

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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

BASIC STEPS & SUGGESTIONS ON STARTING A SELF-HELP GROUP

Self-help groups offer people who face a common problem the opportunity to meet with others and share their experiences, knowledge, strengths and hopes. Run by and for their members, self-help groups can better be described as "mutual help" groups. Hundreds of these groups are started each week across the nation by ordinary people with a little bit of courage, a fair sense of commitment, and a heavy amount of caring. The following guidelines are based on our experience at the Self-Help Clearinghouse helping hundreds of individuals to start groups. While there is no one recipe for developing a group (different national groups offer different model approaches), here is an overview of the general steps and strategies.

1. **Don't Re-invent the Wheel.** If you are interested in starting a group around a particular concern or problem, find out what groups already exist for it. Check first on the internet for any national self-help groups that address your concern. Contact and ask them for what help and "how-to" starter packet information they can provide, and which of their groups might be closest to you. Then check with local community helplines serving your area to confirm there are no existing local groups that may address your issue, but are not affiliated with a national group. If you do have a local self-help clearinghouse in your area, contact them and learn how they can help you in starting a group
2. **Think "Mutual-Help" From the Start.** Find a few others who share your interest in starting (not simply joining) a self-help group. Starting a group should not be on one person's shoulders alone. So, put out flyers or letters that specifically cite your interest in hearing from those who would be interested in "joining with others to help start" such a group. Include your first name and phone number. Make copies and post them at places you feel most appropriate, e.g., library, community center, or post office. Mail copies to key people whom you think would know others like yourself. When, hopefully, you receive calls, discuss with the caller what their interests are, share your vision of what you would like to see the group do, and finally ask if they would be willing to share the work with you for a specific period of time to try to get the group off the ground. Suggest that their work could be greeting people at the door and introducing new members, bringing refreshments, making coffee, co-chairing or helping to run the meeting, etc. Once a couple of people have said yes, you have a "core group" or "steering committee" - and you won't have to do it alone. It's much easier to start a group if the work is shared. But most importantly, if several people are involved in the initial work at that first meeting (refreshments, publicity, name tags, greeting new people, etc.), you will model for newcomers what your self-help mutual aid group is all about - not one person doing it all, but the volunteer efforts and the active participation of all the members.
3. **Find a Suitable Meeting Place and Time.** Try to obtain free meeting space at a local church, synagogue, library, community center, hospital or social service agency. If you anticipate a small group and feel comfortable with the idea, consider initial meetings in members' homes. Would evening or day meetings be better for members? Many prefer weeknights. It is also easier for people to remember the meeting time if it's a fixed day of the week or month, like the second Thursday of the month, etc.
4. **Publicize & Run your First Public Meeting.** Reaching potential members is never easy. Depending upon the problem area, consider where potential members go. Would they be seen by particular doctors or agencies? Contacting physicians, clergy or other professionals can be one approach to try. Posting flyers in post offices, community centers, hospitals, and libraries is another. Free announcements in the community calendar sections of local newspapers can be especially fruitful. Consider simply calling the paper and asking to speak with an editor to suggest an article on the group and the issue. Editors are often grateful for the idea. The first meeting should be arranged so that there will be ample time for you to describe your interest and work, while allowing others the opportunity to share their feelings and concerns. Do those attending agree that such a group is needed? Will they attend another meeting, helping out as needed? What needs do they have in common that the group could address? Based on group consensus, you can make plans for your next meeting.

If your group intends to have guest speakers, another idea for a first meeting is to arrange for a good speaker and topic that can be publicized well in advance. But be sure to build in time for people to discuss the speaker's points in light of their own experiences, i.e., after questions and answers with the speaker, have a discussion group or (if a large turnout) break into smaller discussion groups. Then come together as a full group and present the idea of continuing discussions as an ongoing self-help group.

5. **Identify and Respond to the Felt Needs of Your Members.** If your group is new and doesn't follow a set program for helping members help one another, always remember to plan your groups' activities and goals based upon the expressed needs of your members. Share your vision. At the very first meeting, go "round-robin" permitting each member an opportunity to say what they would like to see the group do. Then discuss these needs and come to a consensus as to which ones you will address first. Don't assume that you know the members' needs without ever asking them. Remember to regularly ask your new members about their needs, and what they think the group might do to meet those needs. Similarly, be sure to avoid the pitfall of the core group members possible becoming a clique. The welcoming of new people into the group is a process that continues well beyond welcoming them at the door.

6. **Future Meetings.** Other considerations for future meetings include:

- *Define the purpose/mission of the group in no more than two sentences.* Is it clear? You may want to add it to any flyer or brochure that you develop for the group. Some groups also include any guidelines that they have for their meetings right on their flyer or brochure.
- *Membership.* Who can attend meetings and who cannot? Do you want regular membership limited to those with the problem and an associate membership for spouses and family?
- *Meeting format.* What choice or combination of discussion time, education, business meeting, service planning, socializing, etc. best suits your group? What guidelines might you use to assure that discussions be non-judgmental, confidential and informative? Topics can be selected or guest speakers invited. A good discussion group size may be about 7 to 15. As your meeting grows larger, consider breaking down into smaller groups for discussion.
- *Ongoing use of professionals.* Consider using professionals as speakers, advisors, sources of needed space and services, educators, helpful gatekeepers, advocates, possible trainers, researchers, consultants to your group, or simply as sources of continued referrals. All you have to do is ask.
- *Support between meetings.* Many groups encourage the exchange of telephone numbers or a telephone list to provide members with help over the phone when it is needed between meetings. Older groups have a buddy system that pairs newcomers with veteran members.
- *Projects.* Begin with small projects, e.g. developing a flyer or newsletter, obtaining newspaper coverage by calling editors, etc. Rejoice and pat yourselves on the back when you succeed with these first projects. Then, if the group desires, work your way up to more difficult tasks and projects, e.g. planning a conference, advocating the introduction of specific legislation, developing a visitation program, etc.
- *Sharing responsibilities and nurturing new leaders.* You will want to look for all the different, additional roles that people can play in helping other members and making the group work, e.g., group librarian, arranging for speakers, greeter of new members, group liaison with an agency, etc. In asking for volunteers, it's easier to first ask the group what specific tasks they think would be helpful. If you haven't yet experienced it, you'll come to know the special "helper's high" satisfaction of helping others. Don't be selfish. Remember to let your members feel the fine satisfaction of helping others in the group. By sharing responsibilities you help create opportunities for others to become key members and leaders in the group.
- *Lastly, expect your group to experience regular "ups and downs"* in terms of attendance and enthusiasm. It's natural and to be expected. You may want to consider joining or forming a coalition or state association of leaders from the same or similar types of self-help groups, for your own periodic mutual support and for sharing program ideas and successes.

PUBLICIZING YOUR GROUP

In addition to those we suggested earlier, you and your group co-founders can consider these ideas for publicizing your group. Select which ones will be tried and who will be in charge of carrying each out.

- *Contact local agencies and associations* that address your area of concern, e.g., county office on aging or disability, United Way, YMCA, mental health association, etc. Ask if they would please mention your group at their next staff meeting. If they print a newsletter, ask if they would kindly mention your group in it.
- *Contact key professionals*: doctors, agency directors, social workers, clergy, media representatives, i.e., anyone who would be sympathetic to your need. Ask for their support and any ideas they may have for publicizing your group, e.g. their writing letters to other professionals or agencies or, if they have expertise or experience in your area, their willingness to be interviewed by a reporter.
- Simply pick up your phone and *call the local weekly/daily newspaper*, ask for an editor or reporter, request they consider doing an article, cite how unique and helpful your group will be, mention any professionals who support your work and would be willing to be interviewed too. If they only ask you to send them more information, include a double-spaced press release as an attachment that says:

SUPPORT GROUP ORGANIZING - Persons who/with _____ are invited to participate in a self-help support group that is being organized for the _____ area. Members of the group will share their experiences, coping skills, hopes, and successes. A meeting date and location will be determined by the response of interested participants. To become involved, or for more information, call (phone number) by (date).

###

- If health related, *contact your local hospital's departments* that see members, e.g., social services dept., community health education dept., oncology dept., etc.. As with other professionals whom you contact, consider asking for their outreach suggestions, too.
- *Write a brief 10 second radio spot* and send it to local radio stations requesting they please air it as a public service announcement, or include it in their "Community Calendar" announcements.
- *Write a very brief community announcement ad* and send it to the *local cable TV* company(s) for posting on their community notices channel.
- If you know of any *websites* that publicize local events in your area, write the webmaster or post a message on any related message board. If you are developing a local group of a national organization, ask the national to list you at their website.
- *Talk to persons who have started similar groups* and ask what methods and contacts they found especially helpful in recruiting new group members.
- *Design and have printed a brochure* that explains the group's purpose and activities in greater detail than your flyer.
- *Call your local community helpline(s)* - make sure they know about, and have your group listed in their database.
- *Contact local churches* and ask that they please post a flyer or mention your group in their bulletin/newsletters.
- *Write a "letter to the editor"* describing your group (it is more likely to be printed if you comment on a current article or editorial that relates to your issue).
- Finally, ask yourselves, *"Is there another good way we can reach potential members?"*

SUGGESTIONS FOR LOCATING A MEETING SPACE

"If they're anything, support groups are low maintenance. They don't require a lot of equipment, or complicated setups, or specially-designed facilities. Basically they call for a bit of quiet, a bit of privacy, and a few people who are ready to say something meaningful to one another. Consequently, support groups can function fairly well in a variety of places."

- James E. Miller, Effective Support Groups, p. 23.

The most obvious place to have a small meeting, especially a first meeting of your core group, is in someone's home. If you expect more people than such a space can hold, or if you personally prefer not to open your home to people who are (initially) strangers, consider the possibilities listed below:

- *Churches* are the most common public meeting place for self-help groups and seem the most cooperative. In requesting space, a personal connection is the best (know anyone who is a member?), and could mean no charge initially - so work through personal contacts you or your core group may have (the pastor or Rabbi). Otherwise, just phone local churches. More and more churches have been requiring a minimal donation to go towards heating and utilities.
- *Hospitals* are another option, especially if your group is health related. An advantage is that hospital space is usually free, but for this reason space on a regular basis is in short supply Begin by contacting the administrative office or the community relations department to request a meeting space.
- *Community organizations or agencies* such as community centers, counseling centers, YMCA/YWCA, Red Cross, Salvation Army, veteran organizations, senior citizens centers, and others will sometimes provide space free of charge for self-help group meetings. Your local library or daycare centers and schools, bank, municipal town hall or community college are other facilities where self-help groups hold meetings. Again, if anyone in your initial group personally knows a staff member or officer, it helps. Contact other groups in the area to see where they hold meetings.

Availability of a kitchen or a sink with running water is desirable for making coffee or other refreshments. It is helpful to place chairs in a circle or around a table. In this way, members may face each other and the atmosphere is friendlier and more supportive. A table can serve to display books, pamphlets, announcements and other printed materials. A small storage space can also be helpful for storing supplies, etc., if one could be made available.

When inquiring about a meeting place, be sure to communicate the fact that your group is a voluntary, non-profit organization that intends to provide a service to the public free of charge. Be clear on the specific nights that you would like your meetings to take place, how long they will be, and who will be responsible for opening and closing the facility. Such attention to detail will serve you and your group well!

IDEAS FOR STRUCTURING YOUR GROUP MEETING

Meeting formats for self-help groups vary from loosely structured discussion groups to more formally structured meetings that follow the traditional program of the national group (e.g., "12-Step groups"). There is no one right way to plan a meeting. To gather information on various group structures, search the internet for any online literature on starting groups. Also, visit other groups in your area—even if the group deals with a different subject—to see what you like, and what you don't like.

The following activities are common to some self-help group meetings and can be used as an initial guide for structuring your meeting. It's not necessary to incorporate every activity mentioned here in each meeting agenda.

As people arrive at the meeting room, be sure that at least one member is there to...

Welcome New Members: It is a practice of many self-help groups that a volunteer member greets and welcomes new members at the door when they arrive, introducing them to other members, especially those who are in a similar situation.

1. **Start the Meeting:** Shortly after the agreed upon time, the meeting should be called to order by the leader for that night. Some groups open their meetings with a welcoming statement, a reading of the group's purpose and/or a meeting guideline, and/or an outline of what the agenda is for that meeting.
2. **Introduction of Members or "Check-In":** Going around the room, each member can introduce himself/herself briefly (often just giving a first name) and may state their reason for coming to the group or, if not the first meeting, how they have been doing since the last meeting. This introduction should be kept to a minimal—additional time for sharing comes later in the meeting.
3. **Basic Discussion or Another Activity:** For a first meeting, members can take turns (going around in a circle) indicating what they would like to see this group do, the key topics they would like to see discussed, any group speakers they would like to hear on those issues, and other major activities or problems that they would suggest the group address. Be aware of the fact that often those people, who bring up a special issue, may be knowledgeable enough to share with members what they know about the topic. In other words, you might ask if they would spend time talking about what they know the topic at a future meeting.
 - **Regular Group Discussion and/or Guest Speaker.** For discussion, selecting one or more discussion questions ahead of time is one possibility. Another idea is to have a book or an article reviewed by a member who reports on it, and then the group might discuss any questions raised. Playing a short but good tape recording of a presentation, TV or radio program is another way to trigger group discussion. If you decide to have a guest speaker at one of your meetings, consider having time for group discussion that would give members an opportunity to comment upon on the speaker's points that, based upon their experience, they found most important.
 - **Goal Setting** Some groups set aside some time after discussion for goal-setting--that is, each member who is willing, sets a personal goal that they hope to meet by the next meeting. Then at the next meeting, they can report back on how they did.
4. **Business/Planning Portion:** If included, this time could be set aside for any business the group wishes to take up, such as planning or reporting upon projects or activities (to include any advocacy efforts by the group or members), arranging for future meetings (choosing discussion topics/guest, speakers, etc.), making announcements, and collection of any dues or voluntary contributions by "passing the hat."
5. **Wrap-Up or "Check-Out":** This is an opportunity for the leader or other member of this meeting to summarize the meeting discussion and ask if any members need to say anything left unsaid from the meeting, whether it be an insight or an expression of thanks. Members are then reminded of time and place of next meeting.

Formal Closing: It is helpful when you have some signal or tradition that the meeting is formally closing, e.g., a closing statement, or other ritual at the end of each meeting, e.g., joint reading of the serenity prayer, "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change... etc."

After the meeting, refreshments are often served, providing an opportunity for informal but often very helpful conversations. After the meeting, in some groups, members have the opportunity to go to a diner for coffee. If this is the case, always invite new members and avoid the appearance of cliquishness that turns off newcomers.

SAMPLE GUIDELINES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Self-help groups should provide an atmosphere of caring, sharing and support for their members. Here are some basic guidelines used by groups that may help your members feel more comfortable and “safe.” Choose or adapt any of the suggestions below. To insure that all members are familiar with them, you can have a member briefly read the main points (in bold below) at the start of each meeting, or post the guidelines in an area where members can read them.

- **We start and end our meetings on time.** We try to arrive on time, because people arriving late can sometimes be disruptive. We also need to be respectful of people's time and also end the meeting on time.
- **We keep confidential all personal information shared in the group.** What we share about our personal lives and experiences is to be kept absolutely confidential by all members. So, "what is said in the group stays in the group."
- **No interrupting while others are speaking and no side conversations.** It is important that we actively listen when someone is talking and avoid interruptions or side conversations.
- **Use "I" statements.** We encourage all members to speak in the first person, using "I" statements because we know that we learn when each of us shares our different experiences.
- **Don't give advice.** We do not prescribe, diagnose, judge, nor give advice. Rather we respect each member's right to reach and make their own personal decisions. So we listen, we speak about what has worked for us in similar circumstances, and we help members to recognize and explore their options.
- **Share what helps you.** While we all address the special problems we face, we all make a special effort to share our successes, coping skills, insights, strengths, and hopes - no matter how small.
- **No monopolizing the group's time.** By talking for long periods of time or talking too frequently, we are disrespectful of the need for all members to participate.
- **Members have the right not to speak.** In our group discussions, each person always has the right to pass on any question that he or she prefers not to answer.



"To deal with any controversial issues that might divide a group, we should begin by clearly stating the purpose of the group and the way this group goes about its interaction. For example, a parents' support group might have this as part of their purpose; 'Our Parents' Mutual Aid Group meets to aid parents in dealing with their unique concerns as parents. In that spirit, we are not here to take positions about what is right or wrong for another parent. Rather, our purpose is to help all parents examine the implications of the decisions they choose to make. Room for a variety of points of view and ways of doing things will always be provided.'"

- Ted Bowman, national group trainer

DISCUSSION TOPICS

While well-established groups usually have developed structured exercises to help members share their experiences, strengths, hopes, coping skills, and practical information, other groups simply plan initial group discussions on the basis of their members' common needs and interests. Consider surveying the members and have them name those topics that interest them the most. Then members can take turns at different meetings to simply introduce a chosen topic by giving a brief summary of the issue and then introducing discussion questions. If they need to prepare, they can read up on the topic or ask other members about their experiences or perspectives on it. Topics could range from education to advocacy issues, but the most important point is that the topic be based on the needs of your members. Discussion can also be based on a specific question, as determined by members beforehand. Some sample questions are provided here. Members may want to review them and pick those they would most like to schedule for discussion. For the discussion, members can go "round-robin," taking turns answering, following a clockwise motion around the room. Another way is the "popcorn" approach, when members simply speak up when they feel ready to speak (or "pop") until everyone has had a chance to respond. Also, it's important that the group shouldn't be too large, to be sure to allow each person the opportunity to talk. If you feel your group is too large, consider breaking into smaller groups.

Remember that the purpose of asking these questions is to help individuals share, think about, and learn from each others' experiences and insights. There are no right or wrong answers, only answers reflecting the different personal responses and perspectives of people coping with the stresses and challenges. The following questions are just examples. The best questions are ones your members develop. Try to phrase questions so they will reveal positive answers.

1. Who has been most supportive to me in helping me deal with this situation? What have they done or said that has helped me the most? What has been the worst advice given me.
2. How do I handle the issue of whether and when to tell others about my situation - in social situations, the workplace, and elsewhere?
3. What did I used to think about people who had this problem before I knew I had it? What's the most important point that the public should know about this that they don't know now? How can or should they best be taught?
4. What am I most proud of, as it relates to my coping with this situation - either personal traits, coping skills, or accomplishments that help me deal with the small (and large) problems.
5. What would I say in a note or a letter to someone (or their spouse/family) who was facing what I have faced?
6. Generally, how has my life changed? What new values and priorities do I have now that I did not have before?
7. In what ways does the life event or illness control my life? In what ways have I learned ways to regain control of my life?
8. For what in my life am I most grateful? What do I now like most about my life?
9. What long term goals have I set for my life? What is the major goal and how do I plan to reach it?
10. If I have learned anything special about life or human nature as a result of my situation, what is it?

"The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas."

-Linus Pauling, M.D.

"Don't ever forget the power of listening and the strength it takes to be there –
not curing but caring... The world is in need of listeners."

- Bernie Siegel, M.D.

"With the gift of listening comes the gift of healing, because listening to your brothers or sisters until they have said the last words in their hearts is healing and consoling."

- Catherine de Hueck Doherty

"Mutual empathy is the great unsung human gift."

- Jean Baker Miller, MD & Irene P. Stiver, PhD

"ONE PERSON ALONE SIMPLY CANNOT DO IT" SHARING THE WORKLOAD

You know you can't do everything, and in a "mutual aid" group you shouldn't - unless you want to set yourself up for probable burnout. Also, if you have been helping people, you already know how good you feel after you help them - so don't be selfish and keep all those good feelings to yourself! Other members need to become involved and share the work. Research shows that the longer-lasting self-help groups are the ones where the responsibilities are shared. Be sure to remind members that "The responsibility for running our group can't be just on one person's shoulders, we all need to help out." Others can co-lead the meeting with you, greet people at the door, and bring refreshments.

The key to getting people involved and helping out in your group can be expressed in one word, "ownership." Who owns the group? The extent to which people perceive the group as truly "their group," will influence how much they will invest their time and efforts in helping their group to survive and prosper. But if they view the group as belonging 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. When several people are seen helping out at meetings, they model for newcomers what your self-help mutual aid group is all about - not one person doing it all, but a group that depends on the active participation of its members. This is why, if you're starting a group, it's especially important to seek out a couple of other people who will help out in promoting and running that first meeting.

In delegating responsibility, you always run the risk that the work may not be done, or done quite the way you would do it. But if you don't delegate, you run an even greater risk of not believing in or nurturing the abilities of your members.

If you have an existing group, a first step in getting more help is to identify, name and describe the jobs that will help your group fulfill its purpose. Write them down (see samples under "Volunteer Opportunities With Our Group," p. 55). In each description, be clear as to what tasks are involved. "*Fear of the unknown*" is one of man's greatest fears. The clearer the job duties, the easier it is to get people to accept responsibility for doing "*that*". But recognize, too, that not all jobs have to be written down. There are always a good number of short-term project opportunities that will arise.

WAYS TO GET MEMBERS TO HELP OUT

1. **Ask them personally on a one-to-one basis in private.** Ask if they would like to serve in a specific job. Be sure to indicate why you think they would be good for that position, and how you or someone else will help them if they have a question or problem. If they give you a time-limited excuse (e.g., a family obligation over the next two months), note it, and approach them again after the given time.
2. Whenever possible, **give members a choice of two jobs**, but allow them to volunteer for another job.
3. Always **specify how long** they will be expected to serve, e.g., until the end of the year. You may want to consider a fixed term of service for all jobs, e.g., one year.
4. If you encounter problems in finding someone to do a specific job, **ask for two people to volunteer to share the responsibility** of that job. Some people will more willingly accept if they know the work won't be all on their shoulders.
5. Similarly, some groups have difficulty getting someone to volunteer to be the "president." **Having two "Co-leaders"** may be less intimidating to reluctant group members. On the other hand, we know of at least one group that attracts members by giving everyone who volunteers for a job the title of "vice-president of"
6. Be sure to continuously **acknowledge people publicly** for the jobs/tasks accomplished. This can be done at meetings, through newsletters, on a web page, or by awarding certificates of appreciation.

7. While not as good as a request in person, you can consider **circulating a sign-up sheet** at a meeting, or in a mailing (see "Volunteer Opportunities With Our Group" section). But don't depend on that one method alone.
8. In addition to a "sign-up sheet" above, another idea is a **skills/contacts sheet**. Members could list any special skills or knowledge they have (worked with media, computer techie, typing, etc.), and any special personal contacts (brother is a printer, son is a lawyer, etc.). Use the list to tap members for jobs and projects. The skills category may provide new and exciting positions (e.g., if someone writes "give great parties" sign them up for being the Holiday party chairperson!).
9. **When people resign from their volunteer position, ask them to suggest a good replacement.** Also, ask them for feedback on how they would evaluate their experience. Their positive comments could be used to encourage others to take the position; and any suggestions they offer should be seriously considered.
10. **Always nurture new potential volunteers.** Find small jobs (e.g., handing out brochures, doing photocopying, etc.) that will give people a small but initial opportunity to help out in the group.

A CAUTION

As a founder of a new group, members naturally will look to you for answers and guidance. Be careful not to become "the expert." Redirect questions put to you to the group. Remember that's why they call it a "support group," and not a "support person." Work to pull together the collective wisdom that can be found in mutual aid self-help groups when members pool together their experiences, resources and insights. You can take great pride and satisfaction in your volunteer work when you see members helping one another through the group you started.

If you are looking for additional reading, one of the better references is [Effective Support Groups: How to Plan, Design, Facilitate and Enjoy Them](#) by James E. Miller, Willowgreen Publishing, 1998, 64 pages, \$6.95.

"Expect people to be better than they are; it helps them to become better.
But don't be disappointed when they are not; It helps them to keep trying."
- *Merry Browne*

(Following is a sample Handout - Rewrite it to Meet Your Group's Needs)

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES WITH OUR GROUP

Every self-help support group depends upon its members' involvement to keep the group running. Please help us to continue our meetings by offering to volunteer for any of the following tasks (check any you would be willing to serve in). You would be volunteering to serve in a position until (date)_____. If you have any questions or need further information, just speak to _____.

- Greeter** - Arrives early to welcome new members at the door, explains how the meeting will run, tries to answer any questions, introduces them to the other members - especially those with similar experiences. Handles name tags, if group decides they want to use them.
- Refreshments Coordinator** - Arranges for refreshments at meetings, makes coffee (if desired by group), arranges for and sets out "goodies" and hospitality supplies. Initially, this job might be combined or shared with "greeter."
- Phone Contact person(s)** - Ideally, we should have two or three people taking calls from our group flyers, ads, etc. The contact person gives potential members meeting time, location and directions, basic information, and encourages caller to come to the meeting to see how the group works. Be prepared with local helpline numbers and/or other resources, if caller needs any immediately.
- Outreach/Publicity Coordinator** - Gets the word out! Arranges for meeting notices in newspapers, distribution and posting of flyers; does special mailings, press releases, etc. Might occasionally speak before community groups or at professional agency staff meetings.
- Librarian** - Arrives a few minutes early to put out materials or copies of information, resources and events (which might be stored at meeting site, if possible); replenishes literature as needed, checks out books, collects payment/donations for materials.
- Liaison person(s)** - Maintains contact with a specific local, state or national organization (ideally with a staff member at that organization), receives their newsletter, updates members on the news, events and services. For which organization(s): _____.
- Newsletter Editor** - Compiles newsletter with help of co-leaders and other members, writes/finds articles or help with the writing, organizes the printing and mailing.
- Webmaster** - maintains the group's website, providing information on the group and its work, best website links, future events, recognition, projects, newsletter, etc. Self-help groups can sometimes get free web space from newspaper or community websites.
- Secretary** - Keeps list (maybe computer list) of active members, mails out meeting notice reminders with any topic before each meeting, composes and mails out any letters to include "thank you" notes if speakers are used, handles any responses. Works with treasurer.
- Treasurer** - Collects/deposits contributions (passing a donations basket around towards end of meeting) or collects/deposits dues if there are any. If group needs a checking account, writes checks, and reconciles any monthly bank statement. Works with secretary.
- Co-Leader** - A Co-Leader shares or rotates the responsibility for running the meetings. They arrange for the meeting space. They stay in touch with national office (if there is one). May assume any of the duties below when there is no member yet assigned.
- Other** (handling special projects or events): _____ (fill in space as needed by your group).

*"No one can be the best at everything.
But when all of us combine our talents,
we can and will be the best at virtually anything."
- Dan Zadra*

DEVELOPING SELF-HELP GROUPS: TEN STEPS & SUGGESTIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Among the variety of roles that professionals play in support of self-help groups - which range from providing referrals, to being a guest speaker or serving as a group advisor - no role is more challenging and productive over the long term than that of helping to create a new, free, on-going self-help group. It appears that about one out of every three self-help groups is started with some help from a professional. By the very nature of his or her work and specialty, the professional is in a favorable position to identify and link persons who have the potential to start a mutual help group.

For most professionals helping to start a free, on-going self-help group, the task involves their assuming what very well may be a new type of professional role--that of a consultant in a group organization. The following serves as an overview of ten basic steps that the professional can follow in helping self-help groups organize. These are suggested guidelines that have proven helpful to many professionals. It represents one general approach. Actual group development and the sequence of steps may vary slightly, based upon choice of a particular self-help group model or other special circumstances, preferences or opportunities. The ten steps are to:

1. Acquire a Basic Understanding of Self-Help Group Dynamics and Benefits. The professional who contemplates starting a self-help group is probably already aware of the general needs for such a group (e.g., social support, experiential knowledge, normalization, shared coping skills, helper-therapy, positive role models, etc.) and has recognized the way in which the group could supplement professional services. The professional needs to familiarize him/herself with the basic understanding of self-help group dynamics, and how they differ from professionally-run therapy or support groups. For a better understanding as to how self-help groups operate as mutual help organizations, the professional can refer to readings on mutual help (see bibliographical section). An excellent way to learn is simply to attend a local group that has meetings open to professionals.
2. Assess Current Groups and Models. If you have determined that a need exists for a particular type of self-help group, check as to what national or model self-help groups may already exist for that problem. At the same time, you also want to confirm that there is no local chapter or similar group already existing in your immediate area. A variety of these national and model self-help groups print development manuals or helpful "How to Start" guideline materials that you should obtain and review.
3. Identify Persons Interested in Starting a Group. Identify at least two former/current patients or clients who have experienced the problem, and who express an interest "in starting" a group. Simply having persons interested "in joining" a group is not sufficient. Ideally you will want to include "veterans" who have had greater experience at coping with the problem and are willing to help others. Some opportunities for locating potential group founders include: contacts with other professionals and agencies; announcements at the conclusion of educational programs or conferences on the topic; and registration of your specific group interest in starting a group with your local self-help clearinghouse if there is one.
4. Form a Core Group. Once several persons have been identified, the next step is to have a preliminary meeting to organize these persons into a "core group." The professional will want to confirm their interest and emphasize that this is a "mutual help" effort to create a mutual help group. All members of the core group should be expected to contribute in some way to the development of the group by sharing in the work. They should make this commitment to one another, possibly for a specific period of time.
5. Clarify and Negotiate the Relationship. It is important at this preliminary meeting to clarify the professional's role in relationship to the development of the group. The most appropriate role for the professional to assume at this stage is that of a consultant. A common pitfall for professionals is to continue at this time to play the traditional role of leader, which promotes ongoing dependence on the professional, while also stifling the member's own sense of responsibility and ownership that spark the very energy and dynamics of most mutual help groups. The role of the consultant, the types of assistance available, and a time frame for providing consultation, should be explained and agreed upon with members of the core group. The consultation would focus primarily on group organization, but also might include help in resource identification, skills building, program development, and collaboration in problem solving. As in the case of any consultant, the professional provides advice and counsel, but does not assume responsibility for leadership, decision making or group tasks, unless the group requests such assistance. Some groups refer to this as being "on tap, not on top." The

importance of the members themselves taking responsibility for the group, and the professional serving in an ancillary role, is key.

6. Advise on Planning and Publicizing First Public Meeting. With the consultative relationship established, members of the core group should turn their attention to their first project - the first general meeting of the self-help group. Core group members should share responsibilities for the meeting. This they can do by sharing tasks such as serving as co-chairpersons, making arrangements for the meeting space, serving as greeter, making refreshments and coffee, etc. Shared responsibilities reduce the high risk of "one leader burn-out" that is often faced when only one person assumes the responsibilities. More importantly, at that first meeting core members will "model," by their shared volunteer activities, what mutual help is--not one person doing it all, but shared responsibilities and contributions by members. Core group members can begin work on publicity, letters to the editor, putting notices in church bulletins, printing and distribution of flyers, etc. The professional can assist in promoting referrals to this first meeting by contacts with other key professionals, agencies and associations.
7. Assist at the First Meeting. A professional's participation in the first meeting may vary from providing moral support to core group members who are chairing the meeting to addressing the group as a speaker, or possibly even being a co-leader if necessary. The role should be minimal in order to allow the group to exercise and develop its own group competencies. Time should be allowed for all members to introduce themselves and describe the needs they feel the group might address. It will take several meetings of trust-building before members take more initiative in contributing to group discussion and work. At the close of the first meeting there should be general consensus on the needs for a group and agreement on a suitable site and time for a second meeting. It is easier for people to remember future meeting times if it is held on a particular day of the week or month, e. g., the second Thursday of the month.
8. Advise on Plans for Subsequent Meetings and Continued Organizational Development. The format for future meetings should include a portion of time devoted to the "business" of developing the organization, as well as discussion. Many groups include guest speakers, films, or special service projects as part of their educational program for members. For example, one service would be the establishment of an audio tape library of guest speaker presentations. Another would be development of a lending library of books and medical articles on the specific problem the group addresses. Future projects may include community education and visitation programs. The organizational structure for the group may be as formal or informal as members prefer--with or without elected officers and written by-laws. But general guidelines for group meetings and discussion, which the professional can help the group develop, are often helpful. Another helpful resource that the group can begin to develop is that of a professional advisory committee. The group itself may decide to establish several working committees, e.g., program, publicity, or study committees, to examine needs that were prioritized at the first meeting.
9. Identify and Address Any Special Problems. With any consultation there often is the need to "trouble-shoot" or address new problems as they arise. The professional, as a consultant, can be very helpful in advising the group of solutions to problems that they may encounter, e. g., handling a member who dominates discussion, or increasing membership through better publicity. Problem solving should usually be a collaborative effort with members. It is also important to note the responsibility for addressing these problems should continue to be focused on group competencies, rather than too quickly providing professional intervention at times critical to group development.
10. Review and Evaluate Role. At the conclusion of the consultation time period, an assessment of the consultation and a reassessment of the professional role should take place jointly between the consultant and consultee. If the group is operating without problems, the consultation may be terminated. At the request of the group, the professional may remain available on an ad hoc basis as a consultant. He or she may also assume a somewhat different role, such as a resource or agency liaison person who may continue to attend meetings to answer questions related more to their expertise rather than group process issues. At other times the professional may be called upon to assume additional temporary roles, such as serving as a trainer in skills-building.

In summary, an important factor in the development of a viable and self-sustaining mutual help group is the need for the professional to assume a consultation role. This permits the group members to assume responsibilities for the operation of the organization, for exercising and developing group competencies, and for addressing the felt and unmet needs of its members. The extent to which members perceive the group as "their own" will directly determine the amount of responsibility they take for it and the amount of investment they make in it. The importance of self-help, as ultimately reflected in the members' ability to take responsibility for the group, is crucial to developing and realizing many of the unique benefits that self-help groups have to offer.