

OA GUIDELINES



Guidelines for Addressing Disruptive Behavior Affecting Overeaters Anonymous Meetings

These guidelines have been developed through the experience of OA members and the Board of Trustees, who have contributed to their creation. They reflect OA Traditions and Concepts of Service as reflected in our OA Conference-approved literature. These guidelines are strong suggestions based on those who have gone before. They do not replace the local group conscience, but we encourage OA groups and service bodies to consider carefully before acting contrary to these suggestions.

The guidelines are designed to assist members in situations where an OA meeting (or meeting attendance) is being disrupted by the behavior of one or more members, within or outside a meeting, whether face-to-face or virtual. Fortunately, such disruptions are rare. The disruption can range from subtle, annoying behavior to dangerous behavior. Many times the behavior is unintentional. Here are examples of issues you may encounter in your meeting:

“My regular meeting is having a problem with a member who is disruptive. She speaks out of turn and argues with other people. People are worried and the group is losing members. What should we do?”

“My home meeting is having a problem with a member who acts in a threatening manner. People are afraid and upset; many are not coming back to the meeting. Short of legal action or contacting the police, does OA have a policy on how to handle difficult members?”

“One of our members has made inappropriate sexual advances toward another member. How should the member and the group handle this situation?”

“Some members from my home group are being particularly controlling with their sponsees and specifically saying that, in order to be considered abstinent, members must stop taking medication and must follow a specific food plan. How can we deal with this?”

“Can we kick a member out of a meeting and/or out of OA?”

There are no easy answers. Although OA has no written policy on disruptive behavior, we can refer to our literature and the Traditions.

- “From Tradition One in *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*: “The unity of OA is a matter of life and death to us. However, unity isn’t always easy to maintain.... If we as individuals did not value the common welfare of the Fellowship above our own ... OA ... would lose the strength that comes from our union of the many” (p. 110).
- From Tradition Three in *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*: “Occasionally groups are plagued by members who disrupt the harmony of the meetings. 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.... We have found that most personality problems can best be dealt with on a one-to-one basis through sponsorship” (p. 131).

Tradition Five tells us that the primary purpose of every OA group is to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer. Every member of the group has the responsibility, therefore, to keep that primary purpose in mind. If a member’s actions are disruptive or dangerous, the OA group not only needs to protect itself and its members, it must also make certain that the primary purpose for which the group exists is upheld. If it doesn’t, the meeting may fold and many may 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 can help. You may find it helpful to contact your intergroup, service board, region, or

the World Service Office to learn how others have dealt with such problems. A letter from the chair of the Board of Trustees to OA members, dated October 6, 2017, stated, “In some cases the individuals who offer themselves as sponsors may go beyond the boundaries suggested for sponsorship. . . . They ought only to share or suggest changes that worked for them in their journey. Sponsors should not issue orders or make demands.”

Alerting local groups, intergroups, and service boards or virtual service boards to potential problems helps them to be prepared if the disruptive individual shows up at another meeting. Be careful, however, to put principles before personalities (Tradition Twelve) and protect members’ anonymity as well as confidentiality.

Clear guidelines in meeting formats (such as a statement regarding cross talk or safe practices in choosing a sponsor) can prevent most problems. Important guidelines may need to be repeated more than once during a meeting. Because virtual meetings lack face-to-face contact, it is critical to set guidelines based on principles prior to creating a meeting format. As our *Suggested Meeting Format* states, “The chair for each meeting has the discretion to suggest to anyone sharing that he or she is off-topic or is speaking too long.”

When addressing a disruptive member, begin informally, one-to-one if possible. One or two members 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 strive to place principles before personalities and treat others with kindness, patience, tolerance, and love. It is best if the members approaching the disruptive individual are grounded in these principles. Any person is welcome at our meetings, but their disruptive behavior is not. Remember, we are dealing with inappropriate behavior. You might need to ask yourself how you would treat a sick person in this situation. You might 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, or if the individual is uncommunicative or uncooperative when approached, it may be necessary to hold a group conscience with the whole meeting or form a specific committee. Be sure to provide an equal hearing for all. Ask everyone to pray for God’s will and 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 a disruptive member who is unwilling to change their behavior(s) 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 never be used to cover up unsafe behavior of any kind.

Other Suggestions

In all cases, strong meetings can minimize opportunities 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. The *Suggested Meeting Format* provides wording, giving the chair of the meeting responsibility for dealing with such behaviors. Well-prepared group secretaries, leaders, or chairs—and an informed group conscience—are essential to the well-being of meetings.

If disruptions are subtle and reflect nonadherence to the group conscience or meeting format, consider holding a meeting on Tradition Two and/or Tradition Five. Discuss how the Tradition(s) has helped you in your recovery.

A chair, moderator, 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 interrupt the disruption and refocus the meeting. A short break or a moment of silent reflection may help. These ideas may bring enough of a pause between the behavior and the continuation of the meeting to bring everyone back to focus on our OA recovery.

If the behavior includes approaching members (during or after a meeting) for inappropriate reasons, including sales pitches, sexual advances, or other unacceptable actions, group members may interrupt the behavior by joining a conversation that might morph into something else and redirect it. For example, if you have a member who habitually approaches younger newcomers as an available sponsor, whereas another member might be a healthier, safer option, members may interrupt and discourage the person known for this type of behavior.

If the disruptive behavior is subtle and primarily attention-seeking, take the person aside or offline, listen to their 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 their own solutions. Remember, there but for the grace of God go I.

Most situations can be resolved within the group. However, if a person appears to be a danger to themselves or others, then it is appropriate to call the police. Police are trained to deal with such cases.

Sometimes a member is so distraught that they may need immediate attention. In a face-to-face meeting, it may be appropriate for someone to take that member aside to offer help. In a virtual meeting, a member may arrange to immediately contact the distraught person to work one-on-one offline while the rest of the group continues its meeting.

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

Technology can also be helpful. Phone meetings often have access to an internet interface or “dashboard” that allows meeting moderators to mute or remove a

disruptive caller from the meeting. In virtual meetings, make sure that a moderator with access to the dashboard is familiar with the Traditions and only mutes, drops, or blocks a caller after other methods have failed. Online meetings have options such as private messaging and “gag” commands. Moderators can remove a member who is cursing or spamming and offer a public explanation.

Remember, a member is never permanently banned from a meeting (Tradition Three).

Resources

- *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous* (#990)
- *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* by Alcoholics Anonymous
- *The Twelve Concepts of O.A. Service* (#330)
- *O.A. Group Inventory* (download at oa.org/documents; “Group Support”)
- *Strong Meeting Checklist* (download at oa.org/documents; “Group Support”)
- *The O.A. Handbook for Members, Groups, and Service Bodies: Recovery Opportunities* (#120)
- *Suggested Meeting Format* (download at oa.org/documents; “Meeting Formats”)

OA Board-Approved

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