

## M.5. HANDLING OPPRESSOR PATTERNS, INCLUDING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, AND ADDRESSING MISTAKES, DISAGREEMENTS, AND CRITICISM<sup>1</sup>

This Guideline has two parts. The first part [A] describes how we handle oppressor patterns, mistakes, disagreements, and criticism in RC. The second part [B] addresses our commitment to keep the RC Community free of sexual misconduct and states the actions we will take if it occurs. The principles in Part A apply to Part B.

### **A. Handling Oppressor Patterns and Addressing Mistakes, Disagreements, and Criticism**

#### *Our Commitment*

The RC Community works to end all forms of mistreating people, including all oppressions.<sup>2</sup> We are committed to caring about every human, learning about their experiences of oppression, and becoming increasingly effective at ending oppression.

All of us have grown up in oppressive societies and so we bring undischarged distresses and patterns of behavior from oppression into the RC Community. The RC Community has developed understandings and tools to address these distresses and behaviors. Much of our work focuses on helping people recover from being mistreated and preventing the acting out of undischarged distresses. We also assist each other to reclaim the ability to notice and intervene when oppressive behavior and mistreatment occur, including when we ourselves act in an oppressive manner.

We do these things without losing sight of the goodness of all humans. We understand that no one mistreats anyone else without first having been mistreated and that no one is free from acting out some form of oppressive behavior.<sup>3</sup>

#### *How to Take Responsibility*

We don't want any Co-Counselor to be mistreated in our Community. As humans who are inherently caring, we want things to go well for ourselves and all other humans and to set things right when they don't go well. As a peer organization, when we make mistakes, mistreat, or act oppressively toward each other, we want to, are committed to, and, count on each other to, take responsibility for our actions. This is our collective responsibility, and includes the following:

- a. Stopping our own or others' oppressive and hurtful behaviors
- b. Understanding what has happened
- c. Acknowledging the impact of our actions on others

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<sup>1</sup> We distinguish criticism (pointing out someone's faults in a judgmental way) from telling someone they have made a mistake or offering feedback with the understanding that people are always doing their best given the hurts they have acquired. Instead of using punishment, which reinforces distress patterns, we seek to end harmful behavior by offering, when possible, Co-Counseling sessions as part of a process to heal and resolve any effects.

<sup>2</sup> Oppression is the one-way systematic mistreatment of a group of people by the society, or another group of people who serve as agents of societal oppression, with the mistreatment being encouraged or enforced by the society. Examples include racism, classism, and sexism.

<sup>3</sup> We encourage Co-Counselors working on oppressor material to primarily work on it in sessions with other people who are not members of the oppressed group. One should ask permission before counseling on oppressor material with a person who is targeted by that oppression.

- d. Not reactively denying, defending, or justifying our behavior
- e. Discharging on the underlying distresses and remedying any lack of accurate information that led to our actions so that we are less likely to act in the same way again
- f. Making efforts to resolve any negative effects of our actions, which may include listening to the experiences of and apologizing to the people involved

We are committed to not leaving anyone alone with these struggles. Accomplishing this requires a great deal of discharge in the context of a caring Community. All patterns, including those that lead to harming others, can be discharged and not acted upon.

We want to build relationships without acting out our distress recordings at each other. We understand that many of our conflicts, disagreements, and feelings of hurt and mistreatment are based on the restimulation of past distresses rather than on current issues. We can also be confused by unrealistic expectations that the Co-Counseling relationship and the RC Community will be free of all oppressive behaviors.

#### *Addressing Issues and Concerns*

The steps outlined below<sup>4</sup> can help us interrupt patterns (including oppressor and internalized oppression patterns); correct mistakes<sup>5</sup>; address disagreement, criticism, and upset; discourage gossip and attacks<sup>6</sup>; and promptly address an issue we have with another Co-Counselor, including an RC leader:<sup>7</sup>

- a. Counsel, discharge, and think about the concern raised
  - 1. with the goal of seeing the situation as clearly as possible;
  - 2. with the goal of resolving the issue in a manner that supports the re-emergence of all involved;
  - 3. in ways that don't spread the upset by restimulating others (for example, without using names, by working on the related early hurts, and by counseling with someone who has both a good relationship with the other Co-Counselor and can maintain confidentiality).
- b. Consult with an RC teacher or Reference Person for assistance.
- c. Think of possible ways to resolve the situation and take the action(s) most likely to lead to a successful outcome.
- d. Communicate directly with each of the Co-Counselor(s) involved, providing them the opportunity to discharge on the situation with another Co-Counselor. Then meet together with them, exchange listening, and resolve the situation if possible. If oppression has been involved, the person(s) in the oppressor role should listen

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<sup>4</sup> This procedure is similar to other traditional and legal models including Restorative Justice, Alternative Dispute Resolution, mediation, and other models in many different cultures.

<sup>5</sup> Mistakes by leaders are also addressed in Guideline E.1. Structure of the Community: Leadership.

<sup>6</sup> See Guideline O.2. Handling Attacks.

<sup>7</sup> Any Co-Counselor involved in a situation applying this Guideline is always welcome to have a Co-Counselor with them in a supportive role at any stage of the process.

for a lengthy time without speaking. Involving a third Co-Counselor is often useful.

- e. If direct communication and discharge do not resolve the situation, or if communicating directly with the other Co-Counselor is not workable for any reason, request the assistance of an experienced Co-Counselor, an RC teacher, or an appropriate Reference Person.
- f. If the situation still does not resolve, take it to the next level of Reference Person, including an Regional Reference Person (RRP), International Liberation Reference Person (ILRP), International Commonality Reference Person (ICRP), or the International Reference Person (IRP).

Most upsets, criticisms, and disagreements can be resolved with discharge and communication without taking all these steps.

We have found it is most effective to counsel and discharge about these difficulties in sessions. Trying to resolve these difficulties without the attention of an aware counselor has, in our experience, not been effective. Also, it is most useful when we discharge on the early distress that underlies our feelings and resist any tendency to use Co-Counseling sessions to act out our feelings of upset.

We have come to understand that simply criticizing an individual, including a leader, is different from disagreeing with the person's idea or policy and is not useful to either person. Instead, we can discharge on restimulations that pull us to unawarely and mistakenly act out distress recordings at other Co-Counselors, including RC leaders, and at the RC Community, so that we can make constructive contributions.

#### *Issues with Leaders and the Community*

If a Co-Counselor believes that a leader is mistreating them and defending that behavior, the Co-Counselor should bring their concern, as quickly as possible, to their RRP or another local RC leader. We do not want any mistreatment in RC, by anyone.

If the concern is with the RRP or other local leader and you need help outside the geographical Region, contact another RRP or the IRP.

We recognize that Co-Counselors can sometimes attach distresses to leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Before addressing an issue with an RC leader, it is useful to discharge (with someone other than the leader) on any distresses we have about leaders in general. This can help clarify the issue for us, making it easier for us to resolve the issue, and to think well about ourselves and the leader.

As leaders, we need to discharge on any early hurts that could make us feel defensive or attacked, so that we can listen to and act on the information and possible correction being offered to us.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Such distresses might include rigid anti-authority feelings, tendencies to express disappointment in and criticism of leaders, and feeling powerless to think about or share thinking with leaders. These feelings may be rooted in our experiences with the adult "leaders" in our early lives, such as our parents and teachers.

<sup>9</sup> See: *Articles Supporting Our Understanding of the RC Community Guidelines*. [rc.org/guidelinesresources](http://rc.org/guidelinesresources).

## **B. Addressing Sexual Misconduct in the RC Community<sup>10 11</sup>**

### *Overview*

Addressing sexual misconduct is part of our commitment to end all forms of mistreatment, including all oppression. Within the RC Community, we are committed to creating and maintaining an environment free of sexual misconduct and harassment. We address the systemic roots of sexual misconduct through our work on sexism, male domination, and other oppressions. Sexual misconduct<sup>12</sup> includes sexual advances or stalking, sexual requests, sexual harassment,<sup>13</sup> and other unwelcome behaviors and communications of a sexual nature. We define sexual harassment in RC as conduct of a sexual nature—verbal, written, physical, visual, or electronic—that is serious<sup>14</sup>, or unwelcome and repeated. All these behaviors, intentional or not, are wholly inconsistent with the intentions, goals, and policies of the RC Community.

### *Young People*

The RC Community is committed to creating and maintaining an environment for young people of all ages that is safe from sexual misconduct and exploitation, works to end oppression, and empowers young people to share their thinking and express their emotions. Any young person who feels they may be experiencing sexual misconduct in the RC Community is encouraged to confide in any adult Co-Counselor, parent or not, whom they trust. That Co-Counselor should then act as their ally and follow the steps in this Guideline. This action does not preclude taking additional action outside the RC Community if the adult or young person deems it necessary.

### *How to Raise a Concern of Sexual Misconduct<sup>15</sup>*

If a Co-Counselor experiences sexual misconduct in the RC Community, they can choose to do any or all of the following to resolve the situation within RC:

- a. Resolve their concern informally, with or without the assistance of an RC leader (It is always fine to involve a leader, or consult with a leader.)

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<sup>10</sup> The processes laid out in Part B, at the discretion of the IRP or RRP, may also be used for any situation in which a Co-Counselor feels endangered by the behavior of another Co-Counselor.

<sup>11</sup> See *Sexual Misconduct Guideline Resource Document*: [rc.org/m5\\_resource](http://rc.org/m5_resource). This resource document provides an RC context for much of this Guideline.

<sup>12</sup> Sexual misconduct could include a client working on sexual distresses without their Co-Counselor's agreement. It could also include a client repeatedly bringing up sexual material, inside or outside of a session, without considering how oppression and domination have affected both the client's and the counselor's distress recordings connected to sex. (This concern especially applies to adults with young people.) People are encouraged to use their reference people to help resolve any confusions or issues.

<sup>13</sup> In RC we have workshops, classes, and sessions on the topic of sex in which sex may be explicitly talked about. Co-Counselors voluntarily participate in these events, and in these activities we create the conditions in which participants can discharge on early hurts and the feelings connected with the early hurts in order to have a relaxed, rational relationship to sex. Participants may experience uncomfortable feelings about sex in these events, but that is not the same as sexual harassment.

<sup>14</sup> Not all conduct of a sexual nature is "serious." If such conduct is repeated and unwelcome, even if not serious, it could become sexual harassment.

<sup>15</sup> Concerns about sexual misconduct at a workshop should be immediately communicated to the workshop leader. If it is about the workshop leader's conduct, it should be immediately communicated to a Regional Reference Person. A report should also be made to the Complaint Review Committee (see below) by email.

- b. Take some or all of the steps suggested in Part A (above) to resolve the concern<sup>16</sup>
- c. Use the processes outlined in this Part B. (From here on, this process will be called “the Complaint Resolution Process.”)

*The Ad Hoc<sup>17</sup> Complaint Review Committee*

The Complaint Resolution Process requires the establishment of an ad hoc Complaint Review Committee (“CRC”). The ad hoc Complaint Review Committee works together with the RRP(s) to address the complaint. The CRC consists of the International Liberation Reference Person (ILRP) for Women (or her designee), an ILRP or RRP chosen by the person raising the concern, and a diverse committee of up to four others chosen by the IRP and the ILRP for Women. The composition of the CRC for any specific situation, apart from the ILRP for Women or her designee, will vary depending on the Co-Counselors and issues involved.

*The Complaint Resolution Process*

- a. Inform the Appropriate People and Prevent Ongoing Harm: A Co-Counselor who believes that they have experienced sexual misconduct from another Co-Counselor, and chooses to use this Complaint Resolution Process, should initiate it by contacting, or asking someone else to contact, one of the following:
  1. Their RC teacher or Area Reference Person (ARP)<sup>18</sup>, who will notify the RRP and the CRC
  2. Their RRP, who will notify the CRC
  3. The CRC (by direct email to the CRC at [committee@rc.org](mailto:committee@rc.org))

This Complaint Resolution Process is not intended to replace any other process (for example, a legal process or mediation).

If the ARP (in consultation with the RRP), RRP or CRC thinks sexual misconduct may be happening or is about to happen, they will immediately intercede to prevent the possibility of misconduct, inform the Co-Counselors that they are not to have contact with one another, and take other measures necessary to prevent harm. The RRP and CRC may restrict the person who is complained about from RC Community activities pending final resolution or take other measures they deem necessary.

When the Co-Counselors involved are from different Regions, their RRP(s) will work together to carry out this Guideline. They will determine which RRP takes the lead.

- b. Gather Information: An RRP and/or a member of the CRC will meet with each person involved separately. They will gather information, assess the situation, and ensure that all concerned have the opportunity to tell what happened. Co-

<sup>16</sup> A Co-Counselor raising a concern about sexual misconduct may choose, but is never required, to bring their concern directly to the person who they believe caused them harm, to try to resolve the situation. We recommend that this meeting also include an RC leader.

<sup>17</sup> Ad hoc means created for a specific purpose when necessary.

<sup>18</sup> If the Co-Counselor believes that they have experienced sexual misconduct from the ARP, they should directly contact their RRP, who will involve the CRC. If they believe they have experienced it from their RRP, they should contact their ARP, who will involve the CRC. If they believe they have experienced it from the IRP or Alternate IRP, they should contact their RRP, who should involve at least one other RRP and the CRC. In such a case, the IRP should not be involved in the process. If the complaint is about a member of the CRC (an ILRP, ICRP, or RRP), that member should not participate on the CRC in this case. This principle applies throughout this Guideline.

Counseling is usually incorporated into this process and each person is welcome to bring a Co-Counselor in a supportive role.

- c. Take Action to Determine and Address the Harm: Once the information gathering is complete, the CRC and the RRP(s) discuss whether sexual misconduct (as defined in this Guideline) has occurred. If they conclude that it has occurred, then the CRC and the RRP(s)<sup>19</sup> will decide what should be done<sup>20</sup>. They will first meet with the person found to have been harmed to discuss how the RC Community can help address the harm. Such assistance may include counseling and referrals to organizations that assist individuals who have experienced sexual misconduct.

The RRP and the CRC will also decide on

1. steps to correct the behavior;
2. when appropriate and if both parties agree, steps that the persons involved can take to resolve and restore their RC relationship; and
3. steps to prevent future occurrences, including applying what has been learned on a Community-wide basis.

- d. Potential Consequences: Depending on the nature of the misconduct, the Co-Counselor who failed to follow this Guideline may be required by the RRP(s) and the CRC (in consultation with the IRP) to step down from any RC leadership roles. They may be required to leave the RC Community temporarily or permanently. In appropriate circumstances, the Co-Counselor who failed to follow this Guideline may be offered the opportunity to remain in the Community under specific conditions, which could include some or all of the following:

1. The Co-Counselor refrains from the harmful conduct and agrees to act and discharge on their commitment to refrain from such conduct.
2. The Co-Counselor follows a plan set forth by the RRP(s) and the CRC that may include some or all of the following:
  - i. The Co-Counselor not Co-Counseling with or contacting the individual(s) affected
  - ii. The Co-Counselor not attending RC events that the individual(s) affected are attending
  - iii. The Co-Counselor only Co-Counseling with persons approved by their RRP
  - iv. The Co-Counselor not attending RC classes or workshops without their RRP's permission, until
    - they have done extensive counseling and taken any other actions directed by their RRP to address the situation;
    - they have demonstrated that they have re-evaluated their behavior; that they have a clear understanding of the

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<sup>19</sup> If the complaint is against the RRP, the IRP, or the Alternate IRP, the appropriate leaders (identified in the previous footnote) should work with the CRC to fulfill these responsibilities.

<sup>20</sup> If the CRC is unable to reach a conclusion or concludes there was no sexual misconduct, then the RRP will meet with the Co-Counselor who raised the concern to communicate the CRC's decision.

misconduct; and that they have developed the awareness, commitment, judgment, and capacity to no longer engage in the behavior; and

- any arrangements to rejoin Community activities have been approved by their RRP (in consultation with the CRC).

The RRP(s) will oversee the implementation of these and any other steps and will monitor the situation to prevent future occurrences.

The RRP(s) and the CRC will inform the IRP of their findings. Any of the persons involved may appeal the result of this process to the IRP for intervention, and the IRP (in consultation with the RRP(s) and CRC) will have the final say regarding actions to be taken in the RC Community.<sup>21</sup>

The RC Community is not obligated to apply this process to adult Co-Counselors who have formed a mutually agreed upon sexual relationship in breach of Guideline M.1, the No-Socializing Policy, or who are no longer actively participating in the RC Community.

#### *Intervening in Sexual Misconduct*

When a Co-Counselor has knowledge that indicates to them that sexual misconduct may be occurring within the RC Community, they should talk to the person they think is the target of the misconduct. If that person does not pursue the issue, and the Co-Counselor believes ongoing sexual misconduct is occurring or the targeted person is involved in a sexual relationship between Co-Counselors without mutual consent, the Co-Counselor will report their concerns to their Reference Person (informing the person that they are doing so). If their Reference Person's action does not lead to resolution of the issue, the Co-Counselor with knowledge shall inform the CRC and their RRP, who will determine what further actions should be taken.

#### *Confidentiality<sup>22</sup>*

In our experience, situations involving mistreatment, oppressor patterns, and sexual misconduct are most effectively resolved when confidentiality is maintained to the extent practical. We want to protect the privacy of the Co-Counselors involved as much as possible. Any Co-Counselor involved in this complaint process is not to share information with Co-Counselors not involved in this process, except as client in their Co-Counseling sessions.<sup>23</sup>

#### *No Retaliation*

The RC Community does not tolerate retaliation against a Co-Counselor who has reported mistreatment or misconduct. If a Co-Counselor believes they have experienced retaliation, they should immediately inform the leader to whom they reported the misconduct or inform the CRC directly. That leader shall address it in consultation with the CRC.

#### *Effective Use of this Guideline*

The RC Community welcomes Co-Counselors to come forward with concerns as they arise or as the Co-Counselor is able to come forward so that constructive action can be taken.

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 166.

<sup>22</sup> In RC, we expect confidentiality to be respected. Co-Counselors should be aware that most legal systems are unlikely to honor our principles of confidentiality. This section would not apply in a legal proceeding.

<sup>23</sup> Clients are asked to counsel in ways that don't spread the upset, as addressed in Part A.

All Co-Counselors are expected to act responsibly and with integrity in raising concerns, responding to concerns, and participating in the information gathering process.

The RC Community will inform Co-Counselors, including young people, about the existence of this Guideline and its use.

## REASON

Part A. This Guideline supports the development of loving, affectionate, thoughtful, effective, and caring relationships against the pressures and confusions of the societies that surround us.

Many of our disagreements and difficulties with each other will be resolved with continued discharge and new information and do not require immediate resolution. (See also Note IV. Reaching Decision, page \_\_.)

At the same time, we want to end the acting out of oppressive attitudes and behaviors. We want mistakes, mistreatment, disagreements, criticism, and upsets to be handled thoughtfully and effectively, and in a way that is re-emergent for everyone involved, improves our relationships, and supports the ongoing work of the Communities.

Because of our hurts, we often are unaware that we are acting in an oppressive way until we have done considerable discharge. When our oppressive behavior is brought to our attention, we may be restimulated, disagree, deny we have acted oppressively, and/or suggest that the person in the oppressed role discharge, as if their feelings are the issue. Instead, we can consider what we are being told as an opportunity to listen, learn and use the discharge process with others before responding.

We know that many of our feelings of upset are based in the restimulation of past distresses. We may feel critical of or upset at one another with little or no basis in the present.

Direct communication (without acting out distresses) gives each person the opportunity to

- a. learn directly about the situation;
- b. think about the content of the issue and any connected upsets;
- c. challenge old feelings and patterns of internalized oppression and powerlessness, coming from having been victimized;
- d. fully discharge on any harm or restimulation;
- e. identify and discharge on any distress patterns or oppression in the situation;
- f. be reminded of the human qualities of each person;
- g. use discharge and communication to resolve the situation and make needed corrections;
- h. strengthen our relationships; and
- i. enlist other Co-Counseling resource when necessary.

Mistakes, oppression, sexual misconduct, disagreement, criticism, and upsets can



negatively impact individual Co-Counselors, Co-Counseling relationships, and the RC Communities. Systematically using this process can deepen relationships and strengthen the Community.

Part B. We are determined to promptly address concerns of sexual misconduct and stop ongoing misconduct. We want to limit the harm and confusion it causes. We will offer those who were harmed the opportunity to recover from the harm. Those who acted in hurtful ways will be given the opportunity to take responsibility for the harm created and address the underlying causes of their behavior. This process can make lasting change possible.

Sexual misconduct is rooted in systemic oppression and exploitation. It is pervasive at all levels of our societies and greatly harms those who are targeted. We are committed<sup>24</sup> to preventing and stopping any sexual misconduct in the RC Community and addressing its systemic roots. We do this through our work on sexism, male domination, and other oppressions.

Our work to stop the acting out of all behaviors caused by sexual distress also includes counseling on sexual distresses and the sexual abuse and exploitation common in our societies. We do not want undischarged distresses connected with sex to negatively impact relationships between Co-Counselors. RC Teachers and Reference Persons can assist Co-Counselors who are counseling on sexual distresses and when these distresses impact a Co-Counseling relationship.

For more thinking on sexual misconduct and RC see: *Sexual Misconduct (Guideline M.5.) Resource Document* [rc.org/m5\\_resource](http://rc.org/m5_resource).

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<sup>24</sup> We also do this in the following ways: by requiring certification of RC teachers, screening for classes, being clear that the Co-Counseling relationship is not a social one, regular “checks” in RC classes on members’ Co-Counseling sessions, and developing liberation policy statements for women, men, and LGBTQ+ people, as well as many other groups.