

## How Should I Respond If I Am Approached by a High-Pressure Group? How Can I Find Healthy Groups?

If you are approached by what you think may be a destructive or high-pressure group, the best advice is not to give out any personal contact information and to say you are not interested and walk away. You could also ask for written information and tell them you will contact them if you are interested. For your protection and that of other students, and consistent with the expectations underlying the student rules and regulations, you are expected to report such experiences to Oberlin College staff.

You are also welcome to discuss healthy organizations and groups with Oberlin College faculty and staff, who want you to make good connections and find community at Oberlin. Particularly regarding spiritual communities, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life exists to help you find healthy communities ([www.oberlin.edu/orsl](http://www.oberlin.edu/orsl)). Other offices such as the Multicultural Resource Center, the Bonner Center for Service and Learning, the Student Union Office, and Athletics can also help you connect with the many healthy and positive student organizations and activities at Oberlin.

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# OBERLIN

COLLEGE & CONSERVATORY

### Office of Religious and Spiritual Life

Wilder Hall Room 217  
135 West Lorain Street  
Oberlin, OH 44074

[P] 440.775.8103

[W] [www.oberlin.edu/orsl](http://www.oberlin.edu/orsl)

# AVOIDING DESTRUCTIVE HIGH-PRESSURE GROUPS

## INVOLVEMENT IN CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IS AN

important aspect of college life, and you will likely have a positive experience in the majority of organizations you will participate in at Oberlin. However, in the local area as everywhere, destructive and high-pressure religious, political, and social groups exist, and so it is important to learn how to avoid these groups in order to protect yourself from the harm they may cause. Some people would call such groups “cults,” but whatever term is used, any religious, political, or social group that practices deceptive, destructive, or high-pressure tactics is not welcome on Oberlin’s campus and should be avoided for your own wellbeing.

Oberlin College’s guidelines for recognized religious communities prohibit behaviors such as deceptiveness, proselytizing (outreach that applies pressure or exploits vulnerabilities), and harassment. Therefore we strongly encourage students to begin their exploration for spiritual communities with those recognized on the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (ORSL) website ([www.oberlin.edu/orsl](http://www.oberlin.edu/orsl)). If you choose to explore other groups, please consider the information in this pamphlet.

## How Can I Tell If a Group Is a Destructive or High-Pressure Group?

Some of the characteristics of destructive or high-pressure groups include:

**1. LACK OF FORMAL RECOGNITION**—The guidelines that govern official recognition of organizations by Oberlin College are put in place to protect your wellbeing. Groups that are not connected with or refuse to be accountable to college structures should raise some questions.

**2. DECEPTIVENESS OR MISINFORMATION**—The information the group provides about itself is not clear, complete, or honest. You might be invited to events for which the purpose and details are not clear or turn out to be not what they were supposed to be. In addition, the organization's procedures regarding leadership, resources, etc. may not be transparent and available.

**3. OUTREACH EXCEEDS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL**—The group's outreach may involve pressure or occur in methods, times, or places that are inappropriate—violating your privacy. The group may not honor your refusal of such outreach. Outreach may take the form of excessive flattery, discouraging of doubts or questions, and seemingly instant friendships with everyone. You may be asked to do outreach to others before you are involved in or really know the group.

**4. ISOLATION OR SEPARATION**—The group encourages you to separate from your family or friends or encourages you to be friends only with other members of the group. Having different friends or involvements is criticized or discouraged or seen as lack of loyalty to the group.

**5. UNHEALTHY BEHAVIORS**—The group encourages you to engage in unhealthy, unethical, or illegal behaviors such as underage or excessive alcohol or other drug use, neglect of your physical health (e.g., sleep, exercise, nutrition), neglecting your studies and other interests, etc.

**6. FEAR, GUILT, AND SHAME**—The group's messages or activities cause you to feel anxiety, depression, or unworthiness. Involvement is seeming to take a toll on your self-esteem.

**7. ABSOLUTISM**—The group seeks to aggressively substitute your old views and values for new ones and insists on unquestioned obedience and loyalty attained by limiting independent thought or action. Doubts and questions are seen as weaknesses or lack of commitment. Power is not open and shared. The leadership seems controlling rather than empowering of students. The group may also encourage prejudice toward minorities or other groups.

**8. CONCERN BY THOSE CLOSE TO YOU**—Your involvement in the group is causing concern for your family, friends, or mentors based on their interests in your wellbeing.

### When Might I Be at Risk for Joining a High-Pressure Group?

Destructive and high-pressure groups tend to prey on people who are vulnerable in some way. Some ways you might be vulnerable include:

- Being a new student in college, and potentially new to this area or the United States
- Being homesick or lonely, and feeling a strong

need to quickly meet new friends

- Having experienced a change in your relational or romantic life (including grief)
- Having difficulty with schoolwork or in other areas of your life (health, finances, etc.)
- Being in a time of transition in some way, such as trying to choose a major or career
- Being disillusioned by having had an experience that shakes up your worldview

All of these experiences are natural parts of life that almost everyone experiences at some time or another. A good coping strategy involves reaching out to family, friends, advisors, mentors, and supportive communities. However, it is important to be careful of individuals and groups who might take these opportunities to exploit your discomfort and pain against your best interests.

