

# GUIDE FOR ALLIES

## ABOUT THIS ALLYSHIP GUIDE

In recent years, there has been increased public awareness about the experiences of individuals who belong to and/or leave **high-demand, insular religious groups** (IRGs), in great part due to social media and mainstream media coverage.

Naturally, there is greater interest among those in the broader public to support and advocate for those negatively affected by IRGs.

At Rights and Religions Forum, we work to address the **marginalization of individuals in IRGs across the spectrum of belief and practice**. As we work to build a movement that includes allies, we seek to center the experiences, expertise, and goals of the groups and individuals directly impacted by the issue.

RARF convened individuals from IRGs to develop this guide as a resource for allies seeking to **engage those from IRGs authentically, respectfully, and with the most positive impact**.

They have made these recommendations based on their lived experiences as part of our broader call to action for allies to assist us in addressing the negative impacts of IRGs and the systems within mainstream society that enable them. As we make this call to action, we recognize the many allies who have made our work possible and who have played essential roles in helping us in our mission to ensure that everyone raised in an IRG can build a life that is consistent with their values, needs, and beliefs.

RARF uses the term “IRG disaffiliate” broadly to describe individuals who are not aligned with the values, beliefs, and practices of their IRG. This can include those who choose to stay but who are questioning or challenging the IRG’s status quo, as well as individuals who choose to leave the IRG.

## INQUIRING WITH PURPOSE

While it can be an empowering and impactful experience for IRG disaffiliates (*those who leave the IRG they belonged to*) to share their story publicly, it can often be traumatic. Especially for those who survive abuse, retelling their story forces them to relive their trauma.

Yet, many bravely continue to do so, despite the high mental and emotional cost, in order to ensure others who have gone through similar experiences know they are not alone, and to bring much-needed public attention to the issue.

**An unfortunate occurrence for IRG disaffiliates is exploitation of their stories for entertainment and profit. These experiences discourage others from sharing their stories.**



*Allies can be supportive by ensuring that IRG disaffiliates are given full agency to tell their stories on their terms.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Conduct Research:** Locate publicly available content. Not sure where to find it? Ask, *“I am interested in learning more about your experiences—can you direct me to first-person accounts of people from your IRG background?”*
- **On an individual level, resist the temptation to ask personal and invasive questions about sensitive topics** such as sexual experiences, abuse and the most taboo or stereotypical aspects of their IRG of origin. Individuals from IRGs are aware of what allies need to know, and will share based on their comfort level.
- **Be discerning about the sources** you are using to learn about IRGs. Investigate whether the source—news publication, documentary, TV series podcast, or book—advances an agenda other than accurate, authentic representation of IRG experiences. Sources may be overly generalized or motivated by entertainment, profit, and ratings.

## DEMONIZING AND ROMANTICIZING IRGS ARE TWO SIDES OF THE SAME PROBLEMATIC COIN

Recognize and call out common biases, prejudice and tropes. While IRG disaffiliates do not hold back in criticizing the communities they come from, they are often pained by how outsiders will paint their communities with a broad brush.

They believe that their group or community, like others, should not be judged either by their worst members or best members. Demonizing their DNA, family, and community adds a huge shame burden that is counterproductive to an already challenging experience.

When communities are demonized as evil, and when they are romanticized as an idyllic utopia, advocates' work becomes more difficult. It puts them in the frustrating position of having to defend their communities to those who demonize them, while also fighting for recognition of the true harm caused by these communities.



*Engaging in a nuanced approach that recognizes the full humanity of every individual, is the best way to be supportive.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Even if the disaffiliate is criticizing or demonizing their IRG, it is not an invitation for others to join them.** When demonizing the entire group, the disaffiliates' family and friends are being demonized.
- **Avoid using words like “normal” that stigmatize people.** Try “mainstream” to distinguish between IRGs and non-IRG contexts.
- **Recognize that many mainstream institutions are not superior to people in IRGs.** Harmful beliefs and patriarchal practices exist in IRGs just as they do in mainstream religions, sports, politics, media, and all hierarchical structures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER (continued)

- **Discourage others from treating IRGs solely as a source of entertainment to satisfy their curiosity.** This could mean encouraging more nuanced and compassionate language and questions that genuinely lead to increased understanding.
  - **Be open** to receiving a narrative about a person's life that is not congruent with your previous knowledge about their IRG.
  - **Do not hold up one person's story as representative of the entire IRG they come from,** regardless of how much of a following they may have online or the national media attention they have received. Listen to both practicing and non-practicing members of an IRG to get a more nuanced understanding of the community. Always assume there is a broad range of individual experiences, as well as a broad range of rituals, beliefs, and leadership structures within a single IRG and from family to family.
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## IRG DISAFFILIATES VALUE THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE



*People from IRGs are looking for support and opportunities for empowerment around their personal decisions.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **Do not shame or judge** people for not leaving their IRG.
- **Don't assume everyone wants or needs to be "rescued"** from their IRG. Some people choose to stay. Not everyone wants to leave, and not everyone who wants to leave is in a safe or financially secure enough position to do so.
- **There are many different life trajectories and reasons for leaving or staying.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER (continued)

- **Trusting relationships with people in mainstream society can keep the door open for those who want to leave.** Personal relationships based in trust and respect can provide someone with the soft landing they need to seriously consider leaving. With a willingness to learn and a desire to listen, you can offer a pathway for an IRG disaffiliate.
  - **People who leave their IRG should not be assumed to be vengeful or ungrateful.** Some IRG disaffiliates maintain connections with family and IRG community members while others do not. These are complicated circumstances to navigate.
  - **People don't necessarily want or need a new religious community.** Don't impose your version of religion or try to convince someone how beautiful a different or less stringent version of religious life can be.
  - IRG disaffiliates may benefit from **employment assistance, housing, information/support/tutoring for high school education or to obtain a GED, clothing, and driving classes.** You can help by providing direct assistance, offering information about where to find these resources, or volunteering with or donating to organizations that directly support IRG disaffiliates/provide these services.
  - **Use strengths-based practices and language.**
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## CULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH IRGS

There is a broad range of professionals who may interact with individuals from IRGs, including but not limited to: **law enforcement, healthcare workers, attorneys, judges, counselors and therapists, social workers, and child advocates.**

Here are a few tips for supporting people from IRGs for those working in these fields.

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER

- **In some IRGs, English is not the first language.** Therefore, some disaffiliates may struggle to communicate with you in English and a trusted, unbiased translator may be necessary. At times, it is best to find a translator who is not from the IRG to avoid situations where a disaffiliate is uncomfortable and/or not forthcoming because the disaffiliate is concerned that the information will be shared within the IRG.
- **IRG members may use coded language** when describing their situation, or may altogether lack the language to describe it. As you develop personal relationships, keep in mind that mainstream pop culture references can be unfamiliar to someone from an IRG. Many IRG disaffiliates liken leaving IRGs to the experience of being a refugee. Although they are native-born, they lack the cultural context to relate to mainstream culture due to the insular nature of their IRGs.
- **IRG members may not know their rights** and lack the knowledge they need to seek help. While it may seem simple to exercise certain rights, IRG disaffiliates may find it challenging. Whenever possible, educate and empower them to exercise their rights.
- **The lack of education** in some IRGs can be extremely difficult to overcome and a lifelong disadvantage. Avoid assuming for example, that the disaffiliate has read the same books or has the same background in basic topics. Speak about your education personally, rather than make broad statements that assume shared educational experiences.
- **Many individuals from IRGs suffer from religious and other traumas.** Learn about religious trauma, and ensure you are providing care and support that is trauma-informed.
- **Be aware of your own triggers and trauma** particularly when it comes to religion, especially if you are helping an IRG disaffiliate in a professional capacity. When listening to the experiences of people from IRGs, you may feel compelled to share your personal religious dilemmas and journeys. This can put the person you are trying to help in a position where they feel obligated to validate or support your choices around religious practice and beliefs.



## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER (continued)

- **IRG disaffiliates may lack basic documentation**, such as a Social Security Number, and may need support navigating tasks such as seeing a doctor or getting a driver's license.
- When you guarantee confidentiality and/or you are required to maintain confidentiality, **preserve confidentiality**.
- **Educate yourself about how laws impact IRGs**. Misconceptions can undermine IRGs access to support and justice. It can be hard to understand why certain religious conduct is underreported without understanding the impact reporting can have on the individuals who are most vulnerable.
- **Using religious references** or starting religious discussions can make IRG disaffiliates uncomfortable.
- **If someone is presenting as religious**, that does not necessarily mean they are religious.
- **Be wary of the gatekeepers within IRGs**. They may represent an IRG as a respected or well-known leader, however, they don't necessarily have children/the most vulnerable people in mind and sometimes may be protecting those in power. Approach these liaisons with skepticism and do not necessarily accept their presentation of issues as the whole truth or representative of the beliefs and experiences of many in their IRG.
- **Religious leaders representing the interests of IRGs** may be effective advocates for their community, but they can also perpetrate harm and enforce group norms for those within the community. They may try to influence law enforcement, politicians and service-providing professionals or shame the individual seeking those services.
- **People are afraid of retaliation from their community**, and for good reason. The consequences of reporting criminal conduct can be severe.

## RECOMMENDATIONS + POINTS TO CONSIDER (continued)

- **Apply the highest standards of professional ethics**—as you should for any group—but particularly with this population given that they often are not aware of their rights.
- **IRG disaffiliate leaders may not only work with other disaffiliates**, but also support individuals who choose to stay in their respective IRGs. Veering off the religious path in small ways can lead to tremendous consequences. IRG disaffiliates often don't expect others to veer off completely. As a result, you may see religious presenting individuals in spaces created by and for IRG disaffiliates.

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For more information and resources, please contact Rights and Religions Forum at [info@rarforum.org](mailto:info@rarforum.org)

You can also find additional resources to learn more about various IRGs and support available to them on our website at [rarforum.org](http://rarforum.org)