

Can I Ask Someone to Leave My Small Group?

Discerning the answer to this complex question

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The group begins and one woman tells us she really needs to leave on time tonight. Clear to me, she is talking to that one person: the one who hijacks our ending time every week. Nonetheless, like clockwork, when we get to the end of group time, she begins sharing an emotionally uncomfortable story, even more uncomfortable to interrupt. The sharing is out of context. We are out of time, and her needs are strung out there like laundry on a sunny day.

Have you been there? Have you participated in a small group where you secretly wished that one person wasn't there? The one who talks too much, the one who says awkward things, or consistently pushes your group over the time limit? You cared about the person, but his or her presence created challenges for your group dynamic and eroded your ability to love them and others.

It's even more challenging to be the *leader* of that group. I've been there wondering, *How many members are waiting on me to redirect our group as she derails the conversation again?* She'd been talking more than 15 minutes past our agreed-upon ending time, tears streaming down her face as she shared weighty personal matters. While we may hope issues like these will resolve on their own, the simple fact is they won't.

Assess the Situation

All of us desire grace and love to be extended to us. We long and need to be welcomed just as we are, and rightly so. But how do we know when it's time to extend grace and gently redirect someone who is off course in our small group? And when does extending grace mean asking the person to seek the support he or she needs outside of your small group? Here are five steps to helping you discern the answer to that question, and if necessary, guidelines on how to ask the person to leave.

1. Know when to accommodate.

Often a first or second offense during your small group is a time for accommodation. When group members are in a difficult season and find themselves in the supportive environment of your small group, they may spill out their emotions unexpectedly. I've done it myself. Accommodate their needs by offering statements such as "It sounds like you need (prayer, support, to share more about your story, etc.)" Then offer ways to meet that need in the moment. For instance, you could take a moment to pray sincerely for the group member, and then move forward. You could also ask what would be helpful in this season such as meals, babysitting, or transportation. Then after your meeting, send an email to the group members asking them to volunteer to extend such care.

When the situation above happened in my group, I kindly stated our group time was over, told others they were free to go but anyone able to stay and pray for the needs she had shared was welcome to do so. Accommodating within the expected boundaries of the group is a reasonable and loving step to take. Many people will self-correct and feel loved along the way, all while having their needs met.

2. Evaluate when to hold group members accountable.

When accommodating becomes commonplace because of a continual breach of group expectations, we need to hold group members accountable. If your group has a covenant or a list of expectations you agreed to at the beginning, review it as a whole group. Any group can benefit from the reminder of expectations like confidentiality, beginning and ending on time, and the focus and purpose of the group time. Discussing these expectations as a group ensures no one is singled out.

If a group discussion about expectations doesn't help, it's time to meet with the person one-on-one or on the phone and talk more in-depth about the issue and the focus of the group. Ask how the person is doing in the group and how he or she hopes to grow by being in the group.

This conversation is time to ask for greater accountability to the group expectations. Reference their behaviors rather than your feelings of frustration. For example, I might say, "I'm thankful you feel comfortable sharing what's going on in your life with our group. I've noticed, though, that you tend to share in the last few minutes of our group time, which makes us run past the agreed-upon end time." This is more helpful than, "It's really annoying when you start sharing a drawn out story when everyone just wants to go home." Remind the group member of the group expectations and ask if he or she is willing to hold to these expectations. I also ask group members how I can support them in doing so. For instance, I supported one woman by calling her the day before group each week so we could check in. She was going through a difficult time and our short check-in call helped her come to group feeling heard and loved, lessening her need to overtake the conversation to get her needs met.

3. Pray, listen, and trust.

When you experience challenges in your group, pray. Ask the creativity of the Holy Spirit to guide you as you love your group and this person. Ask for clarity in group time as it can easily feel "fuzzy" when you are the leader navigating awkward moments. Ask for what God may want you to notice that you haven't seen before, and then quietly listen. Trust God will unfold the path as you take the next small step.

4. Consider everyone in the group.

Your group members are waiting for you. They're watching your leadership and learning from your courage—though it may feel more like fear than bravery! Remember their experience is more than just the content of your study or discussions. The safety you create as a loving leader may teach them more than the material you engage in your group. As the leader, you are the biggest influence on making your group a place for everyone to learn and be stretched in love.

5. Seek wise counsel.

If the group time continues to be compromised, talk with your coach, a pastor, or other group leaders in your church. They will be sympathetic to the complexity of the situation. Invite them into the situation, and don't be afraid to offer your true feelings about the matter. Process the situation and ask for their counsel. Discuss any resources the group member may need beyond your small group and if it's the time to ask this person to leave your group to focus on getting needed care.

How to Ask a Group Member to Leave

Though it's never easy, there are times when you need to ask people to leave your group—for their benefit and the benefit of the other group members. Here are some tips I've learned along the way:

Do It Right Away

Do it promptly and don't do it alone. Take someone from the group with you, preferably a mature group member who truly cares about this person.

Choose an Appropriate Meeting Place

Discern if the conversation is best done in a home, public setting (park, coffee shop, etc.), or at your church. Consider the person's temperament and possible response. I once met someone in a local park to have this difficult conversation. It was a calm setting where the person could express feelings without being watched. A coffeehouse, on the other hand, doesn't offer this kind of privacy. A home, however, felt too private for the uncertain display of emotions I was anticipating, and the church was not an option at the time. Each situation will be unique; be sure to take the setting into consideration as you plan for this important meeting.

Discuss the Issue

When meeting, don't make small talk. Gently say why you're there from the beginning. It can feel patronizing to make conversation for too long and then feel rejected. Respect them enough to spare them the extra grief.

Stick to talking about behaviors—not perceptions, attitudes, or your feeling of frustration. This should never be the first time you are discussing the breach of group expectations, so this shouldn't come as a shock.

Allow them to express their hurt, anger, sadness, or any other emotions they're feeling. It will feel like rejection to them. Listen graciously. Don't make any changes in your decision at this time in the heat of their emotions. The pull to rescue someone out of pain can be strong and is understandable. A process of discernment got you to this place, however, and a process of discernment would be wise to make any further decisions.

Offer them further support as discussed with your coach, pastor, or other leaders. Their needs may be in the realm of pastoral care, therapy, counseling, or something else entirely. Tell them you support them and care deeply for them, even though it may not feel that way in the moment. This is not patronizing if you have walked through these steps motivated by love.

Talk to the Group

Debrief honestly with the group members at your next group meeting, and talk about why the person is leaving your group. I suggest allowing for about half of the group time to process, if needed, and the other half to get back into your content. Ultimately, break up the time according to what feels natural for your group.

State briefly and honestly your process including the counsel you sought, how it was handled, and the behaviors that caused you to make the decision you did. I once had a group member ask, "How do I know I am not next?" Understandably, she was feeling insecure and uncertain of her place. I let her know there were loving and supportive conversations which occurred prior to asking the person to leave. It was not a rash decision I made alone or in frustration, but rather for the spiritual formation of the individual and the group.

Allow space for further questions. Listen attentively and trust the process you have gone through. If you get stuck, don't feel you have to make something up. Tell your group you want to think about it and be sure to follow up on their questions at the next group meeting.

Assure the group of your pursuit of everyone's growth and emotional safety, even in messy situations. Spend time praying for the person who has left. If appropriate, encourage others to connect with him or her for support.

Finally, move into your regular content together. It may feel uncomfortable or forced in the moment. It's okay. This experience is likely outside of everyone's comfort zones. Trust the Holy Spirit to be guiding and healing each of you as you continue to pursue love, being formed into the image of Christ.

In this particular scenario, a few other group members told me in confidence they had considered leaving the group because of the ongoing circumstances the individual created. Several others approached me to thank me for my leadership and courage. Interestingly, many said they learned more about leadership and love than they'd ever expected. For them, it was not just about me asking her to leave the group that showed courage and love, but about the grace with which we gently met that person's needs in all the awkward moments leading up to the decision. The experience of love for someone who could have easily been dismissed was transformational for each of them and taught them they would be graciously and truthfully loved during any season or challenge they may face.

We must be faithful to God's call, even when it means doing the hard work of handling difficult group situations. May we grow in courage to love boldly, and may God give us the wisdom and discernment to do so in a way that honors him and builds the church.

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