

c) Managing challenging people

An IBS support group should be relatively informal affair to ensure that members feel relaxed and able to discuss their condition openly and honestly.

They may be quite frustrated at how they feel they have been treated by medical professionals. It's okay, and indeed useful, for them to be able to talk about their frustrations. By airing these frustrations and feeding this information back to healthcare professionals we will be able to help improve services to those with IBS and inform best practice.

However, it is very important to the long term success of your support group that 'doctor bashing' does not become a normal part of your group meetings.

It is important to try and balance member's frustrations with an acceptance that IBS is a difficult condition to manage with no definite cause identified. Each individual should take responsibility to do what they can to best manage their condition effectively.

Differing ideas are a good part of any group discussion. Only by examining our own pre-conceived ideas can we hope to move forward and challenge ourselves, questioning if we are managing our IBS in the best way possible.

It is likely that your group members will come from a diverse range of backgrounds. You should think about the following points and consider how best to manage difficult conversations and people.

It is important to identify tricky behaviour as early as possible. Look out for:

- dominating individuals who talk too much and don't let others speak
- body language from an individual that suggests they're bored with the discussion
- people who constantly change the topic of discussion to talk about their issues and not allow enough time for other members to contribute.

How you deal and respond to these challenges will have an effect on the success of your group. It's useful to consider the following responses:

- consider why the particular individual is like this and if you can do anything differently
- use the contribution of other members to develop and shift the direction of the discussion in a more positive direction
- interrupt the speaker and explain the importance of other member's contributions
- don't aim to compete and try to avoid being overly defensive with the individual in question.

Dealing with difficult group members

The non-taker – this is the quiet person in the group who never wants to talk or share. As a Support Group Leader try calling on them to share an answer or ask a question as a way of prompting. Also affirm them when they respond.

The Over-taker – this person always has plenty to say and loves to be the first person to say anything. As a Support Group Leader remind everyone in the group that there is equal participation and members must be considerate of others.

The insensitive taker – this person cuts people off, disqualifies other group member's ideas or suggestions or does a variety of other things to offend group members. As a Support Group Leader do not be afraid to challenge this behaviour.

The tangent starter – this person easily gets the group off track by starting irrelevant conversations. It is ok to go off track for a little while when necessary but as a Support Group Leader you should be confident to bring the group back on track.

Suicidal thoughts/threats

It is extremely unlikely that members of your support group will threaten to commit or consider suicide but it is an aspect that cannot be ignored.

IBS has the potential to cause great embarrassment and long term pain and discomfort. Coping with the numerous and changing symptoms can be mentally exhausting. It is important that you appreciate the mindset of some members and that you may have to manage someone who is expressing suicidal thoughts.

NB. This is not the same as someone who is suicidal; they may just feel so desperate that their thoughts are manifested in this way.

What you can do to help

- take them seriously and ensure that they know that you care about how they feel and that they are not alone. Being part of a support group should allow all members to talk about their feelings openly but in confidence
- don't judge them. You may think that their behaviour is making their condition worse but pointing this out to them at this point in time will not be particularly helpful
- ask open-ended questions and try and get them to talk about how they're feeling
- let them know that you care and allow them to unload their frustration, anger and despair
- avoid getting into arguments, problem solving and offering quick fixes. It's not a case of how bad the problem is, but rather how badly it's affecting them
- make sure someone is constantly with them if you think they are in immediate danger. Contact the Emergency Services or take them to A&E
- consider looking for support for yourself. Supporting a group member who has suicidal thoughts will be a stressful time for you too. If appropriate talk to either friends or family, your doctor or to someone on an emotional support helpline such as the Samaritans.