

# 25 ICEBREAKERS FOR GROUPS

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A GUIDE FOR THERAPISTS,  
TEACHERS AND GROUP LEADERS



By Suraya Keating, MFT

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	3
<b>BENEFITS OF ICEBREAKERS</b>	4
<b>CATEGORIES OF ICEBREAKERS</b>	
• GETTING TO KNOW YOU ICEBREAKERS	5
• BUILDING GROUP TRUST ICEBREAKERS	8
• MUSIC & MOVEMENT ICEBREAKERS	10
• DRAMA & CREATIVE WRITING ICEBREAKERS	12
• VISUAL ART ICEBREAKERS	14

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# INTRODUCTION

## 25 ICEBREAKERS FOR GROUPS

Are you a therapist, teacher or group leader looking for new “icebreakers” to promote unity, community and vulnerability among a group you are working with? Do you want to learn some fresh, creative ways to promote trust and spontaneity among group participants? If so, read on for some great ideas.

As an Expressive Arts and Drama Therapist, and as a Teaching Artist, I have spent the last twenty years of my life exploring how creativity can be cultivated as a source of vitality and wisdom. I have worked with thousands of individuals in group formats- preschool children, special needs youth, teens recovering from drug addiction, adults dealing with anxiety and depression, prison inmates and more. With every group with which I work, we use “ICEBREAKERS” as a way cultivate positive connections among group members, and make the group a place where learning, play, deep sharing and transformation can happen.

This guide describes 25 favorite ICEBREAKERS that I have used in 20 years of facilitating groups with children, teens and adults. You can use these icebreakers with your group exactly as they are described, or you can adapt each icebreaker to suit the particular population you are working with.

## What is an ICEBREAKER?

An icebreaker is any activity facilitated within a group that helps people to connect with themselves and each other in such a way that promotes unity, playfulness and trust.



# BENEFITS OF ICEBREAKERS

There are many positive results you can expect from using effective ICEBREAKERS. Some of the benefits you may experience with your group include:

- Increased group cooperation
- Deeper levels of vulnerability
- Heightened connection among group members
- Deeper ability of group to listen to one another
- Increased joy and self-expression
- Heightened unity among group members

# GETTING TO KNOW YOU ICEBREAKERS

*Sometimes, reaching out and taking someone's hand  
is the beginning of a journey. At other times,  
it is allowing another to take yours.*

– Vera Nazarian

## 1) NAME GAMES

There are many forms of names games. Four of my favorites include:

**a) Name & Adjective:** Ask each person to share their name, and an adjective that describes them that starts with the same letter or sound as their first name. (Examples: I'm dynamic Dave. I'm sensitive Samantha.)

**b) Stage Name:** Each person in the group shares their real name, and then introduces themselves with their "stage name" by combining the name of a first pet they had with the name of the first street they lived on as a child. For example, if a woman named Helena had a cat named Rosie and lived on Main Street as a child, they would say: "My real name is Helena, and my stage name is Rosie Main."

**c) Name Circle:** Sitting in a circle, one person shares their name with the group. The person to their right then shares their name, as

well as the name of the person who shared first. The next person then shares their name, as well as the names of the two people who shared before them. This continues until everyone has shared their name, and each new person who shares has also repeated the names of everyone else who has shared thus far in the group. This is a great way to learn names quickly!

**d) Name and Movement:** Each person in the group shares their name while making a movement to represent how they feel. Everyone in the group then mirrors or repeats back that person's name and movement.

## **2) SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES IN PAIRS**

Invite group members to find a buddy whom they do not know well. Ask each buddy pair to find 1-3 similarities and 1-3 differences between them. Later, later have each buddy pair share their findings with the entire group.

## **3) SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES IN GROUPS**

As with exercise number #1, invite group members to find a buddy and to find 1 similarity and 1 difference between them. After this task has been completed, invite group members to create new groups of 3 each. Those in the group of 3 are then invited to find 1 thing that everyone in the group has in common, and 1 thing that is different about everyone in their group of 3. Participants are then

*invited to make new groups of 4-5 individuals, and to repeat the task of having everyone in the group find 1 similarity and 1 difference.*

## **4) PEOPLE BINGO**

On a piece of paper, draw a BINGO card with 8-16 squares. In each square, type or write various unique characteristics of people.

Examples of unique characteristics include:

- speaks more than one language
- is an only child
- has lived in another country
- loves comedy shows
- considers her/himself to be a sensitive person
- is a parent
- has more than 3 siblings

Change these characteristics as you feel would be best suited for your group. Each square should have a different characteristic.

Hand out the BINGO cards to every member of the group, and then invite them to play a game of "People Bingo" in which they need to find a different person's name to write in each square that meets the characteristic described in that square. To make the game more challenging, make it a requirement that nobody can write the same person's name in more than one square.



## 5) SPECTROGRAMS

A spectrogram is a tool from Psychodrama which invites individuals to place themselves on a continuum of experience of with regard to a certain quality, emotion or experience. To do this with a group, invite the group to imagine a line running down the middle of the room. One end of the line represents individuals who have a certain quality very strongly. The other end of the line represents individuals who have the opposite quality strongly. For example, the group leader might say, "Place yourself at the far end of the line if you see yourself as a very extroverted person, and place yourself at the near end of the line if you see yourself as a very introverted person. If you feel you are somewhere in the middle, place yourself wherever you feel best represents you with regard to this quality." Group participants then place themselves along the line wherever they see fit. Other examples of polarities you can use include: having a great day/having a bad day; very open with your emotions/very private with your emotions; optimistic/pessimistic.

# BUILDING GROUP TRUST

## ICEBREAKERS

*We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known.*

– Brene Brown

### 1) BLIND WALKS

Assign each group member to a buddy, or let them choose their own buddy. Buddy “A” puts on a blindfold, while buddy “B” leads the person around the physical space, introducing them to different objects in the space in a safe way. For example, if you are outside, the buddy who is leading the blindfolded buddy can take their buddy to feel a tree, the grass, a rock or anything that is safe to touch. Roles are then reversed, with buddy “A” leading around buddy “B” who is now blindfolded.

### 2) MAMA ANIMAL, BABY ANIMAL

Assign each participant a buddy, or let them choose their own buddy. Buddy “A” plays a mama animal, while buddy “B” plays the baby. The buddy pair decides on a sound that the mama will use to “call” her/his baby to her/him. Buddy “B” puts on a blindfold, and then follows the call of his/her mama animal by moving in whatever direction s/he hears the mama’s voice. The mama animal must keep the baby animal safe by not letting him/her move into any objects or other people. Roles are then reversed.

### **3) TRUST LEANS**

Assign each participant a buddy, or have them choose their own buddy. Buddies lean into each other back to back and rest their weight on one another. Next, they turn around to face their buddy, and while grasping hold of their buddy's wrists, lean backwards in a way that feels mutually supportive. Please note that participants with an injury may choose to opt out of this exercise. One simple modification for those with injuries is for buddies to sit down back to back and lean against one another.

### **4) TRUST FALLS**

Groups of 6-10 people create a small circle, with everyone standing shoulder to shoulder. One volunteer goes into the middle and crosses her/his arms over her/his chest in an "X" position. Everyone else in the group holds their hands in front of their own chest with palms out, preparing to catch the person in the middle. At the own choosing, the person in the middle falls in any direction into the arms of those surrounding them. The people in the outer circle catch the person in the middle as s/he falls.

### **5) THE KNOT**

Groups of 4-8 individuals stand in a circle. They are asked to grab hold of the hands of two different people in the circle who are NOT standing directly beside them. In this way, the entire group will form a "knot." Moving slowly, the group is invited to figure out how to unwind this human knot without breaking the connection of the hands. If the knot is unwound successfully, the group will end up in a circle with everyone holding hands.

# MUSIC & MOVEMENT

## ICEBREAKERS

*When you dance, your purpose is not to get to a certain place on the dance floor. It is to enjoy each step along the way.*

– Wayne Dyer

### 1) MOVING SCULPTURES

Participants find a buddy and assign roles of A and B. Person A is the “sculptor” and B is the “clay.” Person A is asked to name a feeling that s/he felt in the previous week, and to “sculpt” their buddy, Person B, by asking them to do a movement that portrays that feeling. Person B then practices this movement. At all times, the person who is the “clay” is invited to take care of herself and stop doing any movements that are causing discomfort. After the sculpture is finished, Person A shares the moving sculpture with the rest of the group. Roles are then reversed, with Person B becoming the sculptor and Person A the clay.

### 2) LARGE GROUP JOURNEY DANCE

One person is the leader. That person is asked to think of a journey s/he has taken in her/his life related to emotions, and to dance that journey in slow motion. For example, someone might share a dance that represents a journey from grief to acceptance, from anger to

love or from heartache to contentment. Everyone in the group “mirrors” or copies the leader as s/he moves. After the dance, group members share their reflections on what they thought they journey represented. The leader later reveals (if s/he wants to) the nature of the journey dance that s/he shared.

Participants find a buddy and assign roles of A and B.

### **3) SMALL GROUP JOURNEY DANCES**

This exercise is nearly identical to Exercise #2 above, with the exception that participants form groups of 3-5 people. Everyone in the small group takes turns being the leader of a journey dance, in which the leader expresses through movement some journey s/he has taken in her/his life. Everyone in the small group “mirrors” or copies the leader as s/he moves. After each person in the group has the chance to be leader, the group reflects on their experience of the exercise by talking about what moved, touched or inspired them in the activity, or about what was challenging for them.

### **4) SMALL GROUP SONGS**

In groups of 4, participants are asked to write a 4-line song by completing the following line starters:

- LINE 1: If you only knew....
- LINE 2: Life would be so....
- LINE 3: If you only saw....
- LINE 4: Life would be so....

## **5) LARGE GROUP RHYTHM JAM**

Participants sit in a circle. One person begins a rhythm using their bodies, or using any ordinary object in the room (e.g., pen, cup, bottle, book, etc.). The person sitting to their right then adds on to the rhythm by adding a new sound. This continues with each person, one by one, adding on to the rhythm and allowing the rhythm to build through the space until all have joined in a large group rhythm jam.

# DRAMA & CREATIVE WRITING

## ICEBREAKERS

*We are only as strong as we are united,  
and as weak as we are divided.*

– JK Rowling

### **1) WHEN THE WIND BLOWS**

All participants minus one person sit in chairs in a circle. The person who is not sitting stands in the middle of the circle, and says the phrase, “The wind blows on you if...,” ending the phrase by naming something s/he likes or doesn’t like. For example, the person in the middle might say, “The wind blows on you if you like to watch movies.” After this statement is made, all of those participants for whom this statement is true must get up and find a new chair to sit in. The last person standing shares the next “The wind blows on you...” phrase.

### **2) FAMILY SCULPTURES or TABLEAUS**

One at a time, group members are asked to create a “family sculpture” by inviting other group members to portray his/her family in a tableau. For example, the protagonist, or the person who is creating their family, might ask someone to represent their mother,

another person their brother and another their grandmother. The protagonist is also invited to choose someone to represent him/herself. The protagonist then puts everyone into a position that represents his/her relationship to everyone in the family.

### **3) INSPIRATION & CHALLENGES WITH MOVING SCULPTURES**

Sitting in a circle, one person shares one thing that has inspired them and one thing that has challenged them during the past week. The two people sitting to their right are then asked to “act out” whatever the person shared through sound and movement. The first person to the right acts out whatever was inspiring to the person who shared, while the second person the right acts out whatever was challenging to that person.

### **4) “I LOVE” GROUP POEM**

On a large blank piece of paper, one person in the group writes a line of poetry or prose that starts with the phrase “I love...” That person then passes the paper to a second person in the room, who reads the previous line and then writes a new line starting with the phrase “I love”. After this person writes his/her line, s/he then folds down the paper so that the first line can no longer be read, and passes the paper to a third person so that s/he can add a new line starting with the phrase “I love...” When the third person completes his/her line, s/he folds the paper again so that only the third line is



visible as s/he passes the paper to a new person. The paper continues to move through the room in this way until everyone has added a line to the poem. When complete, one person reads aloud the entire poem, and everyone guesses who wrote which line.

## **5) GROUP POEM with TABLEAUS**

Groups of 4 participants create a 4 line poem, with each person creating one of the lines that starts with the phrase "I love...". Feel free to adapt this line starter and use other phrases to begin each line of the poem. After creating the 4 line poem, the group then creates a "tableau" or a frozen picture to depict each line of the poem. When complete with rehearsing, each group presents their 4 line poem for the rest of the group.

# VISUAL ART ICEBREAKERS

*The power of imagination makes us infinite.*

– John Muir

## 1) CONSTRUCTION PAPER SELF PORTRAITS

The facilitator supplies the group with construction paper of many different colors, as well as glue sticks. Participants are given 15 minutes to create a self portrait by ripping the construction paper in any way they like and gluing it in the form of a self portrait. No scissors are supplied or other arts materials. This helps people to work spontaneously and lowers any tendency towards perfectionism or to “get it right.”

## 2) IF THIS IMAGE WERE ME

The facilitator brings in a collection of 25-50 images for the group, and instructs the group to select one image that s/he resonates with. Sitting in a circle, each person in the group introduces their image by saying, “If this image were me, it would tell you that....,” and then completing the phrase in any way that feels truthful.

### **3) IMAGE WISDOM**

The facilitator brings in a collection of 25-50 images for the group, and instructs the group to select one image that s/he feels expresses wisdom of some sort. Sitting in a circle, each person in the group speaks aloud the wisdom of their image by saying, "The wisdom I have to share with you is...", and then completing the phrase in any way that feels truthful.

### **4) GROUP COLLAGE**

Each participant brings an image of something they love or something they feel inspired by. On a larger piece of paper, each person places their image in a spot of their choice to create a group collage of things that the group loves or feels inspired by.

### **5) VISION FLAGS**

On a piece of white or light-colored fabric approximately 8" X 24", participants draw or write their vision for their lives using fabric friendly markers, crayons or paints. After creating their flags, each person shares with the group what their vision for their life is. You can adapt the theme of the flags and have group members create flags about things they love, things they are challenged by, people who are important to them, etc. When each person's flag is dry, hang them together in a place where the entire group can see them.

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