

New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

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

THE IMPACT OF FOSTERING A “GROUP’S GROUP”

One of the best ways to keep a self-help group vital is to share the responsibility of the group with all of the members. A group functions more effectively when all its members accept responsibility for the group and have an emotional stake in the group. This doesn't diminish the need for a skilled group leader—having someone facilitate the flow of the group is vital. But if your group has too many members playing no role or having no real responsibility, you need to make a point of discovering what each person can do so the group is developed by its members and not merely offered to them.

What is Shared Leadership?

- Members share the responsibilities for the leadership roles
- Members share the responsibilities for the tasks involved in operating a group

Why Shared Leadership?

- Gives all members a feeling of “ownership” so they will invest their time and effort in helping the group. The more members feel that it is their group, the more they contribute to its success
- Since different people have different strengths, styles, skills and knowledge, the resources of all members can be used to the fullest extent.
- Prevents burn-out of the leader(s)
- Members learn new skills and can become more proactive in the group and in their lives.
- All members can experience the “helper’s high.” The more a member can give to others the greater benefit they receive from self-help.
- Models what mutual aid self-help is all about.

How Facilitators Can Encourage Shared Leadership

- If someone asks a question, don't just answer it. You are not the expert. If appropriate, throw the question back into the group so that others have the opportunity to share their knowledge. The group members will begin to get to know each other better and trust will build between them.
- Don't make decisions for the group by yourself. Allow other members to be part of the decision making process.
- If there is an argument or conflict among other members, never take sides. Instead, be a mediator and help resolve the conflict in a fair, unbiased way.
- Be the guide on the side; not the sage on the stage.
- Share your feelings and experiences with the group. Let them know that you are a peer. Never talk more than the other attendees do.
- Draw each person into the discussion without threatening them or putting them on the spot. Notice silent persons and encourage them to participate.
- Encourage others to co-facilitate or to facilitate when you cannot. Be open to a rotating leadership among interested members.
- Don't assume that you know what others think or how they feel. Draw out other's feelings, thoughts and reactions.
- Don't feel uncomfortable with a lack of responses or long periods of silence. Sometimes the group needs time to process a thought or emotion. Don't start talking to fill in the gaps or silences—let someone else in the group re-start the conversation. If after 45 seconds no one says a word, say something like, “Wow, that was a very powerful feeling that X talked about. How does anyone feel about it?”
- Don't allow yourself or others to put others ill at ease.
- Don't fall into the role of rescuer. Your role as a facilitator is not one of solving everyone's problems but in helping each other solve their own problem.

- Don't have a preconceived plan of the meeting. Plan—but be open to change.
- Be aware of member's body language. Do they look bored, upset, and sad?
- Remember, you are there to guide the process, not the content.
- Encourage members to decide on discussion topic.
- Participate as a member of the group, doing no more than your share of the work as a group member.
- Facilitate dialogue through questioning.
- Model recognizing and addressing problems within the group (monopolizers, advice givers, etc) so that all the members feel more comfortable sharing in this responsibility.
- Practice participatory leadership styles. This style sees others as part of the team and believes that all members share responsibility in order for the group to work well.
- Acknowledge, support and validate members who have made a contribution to the group.
- Know the niches of responsibilities (e.g. greeter, contact person, refreshment coordinator, publicity coordinator, librarian, newsletter editor, secretary, co-leader, social events coordinator, etc). Have clear job descriptions
- Help members feel empowered—to be active participants in the group process, to assume responsibility for their own feelings, changes and growth, and to live life fully as they are able to outside the group.
- Personally ask members to help out. Give members of choice of jobs. Tell them its not forever. Pair people up if practical. Circular sign-in sheets to get information on each person's skills and interest. Grow members into positions of responsibility and leadership. Publicly acknowledge volunteers
- Believe and practice that power must be shared in order to make the organization effective
- See others as part of a team and all members are equally responsible for the operation of the organization
- Encourage decision making by consensus
- Promote positive comments and new viewpoints to keep the discussion upbeat
- Help members feel comfortable and to get to know each other
- Be willing to distinguish between, and control, your personal views and the views of the group.
- Let your group create. They will support what they've created.

What Members Can Do To Participate in the Running of the Group

- Make a commitment to the group, contributing whatever talents, skills, resources or information that is necessary to assure the group's success and survival.
- If you see a need for a task to be done, do it.
- Help make decisions for the group (e.g. help choose the topic for discussion).
- Make newcomers feel comfortable from the start by introducing yourself and other members. Share your story, your coping skills and hope. Include them in the group discussion and be open to new points of view. Never display cliquish behaviors
- Listen attentively when another member is speaking. Be sure the speaker has finished describing his/her problem before offering help.
- Promote positive comments and new viewpoints lest the discussion deteriorate into a gripe session.
- Notice silent people in the group and encourage them to contribute.
- Participate in the discussion--sharing your problems and offering ideas and suggestions.
- Allow a member to ventilate negative or angry feelings; often this must be done before positive advice can be given and received.
- Keep the group discussion moving.
- Notice when others need special support.
- If there is a disruption near them during the meeting (e.g. a side-conversation), they can take action to stop the disruption behavior (e.g. quietly saying, "Shhh," to the offender).
- Offer to help out in any way that they can, no matter how small, in the running of the group.

The key to getting people involved and helping out in your group is in one word, "ownership." Who owns the group? The extent to which people perceive the group as truly "their group" they will invest their time and efforts in helping their group to survive and prosper. But if they view the group as belong to just one person, be that person a lay leader or a professional they will tend to be passive and let that person continue to do all the work.