

Self Help Groups

If you are thinking about setting up a self-help group, some of the first questions to ask are:

Who and what is the group for?

Can I cope with setting it up on my own?

Who is the group for?

Much of the value of self-help groups comes from being with people who share similar experiences. With this in mind, you can decide how narrow or wide to make your membership criteria. Just for women, just for men or both? Age range? Will it be for survivors of sexual abuse or to survivors coping with the effects of all types of abuse? Is it to be focussed on the needs of a particular social, ethnic or sexually orientated population?

What is the group for?

For many people, being with other survivors is an important part of the healing. Some groups have a particular purpose, such as a survivors' social group, or writing group; for most the primary purpose is to support each other in working through issues arising out of having been abused. Removing the shroud of secrecy, sharing experiences and feelings with people who have had a similar history can be reassuring and can overcome the feeling of being alone and different. It is an opportunity to feel accepted and respected for who they are amongst those with understanding.

Hearing about and learning to accept and appreciate the experiences of other people can help us understand ourselves. Developing empathy for others can help to erode our own self-blame, shame and guilt. Being part of a group can also help us see that we have something valuable to offer ~ our support and experiences can help others. Through all of this our confidence and self-esteem can grow and be restored.

Can I cope with setting it up on my own?

Setting up a group can be daunting, time consuming and may be emotionally draining. First ensure you have reliable support outside; this can be a partner, professional colleagues, counsellor, friends or family. Setting up is one thing, but running the group is likely to be extremely challenging. Having support within the group is essential. You may already know someone who would like to be in the same sort of group as you; can they help you set up and run it? Is there a counsellor in your area who would like to help? It is important that you find support for yourself early on for you and the wellbeing of the group as a whole. Rape Crisis, community centres, MIND, CVS, Victim Support or RELATE are some examples of where you could find valuable support and assistance. It might also be helpful to contact a similar group that is already running. Their knowledge could prove to be invaluable.

Group dynamics

Even if a self-help group is exactly what is needed for you and others in your area; success is not automatic. The dynamic energy within groups can raise many challenging emotional issues for the individuals involved. This can be the source of energy required for growth if managed skilfully, but if not the results can be damaging. Each member should learn to actively listen to each other and not attempt to be therapists. Active listening is a very good topic for the first meetings because it directly increases the ability of each member to help the others and indirectly forms the mutual contract.

Another consideration needs to be if and when new members join. It will usually have taken considerable courage on the part of the new member to attend, particularly if they do not know other members. To ease this situation, it is always a good idea if the group leader or facilitator meets this person beforehand; then at the first meeting for an established member to be assigned as a friend to stay with them.

Group process

Much can be gained by members sharing their experiences of abuse, healing and resolution. From time to time, a member may not feel like sharing their stories, thoughts and feelings. The importance of privacy and appropriate self-disclosure is an essential aspect of group work and no member should ever feel obliged to speak unless they wish to. Far more important is the creation of a safe environment.

Finding members

You will need to decide how to advertise the group and how new members will contact you. Will the group be closed once it has been set up or open to new arrivals? From experience, a new group membership of about 5-8 individuals seems to work well; however smaller groups can provide valuable support.

Good ways of publicising the group include: notifying the organisations mentioned above, putting notices on community boards and/or placing a small advertisement or newsletter. Advertise a few months in advance. It is not usually wise to give out your home phone number for security reasons. Invite interested parties to email you to a disposable address. Ask for their phone number; you can hide your number by keying 141 before entering the number you wish to call.

Other options are to use a mobile number that can be disposed of or using a service like BT 'Callsign'. For a small monthly sum, you will be given an additional landline number and the incoming ringtone will be different.

Be prepared to point an interested party in a more suitable direction if they do not appear to be suitable for your group. The DABS Pathfinder Service on 01255 852774 may be able to help.

Open or Closed?

Will the group be closed once it starts, or open? A "closed group" means you all join at the start and then no new members are accepted. This can feel safer and be easier to manage. It can allow trust to develop faster between members as they get to know each other. On the other hand, over time the group can become stale or too small, so running a waiting list and having times when new members are admitted could work for you.

An "open group" allows a new person to join at any time. This sort of group can be a valuable resource in the community, although it tends to need more professional support to keep things running smoothly and safely.

Facilitators

A facilitator is usually someone who has experience in running a group and is familiar with issues of abuse and sexual violence. They can help the group run smoothly and safely. Facilitators can; suggest topics for discussion, help resolve conflicts, ensure the ground rules are working and provide a consistent reassuring presence especially for large and open groups.

Even closed groups can find it helpful to have a facilitator for the first few meetings while they find their feet and the group stabilises. The organisations mentioned earlier, or your own counsellor, may be able to help with suggestions.

Clinical Supervision

A professional facilitator must have access to clinical supervision. A clinical supervisor provides support to someone who is themselves supporting others. It means having someone outside to go to with issues.

If you or one or more group members are acting as facilitator/s, issues are generally best discussed within the group as a whole. You may each find that taking group issues to your own outside support network and/or counselling sessions is helpful.

Venue

A safe, private, comfortable and accessible meeting place is essential. One of the support organisations mentioned above may be able to provide a room for little cost or free. This has the big advantage of being neutral territory. The alternative is a group member's home, either in rotation or always the same one. Disadvantages can be that it is intrusive, likely to have significant distorting effects on the group dynamics and can blur boundaries between areas of life that need to be kept apart. If there is no alternative, be aware of these things. As a rule, meeting in the same neutral place is best.

Costs and funding

It is important to keep the costs of the group as low as possible. Free support and venue can help. There may also be small grants available in your area for setting up groups or it might be necessary for members to pay a small amount each week to cover costs.

Ground Rules

Most groups have a set of ground rules worked out and agreed by the members themselves. The purpose is to make the group a safe and supportive place. Points to include are:

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is essential in a therapeutic relationship as part of building mutual trust whether one-to-one or in a group. We recommend that groups adopt and apply the same high standards as those used by counsellors. There are legal exceptions:

- If there is a serious risk of harm to others, including circumstances where vulnerable people are being abused.
- Information about terrorist activities, drugs, arms trafficking and money laundering.
- It may also be a criminal offence to 'tip off' a member when such disclosures have been made.
- A Judge may also make a court order to disclose confidential information.

In practice, apart from these exceptions groups should decide that what is said in the group stays in the group.

Respect: Groups often have a rule about treating each other with respect. This helps create a non-judgmental, safe environment. You may want to include an anti-discrimination statement.

Talking and Listening: It can be useful to have ground rules about talking, listening and space to quietly reflect or act out distress by crying without interruption. For instance, you may have rules not to interrupt, for mobile phones to be off and other distractions removed. The best support is sometimes to allow a member to express their distress rather than stepping in and rescuing. You might have time at the start and end of meetings where everyone in turn gets a chance to say how they feel. Applying 'active listening', mentioned before is good for speakers and listeners alike. Mistakes can feel like being abused to a survivor and can trigger memories from the past. They may have learnt not to speak and that they would be ignored or disregarded.

Commitment: Groups need commitment from members: to attend regularly, on time, in a fit state to participate or to let someone know if they cannot make it. If you have to consider excluding a member who frequently breaks the rules or who is disruptive, it would be wise to seek advice.

Sharing responsibility: Group dynamic distortions occur when responsibility is not evenly shared. Self-help groups generally do not have a leader and everyone is equally responsible where tasks are concerned.

Resources

It can be helpful if the group has access to other resources such as books and information. This is primarily for the benefit of members and can also be used to refer people who contact you but are not ready for a group.

Structure of Meetings

It can be helpful to have a simple format for meetings. Group members can decide this collectively. Some groups are 'issue-based' - they set a topic for each week such as relationships, self-esteem and so on. Others are more free-flowing, picking up on issues as they arise. Many are a combination of the two. Whatever the overall format, it needs to be flexible enough to give attention to someone who is in particular distress, while at the same time solid enough to benefit all.

A common format is to start the meeting with a brief 'check-in' - an opportunity for everyone to say what they have been dealing with since the last meeting, including their feelings. This could lead to further discussion, particularly if someone connects strongly to what has been said. It is important that everyone has a chance to speak first. Keep notes so that the group can decide afterwards what to go back to.

Meetings are often about 2 hours long, with a short break in the middle. Enough time needs to be allowed at the end for a 'check-out'. As well as providing another opportunity for everyone to be heard, it may raise issues about the running of the group or for discussion the following week. Finally, five minutes are needed to clear up, arrange the next meeting and leave. It's important that everyone participates in this part of the process too!

See Group Work in the DABS Directory Book List section