

Dealing With Needy People in Your Group - by Josh Hunt

It is important to think through the problem of neediness in group members. The Bible teaches that neediness, defined as being incomplete and without, is something God uses to grow us up and heal us. He comes to us when we experience that we cannot fix or save ourselves in our own strength:

“For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death” (Psalm 72:12–13).

Problems in Neediness

However, neediness becomes a problem to address when it manifests in unhealthy ways, such as:

- Taking up too much group time
- Constant crises that never gets resolved
- Emotional dependency that the group can't meet
- Inability to be comforted
- Not taking group advice
- Seeing the group as “not enough”

Dealing with the Core Issues of Neediness

Once you have discerned the difference between neediness that serves growth and neediness that prevents growth, you will want to understand core issues and deal with them.

Inability to connect with the group.

Some needy people bring their issues to the group, but when the members reach out to them, there is a disconnect, and the needy people cannot receive the support being offered. They are unable to accept comfort and soothing. The needy person may not know how to, or may be afraid to, accept what is there for him. Make this a team issue and discuss the person's refusal or inability to value, experience, and receive the group's love and care.

Problems using the support.

Sometimes a person can receive love but, for whatever reason, is unable to use the support to take growth steps. Grace and support are the “fuel” that God designed for us to metabolize—digest—and use to take responsibility for solving our problems. The person who seems to receive support but continues to stay stuck, blame, or reject help has been termed by one psychological researcher as the “help-rejecting complainer.” Help the person see this: “Rob, you seem to be able to take in the connections the group is bringing to you for this issue. However, it isn't translating into decisions, action, courage, and choices for you, which is a part of the reason we use love. How can we help you with this?”

Bite-sized support.

When a needy person gets into her pain or emotion, she may not be able to come out of it and may inadvertently regress to a point where she takes over the group time. Help her to use the time allotted and prepare her to mutually receive and give with the group. This often empowers the person and helps her realize she has some choices in the growth process: “Hallie, I want the group to help you with your grief and confusion. At the same time, I want the other members to get something for themselves, too. If you get into your pain tonight, is it okay if at some point I let you know we’ll need to move on?” Of course, if you try this several times and she is unable to do that, you may realize the person has authentic and valid needs that may require more than the group can give.

Relational neediness versus task neediness.

Sometimes people don’t see that what they need is connection. Instead they go to the group for emotional rescue, looking for advice, instructions, answers, and sympathy. They need to understand that most relational supplies should make us better able to handle life’s demands. While the group should certainly be a source of wisdom and truth, be aware of when members try to substitute for the attachment resource. “Natalie, often you go to the group for suggestions, but I think the members might want to give you themselves and see what you do with that.”

(Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2010). Making small groups work: what every small group leader needs to know. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.)