



## Confidentiality in Self-Help Support Groups

### Here is what some people have said about confidentiality in groups:

- “Generally speaking, confidentiality means never discussing, without direct consent, the circumstances of another group member.” (Self-Help Mutual Aid Facilitator Training, Ministry of Social Services, Government of B. C.)
- “What you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here!!” (Dreamcatchers peer support group pamphlet)

### What is confidentiality?

Many of us have been told personal stories “in secret” by friends or family members. In a self-help group we hear personal information and stories from people who are “strangers” or people we don’t know well. Most self-help support groups ask participants to keep information and stories in confidence, or “in secret”.

Technically speaking, confidentiality means we do not share any information or stories with others. However, many groups decide that members may talk about what they heard or learned in the group, as long as no identifying information is shared. This means nothing about name, workplace, family members, address, etc. is shared.

It is very important that each group member respects general agreements about confidentiality and anonymity. Confidence is defined in the dictionary as “a state of trust”.

### Why is confidentiality so important?

Personal sharing is important to self-help. An environment of trust and safety allows group members to share more deeply with others.

People must feel that information will be kept confidential before they can safely share their stories. Some groups describe confidentiality as the anchor of mutual aid.

Confidentiality is the anchor of mutual support. By creating and maintaining trust with each other, we can share, support and heal more deeply.

### Two exceptions you should know about:

There are two exceptions where you must report information. You should make sure that group members understand these exceptions.

1. If you suspect that a child is or may be in need of protection.
2. If someone declares a plan to harm him/herself or another adult.



### **1. In a case of suspected child abuse or neglect:**

The Child and Family Services Act states clearly that members of the public (including professionals who work with children) have an obligation to report promptly and directly to a children's aid society if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is or may be in need of protection.

Action must be taken if "the person having charge of the child" is suspected of causing, or knowingly failing to protect the child from: physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect or risk of harm.

If you need to contact a children's aid society (sometimes called "family and children's services"), check your telephone directory for the closest office or call the police. For more information on this child protection law, call the Ontario government publications office at 1-800-668-9938 and ask for a copy of their pamphlet "Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect" (ISBN 0-7778-9391-6).

### **2. If a person plans to harm him/herself or another adult:**

If a group member clearly states a plan to harm him/herself or another adult, it would be wise to quickly get confidential advice on how to help or intervene. For example, if you believe that someone is in danger right now, try to call a distress or help line. The counsellor on the phone can help you figure out the situation and decide on the best (if any) action you should take. A professional who provides support to your group could also help with this. Otherwise, call the police.

Besides the two exceptions outlined above, the only time you can change a commitment to confidentiality is if you ask and talk directly with the person concerned.

### **What does my group need to do about confidentiality?**

Confidentiality is both a commitment and a skill. To gain people's commitment, discuss the specific needs of each group member. Then decide on shared rules for your group.

To be sure everyone is clear, (especially newcomers) you can:

- Read out a statement at the beginning of each meeting
- Ask people if they have questions or concerns about the group's current confidentiality agreements
- Give examples of a common situation where confidentiality needs to be practiced (e.g. meeting a group member at a public event)
- Use rituals which remind members about their commitment

To support group member's skills in practicing confidentiality you can:

- Talk about case studies or group members' experiences
- Try role playing difficult situations

The Ontario Self-Help Network has more resource materials to help you take action on the above suggestions. For more confidentiality resources, guidance or training, call 1-888-283-8806 or email [oshnet@selfhelp.on.ca](mailto:oshnet@selfhelp.on.ca).

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