

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

EVALUATING YOUR MEMBERSHIP SIZE

One of the most common concerns of self-help groups is the notion that they don't have enough members. They feel like a failure because they have what they perceive to be a very small group size. It is as if the success of a group is reflected solely by the size of its membership. Nothing can be further from the truth.

What is the ideal number for a self-help group?

- **The ideal size depends on the purpose of the group.** Too many members prevents ample sharing time; too few and advocacy efforts aren't effective. If your group is small and you want to do some advocating—join up with other similar, like-minded groups and advocate together. If you have a large group but want to be able to have meetings where everyone has a chance to talk, break your group into smaller, more intimate sizes where everyone will get a chance to share.
- **The size of every group goes up and down.** Membership can vary with the seasons. If you live in a region where you get a lot of snow, expect the membership to go down during the winter. If your group has a lot of members with young children, expect the membership to go down during the summer when the kids are out of school.
- **All groups have a natural lifespan.** When needs are met, members may leave. Don't necessarily view it as negative when someone leaves the groups—think of it as a successful graduation. People do leave because their needs have been met through the group and they no longer feel alone and unable to cope. Dwindling membership can be a sign of a successful group!
- **Membership size is dependent partly on population size.** If you live in a big city and your group deals with a very common problem, chances are that if you have a good group and use effective publicity tactics, your group will be larger than most. On the other hand, if you live in a rural area, deal with a very rare illness or a very uncommon issue, or if your members are dependent on such things as transportation in an area where there is little, then chances are the size of your group will be smaller than most.
- **Membership size does not necessarily reflect how good a group is.** The ideal size of a group is the number of people needed to give each other support! If your members have very complex or needy problems, having more personal time to speak during group discussions may be a very good thing.

- **Don't think quantity. Think quality.** Just because your group may be small in numbers, it may be huge in the amount of support, information, encouragement, community and hope that it gives its members. Say you only have five active members—but if those five people can cope better with their problems, feel a genuine sense of community and caring, and help alleviate pain because of the support group, then that is a beautiful thing!

So, the big question is, “When do we know that it is time to start recruiting new members more actively?” The answer is, “It depends.”

- **Evaluate before you publicize.** If your group has been slowly (or rapidly) losing core members or if newcomers only attend one or two meetings and don't return, you may be tempted to engage in a large publicity campaign. Stop! Before you do any publicity, do an evaluation of your group.

If a group is poorly run, has an over-controlling leader, doesn't feel safe or welcoming, doesn't meet the needs of its members, or doesn't deal with disruptive or aggressive behavior in a timely manner, it will probably lose members rapidly. If that is the case, the remedy is not just embarking on a large publicity campaign to get new members. The remedy is in evaluating the group structure, leadership and purpose. Only when the internal problems of the group have been fixed should the group seek out new members. If you don't fix the problems, any new members coming to your group won't stay. Consequently, even if you later fix the problems in the group, those who tried your group and left will not return. Once you've lost a member—chances are they are gone for good.

- **Your group discussions are boring, cover old ground and get off topic.** This is probably a sign that it is time to recruit new members. You need enough members to keep the group discussions lively, on track and revitalized. If there are only members who know every bit about each other's experiences, there may not be enough “new” stuff to talk about. Consequently, the group may become more social than support.
- **You want to change the format or structure of your group.** If your group is changing its structure (e.g. from a telephone network to a face-to-face group) this might be a good time to try to recruit new members—a way of getting new blood into the veins of the group. New members will have fresh insights and new ideas. This change will also give you the opportunity to do some effective public announcements which will advertise your group.

Remember: All effective self-help groups have validity. Just as there are semi-trucks, large SUV's, station wagons, mid-size sedans, and small convertible sports cars on the road, they all have their own unique purposes and buyers, pros and cons. It would be a boring world if every person was the same size, and a bland marketplace if all vehicles were exactly the same. It is important for self-help groups to focus on what they do best—provide mutual support. Now, that is a good thing!