Self-Help 101: Understanding self-help and starting a peer support group

A WORKSHOP DEVELOPED BY:
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Let’s
• get comfortable
• talk about goals...

What I hope to gain from this workshop:

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Topics we will cover:

- What is a self-help support group?
- How self-help approaches complement other forms of support.
- Why people come to groups and how to motivate them to come to the group.
- Steps for starting a group, including planning stages and holding your first meeting.
- Stages of group development and why they are important.
- Ideas for evaluation and maintaining momentum.
What is self-help?
What is self-help?

The Self-Help Resource Centre uses the following definition of self-help/mutual aid:

- Self-help is a **process of sharing** common experience, situations or problems.
- Self-help is **participatory** in nature and involves getting help, giving help and learning to help yourself as well as sharing knowledge and experience.
- There is **no charge** to participate, although a nominal donation to cover expenses is sometimes requested.
- Self-help initiatives are run by and for participants, meet on an **ongoing** basis, are **voluntary** in nature, and are open to new members.
- The primary focus of self-help is **emotional support, practical support** and **informational exchange**.
Some support groups borrow from (but are not exactly) “self-help”:

• Groups that charge a fee to participate.
• Groups that are run by a professional (paid) facilitator.
• Groups that are run by someone who does not have the same diagnosis or issue as the members.
• Groups that have members mandated to attend.
Member-led, Hybrid or Professionally-led group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Source</th>
<th>Personal experience</th>
<th>Training/education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>All of us</td>
<td>Outsider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Mutual support</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Group members</td>
<td>Led by facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources Used</td>
<td>Volunteer &amp; in-kind</td>
<td>Paid staff, fee, funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Time-limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Decided by members</td>
<td>funders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Different sources of support

- friends
- family
- self-help support group
- professionally-led support group
- Medical/professional
- therapy
- information
Why do people come to a support group?

• ____________________________________________

• ____________________________________________

• ____________________________________________

• ____________________________________________
Why do people come to a support group?

- For information;
- To exchange ideas and coping strategies;
- To have support of others with same the issue/problem/concern;
- To normalize some of their feelings;
- To share their experience and knowledge;
- To get advice from “expert” speakers;
- To socialize and have a good time and feel good;

*Find out early why people have come to your group. What do they want to gain from their participation?*
PART II: Ready, set, go...

What steps have you already taken, or thought about, to get your group started?

1. _____________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________
3. _____________________________________________
4. _____________________________________________
5. _____________________________________________
Building Your Group: The First 5 Steps

☞ Find out about existing groups.
☞ Visit and talk to other group leaders.
☞ Collect printed information.
☞ Hunt for 2-3 people to work with you as a planning team.
☞ Do the planning: develop a group blueprint.
Step

PLANNING: Topics to Discuss

- Goals & boundaries
- Group activities
- How to share the work
- Group guidelines
- External supports
- Ways to maintain momentum
**Develop a group plan** (step 5)

👍 What do we have in common? Issue

What are the goals of the group? Start with two.

👍 Who can join our group? Be specific.

Where and when will we meet? *List possible locations etc.*

Should we limit the number of people?

👍 How should our time be spent?

What kind of topics should be covered? Should we have speakers?

👍 Do we need money? Why? How much? For what?

👍 What will make the meetings safe?

Should we set some guidelines for how to behave in the group? Are our discussions confidential? Anonymous? What does that mean?

👍 What might go wrong and what can we do to prevent it?

👍 How will we know this is working? *List ideas for evaluating your group such as a suggestion box or a group discussion.*

👍 Who can help us and what can they do?

👍 What shall we name our group?
**Sample job descriptions...**

(Step 5)

What are the tasks involved in keeping a group going?
List and group jobs.

Possible job titles:
- Contact person
- Time-keeper
- Refreshment co-ordinator
- Welcomer
- Information/publicity
- Phoners
- Meeting leaders #1 and #2

Develop job descriptions and terms of office.
Building your group: The Next 5 Steps

- Organize your first meeting.
- Have your first meeting.
- Maintain momentum.
- Evaluate, learn and change.
- Celebrate what you have achieved.
The First Meeting

Reflect back on a first-time gathering that you attended:

How did you feel? List your thoughts________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What made you uncomfortable?____________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What made you comfortable?______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
The First Meeting

• You are the host: make the environment comfortable, welcoming, accessible, happy and bright;
• Have someone welcome participants individually;
• Use ice-breaker activities to help participants become comfortable with each other;
• Clarify your guidelines: respect, acceptance, confidentiality;
• Help participants relax by reviewing the purpose of the group, and what they should expect;
• This is the best time to check and see what the members want from the group- make a list.
Meeting preparation check-list

- Name of the group
- **Meeting number** (this shows how many times you have met)
- **Attendance** (have name tags – first names only)
- Set up
- Equipment needed
- Refreshments
- Materials needed
- Who should do what
- **An agenda** (to briefly describe what the members can expect to happen. Try to prepare the next meeting agenda with members)
The stages a group will go through:

Stage 1: first date - high numbers, nervous leaders, silent members, people leaving early, people who come once and then not again.
To consider: be clear about your goals and guidelines, keep calm, don’t push..

Stage 2: casual dating - fewer people, members not quite ready to make a full commitment, conflict, power struggles.
To consider: stick to membership decisions, make sure everyone has a chance to speak, stick to agenda, set aside time to discuss tensions/conflicts (use communication/conflict resolution steps).

Stage 3: commitment - fewer people, members coming regularly, more commitment, readiness to volunteer, lots of talk, sense of trust, ease, lots of laughter.
To consider: rotate jobs, do an evaluation, congratulate yourselves!

Stage 4: separation - the founder leaves, a key member leaves, someone is ill, or a crisis takes place.
To consider: keep calm, recognize the inevitable stages of self-help (this might take you back to stage one), have a discussion about what it feels like. Celebrate what you have gained, breathe, say goodbye... you are about to reinvent yourselves!
Ways to Maintain Momentum

Brainstorm ideas and remind yourselves that this is important!

• How will we acknowledge and thank existing leaders?
• How will we recruit new members?
• How can we celebrate our accomplishments?
• How can we avoid burnout/take a break?
Is this working?

A sample member questionnaire:
1. How did you hear about the group?
2. Are the times and dates convenient for you?
3. What were you expecting when you joined the group?
4. Were those expectations met? If yes/no, how?
5. Can you suggest how we can improve the group?
6. Would you like to play a more active role in keeping the group going?

* Results to be compiled and collated by planning committee, presented to members at meeting for discussion and consensus building or vote.

“The Kleenex Talk” model:
Prepare forms with two questions: 1. “What works for you?” 2. “What doesn’t work and how can we improve it?”
Encourage members to leave sheets in “suggestion” (Kleenex) box at end of each meeting. Hold a discussion every 3-6 months.
Celebrate What You Have Achieved!

“It is the best thing that ever happened to me…

… It taught me that I was not the only one in the world with that kind of problem. I learned to listen when people shared their coping methods with me. I appreciated that the people in my group were my very best friends - imagine having a room full of very best friends.”

- member, Al-Anon Group, Ottawa
Components of a “good” group

• It feels right for you.
• It’s facilitated by the members.
• Decisions about location, dates and times are decided on by members.
• It’s free or low cost.
• There is more than one person sharing the work of the group (publicity, facilitation, problem-solving, outreach)
• There is conflict, change and laughter.
• Membership goes up and down.
• Members graduate and celebrate.
• People make friends.
• People learn, give and receive.

• National Network of Mutual Help Centres, 2000