

Troubleshooting in Small Groups

Problems show up in even the best groups. But if a group is truly devoted to one another and to the group's purpose, it will work through these tensions. Here are some of the most common group problems, charted with their symptoms and some suggestions to help.

SYMPTOM	POSSIBLE PROBLEMS	APPROACHES
Members come late.	Group pattern to start late.	Set definite time. Begin promptly. Discuss with group: "We're having trouble getting going. Is it too early? Are there conflicts?" Let members respond.
Agreed-on Preparation	Too much expected. Not clear how preparation relates to what group will do. Lack of commitment (may relate to being too busy and other priorities).	Be realistic. May need to change expectations. Check to make sure group understands and agrees to preparation.
Quiet members	Questions asked are too hard or too easy; not enough observation questions asked. Members not prepared. Lack of trust. Leaders and others not handling silence well; jumping in too quickly.	Follow sequence of observation before interpretation. Have quiet member read passage out loud. Remind members: "Verbal people need to hold back at times; quiet members need to force themselves to speak up. Direct questions (ones that others can answer too) to quiet person. On an application question, do a round where each person in the circle responds. Allow time after question for people to think.
Overly talkative member	Outgoing. Doesn't like silence. Sees things quickly.	Talk to privately. Mention that we need silence after some questions to think and reflect. Ask for help in drawing others out. Suggest he or she ask, "What do some of the rest of you think?"
Issue causing disagreement	Verbal people "win out." Creates tangents. Members don't accept their differences.	State ground rules. Try to stick to the passage or subject at hand. Suggest they discuss problem after the meeting. Acknowledge that there are differences of opinion on this; on what can we agree?
Always-right member	Knows right way for everything. Knows only one interpretation of passage.	Avoid arguing right and wrong. Put focus back on passage to collect more data and summarize. Clarify facts. Help group look for alternatives and see "right" person's frame of reference, e.g. "In what circumstances might Sam's interpretation hold true?"
Disagreeing member	"But" is favorite word: "That's true, but..." May hold group back from action or conclusions, causing group to stagnate.	Give feedback to disagreeing member: "What exactly causes your hesitation?" Confront group with choice of holding back (no risk) or going ahead (with risk but also growth): "How can we get around this objection?"
Pace is too slow or too fast	Too much time spent on some activities. Little interaction. Question too simplistic (or too general). Full answers not sought. Application too general.	Plan specific amounts of time for each activity. Move along with good transitions. Test study questions with a co-leader: are they clear? Are they open, but not overly general? Ask for specifics in sharing. Push for complete answers: "What else?"
Conversational prayer stifled	Lack of trust. New to members. Not aware of specifics for prayer.	Spend more time building community and praying for needs. Pray in direct and specific statements or requests. Discuss conversational prayer. Pray on one topic before moving to another. Do a study on prayer.
Group in-grown; no growth or mission	Purpose no clear. Study no motivating. Limited sense of growth of God's kingdom. Fear.	Plan non-threatening activities to which you can invite others; do active outreach where new members are added to and cared for by small group. Center Bible study and worship on character of God., purposes of God, aspects of group life or life of the church.

Superficial sharing	Leader not setting example. Application not specific. Community building not challenging growth as a group.	Plan community exercises carefully for stage of group's development. Ask for specifics in sharing. Be open and specific in your own sharing. Meet one-to-one outside group for sharing and prayer.
Members with ongoing problems	Problems dominate group life. Member monopolizes group with personal crises.	Talk individually to the person, suggesting resources for help (e.g. counseling). Help group see its purpose, identity (church groups are not necessarily therapy groups).

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Problem Solving

Dealing With Problems in Small Groups

Symptom

What To Do

Member won't participate.

Involve him in conversation. Find out about his personal interests. Listen with interest to what he says. Devote some time to him outside the discussion. When he takes part, make a special note of it: "That's a good point, Joe. We haven't been hearing enough from you; we appreciate your input." Ask direct, open-ended questions that only he can answer. Do not use questions that can be answered "yes" or "no" and do not ask questions that he might be unable to answer for lack of information.

Member is a joker and the life of the party.

Encourage him when tensions need to be released. Laugh, and compliment his wit. Ignore him when it is time to go to work after tensions are relieved. His role is to productively release tensions, not to waste time joking when the group should be discussing.

Member monopolizes discussion.

Encourage him if he is contending for a role that will benefit the group most. In general, encourage the group to keep him in check. Don't embarrass him or be sarcastic.

Member is argumentative and obstinate.

Keep your temper. Don't let the group get tense and excited. Antagonism breeds further antagonism. Remember the group can be partly responsible for his behavior. What can the group do to change it? Examine his position carefully. Find merit in it if possible. Do not close your mind to ideas just because they are expressed in an opinionated way. The group must examine all sides. In an emergency, tell him time is short and you will be glad to talk with him privately before the next meeting. Explain that his view is important and the group will consider it but that he must not destroy the group's effectiveness.

Group is confused and wants direction.

Now is the time to make suggestions. Provide agendas and suggestions for systematic approaches to discussion. The additional structure will be welcomed.

Group is tired, apathetic, and dull.

Use small talk and humor. Make them smile, chuckle, laugh. Display much enthusiasm and energy until it is caught by the group. Explain

the subject vividly. Ask questions that are simple.

Group is resistant, antagonistic, hostile.

Analyze members' abilities. Assess the most useful role for each. Support members who assume suitable roles. Use humor (not ridicule or satire) or change the subject. Remind the group of its major objectives. Face the situation and bring role struggles into the open. Talk about social interaction.

Group is enthusiastic, responsive, active.

Allow the group to continue this behavior. Do not worry excessively about sticking to the planned agenda. The chaff of over-productivity can be sifted out later. Encourage the group's creativity.

Handling Interruptions in Your Group

You've just begun the opening prayer when in comes George, late (as always) and looking for a chair...Chris has finally gained the courage to begin sharing with the group about a painful situation at home, but just then somebody spills coffee all over your Bible...you've reached a critical part of the discussion about handling anger and the phone rings- giving you an opportunity to apply what you're learning.

Interruptions. A frequent, frustrating, inevitable part of small group meetings. How do you handle them?

Prevention Better than Cure

Start by anticipating the problem. If your group is just beginning, now's the time to lay some ground rules. Latecomers probably account for the majority of interruptions – so the first rule should be punctuality.

If your group has been together for awhile and latecomers have been a serious distraction, hold a special session at the start of the next meeting (but make sure the latecomers are present – they are the ones who need to hear this) in which you covenant together to respect one another's time.

You may want to come up with some creative Penalties for chronic lateness. For example, one Small group collected a small fine to be put in a project fund. Another group made a humorous jingle that they sang to latecomers. Make sure the whole group agrees on this idea. If the problem continues, you may need to speak to the person (or persons) in private.

Prepare your physical environment before the meeting starts. Unplug the phone (that most notorious and shameless of all intruders). Hang a sign on the door that says "Meeting in progress. Please leave a message" and tie a pen and pad to the doorknob.

Plan the meeting agenda as well to minimize Interruptions. If you have a regular period of Socializing, make conversation and refreshments first before prayer or discussion. Research shows that the best time for socializing is at the beginning because it helps to establish the warmth necessary for healthy group dynamics.

If the latecomer is a new member or visitor, be more lenient. His primary social need as he walks through the door is to be accepted as part of the group. Coming in alone will make him feel overwhelmingly isolated, so be sure to recognize him warmly, call him by name, or introduce him if necessary, and enlarge the circle to include him.

State the Obvious

Recognizing an interruption is always the best policy for the leader or speaker. The group's train of thought has already been broken – everyone knows where everyone else's attention is focused – so why not admit it? Instead of pretending nothing has happened you can quickly resolve the tension created by an interruption if you comment about it and go on.

Your remark may be merely factual: "There's a chair right over there." Or it may be humorous. One group leader, for example, commented as a large cockroach sped across the floor and captivated the entire group: "He must be under conviction." The ensuing laughter relieved the pressure and turned the group's focus back toward the speaker.

When you have everyone's attention again, it's best to repeat for the group the last comment made (whether you or someone else was speaking). This restores continuity and gets the group back on track.

Seeing the Opportunity

Not all interruptions are bad; they may be opportunities. Several years ago a small group of college students met in a room next to the chapel to pray for new channels of outreach on campus. They were interrupted by a knock on the door. The young man who stood on the doorstep was coming down from a drug high and anxious to talk to someone. Instead of telling him when the chaplain had office hours, they invited him inside, talked with him, and prayed for him.

What if they had viewed that event as an intrusion instead of answer to their prayer? With that in mind, our strategy must be to prepare ourselves and practice patience so we can "redeem the time" by handling interruptions with wisdom and grace.

Rocking The Boat: It's Not Always Bad

I'm concerned about the misuse (or misunderstanding) of the term "conflict" in Christian circles. Conflict has suffered at the hands of its supposed counterpart, unity. Conflict can be the source of healthy growth in small groups- in the same way that unity can be a mask for blind conformity that destroys vitality and creativity.

In other words, conflict is not necessarily bad. It can be beneficial, depending on how it is handled. A harmful conflict occurs when group members suddenly withdraw from the conflict or angrily explode. Harmful conflict focuses on individuals' emotions and not on the issues at hand. Harmful conflict heightens "we/they" distinctions, and the group fails to develop a sense that "we jointly" have a problem. Competition thrives and cooperation is snuffed out.

How can conflict benefit a group? Psychologists argue that in the midst of conflict, groups often draw closer and solidify their values – that is, as disagreement threatens to become a barrier, the drive for unity in the group increases. The group members can express their differences candidly, without fear of destroying relationships, because they are committed to the group and the variety of ideas and gifts it represents.

On the other hand, unity is often sought at the expense of forthright expression and interaction between group members. When unity is stressed above other group dynamics, group members will suppress some of their feelings and ideas, believing that this is in the best interest of the group. But suppression of ideas stifles the creativity of the group and limits its power to act as a change agent in the lives of its members.

True unity requires that all group members acknowledge each other as equal brothers and sisters in Christ (James 2:2-9), and then trust God to use their interaction to lead to truth.

Unity Can Be Achieved Through Conflict

The Book of Acts outlines the transition from Judaism to Christianity, a process which surfaced

many conflicts that needed attention in order to keep the message "Pure." The dispute between

Paul, Barnabas, and others over the issue of circumcision (recorded in Acts 15).

First, not all conflicts are bad. Nowhere in this passage is the disagreement considered sinful.

Second, unity is achieved through conflict when the goal is "everyone wins" and when mutual respect among the believers is practiced. This foundation encourages active participation and differing points of view.

Third, all members have particular as well as interdependent needs. Putting everyone in a "mold" is counterproductive. In the Acts 15 passage, individual personalities emerged, resulting in a genuine attempt to solidify the Body of Christ.

Fourth, conflict should be expressed in a rational manner. This means listening well to what is said in the group. Emotions were undoubtedly high in the situation recorded in Acts 15. But the men waited until they could debate the issue more rationally in Jerusalem. Verse 12 reports that the group listened to each other: "all the multitude kept silence and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul."

Fifth, when a conflict is resolved, the group should express confidence in the decision reached. To ensure this confidence, follow-up evaluations and written agreements might be helpful. This was the procedure followed by the council at Jerusalem.

Sixth, once a conflict is resolved, the group should go on with its business. Members must agree not to use past conflicts as ammunition in future discussions. The vow to bury the past will result in confirmed direction and peace of mind for the group members.

We should guard against resting on the successes gained from past conflict resolution. Apart from the continual leadership of the Holy Spirit, we can fall into destructive rather than constructive conflicts (as was the case in Acts 15:35-41). God is sovereign, however and will work even these situations.

Talking Too Much?

Group members who tend to talk more than their share can stifle discussion and generate resentment in the rest of the group. What can you do to keep a talkative member from monopolizing the group experience?

Some Strategies

Start by following Jesus' instruction to check for "beams" in your own eye. Verbal expressiveness is so highly valued in our culture that talkers often gravitate naturally to roles of leadership. Are you in a position to point out the problem in someone else?

- 1) Seating: Sociologists have found that a simple change in seating arrangement can restructure group dynamics. In a circle, the person sitting directly across from the leader is the one who get the most non-verbal encouragement to speak. The leader often looks directly at him, and he perceives this as an invitation to speak. The person sitting immediately beside the leader receives the least eye contact from him or her and is less likely to respond.

Refrain from choosing a particular chair or position every time you meet. Wait until the talker in the group is seated and take your position beside him. This allows you to give him some personal attention before and after the meeting. And if you do have to interrupt him, you can reach over and touch him in an affirming way to let him know that you still appreciate him and his input.

If you're seated around a rectangular table, the people seated at the two ends will most likely dominate the discussion. Try to put yourself on one end and the talker of your group next to you.

- 2) Questions: Using the right kind of question is probably the best way to deal with someone who talks often. First, direct specific questions to individuals instead of addressing questions to the whole group. Open questions will always be answered by one person where there is a talker in the group. Second, address the talker in your group with questions that have limited answers, e.g., true-false, yes-no, or

multiple choice – "do you think Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was a physical ailment or a spiritual one?" Despite the general rule about not interrupting the speaker who has the floor, you may find yourself having to break into a long speech for the sake of reviving discussion. If you must interrupt the speaker, ask him or her a question. Questions are less abrupt than statements. Ask a yes/no question and when the speaker replies, give someone else a chance to get into the discussion: "Do you agree, Sally?"

- 3) Note Taking: Sometimes it's helpful to ask the talkative member to take notes of the meeting (perhaps there's someone absent who would like to have such notes). This exercise keeps the talker busy enough that he is not tempted to monopolize the conversation. It also helps him or her to stop and listen to what others are saying. This is often very difficult for people who are used to talking incessantly.

Personal Help

To help a group member with a chronic talking problem, sometimes you must confront him in private (Matthew 18:15). Handle this confrontation with sensitivity. Plan to learn about the specific needs of the person you confront so you or the others in your group help meet them. For example, discerning that behind incessant chatter is a deep insecurity will give you a better idea of how to deal with the problem at its root.

Approach the talkative member with a question: "Would you like to be able to talk in a way that gets people to listen?" Perhaps Proverbs 10:19 would be a good place to start and you evaluate the situation together. Verbal self-control is a major theme throughout Proverbs.

Once you begin to uncover and address whatever deeper needs the group member might have, you can suggest some practical exercise (the note-taking exercise mentioned above) that will help him deal with that problem.

Remember that the talkative person in your enemy – although he or she may seem at cross purposes with the group. Someone who is so verbally expressive may very well be a good leader who just needs to learn self-control. If so, you have a chance to help him or her learn to channel words into a refreshing stream that brings life.

Conflict?

Small groups are most often parts of church congregations. In instances where a conflict cannot be resolved within the small group, the group should bring the matter before the congregation, usually beginning with the elders or other spiritual leaders of the congregation. The goal is still repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

1. Ask God to give you a caring heart. Instead of going for your “pound of flesh,” make sure that you really want to lift the weight of the other person’s sin against you off that person’s shoulders.
2. Think through your positive approach and the statement you plan to make to the one who has wronged you.
3. Begin the reconciliation meeting with prayer. Ask God to forgive you for your sins.
4. Begin by stating that you trust the meeting will help you both deal openly with the conflict.
5. Give the other person time to respond to you. Be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:9).
6. If reconciliation takes place, celebrate with a prayer of praise together.

1John 5:3 reminds us that we demonstrate our love for God by obeying his commandments.

We are also told that “His commands are not burdensome.” If we seek to demonstrate the “obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5), reconciliation with a fellow believer is never a burdensome ordeal. It is, rather, an opportunity to experience the joy which comes with the start of a deeper relationship in Christ.

Those Awkward Silences

Periods of silence will emerge in any group. Sometimes these will occur at the beginning of group sessions, before actual discussions begin, and sometimes after lively interaction that leads to resolution.

Group silence is good and healthy. It helps group members tune into their feelings, concentrate on group relationships, and reflect on what they’re learning.

When silence occurs the leader may fear that the group has nothing left to say and will be tempted to break in with a comment. But if a leader habitually breaks these silent moments, the group will always expect him to provide cues about what they should do next. The group will never learn to use silence productively.

Group exercises into which silence is structured are helpful. They may help the leader to become more comfortable with silence and give the members opportunities to see and feel the benefits of silence.

Begin by having the leader ask a question. For example, “What do you think a missionary is?” Instruct the group members not to respond until they have formulated a clear response or until 60 seconds have passed (one minute of silence is a long time!). After everyone in the group has had a chance to answer, move on to another question and follow the same format. Do this once every time you meet until the silence feels productive and causes no tension for members.

Turn Conflict Into An Opportunity To Gain A Brother

Christians are not immune to conflict. Conflict has existed since the dawn of man, and the Body of Christ has never avoided it. But Scripture calls us to make peace with our brothers.

Jesus reminded us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). Paul exhorts us to “do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). These references leave no doubt that God would have us build bridges rather than walls with other Christians.

The world sees resolution of conflict as something done to get on with business. The Christian sees it as a means of building stronger relationships for God’s kingdom.

Successful peacemaking involves prayer, careful listening, good communication, and Christian discipleship. Since these disciplines are crucial components of small groups, it is feasible to exercise reconciliation in a small group.

Let us look a biblical pattern for reconciliation to apply in small groups. Matthew 5:23-24 says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus provides another method for reconciliation: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ”

By nature we often seek retribution rather than reconciliation. This is where the hope for reconciliation breaks down. We want our “pound of flesh” when we feel we have been wronged, but we are willing to let the matter drop if we have sinned against someone else.

These options are not supported by Jesus’ instruction in Matthew. Jesus desires that we regain a positive relationship on a deeper level,

not that we destroy the offender. Our motive must be to demonstrate God’s love, not vengeance.

The guidelines Jesus laid down for reconciliation in Matthew 5 and 18 can be followed in working through conflicts in small groups. The first step – going to the other person privately – is crucial. It is best to attempt to resolve problems that affect the group by going directly to the individual who seems the source of the problem. Often the problem can be resolved just between the two persons initially involved without its ever spreading through the group as a whole.

Sometimes reconciliation does not take place immediately. Despite our repeated attempts to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness just between the two of us, we may finally conclude that we need the help of others.

Scripture says we are to take one or two others with us to talk with the offending party. Part of the idea is to keep the injury and the knowledge of it to as narrow a circle as possible for the good of the whole group. We need to meet repeatedly so long as there is hope for reconciliation on this level, with one or two witnesses and the two persons principally involved.

Always the thought in mind should be reconciliation and forgiveness, not simply proving one side or the other wrong. We must approach all such situations with humble recognition that none of us is without sin (Galatians 6:1-4).

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At any point along the way, if repentance and forgiveness are forthcoming, the people involved should take steps to turn a formerly negative experience into a positive one of growth in Christian maturity.

There are certain considerations that will aid in the process of reconciliation:

1. Ask God to give you a caring heart. Instead of going for your “pound of flesh,” make sure that you really want to lift the weight of the other person’s sin against you off that person’s shoulders.
2. Think through your positive approach and the statement you plan to make to the one who has wronged you.
3. Begin the reconciliation meeting with prayer. Ask God to forgive you for your sins.
4. Begin by stating that you trust the meeting will help you both deal openly with the conflict.
5. Give the other person time to respond to you. Be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1: 9).
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