

## Why Crosstalk is Bad

Though AA literature says nothing about crosstalk, many meetings wisely have rules against it.

If you're unfamiliar with the term, "crosstalk" refers to direct feedback given by one member to another during a meeting. This feedback can take various forms, some of which are very subtle:

- **Praise:** "You sound really fantastic, kid!"
- **Back-handed praise:** "Thanks for keeping it green."
- **Unsolicited advice:** "John, I know you want to show up for your aunt, but you should definitely cancel that trip."
- **Religious opinions:** "I'm sorry to hear your dad is dying, but you just have to remember that God has a plan and nothing happens by accident."
- **Controlling advice disguised as experience:** "When I came in, they told ME to take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth. They also told me that behind every skirt lies a slip."
- **Abuse:** "Bobby, you're an idiot."
- **Correction of previous shares:** "I'm going to share some gratitude, because I like to share about the solution instead of complaining about my luxury problems."

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Though countless people get sober in meetings that allow crosstalk – and some even say crosstalk saved their lives – I believe crosstalk does more harm than good to everyone involved. Here's why.

### 1. Crosstalk is often humiliating to the recipient

Crosstalk may spring from a desire to help, but fails in the execution. Ask yourself this: do you like being corrected or told you are wrong? I'm pretty sure the answer is no – most alcoholics find this humiliating even on a one-on-one basis. Telling an alcoholic they're wrong in public greatly multiplies this effect. No matter how helpful the intent, publicly humiliating another alcoholic is NOT service.

### 2. Crosstalk is often an attempt to control

A painful symptom of alcoholism is the tendency to think we know best. It is in our nature to try to control situations and to tell people what to do – *even though we hate being controlled or told what to do*. When we crosstalk, we fool ourselves that we are doing service, even as we indulge our worst proclivities for self-will and control.

A classic example: after a particularly crazy share from a shaky AA, someone snidely shouts "keep coming back," to scattered general amusement. Alcoholics have really good bullshit detectors, so if you've ever seen this happen, you probably recognized that although the text was literally supportive, the intent was not *entirely* pure.

In this case, the shouter tries display his own wit at the expense of the sharer. Or maybe the shouter wants to control the situation by shaming the sharer, to discourage him from sharing in the future, or to discourage others from sharing in a similar way. This is neither honest nor sober behavior.

### 3. Crosstalk suppresses honest expression

At best, meetings provide a place for us to be honest without shame or fear of judgment. Honesty is one of the cornerstones of AA's spiritual program, identified in the Big Book as "indispensable" and "essential to recovery." None of us is perfect, and our continued sobriety depends on our ability to come clean. Therefore, it seems obvious that anything that makes people less inclined to be honest should be strictly avoided.

If a member knows that, by sharing honestly, she might draw down a hail of recriminatory crosstalk, she may be more likely to keep a secret to herself. Crosstalk, by its very nature, has a tendency to punish honesty. Fear of crosstalk will naturally stifle people's ability to share honestly.

Still not convinced? Try a thought experiment: Two meetings are being held simultaneously in adjacent rooms, one with a sign that says "crosstalk allowed" and the other with one that says "no crosstalk." Which one would you want to attend if you had something to share? Which would you attend if you felt like telling people what to do?

### 4. Giving unsolicited advice is alcoholic behavior

Telling others what to do is a common symptom of untreated alcoholism. "Sharing for the newcomer" is like giving unsolicited advice with a shotgun. If I really have what other people want, I won't need to force my wisdom on a captive audience. Advice for a specific person can always wait until the meeting is over. It's usually wisest to save advice for sponsees, or others who specifically ask for it.

If I think a newcomer will drink without hearing my advice, I am overestimating my influence and importance, and my ego is in need of some deflation.

### 5. Listening without judging is how we recover

I can only get lasting relief from my disease if I can learn to listen without judging. Meetings make that possible through the cultivation of empathy in a safe environment.

But if I spend my meetings weighing what others say with a mind towards commenting, correcting, or instructing, I forfeit that relief, and can leave a meeting feeling no better than when I arrived. To get sober I must learn to listen and let go of judgment and put aside alcoholic behavior.

Though I will occasionally share how I identify with a speaker, I don't respond directly or indirectly to other members' shares, and I never tell people what to do. I stick to my feelings and my experience.

### Crosstalk does more harm than good

I'm sure that some crosstalk is 100% good, and benefits everyone in the room. But the value of these occasional instances of skillful crosstalk cannot make up for the harm caused by the instances of painful, shaming, or suppressive crosstalk that jeopardize the atmosphere of recovery.

No one should be abused or humiliated at an AA meeting. If the door is open to crosstalk of any kind, there is a possibility of the worst kind occurring. Rules against crosstalk create a more welcoming, healthy environment for all alcoholics, regardless of how much time they have.