

Self-Help Resource Centre www.selfhelp.on.ca
Tel: 416-487-4355 Toll Free 1-888-283-8806

Self-Help 101 – You Are Not Alone!

by NEIL MUSCOTT

H Barb is a first time mom feeling uncertain about her parenting skills. Rick's a single dad trying to balance work and time with his young daughter. Jasmine and Michael have a blended family, but their four children are not mixing well. What do these parents have in common? They all belong to self-help groups – people with common life experiences who meet to share support, information and solutions.

The self-help philosophy – that your peers can help you as effectively as an expert – is growing in popularity. In the Greater Toronto Area, the Self-Help Resource Centre has a database of nearly 500 self-help organizations covering twenty different major topics. More than 100 of these groups are focused on parenting, children and family issues. There are groups for everything from basic parenting skills to special needs children, from breast-feeding to grandparents' rights.

Why is the grass-roots approach of Self-Help so popular? One reason is that self-help groups, sometimes called mutual aid or peer support, are run by the members, for the members. They empower people to solve their own problems. Meetings are ongoing, open to new members and free of charge. This makes them very appealing to busy, budget-conscious parents.

Self-help groups have different formats, but all are based on the philosophy of sharing. Participants give and receive help in a positive supportive atmosphere. A typical meeting includes introductions, a chance to share your story and the opportunity to give and receive support and practical advice. Some groups have a schedule of organized activities with guest speakers, outings and specific topics for discussion.

Many groups go beyond therapy to address larger issues. For example, the parents of special needs children might lobby the school board for more funding. Families dealing with a chronic childhood disease can share research about new medicines and alternative treatments. In recent years the self-help model has also been used successfully in community

development and health promotion. Peer mentor programs in schools deal with illiteracy, anti-bullying and race relations. Support groups help high-risk patients learn how to reduce their risk of diseases such as stroke and diabetes.

Does Self-Help Work? More and more scientific studies of self-help demonstrate its positive impact. People struggling with chronic illness feel less stress and respond better to treatments when getting group support. People bounce back from traumatic events more quickly with the empathetic concern of other trauma survivors. According to self-help guru and author Brian Hyndman, besides dealing with specific issues, self-help participants enhance their communications, life and problem solving skills. Of course the most obvious benefit of joining a self-help group is finding out that you are not alone. The problem that gave you sleepless nights seems much smaller when you learn that it is shared by many.

Professionals and Self-Help. While some professional advice-givers may feel threatened by the idea of people helping themselves, the two are not mutually exclusive. Many professionals see support groups as a healthy compliment to one-on-one counselling. Some encourage clients to join a group while simultaneously receiving professional help. Why do both? As one self-help participant put it, "hearing advice from someone who has lived what you are going through is different from paying someone for advice." Some professionals even run self-help groups. Usually these groups have a set-time limit and a very focused goal. For example, a hospital might host a self-help group for postpartum depression led by a trained professional. The group only meets for the duration required to help the new mothers through their difficulties.

The Ups-and-Downs of Self-Help. Self-help is not for everyone or every situation. A shy person might feel very anxious talking in front of a group. (Of course there is a self-help group for exactly that problem.)

Some people prefer the focused one-on-one advice of a trained professional. Some situations demand immediate professional help – traumatic experiences, terminal illnesses, bereavement. Joining a group can come after the immediate crisis has passed, forming part of a long-term support network.

Like individuals, self-help groups struggle at times. Some run into problems such as personality conflicts, burn-out or falling attendance. Many people join a group during a crisis period, only to fade away once their own situation is resolved. A healthy group, while open to new people, should have a core of committed members. Once the group establishes a format, leadership and facilitating should be shared, rotating between interested members. This helps create an open, positive atmosphere as well as prevents burn-out.

Steps to finding help

- Locate a group. Search the database at selfhelp.on.ca. or call (416) 487-4355 for a confidential referral. Check with your community centre or public health unit or try 211, the social services hotline
- Call with questions. If you're nervous, ask about bringing a friend to the first meeting.
- Attend a meeting. Do you feel comfortable sharing? Do you like the atmosphere, do the members share your goals, are the guidelines clear?
- Can't find a group or don't like the one you did? Form your own

Grow Your Own Self-Help. You can start your own self-help group – three people around a kitchen table can be as powerful and effective as three dozen meeting in a community centre. Before starting a group contact the Self-Help Resource Centre. They have free hand-outs, articles and workshops for self-help groups and well-informed staff who can answer your questions. Self-help is great way to support yourself and others at the same time. ✦

Neil Muscott is a writer and teacher who works for the Self-Help Resource Centre of Toronto.