

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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SOME HELP FOR THE HELPER: A GUIDE FOR THE GROUP CONTACT PERSON

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As a contact person, you are the essential link between someone in need and your self-help group. When a prospective member finally gets the courage to call, your response can determine whether or not that person will come to your meeting. You will also be a crucial link to the public at large; your name and phone number will appear on your group's media announcements and flyers. Your responsibilities can seem overwhelming unless you have support--that's where this Guide comes in. Designed primarily for the new contact person, we hope this Guide will be useful to experienced contact people as well.

Some contact people with experience in self-help groups have already given us some good advice, which can be summed up as: "Know yourself." One group leader described the ideal contact person as "patient, compassionate, understanding." Another advises contacts to be "sensitive to other people's needs, but not so overly sensitive that you take their problems home with you." Other groups look for a "good listener--willing to listen to a 40-minute phone conversation;" "someone who knows when to share the load with others in the group;" "someone able to give full attention to a person in crisis." Chances are, if you and your group want you to be a contact person, you already have many of these qualities.

Most groups have found that callers are most comfortable talking with a contact person who shares their problems and is involved in the group. This is especially true of groups that deal with very sensitive issues such as incest, AIDS, child abuse, etc. In some instances, it is much more comfortable for the caller to be offered the option of talking with someone of the same gender, age group, or having the same condition or experience, etc. It is advisable that contact people have a good deal of experience dealing with their own situation, which places them in a much better position to be of help to others.

A few groups prefer a professional as the contact person to determine whether the caller can be helped by the group or requires an alternative such as individual therapy. However, a new person often prefers to talk to someone who has "been there." If, after doing some soul-searching, you feel that you know yourself and the needs of your group, this guide may be able to help you.

SETTING UP A TELEPHONE SYSTEM

As always, the best advice is: don't try to do it alone! Is there a way to rotate coverage of the phones? Can your flyers list two or more phone numbers? The phone company has a "call forwarding" service which, although expensive, may make it possible for several members to act as telephone contact people.

Answering Machines: Pros and Cons

Answering machines are great for taking messages when you are away. They can also give you the opportunity to return calls at your convenience, when you are not busy with personal matters and you have the emotional energy to respond to someone who needs support. If you do use an answering machine, the message should include:

- Your name and the name of your group.
- Date, time and place of the next meeting (updated regularly)
- Best time for you to return the call
- Name and phone number of another contact person, if available.

Try not to crowd the message tape with too much information; it can confuse the caller. When recording your outgoing message, be aware that cute, unusual, loud or outlandish messages can turn potential members away. And make sure you call back promptly.

But answering machines do have their drawbacks. Some callers are not comfortable leaving messages on machines, especially when talking about personal matters. Picking up the phone to make the call may have taken tremendous courage, and callers may become frustrated and discouraged when they hear a recorded message. Nothing can replace a caring human voice and a listening ear.

Answering Service

Some groups, particularly large organizations with many chapters, employ an answering service or local hotline to be used as the main number for callers seeking information about their groups. Although answering services can be efficient, and sometimes offer their services around the clock, they tend to be less personalized than contact people. They lack the firsthand experience with the group and the problem which helps people make the decision of whether or not they want to attend a meeting. Services can, however, offer the names and phone numbers of local members should someone want to talk. Answering services can be costly and have limitations; however, they are an alternative for groups who receive many calls.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CONTACT PERSON

One experienced contact person described responsibility as "the ability to respond." Your response to callers can include listening to them, educating them about your group, encouraging them to come to group meetings, and referring them to other resources.

Listening

Being a good listener is probably the most important quality of a contact person. Here are some ways to brush up on your skills.

1. **Compliment the courage of the caller.** As a self-help group contact person, you are often the first person the caller has reached out to and asked for help. Many people find it exceedingly difficult to admit they need help with a problem. To go one step further and ask a stranger for help is clearly a courageous act. To support a caller who may be extremely anxious during this initial contact, it is helpful to compliment the person on having the courage to call.
2. **Use the caller's name frequently.** If the caller has given you a first name, remember it and use it frequently during the phone conversation. This helps communicate a sense of caring about the caller and gives the conversation a friendly tone.
3. **Be an active listener.** Most of us need a little time before we feel comfortable enough to talk about sensitive issues. Encourage callers to tell their story and express their concerns and feelings without interrupting or pressuring them to get to the point. Bear in mind that sometimes a caller's true concerns will come up later in the conversation.
4. **Clarify the person's problem or need.** During the course of the conversation, clarify the caller's problems and expectations. If your group is not likely to meet the caller's expectations, let the person know and, if possible, refer them to a more appropriate resource.
5. **Be clear about your limitations.** Rather than present yourself as an "authority" on the issue, be yourself, another person who shares the caller's problem, and focus on sharing what has worked for you.

6. **Share some of your experience.** While sharing experiences is fundamental to self-help, during this initial contact, talk about your own situation only as it relates to the caller's experience. Refrain from overwhelming callers with your problems.
7. **Follow through on promises.** The credibility of your group is at stake. If you make any promises (e.g. returning the call, sending literature, etc.), try to follow through as soon as possible. If you do not have the time, ask for some back-up from other group members.

Educating Callers About Your Group

You need to tell callers the purpose of your group and what it does and does not offer. Try to be as accurate as possible. Although you may be very enthusiastic about your group, too much enthusiasm during this initial contact, particularly regarding your group's philosophy or beliefs, can turn people away. Beware of overwhelming your caller.

Try to offer "cautious optimism". Often a caller believes that you and your group can "make it all better." You need to remind the person that recovery is an ongoing process which won't happen overnight (or ever), but you can also offer something positive such as "now you know that a support group exists, and we are here for you."

Callers will need factual information, such as the date, time and meeting place of your group. They may also have some basic questions such as:

1. What is the purpose of your group? (e.g. is the main focus educational, mutual support, social, advocacy)
2. What are the group members like? (e.g. How many people attend meetings, what is the ratio of males to females at meetings, what is the average age of members; etc.)
3. Are the members' problems the same or similar to the caller's concerns? (e.g. How broad is the focus; has anyone experienced the same or similar loss, medical treatment, illness, problem, etc.)
4. How does the group work? (e.g. Does it follow the 12-step program; is it facilitated by a professional; how is it structured, does everyone have to talk, are there guest speakers, etc.)
5. Are there any fees associated with the group? (e.g. are their membership dues; do you pass the hat; do you need to buy literature; etc.)

Encouraging Callers to Attend Group Meetings

Since people often get nervous at the prospect of attending a meeting with a group of strangers, your job as contact person is to lessen some of that anxiety and make it possible for them to take that next step. Some useful strategies include:

1. **Acknowledge the caller's concerns** Letting a person know that most people feel nervous about coming to a first meeting can be reassuring to a caller. Offer to meet prospective members at the door of the meeting place a few minutes before the meeting begins to help them get acquainted. Just knowing that you will be greeted by a somewhat familiar person can help a person feel more comfortable.
2. **Describe a typical group meeting.** People tend to be more willing to approach new situations if they know what to expect. In describing a typical meeting include general information and a description of how a meeting works. Reassure the caller that the group respects a persons' decision

not to participate in group discussion. This is particularly important for people who are anxious about talking in front of groups.

3. **Respect a caller's decision not to attend a meeting.** Let callers decide if and when they are ready to come to a meeting, and respect that decision. People who are initially hesitant sometimes need to give their situation a little more thought before they're ready to take that next step.
4. **Set limits on your availability to listen.** Since a group helps in ways that extend far beyond a phone call, keep in mind that your job is to help people take their next step toward helping themselves...joining a mutual help group.

Handling Difficult Calls and Helping Callers Through Difficult Situations

Experienced self-helpers understand that "difficult people" are actually just "people experiencing difficulty." These difficulties can be expressed in a variety of ways which may try your patience. Below are some suggestions for dealing with some of these other situations.

1. **Unwilling or "unready" to attend a meeting.** People dealing with a difficult situation may need to vent their anger and frustration during a contact call. After you have provided a caller with the opportunity to express feelings, the person may be ready to listen to suggestions and information about your group. But sometimes, after a lengthy talk or several phone calls, a person still may not want to attend a meeting. At that point, you can say they you cannot provide any more help, emphasize that the group can offer more information and support than you can provide over the phone. Don't be surprised if the person calls back later, relieved that someone finally listened, and is now ready to hear about a self-help group.
2. **Long Phone Calls.** If a caller starts to repeat previous statements or begins bringing up new information not relevant to support groups issues, it's time to end the call. A useful technique for this situation is to let the caller know that you think what they are saying is important; so important in fact, that it should be saved for the whole group to hear. Another approach is to let the caller know that while you cannot stay on the phone, you will be happy to pick up this discussion at the next group meeting.
3. **Phone Calls at Inconvenient Times.** If you do not use an answering machine, you may be plagued by inquiries at times when you are least able to focus attention on the caller. One way of dealing with this situation is to gently say "I only have a few minutes to talk right now. I'd be happy to call you back at a later time." If the caller sounds upset, the value of a backup contact person is that you can refer them to another resource. Acknowledge the caller's feelings and needs and offer them the alternative (e.g. "You sound upset and I understand your need to talk right now. Unfortunately, I was just leaving but let me give you a number of another person that may be able to talk with you now"). Always let a caller know that you are sorry that you cannot talk with them at the moment, but that you would be very happy to talk with them when you have the time to really listen. Be careful not to sound as if you do not care or won't make the time to listen or you may lose a prospective member. On the other hand, don't berate yourself for not being able to be available all the time.
4. **A Person in Crisis.** For most contact people, veterans and newcomers alike, the most difficult caller you may encounter is the person who is suicidal or experiencing an emotional crisis. The call is difficult for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the contact person's concern for "doing the right thing." Keep in mind that as a contact person, it is not your job to provide crisis intervention. Your major goal is to try to calm the caller down so that you can refer them to an appropriate resource or collect enough information (e.g. name and location, to get a local emergency team to the caller).

If faced with a crisis call here are some pointers:

- **Use a calm, reassuring voice.** A calm voice can help calm a distraught caller. Gently acknowledge their feelings, e.g., "You sound upset. Just take your time we'll talk when you are ready" or "Why don't you take a couple of deep breaths to make you feel better." Let them know that it's all right that they are upset. Realize that it was probably very hard for them to call a stranger in their time of crisis, and they may even feel a little foolish. Helping the caller to feel more relaxed might enable them to explore with you other support networks they may have, such as family, clergy, mental health center, or friends. You may ask, "Can you talk to a family member about this?" or "Have you considered professional help to get over this rough time?"
- **Be empathetic.** Let the caller know that you understand and care. Make an occasional "Mmm hmm" so that they know you are listening. Let them do most of the talking.
- **Make referrals.** If they are still in crisis, refer them to local emergency resources (i.e. mental health center, hospital emergency room, police department, or hotline.). If a caller is in imminent danger of committing suicide, it is imperative that you try to find them professional help as quickly as possible.
- **Know your local resources.** This is not the time to go hunting for information. Always keep a current listing of local resources near your phone. It might be a good idea to call the local mental health centers, emergency rooms, and helplines beforehand to find out exactly what kind of services they provide, and how you can use them if you are ever faced with a crisis call. Call the phone company to find out if they offer any special codes to use to help the police track down calls.
- **Know your role and accept your limitations.** Many contact people participate in their group because they want to help other people. However, helping people to help themselves is not the same as rescuing. As a contact person, you are probably not trained in crisis intervention. You can listen to the person in crisis, and make referrals, but it is important to acknowledge your limitations.
- **Referring callers to other resources.** It vital to have a list of local resources when dealing with someone in crisis. In addition, you will probably find it helpful to maintain an updated list of community resources such as physicians, social workers, home health aides, etc.

Dealing with the Media

If your group is large enough, you may be able to have someone else handle phone calls from the media (newspapers, radio and television), while you attend to prospective members. Keep in mind that publicity of any kind is likely to generate a large number of phone calls, and you may be overwhelmed. Don't be afraid to ask other group members for help. It is your job to develop rapport with the media so your ability to discuss issues clearly and enthusiastically will be a great asset to your group.

Obscene Phone Calls

The best way to handle an obscene phone call is to hang up. Many times the caller's sole purpose is to get a reaction. If you merely hang up instead of responding or listening, the caller may stop calling. If the caller persists, contact the phone company. Making an obscene call is against the law.

PREVENTING BURNOUT

Burnout is a serious problem with no easy solutions. However, you can work to organize your group so that no one is unduly stressed. Suggested strategies to prevent burnout include:

- Have more than one contact person and rotate the name of the first person listed on any publicity material. This will provide a more even distribution of calls among your contact people with no one serving as the "one and only."
- Use one telephone number to give out names of contact persons to call. (You can even use an answering machine to give out the names and numbers of contact persons.) These names can be changed every month or so. This way, many members share the responsibility throughout the year.
- Limit the contact person's length of service. If your group receives many phone calls, it can help to know that you will be rotated off duty after a certain amount of time. Just anticipating the "foreverness" of the duty can accelerate burnout.
- Develop structured guidelines. Some groups develop specific guidelines on how to handle certain situations or types of calls (e.g. talking with the media, handling inappropriate callers, how long to talk with a caller, etc). This policy can relieve the contact of worrying too much about handling certain situations. Written guidelines also ensure continuity and consistency between contact persons and can serve as a training manual for members new to the group.
- Share with your group. As a final point, please keep in sight the fact that you are a member of a support group...people helping people. If you feel overburdened or if you are concerned about a particular call, share your feelings with the other members of your group. That's what it's all about.