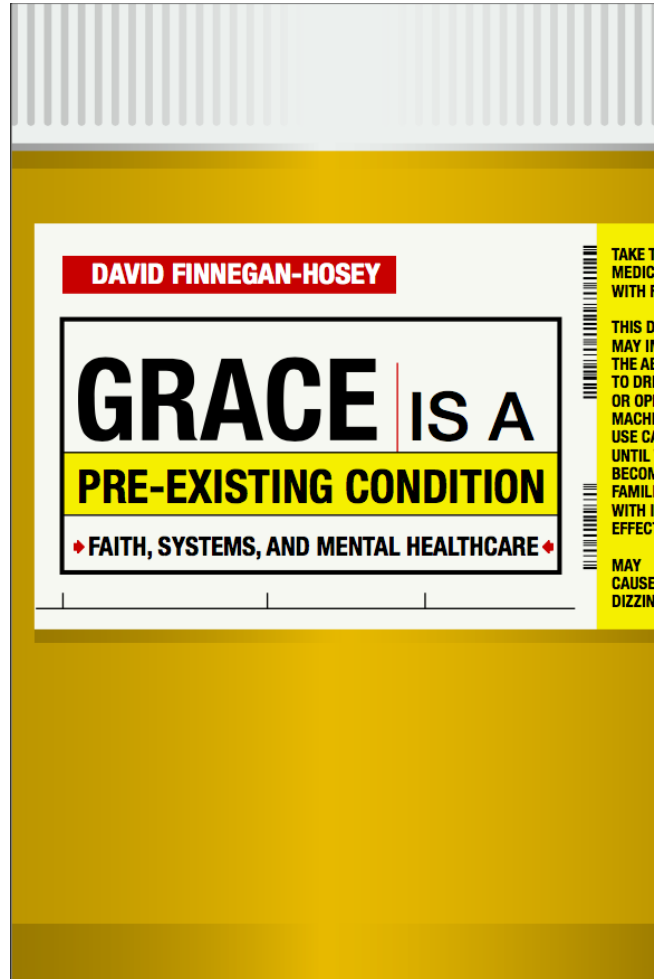


Discussion Guide for
*Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition:
Faith, Systems, and Mental Healthcare*



Guide created by David Finnegan-Hosey and Hailey Joy Scandrette

This discussion guide is intended for groups who are reading *Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition* together. Some questions assume that the group is part of a faith community, but these questions can be modified with relative ease if this is not the case. The questions can also be adapted for individual use.

The guide imagines a 6-week study group, but individual groups can feel free to modify this format to meet their needs. Each week includes some questions for discussion, and some weeks contain additional suggestions for resources or focus areas for that week. Don't feel like you have to stick to these questions, nor rush through to make sure you answer all of them. The questions are designed to prompt conversation, not to limit it! Your group might want to take a look at the questions before you begin each chapter.

For more resources, or to contact the author, you can visit www.davidfinneganhosey.com. David would love to hear from your group!

Creating a Space for Difficult Conversations

Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition addresses some difficult topics, including mental illness, medical debt, and systemic injustice. These topics can be hard to talk about, and for people with first- or second-hand experience of them, can be potentially triggering. Therefore, it is important to set the stage by creating a space for difficult conversation that feels safe and supportive.

I suggest you begin each discussion with a grounding/centering exercise. Take a few moments to be present in the space. Focus on how your body feels – are you touching the floor with your feet? What does the chair feel like beneath you? Pay attention as you breathe in and out. If the conversation ever begins to feel overwhelming, you can return to this grounding practice.

Set some ground rules for the discussion. These can include things like: It's ok to step out of the space if you need a break. It's ok to bring the group back the grounding practice. You might also set rules around listening to each other's stories without interrupting, respecting differences of opinion, and confidentiality. Week 1 of the guide contains some additional suggestions for ground rules.

Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition is premised on the idea that it matters for people to share their stories of mental health struggles. With that said, it is important to recognize our own limits and the limits of the group. Your discussion group is not a professional therapy group, and that's ok. You might consider gathering resources beforehand for group members who decide that a professional therapist, group therapy, or psychiatrist would be helpful to them. One such resource is the National Suicide Prevention

Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 (there is also an online chat hotline available at suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat).

Week 1: Setting Ground Rules, Introducing Ourselves and Grace

During this first week, set some ground rules as a group. Here's a sample set of ground rules from Amy Petre Hill of Mental Health & Inclusion Ministries (www.mhiministries.org), adapted from the NAMI Family Support Group Principles of Support (namiaurora.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/NAMI-Family-Support-Group-Handout.pdf):

- 1) Start and stop on time
- 2) Set a time limit for check-in
- 3) Absolute confidentiality
- 4) Be respectful
- 5) Be mindful of others; no monopolizing or cross talk
- 6) Keep it in the here and now – we can share stories from our past, but our discussion is focused on the present moment
- 7) Empathize with each other's situation

I have also found it helpful to talk about how the group will lovingly call each other in when someone feels the ground rules are not being followed – because we all make mistakes!

Now is also a good time to start learning each other's stories. In the introduction to *Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition*, the author acknowledges that his story is to a degree limited to his own experience and perspective and that it's important to keep that in mind throughout the book. In the interest of exploring many stories as we engage with this topic, reflect a bit on your own story with mental health and share a bit about that if you are comfortable doing so. If you're not comfortable sharing your own story, please share what drew you to this group and why you're interested in this discussion.

Additional questions for discussion:

1. The introduction discusses “embedded theology” – ways of making meaning that are ensconced and often unexamined.” Can you identify unexamined beliefs you've held, how they shaped your perspective, and their wider impact on a personal or even systemic level?
2. The title of the introduction is, “Starting with Grace.” What would it look like if we really took that concept to heart and embraced a deep belief in and commitment to grace for ourselves, our neighbors, and the world as a whole? What comes up for you personally when you think about grace?

Week 2: Pre-Existence, Insurance, and Assurance

It's helpful to go over the ground rules again at the beginning of each session, as well as to begin with a grounding and centering practice. Also, it's common in groups to have folks join after the first week; remember, you don't have to get through every single question, and it's important to create space for participants to share their own stories and make connections between those stories and larger systems discussed in the book!

Questions for discussion:

1. Have you engaged with both "original sin" and "original blessing" theological frameworks in your life? If so, how have those different perspectives impacted your beliefs and the practical ways in which you've implemented your faith? What does it look like for you to embrace a narrative of "original blessing?" How does that impact your relationship with God, other people, and the world around you?
2. Why does it matter to you personally that the story of your existence and relationship with the divine begins with grace? How does/could that impact your self-conception and the way you move through the world?
3. On pages 32-34, the author writes about what he has "come to believe." What about you? What has led you to the beliefs you hold now? Can you identify (giving an example or two) how these theological beliefs impact your practical beliefs about healthcare or other social issues?
4. At the end of the chapter the author asks "What would it look like to have a health system truly based in this root of care, for all of us?" What comes to mind when you reflect on that question?

Week 3: Debt

This week, we'll be talking about medical debt and debt forgiveness. Your group might want to watch the "Collecting to Forgive" video at ripmedicaldebt.org/about to learn about the origins of RIP Medical Debt, one of the organizations the author mentions in this chapter.

You might also want to take a look at more recent coverage of this issue, such as this brief NBC News story about hospitals suing patients over unpaid bills (www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/growing-number-of-hospitals-sue-patients-to-collect-debts-78644293805) or this *ProPublica* reporting on debt collection in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic (<https://www.propublica.org/article/one-thing-the-pandemic-hasnt-stopped-aggressive-medical-debt-collection>).

Questions for discussion:

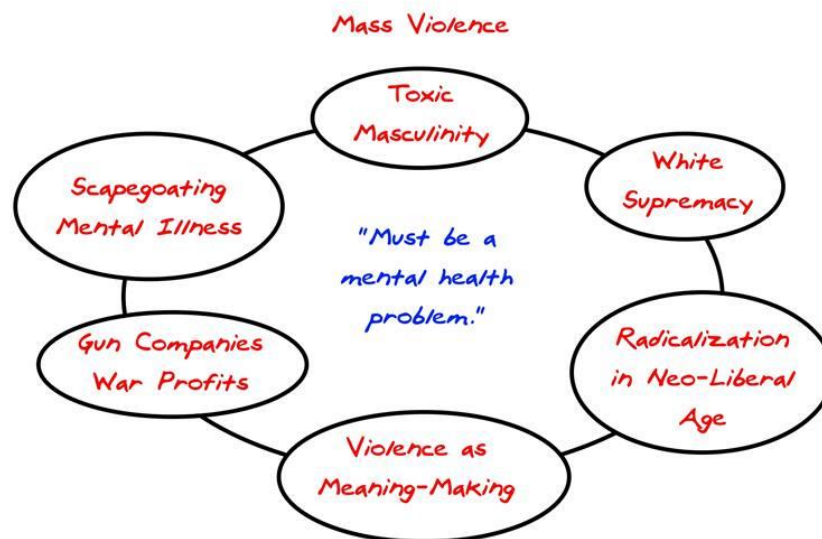
1. Before reading this chapter, what were your beliefs or assumptions about debt? Did the statistics about medical debt in the USA surprise you or were they fairly in-line with the experiences you've witnessed in your life? What other thoughts or feelings came up for you when reflecting on the systemic issue of debt in our country?
2. In the section "Debt, Forgiveness, and Salvation," the author asks, "What would it mean to take seriously the forgiveness of debt as one aspect of God's gracious, saving work?" Sit with this question for a few minutes and share what it sparks for you.
3. What would it mean for your church or community to participate in "the divine work of forgiving debts and declaring Jubilee?" How would that look? How might that work positively impact your community and the world outside of it?

Week 4: Systems

This week's chapters cover challenging ground, so it's a good idea once again to start with your ground rules and a grounding/centering practice.

Questions for discussion:

1. Think about some of the headlines and articles you've seen following mass shootings over the past couple of years. Do you remember them mentioning mental illness? How did you react? Did reading this chapter challenge a perspective you've held in the past? How would you like to engage with conversations that link violence to mental health in the future?
2. In Chapter 4 we were invited to think carefully about some of the various systems that lead to violence in the United States, how they interact with each other, and their violent impact beyond overt examples such as mass shootings. What stood out to you or challenged you most in the portion of the chapter? How did it feel to look at this issue with a systems-aware perspective?



(This "Mass Violence" chart, created by Peter Jarret-Schell, is a visual representation of the author's discussion of systems in Chapter 4)

3. At the end of this chapter, the author encourages us to reexamine our spiritual response to tragedy and broken systems. In your faith tradition are you used to considering action as an integral part of prayer? What does that process look like for you?
4. In Chapter 5 the author offers a contrast to “there but for the grace of God go I” in “Here, for the grace of God, we go.” What changes when we view grace as something that doesn’t separate us from suffering, but draws us into solidarity with it?
5. This chapter concludes with a short section on vocation. How have our cultural narratives around work and worth impacted your own life? Have you felt a push and pull between the call to life and the temptation to measure your worth by what you produce or earn?

Week 5: Care, the Common Good, and Working for Change

This week's chapters make a link between self-care, care for others, and working for broader change. The grounding/centering practice you've been starting with is a great example of this kind of connection!

1. When you think about feeling overwhelmed or anxious what comes up for you? How do those feelings impact your ability to move through the world? Are you ever tempted to feel like "a drain on the common good"? Where do you turn when you feel these things?
2. Do you ever fall into the trap of thinking that you are not enough because you are not doing enough? How does that impact the external work you want to do or feel you *should* do? When you are grounded in your enough-ness how do your perspective and your approach to external work shift? What grounds you in your enough-ness? If grounding yourself in your enough-ness is something you struggle with, what kind of support or tools might help you to practice enough-ness?
3. What role has storytelling played in your community and connections with others? Can you think of a time when sharing your story or listening to someone share their story had a profound impact on you? What was the context? What did it feel like? What did people around you do to make that context feel safe and supportive?
4. Are there ways you see your community already cultivating spaces for storytelling and vulnerability? Are there practices, attitudes, or tensions discussed in this chapter that you're eager to see your community adopt to further cultivate those spaces? How could the people in this room conspire to facilitate such spaces?

Week 6: Conclusion and What's Next?

In addition to taking time this week to discuss the concluding chapter of *Grace is a Pre-Existing Condition*, this is a good time for your group to ask, "What's next?" How can your discussions, stories, and conversations over these past few weeks become part of the bigger, broader conversation about more just and equitable care for all?

Perhaps you might consider participating in a campaign with RIP Medical Debt, which the author talked about in Chapter 3.

Perhaps your group might take a look at this video summarizing the demands of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, which the author mentions on page 113 as an example of a coalition making connections between story-sharing and systems: www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-demands

If there's an election coming up, it might be a good time to take another look at the section on Mental Health Voting on pages 114-118 and think of ways to promote "voting with a more just and equitable mental healthcare system in mind."

Perhaps you'd like to host a Mental Health First Aid training at your church, or invite the author to come speak and help think through some ideas of how to work for change in your local community.

Whatever next steps your group decides to take, let us know about it! You can get in touch with the author at davidfinneganhosey.com/contact, and find additional resources at davidfinneganhosey.com/resources!

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Learn more and read more of Hailey Joy Scandrette's writing at haileyjs.wordpress.com