



Integrating Self-Help Strategies

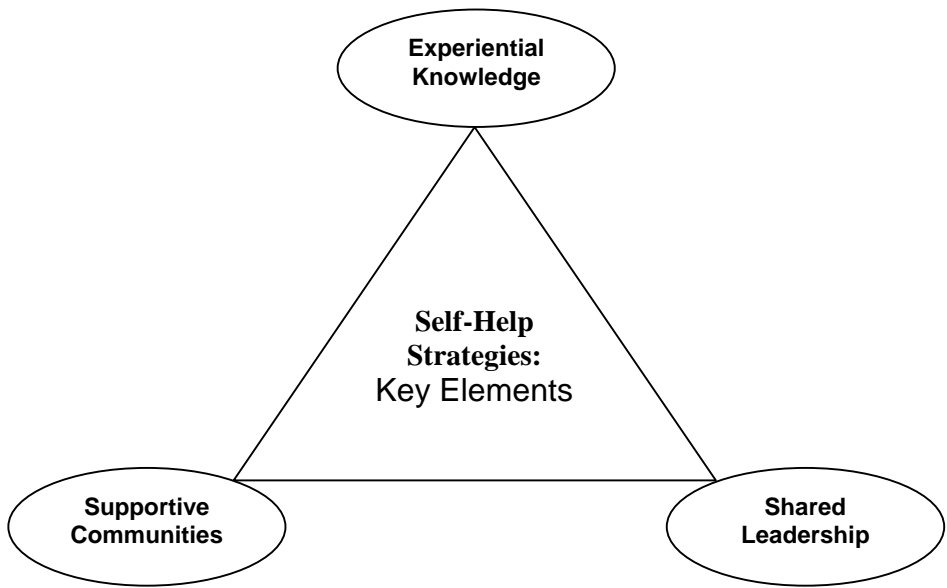
... in your Health Promotion Work

“Health promotion is carried out by and with people, not on or to people.”

- Jakarta Declaration on Health Promotion (WHO, 1997)

Self-help groups and peer support activities enhance social support networks – a key determinant of health. This fact sheet contextualizes self-help/peer support approaches and offers introductory ideas on how professionals can integrate self-help strategies - and variations on them - into community development and educational work.

“Giving and receiving support provides new information and perspectives, helps us feel that we are not alone in overcoming adversity, contributes to our sense of well-being and empowers us.”



The three key elements of self-help strategies are: valuing experiential knowledge, sharing leadership and building supportive communities. See page 2 for practical ideas on how to integrate these elements into your professional work.

Self-Help in context

Self-help is a community-based approach that brings people together around common life challenges or transitions (big or small). Self-help exists in different forms in all cultures.

In North America, self-help/peer support strategies were popularized over the past half century by grassroots initiatives within numerous and diverse communities. These initiatives were led by ordinary (often marginalized) people recognizing their need for, and the benefits of:

- sharing experiential knowledge;
- developing supportive communities; and
- sharing leadership (a.k.a. sharing opportunities for empowerment and skills development).

Part of what is so powerful about self-help/peer support initiatives is that they embrace values and strategies that have often been forgotten in the mainstream.

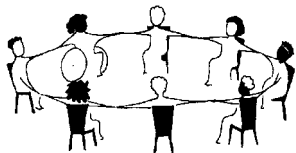
Historically, there were always some professionals who recognized and supported the unique and complementary value of self-help/peer support. These professionals provided encouragement, assistance, or even shared in the leadership of self-help initiatives. Today, increasing numbers of researchers, helping professionals and educators are seeking ways to integrate self-help strategies into their mix of approaches.



Practical Ways to Integrate Self-Help Strategies in Your Work

Support Member-led Self-Help Groups

There are numerous ways you, as a professional, can support member-led self-help initiatives including:



- Assist with publicity efforts,
- Offer free space and photocopying, or
- Share professional expertise upon request by the group.

For more details, see the SHRC factsheet “A Different Role in the World of Self-Help: Tips for the Helping Professional.”

Enhance Shared Leadership in Professionally-led Support Groups

In professionally-led groups it is traditional for one leader to coordinate all activities. However, there are many jobs involved in “leading” a group, including: contact for new members, greeter at meetings, coordinator of room/refreshment logistics, facilitator(s) of meeting opening/discussions/activities, timekeeper, coordinator of speakers, etc.

- Discuss these different aspects of group leadership with group members and brainstorm how some of them could begin learning/adopting some of these roles.
- Visit www.selfhelp.on.ca for SHRC’s article “Self-help groups: Moving from professional leadership to mutual support”.

Develop/Coordinate One-to-One Peer Support Programs

Popular examples of one-to-one peer support are telephone support lines and buddy programs. Peer volunteers provide informational, practical, and emotional support. As a professional, your involvement can extend to recruitment, coordination, training and support of volunteers.

- Ensure that volunteers have real opportunities to share leadership in program planning, implementation and evaluation.

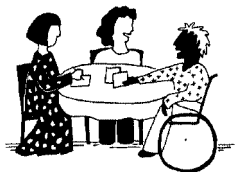
Integrate Self-Help Strategies into Outreach and Educational Work

Whenever you make presentations, produce print resources or post information online, profile experiential stories.

- Include “lay” people on panel presentations to share their personal experiences with an issue, transition, or challenge.
- Ask community members to write short testimonies (or interview them) for publication in newsletters and online.
- Quote people as often as you quote statistics, general information or “how-to” ideas.



In classes, workshops and conferences, begin with the experience of participants. Then add theory that builds upon and connects with participant experiences.



- Prepare guiding questions for pair discussions that draw out experiential stories (e.g. “share a story about...”) and invite participants to reflect on their experiences (e.g. “what were the highlights? challenges?”).
- Plan small group activities where each group self-facilitates. Provide a basic structure... and let the group take it from there. Be prepared to “let go” if the small groups choose to pursue a variation on your initial plan.
- How much can a professional do this? – work towards 50% of the time.

Bring qualities of self-help into your broader work:

- Locate yourself in your work. Tell your personal stories. Let people get to know you as a whole person. Be willing to be vulnerable.
- Invite “clients” to contribute to setting agendas for work, meetings, etc. See if you can move towards more shared leadership over time.
- Add play and ritual. This builds connectedness as a group. Nurture relationships and community.