

HOW TO HANDLE CHALLENGING GROUP MEMBERS

So leaders can maintain a safe environment

In order to maintain a safe environment in your Single & Parenting group for sharing, a balance is needed between giving people the opportunity to express themselves and keeping people from overtaking the group. It's not always the loud or talkative person who disturbs the group during discussion time; sometimes safe discussion is hindered through other, more subtle means. Remember, you are the one who maintains a safe environment for people to explore thoughts, questions and concerns.

Start by having group guidelines in place before your first meeting. Go over the group guidelines the first few sessions and every time a newcomer attends. (See the LeaderZone Library for group guidelines ideas.) One rule to add to your group guidelines is what is referred to as the "permission rule." You ask your group to give you permission to bring you back to the topic if they go off into other subjects, explaining that this allows all to have time to talk on each question. Then ask them to raise their hands if they give you permission. This sets the expectation, and when a group member goes off topic, you can gently say, "Thank you, Kim. Remember you gave me permission to bring you back to our subject." "Good comments. John, what are your thoughts on that question?" and move the discussion along.

Once your guidelines have been communicated, you will still experience a variety of personalities during the discussion time, but a difficult person can be reined in using the practical tips in this article. Below is a list of traits and behaviors you may experience in your group and suggestions for handling the various situations. Please keep in mind that this list is not inclusive and that any of these issues can disrupt group discussion time.

TRAITS AND BEHAVIORS

Arguer (possibly angry or upset by personal problems) Validate this person's feelings, try to find merit in his or her points, then redirect the conversation to a different person by utilizing a new question.

Complainer (someone with a pet peeve or a legitimate complaint) Redirect this person's attention to the topic under discussion.

Confronter (two or more members in confrontation) Emphasize points of agreement, stop the discussion and use a redirecting. Remind them to respect one another, to speak the truth in love and that it is "okay" to agree to disagree.

Dater (looking for a date) This must be dealt with immediately. Speak to this person after group with a co-facilitator, reemphasizing the purpose for attending a Single & Parenting group. Clearly communicate the group guidelines for acceptable behavior in your group and that anyone who does not comply will be asked to leave. If you discover the person has wrong motives or is noncompliant, remove him or her from the group.

Enabler (one who does something for someone else that he or she should do for him- or herself, one who likes to fix everyone else's problem) Remind this person everyone is here to explore and to work on his or her own issues.

Inarticulate (poor language skills or the ideas are good but inadequately expressed) Reflect and repeat the person's ideas in your own words. "Let me see if I understand ..." or "It sounds like ..." Protect the person from embarrassment or ridicule.

Know-it-all (thinks he or she has the right answers) Validate this person's feelings and redirect a question to someone else: "Let's get some more opinions ..."

Observer (observes participants and group interaction for reasons outside your Single & Parenting group purpose/ministry, such as for research and analysis) Use discernment in identifying this person. Maintain leadership of your group by removing this person. Observers are allowed when:

1. A Single & Parenting leader is in training from your own church.
2. A Single & Parenting leader is in training from another church (must obtain permission from the group and your church leadership).
3. A professional counselor wants to know more about the material for the purpose of referring clients (must obtain permission from the group and your church leadership).
4. A family member or friend is attending as moral support (limit the number of sessions attended so participant is learning to depend upon God not people).

Off Base (completely misses the point of the question, may have something else on his or her mind) Direct attention to the topic discussion. Say, "Can you tell me more about ..." or "Something I said may have thrown you off the subject, but the question we are talking about now is ..." or explore what is on the person's mind by saying, "Can you tell me more about ..." "How interesting, what led you to think of ..."

Pity Party (one who uses suffering to gain or maintain attention) Ask this person to give you ideas of ways he or she can help others. If the person can't, invite suggestions from the group.

Rambler (talks about everything and/or the subject tends to get lost) When the person stops for a breath, validate, rephrase one of his or her statements and move on by saying "Has anyone else had that experience?" Address a direct question to someone else. Indicate in a friendly manner that the discussion has moved away from the topic.

Shy One (tends not to talk or share readily, needs drawing out) While no one is required to participate in the discussion, the following are reasons why people might choose not to share: a lack of confidence, inability to mentally keep on track with the discussion, leader or others in group are overbearing, distracted due to personal problems or fear of rejection. "[Use name], it looks like you may have some thoughts on _____, would you consider sharing them?" Be prepared to praise and encourage anything contributed.

Spiritualizer (frequent scriptural "pat" answers) Ask, "How do we apply that statement in a practical manner?" Validate and redirect a question to someone else.

Stubborn (won't budge, narrow viewpoint or doesn't see the purpose) Validate and redirect a question to someone else. Remember, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to teach and lead them into the truth from God's Word.

Theological Debater (likes to engage in formal argumentation or debate on controversial issues) Validate the emotion not the subject, and redirect. May need to speak with this person after class or redirect him or her to an elder or pastor for information. You can say, "I really appreciate your enthusiasm on this topic, but we need to move on to ..."

Vulnerable (easily manipulated either emotionally or financially) Caution this person and recommend he or she seek the input of trusted professionals, such as counselors, bankers, lawyers, financial advisors and accountants.

TIPS ON HANDLING DOMINATING GROUP MEMBERS

When handling dominating participants, consider utilizing the following suggestions: avoid direct eye contact, turn your body away from them, sit next to them and use a gentle tap or nudge to redirect. Use a cue card with the written words, “2 statements” to remind the person to wrap up his or her thoughts. If necessary, talk to the person privately (with a co-facilitator) after the meeting to address the issue the person is struggling with.

Be aware that those who are addicted to alcohol or drugs may attempt to attend your group. A person with these addictions may exhibit disruptive and dominating behaviors.

Also, a person with a mental illness such as bipolar, schizophrenic or chemical depression may or may not be taking medication, and as a result, may disrupt your group. You may also have a suicidal individual in your group (one who speaks or acts with thoughts of harm to oneself or others). Remember, know your Christian community resources and be ready to redirect people to appropriate medical and professional help.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Here’s how you can use this information as a “group role play” in a unique (and fun!) way. Invite your leaders to sit in a circle of chairs and designate two people as group facilitators. Give everyone else in the circle a folded piece of paper with one of the above behaviors written on it. Each person in the circle should not disclose his or her dominating behavior but should act out or demonstrate it to others through words and actions.

Instruct the group facilitators to begin the group discussion (give the facilitators a specific topic to discuss), and encourage the rest of the group to act out their assigned behaviors throughout the discussion. The facilitators should attempt to keep the discussion going while being sensitive to the dynamics of the group!

After a time, stop the group and have them guess each person’s dominating behavior.

Training application

Point out good things that the facilitators did; then offer helpful suggestions, and let the group members offer suggestions as well. Repeat the exercise, but with new facilitators and with new behaviors assigned.

By Jodi Rule-Rouse and Jan Lefever.

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