

HOW TO BEGIN A SUPPORT GROUP

Introduction

Say hello. The beginning of a support group starts with one person greeting another. It can be as simple as that. When two people have made an initial contact, inviting additional people you know or meet to get together at a scheduled time, will help the support group to grow. Posting information about the group in places where people who might be interested in joining will see it, may cause the group to expand further.

The term "support group" can be misleading. The words are appropriate, but the fact that there is a term to label the essence of two or more people offering encouragement, testimony and/or the comfort of simply being together, often misleads some people into thinking there **must** be "more to it". There needn't be.

In times past, people who lived in cities may have had the opportunity to spend time talking over the backyard fence, perhaps while hanging laundry on the line to dry; perhaps while doing yard work. People who lived in rural areas often created the opportunities to meet with others through social events, such as dances, town gatherings, and/or weekly worship. Imagine women gathered in the kitchen together, men smoking cigars in the den, and two or more people huddled on the back steps. In other words, any gathering of two or more people with shared experience or interests is considered a *support group*.

Self-help groups form from the initiative of people interested in pursuing a particular topic or from their desire to gain/give support from/to others. Essential to genuine self-help groups is the self-determination of its members and the group's independence.

Build from what you know

If you would like to begin a support group, it may be desirable to select a topic or theme for the group. This is a starting point of common interest or experience. Groups seldom focus continually on any one topic. A mutual experience, interest, or theme, however, creates the frame of who will join the group and provides the best opportunity for the group to be a valuable support to its members. The consensus of participants in attendance leads each gathering.

Selecting the theme for a group might be accomplished through self-inventories or personal assessments. Such materials are available through a number of sources, but a simple questionnaire can be created for this purpose. **The desire to begin a group is a perfect theme to actually begin the group around!**

A support group is forming!

People who are interested in participating in a support group are gathering together to explore a theme and create this opportunity with others. Join us!

TUESDAY, March xx, 2006 - 6:00 PM to 7:00 PM

The public library (Mc Donald's, local church, coffee shop, park)

XXX Street, XX, New York 10001

Contact person/people: XXX XXXXXXX (315) 555-5555

No registration required. Walk-ins welcome. Hope you can come!

It is not required or even important to use the term *support group* to identify this initiative, goal, or process. Holding a *meeting* or *series of meetings* could have the goal of discovering the interest and needs of participants or potential participants. Members of the meeting may define objectives of the group. Perhaps a workgroup could develop to seek resources for future meetings - workshops, trainings, seminars, or the creation of additional groups. Resources may include community organization leaders, peer-run organization leaders/members, educators, trainers, etc. **Participants may simply desire to share their personal knowledge of a topic(s) with each other.** Following is a sampling of topic ideas and is not intended to be inclusive or restrictive:

| | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Personal Inventory / Assessment Process | Finding a Job |
| Developing Leadership Skills | Self-Esteem |
| Networking / Resourcing | Relaxation Techniques |
| Problem Solving Skills / Techniques | Education |
| Community Activities / Organizations | Self-Determination |
| Empowerment / Self-Reliance | Peer Advocacy |
| Advance Directive | Support Plan |
| Assertiveness and Communication | Self-Help Skills |
| Socializing/Social Activities | Making Friends |
| Goal Setting - Developing a Vision | Money Management |
| Crisis Management | Housing |
| Child-rearing Techniques | Relationship Enhancement |

A support group could easily be formed around the entire list above. Attendees would meet for the *purpose of exploring the above topics together*. Participants could take turns facilitating the group, supplying materials, or arranging for a presenter. Topics could be added to the list in response to the interest expressed by members of the group.

Group Development (growth)

People interested in beginning a group may desire to gain membership from their community. Here are some useful suggestions:

1. Decide on a convenient date, time, and place for yourself (/selves, if you have another/others interested in doing this with you)
2. If you plan to meet in a church basement or at the local library, for example, you may need to make arrangements with the management of those places
3. Invite everyone you know (or meet). Get the word out! Stress that there is no obligation to future meetings or gatherings. Elicit help from friends and family. Word-of-mouth publicity can be very effective.
4. Flyers are important tools to generating interest and providing information.
 - Make *flyers* visually attractive, uncluttered, easy-to-read, and answer *who, what, when, where (sometimes why and how)*
 - Colored paper helps to highlight the flyer and catch the eye of people browsing bulletin boards
 - smaller flyers are less likely to be removed or posted over

GENERAL FORMAT

Heading: (Optional) Members may decide to choose a name for the group or an initial name at the outset that could be changed at some point by consensus;
i.e. THE EXPLORERS CLUB

Title: Subject or name of activity or event,
i.e. OPEN MEETING

When: Day, date (including year), and time

Where: Name of location and address
(with telephone number and contact person)

Why: What the event or activity hopes to accomplish

RESOURCES

Besides yourself, you will need paper and a pen/pencil. (Original flyers from The Alliance from the '70s were hand-written in pen or pencil on half sheets of paper. They were beautifully done AND effective!)

You might wish to gain assistance from a local store or other community resource, such as the library, for supplies

POSTING

It is beneficial to post flyers at least two weeks before the scheduled event. If possible, it is also beneficial to return about one week before the event to ensure that the flyer is still posted.

The more flyers that are posted, the more opportunity for people to see them. Choose community boards (often in stores, churches, and community centers - public places that generate "traffic"). Ask people to help, even if they hold no interest in the group.

Most local and/or community newspapers offer a listing of public events free of charge.

Think of groups, meetings, or gatherings that will be getting together before yours. You might want to distribute or post your flyer at that opportunity.

5. Be prepared for "no shows". Sometimes people agree to attend events and then do not show up. Twenty people may attend the first gathering, or only one or two. It is very possible that no one will come.

Plan the next meeting! Oftentimes, people look to see if a particular flyer is posted repeatedly. This would mean, to them, that the group is continuing to meet, continuing to be established, and was not a one-time effort.

Every group MUST fully incorporate the concepts of self-help - people helping themselves. Many people have been dis-empowered (lost confidence) by their life experiences or the aftermath of those experiences. By far, what most people need to accomplish their goals is support. Self-help support must be offered and given in an atmosphere of reciprocity or mutual support - people helping each other.