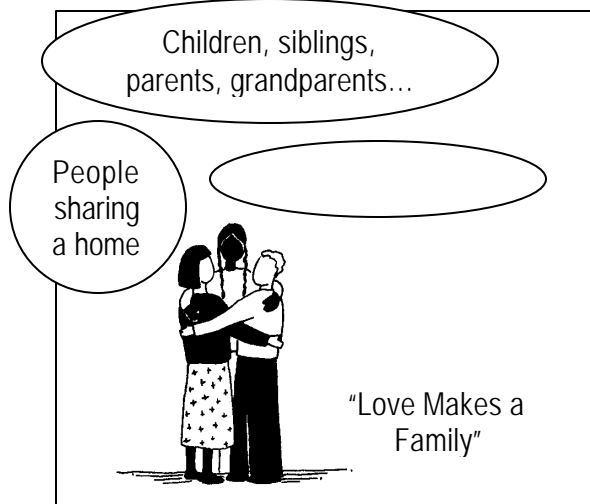




Families and Self-Help/Mutual Aid

What is a family?



Whatever your definition of family...

When someone close to you is facing a challenging illness or life situation, self-help/mutual aid groups can offer a unique kind of support.

In self-help/mutual aid groups, you can share experiences, support and coping strategies with other people who are "in the same shoes". Groups create informal social support networks which research has found to be a key ingredient to health for people and communities.

This fact sheet is an introduction to self-help/mutual aid groups for family members caring for each other.

Self-Help Groups: For Different Family Issues

Many groups are led by and for family members/friends. However, if you cannot find a specific family group in your community, try approaching a related group (e.g. for individuals directly affected by an issue) and ask the group contact if family members can attend any of their meetings or activities.

Caregiving

- Most non-profit organizations addressing a particular illness or disability know about (or sponsor) support groups or social activities for family members/spouses/caregivers.
- Some caregiver groups operate in the context of a particular ethnic or religious organization.
- Many long-term care facilities around Ontario now have Family Councils.

Bereavement

- Widowers' groups may be hosted by a community agency or funeral home.
- The self-help organization Bereaved Families of Ontario sponsors groups for family members bereaving a child, as well as programs for children bereaving a parent.
- Pre/post-natal loss groups provide support when a family has lost a pre-term or young infant.
- Separation and divorce support groups also address bereavement issues.

Parenting

- Neighbourhood playgroups are a historic example of self-help/mutual aid in action.
- Some self-help/mutual aid groups address less common parenting challenges (such as multiple births, children with Attention Deficit Disorders, or a child who is deaf).
- Helping professionals may sponsor groups for women experiencing a high-risk pregnancy, a teen pregnancy, or post-partum depression.
- La Leche League (mother-to-mother support for breastfeeding) is an international organization with local groups and a peer support phone line.
- Single parents, parents with a disability, gay parents and grandparents raising grandchildren have created their own groups to reduce isolation, share parenting strategies and advocate.
- Parents of challenging teens often create independent groups to share support, information and coping strategies.

For more information and resources, contact the Ontario Self-Help Network/ Self-Help Resource Centre:

(416) 487-4355 or (toll-free) 1-888-283-8806

email: oshnet@selfhelp.on.ca

website: www.selfhelp.on.ca



Mental Health

- Mental health family groups may be general, or specific to a particular problem (e.g. eating disorders).
- Some communities have regional organizations or networks that sponsor a variety of groups (by issue or community).

Addictions

- Most people have heard of the “12 step” approach (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous). Many communities have 12 Step “family groups” for family members of people struggling with alcohol, drug or sex addictions.

- Some communities have alternative groups that take an independent approach to addiction issues; they may be completely independent, or connected to a local addiction services agency.

Other Family Issues

- Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides peer support and works to educate against homophobia in communities across Ontario.
- Low Income Families Together is an anti-poverty group led by low-income families. Their activities include advocacy and mutual support projects.

Why seek a group?

Shame/stigma may make your experience a “secret” and keep you or your family member from getting the help you need and certainly deserve. There is nothing to be ashamed of!

Your life has suddenly gotten complicated by your family member’s illness or situation (or you just realized how complicated it has been all along).

Many, many other people have gone through similar situations. A self-help/peer support group gives you the opportunity to learn from others who have been there – just like you.

How the Ontario Self-Help Network can help:

- We can help you locate a group in your community. Contact our office or one of our affiliate centres across Ontario. You may like to request a copy of our fact sheet called *Finding the Right Group for You*.
- We can help you start a new group in your community. Ask for our *Starting a Group* articles, our *Self-Help 101* fact sheet and sample group materials. We can also assist you with specific questions or challenges over the phone, by email, or in person.
- The Ontario Self-Help Network is a program of the Self-Help Resource Centre which supports networking, referral and development efforts for all kinds of self-help/mutual aid groups (and other peer support initiatives) in communities across Ontario. Check out our website at www.selfhelp.on.ca for more details and resource materials.