

Practical Ministry Skills: Ministering to Difficult Group Members



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MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



Leader's Guide

How to use "Ministering to Difficult Group Members" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International.

Our "Practical Ministry Skills" training downloads are completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each download focuses on a practical theme that is relevant to small-groups ministry, and is comprised of brief handouts focusing on specific aspects of that theme. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for new small-group leaders or coaches.

The theme of this download is "Ministering to Difficult Group Members." It is designed to help group leaders and facilitators handle a variety of difficult group members. Each handout can be used as part of a training session for large groups of leaders and coaches, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, for an overview of the problems associated with difficult small-group members, see "Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache," by Les Parrott (pp. 3–4). For tips on working with group members who may have emotional issues, see "When a Member Is Emotionally Troubled," by Pat J. Sikora (pp. 5–6). And "When Someone Promotes a False Theology," by Reid Smith (p. 13), combines practical tips with proven strategies for prevention.

Our prayer is that this material will equip your small-group leaders and facilitators to successfully minister to difficult people.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.Smallgroups.com.

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MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache

How to handle difficult relationships in your small group

Romans 12:18

As kids, it never occurred to us to “work” on any of our relationships. They just happened. And if for any reason they didn’t, we jumped ship. No fuss, no muss.

But somewhere along the line, each of us entered the fray of mature relationships—and things got dicey. We learned that some people were more difficult, if not impossible, to get along with. We learned that trusted friends could betray us. Authority figures we admired could snub us. A colleague’s constant criticism could hurt us. And even family members with important information could leave us out of the loop. But we also learned that, unless we wanted to be hermits, we couldn’t abandon every relationship that hits a snag. That’s the rub with difficult people—we sink or swim together, especially in a small group.

A pioneering band of researchers has studied the age-old mystery of what makes people happy, in a general sense. Their answer is not what you might expect. What comes up consistently at the top of the charts is not success, good looks, or any of those enviable assets. The clear winner is relationships. Close ones—the kind of relationships that small groups engender.

But such research raises an interesting question: If relationships make us so happy, why do so many of them make life so difficult? And more importantly, what can we do to keep our cool, stand our ground, and reach positive solutions when we find ourselves in a group with high-maintenance relationships?

Defining the Issue

About 40 years ago, William Schutz was requested by the U. S. Navy to construct an instrument that would help them assemble compatible submarine crews—groups of men who could live together, elbow to elbow, for extended periods of time with minimum conflict. Schutz determined that compatible behavior was determined primarily by “natural fit.” In other words, people who get along well with each other do so without much effort. Their relationship doesn’t require much work; you could say it is low-maintenance.

Hopefully, you have a few low-maintenance members in your small group—people with whom you naturally fit. Sure, you may hit temporary turbulence together from time to time, but it’s periodic and the relationship stays on course. If you are like most people, however, you also have some small-group relationships that aren’t so easy. These are the impossible people who beef, bite, and bellyache. They give you the cold shoulder, require special attention, play the victim, dominate the group, or trample other people’s feelings.

So, you may wonder, are we simply left to wallow in the misery they create? Hardly.

After combing libraries, listening to small-group leaders, and surveying dozens of small-group members, I have concluded that it is possible to make most high-maintenance relationships much better—in many cases, better than you could even imagine. Scripture not only says, “If it be possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), it also promises that when we work at turning from our self-centered ways to building up our relationships, we “flourish like a palm tree...like a cedar of Lebanon” (Psalm 92:12). The effort you exert to improve a difficult relationship is almost always rewarded with new vitality for you and your group.

Maybe you are free from passive-aggressive group members, or members that are highly critical or controlling. Or maybe you’ve never encountered any other descriptions that fall under “difficult people” in a small group. If so, read no further. Consider yourself lucky, and extremely rare. But if you are like most group members dealing with difficult people, I offer the following key suggestions.

Don’t Let a Difficult Person Determine Your Mood

When Thomas Jefferson included “the pursuit of happiness” among our inalienable rights, he pinpointed an idea that is important for all of us wanting to live with inward joy: people will interfere with our inalienable right to be happy if we allow them to.

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I participated in a small group some time ago, and my friend who was leading it gave some materials to a very sullen group member. As he did so, he politely thanked the man with a sour disposition for being there. The man, however, did not even acknowledge it. Afterwards, I asked my friend about it. “A sullen fellow, isn’t he?” I commented as we walked away. “Oh, he’s that way every time we meet,” shrugged my friend. “Then why do you continue being so polite to him?” I asked. My friend replied, “Why should I let him determine how I’m going to act?”

What an insight! But what really impressed me was that my friend was practicing it. To know that others don’t control our moods is one thing, but to actually live this out is quite another. So practice this lesson every chance you get with a high-maintenance person in your group. If you do, it will soon become a habit.

Set Your Boundaries

As a kid, I was the ball-boy for a soccer team at the college where my father worked. I ran back and forth along the sideline ready to retrieve a ball that went out of bounds. Of course, when it did, the action on the field stopped. The same is true when you learn to set boundaries with difficult people. Since your small group has no referees to blow the whistle or coaches to call a time-out, you become responsible for saying “foul” or “that was out of bounds.” You alone manage the game.

So set some boundaries with the high-maintenance people in your group. Set limits on what is acceptable behavior for you. Decide what you want, be specific, and let the person know the rules. When he or she steps out of bounds, blow the whistle and call a time out before you resume play as a group together (or if more appropriate, after the group dismisses for the evening).

Guard Against Infection

Warning: the negativism virus is highly contagious. Just like the flu, negativism can unwittingly be transmitted throughout a small group. Think of it this way: When someone honks insistently on the highway, does your ire rise to match theirs? No word has been spoken, but if you are like most people, you catch the driver’s negativity.

The point is that when we are around a negative person, we become negative, too. We cut down other people’s ideas and make cynical statements. Once infected, it becomes a way of relating. It becomes our membership-dues to acceptance.

So the goal for you as a small-group leader is to be objective and observe the person’s negative feelings without getting infected by them. Paul gives us the best protection against negativism when he says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Recognize the Chemistry Between You

Everybody is somebody’s impossible person some of the time. But rarely is somebody everyone’s impossible person all of the time. Oh, there are those few annoying exceptions that make it their mission to complicate everyone’s existence—you can usually detect them when the mere mention of their presence elicits a resounding “Oh no!” from a group of people. But, thankfully, they are rare.

That’s why a good rule of thumb is to remember that the difficulty you experience with most impossible people is in your relationship, not in the person. Someone you like very much might get along just fine with someone else in the group that you can barely bare. Impossibility, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Les Parrott, Ph.D., is co-director of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University, and author of High-Maintenance Relationships and The Control Freak. Visit Dr. Parrott’s website at www.RealRelationships.com for hundreds of free video pieces and further advice.

—LES PARROTT; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What is it about a small-group setting that makes difficult relationships so unavoidable?
2. In general, do I allow the behavior and attitudes of others to influence or affect my behavior and attitude? What steps can I take to avoid that in the future?
3. What boundaries have we set for our group? Who is in charge of determining when a person has gone “out of bounds”?

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When a Group Member Is Emotionally Troubled

Professional advice for ministering to wounded people in a group setting

Romans 3:22–24

It's a fact that we're seeing more seriously troubled people in the church—people who are depressed, suicidal, addicted, or mentally ill. As society continues to break down and as abuse in all forms continues to increase, fewer people make it through childhood unscathed. When you add chemical imbalances due to diet and environment, and throw in post-traumatic stress disorder from war or abuse—we have a problem.

The good news is that these people are increasingly seeking out the church for help, recognizing that the gospel offers their best hope for healing. The bad news is that an emotionally troubled person—we'll call him Travis Troubled—is now in your group, and he isn't functioning well. Here are some quick tips to help you identify the problem and support Travis, no matter what.

Identify the problem

People with emotional or mental problems may behave in a way that is frustratingly consistent, or they may switch back and forth like a chameleon, depending on circumstances. Sometimes intervention or a boundary in one area will lead to the problem morphing into something different. So your first task is to try to identify what's going on.

- **Pray for wisdom.** Is the problem mental, emotional, or spiritual? Or all of the above? You may not know, but God does. He'll give you wisdom if you ask, so your first call for help should be in prayer.
- **Seek professional assistance.** Chances are, you'll feel that the problem is over your head. Seek assistance from your pastor or from mental health professionals in your church. You can also do some reading in the library or on the internet, but be careful that you don't start diagnosing Travis without the proper background. Also, be sure to use excellent sources. Sometimes a little information can be extremely dangerous!

Intervene When Appropriate

You're probably not called to "fix" Travis, but there are several things you can do to make your group a safe place for him and the other members.

- **Form a safe community.** A healthy community where people love and accept one another just as they are increases the joy of each person, and without an adequate joy capacity, we can't heal. Joy results from experiencing a genuine emotional response that says, "I'm glad to be with you!" Wounded people don't have enough "normal" people in their lives who are simply delighted to be with them, which means they don't have the capacity to handle pain or challenges. If you do nothing else, filling Travis's "joy bucket" will go a long way toward creating a sense of normalcy and fertile ground for healing.
- **Set boundaries.** If Travis seems to want all of your time, energy, and attention, you'll need to decide how much you can give and then set some boundaries. A boundary is any limit that defines where one person stops and the other begins. Boundaries can apply to physical space, time, feelings, attitudes, finances, or any other resource; they help others know what you will accept and what you won't. Consider the rest of your life's demands as you set boundaries with Travis (and anyone else in the group). For example, when may he call you and how long will you talk?
- **Set limits.** It's important to identify acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the group. Acceptable behavior may be annoying, but doesn't hurt anyone. Unacceptable behavior—which can include almost any form of acting or speaking out—risks hurting either Travis or someone else. You'll need to define clearly what you will and won't accept in the group, and immediately stop any disruptive behavior. If Travis has a habit of doing something unacceptable, talk to him about it, set a limit, and develop a cue between the two of you so that you don't have to embarrass him in the group. If he's willing to cooperate, many behaviors can be changed by a look, a touch, or a word.

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- **Speak to his spirit.** When you're setting limits with Travis, be sure to speak to his spirit rather than his soul. The spirit is created in the image of God and responds to truth; the soul wants immediate gratification. While the soul is the defender of the status quo, the spirit is usually willing to grow and change—even if a person is mentally ill. So often we speak to the souls of people. We want to teach them, inform them, or fix them. But change can occur more easily in the spirit, which can be engaged through eye contact and speaking truth deliberately. So rather than arguing with him, look Travis in the eye and gently but firmly say something like, “Travis, I believe you can make it all the way through the study today,” or “Travis, no one is trying to confuse you. If you're feeling confused, let's talk about it after the group time.” The spirit can be trained to exercise influence over the soul's mind, will, and emotions. And as it does, you'll see Travis's behavior change.
- **Educate your group.** Chances are, the other group members would rather not deal with Travis. They'd prefer a group of people “like me”—you know, healthy people who have it all together. As the group leader, serve them by reminding them that we are the Body of Christ, and that when one member suffers, we all suffer. Remind them that each of us needs to grow and heal in some area. Encourage them with the joy set before them in seeing Travis become a little more functional. Teach them to rejoice in small bits of growth.
- **Lead him to Jesus.** Salvation is essential. You'll have much better results working with an alive spirit than with one dead in sin. Don't force this decision, of course, but certainly keep offering it. Many wounded people feel they have to wait until they're healed before they can come to Jesus. Show them that the opposite is true. And even after Travis is a Christian, keep pointing him back to Jesus. He needs to learn to fix his eyes on Jesus as his everything (Hebrews 12:1–3) and to continue to focus on truth.

When All Else Fails

One of my overriding principles of leadership is that the group is more important than the individual. This principle always surprises leaders; it seems antithetical to the concept of community. But it's essential. If people join a group to grow, they need a reasonably healthy environment in which to mature. Even one person who brings serious problems *and* (and this is the operative word) who can't or won't respond to leadership or correction will discourage other group members. Soon you'll experience complaining, absences, or both.

The heartbreaking reality is that many people today simply can't function in a traditional small-group setting, and you may need to ask those people to leave the group. This is always a last resort, and while it's seldom necessary—I've only had to do this a handful of times in over 30 years—it's important to know you have that option. You may need help in evaluating when you've reached this point, or if you are honest with yourself, you'll know it.

When you talk to Travis, try to offer him an alternative. Say something like: “Travis, it appears that this group may not be the best option for you right now. I have the name and phone number of someone who may be helpful in preparing you to participate in this kind of group and getting the most out of the experience. You're always welcome to come back when you feel that you are ready to tackle it again.”

If possible, offer to continue meeting privately with Travis, since abandonment is a huge issue with wounded people. Also, urge him to seek professional help—even help him find it, if necessary. Follow up even after he leaves. Don't just leave him to flounder unless that's his choice. And be sure to pray.

Ministering to an emotionally or mentally troubled person is work, but it can be one of the most rewarding endeavors in your Christian ministry and life. Remember—if God brings you a Travis, know that He thinks you're ready for the challenge.

Pat J. Sikora is the founder of Mighty Oaks Ministries and author of Why Didn't You Warn Me?—a resource that equips group leaders to successfully deal with challenging members.

—PAT J. SIKORA; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What characteristics might set apart a person who is emotionally, mentally, or spiritually wounded?
2. What boundaries are appropriate and necessary when ministering to a wounded small-group member?
3. What kinds of behaviors or attitudes would make it necessary to ask an emotionally troubled group member to leave?

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Handling Difficulties with Children

The principle “As with adults” can revolutionize your group.

Matthew 19:14

I have found that many leaders of small groups think that children will bring with them difficulties that can only be resolved by having an “expert” on hand. But there is a very simple tool that enables group leaders and members to naturally facilitate the inclusion of children, and to overcome most difficulties they may cause.

As With Adults

The tool is actually a phrase: “As with adults.” This simple statement can revolutionize your group, whether it is a small group for children or an intergenerational one. Children have the same needs as adults in many areas of their lives. Most of the difficulties that are encountered in a small-group setting occur because children are expected to be totally different, and the result is that they behave differently. Here is a list of some of the needs that adults bring to a small group: 1) To meet with Jesus, 2) Fun, 3) Friendships, 4) Encouragement, 5) Unconditional love and acceptance, 6) Accountability, and 7) Support in reaching unsaved friends.

How many items from this list would a child not need? Sadly, when difficulties arise with children, negative attitudes and actions often emerge: exclude them, shout at them, roughly handle them, or ignore them. Yet we would see this as completely inappropriate with adults. Again, the principle is: “As with adults.”

Practical Examples

From this baseline we can begin to adjust our thinking when we encounter difficult children. The following questions—which are common in small groups that include children—show the principle at work:

- **What do I do if a child does not want to attend group meetings?** What would you do if an adult did not want to attend? Visit the child. Ask if there is any way the small group can make attending more comfortable or beneficial. Build a relationship. As with adults!
- **What should I do in a group meeting if a child is reluctant to take part?** What would you do if an adult were reluctant to take part? Break the group into subgroups of twos or threes, allowing everyone to talk in a smaller setting. Validate the child when he or she does speak. See if there are any reasons why the child might not feel safe enough to speak out in the group. As with adults!
- **What should I do if a child is behaving inappropriately?** What would you do if an adult were behaving inappropriately? Talk with the child quietly before or after the group meeting. Visit him or her outside of the group and see if there is a problem that could be addressed. Build a relationship with the child so that he or she will be open to receive help or discipline. Pray for the child. As with adults!
- **How can I build a relationship with a child?** How do I build a friendship with an adult? Spend time with the child. Visit his or her home. Remember the child’s birthday, and take an interest in things that are important to him or her. Speak to the child when you run into him or her; sit next to the child in church. As with adults!

I conclude by adding that I am aware that children do have some areas of different needs from adults. But if the “As with adults” principle is applied to your small group, you will immediately rise to a new paradigm and liberate every group member to be able to respond, relate to, and mobilize the children that are present. Of course, it’s important to communicate with the child’s parents and include them in the process of handling the difficulty. But “As with adults” can help that, too!

—DAPHNE KIRK; copyright 2002 by Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Do we treat children differently than adults in a small-group setting? Why?
2. How would the “As with adults” principle have affected a recent encounter with a child in our small group?
3. What areas of difficulty with children would not be solved by employing the “As with adults” principle? Why not?

MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members**Responding to Critical Group Members**

Matthew 18 can save you a lot of trouble as a small-group leader.

Matthew 18:15–17

One of the toughest issues any small-group leader will ever face is critical people—those who want to make the small group a place to criticize the church, its leadership, or other people. Jesus gave us the answer on how to deal with these situations, so let's look at his teaching and then apply it to some situations that small-group leaders may face.

First, Matthew 18:15–17 is a Scripture reference that every small-group leader should memorize. So, let's walk through it step-by-step and learn what Jesus taught about how to deal with these kinds of issues. We'll also learn why, as a leader, you can save yourself a lot of heartache when you put it into practice.

- Step One: "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back."
- Step Two: "But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses."
- Step Three: "If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church."
- Step Four: "Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector."

We can't underestimate the importance of this text for dealing with critical people. Following Jesus' example ensures that you and your group do not become deeply embroiled in personality issues. Let's look at some situations that small-group leaders may face and how to apply Matthew 18 to them.

Criticism of the Church or Its Leadership

When someone tries to attack the church, leaders need to be prepared to say the following: "If you have a problem with church leadership, I want to encourage you to go talk to someone at the church and share your concerns. I'm sure a church leader would be happy to talk to you about this. Matthew 18:15–17 doesn't allow me to discuss this with you (or in the group) before you address this issue biblically with the person with whom you have this problem."

If an individual has a problem with a specific pastor or staff member, you should also be prepared to invoke Matthew 18:15–17 by asking the question, "Have you talked to him or her about this issue?" This should be followed up with the statement, "I would love to talk to you about this, but Matthew 18:15 says you are to talk to that person first before I can even discuss it with you." In most cases, that will be the end of the issue, because most people don't have a deep enough conviction on these issues to actually confront the person. And if they do, it will be done in the way Jesus tells us to do it.

Criticism of Other People in the Church or Small Group

If someone wants to use the group to criticize other people, you must not allow it. Let everyone know that the steps outlined in Matthew 18 for attack of the church and its leadership apply here, as well.

Here's where it can get tough. When someone comes to you and wants you to listen to his or her criticisms, it's human nature to want to step in and try to help fix the situation. But Jesus has given us an outline for dealing with this, and you will regret it every time you don't follow it. In fact, the following is a list of things that can happen when you don't follow Matthew 18 in dealing with people who want to criticize or attack others. If you are a small-group pastor, lay leader, coordinator, or group leader, read this carefully. It will save you a lot of pain.

- If you allow yourself to get involved even just a little bit, you will be completely involved before you know it.
- You will find yourself taking a side without having all the facts, and most of the time you won't realize you didn't get the entire story until it's too late.

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- You may find yourself giving advice on issues you really know nothing about. Even worse, you may give bad advice—thinking you did the right thing only to find out later how much damage was done.
- You will set a precedent to the rest of the group that you are their counselor and problem-fixer—something you will live to regret.
- The problem will grow and work its way into the rest of the group because the same person talking to you about this is talking to others in the small group, also. If you apply Matthew 18, however, it usually stops the criticism in its tracks.

—BILL EASUM AND JOHN ATKINSON; excerpted from *Go Big with Small Groups* (Abingdon Press, 2007).
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Discuss:

1. Where should a group leader draw the line between honest sharing and negative criticism?
2. Is our group prone to negativity and criticism? How can we become better at handling conflict and criticism?
3. Describe a time you used the Matthew 18 principle. What were the results?

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When Group Members Talk Too Little

Practical tips for handling a resounding small-group silence

Hebrews 10:24–25

There is no question that small-group leaders can increase the effectiveness and depth of group discussions through the right amount of planning and preparation. But there is an X-factor involved—one that typically rears its head at the worst possible moment in the middle of a discussion. That X-factor is silence. Stated simply, when one or more group members refuse to answer your questions or engage in the discussion, their silence can make all of your preparation seem worthless.

Fortunately, several practical methods do exist that can help shy or quiet small-group members open up and get involved.

Don't Jump the Gun

When you ask a question that goes unanswered by the rest of the group, the temptation to jump in and break the silence can be very strong. But it's important to resist. Answering your own question is almost never a good idea and usually implies one of two things—either that the question wasn't important enough to discuss in the first place, or that your group members aren't capable of answering it on their own.

Instead, wait for an answer. Let the silence stretch for 30 seconds, or even a minute. Doing so gives people a reasonable amount of time to process the question, compare it with the material being discussed, and formulate a response. If after that amount of time it becomes clear that nobody is coming forward, consider re-phrasing the question by focusing on a different angle. Better yet, get the rest of your group involved by asking, "Is there a better way to approach this topic?"

Make Eye Contact

In a group setting—especially one where people are interacting as part of a circle—people usually interpret eye contact as an invitation to speak. So if a group member hasn't contributed to the discussion yet, look directly at them as you ask the next question. Also, be aware of the message being sent by your body language. Lean forward and smile as you ask the question. This reassures the person that you are interested in what he or she has to say.

If you are in a group where one or more people have a history of not participating in the discussion, use your choice of seating as an advantage. By sitting directly across from a quiet person, you maximize the amount of eye contact he or she will receive.

Be Assertive

Many discussion leaders are hesitant to "call on" a specific group member for fear of intimidating or embarrassing them. But this is a useful tool for group discussions where it's important that each person participate. Asking for a specific person to respond doesn't need to be authoritative or mean. Instead of demanding an answer, simply ask, "Steve, did you have anything to add?" or "Jamie, did anything strike you as especially interesting?"

When taking this route, be sure to accept "I don't know" as an appropriate answer. Sometimes people genuinely don't have anything they want to add, or what they did plan on saying was mentioned by somebody else. As a discussion leader, it's not your role to drag information from each member of the group. Rather, it's your job to politely and assertively let each person know that their opinions are valued and welcomed.

Subgroup

As a general rule, intimacy and sharing in a group go up when the number of people goes down. That's why subgrouping can be such a powerful tool for groups with members who are less inclined to talk on a regular basis. By subgrouping, I simply mean dividing a group into two or more smaller segments when necessary. The most basic way to subgroup is to have men and women separate for some or all of your group's discussion time, but there are other methods. Splitting into groups of three or four based on age is another useful example.

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Praise, Praise, Praise

When a traditionally quiet person does speak out in the middle of a discussion, make sure it becomes a positive experience. Credit the person for the thoughts expressed and be assertive in inviting more by saying something like, “That’s a great insight, Chris. We need to hear more from you in the future.”

Again, watch your body language and be sure to smile. If a quiet person says something that you don’t agree with, or that doesn’t quite match the topic at hand, don’t grimace or smirk. Instead, credit that person for speaking out, then seek out the opinion of another group member—ideally this would be a co-leader, if you have one—who can steer the conversation back on track.

—SAM O’NEAL; copyright 2008 Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Am I comfortable or uncomfortable when speaking in a group? How might that affect my perception of those who feel differently?
2. In general, is our group comfortable with occasional silence? What usually happens when the group is silent for an extended period?
3. What are ways we can praise a quiet person for speaking without being patronizing?

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When Group Members Talk Too Much

Practical tips for managing a dominant personality in your group
Ecclesiastes 5:7

Few barriers can subvert the depth and transforming power of a small-group discussion faster than one or more group members who dominate the conversation. Such members can monopolize entire gatherings with their problems and perspectives, and can hinder the participation of everyone else in the group.

Be Assertive

The best way to handle a dominant person is assertiveness on the part of the group leader and/or facilitator.

- **Be assertive before the discussion.** Prior to a discussion, or prior to asking a question, tell the group that you are looking for brief answers and thoughts. You may even consider setting a cap on the amount of time people are allowed to speak on each question—no more than one minute, for example. Also, make it known that you want to hear from as many people as possible on each subject.
- **Be assertive during the discussion.** If a group member ignores your request for brevity and begins to monopolize the conversation, the best thing to do is nip it in the bud—even if that means interrupting. Thank the person for his or her contribution, and then move the discussion in another direction by calling on another member or by asking a new question.
- **Be assertive after the discussion.** If a person continually monopolizes the group's time, you may need to talk with that person about it in private. State that you appreciate his or her willingness to contribute to the group's discussions, and recognize the depth of his or her answers and opinions. But also be honest in sharing that the frequency and thoroughness of the person's responses can make it difficult for other group members to participate. During these conversations, it's possible to ask the dominant person for help in encouraging the rest of the group to talk, thus turning a difficult person into an ally.

Manage Eye Contact

Dominant personalities often associate eye contact from the discussion leader as a green light to talk. They may even interpret it as a request from you to share what's on their minds. Therefore, minimizing eye contact is an effective method for handling group members who talk too much.

To accomplish this without offending the person, invite him or her to sit next to you before the discussion begins. This will decrease the number of times you make direct eye contact with the person, which should also decrease his or her need to talk.

Manage the Group's Silence

Many people are uncomfortable with silence, and members who seem to jump in and answer every question may be doing so in an attempt to break the silence and end their discomfort. Therefore, by helping them get used to silence as a normal part of group life, you may decrease their need to talk over time.

One way to accomplish this is to ask group members to wait a specific amount of time before responding to a question. Say something like, "People need different amounts of time to process a discussion question and organize their thoughts for a response. To make sure that everyone gets a chance to fully engage with our discussion, I'd like everyone to wait 10 seconds after I ask a question before jumping in."

—SAM O'NEAL; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What characteristics can help group leaders identify a dominant personality?
2. What are the short term consequences of allowing one or two group members to monopolize a discussion?
Long term?
3. What are the positive characteristics of dominant group members?

MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



When Someone Promotes a False Theology

Prevention strategies and tips for addressing heresy in your small group

Titus 1:9

Any group Bible study will reveal that not everyone thinks the same thing about a given passage of Scripture. But how does a small-group leader handle a situation where somebody in the group begins promoting a false theology? Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- Don't be afraid. Prayerfully commit your group and each study to the Lord.
- Put the good of the whole group on the front-burner and concern about stepping on the toes of the individual in error on the back-burner. That person did not hesitate to bring up his or her point to the group; therefore, you should not hesitate to lovingly address it in the group.
- Sort the essentials from the non-essentials and spend your time and energy on what really matters.
- Remember, there is a difference between somebody saying something that happens to be erroneous (most of the time this is the case) and somebody who is actually *promoting* false theology. If somebody is promoting false theology, address it head-on with truth and grace (Titus 1:9).

Addressing False Theology

These steps will help you approach such a situation in your group:

1. Ask the person to clarify what he or she is really saying. You might even restate what you have heard: "Are you saying that _____? Am I hearing you correctly? Could you explain more?" Adopt an inquisitive posture, be humble, and ask for explanation with scriptural support.
2. If they try to substantiate their position, invite other group members into the conversation by asking them, "What do all of you think about what _____ has said? Does it harmonize with what you've read about this topic?" The conversation doesn't have to be confrontational—simply journey together.
3. Gently but firmly express the truth, and if possible support what you share with a biblical reference. It's vital that you don't let the individual's misunderstanding derail the whole meeting. If he or she wants to pursue the matter further, state that you will be happy to do so after the group.
4. If the person seems persistent in promoting something other than the truth, ask him or her not to do it again. If the person does not respect your request, contact your coach or pastor for support.

Preventing False Theology

Here are additional tips to help keep your group centered on God's Word and create an environment where biblical community can grow:

1. Clarify from the beginning that your small group holds the Bible as the Word of God. As such, it will be the authoritative source and standard of truth for your Bible study and discussions.
2. Continually bring your discussion back to the person of Jesus Christ by asking, "How does this help us to understand Jesus more, grow closer to him, and live more like him?"
3. Be intentional about drawing each group member into the process of reading and interpreting what the Bible has to say on issues of life. It can only help the group if each person grows in the ability to accurately interpret God's Word.

Because we are all fallible, we need to continually and intentionally commit to God's Word as the source of our knowledge. We also need our fellow journeyers to lovingly confront us when we begin to drift. Remember, neither of those necessary steps will happen unless you as the group leader take the initiative.

—REID SMITH; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Where is the line between hurting someone's feelings and allowing him or her to lead the group astray?
2. What steps can our group take to discuss and outline our core doctrinal beliefs?
3. What steps can we take to better prevent members from developing a false theology?

MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



Battling Favoritism in Group Discussions

The dangers of differential responding in a small-group setting

James 2:1–13

In group discussions, some people respond more intently to the statements of one person than they do another. The technical term for this phenomenon is *differential responding*. In particular, differential responding becomes an issue if the difference in response to statements reflects such things as gender or racial bias, perceived status, or personal history.

When people begin to give more attention or importance to one person's statements because of class or other arbitrary designations, they have taken something away from the rest of the group and have been unfair to those who are ignored.

Defining the Term

The group I am a part of recently had a discussion about the way women's statements are not valued. One woman in the group (who has been on numerous governing boards and committees) described how she has frequently made statements that were ignored by others, only to have a male make a similar statement later and have it be valued. Other women in the group validated her observation with their own similar experiences.

Similarly, my spouse and I have had frequent discussions about how my statements are valued by others more quickly than hers—especially when my degree, title, or position is made public. We have had some laughs about this, remembering a time when we were invited to a gathering where we knew no one present. We were both being ignored until someone who knew me entered and addressed me with the “Dr.” in front of my name. Suddenly several people turned to us, wanting to engage us (me) in conversation. Needless to say, we were less interested in engaging them at that point than we might have been earlier in the evening.

It should be noted that differential responding is not the same as giving weight to a person's remarks because they have legitimate expertise. I will listen to my financial advisor's opinion about retirement funds more intently than my grocer, for example.

Taking Action

Differential responding often relates to a shared personal history, especially if the people in a group are couples or if two members have a relationship outside the group—employees, a history of committee work together, or similar experience. If the leader observes one person ignoring the statements of a partner, or if one person usually criticizes statements made by the same individual, it is an issue the leader needs to address—if the group doesn't deal with it first. The response pattern may have developed over many years of being together. Small groups in churches are not marriage therapy groups; however, they are appropriate places for couples or coworkers to examine their communication patterns with others who share an interest in the topic.

Addressing differential responding is most easily handled with a leader observation: “I notice that when women in the group make statements, you frequently [describe the behavior: laugh, don't respond, disagree, or the like].” It is more delicate for the leader when the issue is wrapped in personal history. “I notice that when your spouse [friend, coworker, or the like] makes a statement, you often close your eyes and make a face. What does that mean?” Be prepared, as a leader, for an intense discussion that other couples or friends in the group will join when this kind of observation is made.

In addition, this discussion may provoke some generalizations such as, “Men never...” or “Women always...” On the bright side, such discussions may be an opportunity for the group to challenge these generalizations.

—BROOKE B. COLLISON; excerpted from [Know and Be Known](#) (Alban Institute, 2007). Used with permission.

Discuss:

1. Describe a time when you felt ignored or unheard. What was the experience like?
2. What is the difference between showing favoritism toward someone with a particular degree and giving weight to a group member with legitimate expertise?
3. Is it appropriate to address with the whole group favoritism that seems to stem from personal history?

MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



The High-Maintenance Self-Test

Are you involved in a high-maintenance relationship?

By answering these questions, you can assess whether you are in a high-maintenance relationship in your small group. Take as much time as needed. Answer each item carefully and honestly.

- Y N Have you recently been dealing with a relationship that drains you of enthusiasm and energy?
- Y N Do you sometimes dread having to see or talk to a particular person in your small group?
- Y N Do you ever have imaginary conversations with this person, or arguments in your mind where you defend yourself or try to explain your side of a conflict?
- Y N Do you have a relationship in your group to which you give more than you get in return?
- Y N Do you find yourself second-guessing your own performance as a result of an interaction with an individual?
- Y N Do you ever feel especially anxious when a particular person from your group has called and left a message for you to return the call?
- Y N Do you ever become more self-critical in the presence of a particular person in your group?
- Y N Is your creativity blocked, or is your clarity of mind hampered somewhat by the lingering discomfort of having to deal with a difficult person?
- Y N Do you ever notice that you are trying to calm yourself down after being with a particular person in your group by eating more, by biting your nails, or some other unhealthy habit?
- Y N Have you become more susceptible to colds, stomach problems, or muscle tension since having to deal with this difficult person?
- Y N Do you ever feel resentful that this person seems to treat other people in the group better than she or he treats you?
- Y N Do you sometimes find yourself wondering why you are singled out for criticism while at the same time this individual rarely, if ever, acknowledges things you do well?
- Y N Have you thought about quitting the group as a result of having to interact with a difficult person?
- Y N Have you noticed that you are more irritable or impatient with people you care about because of leftover frustrations from your situation with this difficult person?
- Y N Are you feeling discouraged that this person has continued to drain you of energy despite your efforts to improve the relationship during the group meetings?

Scoring: Total the number of Yes answers. Out of these 15 statements, if you answered yes to 10 or more of them, you are, without a doubt, in a high-maintenance relationship.

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MINISTERING TO Difficult Group Members



Further Resources

Websites and books to help your group minister to difficult people

Smallgroups.com. Small-group training and curriculum from Christianity Today International.

- “Small-Group Leader” Orientation Guide
- “Becoming a Great Listener” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Shepherding People in Pain” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Dealing with Divorce in Your Small Group” Survival Guide

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Dealing with Difficult People by *Jill Briscoe*. A practical guide for handling the problem people in your life (David C. Cook, 2003; 978-0781439510).

Handling Difficult People by *John Townsend*. What to do when people push your buttons (Thomas Nelson, 2006; ISBN 978-1591454779).

How to Get Along with Difficult People by *Florence Littauer*. The new edition of a classic book on human relationships (Harvest House, 2006; ISBN 978-0736918442).

Why Didn't You Warn Me? by *Pat J. Sikora*. A practical guide for dealing with challenging small-group members (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).