

Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache

How to handle difficult relationships in your small group

Dr. Les Parrott

As kids, it never occurred to us to "work" on any of our relationships. They just happened. And if for any reason they didn't, we jumped ship. No fuss, no muss.

But somewhere along the line, each of us entered the fray of mature relationships—and things got dicey. We learned that some people were more difficult, if not impossible, to get along with. We learned that trusted friends could betray us. Authority figures we admired could snub us. A colleague's constant criticism could hurt us. And even family members with important information could leave us out of the loop. But we also learned that, unless we wanted to be hermits, we couldn't abandon every relationship that hits a snag. That's the rub with difficult people—we sink or swim together, especially in a small group.

A pioneering band of researchers has studied the age-old mystery of what makes people happy, in a general sense. Their answer is not what you might expect. What comes up consistently at the top of the charts is not success, good looks, or any of those enviable assets. The clear winner is relationships. Close ones—the kind of relationships that small groups engender.

But such research raises an interesting question: If relationships make us so happy, why do so many of them make life so difficult? And more importantly, what can we do to keep our cool, stand our ground, and reach positive solutions when we find ourselves in a group with high-maintenance relationships?

Defining the Issue

About 40 years ago, William Schutz was requested by the U. S. Navy to construct an instrument that would help them assemble compatible submarine crews—groups of men who could live together, elbow to

elbow, for extended periods of time with minimum conflict. Schutz determined that compatible behavior was determined primarily by "natural fit." In other words, people who get along well with each other do so without much effort. Their relationship doesn't require much work; you could say it's low maintenance.

Hopefully, you have a few low-maintenance members in your small group—people with whom you naturally fit. Sure, you may hit temporary turbulence together from time to time, but it's periodic and the relationship stays on course. If you are like most people, however, you also have some small-group relationships that aren't so easy. These are the impossible people who beef, bite, and bellyache. They give you the cold shoulder, require special attention, play the victim, dominate the group, or trample other people's feelings.

So you may wonder, *Are we simply left to wallow in the misery they create?* Hardly.

After combing libraries, listening to small-group leaders, and surveying dozens of small-group members, I have concluded that it is possible to make most high-maintenance relationships much better—in many cases, better than you could even imagine. Scripture not only says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18), it also promises that when we work at turning from our self-centered ways to building up our relationships, we "flourish like a palm tree . . . like a cedar of Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12). The effort you exert to improve a difficult relationship is almost always rewarded with new vitality for you and your group.

Maybe you are free from passive-aggressive group members, or members that are highly critical or controlling. Or maybe you've never encountered any other descriptions that fall under "difficult people" in a small group. If so, read no further. Consider yourself lucky, and extremely rare. But if you are like most group leaders dealing with difficult people, I offer the following key suggestions.

Don't Let a Difficult Person Determine Your Mood

When Thomas Jefferson included "the pursuit of happiness" among our inalienable rights, he pinpointed an idea that is important for all of us wanting to live with inward joy: people will interfere with our inalienable right to be happy if we allow them to.

In a small group I participated in some time ago, my friend who was leading gave some materials to a very sullen group member. As he did so, he politely thanked the man with a sour disposition for being there. The man, however, did not even acknowledge it. Afterward, I asked my friend about it. "A sullen fellow, isn't he?" I commented as we walked away. "Oh, he's that way every time we meet," shrugged my friend. "Then why do you continue being so polite to him?" I asked. My friend replied, "Why should I let him determine how I'm going to act?"

What an insight! But what really impressed me was that my friend was practicing it. To know that others don't control our moods is one thing, but to actually live this out is quite another. So practice this lesson every chance you get with a high-maintenance person in your group. If you do, it will soon become a habit.

Set Your Boundaries

As a kid, I was the ball boy for a soccer team at the college where my father worked. I ran back and forth along the sideline ready to retrieve a ball that went out of bounds. Of course, when it did, the action on the field stopped. The same is true when you learn to set boundaries with difficult people. Since your small group has no referees to blow the whistle or coaches to call a time-out, you become responsible for saying "foul" or "that was out of bounds." You alone manage the game.

So set some boundaries with the high-maintenance people in your group. Set limits on what is acceptable behavior. Decide what you want, be specific, and let the person know the rules. When he or she steps out of bounds, blow the whistle and call a time out before you resume play as a

group together (or if more appropriate, after the group dismisses for the evening).

Guard Against Infection

Warning: the negativism virus is highly contagious. Just like the flu, negativism can unwittingly be transmitted throughout a small group. Think of it this way: When someone honks insistently on the highway, does your ire rise to match theirs? No word has been spoken, but if you are like most people, you catch the driver's negativity.

The point is that when we are around a negative person, we become negative, too. We cut down other people's ideas and make cynical statements. Once infected, it becomes a way of relating. It becomes our membership dues to acceptance.

So the goal for you as a small-group leader is to be objective and observe the person's negative feelings without getting infected by them. Paul gives us the best protection against negativism when he says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Recognize the Chemistry Between You

Everybody is somebody's impossible person some of the time. But rarely is somebody everyone's impossible person all of the time. Oh, there are those few annoying exceptions that make it their mission to complicate everyone's existence—you can usually detect them when the mere mention of their presence elicits a resounding "Oh no!" from a group of people. But thankfully, they are rare.

That's why a good rule of thumb is to remember that the difficulty you experience with most impossible people is in your relationship, not in the person. Someone you like very much might get along just fine with someone else in the group that you can barely bare. Impossibility, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

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Discuss:

1. Do you allow the behavior and attitudes of others to influence or affect your behavior and attitude? What steps can you take to avoid that in the future?
2. What boundaries have you set for your group? What do you do when a person has gone "out of bounds"?
3. Who in your group gets along with the difficult person/people? How can you enlist his or her help in caring for them?

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