

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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GROUP MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES: WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR GROUP WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE

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Self-help groups go through developmental stages, much like the stages in a person's life, from birth or initial organization through youthful growth to maturity. As a group passes through these phases, situations can arise which have the potential to disrupt its effective functioning, no matter what type of group it is or what its goals are. The following strategies and techniques are a few of those developed or adapted over the years by self-help group members in response to situations they have experienced in their groups. Bear in mind that these are only sample suggestions. An underlying principle of self-help is that the group as a whole should identify and resolve its problems by discussing and developing its own solutions.

GROUP SIZE: WHEN AND HOW TO REACH OUT FOR NEW MEMBERS

The size of a group depends on group goals and purposes. A group whose main focus is to provide opportunity for discussion and support, such as groups for separation and divorce or incest, should probably try to maintain a small membership. This allows all members to express themselves and to participate in sharing and discussion. Groups which focus on advocacy and fundraising seek a much larger membership in order to be more effective. Whatever the "ideal" size of a group, it is usually a cause for concern when a group begins to lose members.

There are many reasons why group membership can begin to drop. Groups all have a natural lifespan and when members' needs have been met, they may choose to drop out. Also, membership tends to fluctuate seasonally, high in spring and fall in certain kinds of groups. Some people need to attend only one meeting to be reassured that their situation is not unique and that the group is available if they need it. Some people have unrealistic expectations, they think the group will solve all their problems, and then drop out when it doesn't.

It is also appropriate for some groups to think of disbanding, for instance if its members have achieved their original goals and do not feel a need to continue in a group. "Losing members is not always a sign a group has failed. It can be a sign it has succeeded exceptionally well." (Lucretia Mallory, [Leading Self-Help Groups](#))

Many groups carry on continuous outreach to their communities, to let people know about their group and to maintain whatever they believe is their optimum membership level. The following suggestions are some ways a group can conduct on-going membership recruitment, as well as do periodic outreach for membership:

Attracting New Members

- Encourage members to do word-of-mouth publicity
- Develop a brochure or newsletter to distribute to members and prospective members
- Continue to send meeting announcements on a regular basis to newspapers, churches, community centers, etc.
- Develop a speakers' bureau

Welcoming New Members

- Assign members as greeters for meetings, to introduce themselves to new members and to remember names
- Pair off an old member with a new member for projects or just for contact and welcoming
- Include newcomers in socializing
- Share some of the group's history to allow the newcomer a feeling of belonging

Keeping Members

- Notify members of meetings by phone or mail; keep mailing and telephone lists updated
- Coordinate transportation if this is an issue for your group
- Have interesting, varied programs
- Enable members to take leadership roles to feel they are part of a group experience and are appreciated
- Include a social component in meetings; perhaps serve refreshments

Seeking Help Outside the Group

- Consider joining any coalition of self-help groups that may exist
- Seek consultation from a professional
- If you're listed with a self-help clearinghouse or an information and referral line, call them to make sure your meeting is listed accurately
- Consider merging with another group

MEETINGS: MAINTAINING GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

In order for a group to continue to fulfill its purpose, its meeting place needs to be appropriate to the size and purpose of the group—in a central, affordable location where members can establish a relaxed atmosphere. However, as a group develops and grows, so may its size or goals, and this may necessitate a change of meeting location. The group can use the brainstorming and decision-making skills described below to resolve this issue.

Following are some other situations which indicate a group's meeting could benefit from some first aid, along with some suggestions about what can be done.

Meetings become a complaint session

- 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. "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 Covering Old ground—not moving or progressing.

- Select a topic in advance and have each person look for experiences in his or her life during the week that relate 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 in the Group

- Stress positive points in the group or situation when addressing conflict directly
- Keep expressing empathy as it is appropriate
- Avoid accusing and blaming. Use "I" statements (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 on a group level.

STIMULATED SHARED LEADERSHIP AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

Every group has leaders, both in the formal sense where a person conducts or facilitates the meeting and in the informal sense whereby every person in the group takes on a leadership role by making suggestions, volunteering

for responsibilities, keeping group discussion moving or noticing when other members need special support. One way to stimulate the latter kind of leadership development is to spread responsibility for the group's tasks among members. For example, setting up refreshments, sending meeting notices to newspapers or greeting newcomers can be done not only by three different people, but by different people each time.

Leadership Burnout

Failure to support this broad type of membership development can result in burnout of designated leaders, especially if no clear and achievable definition of their role exists. Some ways to cope with burnout include:

- work in teams or small committees
- time off from the leadership role
- more delegation of responsibilities
- well-defined job descriptions that are specific, reasonable, achievable and time-limited.
- Contact with other group leaders, individually or in a group session, to discuss and share issues which can be extremely helpful

Domineering Leadership

- When a leader begins to dominate a group in a negative way, this may be the time to define leadership roles in a more formal way, if not already done, thus avoiding a direct confrontation. This is an opportunity to develop appropriate job descriptions, not only for the facilitator or leader's position, but for all the functions members perform in the group. In this way, the group will avoid obviously zeroing in on one person.
- In some situations, the only way to handle a domineering leader may be by confrontation, either in a group meeting or privately. If this is done in a group setting, it is important to have a sense from other members that they too feel the leader's style is damaging to the group. Otherwise, the member who initiates the confrontation may end up out on a limb alone. Whichever way this is done, it is important to always do it tactfully and with the good of the individual as well as the group in mind.

WHEN "PROBLEM PEOPLE" DISRUPT A GROUP

If you feel uncomfortable with something that is being said or done in your group, chances are other members also feel ill at ease. Sometimes an individual member creates discomfort in a group, for example: the discussion dominator, those who never talk, and those who break confidentiality.

It's helpful to have group guidelines which all members are aware of and can refer to when someone is becoming a problem. These guidelines usually specify the behaviors which the group supports and those which it finds unacceptable. Some groups review their guidelines briefly before each meeting—this keeps fresh in member's minds what the group has decided are appropriate ways to act in the group.

Talkative Member Who Monopolizes Meeting:

- Have a "round robin" at the beginning of the meeting, giving members an opportunity to talk about anything which is a pressing issue for them at the moment. This can alert leaders and members to individual needs which may require some meeting time in which to be addressed.
- The leader, or a group member, can pick up on something the person has just said, use it for the beginning of the next topic and ask a question of the group or another member with whom they have made eye contact, "That's a good point, Bill. (Turns to Mary) Mary, have you ever..."
- It may be necessary to interrupt, "Joan, I know this is something which is really important to you, but several others have thoughts they want to share. Bob, what are your feelings about this topic?"
- The leader, or again a group member, can say, "I'm concerned that John didn't have an opportunity to speak. Let's get back to his concern."

Distracting Side Discussions

- Leader or a member can address a question to one of the conversationalists, or ask them to share their comments with the group.
- Assertive confrontation in this as in many other situations may be appropriate, especially if the person(s) seems immune to gentler suggestions.

Authoritarian Advice-Giver: For the one who knows everything, one strategy is to use this person's assertions for a springboard. "John, many of us used to think as you do, but our experience with _____ (or a book, or an article) helped us change our thinking a little."

Silent Member: Silence is not necessarily a deficit. New members may not feel comfortable at first expressing feelings or ideas in front of people whom they have just met and may need a few meetings before they feel free to talk. However, when this breaking-in phase seems to become prolonged, the leader or other member can invite participation, for example, "Joel, I know you have had an experience similar to the one Julie just described. Can you share some of the reactions you had to it?"

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

One of the best resources for a group which is experiencing some kind of difficulty can be another group whose goals and structure are similar.

A self-help clearinghouse is an excellent source for locating other groups to consult with. Also, many clearinghouses utilize the self-help expertise they have acquired to help groups with problems. Conferences or workshops organized by a clearinghouse offer opportunities to network with representatives of other groups.

Other ways to locate similar groups are in the newspapers, via word of mouth, on the internet, through a local helpline, or from a mental health center.

If a group is a chapter or member of a wider organization, its parent organization can be a good resource for troubleshooting.

STRATEGIES FOR GOAL-SETTING, DECISION-MAKING AND BRAINSTORMING

Situations can occur in a group which requires the attention of the whole group, not just of individual members or leaders. Some examples are a change in group focus from support and discussion to more activist kinds of goals, or whether to become affiliated with other groups in a coalition for a specific purpose which answers the needs of group members, or simply to find a new meeting place. The following three strategies can help a group address these issues.

Goal-Setting: Focusing on Group Needs

The process of goal-setting, whether done formally or informally, usually takes place when the group is first begun, but if members begin to feel the group no longer satisfies their needs, it may be time to take a new look at the group's purposes and goals. Some ways to do this are:

- Use a few minutes at the end of each meeting to check and see if the meeting met members' needs and expectations.
- Check with new members after 2 or 3 meetings.
- Utilize on-going boards, officers, committees
- Evaluate on a formal basis from time to time; review planning process, goals.
- Use a questionnaire. This allows members who might be shy to express themselves more freely.

Some questions the group can ask in this evaluative process are:

- What are the goals of this group? Do these goals arise from the members' needs?

- What ways does this group use to meet these needs and are these appropriate responses: support, social/recreational, growth/self-development, educational, social action?
- Do the size and structure of the group promote or impede these goals?"
- If goals are not being met, were group needs accurately assessed? Were goals appropriate? Did the group have an unrealistic idea of the resources available to it?

Decision-Making: Ways Groups Can Make Choices

Eventually, every group will have to make choices about how to deal with a particular situation which has come up. The methods a group uses to make decisions will have an impact on the decisions made as well as on the group's continued effectiveness.

Some groups are comfortable with the parliamentary procedures summarized in Robert's Rules of Order. This is probably most workable where membership is large and the group has a fairly well defined structure. Using parliamentary procedures implies, however, that one part of the group will win and the other lose, which can tend to produce factions or cliques.

Decision-making by consensus, on the other hand, involves proposing several alternatives, using suggestions from the group on the brainstorming techniques described below, and then adapting, modifying or abandoning them until a solution is reached that all members can support. This takes more time than voting but helps preserve the unity of the group, and allows individual members a greater role in shaping the final outcome.

Brainstorming: Group Problem-Solving

This approach is best used when a problem or situation is concrete and needs new ideas or approaches for its solution. It works well in a small group of 10-15 people, on problems which are narrow rather than broad or are specific parts of a larger problem. The leader who conducts these sessions must know and observe the ground rules. The process can take about 35-45 minutes.

1. **Define the problem** Make sure it's solvable or posed as a solvable problem. If the problem is too large, keep restating it until you narrow it down to something small you can deal with, perhaps a part of the original problem.
2. **Propose solutions** Ground rules for this process are:
 - a. Suspend judgment: don't criticize or reject any ideas yet.
 - b. Freewheel: express all ideas no matter how wild.
 - c. Quantity: generate a large number of ideas
 - d. Cross-fertilize: pick up on one another's ideas; improve on them
3. **Combine solutions**
4. **Evaluate solutions and weed out** This is the time to be more critical and realistic, but be on the lookout for any new ideas which come up at this point.
5. **Rank order remaining ideas** Decide which one should come first, second, etc.
6. **Select the best option and assign tasks** Develop a plan for implementation, including who will do what by when. Also, decide how to evaluate success.

This brainstorming technique can feed into or provide alternatives for the decision-making processes described earlier.