

Encouraging People with Difficult Behaviors

If you have ever had to face difficult group members, you know how frustrating and potentially demoralizing the experience can be. But there are general strategies and specific techniques that can help you cope. By understanding them and adopting a constructive response, you can influence their behavior. This will make the group environment less strained and more productive.

General Strategies for Handling Difficult Behaviors

1. Assess the situation. Is the person genuinely difficult, or just cranky for a short time?
2. Stop wishing the person were different. You can't change him!
3. Put some distance between yourself and the difficult behavior. Develop a detached view of that difficult person while he is in the process of being difficult. This will give you better perspective.
4. Formulate a plan for interrupting the situation. You can't change the behavior of the other person, but you can change yours.
5. Put your strategy into operation. Plan your timing and prepare for the confrontation.
6. Monitor the progress of your strategy so that you can make adjustments to it when or if it becomes necessary.
7. If your strategies for coping don't work, abandon that strategy and come up with a different approach.

Regular communications with the person, diversionary activities for them, and strength to be firm with them are good prevention mechanisms to minimize the damage difficult people can do to a group or organization, and to the morale of its members and to its program.

The Monopolizer

Individuals who love to talk almost always show up in lifegroups. These individuals can be the friendliest people in your group, but what appears to be friendly chatter can quickly turn into a monotonous, uninterrupted flow of words. The individual who talks a lot often needs attention or focus on herself. These people often fear true intimacy, personal disclosure, or admonishment toward change.

Though the monopolizer thinks she is "helping" the group process she can very easily unsettle the process or pacing of a lifegroup if left unchecked. Some group members will quickly adapt to letting the monopolizer assume responsibility for the "working" in the group; some will become irritated at the continuous attention-seeking focus of the monopolizer. Group leadership and gracious, sensitive facilitation are essential when dealing with these individuals.

Hints for dealing with a Monopolizer

1. Try to sit right beside the monopolizer so that you only have them in your peripheral vision. In this way, you do not encourage their talk with non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, body orientation, ect. Should you have to intervene, touch with words often conveys, "Stop."
2. Make sure your group adopts and reviews periodically group guidelines that include rules like "Everyone gets a chance to talk."
3. Use a systematic order around the group for responses to questions.
4. Learn to interrupt the monopolizer. This may happen at every meeting, or it may happen several times in one meeting. That's OK. Leader interruption will set the precedent and help non-talker members to feel more secure in the presence of the monopolizer. Don't let the monopolizer speak, or have a second turn, until others have responded.
5. Redefine the problem for the monopolizer and the group. Draw attention to their troublesome behavior in a new light. "Betty, you are working so hard at this. Why don't you let yourself rest while some of the others share their view?"
6. Remember that responding to a monopolizer only encourages them to talk more. Don't acknowledge every comment. Move on and redirect the focus to someone else.
7. If the problem persists, talk with the monopolizer after the meeting. Be sensitive in reminding them that this is also other people's group. If appropriate, ask the monopolizer for her help in figuring out how to get others in the group to talk more.

The Expert

This individual has difficulty understanding the difference between knowledge and application. They will often "spiritualize" or "scripturize" problems with easy sounding answers that do not profit authentic discussion. This person is often intolerant of differing opinions or interpretations of biblical passages and enjoys a good argument. A negative effect of "experts" is that they often have a knack for dismantling safe places, which can subject other group members to an atmosphere of tension and dissension.

Hints for dealing with an Expert

1. Position yourself at a 45 degree angle with this person so that eye contact is not perceived as challenging them to argue.
2. Make sure your group adopts and reviews periodically group guidelines that include rules like "Everyone's ideas are important."
3. Challenge your group to steer away from generic answers and to focus on how they personally respond.
4. If the expert interrupts others to shoot off opinions or gives unsolicited advice, try empowering the interrupted member to confront the expert: "Cindy, was Ronda's advice helpful? How did you feel about her response to you?"
5. Do not acknowledge every response from the expert. Instead, move and redirect the discussion back to the rest of the group.

6. Model empathy and transparency yourself. If no one else offers a differing opinion, don't be afraid to be open about how the expert's words affected you.
7. Avoid discussions of who is right and who is wrong. Focus on helping others to graciously communicate their authenticity or "where they are at" on an issue.
8. Interrupt the expert's sermon and ask them to share more one-word feelings rather than thoughts or opinions.
9. Speak to him or her privately and try to discern what drives them to want to appear as an expert to the group. Encourage them to let their "expert" mask down and let others know them more personally.
10. Respond to the expert's comments in love, affirming what they know in their head, and help them understand how their head knowledge may be interfering with the attempts of others to go deeper.

The Controller

Many of us struggle at times with wanting to maintain an inordinate amount of control over some aspects of our lives. Sometimes these power struggles play out in life groups. An individual may feel insecure on some level and therefore be especially prone to try and prove himself at the group's expense. He may try to redirect the group's direction or process, or they may try to wrestle the group leader's position away from you.

You can often identify the controllers by their language cues. Phrases such as "yes, but" or "I disagree" or "well, I think" often indicate dissatisfaction with their position in the group. They will often interrupt others and become critical of the group process. They practice "non-listening" quite often as they formulate their own comebacks. A controller's agenda for being in a group is to "help others" but not address his own issues.

Hints for dealing with a Controller

1. Sit at a 45 degree angle from this person so you only have him in your peripheral vision.
2. Reaffirm, re-establish, remind or redefine the group guidelines as necessary to keep the group on track.
3. Do not take this person on directly. Avoid control battles at all costs. If he tries to engage you directly in the group, defer and suggest meeting him privately later.
4. If the person appears at odds with the rest of the group, ask an open-ended question that will allow him to articulate his agenda. If that agenda is different than the focus of the group, help him identify a different or better group to meet his needs.
5. Affirm and give all group members permission to have other needs or desires than just the ones addressed by the group at hand. Practice gracious flexibility and allow members to leave a group if they do not feel it is meeting their needs.
6. If necessary, admonish or confront the controlling individual privately and attempt to discern the felt need or underlying problem.

7. Use humor or light-hearted banter to refocus the group and re-establish your role as leader.

The Onlooker

While this person is not particularly destructive to your group, she may need some creative encouragement or reassurance to be a full participant. Remember that “still waters run deep” and a quiet individual may not necessarily be bored. They may be “mining the wisdom” of others as they listen. Encourage them to share their “pearls of wisdom” with the rest of the group so that all may benefit.

Hints for dealing with the Onlooker

1. Position yourself directly across the group from this person. Use frequent eye contact, smiles, etc., to encourage this person and help them feel included and valued as a group member.
2. It is OK for people to be silent at times. It is NOT your job to force or manipulate everyone into talking or sharing. Set the tone by being gracious and inclusive.
3. Ask onlookers on a regular basis how they feel about the subject under discussion. You may want to try a couple of yes/no questions to begin with before attempting open-ended questions.
4. Encourage them when they do speak. Allow them to talk even if it's hesitant or irrelevant. Affirm or validate what they have said: “Nancy, I so appreciate it when you share something with us.”
5. Try breaking the group into pairs or groups of three for questions/activities. Sometimes this is less overwhelming for shy individuals and makes discussion easier. Then ask for feedback from partners.
6. Try acknowledging them or talking with them before the group gets started. In this way, they enter the small group already connected to you and feel much safer about contributing.