

# NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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375 East McFarlan St., Dover, NJ 07801 \* 1-800-367-6274 or 973-989-1122 \* www.njgroups.org

## SOME COMMON GROUP PROBLEMS

### The "Pity Party"

*Symptoms:*

- **Meeting Turns Into a Complaint Session:** Members "dump" their problems on the group and other group members don't offer solutions or support; they just offer more complaints. There is no balance of people talking about their problems and others relating their own experiences in dealing with similar problems or offering solutions. This can have an avalanche effect that is difficult to stop.

*Possible Solutions:*

- **Don't move on to another person's problem until the first one has been addressed.** This will stop the "snowball" effect of other people jumping in with the same complaints. It also reinforces the idea that a support group is a place to get ideas on how to deal with problems rather than just a place to talk and not do anything about those problems.
- **Remind group that support groups should be positive, and members should mention the progress that they are making.** Sometimes people don't want to take time away from someone who is having difficulty, but talking about progress is a very important part of a support group. They can offer others suggestions and strategies for improvement. **Put something in the ground rules** that each member must state something positive that happened to them since the last meeting.
- **If many people in the group have the same specific problem, ask them to think about possible ways to deal with the problem in between meetings, and talk about their thoughts at the next group meeting.** This is a good way to get people to take positive action. Make sure that the agenda sets aside time for members to discuss what they've thought about or learned in between meetings. Ask members which of these ideas they plan to use. This puts the emphasis on making progress and taking action.
- **The leader or a group member can state his or her reaction to the way the meeting is going without blaming or criticizing.** For example they could say, "I'm feeling that three or four of us are monopolizing the meeting with some pretty negative comments. Does anyone else feel the same way?" A leader's way of reacting to the meeting can provide a model for members. However, all group members need to take responsibility for how a meeting is going and should not rely solely on the designated leader to keep things on track.

### Group Constantly Covers Old Ground

*Symptoms:*

- **People bring up the same thing over and over.** This involves one or more persons talking about a particular problem they are having and never talking about anything else. If this continues, other members can get bored or frustrated by hearing the same things over and over.
- **Any suggestions on how to deal with the problem or similar experiences other people talk about are ignored.** No matter how many good suggestions are offered, people are stuck in the mode of hold on to old problems and will find a way to discount anything anyone in the group says. The classical "Yes, butter."
- **People don't seem to be making any progress.** Group is bogged down with people talking about the same things and no one is getting better or improving.

### *Possible Solutions –*

- **Point out to the person that he/she is not listening to the suggestions/experiences of other group members.** Try to nudge a member by saying, "I am concerned about you because you don't seem to think that anything we say or do or suggest will be helpful.
- **Ask people to look at one specific part of the problem and work on just that one part.** Instead of being overwhelmed by looking at the whole problem, the group can assist the person to break down the problem into smaller parts and provide lots of encouragement while the person takes on those smaller parts.
- **Put an "update" section in the agenda where people are expected to report on what they've done about the things they've brought up in the group.** If people know that they will be accountable for what they say, and that the group will be asking about what steps have been taken to deal with the problems, they will be more likely to do something instead of just complaining.
- **Select a topic** in advance and have each person look for experiences in his or her life during the week that relates to the topic.
- **Do some reading as a group.** Either all the members can read a book or article and discuss it or one person can do a relevant reading, report on it and lead a discussion.
- **Raise some issues the group has been avoiding.**

### **Conflict Between Group Members**

#### *Symptoms:*

- **People are acting hostile towards each other.** Sometimes the groups talk about highly emotional and personal issues and things may boil over. If members of the group insult each other or belittle the thoughts and feelings of others, the group has a serious problem.
- **People argue over suggestions offered to members of the group.** Some people have definite ideas about some things, and occasionally people are more interested in furthering their own agenda than they are in helping people in the group.
- **Personal problems/personality conflicts disrupt group.** Some group members just don't like each other, or have an outside dispute that ends up being taken into the group.

#### *Possible Solutions:*

- **Remind people of the supportive atmosphere that needs to exist in a good group.** When things get heated it's a good idea to take a little break and cool things off. Such an incident can be made into a positive if people can talk about some of the reasons why they reacted so strongly. Emphasize that angry outbursts need to be the exception for the group and not the norm.
- **A group is not a competition to see who ideas are best; they are a forum to bring out many ideas, with the member in question deciding what is best.** The group must understand that that everyone's opinion is valuable, and that others in the group are responsible enough to take in all the ideas and make their own decisions about the right course of action for themselves. Just because a particular course of action works for one person doesn't mean it will work for everyone. Also, if something doesn't work for one person, it doesn't mean that it won't work for someone else.
- **Personal gripes have no place in a group; ask the people involved to work things out, or keep their problems outside the meetings.** Don't allow people with specific problems toward each other monopolize the group. Insist that the people involved keep their animosity towards each other outside of the group.

- **Stress positive points in the group or situation when addressing conflict directly.**
- **Keep expressing empathy** as it is appropriate
- **Avoid accusing, blaming.** Use “I” messages (e.g. “I get frustrated when...”)
- **Focus on how members are feeling now** and what can be done in the future.
- **Use summary statements** (e.g. “We all seem to be bogged down right now. Maybe we could...”)
- **Practice Active Listening Skills as a group.** Much conflict is the direct result of people not really hearing what another person has said.

### **People Are Passive**

*Symptoms:*

- **People are passive;** don't talk, don't take an active role, don't talk about themselves or their problems.

*Possible Solutions:*

- **Remember, silence is not necessarily a deficit.** New members may not feel comfortable at first expressing feelings or ideas in front of people who they have just met and may need a few meetings before they feel free to talk.
- **Continue to be encouraging. Many people who have been through the mental health care or other systems are not used to believing that their thoughts and feelings are important or valid.** If someone has spent their adult life "in the system," it will take awhile before you can build up that person's confidence. Thank them for attending, directly offer them a chance to speak at the meeting, and let them know that any contribution they make is important and valuable. Sometimes patience is necessary to allow the person to grow.
- **Set an example: don't wait for someone else to speak up...do it yourself.** If people hear others talking and sharing, they will be more inclined to do it themselves. The core group must take the lead and talk about things if no other group members take the initiative to start the group discussion.
- **Try using a neutral activity, such as bringing in an article and discussing it.** Sometimes people will feel more comfortable talking about specific issues instead of themselves. Once they get used to talking in the group, they may feel more comfortable talking specifically about themselves.
- **Use questions to invite members into the conversation.** Perhaps a member would like to talk, but they are a little shy, they feel that other people's problems are more pressing or valuable, or just need a little nudge. Try questions like, "Joe, I'd like to hear what you think about this."

### **Group Members Insist On Giving Advice.**

*Symptoms:*

- A member starts off conversations with, **“You should...”**
- **Solutions to a speaker’s problem come too quickly,** not letting the speaker finish.
- A member has the **attitude** that their solution is the only correct solution.

### *Possible Solutions*

- **Remind the group member that different ideas and opinions exist.** What works in one situation may not work in another, and every human being is different. One of the strengths of a support group is to allow people to hear about different options.
- **Try having the group restrict itself to "I" statements.** This puts the focus back on the individual, and not on telling the group what to do.

### **Some People Dominate the Discussion**

#### *Symptoms:*

- **Monopolizers take up too much of the time allotted to the group discussion.** Other persons who would like to contribute cannot break into the conversation.
- **Other members of the group seem bored.**

#### *Possible Solutions*

- **Tell the person you appreciate their input/contribution to the group, but others need to be heard from too.** You don't want to quiet someone completely because everyone has something valuable to share. Let them know they are cared about, but point out that others need to talk. Most people who monopolize the conversation don't realize what they are doing.
- **Set a time limit.** You can have a time limit set in place for everyone, or if necessary, set a time limit only for only the "offenders." Your group could also agree to use some kind of unspoken signal to quietly let someone know that it's time to hear from someone else.
- **Find out during "check in" how much time people need to talk.** If your group uses "check ins" at the start of the meeting, if someone states that he/she only needs ten minutes to talk yet takes more time, remind them that there isn't enough time for them to speak longer.
- **Sometimes there is no choice but to interrupt so the discussion can move forward.** If other methods fail, their may be no other choice. Be kind, but firm. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but there are other people who would like to talk." Then immediately move on to someone else.
- **The person may become angry or upset but it is unfair to the rest of the group to have one person dominate the meeting.** This is often just a ploy to regain control of the group. Keep in mind what is best for the group.

### **Group Talks Off Topic**

#### *Symptoms:*

- **Group ends up talking about other things besides the meeting topic.**

#### *Possible Solutions –*

- **Refer the group to the agreed-upon agenda, and steer the conversation back to it.** This is why you have an agenda, and why it should be agreed upon.

- **Ask the group if they would like to change the agenda.** If the group isn't going anywhere with the agenda, you can add or subtract topics. Make sure that the new agenda items relate to the overall purpose of the group and insist on sticking to it!
- **Ask the group if people are having a lot of strong feelings about the meeting topic.** Sometimes very deep issues come out during a group and people are just not ready to talk about them. If so, try to find out what the discomfort is about. If the subject is too deep or personal, change it. People need to feel comfortable about sharing, and also feel comfortable about holding on to things they are not ready to discuss.

### **Confidentiality Has Been Violated**

*Symptoms:*

- **Members are quiet, not sharing personal experiences and feelings.** If group members have been very actively sharing information but suddenly stop, you may suspect that confidentiality has been breached.
- **Have a ground rule about confidentiality.** If you only have one rule, have it this rule!
- **Remind people what confidentiality means; some people might just not understand.** In the simplest terms it means, "What is said in this room, stays in this room." It also means that people shouldn't be talking about what happened at the meeting with group members unless they keep the conversation strictly about themselves.
- **Reemphasize the critical importance of keeping what is said in the meeting "in the room."** People must feel safe about sharing in a group. If they think that there is even a small chance that what they say will "get around," then no one will share much.
- **Repeat offenders may have to be told to leave the group.** This one person can ruin the group. It may be hard, but the good of the group must come first.