



How to Handle Sensitive Topics

Support groups are safe spaces where participants can share experiences and find understanding. Occasionally, conversations may touch on sensitive topics such as religion, politics, sexual or gender identity, or cultural background. While these subjects may arise naturally, they can also cause discomfort if handled carelessly. The following guidance is designed to help support group leaders respond with sensitivity and uphold an atmosphere of respect, empathy, and inclusion.

Recognize the Difference Between Sharing and Questioning

There is an important distinction between:

- Sharing personal beliefs using "I" statements (e.g., "In my faith, prayer helps me cope with dizziness"), which can provide insight into someone's personal coping strategies; and
- Questioning another person's beliefs or background (e.g., "What religion are you?" or "Why do you believe that?"), which may feel intrusive or judgmental.

Encourage participants to frame their experiences in "I" language rather than directing questions or assumptions toward others. This simple guideline allows diverse perspectives to be shared safely.

When a Sensitive Topic Arises

If a participant brings up a topic such as religion or politics, leaders should:

- Listen first and gauge the group's reactions. Sometimes, a personal statement is harmless and relatable.
- Step in early if the conversation begins to shift toward questioning, debate, or discomfort.
- Reframe the discussion to maintain a focus on shared experiences. For example:

"It sounds like your faith has been an important part of your healing process. Let's broaden that—what are some things that help others in the group feel grounded during recovery?"

VESTIBULAR DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



This approach helps redirect the dialogue toward connection rather than division.

Addressing Discomfort or Offense

Despite best intentions, participants may feel offended or uncomfortable. If that happens:

- Acknowledge the moment without blame:

"I sense that this topic may be uncomfortable for some people. Let's take a step back and focus on how we each find meaning or coping strategies that work for us."
- Reinforce group guidelines, reminding participants that the space is for mutual support, not advice or persuasion.
- Avoid singling anyone out and move the conversation to common ground.

It's often difficult to predict what may offend someone, and a gentle reminder about communication boundaries can prevent further misunderstanding.

Establish Clear Ground Rules from the Start

Reiterate at the beginning of each session that:

- Participants may share personal experiences and beliefs in "I" terms.
- The group does not provide medical, religious, political, or sexual advice.
- The focus is on empathy, shared experience, and healing, not debate or persuasion.

These expectations help participants feel safe expressing themselves while maintaining boundaries that protect others.

Be Prepared with a Neutral, Respectful Response

Leaders should anticipate moments when sensitive topics arise and prepare responses in advance. Some examples include:

- "That's a very personal topic. Let's focus on how it affects your balance journey rather than the details of your beliefs."

VESTIBULAR DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



- “Different people have different sources of strength. Let’s hear what helps others in similar ways.”
- “I appreciate you sharing that. Let’s make sure everyone feels comfortable contributing their own perspective.”

Having a ready, neutral response helps leaders stay calm and consistent.

After the Meeting

If a participant seems upset or withdraws:

- Follow up privately, if appropriate, to check in and reaffirm that their feelings are valid.
- Seek support or guidance from VeDA’s Community Support Coordinator if you’re unsure how to handle the situation or if a pattern of discomfort emerges.

In some cases, a person may choose not to return despite thoughtful facilitation. While that can be disheartening, the leader’s role is to uphold group integrity and ensure psychological safety for all participants.

Key Takeaway

Support groups thrive on openness, trust, and respect. Sharing personal experiences—including beliefs or values—can be deeply healing when expressed in “I” terms. However, questioning or debating others’ beliefs can erode that trust. As a leader, your role is to model self-awareness, empathy, and gentle redirection when sensitive topics arise.

Suggested Script

“It’s natural that people bring their whole selves—including their beliefs—into the group. The key is to talk from personal experience, not to question or influence others. If a sensitive topic comes up, I’ll step in to reframe it around coping, connection, and shared understanding.”

VESTIBULAR DISORDERS ASSOCIATION