What to look for when a group starts to feel off

Most people join a community group, a workshop series, or a regular gathering because they want connection, growth, or shared purpose. The early sessions usually feel promising: everyone is friendly, the energy is high, and the organiser seems confident and clear. Over time, though, the atmosphere can shift. What once felt supportive may start to feel controlling. Members who used to speak freely become quiet. Decisions that seemed collaborative turn out to have been made by a few people behind the scenes.

These shifts are rarely dramatic. They happen slowly, through small choices that erode trust and accountability. If you are involved in any kind of intentional community, knowing what to watch for can help you protect your own boundaries and the group's integrity. The following points are not about diagnosing bad people; they are about noticing patterns that make a space less safe over time.

Who holds the unspoken authority

Every group has informal authority. It may belong to the person who founded the group, the one who speaks most often, or someone whose opinion carries extra weight because of their experience or reputation. Informal authority is not necessarily a problem. It becomes one when it goes unexamined. If the same person's preferences consistently shape what the group does, and no one questions it, the group may be operating on a power imbalance that no one acknowledges.

Look for moments when a suggestion from one person is treated as a decision, while a similar suggestion from someone else is ignored or needs a formal vote. Notice whether the person with informal authority is open to being challenged, or whether they respond with defensiveness, guilt-tripping, or subtle put-downs. A healthy group can name its own power dynamics and adjust them when they start to concentrate.

How dissent is handled

One of the clearest signs of unhealthy group dynamics is the way disagreement is treated. In a psychologically safe group, dissent is seen as useful information. People can say "I see it differently" without having to justify their right to speak. They can raise concerns about a decision or a process without being labelled as difficult or disruptive.



Watch for patterns where disagreement is met with silence, deflection, or personal criticism. If a member raises a concern and the response is to question their motives, their emotional state, or their commitment to the group, that is a red flag. Peer pressure dressed up as group harmony is still pressure. A group that cannot tolerate disagreement cannot hold space ethically, because it asks members to suppress parts of themselves in order to belong.

Where accountability lives

Community governance works when there are clear, transparent ways to address problems. If someone oversteps a boundary, if a decision harms a member, if a leader acts in a way that feels wrong, there should be a process for raising that issue and having it taken seriously. In many groups, especially those built around a charismatic leader, accountability is vague. The leader may say they are open to feedback, but no one ever sees feedback lead to change.

Check whether the group has agreed-upon norms for handling complaints. Are there multiple people who can receive a concern, or does everything go through one person? Is there a way to raise an issue anonymously if needed? When problems are brought up, do they get discussed openly, or do they disappear into private conversations? Without clear accountability, the group's safety depends entirely on the goodwill of the people in charge, and goodwill is not a reliable safeguard.

The role of social capital

Social capital is the currency of belonging: the trust, goodwill, and mutual obligation that build up over time. In a healthy group, social capital is distributed fairly. Newer members can earn it, and no one has so much of it that they can ignore the group's norms. In an unhealthy group, social capital is hoarded by a few people, and it is used to silence dissent or protect those people from consequences.

Notice whether long-standing members are treated differently from newer ones. Do the same rules apply to everyone? If a founder or a popular member breaks a group agreement, is it overlooked, while a newer member who does the same thing is called out? Unequal application of group norms is a sign that the group is not operating ethically. It means some people have more permission than others, and that permission is not earned through formal roles but through personal relationships and status.

Emotional safety and the right to leave

An ethical space holding practice respects that every member has the right to step back, disagree, or leave without being punished for it. In some groups, leaving is framed as a betrayal. Members who pull away are gossiped about, guilted, or told they are not committed enough. This is a form of control. It tells people that their belonging is conditional on staying in line.



Pay attention to how the group talks about former members. If people who left are described negatively, or if their reasons for leaving are dismissed, that says a lot about the group's tolerance for autonomy. A group that cannot let people go gracefully is not holding space; it is holding on. The same principle applies to internal disagreements. If someone says they need a break from a certain activity or from the group itself, that request should be respected without interrogation.

Filipe Bastos - has written about these dynamics in the context of community-based gatherings, where the line between healthy facilitation and informal control can blur quickly. The observation applies broadly: any group that relies on personal authority rather than transparent systems is vulnerable to the same drift.

Trauma risks and the illusion of safety

Groups that deal with emotional or physical practices, such as movement, breathwork, or expressive arts, carry particular risks. Participants may be asked to be vulnerable, to share personal experiences, or to enter altered states. This vulnerability can be healing, but it can also be exploited, even unintentionally. A leader who does not understand trauma may push participants too far, or may not know how to respond when someone becomes distressed.

Look for signs that the group has clear boundaries around participation. Are people told that they can opt out of any exercise at any time? Is there a way to signal distress without drawing attention? Are facilitators trained in trauma-informed practice, or are they relying on their own intuition? The absence of these safeguards does not mean the group is dangerous, but it does mean the group is operating without the structures that protect its most vulnerable members.

Transparency in decision-making

How are decisions made in the group? If the answer is vague, or if it changes depending on the situation, that is a problem. Ethical space holding requires that the group's decision-making process is known to everyone and applied consistently. When decisions are made behind closed doors, or when members find out about changes after the fact, trust erodes. People start to feel like they are being managed rather than included.

Check whether the group has a clear governance structure, even a simple one. Who decides on the schedule, the rules, the budget, the guest facilitators? Are those decisions made by a core team, by consensus, by majority vote? Whatever the method, it should be transparent and open to review. If the group resists formalising its governance, that resistance may be a way of preserving the current power structure without having to defend it.



What you can do

Noticing these patterns is the first step. The next step is deciding what to do with what you see. If you are a member of the group, you can raise your observations gently, focusing on specific behaviours rather than on people. You can ask for more transparency, for clearer norms, for a way to address concerns. If the group responds with openness, that is a good sign. If it responds with resistance, you have your answer.

You can also choose to leave. Leaving a group that has become unhealthy is not a failure; it is a boundary. Protecting your own well-being is not selfish. It is the foundation of any ethical participation in community life. Filipe Bastos - reminds readers that the quality of a group is measured not by its stated values but by how it treats its members when things go wrong. That is a standard worth holding onto.