

The First Six Gatherings

Everything you need to start a club that people want to come back to: the first six evenings planned, invitations, house rules, the tricky moments, and how to share the load.

For a supper club, book club, walking or running club, stokvel, faith small group, residence house or neighbourhood circle.



How to use this kit

Most new clubs start with energy and fade within a few months. Not because people stopped caring, but because nobody planned the welcome, the rhythm or who does what. This kit plans the first six gatherings for you, so that by the end your club has a shape of its own.

Read Parts 1 and 2 before you invite anyone. Then use one week at a time. Each week has two pages: what to prepare, how to open, the heart of the evening, how to close, and what to do afterwards. Adapt freely: a supper club and a running club will do the same steps in different ways.

The six-week arc	
Week 1	Names and a warm welcome Everyone leaves knowing a few names, having spoken and been listened to, and wanting to come back.
Week 2	The first real conversation The group shares one conversation that goes deeper than small talk, and agrees together how it wants to be.
Week 3	Small groups, so everyone is known Each person has a real conversation with people they have not yet met, and nobody is left on the edge.
Week 4	Something done together The club does one thing together, not only talks, so it can see itself as a group.
Week 5	A ritual that becomes ours The club chooses one small ritual of its own, and welcomes newer members as full members.
Week 6	Look back and decide what's next The club names what it has become, thanks people for their gifts, and chooses its rhythm for the next season.

This kit is practice wisdom from experienced hosts and community builders, with research named where it exists. It is not counselling or therapy. Sources are listed at the end.

What is this club for?

"A book club" or "a running group" is a category, not a purpose. The purpose is what you hope the club does for the people in it. A clear purpose helps you decide who to invite, what to do each week, and what to say no to.

Three tests of a good purpose

- **Specific:** it names these people and this hope, not "to have fun".
- **Yours:** it could not be the purpose of every other club.
- **Worth disagreeing with:** someone could reasonably want something different, which is how you know it says something.

Examples

- A supper club where newcomers to the city make three real friends by winter.
- A walking group where people who have been ill or lonely get moving again, side by side.
- A savings circle that carries one another through hard months, not only on pay day.

Our club is for (one sentence)

Who is it for, first?

What will we say no to?

Invitations that work

The gathering begins the moment someone hears about it. An invitation is your first piece of hosting: it tells people what the club is for and shapes the mood they arrive in.

Invite, do not command or sell

"You must come" fills a room with bodies. "Come, there are prizes" fills it with consumers. "I would love you to be part of this, and you are free to say no" fills it with people who chose to be there, and they take part more fully. A real invitation can be turned down without any cost to the person.

Four things a good invitation says

1. **The possibility:** what this club could make possible, not only the programme.
2. **Why you, personally:** one honest line about why you want this person there.
3. **What it asks:** the time, the contribution, staying to the end, phones away.
4. **The freedom to say no:** and that they will be welcome another time.

Invite people, not only things

Ask people to do something small beforehand: bring a photo, a favourite line, a question, a dish with a story. It gets them thinking about the club before they arrive, and gives them something of their own in the room.

Personal beats public. A message to one person, with their name and a reason, works far better than a poster. Use the poster to reach people you do not know yet, and follow up personally.

Six invitations, ready to adapt

Supper club

Hi [name], I'm starting a small supper club: six evenings, once a fortnight, at [place]. The idea is simple: good food, and conversation that goes a bit deeper than usual. I'd love you to come because [one honest line about them]. It asks for an evening every two weeks and a dish to share now and then. No pressure at all if it's not for you; you'll be welcome another time.

Book club

Hi [name], a few of us are starting a book club to read [kind of books] and talk about what they stir up in us, not only the plot. We'll meet on [day] at [place], six times to begin with. I thought of you because [reason]. It asks you to read (most of) the book and come ready to listen. Say no freely if the timing is wrong.

Walking or running club

Hi [name], I'm starting a [walking/running] group on [day] at [time], from [place]. All paces welcome, and nobody gets left behind; we finish with coffee. I'd love you there because [reason]. It asks for one morning a week for six weeks. If it's not for you, no problem at all.

Stokvel or savings circle

Dumela [name], we're starting a [savings/grocery] circle: [number] members, [amount] a month, meeting on [day] at [place]. Beyond the money, we want it to be a group that carries one another. I'm asking you because [reason]. Please only say yes if the contribution is comfortable; a no is completely fine.

Faith small group

Hi [name], we're beginning a small group that will meet on [day] at [place] for six weeks to [read, pray, talk honestly about life]. I'd be glad if you joined because [reason]. It asks for an evening a week and a willingness to listen. You are free to decline, and welcome any time.

Residence or neighbourhood

Hi [name], we're starting a [house evening / street circle] for [who]. Six gatherings, [how often], at [place], with tea and a good question each time. I'm inviting you personally because [reason]. It's completely voluntary, and you're welcome whether you come once or every time.

Replace everything in [brackets]. Keep the line about why you want them there: it matters most.

YOU ARE INVITED

[Name of our club]

[What this club could make possible, in one sentence]

When: [day and time], starting [date]

Where: [place]

Who: [who it is for]

[What it asks of you: e.g. six evenings, a dish to share now and then]

Come once and see. You are welcome whether or not you stay.

Say hello: [name and number]

A poster to print or photograph for the group chat. Fill it in by hand or retype it.

PART 3

Six gatherings, planned

Each week builds on the last: from names, to a real conversation, to small groups, to doing something together, to a ritual of your own, to looking back and choosing what comes next.

A few habits run through every week: greet people by name at the door; begin with why you are here, not with housekeeping; let anyone pass on any question; and end on purpose, while the energy is still good.



Names and a warm welcome

Everyone leaves knowing a few names, having spoken and been listened to, and wanting to come back.

Before the evening

- Choose a place where people can sit in a circle or around one table.
- Make a simple name card or sticker for each person, and a pen for late arrivals.
- Decide your one-sentence purpose (Part 1) so you can say it in the welcome.
- Ask one or two early arrivals to help you greet people.

At the door

- Greet each person yourself, by name if you can, and give them something to do straight away: a cup of tea, a name card, a seat.
- Watch for the people who find a door hardest: someone who came alone, the newest, someone whose home language is different. Introduce them to one person with a reason: 'You both walk at dawn.'

The opening

- Do not begin with housekeeping. Begin with why you are here, in a sentence or two, said simply.
- Name who is in the room: 'Some of us have walked together for years, and four of you are here for the first time.'
- Then the practical things, briefly: when you will finish, where the bathroom is, that anyone may pass on any question.

Introductions that are more than a job title

- Ask everyone to say their name and answer one light question in a sentence. Go round the circle, starting with yourself, and keep your own answer short.
- Then move into pairs, with someone they do not know, for a warmer question. Give each person about three minutes while the other only listens.
- Bring the room back together and invite two or three people, not everyone, to say what they enjoyed hearing.

Questions to use

- *Light: What is something small that made you smile this week?*
- *Warmer, in pairs: What drew you to this club, and what are you hoping it could be?*
- *Optional: Who first taught you to love the thing this club is about?*

The closing

- Give a gentle signal that the end is near, while the energy is still good.
- Closing round: each person says one word or one line they will take home.
- Say the date of the next gathering out loud, and thank people for coming.

Afterwards

- Within a day, send a short thank-you message with the next date.
- Note who seemed on the edge, and plan to greet them first next time.

My notes for this week

The first real conversation

The group shares one conversation that goes deeper than small talk, and agrees together how it wants to be.

Before the evening

- Prepare one good question for the heart of the evening: light first, then warmer.
- Bring a card or sheet to write the group's agreements on.
- Message last week's newcomers personally: 'Hope to see you again on Thursday.'

At the door

- Greet returning people by name; nothing says 'you belong here' more clearly.
- Pair anyone new with someone who came last week.

The opening

- A one-minute reminder of why you gather, and a warm welcome to anyone new.
- Ask two questions and gather short answers: What does each of us need in order to feel comfortable here? What would help us say what we really think?
- Turn the answers into three to five agreements in the group's own words. Read them back. They apply to the host too.

The small-group circle

- Mix into groups of three or four, with people sitting beside those they know least.
- Say the question slowly, twice. Each person has about three minutes while the others only listen.
- After each person, one listener may ask one curious follow-up question, such as 'What makes that important to you?' No advice and no fixing.
- Anyone may pass, and passing is a full answer. Then invite a few voices, not every group, to share with the whole room.

Questions to use

- *What is something you have changed your mind about in the last few years?*
- *Or, for a club with a shared interest: What part of this do you find hardest, and what keeps you at it?*

The closing

- Read the agreements once more and ask if anything is missing.
- Closing round: one thing someone said tonight that stayed with you.

Afterwards

- Share the agreements in the group chat, in the group's words.
- Ask one person to help with next week (Share the load lists the quiet roles).

My notes for this week

Small groups, so everyone is known

Each person has a real conversation with people they have not yet met, and nobody is left on the edge.

Before the evening

- Plan how you will mix people: numbered cards, coloured stickers, or seating you choose.
- Think about language, power and newcomers when you mix (see the notes below).
- Choose a question that looks forward, towards what the club could become.

At the door

- Hand each person a card or sticker as they arrive; it tells them where to sit.
- A short welcome for newcomers: who they are, and one friendly face to sit with.

The opening

- Begin with a quick light question everyone answers in a word or a show of hands.
- Remind people of the agreements, especially 'anyone may pass' and 'no advice'.

Mixed groups and a forward-looking question

- Send people to their groups of three to five. Give each group the question on a card.
- Mix with care: nobody should be the only one in a group who does not share the language spoken; avoid putting a manager with their own staff or a parent with their teenager for a personal question; give a very new person one friendly face.
- After about twenty minutes, if there is time, mix again for a second round with new people.
- Come back together. Ask: 'What did you hear in your group that surprised you?'

Questions to use

- *What would you love to be true of this club a year from now?*
- *What is one thing you could bring, or do, that would help make that true?*

The closing

- Gather a few of the hopes aloud. Write them down; you will need them in week six.
- Closing line from the host: thank people for what they brought, by name where you can.

Afterwards

- Send the hopes you heard to the group chat.
- Check who has not yet hosted anything, and invite one of them to help next week.

My notes for this week

Something done together

The club does one thing together, not only talks, so it can see itself as a group.

Before the evening

- Choose one shared act that fits your club: cook a meal together, walk a new route, read a chapter aloud in turns, plant something, help a neighbour, sing, play a game.
- Give roles to several people: someone to gather supplies, someone to keep time, someone to take one photo (with permission).
- Keep it simple enough that nobody is left out by cost, fitness or skill.

At the door

- Give each person their part as they arrive: an apron, a page, a map, a tool.
- Make sure the newest member has a job that puts them beside someone friendly.

The opening

- Say why you are doing this together: the purpose of the club, made visible.
- Explain what will happen and roughly how long it will take, so nobody is anxious.

Doing it, side by side

- Let the activity carry the evening. Side by side, people often talk more easily than face to face.
- Build in one pause halfway: a cup of tea, a rest at a viewpoint, a moment to taste what you have made.
- Eat together if you can. Shared food is one of the oldest ways a group becomes a 'we'.

Questions to use

- *During the pause: What has surprised you about this club so far?*
- *Or: What is something you learned from someone here today?*

The closing

- Take a moment to look at what you did together: the meal, the route walked, the pages read.
- Closing round: one person you want to thank, and why.

Afterwards

- Share one photo, only with everyone's agreement.
- Ask: would this shared act be worth repeating, perhaps every few months?

My notes for this week

A ritual that becomes ours

The club chooses one small ritual of its own, and welcomes newer members as full members.

Before the evening

- Look back: is there already something the club does each time that people would miss? That may be the seed of your ritual.
- Think about how a newcomer knows they are 'in'. A name read out, a welcome said in front of others, a small token.
- Prepare the ritual shape below, so you can design it with the group in a few minutes.

At the door

- Greet each person by name. By now this should be easy, and it still matters.
- Quietly ask one long-standing member to say a welcome to the newer members later.

The opening

- Say plainly why you are gathering tonight: to give the club something that is ours.
- Ask the group: what do we already do that we would miss if it stopped?

Design a ritual together, then welcome people in

- Use a simple shape. An opening: welcome people, say why you are here, say whether you are keeping a tradition or starting one. A middle: something worth hearing (a reading, a saying, a short story), then something everyone does. A close: say what has changed, then send people out.
- The middle is the part most rituals forget. Invite everyone to do something: light a candle from one flame, say one word, add a stone to a bowl, raise a cup. Taking part is never forced, and quiet presence counts.
- Choose when the ritual will happen: at the start or end of every gathering, or once a season.
- Then mark the welcome: a long-standing member names the newer members and says, in front of everyone, that they are glad they are here. Recognition, never an ordeal.

Questions to use

- *What do we want people to feel when they arrive, and when they leave?*
- *What small act could say that, without a speech?*

The closing

- Try the closing part of your new ritual for the first time.
- Thank the group for making it theirs.

Afterwards

- Write the ritual down in a few lines, so anyone can lead it.
- Plan to repeat it next week; rituals become rituals by being repeated.

My notes for this week

Look back and decide what's next

The club names what it has become, thanks people for their gifts, and chooses its rhythm for the next season.

Before the evening

- Bring the hopes from week three, and the agreements from week two.
- Prepare to name, specifically, something each person has given the club.
- Have a calendar ready for choosing the next season's dates.

At the door

- Open with the club's own ritual from week five.
- Make sure anyone who has drifted has had a personal message inviting them back.

The opening

- Read back the hopes from week three. Ask: which of these is already a little bit true?
- Keep it light and honest; there is no need to pretend everything worked.

Gifts, promises and the next season

- A round of gifts: each person names one thing someone else in the group has given them or the club, specifically and in front of others. The person receiving it simply says thank you.
- A round of promises: what is one small thing each person is willing to do for the club in the next season? 'I am not ready to promise anything yet' is an honest answer too.
- Choose the rhythm: how often you will meet, where, and who will host. Share the hosting (see Share the load).
- Decide whether to welcome new people, and how they will be invited.

Questions to use

- *What has this club given you that you did not expect?*
- *What would make the next season even better?*

The closing

- Close with your ritual, and say the date of the first gathering of the new season.
- The host's last line: thank people for making this club what it is.

Afterwards

- Send the season's dates and hosts to everyone.
- Take ten minutes alone: what would you do differently, and what will you keep?

My notes for this week

House rules the group makes together

Every group has unwritten rules that insiders know and newcomers learn by getting them wrong. A few short rules, said aloud, are fairer: anyone can follow them from the first evening. They work best when the group makes them.

Two questions to ask (week two)

- What does each of us need in order to feel comfortable here?
- What would help us say what we really think?

Turn the answers into three to five agreements in the group's own words. They apply to the host too.

What most clubs need

- One person at a time; short turns.
- Listen; no advice unless asked.
- Disagree about ideas, not people.
- Phones away while we talk.
- Anyone may pass.
- Start and end when we said.

What stays in the room

Many groups agree that personal things shared stay in the room. Say its limit at the start: if someone may be at risk of harm, the host cannot keep that secret and will help them get support.

Playful one-evening rules

For a special evening, add a rule that exists only once, with a smile: first names only; one conversation at the table; no work talk until dessert. A light forfeit helps (tell a joke, choose the next song), never anything that embarrasses, costs money or involves alcohol.

Our agreements

When it gets tricky

Every club meets hard moments. Most are ordinary and pass with a light touch. These cards are about patterns of behaviour, never about labelling a person.

When one person fills the room

- People speak a lot for many reasons: enthusiasm, real knowledge, nerves, seniority, or something they badly need to be heard on. Hold your guess lightly.
- Light touches: sum up their point in a sentence so they know it was heard, then turn: 'Thank you. I'd love to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.'
- Structures that never single anyone out: go round the circle so everyone speaks once before anyone speaks twice; a minute of silent writing first; pairs, then the group.
- If it keeps happening, a kind private word: what you notice, what the group needs, and a role that uses their energy, such as keeping time.

The quiet member

- Quiet is not the same as unhappy. Some people listen deeply and speak rarely.
- Make room without putting them on the spot: pairs before the group, write first, and 'anyone may pass' said aloud and meant.
- Ask them, privately, how the club is for them, and whether they would like a small role.
- Never ask someone why they passed.

The newcomer arriving mid-season

- Arriving when everyone else already knows each other is one of the hardest doors there is.
- Greet them yourself, introduce them to one person with a reason, and explain the agreements and the ritual briefly.
- Pair them with a friendly long-standing member for their first two gatherings.
- Make sure their welcome is marked, as in week five; do not leave it to chance.

When it gets tricky (continued)

A disagreement turns personal

- Disagreement about ideas can be good for a group. The trouble starts when it becomes about people.
- Point back to the agreements, not at the person: 'Can we come back to ideas, not people?'
- Slow it down: ask each person to say what they heard the other say, before they answer.
- If it stays heated, pause and speak to each person privately afterwards. Repair matters more than winning.

A member who is not okay

- You may notice a change from what is usual for this person: they withdraw, their mood has changed for some time, they sound hopeless, or others tell you they are worried.
- Find a quiet moment and say why you are asking: 'I've noticed you seem a bit low lately, and I wanted to ask how you are really doing.' Then listen.
- Stay calm, take it seriously, and do not promise to keep a secret if someone may be at risk. Help them reach help, and do not try to be their counsellor.
- If you are worried about their safety, it is right to ask directly whether they are thinking of harming themselves. Asking does not put the idea in their head.
- If life is in danger, call 10111, or 112 from a cell phone, and stay with them if it is safe. For support: SADAG 0800 456 789 (24 hours), the Suicide Crisis Line 0800 567 567, Lifeline 0861 322 322, the GBV Command Centre 0800 428 428, and Childline 116 where a child is involved. Check numbers before you print them, and look after yourself too.

A club host is not a counsellor. Your part is to notice, respond kindly, and help the person reach help. No host should handle a crisis alone.

Share the load

Many clubs rest on one person. When that person falls ill, moves or grows tired, the club falters, not because anyone stopped caring, but because nobody else knew how the work was done. Share the quiet roles from the start. Roles are ways of serving, not prizes, and nobody should be pressed to take more than they want.

Role	Weeks 1 and 2	Weeks 3 and 4	Weeks 5 and 6
Host for the evening			
Greeter at the door			
Keeper of the group chat and reminders			
Timekeeper			
Supplies (tea, food, chairs, keys)			
Welcomer of newcomers			
Leader of the ritual			
Note-taker for hopes, agreements and decisions			

Write it down

Keep one page with the purpose, the agreements, the ritual, the season's dates and who to call for the venue. Then anyone can host, and the club can outlast its founder.

After week six

Six gatherings give your club a shape. Keeping it alive is the next craft: a rhythm people can count on, new members welcomed well, hard moments held, and hosting shared. If you want to go further, five BelongWell4Life courses follow the order a club needs them.

Gather Well

Host gatherings people remember: purpose, invitation, the first five minutes, questions, small groups and the closing.

Build Well

Turn a group into a community: who it is for, how newcomers are welcomed, rituals, stories, symbols and inner rings.

Six Conversations

Small groups and better questions, so members become owners, not an audience.

Hold Well

When it gets hard: the person who dominates, the quarrel, the member who is not okay, and repair.

Hand It On

Grow new hosts, share the roles, write it down, and make the club outlast you.

Free: Return to the Room, seven days of small steps back into real connection, and the Community Builder's Advisor, which answers questions about building community in plain words. Find them at belongwell4life.co.za.

SOURCES AND THANKS

Where this kit comes from

This kit is written in our own words. It draws on the BelongWell4Life hosting courses, which are built on these books and studies:

- Priya Parker, The Art of Gathering
- Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging
- Charles Vogl, The Art of Community
- Bruce Feiler, A Time to Gather
- Marissa King, Social Chemistry
- Aron and colleagues (1997), Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, on conversations that grow gradually more personal
- Edmondson (1999), Administrative Science Quarterly, on psychological safety in teams
- Dazzi and colleagues (2014), Psychological Medicine, on asking about suicide

Where the advice is practice wisdom rather than research, we say so in the courses. Help-line numbers were correct in October 2026; please check them before you print.

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