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| *A person holding a black and white striped flag  Description automatically generated with medium confidence* | **Four Symptoms of Dying Groups**  *Should you work through them or abandon ship?*  By Joel Comiskey |

Small groups don't last forever. Some voluntarily break up to begin new groups. Others develop diseases and die. In my work with churches and small groups, I've noticed four diseases that often afflict groups. None of them are fatal. Yet, if a small group is sick with several of them, the life of the community might be beyond recovery.

# Unresolved Conflict

Some group members talk too much, stay too late, or don't control their children—to the distraction of everyone else. I remember talking with one leader whose group had a family that lacked the cultural sensibility of controlling their kids during and after the meeting. The leader said to me, "I'm sorry, Joel, my wife just can't take it anymore. We're going to stop leading our small group."

A person in my own group didn't like the worship time. He had a habit of injecting his own verbal comments while others were trying to sing worship songs.

Situations like these and countless others can be resolved—if you deal with them quickly. Buried problems, however, tend to become an elephant in the room that nobody is willing to discuss.

# Focus on Me

Sometimes conflict in a group is subtle. It can lurk below the surface and rear its head in the form of selfishness. Granted, selfishness is part of every small group to a certain extent. But it's possible for groups to be taken over by selfish people.

Sometimes these people mask their selfishness with such words as *fellowship* or *community*. I had one couple in a small group who openly resisted the idea of reaching out because they were only there for community. Translation: their own needs. This couple wanted nothing to do with reaching out and including others, and they showed their distaste for future multiplication by letting others know the division it might cause.

I agree 100 percent with our need for community, and with practicing the "one anothers" of Scripture. Small groups help mend fractured, broken lives, and that takes time. At the same time, groups must continually reach out to include others, allowing them to experience the healing and community they desperately need. Unfortunately, some people never get beyond themselves and end up damaging the group by demanding more and more attention.

To remedy a situation like this, follow Jesus' advice in Matthew 18 about going to your brother (or sister) one-on-one. And if that doesn't work, take others with you. In the case above, I could have easily caved into this couple because of their strong personality. But knowing that their influence would have stagnated the entire group, I talked with them personally about our core values of reaching out and multiplying in order to keep the group healthy and fruitful. In effect, I served them notice that their values were not consistent with the group's values. Unfortunately, they eventually left the group and the church, which I later learned was a pattern in their lives.

# Lack of Commitment

A group isn't stable when attendance fluctuates from 2 to 15 on a weekly basis. Without the consistency of group members, the group can quickly lose steam. Plus, it's really hard to do life together when you never know who will show up.

As a remedy for this, make a covenant with group members, asking each member to actively participate in the life of the group—which includes regular attendance and showing up on time. Alternatively, you could focus on the core values of your small-group ministry, focusing on faithful and committed members. Clearly communicate that your group is only healthy and fulfilling its purpose when group members are committed and consistent.

# Consumers

Small groups are the perfect place to give people the opportunity to use their gifts and grow in leadership. They turn members into leaders—disciples who make other disciples. I get excited about small-group ministry every time I remember that it allows us to fulfill Christ's mandate to make disciples who are equipped to make other disciples (Matthew 28:18–20).

Some small groups, however, make it acceptable that members never go beyond themselves. When this happens, no one steps up to take care of snacks or lead the worship time. And they certainly aren't willing to become a leader for a new group. The members see themselves as consumers: only attending so that others serve them—not the other way around. Eventually, the leader becomes over-burdened and may decide to quit.

# Will the Group Live?

I led one group for a couple of years and eventually had to close it. Three out of the above four problems overtook the group, and it wasn't possible to work through them all. The group simply was not healthy. The best thing I could do was integrate the remaining members into other groups and start a new group from scratch.

On other occasions, I've been able to deal with a particular sickness and move on. When the group members and I discovered a remedy, the group moved into new life and health and continued reaching out.

If your group is suffering from one or two of the illnesses above, you should be able to gather with your members and your coach and figure out a solution. If your group's illness is more pronounced, however, your only option might be to start over.

— Joel Comiskey is founder of the Joel Comiskey Group and author of numerous books; copyright 2008 by Christianity Today.

# Discuss:

1. Is our group suffering from any of the illnesses above? Which ones?
2. What steps do we need to take to work through these issues? Or is it time to end?
3. Who can you enlist to help you in this process: either helping you work through the issues with your group or helping you end the group in a healthy way?