HEALER’S ART COURSE
Session 1
“Discovering and Nurturing Your Wholeness”

Notes and Suggestions for Small Group Leaders
Setting up the Small Group Discussion

Small Group Discussion
The first small group discussion sets the tone for future discussion and creates a safe space for the students to share things of personal importance. This space of “harmlessness” is what allows students to reveal their hopes and fears openly, establish new ways of thinking and risk the honesty needed for genuine growth. In many ways, the relationship between students in their small groups is a model of the healing relationship between doctor and patient.

Opening
Start with introductions, and keep them fairly brief. Introduce yourself first – share your name (as you would like them to call you), and what you do (very briefly). Ask the others to share their names and year, plus one thing about themselves you might not know from looking at them. Share something about yourself first. What you share sets the tone for the others. Tell the group something personal but not necessarily intimate, i.e., I have three cats, or 45 pairs of shoes, or I used to dance with San Francisco Ballet...

Remind Your Students About Attendance
Because of the new curriculum, each student presently participates in several small groups focused on learning content. Please clarify for students that these groups are different, that they are an ongoing conversation and everyone’s presence makes a difference in the quality of the experience for all. Remind them that we require a commitment to be present for all sessions, that if they are not there at the beginning of the group the group will wait for them before starting and that if something urgent and unexpected prevents their attending a session, they need to call you and let you know so the group does not wait for them. Remind them that because there are only 5 sessions, if they miss 2 sessions they will be asked to drop the course. They can miss one session but will need to keep a makeup journal for a week.

Establish Ground Rules
Take time to help the group determine the “ground rules” for their conversations. Offer some standard ground rules for the discussion, but be sure that everyone is comfortable with them. I like to call these “guidelines” rather than rules. (There may be other mavericks like me in the groups…).
Here are some standard guidelines for group discussions:

- Start on time
- Listen generously…allow for differences…there is no need to agree, but a need to hear.
- Confidentiality (Can participants share discussion content without identifying source; or not share discussion content at all?)
- No teaching
- No eating
- No interruptions
- Talk from personal experience
  - “I – me – my”
- Talk into center of group
- Negotiate confidentiality
- Give advice only when asked
- Allow Silence

Check with the group members to be sure their needs are met by the standard discussion guidelines. Add other guidelines as needed. Do this with a light touch and keep it as brief as possible. But be sure that everyone is comfortable with the guidelines the group decides on before you begin.

Define the Scope of the Discussion

Remind the students that this is an ongoing conversation that will last for the five sessions and that the discussion is a discovery model. Remind them there is a great deal of information about the nature of medicine and healing available among the five of you, and you will be uncovering this during your conversations. What they learn about themselves and the others in their group will be relevant to many other colleagues and to their patients as well. I will probably say something about this in the large group also.

Small Group Content Guidelines

I would suggest beginning the conversation itself by saying a word or two about the power of listening… and the importance of being heard by others. Many students do not realize that listening is really doing something… that it is one of the most powerful ways that we can strengthen and support others, letting them know that their situation matters to us, and helping them find the strength and self-belief to heal.

In the large group exercise, each of you will have made a drawing of the part of yourself you want to strengthen as you learn to be a doctor, and also identified the essential quality of this part. In any order, invite the students to share their drawings, including the quality it represents and its importance to them. Encourage everyone to share, making it clear that anyone who does not wish to share can contribute by listening. Remember, this sharing is intimate, and may be a big step for students who are accustomed to a more competitive relationship with each other. Listen respectfully and warmly. After the students share, share what you have drawn in the same way they have. If it seems right, you might want to ask them if there anything that surprised or touched them during the sharing.
Give the group a few minutes to reflect on a specific simple way that they might remember and strengthen their connection to this valued part of themselves daily. (Students will have also heard about ritual/journaling/imagery/poetry, etc. in the large group presentation. You might want to recap this briefly).

Give the group five to six minutes to reflect and make notes.

Then harvest the group’s ideas. Encourage sharing by as many people as possible – ideally everyone shares. In the middle of the conversation, or at the end, share any ways you personally use to remember who you are as you do your professional work. If the sharing starts very slowly, you may want to do this first... but only if necessary.

Model generous listening! And in an unobtrusive way, keep an eye on the time.

At 9:15 p.m. or so, take five minutes to explain the Closing Circle Exercise. Allowing 30-45 seconds or so for each person, it will take five to six minutes to do this exercise. (See Closing Circle Guidelines).

Thank the students for their sharing. Comment on the evening and the sharing and how it affected you. Remind the students of next week's topic, and say a few words about it as an opportunity to learn the power of listening to heal things that can never be fixed. If it is true, let them know that you have come to trust this as a doctor. Remind the students that a course reader and books will be given to them at the beginning of the next session and that they can pick these up in S-118, the Chancellor's Conference Room in the Medical School just prior to coming to the next session. These are not required reading and are provided solely for their enjoyment.

Lastly... Circulate a sign-up list for them to write down their names and contact information (email and phone #s). Include your contact information on this list. Bring this list with you to the debriefing meeting for Jan, who will type up the list for you to distribute to the students in your group at your second meeting. This contact list allows the group members to stay in touch with each other.
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Process Suggestions

General Guidelines for Facilitating a Small Group Conversation

These guidelines are offered as support in recognition that some of you will be facilitating a student conversation for the first time.

Your small groups will be composed of four or five students and remain the same for each of the five sessions. The most challenging part of facilitating the small group discussion is often the timing – creating an un-pressured and safe space for sharing while meeting the time constraints of the session. Ending the sessions on time is important! Do your best! It is often helpful to signal the close of the session about 10 minutes before you actually close by saying something like, “We are close to the end of this session. Is there someone who has not spoken who would like to add something?,” or something of this sort.

Remember to be who you are, not what you do, and that you are there as a person and not an expert. Share personal preferences, experiences, vulnerabilities, etc. Many students have not had the opportunity to know a physician personally, especially a clinical person, in an honest and open way. It means a great deal to them to be with you. Things you may take for granted about yourself may be very meaningful to them.

Some Basic Suggestions

1. Call group members by name when talking to them or referring to something they have said. In the first session only, ask everyone to share their name again before they speak for the first time, i.e., “I’m John and the symbol I found for the part of myself I want to strengthen as I become a doctor is…."

2. Encourage as many people to talk as possible. Encourage students to address their remarks to one another as well as to you. Questions such as, “Does anyone else feel the same way? Does anyone feel differently? Does anyone want to respond to that? Have something to add? Let’s hear from someone who has not spoken yet…” are helpful in doing this. Calling directly on people, though, (“And how about you?”) may make them feel unsafe.

3. Many of us have the habit of talking too much in a group of students. Resist! Ideal talk-time ratio is this: Facilitators talk 20% of the time, and students talk 80% of the time. If possible the students should do most of the talking.
4. Ask questions to draw out the conversation. Offering information or a brief story from your clinical experience to deepen the discussion where relevant is often helpful and interesting to these pre-clinical students... but share these as stories not as “cases,” and tell them on a personal level, as if you are talking to a group of friends. Use your discretion on this. Try not to fall into a teacher/student mode. (It’s hard...)

5. Allow silences in a comfortable way – silence creates safe space. People are usually going deeper as they sit in silence – the remarks that follow silence are often more honest. If there is discomfort with silence, comment on this power of silence to deepen a discussion and move it forward.

6. Use everything to teach with – the group is learning not only from the content of the conversation, but also from its process, i.e., if there is silence, comment on its importance, how rarely we allow it. Ask them how it feels to them to sit in comfortable silence with others. If people cry, don’t rush in to comfort, as it often shuts people down to be comforted. I have found it helpful to listen to crying as if it is any other form of honest communication. Listen to their crying and receive their emotion with respect. Support their emotional responses. Model an accepting and validating relationship to emotion. Share your personal responses to what has been said, i.e., “I was really touched by your story,” etc.

7. Don’t try to find the “right” response – just caring about what is being said is the right response. Don’t fix anyone or anything. Comment on process if you can, on the difficulty of not knowing, how hard it is not to be able to fix things that cannot be fixed, or the importance of letting time pass, trusting process, or whatever.

8. Watch the time. When you get close to 9:15 pm, you might say something like, “We are going to have to stop in a few minutes. Are there any last thoughts that anyone wants to share, or any questions, before we do a closing?”

9. Have fun! Be open to learning from the students and helping them to feel comfortable, safe and validated.
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Reflective Exercise II: Closing Circle

Purpose
To build a supportive community around the human agenda in health care and the commitment we each have to it.

Educational Goals
• Allows students to bond as a supportive group
• Creates “safe space” for future sharing and opens a new way for students to relate to one another
• Allows students the experience of subjective space in a group

NOTE: Do not mention these goals to students but allow them to discover them experientially for themselves; the discovery is more powerful if it happens in this way.

Suggestions for Introducing the Closing Circle Exercise to Students:
Discuss ritual as a way to build community. Remind them that their support matters to others, and that just knowing you have the support of others is helpful. Suggest the group try out a simple use of ritual. You might want to tell them that this sort of exercise is often used in cancer support groups, where it is called a healing circle... or not. Offer the experience lightly, and with a sense of exploration of this approach... “Let’s try and see what this is like…”

Give Students Clear and Simple Instructions
The ones we use at UCSF are:
1. Tell them that this exercise is done like meditation with eyes closed.
2. Tell them you will make a sound or say a word... such as “peace.”
3. After the sound or word, the person to your left will then say his or her name aloud.
4. In silence, the group focuses their attention on that person, offering silent support for that person’s remembering their wholeness in their own way. Give suggestions. Students may wish others well, pray for them, believe in them, send strength, use imagery to see them whole, and/or use whatever ways are natural for them.
5. After a short interval, you will make the sound or say the word again.
6. The next person to the left says her/his name aloud.
7. The group will focus their attention on this person in the same supportive way.
8. Continue until every group member has had their turn to receive the silent support of the group.
9. End the exercise by saying your name and receiving the support of the group.

Ask the students if they have questions, and then begin. This exercise usually takes five to six minutes after your introduction – about 45 seconds per person. Try out the timing yourself at home. If you are tight on time, 30 seconds of silence for each person can work quite well, and may even be preferable... but it is important that people not feel rushed.

After the exercise, pause while students open their eyes, and allow a brief silence for reflection. Ask students if they have comments. After the closing circle you might say that we can continue to close each meeting in this way, or... if anyone has an idea as to other ways they would like to close in the future, bring these for discussion next time. Comment on the evening and your personal experience of it if appropriate, thank them for the sharing, and mention the topic of the next meeting.