

# How to Deal with Difficult People in Your Group



# Attendee Controls Review

Sound Settings  
Mute/Unmute



Request to Verbally  
Question/Comment



Leave  
Webinar



Audio Settings ^



Chat



Raise Hand



Q&A

Leave Meeting



Communicate  
with Host



Communicate  
with Presenter

We will  
record  
webinar  
and share

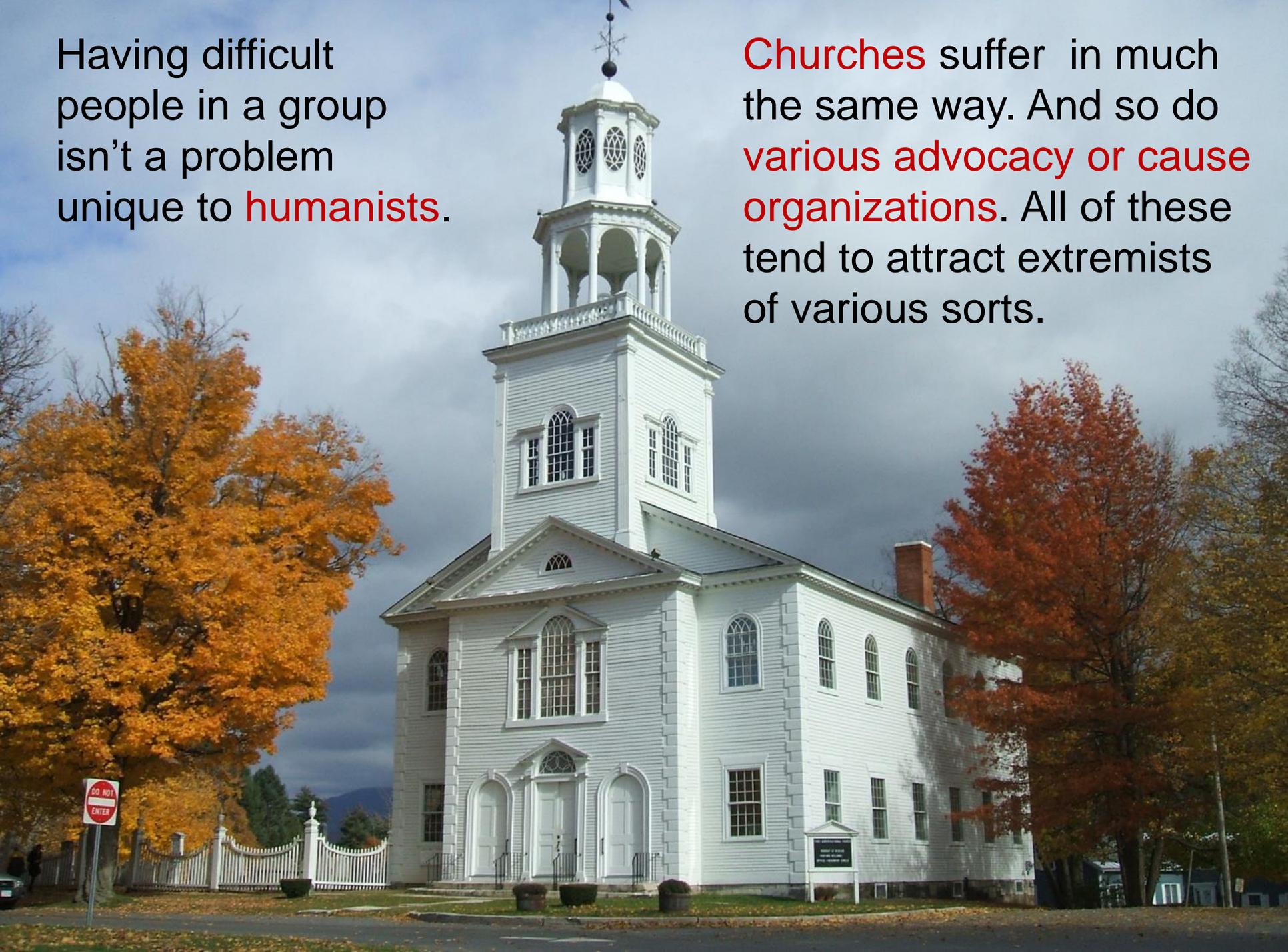
# How to Deal with Difficult People in Your Group



Fred Edwords

Having difficult people in a group isn't a problem unique to **humanists**.

**Churches** suffer in much the same way. And so do **various advocacy or cause organizations**. All of these tend to attract extremists of various sorts.





Nonetheless, there is a unique humanist issue. The late Rabbi Sherwin Wine, founder of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, once characterized many members of humanist groups as the “walking wounded,” people who had been negatively impacted by traditional religion and therefore needed to find community among those of similar experience.

As humanism becomes more mainstream, however, we get fewer of the walking wounded today. But they nonetheless remain a unique part of our groups. So . . .

# Humanist Groups Are Welcoming of all sorts of people



- A. Secularists
- B. Creative people and alternative thinkers
- C. Shy people, outspoken people, and warm people
- D. People with various appearances and styles of dress
- E. People of various ethnicities and nationalities
- F. People in the LGBTQ community

- A. Secularists
- B. Creative people and alternative thinkers
- C. Shy people, outspoken people, and warm people
- D. People with various appearances and styles of dress
- E. People of various ethnicities and nationalities
- F. People in the LGBTQ community
- G. Even grumpy old men



*Copyright Warner Bros. Pictures "Grumpy Old Men" 1993*

But this doesn't mean  
*Anything Goes*



Copyright Cole Porter's "Anything Goes" musical

But this doesn't mean

## *Anything Goes*

**Humanist groups want to avoid**

- A. Racists
- B. Misogynists
- C. Predators
- D. Trolls, moles, and provocateurs
- E. The mentally or emotionally disturbed
- F. Violent individuals
- G. ?

You first duty is to the success of your humanist group.

You first duty is to the success of your humanist group.

This requires a focus on the satisfaction of your collective membership.

You first duty is to the success of your humanist group.

This requires a focus on the satisfaction of your collective membership.

You aren't therapists or social workers.

You first duty is to the success of your humanist group.

This requires a focus on the satisfaction of your collective membership.

You aren't therapists or social workers.

Your group isn't a "treatment option."

# Minor Social Problems



People who:

Talk too loud

Talk too long

Talk too often

Talk too coarsely

Are insulting

Often interrupt

Are socially

awkward

# Minor Social Problems

## Problem 1

“We've had people who have volunteered to take on tasks, who run them autocratically, and quit rather than negotiate.”

*Solution:* “We developed a code of conduct.”

## Problem 2

“We have a lot of socially awkward members that don't understand boundaries, both personal space and topic choice.”

*Solution:* “We are working on a code of conduct policy.”

# Minor Social Problems

## Problem 3

*Deborah requests:*

“I hope we will hear about how to ethically yet *very* effectively deal with people who attend our meetings who don't respond appropriately to social cues (may be on the spectrum, etc.) and can derail a discussion.”

*Possible solutions:*

1. Have a helpful person sit next to or near the person.
2. Confidentially take the person aside and discuss.
3. Discreetly ask the person to stop attending.

# Minor Social Solutions

## Preventive Approaches

### *Ahead of Time*

Establish standard event and meeting guidelines and procedures.  
Have a greeter for meetings and events who can also spot problem individuals.

Find among your members a counselor to observe, guide, and recommend.

### *At the Gathering*

Verbally set forth procedures and some decorum guidelines:  
at the opening of meetings;  
at the start of Q&A (one question and one follow-up).

# Minor Social Solutions

## Action Approaches

(to manage interruptions and long-winded questioners and debaters)

Insist that questioners keep it brief and end with a question mark.

Have a moderator hold the microphone or stand by the line of questioners at a stationary microphone.

Look each questioner in the eye.

Bravely cut a questioner off if he or she violates the rules; don't be passive.

Do damage control afterwards as necessary.

Talk privately with that questioner afterwards to listen and to reinforce the rules.

If the problem continues, have two or three people meet with the disruptive individual in an intervention of sorts.

If necessary, in a nice way, ask the person to leave or stop attending, saying "It's just not working out."

# Major Social Problems



Verbal abuse  
Physical abuse  
Domineering behavior  
Disruption  
Making threats  
Conflict creation  
Sowing of discontent  
Sexual harassment  
Other types of  
harassment

# Major Social Principals

Some members don't need guidance but therapy

- You aren't qualified to do that
- They didn't hire you to treat them

Some attendees actually reject some humanist values

- These are *humanist* meetings
- You aren't obligated to revisit basic humanist values

Some behaviors are actually against the law or actionable

- You have a mission to try and create a safe space
- You have an obligation to try to protect attendees

Therefore, with major problems, there is a duty to act swiftly and decisively. This can involve immediate action or consulting with the American Humanist Association.

# Major Organizational Problems

Theft of  
Money  
Records  
Data

Litigiousness

Acting without authorization

Creating organizational conflicts

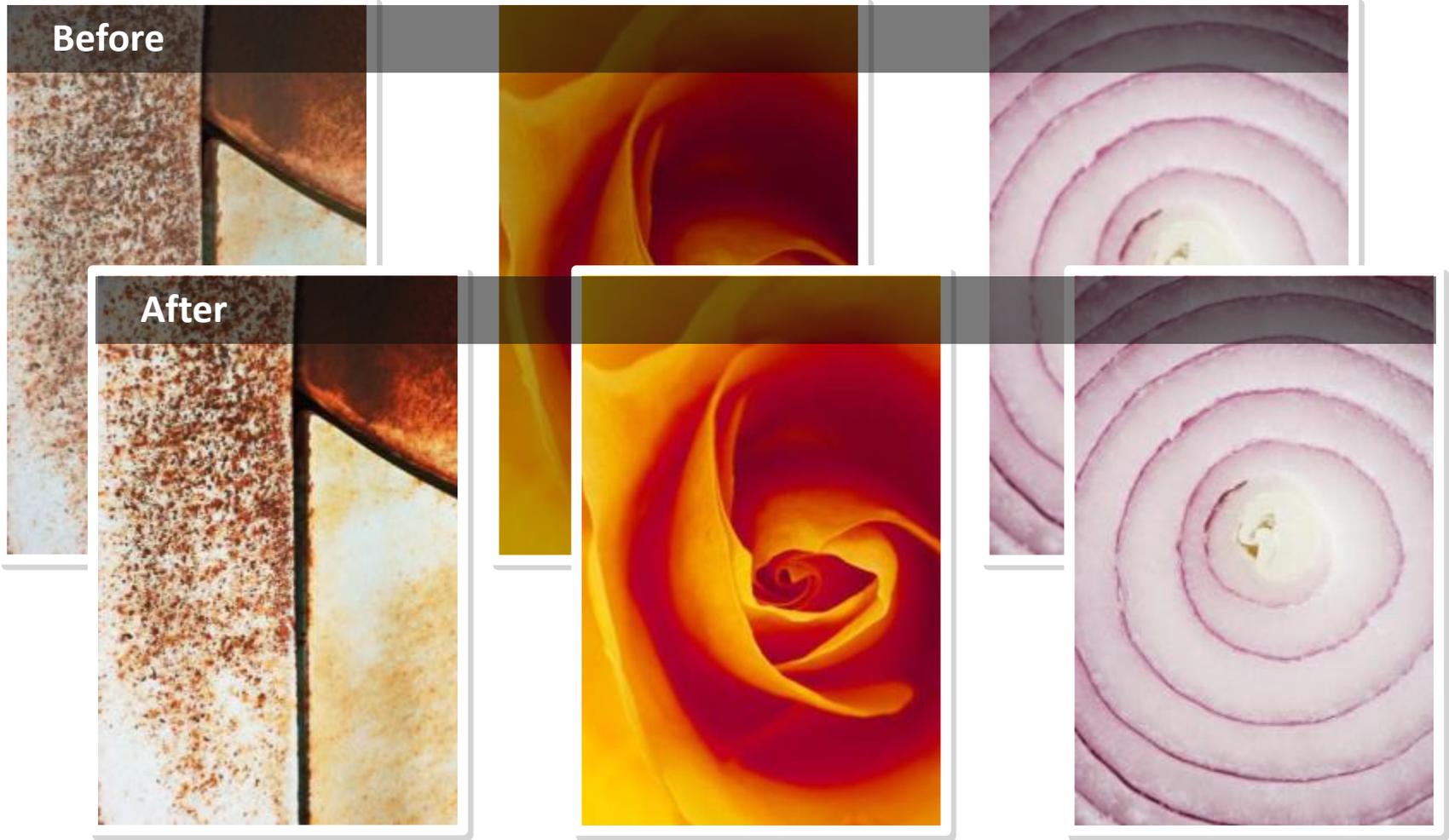


# Major Organizational Solutions

1. Create comprehensive bylaws that address these concerns.
2. Create effective business meeting procedures that get work done.
3. Get the support of board members and leaders on these issues.
4. Use democracy to address these matters because democracy works.
5. Put in place checks, balances, and audit systems or overseers.
6. Don't give the "keys to the kingdom" to just one person.
7. Have copies, backups, and multiple controls.
8. This includes membership lists, finances, and site access.

## Important Realizations

1. Nonprofit organizations are the most frequent victims of embezzlement.
2. Sometimes a talented and skilled leader or volunteer can have a toxic personality and thereby prove disruptive.
3. Actual enemies of your values may join your group to sabotage it.
4. Problems not addressed honestly and speedily only get worse.



What are the issues affecting your group?

*Yvonne asks:*

Here in Charleston, we use Meetup for our book club meetings. This is where new people find us and come to the meeting. Most of the time, of course, this is a happy circumstance, but occasionally a totally new-to-us person attends and uses our little forum as a place to vent their frustrations and complain about life in general. In the past, we have muddled through it and the offender does not show up at future book club meetings.

My question is that if such a situation develops again, how do I, as the designated moderator, handle quieting or expelling such a one from our meeting?

*Sue says:*

We have someone who is not a bad or evil person, but who drives new members away by targeting them at social events.

*Another concerned party says:*

We have an active, long-time member who is often overbearing to the point he has driven some people away.

*Solution:*

The preventive and active solutions offered earlier should go a long way toward resolving these problems.

*Nicole says:*

We have an autistic member that often takes over conversations and doesn't allow for others to add their input or perspectives.

---

Although there are autism resources online, most are treatment options. But this booklet helps group leaders.



*Helping Youth with Autism  
Be Successful in Your Group,  
4-H Club, or Camp*

A GUIDE FOR 4-H EXTENSION EDUCATORS AND VOLUNTEERS



PENNSTATE



College of Agricultural Sciences  
Agricultural Research and Cooperative Extension

<http://www.episcenter.psu.edu/sites/default/files/NEWhelpingAutism.pdf>

*Doug says:*

In my previous Humanist group we had a guy who liked to sue people who he thought wronged him. He had been in the group for many years and was at best a nuisance. Then there was a bad exchange in a group email list and some hurt feelings and the guy was removed from the email list. He threatened to sue the group unless we put him back into the email list. I suggested he be given back his membership dues, then he would not be a member and couldn't be part of the list, but the Board decided to close the email list entirely.

The bylaws were later revised to put in an explicit process to remove a member from the group.

We have a “Group Discussion Best Practices” policy as well as a provision in the bylaws to vote to remove members.

## *Highlights from “Group Discussion Best Practices”*

1. Discussions will be moderated by an officer or volunteer.
2. Please stay on topic and be as brief as possible in making your point. Be considerate of others who might be waiting to speak.
3. Remember – Treat all with basic dignity and worth even those you disagree with. "Attack" the idea and NOT the person. Name calling, bullying, or harassment of anyone will NOT be tolerated. Punishment for doing it may include being asked to leave the meeting or event and could lead to your removal as a member of the group.
4. Because we are a non-profit group we will not and cannot endorse candidates for political office.
5. Arguing religious points or apologetics won't be welcome. Also comments that unnecessarily disparage religion are simply boring to those of us who have moved to secular humanism.
6. There will not be a right to speak without consequences.

*Mike tells this story:*

An AHA chapter had a leader who was so divisive that the other leaders were afraid the chapter would be destroyed if they confronted him. I gave them suggestions and the next year at the AHA conference a woman from the chapter told me they had used those suggestions, the man had left the chapter, and the chapter had doubled in size.

The advice they followed was this. The other leaders quietly got control over the computer records. Then they endeavored to make closer friends with the divisive leader's supporters so that when the boom was lowered they had the people problem buffered. They then met with this divisive individual in a sort of intervention and told him how they saw the issues. But he brushed them off. So they told him he would probably be better off in another group if he couldn't change his ways, as his behavior was destructive.

*Jason has three stories:*

As a fairly active Humanist group, we've had our share of issues over the years.

Person one - let's call him "V" - often demanded the floor at meetings to harp about his pet issues. Eventually we prohibited that. Also, he was a deist and had a habit of insulting atheists. Since around 70 percent of us identify as atheist, he wasn't a very popular guy.

The last straw came when he was at a discussion group and insulted the moderator and downplayed the importance of the issue being discussed (and hence the people affected by it). Again, he started grandstanding about his own issues. He was shut down and walked out, and in an email exchange afterwards, left our group in a huff. Good riddance.

The next person, "T" came to a couple of meetings and seemed like a fairly progressive guy, until it came to his views on women and black people. We'd been keeping an eye on him, as he'd made some public social media comments about blacks being "the real racists," and that even though he was an atheist, perhaps a biblical view of women (as property) "wasn't so bad." He also made comments defending the KKK.

When he started pulling that nonsense in our group page (albeit not as bad as his worst offenses), we'd challenge him on everything to make it clear we don't let people get away with statements like that. We confronted him about it and he backed down. But then weeks later he came out swinging and insulting the people who talked to him about it in the first place. We quickly, publicly, and unceremoniously tossed him from the group and blocked him from our newsletter, Meetup, and all social media.

Before T was tossed, T's buddy "D" defended the Masterpiece Cake Shop because "the free market" should punish them, not the government. Turns out he's a libertarian and thinks the Civil Rights Act was a bad idea. When we challenged him on that, he started using disingenuous arguments, and we called him out on it. I guess he didn't like that because he shot back with personal insults, which got him immediately banned from all social media. He proceeded to publicly drag our name through the mud.

Our bylaws allow us to remove disruptive members, and our only regret is not acting more quickly in the cases of V and especially T. I also think it's important to establish posting rules on social media and enforce them, but I'd also point out no one is owed a platform, and therefore we are quick with the "ban hammer," even if it's about something not specifically mentioned in our policy. Going back to T - I think it's **ESPECIALLY** important to shut someone down as soon as you get a first whiff of blatant racism and/or misogyny.

## **Prohibited Conduct Policy for AHA Conferences**

In general, prohibited conduct includes any abusive conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with another person's ability to enjoy and participate in the conference, including social events related to the conference. Additionally, any clear violation of the law will be immediately referred to local police.

## **Published Notice**

The AHA 77th Anniversary Conference is a welcoming event for all those interested in humanism and the work of the American Humanist Association. We expect all conference attendees to respect others, even those they may disagree with.

In general, prohibited conduct includes any abusive conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with another person's ability to enjoy and participate in the conference, including social events related to the conference. Any clear violation of the law will be immediately referred to local police.

# **AHA Staff Policy**

## ***Harassment***

We strictly prohibit and will not tolerate harassment based on an individual's protected status, including but not limited to sexual or racial harassment. Employees are prohibited from harassing other employees whether or not the conduct occurs on American Humanist Association premises or during working hours.

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), sexual harassment occurs, “when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.”

## ***Harassment (continued)***

This conduct includes but is not limited to:

Unwanted sexually suggestive statements, questions or jokes;

Repeatedly rejected sexual flirtations, advances, or propositions;

Pressuring for sexual activity, including offering employment benefits in exchange for sexual favors or denying employment benefits in response to a refusal to provide sexual favors;

Offensive touching or assault, obscene gestures or suggestive sounds;

Use of insults, slurs or negative stereotyping;

Circulating, displaying or using American Humanist Association voice-mail, e-mail, or Internet resources to receive, view, or send targeted offensive jokes, pictures, or other similar material;

Intimidating acts, such as bullying or threatening based on an individual's protected status;

Falsely denying, lying about, or otherwise covering up or attempting to cover up conduct that is prohibited by this policy; or

Any other conduct that shows hostility toward, disrespect for, or degradation of an individual based on an individual's protected status.

A stained glass window with a central figure in a blue and red robe, and several smaller figures in colorful robes below. The background is a mix of blue, green, and red.

Now let's  
hear from  
you.



Raise Hand



Q&A

# Melody Stringer

AHA Grassroots & Conference Coordinator

[mstringer@americanhumanist.org](mailto:mstringer@americanhumanist.org)

202-238-9088



Thanks for joining  
our webinar!



AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

---

**CENTER FOR EDUCATION**



**AMERICAN  
HUMANIST  
ASSOCIATION**

.....  
**GOOD WITHOUT A GOD**