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.

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.
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.