

# Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**I belong to a book club that is just wonderful. We have about a dozen people who all read the same book, and we meet once a month to discuss it. We have fun conversations, coffee, and snacks, and it's something I look forward to each month. I guess I should say that I did look forward to it before "Sheila" joined our group. She monopolizes every conversation, and criticizes other people when they express an opinion that is different from her. She is generally obnoxious. Several others in the group have told me that they're thinking of quitting because Sheila bothers them so much. Is there a tactful way to handle this situation?**

**-- Book Lover**

Dear Book Lover,

As a book author, let me begin by saying "You go, girl!" I love it that – even in today's hectic world – people still meet to talk about literature and books. It would be a shame to disband the group because of one motor-mouth with an inflated attitude and poor critique skills.

Every group has a responsibility to create an environment in which everyone feels comfortable and safe expressing themselves. Differences of opinion must be put forth without insults but, rather, with respect, and a willingness to listen and learn. Shy people and introverts are especially likely to hold their tongues in the presence of a verbally aggressive person, and that's not a good thing.

If your group had a facilitator, I would urge that person to be assertive in upholding these guidelines. I would suggest that this group leader quietly take Sheila aside and describe the behaviors your group finds appropriate. Sheila needs honest feedback about how her actions are out-of-line, and how they upset your book club meetings.

Since your group doesn't have a facilitator, at least one of you will have to take a leadership role in getting your group back on track, and possibly engage in a very direct conversation with Sheila. But first, try some of these suggestions:

Consider using your next meeting to set up guidelines about how long each person may speak about his/her opinion. Consider using a centuries-old Native American practice called "The Talking Stick." The Talking Stick (which is an actual object, but your group might consider substituting a stick with a bookmark!) is used in council circles to designate who has the right to speak. If you're holding the stick, the floor is yours. If you're not holding the stick, you need to zip your mouth and listen. Throughout the course of your meeting, each person gets a turn to hold the Talking Stick (or bookmark) and share his/her opinions.

I would also spend time at your next meeting discussing how to critique another's point of view. Different points of view don't have to be contentious. In fact, in discussing literature and books, these divergent opinions can lead to stimulating, lively, and respectful conversations. There are many excellent resources about book groups.

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

3/23/05

Some of them cover group dynamics, and the reading of an article or excerpt might be a “neutral” way of broaching the subject. Check out [www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com) and click on the tab for “Book Clubs.”

That’s where I would start, and then observe whether or not Sheila can conform to the group norms. To me, she sounds needy and demanding of lots of attention with pretty poor people skills. I’m not entirely hopeful that she will change much, but let’s be optimistic. If she continues with her obnoxious behavior, then someone will have to talk with her. In the absence of a group facilitator, if she was invited into the group by one of the other members, that person should be the most likely “volunteer” to have this conversation with Sheila. If not, draw straws, but it must be done lest you lose this wonderful experience of intellectual stimulation and building connections with others.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).