

Assumptions Make It Hard to Love Group Members

How to stop your inner judgments and really care for people

Beth Racine

I was standing in front of an intimate group of about 15 people, passionately sharing some of my best small-group leader training. And then it happened. A woman pulled out her phone and started typing. Immediately, my body filled with frustration as my head filled with a non-stop inner monologue: *You have got to be kidding me.* I had already given the whole "put your phones away so that you can focus" speech and still she was determined to be texting, searching the web, or probably checking Facebook. Seriously? Ugh! I was so irritated. *Some people!* I thought to myself, becoming increasingly agitated each time she pulled out her phone.

At this particular training event, I was teaching skills for self-control, composure, and creating safety in small groups. As my self-control was quickly slipping away, my head continued to blow up with more judgments: *She's so disrespectful. Come on, the least she could do is to step out or make it more inconspicuous. If she doesn't like what I have to teach, why did she even bother coming? What's wrong with this lady?*

Then, miraculously, it occurred to me: I was losing my self-control and judging this woman's actions—the very things I was trying to train these leaders *not* to do. It seems to me that God makes people teachers so he can teach *them* a lesson or two, and this was a classic example.

I decided to take some deep breaths and instead of continuing to let my head run through the judgments, I was actually going to model what I was supposed to be teaching. I said aloud to the group, "I'm feeling like my composure is going out the window." Turning to the woman on her phone, I said, "I notice you're typing on your phone."

Before I could continue, the woman excitedly piped in, "Oh, Beth, this stuff is so great. I don't want to forget any of it. I didn't bring a notebook, so I'm

taking as many notes as I can on my phone so I'm able to remember it and apply it!"

I'm pretty sure I turned a beautiful shade of red. I'd completely let my judgments paint a picture of this woman that was entirely untrue.

This happens all the time in small groups. While we're discussing our lives and differing views and opinions, we observe an action, behavior, or comment that causes us to perceive a threat. Perhaps someone says they think the Bible isn't true and we take it as a personal attack on our faith, or a raised eyebrow during a story about our kids makes us think someone disagrees with our parenting methods.

When that happens, our brain immediately jumps to "protect and defend mode." Our minds fill with assumptions in an attempt to make sense of the situation and make ourselves feel better. This is natural and normal. It's a beautiful part of how God wired us. If we let those assumptions run rampant, though, we can create a lack of safety in our groups, invent false stories that become the basis for our interactions, and, ultimately, lose the ability to love and care for our group members well.

The good news is, there is another way. Though we can't completely prevent our heads from going into judgment mode. We can notice when it starts and choose another path instead. Here are some practical steps to shift from judgment to loving well when you're leading a small group:

1. Regain Composure.

In order to do this, we first must recognize when we start to lose it. When I lose self-control or composure, I usually do three things:

- *I notice it in my body.* Usually, I stop breathing, get tense in my chest, and look away. Other times, I power up and stare at the person.
- *I notice it in my words.* I have plenty of things that I say either in my head or to others that are an indicator of lost self-control.
- *I notice it in my feelings.* I get irritated, frustrated, and angry.

Check in with yourself right now:

How do you know you have lost self-control or composure? Where do you notice in your body? What is your internal monologue? How do you feel? When you've started to lose composure, there are four things you can do to get it back:

- *Take deep breaths from your belly.* Make sure that you inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Take more time on the exhale than the inhale. Repeat until your pulse starts to slow down.
- *Pray.* Say, "God, I'm becoming defensive. Please help me calm my spirit and listen to understand, not judge."
- *Focus on the present.* It's so easy to start jumping ahead to conclusions or dwelling on something in the past. Instead, get yourself in the present moment. You can do this by paying attention to your senses: What do I smell? See? Hear? Feel?
- *Remind yourself that you're safe—and so are your beliefs.* Say, "I'm safe. This isn't about me. This is about listening to another person and creating safety for them."

2. Pay attention to your intent.

Why we do what we do is a big factor in the success of our interactions. One of the most loving things we can do for another person is recognize that they have experiences, background, and beliefs that are different from our own, and then honestly seek to understand. Be curious about the reasons they think, do, and believe the way that they do.

Check in with yourself right now:

Consider a time recently when you found yourself making judgments about what another person was saying, doing, or believing. When you entered into a conversation, what was your motivation for engaging? Was it to understand their perspective? Was it to teach them what you believe? Was it to challenge their thinking?

When you find yourself wanting to interact, ask yourself: *What is the reason I want to say something instead of just listening?* If your intent is truly to gain

new insights and information, that's a green light. If it isn't, seek to regain composure first.

3. Start interactions with facts instead of judgments.

Starting interactions with facts makes them less threatening. It opens up a conversation for understanding instead of defensiveness. When we start with judgments, people naturally get into a defensive posture. Starting with facts instead of judgments allows us to gain new insights and understanding. It communicates: "I want to know you and understand what you think, feel, and believe."

A fact is indisputable and based on observable, irrefutable data. Facts are specific, and all parties would agree that they are accurate. A judgment is opinion and can be viewed differently by different people. Here are some examples:

Fact: When we were talking about Jesus, you crossed your arms, rolled your eyes, and sighed.

Judgment: You get so frustrated when we talk about the Jesus.

Fact: I noticed you didn't share tonight.

Judgment: You're hiding something.

Fact: Though group is supposed to end at 8:30, people have been staying until 9:00.

Judgment: The group doesn't care that I need to get home.

Often, our brain jumps to a judgment before we even recognize what fact we observed that led to our judgment. To help identify the facts of a situation, notice both changes in yourself and changes in the group. Strive to pay attention to changes in behavior, language, body language, tone, and emotional reactions. Changes are a good indicator that there's more going on.

When you notice a change, seek to understand why the shift is happening. Rather than jump to a judgment, seek clarity by asking questions to gain understanding about the root causes and contributing factors of what you've observed: "I noticed you crossed your arms when Joe was speaking. Can you help me understand?" When you seek clarity, you can better lead the group.

Sometimes singling someone out to clarify can be more awkward in a group setting. If possible, make an observation about the group: "I noticed when I asked that question, *the group* got really quiet. Why is that?" Other times, you might need to wait until after the group meeting to seek clarity with an individual. This is especially true if there are strong emotions involved, or if the person might be embarrassed if you brought it up in front of the whole group. When you're in a safe, private environment say: "I noticed you didn't share tonight. I wanted to check in with you to see if everything is okay."

Check in with yourself right now:

Consider a conversation you've had in the last week where you felt frustrated or irritated. Did you start the conversation with a factual observation or a judgment?

As small-group leaders, it's our job to create safety and help people experience Christ's love through our words, actions, and attitudes. When we can separate out fact and judgment, we communicate, "It's safe here, and you are valued." These strategies will communicate your deep concern and love for your group members, and they can move your relationships deeper as you withhold judgment and seek first to understand.

—*Beth Racine, M.Ed. is President and Founder of [Envision Innovation](#). She has a heart and passion to see hurting and struggling people find hope, overcome obstacles, and achieve success both personally and professionally.*