

When Divorce Visits Your Small Group

What to do in the likely event of a marital crisis.

by Lee A. Dean

Whether your small group is open or closed, or whether or not you always leave an empty chair, there's one uninvited guest hovering around the meeting place ready to barge into the proceedings. The longer your group lasts, the more likely this intruder is to make an appearance. The name of this party crasher is divorce.

The chances are good that either a couple or an individual in your small group will have to wrestle directly with this crisis, which means the entire group will deal with it as well. What should a small-group leader do to prepare for the impact of divorce on individuals, couples, and the group?

Be Prepared

The statistics about divorce are by now all too familiar. Half of all first marriages end in divorce, while 60 percent of remarriages eventually fall apart. The divorce rates among evangelical Christians are little better than the rates of the population as a whole. Now plug these statistics into the life of a church small group. Logic tells you that small groups would not be immune to the problem, and logic would be correct.

This is especially true if the group stays together for a longer period of time. Dennis Anderson—pastor of adult ministries at Crossroads Covenant Church in Loveland, Colorado—estimates that if a group has been meeting for three or more years, the chances are better than 50-50 that someone in the group will deal with divorce. In addition, almost every group has members who are affected by the divorce of a family member or a friend.

Be Alert

A small group leader must be alert to warning signs that a marriage is in trouble. The leader must also know how to deal with divorce after the fact. The bottom line is that small-group leaders should always be on the lookout for signs of marital breakup and ways to minister to people affected by divorce. But on the lookout for exactly what?

Verbal clues. Watch for how a husband and wife talk to each other, both in the group and in non-group social settings. Be alert for someone criticizing his or her spouse in front of another group member. Behavior at social events can be a telltale sign of impending trouble, because some people are less inhibited at social events than at group meetings.

Physical clues. Leaders should watch for how couples touch each other, their posture, and how closely they sit next to each other. "Is there warmth?" asks Rex Minor,

pastor of adult discipleship at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California. “If you’re in a group with people for six weeks, you can just tell if there’s marital warmth or marital distance.”

Behavioral clues. Watch for changes in behavior. If a person is usually talkative and begins to brood or is unusually quiet, it may be time to ask whether there’s a problem. Watch for flashes of anger from a normally calm and quiet person. The surest sign of trouble is when one or both of the couple stops attending the meetings.

Hidden clues. Another sign of trouble is more hidden: when an individual does not open up or become vulnerable enough to share their struggles. Your course is to continue to be observant and gently challenge people when their words don’t match up with their attitudes, postures, and behaviors. “We’re not called to be mind readers, but we are called to love each other and ask questions,” says Minor.

Be Proactive

Because timing is so important when dealing with sensitive issues, leaders should keep the following in mind:

Too soon is better than too late. When a small-group leader suspects someone is struggling with a potential divorce, when is the best time to get involved? As soon as possible, say both Anderson and Minor. Some leaders may feel reluctant to intervene, especially early in the life of the group, if the leader is inexperienced, or if there is a fear of jumping to conclusions. In practice, however, most leaders move too slowly.

Say it in private. The first step is to have a private conversation with the person or the couple. Share the things you have noticed and ask, “Are you okay? If not, there are ways we can help.” You will not always get the person to open up about their problems on the first try, but you will at least serve notice that you’re watching and that you care.

“More often than not, people want to get help, but they don’t know how to ask for it. They may be ashamed to,” said Minor.

“They may say that everything’s fine. Then you can say ‘I’m confused by these two or three signals I’m getting,’” Anderson explained.

If possible in these private conversations, men should talk to men and women to women. This approach is especially appropriate when talking to a couple in crisis. If this approach isn’t possible, a leader could still contact a member of the opposite sex, but only with the foreknowledge of the other partner.

Ask for help. Small-group leaders need not feel like the Lone Ranger when addressing divorce. Leaders should get pastors, staff members, and other appropriate church leaders involved, but not immediately. Some pastors may want to step in too quickly and do the work of the group leader. The better alternative is for the pastor to become aware of the problem and then offer insight to the leader on how to proceed.

Then the pastor steps back and lets the leader tackle the problem. If the small-group leader keeps coming back for help, the pastor may want to take a more active role. Even in this instance, Minor is less likely to step in and more apt to use the experience as a teaching tool for his group leaders.

Confronting sin. If the divorce has taken place or is in process, the group leader needs to evaluate and confront the situation from a posture of grace. Each party shares some degree of responsibility for the end of the marriage. But when should a leader confront a person whose sinful behavior is largely responsible for the divorce?

The leader should alert the person to the harmful effects of their behavior, both to the individual and to the group. Set a boundary: if the person persists in the behavior, the fellowship of the group will be withdrawn. The leader should continue to pursue the erring person as a lost sheep by maintaining contact and expressing concern.

Be Unified

Perhaps the most powerful assets available to a leader in ministering to someone suffering through divorce are the other members of the group.

Talk as a group. If the person or couple needing help isn't at the meeting, this provides a great opportunity for group members to talk about how they can provide ministry to the hurting person. "The leader should avoid the common mistakes of overkill and undercare," Anderson explains. Leaders should consider who in the group has the best relationship with the person and let them take on the primary ministry roles, with the other group members playing supporting roles.

Serve as role models. Small groups can be a great place to be for people having marital difficulties or who are already divorced. Group members who have successfully saved threatened marriages, or who have navigated the rocky waters of divorce with success, can provide wise counsel to people in crisis. This kind of advice and encouragement is crucial.

Have a plan for when the wounded person wants to share. Sometimes a person wounded by divorce will want to share his or her feelings and needs with the group. How much time should the leader give this person? The best leaders do not plow ahead with the planned activities if someone is crying out for help. Be prepared to give over the proceedings of at least one entire meeting to the needs of the suffering person. Let them vent and get their feelings on the table.

From that point on, leaders can be flexible. Some leaders may want to avoid having subsequent meetings dominated by the person's needs while at the same time making sure that the person receives care outside the meeting. Other leaders may want to devote as much group time as necessary to help steer the group member past the worst part of the crisis.

“You really can’t put a time limit on something like this,” said Minor. “I’ve seen some groups take three months. That feels too long, but at the same time, to limit it to one night doesn’t seem reasonable.”

Encourage ministry between meetings. One of the most effective times for other group members to minister is outside the official group meeting times. Encourage your group members to pray for the person, make encouraging telephone calls, and invite them into their homes for meals. If there is a workshop or support group meeting coming up, encourage the person to attend and offer to go with them.

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