Dissolving Relationships

TI 018 - Thematic

By

J. Eugene Knott

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Eight sessions, based on the "Dissolution Process" schema.

Session I: introductions, dyadic self-disclosure, ground rules, presentation of the dissolution process, and identification of relevant personal elements in the process.

Session II: group sharing and discussion of process components, drawing up behavioral contracts for member goals.

Sessions III - VII are each given a thematic focus drawn from the process. Meetings are topically centered yet open-ended with behavior contracts reviewed weekly and some handouts and comments by leaders incorporated.

Session VIII: Review of overall schema and member comparisons of 2 months’ progress. Recapitulation by leaders and program evaluation.

The 21-page manual/outline includes four handouts.

GOALS: To assist participants in terminating a relationship through provision of a supportive, problem-solving environment; to promote final resolution of "unfinished business" regarding the partner; to enable partners to attain autonomy and social reintegration

TARGET: Those who have decided to divorce or separate (NOT a couples group)

LENGTH: Eight weekly 2-hour sessions

SIZE: 10 maximum, preferably evenly divided between sexes

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INTRODUCTION

This program is intended to help persons who are involved in the process of "psychological divorce." This is largely irrespective of the exact status of the relationship legally, for a bias of the author is that people recently separated, formerly cohabiting, or long since formally "untied" can be in highly similar circumstances and in need of injecting some real movement into the transition out of partnership.

The series of topics and exercises described herein are to be viewed more as rough guidelines rather than rigid, discrete steps in a lock-step sequence. This group program—as with most wherein individual and social change is demanded—is a "forum" for negotiating with oneself and ultimately with significant others, the necessary (and only slightly idiosyncratic) transitional agreements involved in going from relationship as a couple to personal autonomy. A strong conceptual influence in formulating this program is Bohannon's not-so-static "six stations" of divorce (1970). These include emotional, legal, economic, parental, community and psychic concurrent processes ongoing for each of the dissolving partners. More is made of this in the initial session described shortly.

The overall goals of this program are:

--to enable separating/divorcing persons to sever relationship
--to establish a supportive environment for problem-solving
--to promote resolution of "unfinished business"
   regarding partner
--to assist members to attain autonomy and social
   reintegration

This entire program has been compiled from several influences,
notably Brown (1976), Morris and Prescott (1975), Bohannon (1970),
Toomim (1975), and Krantzler (1974).
DISSOLVING RELATIONSHIPS

PRE-GROUP VARIABLES

(1) The group is limited to a maximum of 10 members, with both sexes represented in as close to equal numbers as possible. This has been difficult to achieve in past groups as there appears to be less inhibition for participating in such an experience for women. Their numbers comprise two-thirds of the group typically.

(2) Two criteria are used in selecting members, which is accomplished in brief preliminary interviews by either leader with prospective individual participants. Grounds for exclusion include gravity of therapeutic need, with basically dysfunctional persons counseled into individual therapy or a more therapy oriented group experience. A second, though less rigid guideline is recency of actual physical separation. Persons who have left or been left by a partner over six months prior to the group's beginning are referred to another type of treatment. Rationale for this, in addition to its efficacy in experience with and without such limitations, comes from the notion that the first half year or so of actual separation is the "crisis" period during which needs are greatest and, relatedly, most progress toward autonomy can be made. The bulk of literature on this periodicity factor strongly supports such a rationale.
It is ideal for several reasons of interpersonal dynamics, such as so-called transference, modeling and reintegration, that a male and a female co-lead this particular group. The same argument applies for mixed sex membership.

The most workable format appears to be one of eight sessions of 2 hours each, meeting in consecutive weeks.

In addition to preselection in a preliminary interview, several ground rules are discussed with members. These include the importance of commitment in the form of attendance and active participation by all. Also, a specific prohibition against "dating" members of the group is invoked for reasons of enabling the group to be a clear forum for discussing matters of relationship without undue influence of potentially significant others. Autonomy is best sought in the absence of ill-timed, often desperate attempts to counter "aloneness" and to prematurely re-couple to regain some semblance of psychological and socio-economic homeostasis.
SESSION 1

A. Begins with an introduction of leaders and their presentation of an overview of goals of program and sessions as they are intended to proceed. This usually includes some self-disclosure about why this group exists, why the particular leaders are involved, and their hopes for its outcomes in more personal terms than the previous statement of the four goals of the group (cf. Introduction to program).

B. Following this, the leaders ask members to pair up randomly and share some information with one another covering the following items: (allow 20 minutes in pairs)
   -- name
   -- partnership status
   -- family description, if appropriate
   -- personal hopes and fears re: the group experience

C. Following the dyads, each member is asked to introduce their partner from the previous interchange, and to say what the content of that person's self-description was briefly. (Allow 5 minutes per person)

D. Leaders reiterate welcome to all in the group, and proceed to go over the ground rules for the eight weeks time, answering questions as they arise (10 minutes).

E. The following schematic is shared, usually by a handout or large reproduction for all to see.
THE DISSOLUTION PROCESS*

FIRST CONSIDERATION
TO SPLIT

DECISION TO
STAY TOGETHER

DECISION TO
SPLIT

PHYSICAL
SEPARATION

- EMOTIONAL
- LEGAL
- PARENTAL

- ECONOMIC
- SOCIAL
- PSYCHIC

AUTONOMY
INTERDEPENDENCE
STABILITY

TIME
DECISION-MAKING
PHASE

(avg. of 12 mo.)

( up to 24 mo. on avg.)

RESTRUCTURING
PHASE

Following a presentation and explanation of the dissolution process, discussion among all members is encouraged relative to their reaction to it and its validity to date as a model for their severing ties (remainder of session).

HOMEWORK: Members are to give some thought to their priority of needs vis-a-vis the process components with an eye toward listing, labelling and describing them in the next meeting. Have them bring in a written "list" for this next time.

OBJECTIVES: This session is geared toward initiating some life into the group, having members begin to break the ice and form some mutuality of support and common status. Also, the agenda allows for an overview of expectations, goals, and leader behavior to be obtained by all.

SESSION II

A. Begins with processing homework by asking each member to list aloud and describe their priorities in reference to present perceptions of needs, deficiencies and resources available to meet each. (Allow 5 minutes each)

B. Once completed, the leaders then instruct group members to take the list and construct specific, behaviorally based criteria for meeting those needs including a realistic time frame. (Leaders should give examples, say economic concerns with a criterion of finding or ensuring income fy 2 months from today. Consider impediments to such, e.g. child care, scarcity of jobs, specific skills, work history, contacts made to date, etc.)
OBJECTIVES: The goal of this session is to concretize participants' needs for participation and dealing with the dissolution process. It provides the beginning of some goal-setting in set terms, forming the basis for a self-contract and simultaneously crystallizing self-perceptions of both objective status and subjective needs.

SESSIONS III - VII

A. Each of the succeeding five meetings provides a specific focus on the components of the dissolution process, with the psychic and emotional being combined. The former encompasses intrapersonal thoughts and feelings and the latter refers to the modes of verbal and nonverbal expression of the psychic process in interpersonal transactions. The sequence of dealing with the topics, while somewhat flexible and at the leaders' discretion, has proven most effective when covered in this order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Emotional-Psychic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Parental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Legal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SOME NOTES ON SESSIONS III - VII

The bulk of the time spent in this group is used to achieve three primary objectives:

1. to promote purgative catharsis including "mourning" the losses entailed in splitting
2. to derive support from others who are similarly disposed, including gaining perspective on one's situation
3. to enable members to set some goals, collaborate on problem-solving needs, and initiate (with reinforcement) the necessary action steps towards autonomy, stability, and reasonable interdependence

In the course of these five sessions the style is one of open discussion bounded solely by the topical focus of the particular meeting. The leaders become more like process facilitators and insure adequate exploration of each focal issue rather than conducting a series of exercises. Summarizing at the end of each meeting and providing transitional comments into the next session are also noteworthy duties for the leaders.

This particular format works and works well because members tend to be easily primed and voluminous "pumps" eager to talk and seek each other out for the reasons noted earlier as goals of the core sessions of the program. In addition, the further needs they
bring to the experience are typical of a transition experience, i.e. to work through matters of disconnecting and reintegrating, ideally with a minimum of trauma.

A few remarks about some "between the topics" issues are in order. First, the particular side of the "victimology" one is on regarding leave taking greatly colors the person's frame of reference and openness to disengagement, particularly at the outset. There is a great deal of difference initially between the group members who are "leavers" and those who've been "left." Feelings of bitterness and resentment plus the helplessness they often engender are more commonly expressed by the latter. Careful attention early on to those concerns eliciting them as legitimate and understandable feelings are necessary steps in the dissolution process for many. Conversely, the larger though not the sole burden of assuming "guilt" falls to the people who initiated the separation or divorce, and attending to that issue and its consequences is a major agenda for the group in the early going. Still others may project a valid sense of "relief," and the reactions of others to that frequently cause more trouble than living with the true sense of being "unburdened" does.

A key dynamic underlying the "movement" desired comes from the notion that the major task of the divorcing person, once the decision has been made to separate, is that of RESTRUCTURING one's relationships to the world and the various actors therein. Inherent in that task is the constant companion of any change -- stress, and coping with that is more critical than justifying the grounds for leave-
taking, except where the courts are concerned. And they (legal proceedings) often generate some unique stressors of their own making! The point of all this is to encourage leaders to help make exceedingly clear the fact that dissolution of a two person relationship is never simply confined to the couple. Disruption and the need to realign oneself with many others and their altered treatment of the separated and divorced is common to practically all of one's relatives, kin or social.

To make this point clearer and to promote members' acceptance of the need to take care of themselves rather than becoming overreliant on other resources, the Life Events Scale (Appendix A) is often introduced into Session IV. After the group completes the scale, the leaders point out that several items are particularly germane to the divorcing person. For example, the divorce itself garners 73 points. Added to that are change in financial state (38), change in number of arguments with spouse (35), change in residence (20), revision of personal habits (24), change in recreation (19), change in social activities (18), change in sleeping habits (16), and change in number of family get-togethers (15). These alone total 258 points. The theory behind the scale is that accumulation of over 200 points within a given year's time was highly correlated with ill health, not just psychologically, but in terms of physical illness as well. And this total does not take in any number of other categories wherein changes of various types add to the experience of stress.
Economic matters that frequently pose difficulties for those separating/divorcing include housing, employment, child care, insurance (especially health and auto), transportation and credit. Rarely can two (uneven) households live as cheaply as one, and a frequent cause and/or symptom of the split finds its origins in financial disputes or inadequacy. Basic budgeting and financial planning may be useful here, and many lending institutions provide brief workbooks for such a purpose at no cost. A ready fund of references to community services and agencies is a leader prerequisite here also.

Parental responsibilities most always divide out unevenly, but usually to the disadvantage of both. Often the father is strapped financially to such a degree that his lifestyle is a conflicting one of physical freedom and economic bondage. Meanwhile, traditional custody arrangements favor the mother but such favoritism places both financial and physical constraints on the woman. An additional set of issues comes from the custodial parent having to bear the majority of children's reactions to their loss, and later, also having to contend with renewing social relations in the shadow of censorship from young people who weren't around the last time anything vaguely resembling dating or courtship was begun. One-parent families, although relatively common today, nonetheless pose some difficult and often painful dynamics. It has proven beneficial to encourage parents in the group to "debrief" their summary feelings after each session to some extent with children at home. This varies according to age of course, but such catharsis seems invaluable in building bridges of under-
standing between parent and child, and it helps structure needed
perspective for the kids, as well as modeling appropriate self-
disclosure (See Appendix B).

In spite of its increasing commonality and slowly changing
social mores divorce is still stigmatized. While it is openly
discussed and currently three of every eight marriages are dissolved,
there are few "acceptable" alternatives to monogamous family
life, and even fewer vehicles for aiding split parties to regain
satisfactory social roles and life styles. A major factor in
this quandry has been the legal system which simultaneously
structures the means for dissolution and erects confounding im-
pediments to dissolving the relationship. Fortunately, this topic
and parenting will not be the concern of all members of the group.
Equally fortunate is the fact that what literature there is for
public consumption on these two points is largely very useful.
have been helpful to the group and leaders as resource readings.
A working knowledge of local (state) legislation and judicial
precedent are almost mandatory to conducting this group as well.

Sometimes it has been useful to deliberately focus in the
latter sessions on the ways in which "change" itself has been
handled by the group members in the past. Ways of complementing
that include "teaching" simple Lewinian force-field analysis
and encouraging a log/journal of daily entries to be kept during
the life of the group. Also, it seems that only later in the
course of the program are most participants capable of effectively
coming to grips with their personal responsibilities for the
demise of the relationship. Thus, discussion turns to such
a consideration somewhat predictably in the latter stages of
the program.

A frequently noted item in this and similar groups is that
shifting time perspective is one reflection of transition being
successfully made. Typically, the members begin the group with
their heads in the past, re-examining, trying to sort out the
couple's co-history, affixing blame, and the like. Once the
past has been purged openly to an extent, the participants
seem to move to the "present" and more immediate, pressing
concerns. It is then that the needs for action can be addressed
sing the five core sessions and focal points. Toward the end
of the program -- especially in the final meeting -- a future
perspective is obtained to some degree, and this signals the
time for each person to move out on their own, working toward
goals set realistically in the future. Caution is needed, how-
ever, and an intentional comment on how long the process of rein-
tegration usually takes is warranted in Session VIII.

Finally, despite generalizing throughout to all members with
respect to a "uniform" process, it should be noted (aloud) that not
everyone has identical experiences emotionally or practically
during dissolution. While there is much that is similar to all,
socioeconomic status, age, family size, proximity to relatives,
state laws, economic milieu, and access to services/resources
in the community all influence the process variably for each
member of the group. The key seems to be in assisting participants to move from their present status to their wished for positions vis-a-vis each component of the process, rather than really having to counter each of the above as an impediment. In other words, a responsive, flexible divorcing person is the desired outcome, as opposed to the immediate securing of solutions to the various problems inherent in restructuring one's life.
SESSION VIII

A. This final meeting begins much as the initial one did, with representation of the schematic for the dissolution process. Members are asked to relate their recent actions, current feelings, and future plans for each component to date, and to draw some comparisons with eight weeks earlier. This serves to gain some closure on the experience as a whole, and simultaneously, to help summarize the previous two months activities as a group. Leaders should also make such statements reflecting each of their perceptions of progress made, highlighting the various key transition points, and insightful comments by members wherever they occurred.

B. The last half hour of the session is given over to evaluating the program. It seems most facile and beneficial to do this on paper individually first (see Appendix C), and then aloud in brief statements by all about the group’s impact on them. Following this, the leaders collect the (anonymous) evaluation sheets and, thanking the members for their participation, wish them well and goodbye.

C. At this point, if it has not occurred earlier in the program, some few members may seek out a leader (or both) to engage in further help via private therapy. Generally, this has been productive and appropriately timed for some, particularly those needing support primarily. Thus, if time and circumstances allow, such further contracting is done.
REFERENCES


### APPENDIX A—Life Events Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Scale of Impact</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Accumulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of spouse</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital separation</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jail term</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of close family member</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal injury or illness</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired at work</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital reconciliation</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in health of family member</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex difficulties</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>New family member</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Business readjustment</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in financial status</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of close friend</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change to different line of work</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in number of arguments with spouse</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mortgage over $10,000</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forclosure of mortgage or loan</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in responsibilities at work</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Son or daughter leaving home</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trouble with in-laws</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outstanding personal achievement</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife begins or stops work</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Begin or end school</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in living conditions</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision of personal habits</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trouble with boss</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in work hours or conditions</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in residence</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in schools</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in recreation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in church activities</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in social activities</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mortgage or loan less than $10,000</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in sleeping habits</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in number of family reunions</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in eating habits</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vacation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Christmas</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor violations of the law</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX B

The following ten "general principles" are those elaborated in Weiss' (1975) book *Marital Separation* (chapter 10, pp. 226-232), regarding helping parents help their children through the dissolution process. They can be given out during Session VI.

1. Children, even very young ones, should be kept informed without overwhelming them with information they cannot assimilate.

2. Children are likely to react to the separation with upset and will need appropriate solicitude.

3. Children who fail to resume normal development within a year of separation may need special attention.

4. A competent and self-confident parent as head of the household is the child's most important source of security.

5. Preadolescent children need a parent's full attention at least part of the time.

6. Ordinarily, children gain if the noncustody parent remains in the picture.

7. It is important for the children to retain as many "regions of safety" in their lives as possible.

8. Insofar as there is change, children are likely to profit from parental support in establishing a satisfactory living situation for themselves.

9. Children should be permitted to mature at their own pace and neither be encouraged to become "prematurely mature" nor held back in their development through overprotection.

10. Parents can help their children by establishing satisfactory life situations for themselves.

********************************************************************************
APPENDIX C

Dissolving Relationships
Evaluation Sheet

Please answer as candidly and completely as possible. Your assistance is appreciated.

1. How successful was the program in meeting its following stated goals? (Circle the appropriate number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Successful</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>Met The Goal</th>
<th>Exceedingly Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Enabled me to more fully &quot;sever&quot; the relationship.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Provided a supportive environment for helping me problem-solve.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Helped me &quot;resolve&quot; unfinished business regarding my ex-partner.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Assisted me to gain more stability and personal autonomy.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What were the high points in the program for you?

3. What were your disappointments?
4. Any suggestions for changing the program format or context?

5. Any feedback to give the leaders?

6. Other comments?