

How to Confront a Group Member's Behavior

Balancing confrontation with personal risk taking. *Confrontation is a respectful interaction between two people, when one caring person is willing to disclose their internal responses to another's behavior.* Confrontation is caring enough to say something. The purpose of group work is to “discover ourselves as persons with feelings and to identify our own defenses that prevent this discovery.”

We are well-defended beings. We all put up walls of protection between us and others. It becomes hard to see each other through these walls and to interact freely. Protection in this sense can become over-protection. When these walls of safety are threatened we sense it with alarm. At some level we fear the loss of the thing we value the most—our safety. *Confrontation*, in the sense of our walls being challenged by someone, is a term that carries a negative connotation. We usually think “to confront” is to attack. How can confrontations, then, be any good? Confrontation must be defined carefully by asking *what* is being confronted and how. The target of confrontation is not the person but the behaviors of another person that is interfering with meaningful connection.

Confrontation is compromised when it is done without the concept of “leveling” on the part of the one doing the confronting. *Leveling* is the ability to “respond openly about how we feel when confronting another person's behavior... We level when we take the risk of sharing our feelings...By leveling, we put ourselves on equal ground with the one whose behavior we are confronting.” Confrontation without risk-taking is usually little more than an aggressive form of hiding. It is not confrontation in the sense meant here because it is not a fully honest and authentic expression of our true selves to another person.

When to confront. Confrontation is necessary to the successful treatment of addictions. It is a skill that helps during the conflict stage(s) of a group's life cycle. However, even the gentlest of confronting can be experienced as an attack. It is therefore helpful to be mindful of three competencies: “(1) the ability to pick the proper moment, (2) the ability to discern that the members can handle it, and (3) the ability to see that the member can profit from it.”

Do's and Don'ts. To confront is to take a risk and it therefore takes courage. It is important to be clear about *what* you are confronting. Stick with the “**data**,” the facts and the behaviors. Avoid confronting based on your opinions about what someone might be thinking or feeling. Don't take guesses. Check it out by respectfully exploring it first. The data are the actual, observable behaviors—not your impressions or interpretations. Don't judge. When confronting, you are *disclosing your internal responses*, such as your own feelings about the matter. Confronting is not interpreting the motives of the other person and then attacking. It is sharing our responses of concern regarding the behavior of the other person. Confronting is not an opportunity to give advice to the other person. Instead of saying, “Don't let other people walk all over you so much” you could say “When others walk all over you I feel angry at them for doing it, and it's upsetting for me to see.” Examples: (the **data** are in bold; the *self-disclosures* are italicized)

- “When I hear **loud voices** it's a little *frightening* for me.”
- “I notice that you've **not spoken** today. It makes me *feel uneasy*. Are you OK?”
- “I hear you say, “**I can go into bars and just have a coke.**” I *fear* that can put a person's sobriety at risk.”
- “**I feel cut off before I'm finished.** I *don't want* to be interrupted before I'm done.”

Don't attack the wound and make the injury worse. Confront you fellow group members like a good doctor would a wound—to clean and bandage it with skill, with care, and with healing in mind.