

CPA SUMMARY OF OPEN FORUM “MEETING CHALLENGES: FINDING SOLUTIONS”

Introduction

The “Meeting Challenges: Finding Solutions” forums met 5 times in 2019 – June 7, June 12, June 29, July 12, July 17 - to discuss 8 topics that have been identified as problematic in CPA meetings. There were 15-20 members at each meeting. Through this process of group conscience, guided by a Higher Power, we generated suggestions for leaders and members as a way to maintain unity in our meetings while creating a safe atmosphere for sharing our experience, strength and hope. In this way we can be inclusive and respectfully help all members understand the principles that guide our fellowship.

The facilitator led the forum, focusing on 3 questions to explore for each topic. They were:

1. What specifically regarding the situation needs to be addressed? Basically, in what ways does this situation not adhere to the Traditions?
2. What suggestions can we offer for how the chairperson can respond?
3. What, if any, responsibility do we have as a member in this situation?

Everyone had an opportunity to speak and share their experiences. This document is a summary of the forum meetings. The first section lists all the topics and a description of the issues. The second section are suggestions that can apply to all the topics. This section is divided into two parts: suggestions for the chairperson and suggestions for the members. The third section lists topics and suggestions for a few specific issues. The document ends with a summary conclusion.

Section One: Identifying the Problem

The topics:

1. Crosstalk
2. Outside organizations, politics, religion, treatments
3. Speaking about other fellowships
4. Talking about health specifics and “sickalogues”
5. Angry outbursts during a meeting, attacks on other members, blaming others
6. Members who consistently focus on the problem and not the solution. Sharing the mess rather than the message.
7. Chairperson who is controlling, rude.
8. Suicide

Crosstalk

Each group is autonomous and decides how to define crosstalk. It is often described in the introductory readings for the meeting. Some meetings may want to allow crosstalk at specific times in the meeting. For some people, crosstalk makes them uncomfortable. Both newcomers and longtime members will occasionally crosstalk.

Outside organizations, politics, religion, treatments

CPA has no opinion on medications or treatments. We don't discuss outside organizations, politics or religion. Some people struggle with the concept of a Higher Power. Sometimes people mention their medications or treatment programs. This can trigger someone.

Speaking about other fellowships

The primary focus in CPA is chronic pain and chronic illness. In CPA we use literature from AA and Al-Anon on the topic of the Twelve Traditions. A large majority of CPA members come from another Twelve Step fellowship, and so this is part of their story. It makes some people uncomfortable if someone focuses too much on another program and not enough on their recovery in CPA. Some people find it helpful to share about and/or to hear about the experiences in another program that relates to their CPA program. It is important to work the Steps in CPA even if someone has worked them in another program.

Talking about health specifics and "sickalogues"

Newcomers sometimes need to tell their story when they first get to CPA. Over time they often stop sharing their suffering without also sharing a solution. This is a program of attraction and hearing about how we can identify with others, to know we belong, is important. We first come to CPA in a tremendous amount of emotional pain, and members need their story heard and validated. People need to be treated with respect and compassion. The guidelines read at the beginning of the meeting set the tone to focus on the feelings and the attitudes rather than on the details of our situation. Sometimes people are afraid of saying the wrong thing or breaking the rules and say nothing. We want people to feel welcomed and supported.

Angry outbursts during a meeting, attacks on other members, blaming others

This happens rarely. Sometimes people are affected by their medications and they may act out of control. There may also be people with mental illness. There are also people who have PTSD and are triggered.

Members who consistently focus on the problem and not the solution. Sharing the mess rather than the message.

We want to keep in mind our common welfare, yet also remember that our members are in different stages of their recovery. People come in with a lot of suffering and it takes time for

them to come to the solution, sometimes years. There is usually a balance in meetings of people who talk about the solution and share their hope and strength, and those who consistently share about the problem. When someone shares negatively it helps us see how far we have come in our recovery journey.

Chairperson who is controlling, rude

CPA is a gentle, compassionate program of tolerance. As people with pain and illness we want a meeting environment that is calm and does not make us feel unsafe. Although a controlling, rude, aggressive chairperson is a rare occurrence in CPA, it does happen occasionally. A chairperson is considered controlling when they speak in tone or words that are authoritarian. The only authority is a Higher Power. A chairperson is controlling when they interrupt someone's share and tell them they are doing it wrong, such as sharing too many details about their condition. When the chairperson uses "we" and "us" statements about CPA, acts as a spokesperson for CPA, or calls it "my meeting," this is seen as controlling. Making a negative comment after someone shares is controlling and is considered crosstalk.

Suicide

People in CPA may entertain the thought of suicide at some point. A CPA meeting can be a safe place to talk about the thoughts and feelings around suicide. Speaking of thoughts of suicide can help a person feel less isolated, and more connected and supported by others. Some members can be disturbed by talk of suicide and if this happens it is up to them to leave the meeting. We don't talk about treatments in CPA, so it is not acceptable to share any specifics of suicide, however as with all topics, a wide range of emotions is appropriate. We don't give advice however we do share our own experience, strength and hope.

Section Two: Suggestions for ways to respond when problems occur during a meeting

Part One: General suggestions for chairperson

- There is autonomy for each group meeting, so it would be up to the meeting to decide how to handle meeting problems.
- Our spiritual principles are that we don't enforce rules. Our primary purpose is to carry a message of hope and recovery. We are servants, not enforcers.
- Guidelines keep everyone safe. One of the reasons I like the Twelve Steps is because I feel safe when the guidelines are in place.
- The Chair is not an authoritative position. The chairperson is helping to hold the safe space.
- We don't want to chase away newcomers by being aggressive. Newcomers need time to process and should not be interrupted. We want members to feel safe and being interrupted in the middle of a share is aggressive. It is highly suggested we don't interrupt anyone during their share. People feel very uncomfortable if someone calls them out during a meeting.

- We are all doing our best sharing our experience, strength and hope and carrying the message.
- It is best to speak to someone privately after the meeting. This can be done by the chairperson or a member of the meeting. What we say may be different for a newcomer than it is for a long time member. It is suggested to use “I” statements rather than “you” statements.
- Let them know they are in the right place, and that we stay afterwards for a more in-depth fellowship. Fellowship is a good time to explain how the Traditions work and the suggested guidelines in meetings.
- Suggest that the person speak about the issues to their sponsor rather than in the meeting.
- If someone is asking for input, the chairperson can say, “We appreciate your share and we can address problems after the meeting.”
- If the Chair does want to say something, it is suggested to say, “Gentle reminder, we try to focus on CPA.”
- I let them finish their share, and when they’re done, I say, “Gentle reminder, in this meeting we try to...” depending on the issue. Just a soft reminder after they’re done.
- As leader I don’t interrupt people, but after their share I gently say, “I’d like to remind everyone that...” and use the words from the format. It depends on your tone. If it is a newcomer, I will let it go.
- It depends on the person’s level of skill as a moderator. They might be able to give a gentle reminder. But generally speaking, it becomes unsafe for the chair to mention too many things. It becomes upsetting. I’m more on the side of being an example.
- If someone is a new chairperson, they can ask the older members for guidance if they don’t know what to do if there is a problem.
- It is helpful to provide training for new meeting chairs. Some people may want a Service Sponsor as a guide.
- Consider including a reminder in the middle of the meeting so it’s not a personal attack.
- In virtual meetings the chair has the ability to mute an individual.
- The important view is to validate, relate and defuse. You can get them to calm down. People can call after or hang out afterward in fellowship and talk individually. If this doesn’t work, them muting would work. Our compassionate stance is to validate and relate is really vital.
- I find it hard to do, as a chairperson I feel bad saying you should not share that way. If it is an ongoing issue it needs to be addressed.
- There are no spokespeople for CPA.
- A chairperson can pass the meeting to someone else and step outside with a member who is struggling.
- A chair can end a meeting for all if it seems appropriate.
- I would not intervene with someone is sharing about suicide. It is not a taboo topic. However, I would interrupt if they were sharing specifics about how to do it, just as if they were sharing specifics about their medical treatment and remind them, we don’t share specifics.

- After the share, if someone was in great distress or talked about suicidal thoughts, I'd invite them to stay after the meeting for fellowship time.
- If someone is in distress or talking about suicide, I give them kindness and compassion and invite them to stay for fellowship time.
- At a meeting I let people share what they need to share. When they share, they get it out, it is not a secret. By saying it with others who can relate to it helps. I can't save everyone. I use my tools in the program to guide me as I am as a chairperson.
- We have the Twelve Traditions, the guiding document for how we behave in our meetings and our fellowship. There is one but one ultimate authority, a loving God as he may express himself. We are trusted servants and do not govern. No opinion on outside issues. Groups do not endorse any outside enterprise. We won't provide someone without outside resources. That is not our job. The only requirement is the desire to recover from the emotional and spiritual debilitation. And sharing about suicide is part of recovery. The only guidelines are to run the meeting, and someone gets to share for their time limit. If they run over, they remind them to stop like anyone else. We make allowances if someone is very emotional. We make that call because we are trusted servants.
- As Chair I will follow the Traditions and how we are to behave in our fellowships.
- Our common welfare should come first. As a chairperson, I want to make sure that there is unity in the meeting. What I say between shares, don't interrupt. I feel like I am given the words, I pray before the meeting starts and if something happens, I am praying. I don't give outside resources. I don't give the impression I am speaking for CPA as a chairperson. As an individual, if I have an outside resource, I want to share, I will offer it on my own. But not as the chairperson.
- As Chair I try to surrender to HP for guidance. It is not my responsibility to do anything other than chair the meeting. The format in front of me and provide an emotionally safe atmosphere. It would be inappropriate to offer an outside resource. It is not the place of the chairperson.
- When someone is emotional and sounds like they are serious about suicide, I can't say, your 4 minutes are up. I have to let them know someone heard them. I am so glad you are here, stay for fellowship, get phone numbers. I don't want to leave them hanging. As Chair that is how I would handle it. I'm glad you are here; you are in the right place. I hope you stay and talk in fellowship, so they are not left hanging.

Role of Chairperson

- When I chair, I take it seriously. I practice principles and not personalities.
- The chairperson needs to maintain a safe space. If I said something that was not safe, I need to make amends right away or after the meeting.
- We can give ourselves permission to ask for help. We remember as chairperson we are not isolated; we are part of a fellowship. We can feel free to ask for assistance at any time.

- A chair can have a buddy, someone that can help them if they are having a hard day or if a challenge arises, so they know there is another person ready to back them up.
- We can have a friend who lets us know if we have behaved in ways that disrupted the safe space. They can signal us in a meeting if we are talking too much.
- We might want to have a list of people who can step in to chair so we know if we are having a bad day someone can fill in for us.
- As chair I practice unconditional acceptance of self and the others in the room. I practice being loving and accepting. I can remind myself to put my ego in my back pocket. When I lead, I ask that I give more to this meeting than I take from it. I pray before I chair and make sure I am in the right mind.
- It is helpful to provide training for chair people. This would include the format along with attitudes, understanding it is not a role of authority, and including spirituality such as prayer. This could also include an inventory for the chair, such as asking oneself, "Am I creating a safe space? Am I being unconditional?" When emotions are high it is hard to know what to say or do, so it helps to have the words through the training.
- A chairperson is not expected to stay for fellowship time.

Part Two: General suggestions for members

- My responsibility is to work my own program.
- Always want to be welcoming and understanding.
- Write down people that were struggling and reach out to them after the meeting. Tell them, "I know you're struggling," ask if they have a sponsor. Offer to send them the phone list. Simply contact the member and give your number. Let the member know they can hang out for fellowship to get member numbers.
- Have a person who has the task to help the newcomer. Someone who would be in charge of being a greeter. Suggest a committee of people who can take it on themselves to reach out to the person who is troubled. It's rude to interrupt, especially to a newcomer. Easy enough to meet with newcomers after the meeting and explain the Traditions. Most generally it's the newcomer. Always wait until they have finished sharing. Newcomers don't know the guidelines and we encourage them to get numbers.
- We remember there is but one ultimate authority. No one is in charge of the group.
- Before speaking, ask your Higher Power if you should speak and for guidance about what to say that will share the recovery message.
- Do not interrupt someone. There is a rare exception for actually interrupting.
- If the meeting goes awry, remember to be welcoming, understanding and comforting.
- We all cross talk or get lost in our mess at times and as a member who is aware, we can set the example.
- Feel that the most important person is a newcomer and we do not want to scare them away. We always cut newcomers a little more slack than we do with more experienced members. It does not feel good to be scolded in a meeting. We likely won't return to a meeting in which this happens.

- The unity of the group should be first. We don't want to interrupt the unity of the meeting.
- Members in CPA can't be punished or expelled. We can think, talk and act as we wish.
- When I share, I say, "I appreciate all the shares, they've been so helpful, and I've been able to identify with all of them." To bring back that feeling of love, understanding, welcoming and tolerance. I am responsible and let it begin with me.
- I set the best example I can and be a reminder of the Traditions.
- It's attraction, not promotion. We can be an example of recovery with the way we share.
- If someone is triggered in a meeting, it is not appropriate to interrupt another person's sharing of their experiences. They can address with their sponsor after the meeting, or they can leave the meeting.
- We don't have to share perfectly. We want our meetings to be warm and welcoming.
- When problems occur, after the meeting we can go up to the person who didn't understand the guidelines and offer to talk one-on-one.
- Ask how I can bring the breath and power of a Higher Power back into the meeting.
- Rule 62 - don't take yourself so damn seriously.
- We don't want any consistent behavior to continue, so one option is to bring it up in a business meeting.
- If I am close to the person who has been disruptive, I can talk to them after the meeting. If I knew the person well, I would talk to them afterwards. To talk during the meeting would be more disruptive. See if they are ok after the meeting.
- During my share I could offer help to the person who is distressed, whether the chair or a group member. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed and need to know we are not alone. If it is the chair who is struggling, we can offer to step in.
- As a member I am willing to take risks to speak up as I see the impact of doing this. It makes a difference to give feedback and keep our meetings safe and welcoming.
- There are different ways to give feedback. CPA may want to offer suggestions about how to give feedback to someone who disturbed the unity of the group.
- When I feel unsafe, I go to the Traditions, found in the back of our books, and I find the ones that apply. I will interrupt if someone is being unsafe. Tradition ___ says ___ and it helps keep us safe, loving. It is effective. Shifts from personality and emotion to structure and group conscience.
- I need to protect my own recovery. I can't afford the energy to deal with conflicts. I need to trust my HP to let it go. If I feel close to the person, I would reach out to them. Ask how are you feeling? And say that I was feeling emotionally unsafe.
- Interrupt and say I am not feeling safe right now. Can we dial it back?
- As a new member I am not familiar with the Traditions. Not sure what I can and can't say. Hope the chair knows we are there for support and need to give us leeway if we talk about our condition.
- Sometimes all we can do is speak from the heart in a kind way.
- There are resources. We can communicate with the GR or the Intergroup Delegate. If someone is domineering, we can ask for support through the Intergroup. Or talk to our

sponsor. Ask about how to address it when it is not isolated but a consistent problem. We don't have to carry this alone.

- If the problem is a chairperson, we can ask others in the meeting if they also experience the chair as inappropriate. Then go to Intergroup as a group. Or contact the leader and ask if the chair is ok. This is what is going on. And if it not well responded to, say there are requests that you step down. The same is true if there is a member who is consistently creating problems in the group.
- It is scary when a group leader or member speaks in a tone of control and authority, is rude and aggressive. I don't feel safe.
- You can take the issue to a group conscience. Or take it to Intergroup and ask for guidance. Or ask someone from the Intergroup to come to the group conscience meeting to help facilitate it as a neutral person.
- We need a group inventory in CPA. A good way to get feedback about how things are going. Not gang up on anyone.
- Any member can speak up if someone is sharing instructions on suicide.
- If someone is talking about their feelings and distressed during the meeting, if the leader has not invited them to fellowship, a member can ask them to stay for fellowship. I would also try to get their phone number and reach out.
- If the chair doesn't say something, after the meeting I would take the person aside. If there were 5 people already there, I would not bombard them.
- I am a channel for my HP.
- It is not appropriate to give our personal opinion or advice. We are here to share our ESH. Sharing our own experiences of feelings around suicide. How we regained hope. We feel hopeless when suicidal. Support each other. And be a fellowship.
- If you are very serious about suicide you won't share it with others. You don't want them to intervene. If someone is talking about it, they are reaching out and trying to get support. As a fellow member I could share that it is valid to have difficult feelings and many of us have it. Share what we found, like humor and not taking myself so seriously.
- I would reach out by chat on Zoom. Here is my number. Good to hear you. Keep coming back. I might share about my own ESH dealing with hopelessness and overwhelm. Empathy around embracing all my feelings, knowing they will pass. Be as welcoming as possible. And inspiring how far I have come in CPA in a short time.

Section Three: Suggestions for specific situations

1. Crosstalk
 - a. The format says there is no crosstalk, but there is no definition about what is considered crosstalk. It might be helpful to describe crosstalk.
2. Outside organizations, politics, religion, treatments
3. Speaking about other fellowships
4. Talking about health specifics and "sickalogues"
5. Angry outbursts during a meeting, attacks on other members, blaming others

- a. It is important to validate, relate and defuse. Our compassionate stance is to validate and relate is really vital.
 - b. People can call after the meeting or hang out afterward in fellowship and talk individually.
 - c. If in a virtual meeting, muting them would work.
 - d. Traditions say that everyone gets to be a member and the member decides if they are a member, Tradition one is about unity.
 - e. In a physical meeting the chairperson can say, "You are welcome here. We are glad you found us. Your anger is not creating a safe environment and according to Tradition One unity is important for us. Please calm down." If they can't they get physically escorted out of the room. We have to protect unity for all.
 - f. Stop and call for the serenity prayer
 - g. I interrupt someone and try to say something to help them get into a better space. We can also mute them.
 - h. If someone is being aggressive towards another person, it is important to call this person after the meeting and to see that a person gets to be heard after the meeting.
6. Members who consistently focus on the problem and not the solution. Sharing the mess rather than the message.
7. Chairperson who is controlling, rude.
8. Suicide
- a. People need to be heard, that is paramount. When I am in this state it keeps me connected. Being validated and permission to have my feelings. Not validate the feelings good or bad, but it is ok to have feelings and it is a safe space to share difficult feelings.
 - b. Talking about suicide as a treatment option. In fellowship time, someone talked about suicide as a treatment option. Not just that they said it was an option, but also gave the information on how to get kits to help you commit suicide. I don't have an issue with talking about suicide but offering it up as a solution and how to get that solution, I get nervous about our responsibility in that.
 - c. I have been on both sides as therapist and client. In CPA many of us, and I have felt suicidal, this is a place it is wonderful that you can say everything. There are no constraints.
 - d. I have admitted myself for suicidal ideation. As I understand it when you don't speak about it that is where the concern is. Suicidal ideation is thinking about it and wanting the relief of the pain to stop, but not having a plan. I embrace it, it is a healthy sign to want to connect and not isolate and make a plan. So, to intervene would be shame-provoking to the person. It is no one's place to say something.
 - e. Early in CPA I went to a meeting and I heard someone speak with emotional charge about wanting to kill themselves. At that point I needed more ESH. So, I went to other meetings. Then I heard a story about suicide in *Stories of Hope*. I was grateful that we could talk about suicide.

- f. No topic should be taboo in this group. They feel connected because they can express their feelings.
- g. I had it come up recently. It helped the person that they could share it. They weren't afraid to share it. They were voicing where they were at the moment. I ended up calling the person.
- h. Where can someone talk about these issues if they can't talk about them here? There is no other place. This should be the safe place to talk about suicide.
- i. I get uncomfortable when other people are talking about suicide very seriously. I know it is part of my issue. I don't know if they will really hurt themselves and I get obsessed about that.
- j. In the Big Book of AA, it tells alcoholics to seek outside help for issues that can't be resolved through working the Twelve Steps. So, include this in CPA literature.
- k. I had a sponsee in AA that committed suicide. It had nothing to do with what I said or do. If someone wants to kill themselves, they don't talk about it and isolates. It is not our job to watch for signs. If someone is sharing it is part of the healing from the emotional and spiritual debilitation. On meetings when it is talked about it, I didn't want to kill myself. It helped to share these scary thoughts.
- l. Someone I worked with killed herself. It was not my responsibility to do anything, I am not that powerful. There is nothing different I could have done. There is nothing anyone can say or do to make someone make the choice to take their life. When I have felt suicidal there is nothing anyone could say or do that would make me do anything different.
- m. Being heard was what helped me. Just being able to have my experience validated.
- n. You are either led or not led to help in the moment. I am not responsible for the other person.
- o. Be understanding and give comfort.
- p. As an individual, it is my job to remember that I can give more to a meeting than I get from a meeting. So, when the meeting is derailed, it is my responsibility to be the guardian of the Traditions. A suicide kit is affiliation. Even in a meeting if the chairperson has been affected by a suicidal share and is speechless, I can say, I am so glad you are here. I can listen.
- q. In CPA we normalize suicide as a topic, it is a legitimate to talk about. We don't freak out or panic. We can share about it.

CONCLUSION

We want our meetings to be welcoming, supportive and safe. There is an underlying presumption of goodwill in our groups. The Traditions that help guide us regarding challenging meeting situations are:

- Tradition One - Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon CPA unity. Unity is the most important.

- Tradition Two - There is but one ultimate authority, our leaders are but trusted servants.
- Tradition Three - The only requirement for CPA membership is a desire to recover from the emotional and spiritual debilitation of chronic pain or chronic illness.
- Tradition Four – Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or CPA as a whole.