

# Crosstalk in meetings

*Does AA have an official description of what exactly constitutes crosstalk? Is it prohibited in AA?*

There is no singular rule prohibiting "crosstalk" in AA but it is avoided as a matter of strong custom in many areas and many groups.

Typically crosstalk refers to people speaking out of turn, **interrupting** someone while they are speaking or **giving direct advice** to someone in a meeting. The custom in many areas is to speak only about one's own experience and to **always** avoid **any** form of direct advice (or opinion) in the group setting.

How crosstalk is accepted and dealt with varies from group to group and region to region. In some groups members frequently interrupt one another for joking comments, in other places you might be asked to be quiet or leave for doing the same. In many places outside The USA the idea of crosstalk being detrimental doesn't exist.

The ultimate arbiter on the subject is each individual group. Every group is free to follow make its own rules to follow its own customs. What is considered quite proper within one group can cause quite a stir in another - and there is no rulebook for it.

Page 125 of the Big Book has some good advice on not giving advice:

We find it better, when possible, to stick to our own stories. A man may criticize or laugh at himself and it will affect others favorably, but criticism or ridicule coming from another often produces the contrary effect.

Members of a family should watch such matters carefully, for one careless, inconsiderate remark has been known to raise the very devil. We alcoholics are sensitive people. It takes some of us a long time to outgrow that serious handicap.

The bottom of page 18 also touches on this concept when discussing how to best approach someone you want to help

...that his whole deportment shouts at the new prospect that he is a man with a real answer, that he has no attitude of Holier Than Thou, nothing whatever except the sincere desire to be helpful; that there are no fees to pay, no axes to grind, no people to please, no lectures to be endured - these are the conditions we have found most effective.

Prohibition of crosstalk is a common practice in clinical group therapy and this has perhaps become an influence on AA. Many people first encounter this custom in a rehab setting and often do not consider that it might be different in AA (which is *not* intended to be a form of group therapy).

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Whether or not all this makes sense, the custom of only speaking about your own experience has become deeply ingrained in many groups. In these groups even if a person *asks* for "advice" those speaking in reply are *still* expected to share their own experience on the topic and not necessarily give direct advice. Generally people are seeking to learn how others dealt with different challenges rather than being told what to do.

Basically, whenever a speaker uses "you should" instead of "I did" there could be an issue.

## **An example:**

A fellow shares his trouble with slips and asks for help on how to avoid slips. A lady in the meeting has experience in overcoming a similar pattern of relapse. This lady feels that she got past the slips by getting into sponsoring others and doing service work. She can share in two different ways:

1. **"I** was caught up in **my** own selfishness but **I** got over the slips by sponsoring newcomers and doing lots of service commitments."

*or*

2. **"You** strike me as a selfish person. I think **you** should sponsor people and **you** need to do more service work."

Both cover the same concept but the second answer would probably run afoul of the local crosstalk customs and get some folks in the meeting quite angry. Few people like being told what to do - even if they ask for help. We can give people the benefit of our experience while still not telling people what to do.

Offering advice in the form of an opinion isn't typically viewed as being much different from telling someone what to do. **"I think** you should sponsor people" isn't usually viewed as being better than "You should sponsor people." Neither is limited to personal experience so neither is likely to be received well.

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More from Box 4-5-9 Vol. 52, No. 4 / August-September 2006 p. 5-6 published by AA World Service:

### **What's "Crosstalk" Got to Do with Sobriety Anyway?**

Like an odd apple the term "crosstalk" keeps bobbing up where A.A.s come together. What is it? Why do concerned, sometimes confused groups keep asking the General Service Office for clarification about it? And above all, what does it have to do with our primary purpose—"to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety?"

Says past Chicago delegate (Panel 53, 2003-04) Don B: "When I came to A.A. in 1981, I joined a group led by an oldtimer who was nearly 20 years sober at the time. There were two basic 'guidelines'—only we called them rules:

- (1) You cannot interrupt the guy who is interrupting.
- (2) If you look up and you are the only one left, lock the door when you leave. You talked too long.

Back then, he recalls, "Interruptions were frequent and sometimes contentious. More than one time I thought for sure we'd have fisticuffs. But, no, things would invariably simmer down, and the one getting scolded would say something like, 'I guess you're right. I do need more meetings.' "In the Chicago area today, Don adds, "we have some very large groups; one draws as many as 500 people. With this type of participation—not to mention the positive fallout from increased sponsorship, which sees most new members led through the Steps in a reasonably short time—there's no room for disruptive crosstalk, nor is it tolerated."

Crosstalk means different things to different people. Some groups define as crosstalk or interference any comments, negative or positive, about another's sharing other than, "Thank you for your share." Members are welcome to talk about their own experience as it relates directly or indirectly to another's sharing, but are asked not to refer directly to that person's comments.

This does not appear to be the case at the 79th Street Workshop in New York City. Comments member Susan U.: "If two people start talking back and forth intrusively, then the chair has been known to say, 'No crosstalk!' But sharing of one's own story is always welcomed." Noting that "until the 1990s the word wasn't even in A.A. vocabulary," Susan cautions against rigidity: "There are no rules in A.A., just customs and the conscience of each autonomous group." She suggests that "there is a thin line between guidelines and rules; and experience shows that in A.A.'s 'benign anarchy,' rules, rigidity and attempts to control don't work very well. On the other hand, the nonjudgmental sharing we receive at meetings in response to something we have said can be beneficial to our recovery. It's how we learn to live sober, productive lives, and that's what sharing our experience and strength is about."

Jan P., of Spokane, Washington, reports that "crosstalk as it pertains to exchanges between members is not a

problem with us. In many instances, people are trying to free themselves from extraordinary shame, and our members by and large share from their own experience. But they don't give advice—and there's no hint of censure, belittlement, scolding or preaching under the guise of sharing. In my experience, knowing there's no risk of judgment is what makes recovering alcoholics, especially newcomers, feel safe and gives us the courage to share."

Jenny P., who is Jan's daughter and also lives in Spokane, has found that crosstalk of a giving nature is "sort of a language of the heart. It occurs with familiarity and can be very helpful. If members know one another well, as they tend to in small groups, they feel comfortable about saying, 'I'd like to add something to what Jane said...'. To me the key is comfort and the hope that sharing one's experience in recovery will help another alcoholic to stay sober and face life's challenges with greater ease."