



August 29, 2017

[Send to printer](#) | [Close window](#)

The following article is located at: <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2002/handling-difficult-people-when-extra-grace-is-required.html>

SmallGroups.com, October, 2002

# Handling Difficult People: When Extra Grace is Required

Difficult people can be confusing and overwhelming to lead, having a framework in place can make the situation easier for you both.

*Dr. Jim Jackson* | posted October 12, 2002

**You don't have to be a psychologist, a labor negotiator, a judge, or a marriage counselor to lead a small group but it probably wouldn't hurt. During the last 5 years, in my role as both a small group leader and a participant, I have seen sparks fly, problems fester, and tears flow. And on a few memorable occasions, I have encountered challenging, difficult people who have threatened to bring out the worst in me and the worst in others. At various times, I have lost my temper, shaken my fists, thrown up my hands, paced the floor, prayed for wisdom ... and you probably have too. In the midst of my frustration, I have concluded that although there are no "quick fixes," there are more and less effective ways to nurture, encourage, and love well the difficult men and women who find their way to your small group.**

At the risk of oversimplification, "difficult people" fall into a couple of broad categories—those who present with more or less garden variety quirks, needs, and challenges, and those who are have what psychologists call character disorders. People in the first group are often capable of and open to making changes, and sometimes their problems are situational. Those in the second group have serious life-long adjustment problems which may be demonstrated by the inability to hold a job, chronic relationship difficulties, problems regulating emotions, and marked inflexibility, among other things. For them, the process of spiritual growth and sanctification is usually a slow and uneven one, as their experience of God and others is often processed through a kind of dysfunctional lens or grid. Individuals in the former category are the most common, but those in the latter category are by far the most challenging.

Regardless of where a person falls on the continuum, there are a few general principles (although not an exhaustive list) that can guide your interactions and shape your thoughts and attitudes. Having a specific framework to fall back on is particularly critical because without one, involvement with difficult group members can quickly escalate and become chaotic, directionless, and defensive.

**Cultivate an attitude of empathy.** To put it simply, most difficult people don't like being difficult. They frequently come from dysfunctional families and have often suffered various kinds of mistreatment, abuse, and victimization. While they are fully responsible both for their actions and for the choices they make, they may have had to tackle the challenges of life without the tools that others take for granted. An understanding of their hardships can help develop patience and allow you to see beyond the unattractive picture they may present.

**Try to see the potential in them that God sees.** The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories of God using deeply flawed and dysfunctional mortals to accomplish great things that more "normal" people would never have attempted. Finding creative ways to reframe "negatives" as "positives," and seeing what a difficult person *can be* instead of what he or she *is* (which resembles what God does with each of us) may instill hope and optimism, which can ultimately lead to significant change.

**Bathe them in prayer.** Praying for difficult people seems simple enough, but it doesn't always happen. Don't wait until you feel positively about them to start (because you never will). Tell the Lord that you don't like them, that they drive you crazy, that they are draining all of your energy ... and ask Him to help them become increasingly whole, while also transforming any unhealthy attitudes you have about them.

**Recognize your limits.** You are a small group leader—not God—and that needs to be good enough. You can listen empathically, challenge appropriately, nurture lovingly and even pray diligently, but in the final analysis these things may do little to change the attitudes and behaviors of a difficult person. Guilt over your ineffective efforts to promote change and to soften the edges of troubled group members (while normal) is usually unhelpful and unwarranted.

**Set crisp boundaries.** The needs of difficult people are sometimes so great that they threaten to drain the resources of even the most functional groups. Their interpersonal styles are frequently confrontational and abrasive, and if allowed free reign, they can intimidate or silence other members. While setting boundaries may seem harsh and controlling, it is often the most loving thing you can do both for your challenging friend and for your group.

**Weigh the needs of the "difficult" person against the needs of the group.** While it is true that Jesus spoke of leaving 99 sheep to rescue 1, this principle should not be the sole basis of our theology of relationships. In fact, much harm has been done by well-meaning pastors, missionaries, and others who ignore the needs of their families while spending their time and energy in a break-neck effort to help lost or hurting people. The point is that the needs of a troubled group member—while very important—are not absolute and do not automatically outweigh the needs of all others in the group.

**When you are in over your head, refer to a professional.** If an individual appears to have serious personality problems; if he is in significant emotional distress; if he is a chronically disruptive presence in your group (and you are feeling over your head in your attempts to help)—consider making a referral to a Christian counselor or psychologist who can lovingly help him address the issues that are causing his problems. This does not mean, incidentally, that he must stop participating in your group.