



## Glenn Livingston, Ph.D. and Howie Jacobson, Ph.D. on Community Benefits

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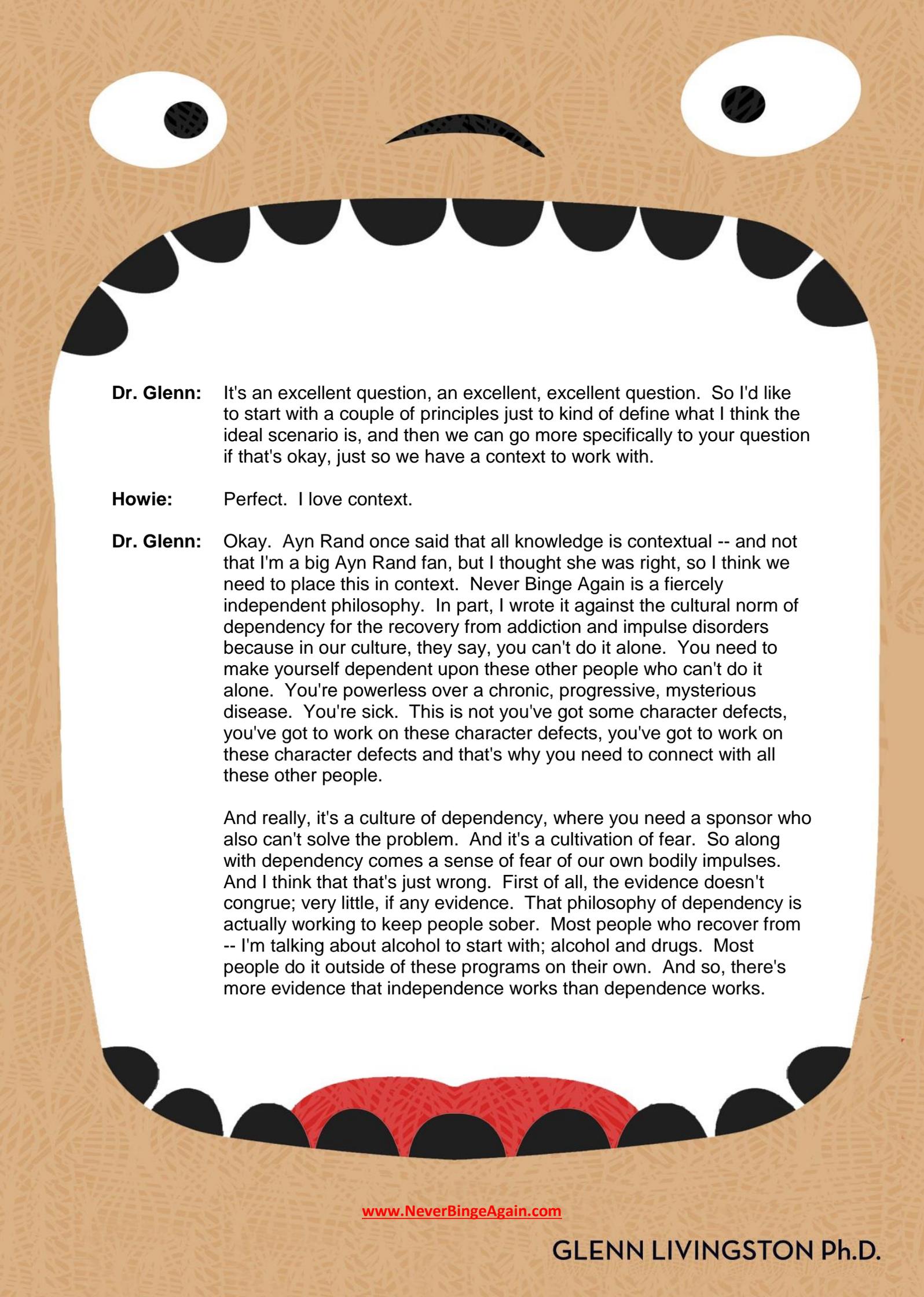
**Dr. Glenn:** Dude, how are you doing?

**Howie:** I'm doing good. So I wanted to talk to you today about sort of social influence. And specifically, I noticed in my group in The Big Change Program, that when we get on group calls, this is kind of a bell curve of where people are, of how they're doing at any one moment, how much progress they feel like they're making, and it can be actually discouraging for folks to hear other folk's successes. So I got a little bit concerned about that as a group leader to make sure that that doesn't happen, but I also wanted to talk about what people can do as members of the group to make sure that their successes are not dependent on other people's failures, but everyone's working together. Someone posted in the group a line that they heard from Weight Watchers, which was, if you've lost weight, the group needs you; and if you haven't lost weight, then you need the group, which I liked, but I'd love to talk to you about the dynamics of being in a group, of kind of comparisons.

And one of the best ways to manage that for yourself, if you're a member of a group and you find yourself either doing well one week or not, or -- you know what I'm asking?

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GLENN LIVINGSTON Ph.D.



**Dr. Glenn:** It's an excellent question, an excellent, excellent question. So I'd like to start with a couple of principles just to kind of define what I think the ideal scenario is, and then we can go more specifically to your question if that's okay, just so we have a context to work with.

**Howie:** Perfect. I love context.

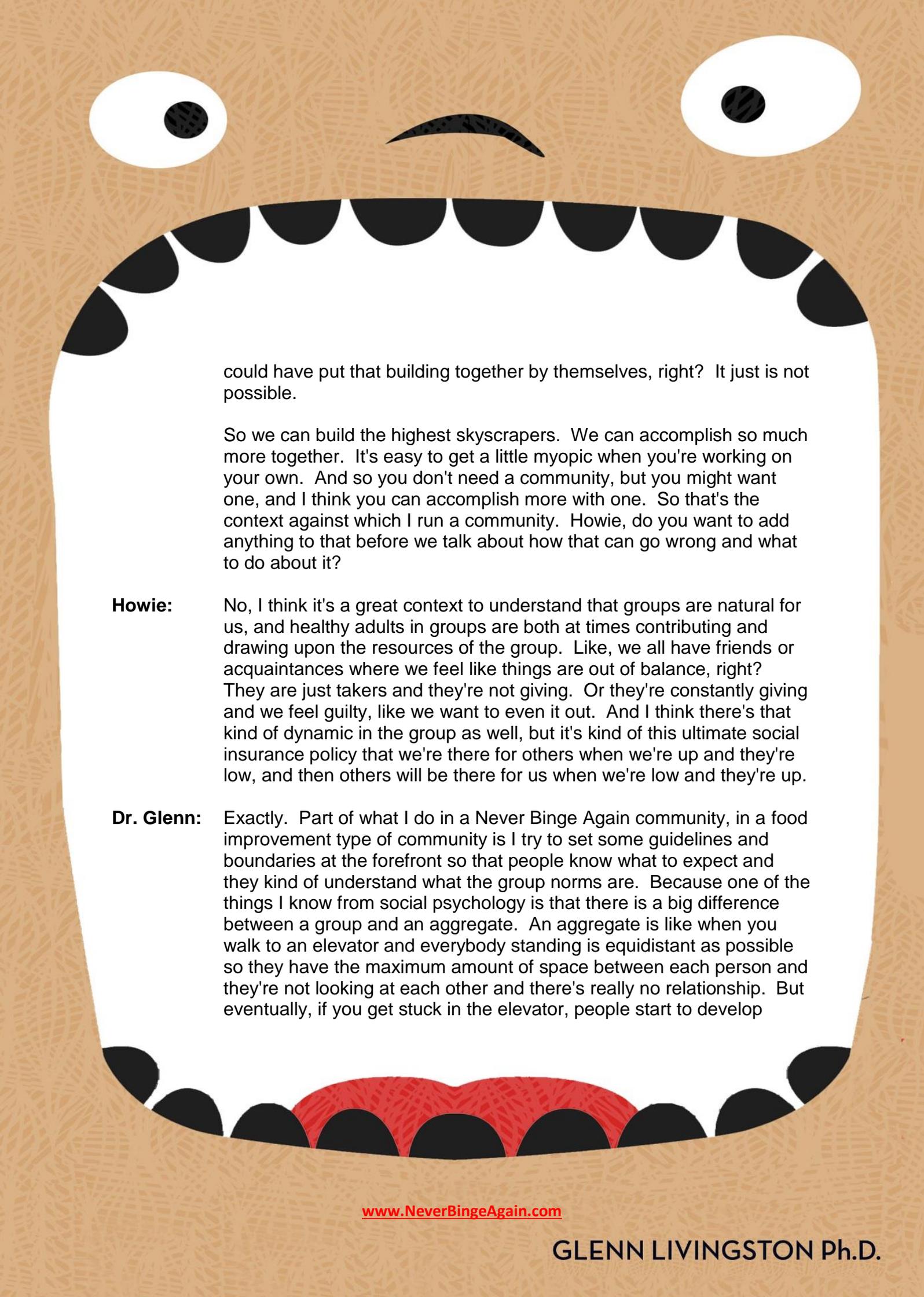
**Dr. Glenn:** Okay. Ayn Rand once said that all knowledge is contextual -- and not that I'm a big Ayn Rand fan, but I thought she was right, so I think we need to place this in context. *Never Binge Again* is a fiercely independent philosophy. In part, I wrote it against the cultural norm of dependency for the recovery from addiction and impulse disorders because in our culture, they say, you can't do it alone. You need to make yourself dependent upon these other people who can't do it alone. You're powerless over a chronic, progressive, mysterious disease. You're sick. This is not you've got some character defects, you've got to work on these character defects, you've got to work on these character defects and that's why you need to connect with all these other people.

And really, it's a culture of dependency, where you need a sponsor who also can't solve the problem. And it's a cultivation of fear. So along with dependency comes a sense of fear of our own bodily impulses. And I think that that's just wrong. First of all, the evidence doesn't concur; very little, if any evidence. That philosophy of dependency is actually working to keep people sober. Most people who recover from -- I'm talking about alcohol to start with; alcohol and drugs. Most people do it outside of these programs on their own. And so, there's more evidence that independence works than dependence works.



However, I run groups. I've got a free readers forum we can mention at the end. I've got a paid group coaching program. And I believe that, in the ideal scenario, groups are extraordinarily helpful, but it has to do with the continuum that Stephen Covey introduced to me. I actually got to consult with him for a very little bit before he died. I really liked him. And what he said was that, "Look, really, maturity is firstly about moving from dependence to independence, but ultimately, it's about moving from independence to interdependence." And what he meant by that was we started as children, we can't do it ourselves, right? And then we get to this point where we're adolescent and we're defining our own identity and we're saying, "Damn it, I can do it by myself. I don't need you."

And then finally, we get to the point we're interdependent where we say, "Well, I could do it myself and I don't need you, but I could accomplish a lot more if we do this together." It's really the interdependent community that I'm after. I'm after people who know that they can do it on their own, but working with other people to help them spot the irrational things that they say to themselves that they might not be able to hear -- we call that pig squeal -- to help them come up with strategies for better taking care of themselves, even some simple things as, oh, what can I carry in the car when I go to a restaurant, or how I plan ahead when I travel, or, hey, I'm just feeling sad and I know I don't have to eat because I feel sad, but it will be nice to have some company, even for some emotional support, that life is just better in a group and there's a reason that humans form a society. We're not lone wolf animals. There's a reason that we form packs and hierarchies and work together in a group. We can accomplish more together. And if you -- sometimes I like to walk around Central Park and look at the big tall buildings and I say, there's no one person that



could have put that building together by themselves, right? It just is not possible.

So we can build the highest skyscrapers. We can accomplish so much more together. It's easy to get a little myopic when you're working on your own. And so you don't need a community, but you might want one, and I think you can accomplish more with one. So that's the context against which I run a community. Howie, do you want to add anything to that before we talk about how that can go wrong and what to do about it?

**Howie:** No, I think it's a great context to understand that groups are natural for us, and healthy adults in groups are both at times contributing and drawing upon the resources of the group. Like, we all have friends or acquaintances where we feel like things are out of balance, right? They are just takers and they're not giving. Or they're constantly giving and we feel guilty, like we want to even it out. And I think there's that kind of dynamic in the group as well, but it's kind of this ultimate social insurance policy that we're there for others when we're up and they're low, and then others will be there for us when we're low and they're up.

**Dr. Glenn:** Exactly. Part of what I do in a Never Binge Again community, in a food improvement type of community is I try to set some guidelines and boundaries at the forefront so that people know what to expect and they kind of understand what the group norms are. Because one of the things I know from social psychology is that there is a big difference between a group and an aggregate. An aggregate is like when you walk to an elevator and everybody standing is equidistant as possible so they have the maximum amount of space between each person and they're not looking at each other and there's really no relationship. But eventually, if you get stuck in the elevator, people start to develop



these cultural norms. You know, like, maybe somebody eventually burps or someone sits next to someone else a little more or they start to smile at each other. And then you start to have a group where certain things are accepted and certain things aren't.

And so if you can define those cultural norms for people before they've decided for themselves, then it's a lot safer. So it has to do with that leader sense of tone in the group. And some of the things I will say are that, you know look, we are not here to argue about diet. This is a diet agnostic community. I have very strong personal beliefs about what the best nutritional philosophy might be, but I'm not here to tell you that. If you want to eat a diet that's different than mine, I'm here to help you to stick to that if you want to. Sometimes, I cringe at that a little bit because I see people trying to stick to something that's I think not nutritionally complete or very difficult to stick to, but I find that having that as a rule in the community is very protective. And then when people seek one-on-one coaching, if they really need some nutritional advice, I try to give it to them even though I'm not a nutritionist, I'm just kind of a smart guy that went through a lot.

Okay. So I tell them, we're not here to argue about dietary philosophy. We're here to help people understand what their inner pig might be saying, how they might be rationalizing breaking their own rules. We're here to support one another and help each other to get back on track after we make a mistake. We're here to prevent those mistakes in the first place. We're not here to figure out the psychology of why we binge. It might be very interesting to know that one person picks chocolate because they're lonely. Another one picks salty, crunchy foods because they're stressed at work. And we could have a very soulful discussion about that, but in my experience, that has really nothing to do why they binge. They binge really for the pleasure and



because of the lack of education and knowledge of what else they can have and because of the billions and billions of dollars that are going into engineering foods by industry and advertising and the addiction treatment industry saying that you can't have just one, you're powerless to resist.

And so I set up a whole set of guidelines and norms for how I want the group to behave. And I find that that cuts off a lot of the trouble upfront. I also spend some time talking about how shame prevents people from participating, and that even if you find someone who successfully caged their pig and has lost a lot of weight, anybody who has been obese and really struggled with binge eating can spot another formerly obese person because there's a certain kind of shame we wear on our faces. We spent too many years suffering. We have the looks and stares from other people, and we kind of had this adaptation to life where we felt like we weren't quite as good as everybody else, and we can all recognize that. But when you think about the enormous amount of money that goes in to pressing these buttons, the fact that we weren't evolutionary prepared for this level of concentrated pleasure, the fact that we're being told all these wrong things by this perfect storm of sociological and economic forces in the world, really, most of that shame is inaccurate and inappropriate. And I want us all to be here to help each other get over that and face what we need to do to get better regardless.

And so, as a leader, I'm able to cut through a lot of the problems that people would be acting out in a group dynamic if I didn't do that upfront. Does that make sense?



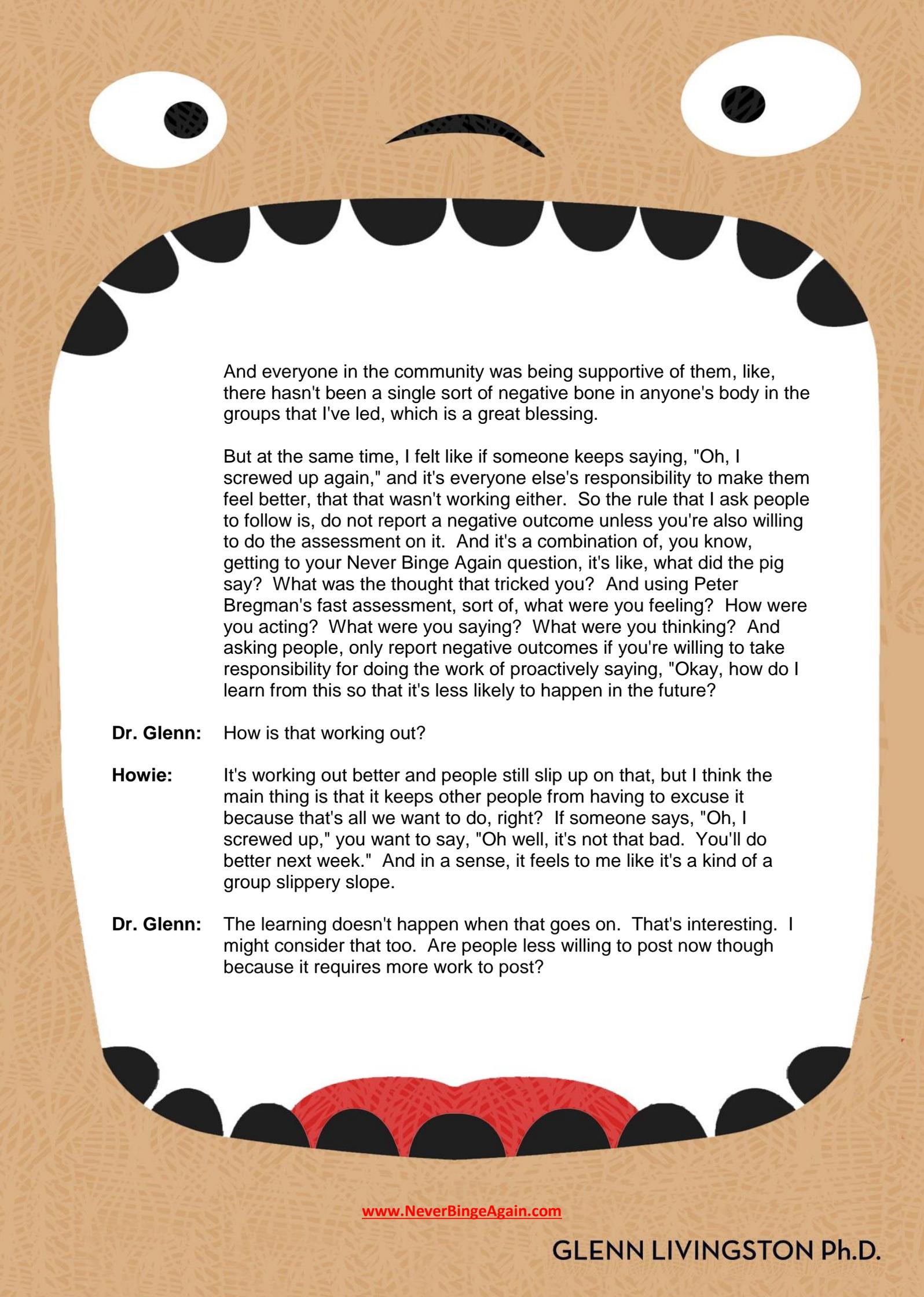
**Howie:** What do you mean by "problems that they would be acting out"? What are the sort of shame-based problems that you might say and be worried about?

**Dr. Glenn:** When people feel ashamed of their own persona, of who they are, they're more likely to shame other people. You'll get more comments about, well gee, that's just stupid if you're trying to eat X, Y, and Z and you think you're never going to be abstinent, you think you'll ever going to stop bingeing. That's just dump. "Oh no, no, who are you to tell me that?" And you start to have these shaming wars. But it's really because people are trying to get the shame out of them and onto other people in a negative way.

**Howie:** So if you say something that triggers some shame or fear of my own, like, I could never go to a steakhouse again because I'd be too weak, then I might project that onto you and it's sort of belligerent or inappropriately giving you advice or being directive because I'm feeling vulnerable and defenseless myself.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah. What you want to do is, as a leader, is figure out the areas where people might be carrying an inappropriate amount of shame, and you want to normalize that so that they're not motivated to get rid of those really bad feelings on each other. That's what I'm saying. Ask me another question if it doesn't make sense.

**Howie:** Yeah. That makes sense. I like how you create rules upfront that create boundaries in which people can be safe. One of the rules I didn't create upfront, but I added after seeing how gross of it was, is -- so people were posting their daily check-ins, or their homework assignments, and they would sort of casually allude to, "I bingeed twice this week", or you know, "I was going to get up for my run, but I didn't."



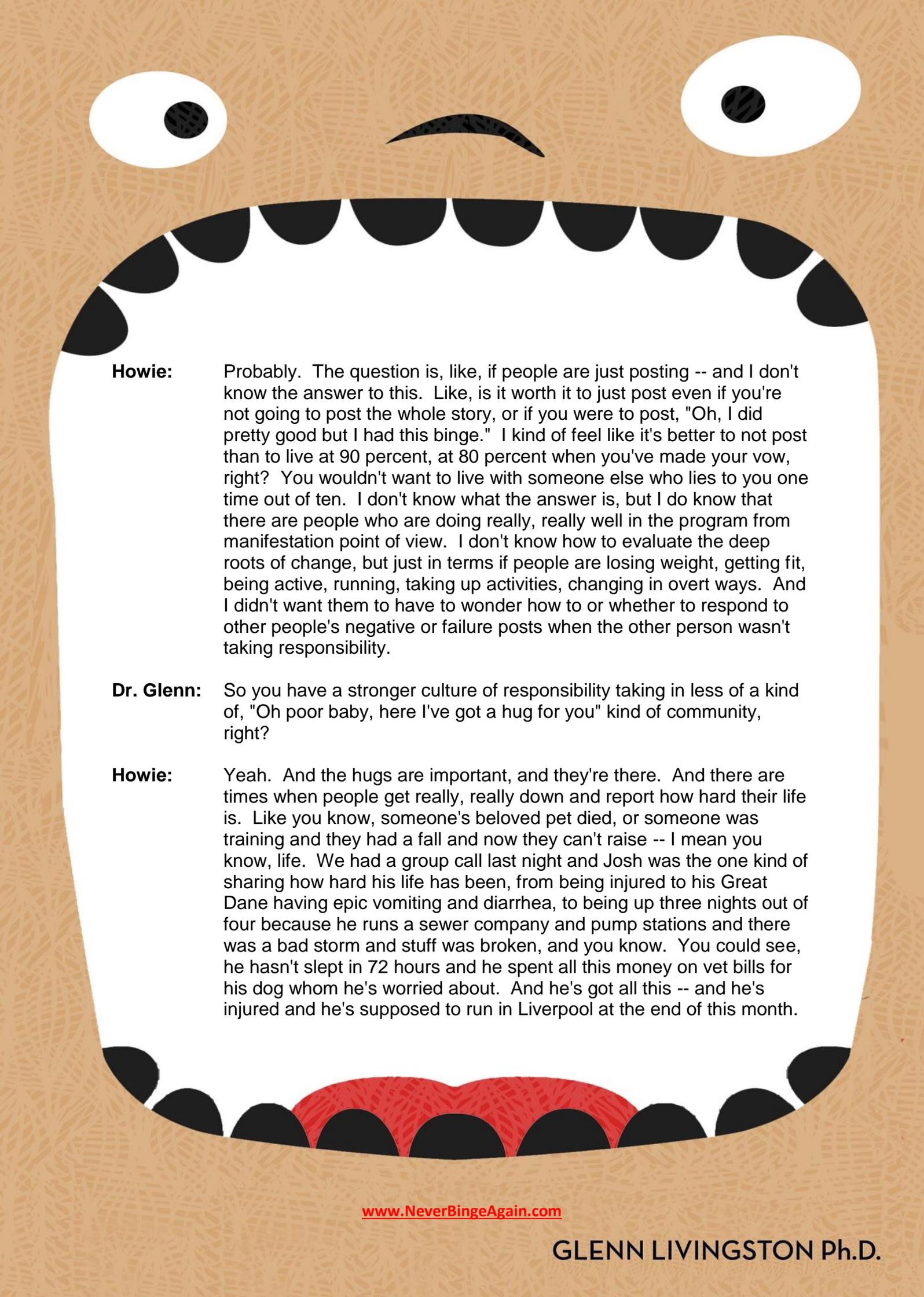
And everyone in the community was being supportive of them, like, there hasn't been a single sort of negative bone in anyone's body in the groups that I've led, which is a great blessing.

But at the same time, I felt like if someone keeps saying, "Oh, I screwed up again," and it's everyone else's responsibility to make them feel better, that that wasn't working either. So the rule that I ask people to follow is, do not report a negative outcome unless you're also willing to do the assessment on it. And it's a combination of, you know, getting to your Never Binge Again question, it's like, what did the pig say? What was the thought that tricked you? And using Peter Bregman's fast assessment, sort of, what were you feeling? How were you acting? What were you saying? What were you thinking? And asking people, only report negative outcomes if you're willing to take responsibility for doing the work of proactively saying, "Okay, how do I learn from this so that it's less likely to happen in the future?"

**Dr. Glenn:** How is that working out?

**Howie:** It's working out better and people still slip up on that, but I think the main thing is that it keeps other people from having to excuse it because that's all we want to do, right? If someone says, "Oh, I screwed up," you want to say, "Oh well, it's not that bad. You'll do better next week." And in a sense, it feels to me like it's a kind of a group slippery slope.

**Dr. Glenn:** The learning doesn't happen when that goes on. That's interesting. I might consider that too. Are people less willing to post now though because it requires more work to post?



**Howie:** Probably. The question is, like, if people are just posting -- and I don't know the answer to this. Like, is it worth it to just post even if you're not going to post the whole story, or if you were to post, "Oh, I did pretty good but I had this binge." I kind of feel like it's better to not post than to live at 90 percent, at 80 percent when you've made your vow, right? You wouldn't want to live with someone else who lies to you one time out of ten. I don't know what the answer is, but I do know that there are people who are doing really, really well in the program from manifestation point of view. I don't know how to evaluate the deep roots of change, but just in terms if people are losing weight, getting fit, being active, running, taking up activities, changing in overt ways. And I didn't want them to have to wonder how to or whether to respond to other people's negative or failure posts when the other person wasn't taking responsibility.

**Dr. Glenn:** So you have a stronger culture of responsibility taking in less of a kind of, "Oh poor baby, here I've got a hug for you" kind of community, right?

**Howie:** Yeah. And the hugs are important, and they're there. And there are times when people get really, really down and report how hard their life is. Like you know, someone's beloved pet died, or someone was training and they had a fall and now they can't raise -- I mean you know, life. We had a group call last night and Josh was the one kind of sharing how hard his life has been, from being injured to his Great Dane having epic vomiting and diarrhea, to being up three nights out of four because he runs a sewer company and pump stations and there was a bad storm and stuff was broken, and you know. You could see, he hasn't slept in 72 hours and he spent all this money on vet bills for his dog whom he's worried about. And he's got all this -- and he's injured and he's supposed to run in Liverpool at the end of this month.



You could see and hear and feel like he's going through a really rough patch, but he also modeled like, here's how I'm coping, here's how I'm avoiding the dopamine-seeking behaviors that I used to do. Here are some ways in which I've compromised that a little bit just to stay sane. And it was empowering for everyone to see that one of our leaders is human and vulnerable and goes through the same shit as anyone else. And people were being very sympathetic and empathetic, but at the same time, they weren't enabling.

**Dr. Glenn:** First of all, I like the guideline. And you know that I highly encourage people to not just dismiss a mistake casually because I think that our food plans are sacred laws, like a sacred oath we've taken to ourselves. And so, if you find yourself breaking one, I would take it just as seriously as if I found myself breaking a law that I was expected to obey in society. I don't know, if I started parking illegally all the time or something like that, I want to ask myself why am I doing that and can I find a legal space to park and make it more efficient for me to do that.

I think that in my community -- maybe it works better in your community like that. In my community, it would work better to make that a suggestion and give people guidance about it and gently remind them about it because I do find that virtually everyone that post that they're having trouble, gets back on track as a result of having posted. There's something about the way the community rallies and helps them see the pig squeals and talks about similar experiences that really does get these people back on track. And the way that I have established the community norms, it does seem that when people post, there's a certain amount of constructive motivation that starts some momentum. And so I don't really want to create an obstacle for them to post.



Now, I can tell you that I've had people who say that they don't want to be part of the community because they don't want to hear other people whine about how they can't keep their commitments to themselves, that that's really not good for them. And I respect that. I could tell you that, personally, who has heard more people whine about how they can't keep their commitments to themselves than me, right? It's really sitting back and listening to everybody's pigs. I can tell you that it's made me stronger. I can tell you that I look forward to hearing the next new excuse that I haven't heard before because that's one more thing that my pig will never be able to tell me. And so I feel like I'm [inaudible 0:17:01] in a cage more and more and more every time that I do a session, every time that I read a post. I've got more and more creative things to tell other people when they have trouble, more and more creative things to tell my pig if I have to.

I feel like what doesn't kill me makes me stronger there, and it works out really, really well for me. And I'd like other people to consider having that perspective. I also think that there are problems that people solve in the course of their life that may not have to do with eating in particular, but they're busy talking and I do hear them happen to casually mention how they solve some of their problem, and I would have never thought of solving that problem that way. And so being part of a community just -- and it makes me stronger and stronger across all areas of my life like that.

People come up with really interesting things in the community. The other day, I was talking to a woman and she said she needed a mantra to help her in social situations, I think it was. And she said, "I choose to be a healthy leader," which meant that she switched the paradigm from thinking about how deprived she was and everything that she was giving up to how, if she were to give in and eat like all these other



people were eating, then they would never get to see her as an example of health and someone that they could conceivably follow into health, and she really cared about these people. And so she decided to choose to be a healthy leader. And I thought about that paradigm before, but I never really put it in those words. And so, having those words crystallized by someone that I was listening to who was struggling with food a lot more than I was, that made me stronger too.

I feel that the opportunities for growth in a community far outweigh the opportunities for being dragged down. I suppose it is possible to get dragged down. And I wrote the Never Binge Again book as a very fiercely independent philosophy so that people can just read the book and recover and have nothing to do with the community if they don't want to. I kind of felt like, well, why wouldn't you want the community if you could get it because there's all this other benefits to that?

**Howie:** So let me ask you one more question, which is, the person who's been doing poorly and then comes on a call or reads stuff in the forum or on the Facebook group and sees other people being successful. And I think there are ways to be motivated by that, and I also think there are ways to be discouraged by that. How would you advise someone who is struggling to think about, when they see evidence of other people succeeding? So they don't go, "Oh well, sure Never Binge Again works for them but not for me."

**Dr. Glenn:** Well, I reminded you that there are two ways to think about anything. There's your way and there's the pig's way. And the way that you'd want to think about that is, how can I emulate this person in even the smallest way to improve my health, fitness and commitment to my food plan? And the pig's way to think about it would be that, that person is so different from us, you're never going to achieve that. Don't even



bother. Let's just go and have us a big hairy binge. What most people don't realize is that you can make a conscious choice about which of those attitudes you want to adopt, and that one of these attitudes is pig squeal and one of those attitudes is your healthy thought, and I would focus on your healthy thought. I would make that conscious choice. I would separate those thoughts in your mind and I would take that adaptation to life.

**Howie:** Oh, that's simple.

**Dr. Glenn:** No, I mean there are all kinds of deep psychological reasons why people have trouble doing that sometimes, but in the end, it's a conscious choice. If you can choose to be happy in that situation, why wouldn't you? If you can choose to take something constructive out of it, why wouldn't you?

**Howie:** Sure. And then that brings you back to sort of one litmus test for pig squeal that I value highly, is like, which advice would you give to a child.

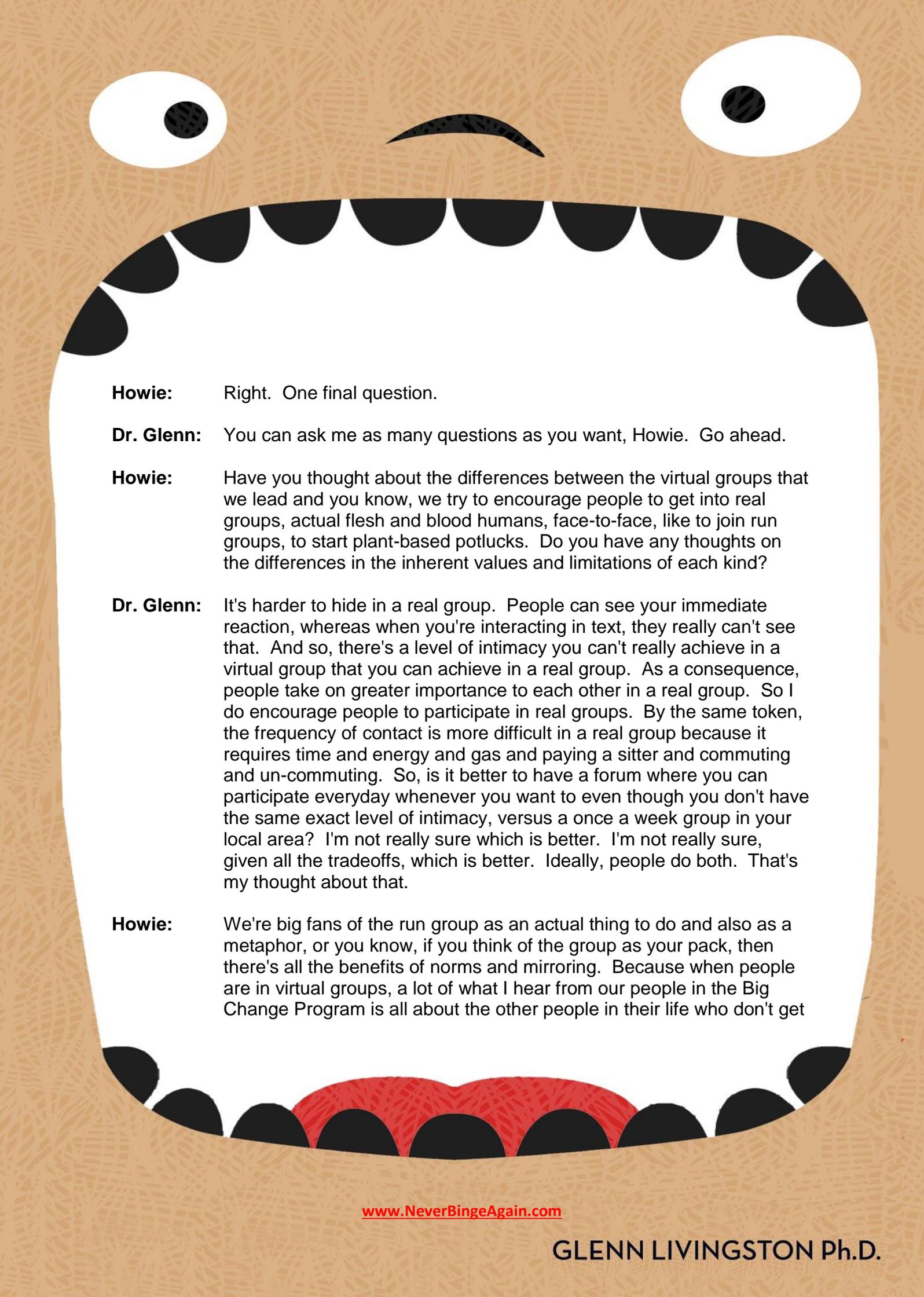
**Dr. Glenn:** Yup.

**Howie:** Would you tell your child, "Oh well, the other kids are reading and you aren't. There's something wrong with you."

**Dr. Glenn:** You say, "You must be really, really stupid."

**Howie:** Yeah.

**Dr. Glenn:** "You're going to wind up picking up after the elephants in the circus or something," but you would never say that.



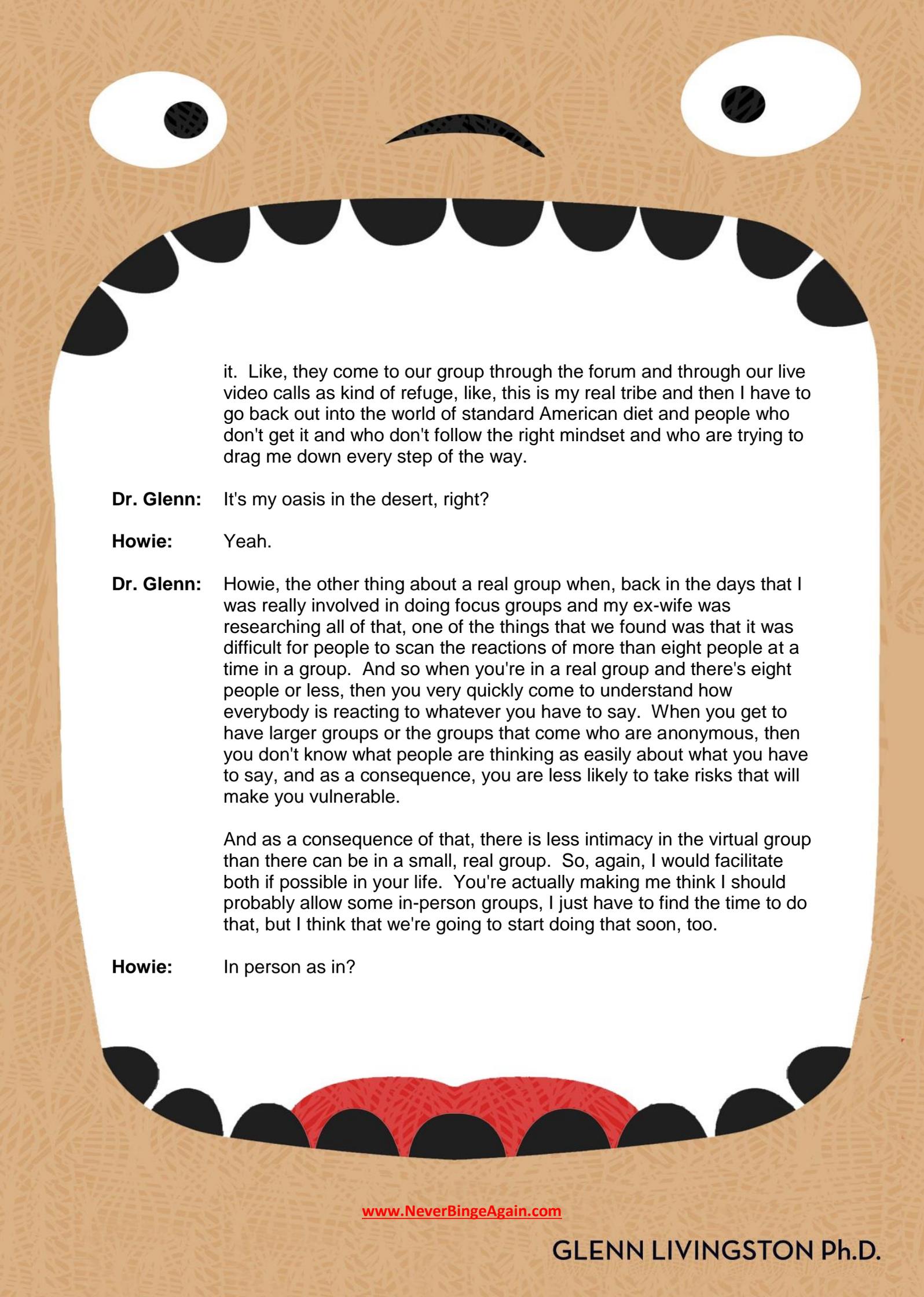
**Howie:** Right. One final question.

**Dr. Glenn:** You can ask me as many questions as you want, Howie. Go ahead.

**Howie:** Have you thought about the differences between the virtual groups that we lead and you know, we try to encourage people to get into real groups, actual flesh and blood humans, face-to-face, like to join run groups, to start plant-based potlucks. Do you have any thoughts on the differences in the inherent values and limitations of each kind?

**Dr. Glenn:** It's harder to hide in a real group. People can see your immediate reaction, whereas when you're interacting in text, they really can't see that. And so, there's a level of intimacy you can't really achieve in a virtual group that you can achieve in a real group. As a consequence, people take on greater importance to each other in a real group. So I do encourage people to participate in real groups. By the same token, the frequency of contact is more difficult in a real group because it requires time and energy and gas and paying a sitter and commuting and un-commuting. So, is it better to have a forum where you can participate everyday whenever you want to even though you don't have the same exact level of intimacy, versus a once a week group in your local area? I'm not really sure which is better. I'm not really sure, given all the tradeoffs, which is better. Ideally, people do both. That's my thought about that.

**Howie:** We're big fans of the run group as an actual thing to do and also as a metaphor, or you know, if you think of the group as your pack, then there's all the benefits of norms and mirroring. Because when people are in virtual groups, a lot of what I hear from our people in the Big Change Program is all about the other people in their life who don't get



it. Like, they come to our group through the forum and through our live video calls as kind of refuge, like, this is my real tribe and then I have to go back out into the world of standard American diet and people who don't get it and who don't follow the right mindset and who are trying to drag me down every step of the way.

**Dr. Glenn:** It's my oasis in the desert, right?

**Howie:** Yeah.

**Dr. Glenn:** Howie, the other thing about a real group when, back in the days that I was really involved in doing focus groups and my ex-wife was researching all of that, one of the things that we found was that it was difficult for people to scan the reactions of more than eight people at a time in a group. And so when you're in a real group and there's eight people or less, then you very quickly come to understand how everybody is reacting to whatever you have to say. When you get to have larger groups or the groups that come who are anonymous, then you don't know what people are thinking as easily about what you have to say, and as a consequence, you are less likely to take risks that will make you vulnerable.

And as a consequence of that, there is less intimacy in the virtual group than there can be in a small, real group. So, again, I would facilitate both if possible in your life. You're actually making me think I should probably allow some in-person groups, I just have to find the time to do that, but I think that we're going to start doing that soon, too.

**Howie:** In person as in?



**Dr. Glenn:** Right now, everything is online. Right now, we have group coaching. Right now we have via online webinars and Skype and we have follow-up coaching via Skype. But I'm thinking that maybe over the summers, I should have some more in-person workshops so that people can experience the benefits of being face-to-face.

**Howie:** Do a road show.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah.

**Howie:** Traveling pig university.

**Dr. Glenn:** Well, that's going to require that I get on a plane.

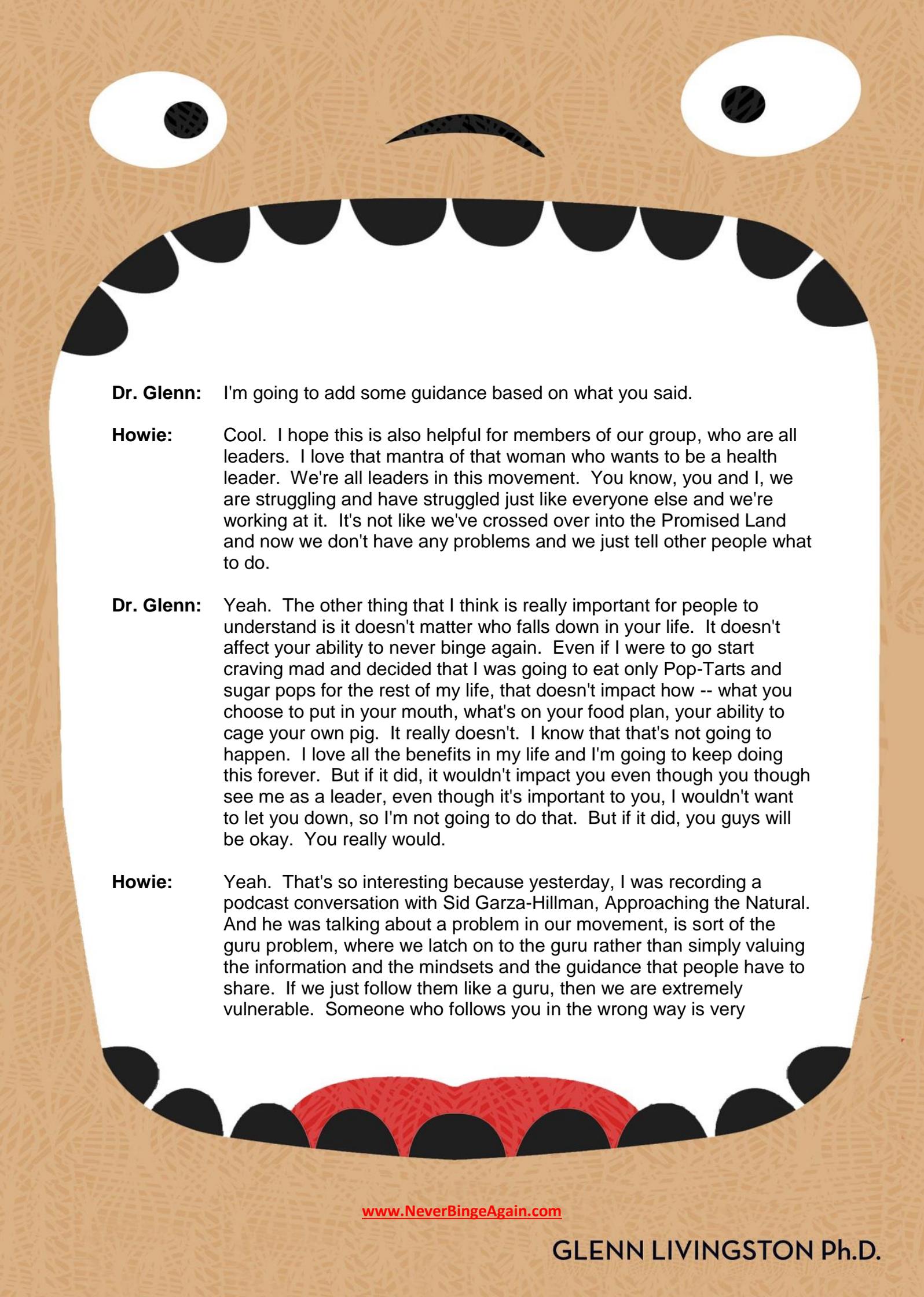
**Howie:** Yeah. I was picturing like a bus, like the electric Kool-Aid acid test.

**Dr. Glenn:** That's funny. Maybe we should that, maybe in August or something like that. We'd travel across the country, go from city to city. That's interesting.

**Howie:** Yeah. A lot of people talk about like they'd love to meet each other, especially people who jive online. We feel like we know each other intimately. In some cases, we reveal more in forums and online than we reveal to the people we live with.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right.

**Howie:** Thanks for sharing these thoughts. It's very helpful to me. As a provider of education, I'm going to rethink the rule and maybe make it a suggestion or reduce the hurdle to people posting their challenges and their negativities.



**Dr. Glenn:** I'm going to add some guidance based on what you said.

**Howie:** Cool. I hope this is also helpful for members of our group, who are all leaders. I love that mantra of that woman who wants to be a health leader. We're all leaders in this movement. You know, you and I, we are struggling and have struggled just like everyone else and we're working at it. It's not like we've crossed over into the Promised Land and now we don't have any problems and we just tell other people what to do.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah. The other thing that I think is really important for people to understand is it doesn't matter who falls down in your life. It doesn't affect your ability to never binge again. Even if I were to go start craving mad and decided that I was going to eat only Pop-Tarts and sugar pops for the rest of my life, that doesn't impact how -- what you choose to put in your mouth, what's on your food plan, your ability to cage your own pig. It really doesn't. I know that that's not going to happen. I love all the benefits in my life and I'm going to keep doing this forever. But if it did, it wouldn't impact you even though you though see me as a leader, even though it's important to you, I wouldn't want to let you down, so I'm not going to do that. But if it did, you guys will be okay. You really would.

**Howie:** Yeah. That's so interesting because yesterday, I was recording a podcast conversation with Sid Garza-Hillman, Approaching the Natural. And he was talking about a problem in our movement, is sort of the guru problem, where we latch on to the guru rather than simply valuing the information and the mindsets and the guidance that people have to share. If we just follow them like a guru, then we are extremely vulnerable. Someone who follows you in the wrong way is very



vulnerable to you slipping up. You know, if you have a rule like, every 700 days, I have a strawberry Pop-Tart and you tell that to people, then all of a sudden, people can give themselves license for all sorts of crazy stuff.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right. And I don't have that rule, by the way. Dependence is a central problem in addiction. It's the belief that you are not capable of managing your own impulses. And cultivating that belief is dangerous. That's why I tell you that it doesn't matter what I do, it only matters what you do.

**Howie:** Beautiful. Well, I've gotten a ton out of this and I hope other people have too. Glenn, thank you so much for agreeing to have a conversation.

**Dr. Glenn:** Thanks, buddy. It was fun to have.

**Howie:** Take care.

**Dr. Glenn:** Okay.

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