# Handling common meeting problems & difficult behaviours

This document addresses two common challenges that can affect meetings:

* + People not participating—members not contributing in meetings.
  + Difficult behavior—members being disruptive in meetings.

Below, we discuss each problem and offer solutions for making meeting time as effective as possible.

**People not participating**

Participating in meetings and groups may be a new experience and people may be:

* + Uncertain about their role and rights.
  + Nervous about speaking in public.
  + Hesitant to share opinions others might not agree with.
  + Afraid of being criticized or ridiculed.
  + Worried that speaking up, feel that complaining or disagreeing in public is impolite or improper.
  + Reluctant to offend anyone.
  + Afraid of the consequences for them or their family member.
  + Worried they cannot voice their ideas or express themselves well verbally.
  + Uncomfortable speaking English.

**Encourage members who do not speak up during meetings**

You may be able to encourage more participation.

* + Review the meeting principles at the beginning of every meeting to reinforce that the council is a safe place to share opinions and ideas.
  + Gently encouraging participation. Be careful not to force participation or single anyone out.
  + Allow people to be present without participating. People will participate in the discussion when they are comfortable. Remember that everyone has a different comfort level speaking in a group.
  + Structure the meeting in the agenda but allow members to speak when they feel comfortable.
  + Consider not limiting discussion to only one time in the meeting unless it is disruptive or inappropriate.
  + Keep active members in check so they cannot overwhelm new or more hesitant members.
  + Suggest that they meet with you (or the appropriate person for the topic) after the meeting if they have more things they would like to discuss.
  + Ask if anyone else has comments or questions on the topic of discussion.
  + Establish smaller committees for projects and initiatives. This may be more comfortable for some members and is a good way to contribute.
  + Have gentle, private conversations with quieter members to find out if they find the council valuable and if they have ideas on how they might like to participate. Be careful not to interrogate.
  + The chair or meeting leader may want to stay for a few minutes at the end of the meeting to allow quieter members to have a quick one-to-one discussion.

**Reassure members who avoid disagreements or confrontations**

It can help to:

* + Emphasize that everyone can have an opinion and something to contribute.
  + Reinforce that disagreements are common and should be seen as resolvable.

**Recognize members may be afraid**

If members have fears about something, you may be able to reassure them. Consider if:

* + They fear that action, or not taking action, might negatively affect them or their family.
  + There is an interim solution for their situation.
  + Someone more appropriate can help with the issue (such as a social worker, the home manager, or a support organization).

**Difficult behaviours in meetings**

The effectiveness of a Resident and Family Council suffers when members disrupt meetings, ignore procedures, create disputes or dampen enthusiasm. Strong leadership will manage members like this. Review the meeting principles/ground rules before each meeting to remind members how they should act and encourage them to respect the rights of others.

**Here are some kinds of disruptive behaviour you may encounter and ideas on how to manage it:**

**Members who use meeting time to complain**

A resident and family council is a place to resolve issues and tackle projects to improve the quality of life for all residents. Sometimes members won’t let issues go that the home has already done its best to address. Try to review the original issue and its resolution because:

* + Some members may be unaware of what happened previously.
  + New options may be available that weren't previously.
  + The issue may have changed enough for the council to re-examine it.

Remember that not all members will be satisfied with the results, and some issues may not be resolvable (for example, those that impinge on union contracts, limitations of physical environment, standards or laws that cannot be changed).

**‘Nothing-will-work’ members who are convinced nothing will change**

Sometimes, past failures in other situations or in the council may have made people defeatist. Try to:

* + Acknowledge past disappointments (not failures) and remind them the council is moving forward.
  + Emphasize concrete successes.

**Members who become angry or upset if others disagree with them**

Some people know that others will agree with them just to avoid a scene. Try to:

* + Limit airtime for these members and don’t let them take over. In extreme circumstances, someone may need to speak with the person privately to let them know their behaviour is viewed as confrontational and causes others to hesitate to share opinions.
  + Reinforce that all opinions are valuable and the council is strongest with a variety of ideas.

**‘Broken-record’ members who keep raising the same topic**

Some people try to get their way by wearing others down. Often they feel no one is hearing them.

* + Reinforce that you have heard them by summarizing their view and asking if they agree.
  + Emphasize that they have been heard, and then ask others for their viewpoint. If they interrupt, remind them that you would like to hear how others feel but appreciate their contribution.

**When unproductive behaviour seems to dominate meetings**

Consider if complaints have more to do with the individual than the process. In that case, they should be handled in a one-on-one setting. However, complaints can be a sign that something is not working and you may need to:

* + Seek out advice and mentorship from previous council members or the facility representative/home’s operator.
  + Refocus the council or organizational structure or meeting format.
  + Emphasize the meeting principles/ground rules before meetings begin.
  + Invite a guest speaker. Giving residents and family members opportunities to learn and understand issues that affect them can open up new solutions.
  + Take courses on conducting meetings or dealing with difficult situations. Many community colleges and public libraries offer related courses.
  + Celebrate successes more. This can ease frustration and encourage cooperation.

**How to turn negative energy into constructive action**

To do this:

* + Reframe the discussion by asking questions: what is the main issue? What do we want to achieve? What are our next steps?
  + Highlight positive contributions and encourage the person to participate constructively.
  + Find a project or committee that matches someone’s interests and that could benefit from their energy.
  + Reinforce the meeting principles/ground rules and the requirement for respectful behavior.
  + Address disruptive behaviour early and be firm with disruptive members.
  + Prevent the actions of a few from dominating the entire council.