## Manual for Support Groups

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What is a Support Group?

A support group is a group of people who gather to share common problems and experiences associated with a particular problem, condition, illness, or personal circumstance.

It is where people are able to talk with other people who are like themselves - people who truly understand what they’re going through and can share the type of practical awareness that come from personal experience.

Some of the common characteristics of support groups include:

- They are made up of peers - people who are directly affected by a particular issue, illness, or circumstance.
- They are member-run and ‘owned’, providing a sense of belonging.
- They usually have a volunteer discussion leader or facilitator, and sometimes a professional one.
- They tend to be small in size, to give everyone a chance to talk.
- Attendance is voluntary.
Who Can Benefit from Joining a Support Group?

Support groups are helpful for people dealing with a broad range of life challenges, losses, and traumas. Almost anyone can benefit from being part of a Support Group which can be used to address many concerns, such as:

- Diseases, injuries, or chronic medical conditions
- Mental health issues
- Dealing with trauma
- Eating disorders
- Sexual identity questions
- Physical disabilities
- Bad or unhealthy habits
- Emotional problems
- Addictions
- Bereavement
- Parenting

Besides serving people directly affected by a problem, support groups often welcome family members or friends of those experiencing illnesses or difficulties.

Also, many independent support groups exist just for family members or friends: for example, one such group is Al-Anon, a group for families and friends of alcoholics.
Why Start a Support Group?

There are many benefits:

- People with a problem can be helped to feel less alone and more understood.
- They do not cost much to run - advertising for the group and maybe some refreshments are all you'll probably need to pay for. Another cost might be meeting space.
- People become empowered to work on solving their own problems.
- Members can share information, keeping one another up to date on news of interest to them.
- Members act as role models for each other. Seeing others who are struggling with similar issues and making progress in their lives is inspiring and encouraging.
- It is a safe place for someone who needs to talk about deeply personal issues, experiences, problems and thoughts.
- Members are equals - this can make people feel comfortable opening up about their problems.
- Talking to others in support groups reduces anxiety, increases hope, improves self-esteem, and helps members' sense of overall wellbeing.
- It can decrease the sense of isolation and stigma that people may feel.
How to Create a Support Group

There are some key elements to work on when you are planning to set up a support group in your community.

Defining the Group’s purpose

Before you begin planning for your support group, you need to define:

- The purpose of the group.
- What specific issues will your support group address?
- Who do you want to reach?
- How narrow is the focus?
- What will the group provide?
- Will the group meetings focus solely on sharing and encouragement between members, or will you concentrate on education and community awareness?

A clearly defined mission will help you stay focused and clearly evaluate your group’s needs.

Do your research

Although each support group is different, successful support groups are organised and structured. If you’ve never attended a support group, visit other groups to see:

- How the group is maintained.
- Is there a moderator or discussion leader?
- How are meetings structured?
- Who handles communication between members, i.e., meeting schedules, contact information, announcements, etc.?
- How is the group financed?

Most groups will be glad to share their tips for success and answer any questions you may have.
Identify your resources

- The most important resource for any support group is a meeting location. Churches, community centres, and libraries typically offer meeting spaces for free. *Be sure to choose a location that is centrally located and easily accessible by public transport.*

- Most support groups can be maintained for little expense, but you may need to budget for printing, copying, mailing, and other administrative functions. There are many possibilities open to support groups.
  - Will you charge a small membership fee?
  - Could you hold fund-raising events?
  Discuss funding options with your group members and brainstorm for ideas.

- You may want to consider setting up your support group under the auspices of a larger organisation. Some of the benefits are:
  - A larger organisation can often offer resources and assistance in setting up a new support group.
  - The name recognition that comes with being affiliated with a big, well-known organisation can give your group more credibility.
  - It can also make it easier for people who need your support group services to find you.
  - Working with a larger organisation keeps you from having to "reinvent the wheel" in deciding how the group will operate - you can take advantage of their experience.

Selecting a place to meet

Depending on the type of group, members may want to be discreet about their attendance, and may be less likely to come if the group meets in some busy place where they might be seen.

If you work with an organisation that has a meeting space of its own, you might want your support group to meet there. However, you might find that a school, church, restaurant, library or some other community space or public building is better suited to your needs.

The location should be easily accessible for the people who will be coming to the support group.
• Is the building an easy place to find?
• Is it accessible to people who use wheelchairs, canes, or guide dogs?
• Is there adequate parking nearby, or public transport?

Importantly, the location should also be somewhere where people can feel comfortable enough to talk about their problems and able to offer each other support.

It is also possible to hold meetings in a member’s home. However, groups tend to be more accessible to newcomers if held in public places. Therefore, meeting in somebody’s home should probably be done if it’s a closed group.

**Style and Frequency**

Consider whether the group will meet for a specific period of time or for an indefinite period. Support groups can be long-running, or they can be restricted for certain periods of time, depending on the needs of the group. A duration of six weeks may be sufficient for someone going through a crisis such as grief or divorce, while an ongoing group may better serve people with a chronic illness.

The group must decide how often and on what day the meetings take place. Some groups feel the need to meet weekly, others find once a month is all they can manage. Be consistent – have your meetings every week or month on the same day (e.g. every Thursday evening or the last Saturday morning of each month).

Keep the sessions informal with a break in the middle for tea and coffee. Informal does not mean unstructured, simply that there should be a certain amount of flexibility and there must be provision for both tears and laughter.

Do not make the meeting too long – no more than 2 to 3 hours as emotions can run high at times and fatigue can easily set in. Meetings that are too long can discourage people from returning on a regular basis.
Decide whether the group will be open or closed

- Open support groups are those in which new members are welcome to join at any time during the life of the group. This may also mean that anyone can join the group - friends, family members, etc.

- In closed groups, people are only allowed to join the group at certain times (e.g. for the first three weeks only) or under certain circumstances (e.g. groups that are only for women or men).

- If you plan on working on a very specific issue and want the entire group to go through the process at the same time, you may want to consider having a closed group. However, open groups are best for most kinds of support groups.

- Consider how large you want the support group to be before you start recruiting. Generally, it’s best to have a group that is large enough to function well even when some of the members are absent, but small enough for all the members to feel comfortable. As a rule, 5 to 15 people is a good number; anything larger easily becomes impersonal.

Decide on any remaining details, such as:

- Should we serve refreshments? Refreshments help make everyone feel at home and encourage socialising among members. If you don’t have much money, you may have to be creative to get it set up. People can take turns providing cheap refreshments, or perhaps someone knows a business or restaurant who would be willing to donate refreshments.
• **Do you want the option of children being present?** This really depends on the nature of your group and on the comfort level of group members. Some people will need child care in order to attend your meetings. Therefore you will need a nearby room to your meeting for the children and child care providers. There will also be added dietary considerations for children.

• **Would you like guest speakers to present to the group?** Guest speakers can be a great way to expose the group to new information or to educate on a specific topic. Group members may make suggestions regarding which speakers to invite.

• **Would you consider social events?** You and your group members may wish to consider integrating social events outside the support group’s schedule, when everyone can simply get together for a little relaxing fun.

• If you can, give your group a name that describes its purpose. The name will help advertise your message.

**Cultural considerations:**

Are all the group participants from the same cultural background or would this be a multicultural group?

Would the sessions be conducted in English or in any other language?

If this group will have participants from various cultural backgrounds, it is important to be mindful of the potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding:

• Non-verbal communication may mean different things for different cultures
• Eye contact – polite or impolite?
• Food – Halal? Vegetarian? Vegan?
• Greetings
• Discourse and the ordering of information may be different
• Recognise your own culturally based assumptions
• Acknowledge the right of others to be different
Selecting a Group Leader or Facilitator

Finding the right person to lead your support group is important. The group leader or facilitator:

- Opens and closes the meetings
- Sets the tone for the discussion
- Helps members learn how to listen and offer support to each other
- Deals with any problems that come up during the meeting

The ideal group leader needs to have:

- Enough time to perform the required tasks and commit to be there for every meeting
- A positive attitude, be in generally good health, and be able to work after hours if necessary
- Experience in facilitating such groups. She or he should also be responsible, articulate, fair, organised, and able to work well with others
- Access to needed resources to run the group (a phone, a car, etc.), and people to rely on for assistance, if necessary
- The desire to do the job; an interest in the topic or at least a commitment to helping others
How to Facilitate a Support Group

Support • Learn • Grow

Prepare yourself for the meeting:

- Take a few minutes to think about possible topics for discussion.
- If this is not your first meeting, review the topics that were talked about last time.
- Go over any notes you took. This can help you remember to bring up things that members might want to revisit or give updates on.
- If you plan to make any announcements of community events or activities that may be of interest to the group, make sure you have them ready.

Prepare the room for the meeting:

- Arrive 20 to 30 minutes early to arrange the room.
- Put the chairs in a circle large enough for latecomers to fit in, with enough room for people who use wheelchairs to easily join.
- If you’re going to have refreshments, set them up on a table to the side or back of the room.
- If you’re going to use name tags, have them ready.
- Have a pen and paper to take notes.

Start the meeting:

- As people begin arriving, be sure to make eye contact and say hello, greeting them by name if you have met them before.
- Call the meeting to order on time, or at least within five minutes of the designated time. This encourages other members to be ready. It also rewards those who are punctual. If you always start the meeting late because you are waiting for that one person who shows up 15 minutes late every time, you risk pushing away those who made the effort to be there on time.
• A simple "Let’s get started," or "Well, it's five minutes after seven o'clock, why don't we begin the meeting," is adequate.

**Give preliminary introductions and information:**

- Introduce yourself briefly
- If you have some experience with the group topic, be sure to mention it
- Make any announcements and ask the group if they have anything to add

**Establishing guidelines:**

The most common ground rule for support groups is that everything discussed in the group must be kept confidential

- State clearly, “What is shared in this room, stays in this room”.
- Asking the group members to commit to this boundary is the beginning of establishing group safety.
- It is not okay to share other people’s stories or details of their life that they might choose to reveal in a support group.
- Maintaining confidentiality is essential to the foundation on which the emotional safety of a support group rests.
- Reminding the group of this from time to time is very important.
- Explain whether the group is open or closed and what that means.
- Be sure that everyone understands the rules.
Offer support:

- Giving members support can give them hope and help them realise that achieving their goals is possible.
- Support consists of showing understanding, sympathy and concern.
- Support can also be expressed through body language (such as making eye contact or smiling) or touch (hugging, patting the member's arm). Care should be taken in using touch as a form of support - in some circumstances, touch may be threatening and uncomfortable instead of comforting.

Encourage members to listen to each other:

- Being a good listener means being an active listener, one who is obviously listening and understanding what is being said.
- How do you let people know that you are listening?
  - Body language (leaning slightly towards the speaker)
  - Eye contact (looking in the speaker’s eyes, not looking around the room)
- Brief encouraging statements, also sometimes called nonverbal encouragers ("Uh-huh" or "Mmm-hmm")
- Nodding
- Repeating or rephrasing the speaker's last phrase to let them know you understood.

Encourage members to talk about themselves:

- One advantage of support groups is that they can create an atmosphere in which members feel comfortable talking about and working through very personal issues and experiences.

- Disclosure - the act of revealing personal information - gives other members a chance to offer support, ideas, and assistance. It also encourages other members to share their own experiences and fosters an atmosphere of trust in the group.

- When a member discloses information, the facilitator may have to guide the discussion to make the member comfortable or encourage others to join the discussion.

- Asking open-ended questions - those which cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" - is very useful at this point. Some examples of open-ended questions include:
  
  “What is it like for you when you are trying to get your kids ready for school in the morning?”

  “What have you told your children about what’s going on with your health right now?”

Examples to encourage further disclosure from other members:

“What sorts of things in your own lives make you feel the way Sarah feels about this?”

“How do you all manage when you have to be a caretaker for others while dealing with your own illness?”
You can also plan topics ahead of time. Some support groups do things like have their members do reading or keep journals of their experiences to help spark discussion.

**Help members solve problems**

While solving problems should not be the only goal of a support group, it is something that many members hope for and expect. All members should take part in the problem-solving process so that no single person is seen as the solution to their difficulties. It is the facilitator's job to help members learn how to help each other with problem solving.

Here are some steps to problem solving:

- **Clarifying the problem**: Make sure everyone fully understands the problem. If you are not sure what the problem is, ask questions to get more information.

- **Talking about the alternatives**: Bring up possible solutions to the problem, but be very careful to word them in a way that does not give advice. For example, instead of "You should do this," a better wording could be "I wonder what it would be like for you to try this" or "Maybe you could do this."

  Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of a support group. It takes away a person's feeling that they can handle their own problems and can make people feel attacked and uncomfortable.

  Try asking members to tell what has worked well for them in similar situations. You also ask the person with the problem what he or she thinks might work.

- **Choosing which option(s) to take**: Have the group discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion. You can then let the person with the problem come to a decision, or they may want to take some time on their own to consider the possibilities. Let them know that the group cares and wants to know how things turn out.

- **Offering help**: Sometimes members may offer to assist each other. For example, if the problem being discussed is a member's problems with transportation to the meetings, other members might offer to give that person a ride.
Integrating new members

- If you have an open group, integrate new members by using inviting words and actions.
- Ask the established members to sit next to a newer or less-known group members
- Share the history and knowledge of the group by making minutes or summaries available to newcomers prior to meeting, and if appropriate, current members’ names and telephone numbers/email addresses.
- Call the new member sometime after the meeting to check their experience.

These strategies can help ease feelings of ‘newness’ and increase a sense of belonging.

Close the meeting

Most support group meetings last between an hour and two hours. If the group is caught up in a particularly intense discussion or in helping a member solve a problem, you might go a few extra minutes, but generally it is best to stop before everyone is tired and eager to leave. When the discussion is winding down or when a previously agreed-upon ending time has arrived, wrap things up. Here are some ways you can close the meeting:

- Make a summary statement: Summarise the topics that were discussed and alternatives that were chosen. Highlight any positive observations or solutions that came up, e.g. “I see it’s getting to be the time we’d agreed that we’d stop, and I know many of you would like to get home, so I think we’d better wrap up for the evening.”

- Ask for additional comments or questions: Check to see if anyone in the group has anything to add, e.g. “We talked a lot about our families tonight. Are there any last thoughts anyone would like to add?”

- Remind members about the next meeting: Let everyone know the time and place for next time, e.g. “Our next meeting will be on Tuesday 18th at 10:00 am. I hope you can all be there.”
- **Request volunteers, if necessary:** If you need help with donations, refreshments, transportation, or other group needs, this is the best time to ask for it. Asking for help from members encourages them to take leadership responsibilities and fosters a sense of personal investment in the group's success, e.g. “Can someone please volunteer to call everyone on the phone list a couple of days before the meeting to remind them about it?”

- **Give a final greeting:** Thank everyone for coming, say goodbye, and encourage them to come again, e.g. “I’m so glad you all came, and I think we got into some really interesting subjects tonight. I hope to see you on the 18th”

- **Make final notes:** Shortly after the meeting, make some brief notes about what was discussed while it is fresh in your mind. This information can be used to start the next meeting. Keep any notes on the group in a safe place to ensure confidentiality.
Creating a Safe Place for Feelings

Many people were taught that some feelings are acceptable and others are not, that some feelings are negative and others are positive, and that somehow we need to be rescued from our feelings, especially painful ones such as anger, sadness, hurt, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, and guilt.

Many people have had their feelings shamed in their family of origin and have anxiety about risking sharing feelings in a group.

The reality is that in order to move through and recover from difficulty, grief or trauma people need to be able to feel and release their feelings.

Safety for feelings can be created in a group, when we honour the following principles about feelings:

- Feelings are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. All feelings are okay and do not require either a negative or positive judgment.

- Feelings are meant to be temporary visitors, they are not meant to take up permanent residence in our being.

- Telling someone they should or shouldn’t feel something does not help them, but rather causes feelings to become blocked.

- Feelings can be released when they are heard with compassion, empathy, respect, and a lack of judgment. This is what ‘unconditional presence’ means.
Respecting boundaries

An essential element in creating group safety is respecting the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual boundaries of members of the support group.

Sometimes people have difficulty hearing the struggle, emotional pain, or seeing the tears of another without needing to rescue them. This is most often due to some unresolved issue or pain of their own. ‘Rescuing’ can present in a support group as interrupting, telling people what to do about their problems, and/or physical rescuing, such as uninvited or unsolicited hugs.

The key is to first allow the person a chance to share uninterrupted. Many times group members just need the time to share their story, distressing as that may be, and to have that heard and witnessed.

Occasionally, there may be someone who dominates the group’s time or who is stuck in their own story, having told it many times in the past. It is important to keep the group moving while at the same time setting limits on monopolising behaviours in a kind and compassionate manner.

It is also important to establish that there is not an expectation that everyone share in the group—this clarification also creates safety.
Tips on Keeping a Support Group Going

*Keep track of your group’s progress:*

From time to time, ask members for their feedback on how the group is going. Find out how useful they find it, how comfortable they feel, and their likes and dislikes about the group. Use this information to make adjustments.

*Share responsibility for the group:*

Letting others take leadership roles helps them feel more committed to and invested in the group. Make sure members know their help is appreciated.

*Be sure everyone has a chance to talk:*

Some people are naturally more talkative than others. Asking questions to get quiet members to speak up is important. It is also important to keep the more vocal members on-topic and gently remind them to let others have a turn at times.

*Emphasise the importance of confidentiality:*

Make sure this is well understood by everyone. As mentioned earlier, in order for your members to feel safe enough in the support group to self-disclose and work through problems, they need to feel sure that nobody is going to tell people outside of the group about the group's discussions.

*Encourage outside contact among members:*

Members can offer support to each other outside of meetings. The "buddy" system, used by groups like AA, encourages members to take interest in one another's wellbeing and form relationships outside the group.
**Keep recruiting:**

If you have an open group, make sure you continue to get the word out. Groups can deteriorate when the membership remains the same all the time. If members who leave are never replaced your group will not stay alive.

**Share rewards and failures:**

Let members know that you appreciate their contributions. When people make mistakes, do not place blame.

**Keep a realistic perspective:**

Do not idealise the support group. There may sometimes be people that your group won’t be able to help; this does not mean your efforts are futile. Also, when members leave, it does not mean you have failed them. Usually it means that they have used the group as much as they think is useful and moved on with their lives.

**Remember that this is a support group:**

The dynamics of a group may change over time - for example, it could become more social in function, or it could change focus in terms of topic. No matter how the group changes, your group’s primary purpose is to provide support and understanding to its individual members.
In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.

**Time to use assertive caring:**

- When a member is often late to meetings
- When a member talks too much, dominating the discussion
- When a member rejects every suggestion that others make - the "yes, but" situation
- When a member appears to have problems that are more than the group can handle - such as someone who's had a change in health and should seek medical attention, or someone who may have psychological problems needing professional attention
- When a member interrupts others or brings up inappropriate or irrelevant subjects
- When a member’s problem does not match with what the group is meant to address
The steps to assertive caring

- Show that you understand the member's position or dilemma: Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how the behaviour affects you and the group. State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behaviour. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we are trying to figure out what Sarah can do about child care."

- Set limits: Gently but firmly correct the behaviour. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what Sarah can do about child care, and it is hard to do when you keep interrupting." Letting the member know why you need to change the situation will make him or her more likely to cooperate.

- Suggest an alternative: Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behaviour. For example, "I know things are difficult for you, but right now we are trying to figure out what Sarah can do about child care, and it is hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem after we have come to some options about what Sarah can do."

- Get the member's agreement on the alternative: Make sure the member understands what is being asked of him or her and agrees to do it. For example, "I know things are difficult for you right now, but we are trying to figure out what Sarah can do about child care right now, and it is hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem until after we have come to some options about what Sarah can do. Is that okay with you?"
Other Considerations

Cultural Considerations…

You might like to consider whether you share a common language with other potential support group members, and whether you would like to restrict your group to a particular language.

Interpreters are available for when people do not share a common language. Interpreters may be free of charge if the support group is run by a not-for-profit organisation and some government agencies who will bear the cost. However, an independent support group would need to pay a substantial fee for interpreter services.
In Summary

- Support groups provide a powerful “you are not alone” sense of understanding.
- They are a great way to provide an important service to people without a huge investment of time and money.
- Support groups can make a significant impact in the lives of people dealing with a problem.

*What better reason can there be to start, or become a member of, a support group?*
References

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