

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION DURING MEETINGS

by Gwen Roe

No matter how informal your group, there are unspoken rules of communication. Your group may want to define what you consider to be desirable and undesirable behavior. This handout explains a range of guidelines that groups have developed to improve the art of communication. Specific examples are on the last page.

Rules are best when used to liberate your group and make your meetings effective. Guidelines help to identify productive and unproductive behavior. Therefore, a person's behavior, not the person, is the target of correction.

A few specific examples follow. We suggest you use this handout as a starting point for group discussion. Keep it simple. Remember, it's easier to add more structure when the group needs it than it is to remove structure once it has been created. Many groups read their guidelines at the beginning of each meeting to help set the tone for the meeting, to introduce new members to the group, and to remind members of acceptable behavior.

WHO SPEAKS AND WHEN

The order in which people speak and the amount of time each person is permitted to speak can be predetermined. No one should monopolize the group, and everyone who wants to speak should have the opportunity. "Round Robin" means people take their turn to speak in seating order. "Random" or "Popcorn" means that people speak when they want to. When random or popcorn order is used, usually no one is allowed to speak twice until everyone who wants to speak has spoken once. Another way to control who speaks when is "rotating leadership." This entails giving the person who is currently speaking the leadership role. When he/she is done speaking, they decide on who will speak next. When the next person has the floor, he/she also has the "rotating leadership" role. Some groups accomplish this by having a "talking stick" or some other symbol that means that whoever is holding the "talking stick" has the floor. When they are done, they give the "talking stick" to whomever they want to give it to. The only rule would be that no one can have the stick twice until everyone has had the opportunity to have it at least once.

If time is a problem for your group and you find that a few people consistently monopolize the discussion, there are ways to handle it. The group can have a facilitator/time keeper. A graphic and symbolic way to handle it is to use an egg timer. The person speaking holds the egg timer and can talk as long as sand is running through the egg timer. When the sand has run through, the egg timer gets passed on to the next person whose turn it is to speak.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR PARTICIPATION

Many groups have an outline for people to follow when they first speak. The following combines several outlines: Your first name; what brought you to the group; on a scale of 1 to 10, rate your week; share one good thing that happened over the past week (which helps set an optimistic tone); how you are feeling right now; and one positive thing that you would like to do over the next week. An “outline” for participation helps keep people on track when they speak.

The format can also include using a predetermined question or topic meant to initiate discussion or a predetermined person may tell his/her story. People can either respond to the topic of the meeting or not when they take their turn to speak. Response to the subject should always be voluntary.

GUIDELINES FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

“I” Statements:

Most groups today request that each person use “I” statements when speaking during a meeting. This means that people always speak in the first person about their own experience. “I” statements are a way of enacting “no judgment” rule explained next. For example, a participant may say, “I am sad about...,” “I feel very angry because...,” or “I felt happy when...”

The following examples are not “I” statements and usually are, at best, unhelpful: “You should...,” “You ought to...,” “You are...,” and “I think you are being...” You may offer your own experience and what worked for you in solving a problem, but do not give advice as to what someone else should do.

No Judgments:

Many groups expressly prohibit making judgments. It is easy for all of us to make judgments without realizing it and with the best of intentions. No judgments means that members do not use the words “should” or “ought.” No judgments also means no advice giving, criticizing or giving accusations or verbal attacks. Whether written or not, this rule is basic for all group participants to feel supported and safe.

No Problem Solving:

When someone raises a personal problem, avoid premature problem solving. The person will not feel heard and there may be circumstances which you do not fully understand. The group can be a valuable and enriching resource for problem solving, but only when the person with the problem asks for this kind of help and is ready to hear it. Many times, people just want to vent their frustrations, fears or anger.

No Second Guessing:

There should be no second guessing, e.g., if a speaker says he/she is angry, it is inappropriate to respond with, “You don’t look angry,” “If you are angry, why are you smiling?” or “I wasn’t angry when that happened to me.” In other words, it is important that people feel that they are being listened to, respected, and heard. If a group member is unsure what another member is saying, he/she may want to restate what the speaker has said. This is to ensure that what is being heard is what is being said.

Cross-Talk

The 12-step anonymous self-help group model originated by Alcoholics Anonymous is highly structured. This model provides a structure for groups, as well as an approach to life. They provide many guidelines; among them is the “no cross-talk” rule. In other words, no group participant is allowed to respond to the speaker during his/her turn. (In all cases, “the speaker” refers to a group participant who has spoken during a meeting, not a guest speaker.) In other words, no feedback is allowed during meetings. Participants are, however, welcome to approach someone after a meeting and respond to what has been said. A few groups that have adapted the 12-steps allow cross-talk only when the speaker requests it. On the other hand, other less structured groups encourage cross-talk. The rule “No cross-talk” also means no side conversations, which never should be allowed.

The lack of feedback and dialogue that occurs when there is no cross-talk, reduces the immediate effectiveness of the group for some people. However, the rule minimizes the many unhealthy group dynamics that can transpire during meetings such as alliances, criticisms, or codependency, to name a few.

Silences

A group may spell out that everyone has the right to share experiences, whether unusual, bizarre, or unexpected. Silences are also allowed in such groups. In other words, everyone has the right, within reason, to listen silently. The group’s focus will determine how long someone can remain silent without being approached. For example, if someone is attending a meeting for people with agoraphobia, his/her presence itself is a major victory. If you are concerned that someone is silent because his/her needs are not being met, you may approach him/her after the meeting to check this out.

Punctuality

In order to start and end on time, most groups make punctuality a conscious effort or rule. Many people believe it is a show of respect to arrive on time and to begin the meeting on schedule for the beginning and ending of meetings. Informal socializing and networking can take place before and after the meetings. Whether your group wants to be casual or structured about time, make it a conscious group decision to always be punctual.

CONCLUSION

Your group can decide how to maximize its effectiveness. A group is most effective when the atmosphere, communication style, and attitude of those attending are positive, encouraging, and respectful. People should be welcoming and feel welcomed. One of the most beneficial aspects of a self-help group is when people can speak candidly about their feelings and thoughts and still experience acceptance. For some people, a self-help group is the only place where this happens in their life.

Some rules may seem awkward at first but think about the kind of group you want for yourself and for others. Each group consciously or unconsciously develops its own “culture” which usually differs from most social situations in the “outside” worlds. That is why it is a valuable place, sometimes a haven, for group participants. Bear in mind that no one person is more important than the group in any discussion about group rules.

SAMPLE GUIDELINES FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Self-help groups can be as formal or informal as their members wish. But some groups find discussion easier if there are general guidelines that members can refer to. Here are examples of some guidelines. Guidelines can be included in the group’s brochure (so new members know from the outset what the ground rules are), printed as a hand-out to be distributed before the discussion, or posted on the wall for everyone to read and review.

- ☞ We are a group with a common bond sharing our troubles, understanding and wisdom.
- ☞ We listen, explore options, and express our feelings.
- ☞ We do not prescribe, diagnose, judge or give advice--we suggest.
- ☞ What we share is confidential.
- ☞ We have the right to remain anonymous if we choose.
- ☞ We encourage “I” statements so that everyone speaks in the first person.
- ☞ We try not to discuss persons who are not present.
- ☞ We have the right to ask questions and the right to refuse to answer.
- ☞ We each have the opportunity for equal air time or the right to remain silent.
- ☞ We are here to share our own feelings.
- ☞ Our goal is to accept people and to avoid making judgments.
- ☞ Side conversations are not allowed.
- ☞ We listen when others are talking.
- ☞ Having benefited from the help of others, we recognize the need for offering our help to others in the group.
- ☞ We share the responsibility to make the group work.
- ☞ Our goal is to accept people and to avoid making judgments.
- ☞ We encourage members to share their strengths, skills, insights, successes, and hopes with each other.

Every group has its own purpose, goals and member needs, so each group should develop their own set of ground rules that suits them. Remember, rules can change over time, and rules should be developed and accepted by the entire group.