

CHOOSING A SUPPORT GROUP

Whether you are a professional considering groups for your clients, or a person simply looking for a helpful group for yourself, you may wonder if a support group is right for you. Let's examine the choices from those two perspectives.

FOR A PERSON SEEKING A GROUP



First identify the source of your stress (e.g., the specific illness, addiction, loss, etc.) and any special situation (being a caregiver, parent or friend of the person with the problem). In addition to a group's problem focus, there are many other differences in the types of groups available. Some support groups are member-run, while others have professional facilitators; some have a very narrow focus while others are very broad; some are based upon either spiritual or religious beliefs, while many are not; some are very structured while others have little structure at all; some focus on emotional support, education or advocacy, while others are more social. These differences may be important to you, so the more you learn about a group, the better you will be able to choose the right group for you.



Learn About a Group Before Attending a Meeting

The best information about a group comes from the group itself. Most groups have a phone contact person who will answer any questions you have about the group before you attend a meeting. Also, most groups have a national website, brochure and other literature that describes their group's purpose and activities.



Questions You Might Ask

In addition to finding out the meeting time and place, there are other questions you may want to ask before attending. You might ask about the people in the group: do they understand what you are going through because they have had similar experiences? How many usually attend the meeting (more people means more interest and energy, but less time for each member to share concerns)? What is the ratio of men to women, or the age range of the members (if it makes a difference to you)? You might inquire about any meeting formats and any costs associated with joining the group.



The First Meeting You Attend

Once you decide to attend a meeting, there are many aspects of the group you can learn about first hand. One of the first impressions you'll get about the group will be how welcome you feel. Do people welcome you and introduce themselves to you? Do they sit near you, smile at you and in general make you feel like they are glad you're there? How much mutual help occurs within the group? Do people really help each other, or is it one or two people giving advice to everyone else? If the group is led by a professional, why is he or she leading the group, and what kind of leadership style does he or she exert?



Another observation you can make has to do with general group tone. Does it seem like the group is helpful to its members? Do people seem glad to see each other? Is there positive energy? Humor? Honesty? Do people listen to each other? Do they show concern, respect, understanding and acceptance?



If the members lead the group, how is leadership decided upon? Is it rotated, shared among group members, or limited to just one or two people? What other roles are assumed by group members? How many people help to run the group? Again, a good match between your needs and the group is what you're seeking.



Sometimes you will find a group that's perfect for you on the first try. Other times you may have to try several types of groups or a different meeting of the same group before you've found the best match. The bottom line is whether you feel the group meets your needs. Finally, after you have chosen and benefited from a self-help group, please consider staying for a while to "give back" and help others. Self-help groups depend upon volunteer efforts. Your volunteer efforts will not only help others, but will most probably benefit you in terms of your own physical and mental well-being.

FOR INFORMATION ON LOCAL SELF-HELP GROUPS FOR ANY STRESSFUL LIFE SITUATION, CALL US.

**NJ SELF-HELP GROUP
CLEARINGHOUSE
1-800-367-6274
WWW.NJGROUPS.ORG**

FOR PROFESSIONALS LOOKING FOR GROUPS FOR CLIENTS



For caring professionals who realize that they cannot be all things to their clients, support groups are welcome community resources that supplement professional assistance, and in so doing, can help prevent professional burnout.



Groups also provide support at times when professional offices are closed, whether it is the actual meetings or the phone support often available between meetings. Since the groups provide the unique support of "others who have been there," they can be especially helpful for clients who feel alone and isolated with the stressful situation they face. Groups provide a variety of other benefits: acceptance, positive role models, normalization, coping skills, practical information, education, community, sometimes a "program to work" as in 12-step groups, advocacy and even "helper therapy" - the ability to help others in the group. In providing a referral, a professional can point out the potential value of a group.



In actually making the referral, it's helpful to suggest to the client that they check out the support group to "see if it is for you." If the client has Internet access, and if the local group is part of a national one, suggest they check out the national website. It's often helpful to have the brochures of groups that are often referred to, since the group's brochure explains what the group offers and takes away the fear of the unknown. Ideally these brochures should be available in the waiting area, too.