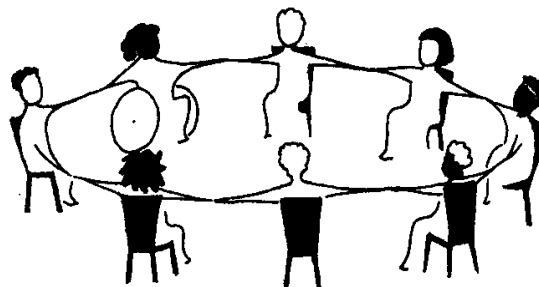




# Self-Help 101

## Self-help/mutual aid: the basics

Self-help/mutual aid support groups are informal networks of individuals who share a common experience or issue. Members get together to share support. The primary focus of self-help is emotional support, practical support and information exchange.



### Ongoing groups from A to Z

People come together in groups around any common experience. A listing in your community might include the following types of groups: Abuse, Addictions, Bereavement, Body Image, Cancer, Caregiving, Disability, Employment Related, Ethnocultural, Family/Parenting, HIV/AIDS, Men, Mental Health, Physical Health, Relationships, Seniors, Sexuality, Women, Youth, and more...

## Characteristics of a self-help/mutual aid support group – compared to a professionally-led or “hybrid” group.

	Self-Help/ Mutual Aid	← 1 2 3 4 5 →	Professionally- led
Knowledge emphasized	personal experience		training/education
Type of Leader(s)	"one of us"		"outsider"
Focus of meetings	mutual support		guidance
Structure	informal		formal
Decision Making	everyone		led by facilitator
Resources Used	volunteer and "in-kind"		paid staff, fees or funding
Duration	ongoing		time-limited
Evaluation	decided by members		often required by funder



**Professionals:**  
*“On tap - not on top”*  
 - Andrew Farquhason

## What about quality of care?

Just like there are good professionals and bad professionals, there are good self-help groups and bad self-help groups. The level of care which a self-help/mutual aid group provides its members is based on qualities such as shared leadership, open communications, respect, clear boundaries and confidentiality. It is also important to recognize that each group is unique and a good group for one individual may not be right for another. Ask for the Fact Sheet “Tips on Finding the Right Group for You”.



## 10 Steps to Starting a Group:

(For more details, ask for a copy of the booklet “How to Start and Maintain a Self-Help Group”)

- ❶ Find out about existing groups.
- ❷ Visit and talk to other group leaders.
- ❸ Collect printed information.
- ❹ Hunt for 2-3 people to work with you.
- ❺ Do the planning: develop a group plan.
- ❻ Organize your first meeting.
- ❼ Have your first meeting.
- ❽ Maintain momentum.
- ❾ Evaluate, learn and change.
- ❿ Celebrate what you have achieved.

### Step ❺ is **PLANNING**

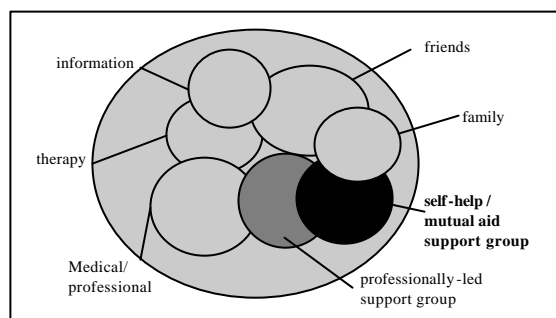
Discuss the topics below and write your group plan:

- ✓ Goals & boundaries
- ✓ Group activities
- ✓ How to share the work
- ✓ Group guidelines
- ✓ External supports
- ✓ Ways to maintain momentum

(For more help planning, ask for a copy of the “Shared Leadership Workbook”)

## A Unique Kind of Support:

Self-Help/Mutual Aid initiatives develop social support networks – a key ingredient to health for people and communities. Hopefully, when an individual faces challenges, he or she can turn to a variety of supports in the community. Self-help is unique because it is informal and involves sharing experiential knowledge and support with others who are “in the same shoes”.



### What self-helpers say:

*“Helping others has in turn helped me. A very special thing happened when I started ‘Hope in a Boat’ – a dragon boat racing team for breast cancer survivors. How good we all feel. Our goal is to show our sisters that there is life, great life, after breast cancer.”* – M.J., Breast Cancer Support, Sudbury

*“I was able to see my problems with fresh eyes. Instead of feeling beaten down and helpless, I gained faith in my ability to change.”* – D.C., Parent Support, Toronto

*“The group helped me to accept what happened to me and what I could do to help myself. After three years, I am able to offer support to others, being there when they need to talk.”* – N.B., Brain Injury Survivor, Sudbury

*“I’ve learned problem-solving strategies.”* – W.B., Grand Society, Toronto

### What researchers have found:

- When breastfeeding mothers were randomly assigned to conventional care or conventional care plus telephone-based peer support, significantly more mothers in the peer support group continued to breastfeed at 3 months post partum. (Dennis et al, 2002)
- Individuals attending AA in conjunction with professional counselling were less likely to drink. (Emrick et al, 1993)
- Older adults with heart disease, lung disease, stroke or arthritis who participated in a program of health information, mutual support and self-care taught by trained peer leaders experienced fewer hospitalizations and days in hospital. (Lorig et al 1999)

A Fact Sheet from the Self-Help Resource Centre

