



Navigators Discipleship Tool



7 Tips for Starting a Discipleship Relationship

You're ready to begin a discipleship relationship and have settled on someone you believe God would like you to disciple. Now what?

Here are seven tips for starting a discipleship relationship that will help you take your next steps.

1. Begin by sharing the “whats” of a discipleship relationship.

What do you want to accomplish in your relationship? Try to avoid any Christianese terms that a young believer or non-Christian may be unfamiliar with, but lay out specifically what you would like to do with them.

“I'd like to read the Bible with you sometime.”

“I'd like to share some things that have been helpful for me in my walk with God.”

“I'd love to share what I have been learning about prayer lately.”

“I'd like to help you grow in your relationship with God.”

Sharing the specifics brings clarity to a potentially intimidating conversation, and, in a way, it's a good reminder that discipling isn't as complicated, mysterious, or daunting as it can seem.

2. Explain the “why” of a discipleship relationship.

Share some of what you've observed about this person and why you want to disciple them.

“I've appreciated the questions you've asked about Christianity and God over the past few months.”

“When I was a younger Christian, I found it so helpful when someone mentored me in how to walk with God. I'd love to do the same with you.”

“Reading the Bible has been so helpful and comforting for me when I've gone through hardship. I wonder if it might be helpful for you with what you're going through right now.”

I've found that people are more likely to respond positively if you are specific about the why of discipleship and communicate with intentionality. When people sense your genuine care, concern, and appreciation for them, they know they aren't just a project to you.



3. Name the time, place, and frequency for discipleship.

The more ambiguous a commitment seems to be, the more fearful people are of entering into it, and the more likely they are to say no. How long are you proposing to meet each week? How many times a week? When? Where? Clear is kind.

“We could read the Bible together once a week over our lunch break. How does that sound?”

“Could I share some practices that have been helpful to me in my walk with God while our kids play during our weekly playdates?”

Naming a specific time, place, and frequency can help you get something on the schedule. In discipling, try not to go more than two weeks without meeting.

4. Start with a trial period for discipleship.

Proposing a trial period will give both of you an out if the relationship isn't the best fit or the timing doesn't seem right.

“Would you like to meet up to pray together once a week after work for the next month?”

“Did you want to go on a hike together every Saturday morning for the next month and chat about your questions about Jesus?”

5. After the trial period, evaluate whether to continue the discipleship relationship.

Sometimes I find myself wondering whether the other person feels our times together and what I'm passing on are helpful. Then as I debrief with them, I find out they're not only taking what I've shared to heart and putting new tools into practice, but they're hungry for more! At other times, I have no such doubts, since it's clear that both of us are energized and sharpened by the intentional time together.

In either case, I may propose continuing the relationship: “You know, I've really enjoyed meeting together to talk about spiritual things these past few weeks. Would you want to continue meeting in this way?” Then we'll set another timeframe after which we'll reevaluate whether to continue.

If you sense at the end of the trial period that the relationship may not be the best fit or the timing isn't right to continue discipling the other person, thank them for setting aside the time to meet and debrief on what they've learned.

Of course, ending a discipleship relationship doesn't mean that the relationship itself needs to end or that you'll never share any spiritual truths with that person in the future. It simply means that your capacity is freed up to intentionally invest in someone else.

6. Don't let the fear of vulnerability hold you back from initiating a discipleship relationship.

More times than not, I find that fear of vulnerability holds me back from discipling more than another person's lack of interest in being disciplined. I've yet to ask someone about being disciplined who hasn't responded with interest.

7. Understand your limits for discipleship.

Maybe you're thinking, *I really don't have a lot of time, but there are two people I'm interested in discipling together. Can I disciple more than one person at a time?*

Of course! I do it all the time, and so did Jesus. We can observe from the four Gospels that while Jesus often engaged with the masses, He spent more in-depth time with His 12 disciples, and even more in-depth time with His inner circle, Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-13).

I would caution against discipling too many people at one time if you want to do it well and adequately meet the individual needs of each person in the group. If Jesus limited himself to an inner circle of three really deep discipleship relationships, that's probably a good limit to set for yourself.