

Self-Help models community-based health promotion

By Gillian Kranias

In 1999, the Ontario Health Determinants Partnership launched a poster campaign reading: "Loneliness is bad for your health". This slogan highlighted the fact that social support is a key determinant of health. Self-help groups and organizations address precisely this issue of social support. They link together people who share an illness or challenging life experience for mutual support, education and/or advocacy. Groups also enable individuals to better address other risk conditions and/or risk behaviours affecting wellness.

Here are some examples of what can happen in a self-help environment:

- * A man with Tinnitus whose medical specialist could do "nothing more" to ease the intense ringing in his ears discovers a self-help group where members share their fears, their pains, and their strategies to cope with and manage a chronic illness.
- * A young woman at university in her first relationship - with another woman - finds a safe space to discuss emotional challenges, hear stories about how others overcame difficult family reactions, and get connected with supportive health services in her community.
- * A young man joins a group of people from all walks of life who suffer anxiety attacks similar to his own. Through the stories of others, he witnesses the possibility of recovery and becomes a more confident client at his individual therapy sessions.

Pure self-help groups are distinct from professionally-led support groups. However, as more professionals embrace the value of self-help strategies, many support groups are adopting a hybrid approach. Self-help emphasizes experiential knowledge, member leadership, mutual support, informal organizations, consensus or democratic decision-making, volunteer and "in kind" resources, ongoing activities and member-led evaluation activities.

Thomasina Borkman, a leading researcher in the field of self-help, documents that among help-seeking people 20% will choose self-help. For those who do, benefits include: affordability, accessibility, empowerment and friendship.

Researchers have also documented the health benefits of self-help initiatives. For example, members of a metastatic breast cancer group lived 18 months longer than the control group (Speigel, 1989); members of a workplace smoking cessation group had a 41% quit rate compared to 21% for the control group that relied on videos and a manual alone (Jason, 1987).

For references to self-help research on a variety of health concerns, see "A Review of

Research on the Effectiveness of Self-Help Mutual Aid Groups, (Kyrouz & Humphreys, www.mentalhelp.net/articles/selfres.htm: 2000). For resources to learn about and apply self-help strategies contact the Ontario Self-Help Network at oshnet@selfhelp.on.ca or 1-888-283-8806