

OA GUIDELINES



Guidelines for Addressing Disruptive Behavior at Overeaters Anonymous Meetings

These guidelines are designed to help members in situations where an OA meeting is being disrupted by the behavior of one or more members, either within or outside the meeting. The disruption can range from subtle, annoying behavior to dangerous behavior. Many times the behavior is unintentional.

Here is an example of a question your meeting may encounter: “My home meeting is having a problem with a member who acts in a threatening manner. People are worried, and the group is losing members. Short of legal action or contacting the police, does OA have a policy on how to handle difficult members? Can we kick a member out of a meeting and/or out of OA?”

There is no easy answer. Although OA has no written policy on this matter, we can refer to our literature and Traditions:

- from Tradition Three in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*: “Even these people are not permanently barred from the group and denied the chance to recover. Of course groups must protect their members from violence or harassment” (p. 131).
- from Tradition One in *Alcoholics Anonymous’ Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*: “Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward” (p. 189). The book also says, “No A.A. can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled” (p. 129).

The first consideration is the good of the Fellowship and its survival. While each member has the freedom to work the program as he or she chooses, it does not come at the expense of the

OA group. If a member’s actions are disruptive or dangerous, the OA group needs to protect itself. If it doesn’t, the meeting may fold, and everyone will lose the opportunity for recovery.

How a meeting protects itself can cause conflict and controversy. Each situation is unique and should be evaluated individually. Discussing it at your group conscience meeting will help. You may find it helpful to contact your intergroup or region to learn how others have dealt with such problems.

If possible, begin informally on a one-to-one level. One member of the meeting may approach the disruptive individual to discuss the problem and look for solutions. Let the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions guide you, always striving to place principles before personalities and to treat others with kindness, patience, tolerance and love. A person is welcome at our meetings, but his or her disruptive behavior is not. Remember, we are dealing with sick behavior. You might need to ask yourself how you would treat a sick person in this situation. You may need to approach the disruptive person by phone. However you decide to approach the disruptive person, it is often helpful to have another member present to ensure your own safety.

If a one-to-one approach is not possible, it may be necessary to hold a group conscience with the whole meeting or to form a steering committee. Be sure to provide an equal hearing for all. Ask everyone to pray for God’s will and to come to the meeting with healthy, tolerant and supportive attitudes. Blame and accusations help no one. The meeting may decide that this individual should be asked to leave for the good of the group. While we cannot expel any person from OA, we can ask an emotionally disturbed person to leave the meeting and stay away until the matter has been resolved. This can be done while upholding Tradition Three; we are not denying the person membership in OA

as a whole. If the disruption is significant, it may be necessary to state clear consequences, including registering a formal complaint with the police. Our Tradition of anonymity (Tradition Twelve) should not be used to cover up unsafe behavior of any kind.

Other Suggestions

In all cases, strong meetings can minimize the opportunity for disruptive behavior. Do you have a strong meeting? Would your meeting benefit from doing a group inventory? Are you using the suggestions on the strong meeting checklist? (See the list of resources at the end of this document.) You may already have procedures in place for dealing with disruptive behaviors. Well-prepared group secretaries, leaders or chairpersons and an informed group conscience are essential to the well-being of the meeting.

If the disruption is subtle and reflects nonadherence to the group conscience or meeting format, consider holding a meeting on Tradition Two. Discuss how Tradition Two has helped you in your recovery.

A chairperson or any other member can interrupt a disruptive person's share or outburst by calling for a five-minute break and using the Serenity Prayer to address the disruption and refocus the meeting.

You can also use humor: "Would those who have brought sledgehammers, mobile phones, chainsaws or toddlers please maintain them in the 'off' position during the meeting?"

If the behavior is subtle and primarily attention-seeking, take the person aside, listen to his or her concerns and ask how you can help. Share some of your own experience on how you got well, so the person may identify and find his or her own solutions. Remember, "There but for the grace of God go I."

You can address disruption in virtual meetings by speaking to the person privately. If this is not successful, discussion at the group conscience meeting may help the group find a way to approach the problem.

Resources

- *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*
- *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous*
- *The Twelve Concepts of OA Service*
- *Group Inventory* (download at www.oa.org/pdf/OAGroupInventory.pdf)
- *Strong Meeting Checklist* (download at www.oa.org/pdf/StrongMtgChecklist.pdf)
- *The OA Handbook for Members, Groups and Intergroups: Recovery Opportunities*
- 2006 World Service Business Conference Workshop Tape: *Dealing with Disruptive Members* (see www.oa.org/ws_business_conf.html)

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