

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

IS IT JUST MEMBER FLOW OR AN UNHEALTHY TURNOVER?

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In contrast with a healthy flow of new members into a long-standing group which is no longer needed by its “older” members, sometimes a group has a rapid turnover of people who attend one or two meetings and then never return. This could be a sign that something is seriously wrong with the group, and if it coincides with other members (or your own) feelings of frustration or needs not being met, it is definitely time to evaluate the group.

Here are some of the reasons for rapid turnover in an existing group:

- **Meetings Are Too Negative** – The group has become just a complaint session, with little or no constructive support
- **Meetings Are Too Boring** – The group only covers old ground, or the format does not allow for new members’ input.
- **Leadership Too Domineering** – The group doesn’t feel like it belongs to enough people.
- **Group Feels Exclusive** – Newcomers perceive cliques or subgroups within the larger group which do not feel accessible to them.
- **Meetings Feel Shallow** – The group doesn’t get at underlying issues of its members, or doesn’t give opportunities for meaningful personal sharing (which can sometimes grows out of having too many outside speakers).
- **Meetings Feel Threatening** – The discussions are too heavy or intense and members are frightened away by angry confrontations that don’t seem to get resolved, or by disruptive members who are not dealt with well by the group.

Any of these reasons could be causing a high turnover rate, and should be recognized and dealt with quickly, especially if most members are feeling the same dissatisfaction.

Advanced Group Issues

When a group has stabilized over time and has only or mainly “old” members who know each other well, a somewhat different criteria might apply.

- **Anger** - Is anger even recognized and dealt with when it emerges, or is it swept under the carpet, ignored or denied? People may be able to take greater liberties with each other when they know each other well, but there should always be a sense of balance and fairness in the group process. Are confrontations made in a caring way, with no one person ever feeling ganged up on by the whole group? Do other group members serve as mediators or less biased allies when two group members are “at it” with each other? Does the leader take sides, or try to remain neutral, ensuring that the different perspectives are heard?

- **Secrets** – To what degree are there secrets within the group, e.g., information that some people have and others don't? Although most groups certainly don't deny their members the right to share deeply personal information about themselves outside the group, situations like this can sometimes become divisive and destructive within the group, creating a two-class system: an "in-group" and an "out-group." When such dynamics occur (and they often do), how are the resultant cliques and subgroups acknowledged by and accountable to the larger group? This may feel very different to the various members, depending on whether they are on the inside or the outside of one.
- **Confidentiality and Trust** – If the group subscribes to the principle of confidentiality (and almost all support groups do), then permeating every meeting should be a sense of trust that people can count on each other to keep what is said confidential. How much is that the case? Does information "leak" out of the group? How are breaches of confidentiality handled? The bottom line is: do members trust their fellow group members to protect their privacy? If not, members will be very careful about what they say, or else leave the group.

Similarly, do group members trust the other people in the group enough to express their true feelings about something, even when they think they are atypical or strange? Would they feel excluded or rejected by the group for taking an unpopular view, expressing a "minority" opinion? How powerful is the "majority" opinion? In other words, is there a "party line," a set of group attitudes and beliefs that is very hard to deviate from without being ostracized?

- **Difficult Members** – This sometimes represents the other side of the coin. In almost every group, there is a person who somehow becomes identified as "difficult," "oppositional," or in some other way bothersome and disruptive to the group. How does the group handle this? Are efforts made to help the person become a more accepted member, or is he or she further scapegoated and pushed out of the group? Is the problem simply one of unpopular viewpoints that somehow threaten the rest of the group, or is the person really disruptive and perhaps unable to behave according to mutually agreed upon guidelines and rules? How a situation like this is handled—humanely or insensitively—can either encourage members to stay with the group, or leave because they know that the shoe can always be on the other foot, and at some point they may be seen as the difficult member!
- **Love, Joy and Hope** – Although it may seem as if most of the decision-making that you'll do is related to assessment of negative aspects of a group, this is not true. An important part of the self-help group experience is feeling the relief of not being alone, the joy of helping others, and the hope of seeing what can be done in the future. In evaluating any group it is important to look at the positives connected with it, and weigh these against the negatives. Is the group a place where people express love and caring for each other? Is the underlying tone one of hope and encouragement? Can people see humor in themselves? Is there laughter in the group?

New members will decide for themselves how they feel about your group—many times without providing feedback. When you evaluate the group (whether as a leader or as a group) make your evaluation honestly. How well your group meets the needs of new members will affect whether or not you have an unhealthy turnover of members.