support you in that.

Oxygen is a book that may be used for personal devotions—although it's almost like going on a guided retreat. It is a guide for meditating and reflecting on Scripture. It is designed to be a tool to help you in your individual walk with Jesus. Those times alone with God are utterly necessary. Jesus himself often spent time in solitude, in conversation with his Father.

But he also spent time with others. Our experiences in solitude are both balanced and enhanced when we come together in community. To facilitate your efforts to journey through *Oxygen* together, we offer the following tips and guidance for reading the book as a group.

Oxygen contains seven passages from each of the four gospels, for a total of twenty-eight chapters. It's designed so you spend one week on each chapter. Each week, you read the same Bible passage four times, each time using a different spiritual practice to reflect on it. If that sounds like a leisurely pace—it is! That's why we call it deep breathing, not hyperventilating.

Your options as a group are endless. You can meet weekly for 28 weeks in a row (which is a little less than seven months), or meet every other week for a little over a year. You can meet almost every week during the school year (September to May), with a week off for spring break and two months off for the holidays.

The questions at the end of each week's Sabbath Reflection can be used individually or in a group.

There is no wrong way to use this book, except to try to hurry through it. You cannot breathe deeply in a hurry. As the title suggests, this book offers practical guidance on deep breathing for your soul. It is meant to slow you down, to let the truth of God's word soak in, and facilitate growth. It invites us to reflect, to ponder, to simply enjoy spending time with Jesus, the lover of our souls. It provides access to the life that Jesus promised when he said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Leader's Prep

This book is full of questions designed for personal reflection. But all of them make good discussion questions as well. To prepare for leading a group, you must first do the exercises yourself. You cannot give away what you do not have. You can't lead others where you have never been.

Remember this section from the Introduction:

"You know the drill when you get on an airplane—they give you instructions about what to do in an emergency. 'Oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling if needed,' the smiling flight attendant on the video says. Then she reminds you, 'If you are traveling with small children, put your own mask on first. Then assist those around you.'

Why? Because if you try to help other people put their masks on first, you're going to pass out before you can help them. Then you will all be in trouble. Not taking care of yourself first will hurt those you are trying to help. You need some air if you are going to be any good to anyone else." (from p.16,17)

Whether you are leading a group or your family, this is true. Put on your own oxygen mask first! Even those of us who do not have small children in our lives are usually pretty good at trying to take care of others before tending to ourselves.

- ◆ Your first step of preparation, therefore, is to read the chapter and try the practices. Notice what you like, what helps you experience God, but also what you don't like, the things that feel difficult or uncomfortable. Be honest with group members about your own experience.
- ◆ Spend time praying for each person in your group, and for God's direction as you lead the group. Listen to what you think God would have you do. Give yourself the freedom to be flexible as the Spirit leads.
- ◆ After you have done the exercises, go through the chapter and highlight any questions that are included in the practices (see for example, the questions in the "Being There" practice on p. 35). Any of these questions may be used for group discussion. Don't try to use them all, simply pick a few that you think are interesting or relevant.
- ◆ Every chapter has discussion questions at the end of it. Pick a few of these to discuss as a group as well. If you'd like to just use those, that's what they are there for. No need to make this harder than it has to be.

Creating a Safe Place

At the first meeting, and perhaps for several meetings after that as a reminder, it will be helpful to state some ground rules:

- ◆ The first and most important is confidentiality. What is shared in the group, stays in the group, no matter what. Personal information can't be taken outside the group, even under the pretext of asking someone outside the group to pray for someone else in the group. Married group members should not share with their spouse what other group members have said.
- ◆ Second, this group will be most helpful if everyone agrees to read the chapter and do the exercises each week. Certainly, you will sometimes have to give people some grace, but it is not legalistic to ask people to make this basic commitment. After all, the purpose of the group is to discuss and learn from the book. Remind group members that what you get out of a group corresponds to what you put in.
- ◆ Third, a small group should ideally have no more than seven people, or it will be difficult for everyone to share and be heard. If your group is larger than that, it's fine, but just split into smaller sub-groups for the discussion time.
- ◆ Finally, agree that the group is not a place to "fix" each other. It should be a safe place where people will know that they can be heard, prayed for and not judged. Agree that there is no such thing as a dumb question, and any questions are welcome. Refrain from giving advice, or saying things like, "Well, what you need to do is..." especially if you end that sentence with something like "just get in the Word." Or "get right with God." Such advice is not helpful, and often make things worse. Sometimes people are right with God, or in the Word, and they still have struggles. (See the book of Job, for instance.)

The First Meeting

Your group's first meeting will be slightly different than the others in format. If you are leading the group on your own, I highly recommend that you ask at least one group member to help you with details, or to lead the group in your absence. Jesus sent his followers out in groups of two, and it's a good idea to work with a partner: either an apprentice leader or a person who's good at administration to help you handle the details.

- ◆ Have everyone read the Introduction (pages 9-24) before the first meeting. This is essential because it explains what the practices are and how to do them. The Introduction also tells readers they will need index cards. You may want to provide some colorful index cards at your first meeting, or encourage group members to bring them.
- ◆ I suggest you open your group each week using the format described in the "Reading Oxygen Together" section. After doing so, here are some questions to use while discussing what you've read in the Introduction:
- ◆ Several Scriptures are quoted in this section—all things Jesus said as he described himself and his mission. What is your response to these verses? When have you felt peace, joy, freedom?

- ◆ What do you think: How do we move from a life that feels just stuffed with too much responsibility and pressure to a life that feels abundant and full?

- ◆ In what ways do you "run through life, breathing shallowly"? What is your gut response to the invitation of this book, to slow down?

After this initial discussion, have the group turn to the descriptions of the six practices described on pages 20 to 24. Have each person in the group describe one practice (perhaps the one they feel most drawn to), describing it in their own words, and then have the group discuss each practice briefly. There are several Web sites which provide further information on these practices, including www.methodx.org, which you may want to consult before the meeting.

Your first meeting should also include some time to discuss what format typical meetings will have, the length of time each meeting will last, and other details like refreshments, schedule, and whether childcare is necessary.

Reading Oxygen Together

The practices in *Oxygen* are very personal, and yet engaging in them with others can draw us together.

When your group meets, here's one way you could structure your meetings. But feel free to change, add or delete as you like. Just remember—no hurrying.

- ◆ Begin your time by saying, “Let’s start with a moment of quiet to settle our hearts and minds, to breathe deeply and direct our attention toward God.” Then spend just two to five minutes in silence, letting people settle down. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but it will stretch and transform you in a way that study alone cannot. If we want to hear God’s still, small voice, we must first learn to be quiet. Reassure group members that this is a discipline that they can get better at and more comfortable with simply by doing it.
- ◆ Close this short time of reflective silence with a simple one-sentence prayer, such as “Lord Jesus, speak to us as we speak to one another.” Or, you can simply say, “Amen.”
- ◆ Next, go around the group and have people answer the question, “Where have you noticed God in the last few days, or since we last met?” Don’t underestimate the power of this simple question. Knowing they will be asked, group members will begin to be more attentive to noticing God in their everyday life. Things noted can be simple, such as, “when my daughter hugged me,” or “when my husband did the dishes without being asked,” or more intense. Often, group members will notice God in the reading for the week, or in a moment of reflection, or in an interaction with a friend or even a difficult situation. Allow people to say “pass” if they prefer not to share, and give them the freedom to decide how deep they want to go with this question. As a group, celebrate the work of God in each other’s lives, and pray for each other in the challenges you face.

Typical Meetings

After the opening silence and sharing, have one group member (not the leader) read the text out loud. Then, take some time to let group members share their experiences.

Here are some questions to get the discussion going:

- ◆ What did you notice about Jesus as you spent time with him in this passage?

- ◆ Which practice did you find most helpful? Least helpful?

- ◆ As you completed the practices, what insights or questions did you write on your life card?

- ◆ Which verse or phrase in this passage was most meaningful to you? Tell us why.

As group members share, draw them out with statements like, “Really, that’s interesting. Tell me more.” Or summarize their statement and invite others to engage by saying something like: “So you think _____. What does someone else think?” Remember, you’re talking about people’s experience with Jesus, so there are no right or wrong answers. Also, your goal is to facilitate discussion between group members—to get them talking *to each other*, not just you.

After the group has shared, you have a couple of options.

- ◆ A. Read the Sabbath Reflection out loud (let group members take turns reading a few paragraphs at a time). Discuss the questions that follow, adding other questions you’ve selected from the chapter as directed in the Leader’s Prep section.
- ◆ B. Do one of the practices as a group. See the section below for how to do this.

Include some group time to pray for each other, and commit to praying for one another during the week. You can decide how much time to spend on each of these areas.

Group Spiritual Practices

You don't have to do the practices as a group. You can try this occasionally, or use the Sabbath Reflection to guide your group time. When you do use a practice, choose one from that week's reading—it's okay that people have already tried it on their own. The practice will feel different when experienced in a group. Here's a brief review on how to adapt practices for group experience.

◆ **Deep listening:** Since about AD 500, Christians have been using this practice as a way to pray and listen to Scripture. Read slowly, letting the words sink into your soul, listening for the one word or phrase that touches you most deeply.

In a group, have someone read the text out loud. Allow several minutes of silence, and then ask group members to simply go around the group and say the one word that stood out most clearly to them. Do not discuss, explain or clarify. Simply say one word, and if you are listening, simply receive what each person shares in silence.

Then, read the text again. After a time of quiet, go around and ask each person to share in just one sentence, what they think God is saying to them through this word. No back ground information is necessary—God knows the situation. You are simply letting the group listen in to a snippet of your conversation with God. Again, other group members may not comment on what is shared, they are simply listening to one another without discussion.

Finally, read the text one more time. After some silence, go around the group and have each person share the word that stood out to them (it may be the same or a different word in each reading) and share briefly (in a sentence or two) what they believe God is inviting them to do or know through this word. Again, the group should not discuss each other's answers, but only listen.

End this time by praying briefly, thanking God for speaking to each person.

◆ **Journaling:** In a group, journaling can be done as drawing or doodling. Use one of the questions in the exercise for that week (for example, in the journaling entry on p. 34, you could select the question, "What needs healing in your life?"). But rather than just pens, provide colored pencils or crayons, and ask group members to draw their answer. Stick figures and symbols are okay, artistic merit is not important. Or, they may simply write a few words or phrases. Those who feel comfortable doing so may show their work to the group, and perhaps share briefly about it.

Because our physical body is involved in the process of writing or drawing, it opens up new thoughts, and it keeps us on track mentally. If you'd like to go deeper, try drawing with your non-dominant hand. That is, if you normally are right-handed, try drawing with your left. Don't try to make it look good, just let your hand move on the page and see what emerges. Often, letting the non-dominant hand draw takes us to an emotional, rather than logical, response, but one that is still true.

◆ **Being there:** What I call the “being there” practice has traditionally been called Gospel meditation or the Ignatian method. Here, we spend time with Jesus by imagining ourselves in the Gospel story.

To do this as a group, read the passage out loud, then ask God to guide you as you imagine what it was like to be there. As a group, brainstorm answers to the questions in the exercise for that week. Talk about what the scene looked like, smelled like, felt like. Imagine together that you are watching Jesus, interacting with him. If you like, act out part of the scene, with group members playing various roles. Use the exercise in the book to guide your discussion. Sharing this experience not only deepens our friendship with Jesus, but it also draws us into spiritual friendship with each other.

◆ **Breath prayer:** A breath prayer is a short prayer that can be prayed in the space of one breath. It expresses our love for God and our desire for God’s touch in our lives.

For this practice, the leader should select one verse from the passage that can be rephrased as a one-sentence prayer. For example, in the passage from Week Two, you may select “Lord Jesus, make me clean.” Or you may choose a related verse from another passage of Scripture, such as, in this case, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” (Psalm 51:10).

In the group, spend some time in silence. Then say the prayer out loud, and allow the group to say it together in response to you. You may repeat this once or twice: saying the prayer, having the group echo it. Allow time to reflect in silence.

◆ **Solitude:** Solitude is simply being alone with God. Simple as it may sound, it’s not an easy thing to practice. Solitude and silence are companions, and while we can experience them separately (we can be silent in a crowd, or alone but not quiet), they enhance one another.

To do this in a group (which seems like a contradiction), simply set aside about 15 minutes of group time for members to go off to a quiet corner. Keep silent as a group, and let each person simply be alone. Do not chat or converse at all during this time, even as you are moving to your own space, or as you move back to the group. Explain that when they are dismissed, group members should not talk at all, but simply go to a place where they can sit alone. Individual members may take the Scripture or the solitude practice for that week to read and reflect on during their time of silence if they’d like.

When you come back together, let each person share just one thing that they thought about or learned during their time alone with God. However, give members the freedom to pass on sharing if they’d rather not.

◆ **Kindness:** The Bible tells us we should love not just with words but “with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). This practice will ask you to put some feet to your faith, to remember that your life is not just about you or even about just you and God.

As a group, this practice can be fun. Be creative: think of ways that together you can help others. For example, you may decide to spend part or all of your meeting making a meal for someone, or brainstorming about how you will help others in need in the coming week. (Make sure you follow through!) Or, take a field trip to a grocery store and buy groceries for a needy family or to restock a local food pantry. (Call before the meeting to get a list of what the food pantry needs). Go visit a nursing home and sing songs to the residents. Or spend some of your meeting time hand-writing notes to people who need a word of encouragement, then mail or hand deliver them during the week.

My Prayer for You

A practice essential for all Christians is the practice of community, that is, gathering together to teach, encourage one another and worship. By reading this book as a group, you are engaging in community. My prayer is that your group members build community and spiritual friendships, sticking with the practices even when group life becomes challenging. My prayer for you comes from Hebrews 10:24, 25:

“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.”



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