

Self-Help Groups in Rural Areas of Canada

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Self-help groups are a means for people in similar life situations to mutually help each other and have been recognized as a legitimate health promotion strategy (World Health Organization, 1986). There are self-help resource centres existing in major cities, therefore there is a good idea about what types of support are available for urban dwellers. There is not much information, however, about the mutual aid resources for those in remote or rural areas. In 2001, approximately 30 percent of the population of Canada lived in a predominantly rural region (Government of Canada, 2002). The definition of a “predominantly rural region” is a region where over 50% of the population lives in rural communities: i.e. communities with less than 150 people per square kilometre (Government of Canada, 2002). This is a substantial portion of the population; therefore an examination of self-help activities and potentials should be made.

Firstly, what is the need for self-help groups in rural areas? There is the thought that rural areas foster higher social support for its citizens due to the smaller population. According to Turcotte (2005), this is not necessarily the case. His study of social engagements in rural Canada revealed that rural residents did not differ much from urban dwellers on social isolation from friends or family, political involvement and levels of trust toward other people. They did find, however, that rural residents were more likely to know and trust their neighbours, volunteer and have a sense of community belonging. There was also the finding that rural occupants saw relatives on a more regular basis than their urban counterparts.

Where does this place the importance for self-help groups in rural areas? The essence of self-help groups is to share a lived experience with those who have been going through similar situations. While the support from family is of utmost importance, there

may also be a feeling that the sharing in self-help groups goes beyond the support from relatives (Charlton & Barrow, 2002). In other words, the need for self-help groups in rural areas is most likely the same as in urban areas, despite the idea of the tight-knit rural community.

Wituk, Commer, Lindstrom and Meison (2000) found that Latino parents in rural United States used and benefited from self-help groups. Their study noted that the feeling of isolation for minority groups in rural regions tends to be greater than in urban areas, thereby increasing their need for peer support. Also confirming the need for self-help groups in rural Canada are the farming stress lines that are set up in for several provinces according to www.rural.gc.ca. These phone lines link people to services and support that they might need in dealing with the stresses of farming or rural life. One may conclude that self-help would be a beneficial resource for these individuals.

What types of mutual aid exist for rural dwellers? What are some of the challenges for encouraging self-help in the more remote areas of the country? Research on the topic is rather limited; however a short analysis is possible.

As asserted by Brunson (2000), self-help groups in rural areas face specific challenges of accessibility. Individuals may have to travel great distances in order to meet face to face, as there may not be enough people to maintain a specific self-help group in any one given rural area. There is also the issue of making the public aware of the existence of self-help groups. Will health professionals even know about groups in their area in order to recommend their use to their patients?

The Self-Help Resource Association of B.C. put together some recommendations for starting and maintaining rural self-help groups. They acknowledge the challenges of

sparse populations and suggest that the group focus be more general rather than specific. Patience is emphasized in starting a new group, as it may take a while for the community to embrace and use this type of support. Small turnouts to group sessions need not be a sign of failure and word-of-mouth strategies are suggested to get the word out about a group. It is also recommended that churches may wish to support and promote mutual aid groups, as spirituality can be important in the lives of rural families. A major factor to the successful running of self-help groups in rural areas is the notion of confidentiality. Close-knit ties in a small town may have negative consequences when a group is dealing with very personal and troubling issues. That is why confidentiality should be stressed at every meeting.

Because face-to-face meetings can be a challenge for self-help groups in rural areas, the use of technology has been applied. In rural Newfoundland, there was an initiative to link breast cancer patients together via teleconferencing: linking patients together through telephone conference calls (Curran & Church, 1998). The conclusion of their study showed that teleconferencing was able to satisfy many of the needs of the breast cancer patients. It was found that the support given over the telephone was analogous to face-to-face group meetings in a few ways. First there was the comfort in knowing that one is not alone in a particular experience. There was also positive group cohesion as well as a sense of empowerment and hope that the group members provided for each other. While they were few, some disadvantages noted were difficulty with the technology, having enough time to speak in the group and preference for face-to-face meetings. It must also be noted that teleconferencing may take resources from a large

organization in order to run properly. In the case of the Curran and Church study (1998), the Canadian Cancer Society supported the initiative.

With the advent of computers and the Internet, it is not surprising to find that there exist great possibilities for self-help online. There is the potential for help to be gained from message boards and email groups that can be accessed at any time. There are also chat rooms which can connect people and give rise to real-time interactions. According to Phillips (1996) a benefit of online self-help groups is anonymity which in turn can foster uninhibited conversation. This is especially helpful for men, as they are generally seen to have greater difficulty disclosing their feelings to groups face-to-face (Barnett, 2005). Also according to Phillips (1996), online groups progress positively in the same way that in-person groups do with regard to support and social communication. Non-verbal cues were compensated for online by using symbols to convey added meaning, suggesting that there are few disadvantages to online communication.

The American Self-Help Group Clearinghouse outlines ways to start email discussion groups, set up chat rooms, message boards and free websites to start online self-help groups. With knowledge of how to build online self-help groups it would just become a matter of getting the word out to the community.

While King and Moreggi (1998) cite Internet self-help groups as a potential benefit to rural settings there remains the question of access. Even though computers and Internet access are becoming more affordable and available, Korp (2006) identifies this as a potential barrier for disempowered groups, many of whom could benefit from what self-help can offer. In contrast to this idea, a study by Sarkadi and Bremberg (2005) on

the use of online support in Sweden found that users were not necessarily from a higher socio-economic bracket nor did they have a higher education than the population average.

In a study of Internet use in Canada, it was found that rural dwellers use computers for communications to a lesser degree than urban or suburban citizens (Singh, 2004). Living in a rural area was a factor for lower Internet use, after ruling out confounding factors such as age, income and level of education. What, then could account for this marked difference in Internet use? The nature of employment in these areas could be a possible reason, limiting the need for technology on a day-to-day basis. More likely is the limited access to high speed Internet in rural areas. According to Industry Canada, a portion of Canada's Innovation Strategy has put programmes in place to increase the amount of Broadband Internet connection to under-serviced parts of the country. Once connections become more readily available in remote areas of Canada, one would expect the Internet to be more consistently used in rural areas (Singh, 2004). At that time, measuring the prevalence and impact of online self-help groups aimed at rural dwellers may tell more complete and compelling stories.

It may be said, then, that living in rural Canada may be a barrier to accessing self-help groups. The use of technology may enhance the possibility of self-help groups for remote parts of the country. This is dependent upon accessibility to the technology as well as knowing about the existence of established and newly formed groups. Further studies on the topic should be done to determine and improve how self-help is and can be used in rural areas.

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