

Dealing with Challenging Group Dynamics

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We've all been there before: during a small group, one member begins to share too frequently, share at a level that is uncomfortable, or display behavior that a mental health professional may be better equipped to address. You see discomfort on the faces of your group members: the group environment is now heavy and difficult to manage. When that happens, what do you do? The temptation might be to ostracize that member, but that's not what we want to happen! Our hope is to model grace and accountability that reflects the love of Christ when dynamics like this arise. Here's a possible roadmap.

1. Make sure that everyone has signed a group member agreement. In that agreement is a clear statement indicating that the leader will initiate a conversation if unhelpful dialogue arises. For examples of expectations you will want to set, reference that group agreement [here](#).

2. Redirect in the moment. To redirect is to gracefully acknowledge an out-of-place comment yet pull the conversation back to the topic. This can be done with phrases like, "Thank you so much for sharing that. What does the rest of the group think about question number 3?" Or, "That sounds very difficult. I'm sorry. Maybe we could come back to that a little later."

3. Talk to the group member in question in private if it becomes a problem. Here are some possible things you could say to that person. There are lots of examples so that you can choose the one that feels right for the given situation.

- *"Hey, I notice you feel really comfortable sharing thoughts and personal experiences in our group. Would you mind helping me model and encourage others to feel comfortable speaking out like you?"*
- *"If I say, 'can I interrupt you' - let's have it serve as a sign between us that I need your help opening up space for someone who hasn't spoken yet."*
- *"Let's work together to make the group feel safe for those who aren't as comfortable as you."*
- *It seems like you want the group to know _____ (about your battle with an illness? About your hard relationship with the church/or with another person?) As a newer small group, though, it may be a subject that is too difficult for some people to manage.*
- *This isn't your intention when you share _____, but group members may shut down and not feel like their story matters, OR you may start to feel like the group has stopped listening to you.*
- *I know _____ is an important part of your story. Can we meet outside of group so I can hear more?*
- *Can I connect you with a congregational care pastor to help process things more?*
- *Can I connect you with a counselor (through our counseling referral ministry) so you can continue to process your story in a meaningful way with someone who is trained to be a really, good listener?*

4. If the problem persists, remind the person of the conversation you had with them and let them know that the expectations in the group agreement stand.

5. If the problem still persists, refer the person to Pastor Justin. (You would also be welcome to do this part if you feel like they have a good connection with you.) I will have a difficult but necessary conversation with that person letting them know that, in keeping with the guidelines listed in the agreement, other resources will be necessary (counseling, pastoral help, etc.) before they are able to return to the group and participate.

The goal here is twofold: maintaining a healthy and fun group for everyone, and encouraging real, healthy growth for persons who are struggling to participate well. Our goal is not to ostracize anyone, but to truly *care* for them in the way Jesus would have us. If we give the person a silent treatment or never confront the issue, we will not be truly helping them grow, and the whole group will feel uncomfortable.

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