

What Does "Crosstalk" Have to Do with Our Primary Purpose?

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Just what is this thing called "crosstalk"? Why are concerned A.A.s writing to the General Service Office for clarification about it? And, bottom line, what does it have to do with our primary purpose: "to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety"?

The word has been with us at least since 1887. Webster's 10th Edition defines crosstalk as "unwanted signals in a communication channel caused by transference of energy from another circuit" - as when, for instance, two members sitting side by side at an A.A. meeting carry on a private, yet not so quiet, conversation or when one member interrupts another rudely or inappropriately. But this is not the kind of crosstalk that members are asking about; specifically, it is traceable to a list of guidelines for behavior at A.A. meetings - *erroneously* attributed to "World Service" - that appears in 1992 in a central office newsletter and has since been reprinted and circulated more widely.

The guidelines state, in part, that "Any comments, negative or positive, about another's share, experience, life, program or remarks are crosstalk - that is interference."..."The only appropriate comment about anyone else's share - a speaker's or another member's - is 'Thank you for your share.'" "A member may talk about his or her own experience as it relates directly or indirectly to another's share, but should not refer to that person's share. Even comments such as 'When you talk about... it reminded me of my own experience...' are possibly inappropriate."

The so-called guidelines did not emanate from the General Service Office. What random investigation reveals is that they may have filtered into some A.A. groups through members who also attend other Twelve Step recovery groups. For example:

(1) In its literature, one fellowship includes a boxed item head, "Suggested Announcement Regarding Crosstalk & Feedback (adopted (1/13/87)." It reads: "In sharing during meetings, we proceed in an orderly, respectful manner. The chairperson (or speaker) will call on people to share. We do not interrupt one another or engage in discussion - this is called "crosstalk." While we encourage expressions of identification with a speaker and appreciation for speakers, we also do not judge or comment on what people say or tell them what to do - this is called 'feedback'"

(2) Another anonymous organization, in its "Suggested Meeting Format," asks attendees "to please not interrupt someone else's sharing, not to make comments about other people's statements... and to talk only about yourself"

Although many self-help groups emulate A.A.'s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, their practices often differ from ours in other respects. As they may have discovered in adapting the A.A. program to their own needs, what's sauce for the goose may be poison for the gander. Says Anne T., of Rome, New York, who belongs to A.A. and also attends meetings of a different fellowship: "From the very beginning, one drunk talking to another has made the A.A. program go round. But in meetings (of the other fellowship), I feel, it makes sense to refrain from crosstalk. People are trying to free themselves from extraordinary shame.

When someone shares in response to something I've said, that's okay, but only so long as there's not even a hint of censure, belittlement, scolding or preaching, all under the guise of sharing. Knowing there's no risk of judgment makes me feel safe."

Looking at the subject from an A.A.'s point of view, a G.S.O. staff member says, "Comparing notes, many of us realized that nonjudgmental suggestions we had received in meetings in response to something we had shared, was very beneficial to our recovery. It is how we learn, and that's what 'sharing experience, strength and hope' is all about. Also, there is a thin line between guidelines and rules; and experience suggests that in A.A.'s 'benign anarchy,' rules, rigidity and attempts to control don't work very well."

Whether an individual A.A. group chooses to include the crosstalk "guidelines" in its meeting format is entirely up to its group conscience to determine, of course. But please do not say that such guidelines came from the General Service Office.