

Managing a Disruptive Participant in Your Marriage Education Program

Management of difficult group dynamics and setting a healthy tone from the beginning will help the success of your marriage education program.

The success of a marriage education program is built on having a proven, well-delivered curriculum offered in a setting that promotes safety and respect, and makes each participant feel valued. Even the best curriculum or the most well-designed program can be undermined if the instructors struggle with their command of the material, their presentation style, or their ability to manage the group well. This sheet will focus on the management of difficult group dynamics

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and setting a healthy tone from the beginning. These strategies may be implemented in addition to setting some ground rules with the group. Ground rules may include agreeing to treat one another with respect, not interrupt, allow only one person to speak at a time, etc. We will also look at what to do when negative behaviors come up in a group workshop.

The challenge of an overly-talkative group participant

Most group facilitators can tell you how common it is to have one or more participants who seem to feel as if they have to answer every question. Though

the questions may at times be very well thought out, the end result can be that other group members feel unable to participate. Over time, this can make other group members feel irritated, and even cause some to give up on trying to contribute to the discussion.

- Intentionally call on other group members in order to convey that you want everyone involved in the conversation.
- Wait for a pause or the end of the first thought, and gently interrupt and invite someone else to speak.
- Deliberately look away from the dominating person and make eye contact with others.

Tangents and Ramblings: Refocusing the discussion

While the overly-talkative participant is normally pretty focused on the topic, participants who go off on tangents can move the group off topic. People have various motivations for going on a tangent. Here are a few techniques to get things back on track:



- Direct the group back to the topic or find something in what they say that you can link back to it.
- Ask if there is a question or how they think this connects to the topic.
- Take the question back and give it to the rest of the group.

Disengaged group members, or members who desire attention for various reasons, can sometimes engage in making jokes or having side conversations with other group members.

Ha-Ha, Very funny: Limiting jokes and side conversations

Disengaged group members, or members who desire attention for various reasons, can sometimes engage in making jokes or having side conversations with other group members.

- If the joke is close to the topic, or helps to illustrate the point, let it go.
- Ask the person an easy, but serious, question to get them focused on the topic.
- Politely interrupt and ask if their thoughts could be shared with the whole group.
- Move toward side talkers and make eye contact with them.
- If necessary, talk to the participant outside of the group, or during a break.

I Want Counseling Now: Managing a participant who wants to monopolize your attention

Sometimes a group member will ask questions that challenge the instructor or content and seem to demand an answer.

- Don't feel you have to solve the person's prob-

lem, but be empathic.

- Don't react to hostility, redirect questions back to the person.
- If there is time, and the topic is appropriate to the group, ask group members for input.
- Offer to talk to the person during the break.

- If you don't know the answer, say so; then promise to help them get an answer.

There are also some more serious, potentially disruptive, behaviors or dynamics that can come up

in a group. Here are a few, along with suggestions for how to deal with them:

Problems in the Peanut Gallery: Managing a heckler

This happens very rarely in a marriage education group where people are attending voluntarily, but it can occur in rare instances. Often hostility is a mask for fear, or insecurity about being in the group or in the setting with their partner.

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- If the comment is hostile, ask if there is another way the person could state what they are saying. Use positive peer pressure.
- Identify hostile behavior when you see it, and gently make it clear that the purpose of the class is to find better ways to manage conflict and hard feelings.
- If necessary, and for the good of the group, overtly hostile people can be asked not to come back. Offer alternative services or resources.

Have a Heart: Defusing the negative actions of one partner who speaks insensitively to the other

Most couples will be respectful and gentle with one another, but sometimes, a couple will bring their unhealthy communication patterns into the group.

- Remind the group of whatever ground rules you have about safety or not talking about your partner.
- Ask the person to reframe or restate what they said in a more positive way.
- If the pattern persists, talk with the couple during a break.
- If appropriate, ask the couples to use the skills or techniques they are currently learning.

Some activities can raise significant feelings for participants in unexpected ways.

Hitting Too Close to Home: Managing a group member who has a highly emotional reaction to the material

Some activities can raise significant feelings for participants in unexpected ways.

- Acknowledge the emotional response verbally or nonverbally. Sometimes the person can “recover” if the group simply moves on.
- Avoid drawing the whole group’s attention to the person, although sometimes their partner or someone next to them will offer them comfort.
- Normalize feelings and remind the group of any skills for dealing with strong feelings that might be part of your curriculum.
- Assure the person that it is okay if they need to take a moment away from the group, but ask them if they would like some support. Often their partner will provide this.
- If you have another instructor in the room, one can accompany the person out of the room.

The bottom line for instructors is to have a good command of the material, and confidence in managing a group conversation. It helps to have a good sense of humor, to have patience with yourself and group members, and to show respect for yourself, your material, and the individuals in the group. If you find yourself struggling to manage these behaviors, get help and support from a supervisor, an experienced instructor, or other members of your team.

Thank you to Leif Noll, Ph.D., a psychologist and PREP® master trainer with extensive experience leading marriage education workshops, for contributing to this tip sheet.