

New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

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DEVELOPING SELF-HELP SUPPORT GROUPS: GENERAL STEPS & GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONALS

Among the variety of roles that professionals can play in support of self-help mutual aid groups - which range from providing referrals, to being a guest speaker or serving as a group advisor - no role is more rewarding and productive over the long term than that of helping to create a new mutual aid self-help group. Research conducted by our Clearinghouse indicates that approximately one out of every three self-help groups is started with the help of a professional. By the very nature of his/her specialty work, many professionals are in a very favorable position to identify, encourage, and link persons who have the potential to start a mutual help group. Here are some suggestions for how you can help in creating an empowering and ongoing community self-help group.

Ten General Steps

For most professionals helping to start a self-help group, the task involves their assuming a new role - as a "**consultant**" specializing in group organization. Here are ten basic steps that any professional can follow in helping a self-help group to organize. These are suggested guidelines that have proven helpful to many professionals. It represents one general approach. The steps and their sequence may vary slightly, based upon choice of a particular self-help group model or other special circumstances, preferences or opportunities.

1. ACQUIRE A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF SELF-HELP GROUP DYNAMICS AND BENEFITS.

The professional who contemplates starting a self-help group is usually 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 greatly supplement professional services. The professional also needs to familiarize him/herself with a basic understanding of self-help group dynamics, and how they differ from professionally-run therapy or support groups. For a better understanding of how self-help groups operate as voluntary, member-run, mutual help organizations, the professional can refer to readings on mutual help and possibly attend a local self-help group that has open meetings. Contact our Clearinghouse for copies of basic literature, book references, the location of appropriate self-help group meetings, and ongoing consultation support from your own Clearinghouse staff person.

2. ASSESS ANY CURRENT GROUPS OR MODELS. Don't "re-invent the wheel." If you have already determined that a need exists for a particular type of self-help support group, see if there is a national or model self-help group that already exists to address this problem (call our Clearinghouse with your specific request - we'll also confirm that there is no similar group already existing in your immediate area). Research also shows how groups that are affiliated with a national will be more vibrant and live longer than a group that is not. A variety of these national and model self-help groups offer free consultation, and often have a group development manual or helpful "How to Start" guideline materials that you should obtain and review.

3. IDENTIFY PERSONS INTERESTED IN STARTING THE GROUP. Identify at least two former/current clients who have experienced the problem, and who are indeed interested "in starting" a group. Simply having persons interested "in joining" a group is not sufficient. Indicate to the potential founders that with several co-founders, the work will not be on one's person's shoulders

alone. If at all possible, ideally seek out "veterans" who have had greater experience at coping with the problem and are motivated to help others with the condition. Usually you will have "newbies" who have assorted levels of less experience and success. Some opportunities for locating potential group founders include: listing your interest with our Clearinghouse; contacts with other professionals and agencies that deal with the issue; announcements at the conclusion of educational programs or conferences on the topic; placement of an item in your local newspaper, and registration of your specific group interest with the Clearinghouse. As potential core group members are identified, you will want to be sure they understand what a mutual-help group is, and what roles and strategies they might adopt in developing one. You may want to provide these individuals with a copy of the Clearinghouse's "Ideas and Considerations." Other Clearinghouse guideline material may be helpful as handouts during other points in the consultation - check with your Clearinghouse consultant.

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 their own "core group." The professional will want to confirm their interest in starting a group and secure from them a commitment that they will be willing to invest their time and energy in helping one another to develop "their" self-help group. It would be appropriate at the start of this meeting to familiarize those attending with the material gathered thus far on existing self-help group models. It is important at this step to 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 YOUR RELATIONSHIP. It is important at this first core group meeting that you clarify your specific professional role in regards to the development of the group. The most appropriate role for the professional to assume at this stage is that of a consultant. But a common pitfall for professionals is to continue at this time to play the traditional role of leader, which unfortunately promotes ongoing dependence on the professional, while also stifling the members' own sense of responsibility and ownership that spark the very energy and dynamics of most mutual help groups. The role of a 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 assistance 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 actual leadership, decision making or group tasks, unless the group itself requests such assistance and has a clear need for it. The importance of the members themselves taking responsibility for the group, and the professional serving in an ancillary role, is key to developing a viable self-help mutual aid group.

6. ADVISE ON PLANNING & 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 by letters to the editor, 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 simply 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 date for a second meeting. It is easier for people to remember the next meeting date if it is regularly 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 & ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. The format for future meetings should include a portion of time devoted to the "business" of developing the organization, as well as to continuing group discussion. Many groups also include guest speakers, films, or special service projects as part of their meeting program and services. For example, one service could be the establishment of an audio tape library of guest speaker presentations. Another could 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 bylaws. But general guidelines for group meetings and discussion, which the professional might help the group develop, are often helpful. 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. Another helpful resource that the group can begin to develop is that of a professional advisory committee.

9. IDENTIFY & 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 helpful in advising the group of solutions to problems that they may encounter, e. g., handling a member who dominates discussion, or increasing a low level of membership through better publicity. Problem solving should usually be a collaborative effort with members. It is also important to note that 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 YOUR 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 or may not 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 or a researcher assisting with a special project that the group wishes to pursue.

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 group members to assume responsibilities for the operation of the organization, for exercising and developing group competencies, and for directly 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 the unique benefits that self-help groups have to offer.

Our New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse Resources & Services

A companion guide to this how-to summary, for your distribution to potential group co-founders, is the handout **Ideas and Considerations for Starting a Self-Help Mutual Aid Group**. It can serve as a helpful guide for those lay persons who will develop and run the group. If you have not already received a copy, please contact the Clearinghouse to obtain one. Additional literature focusing upon other aspects of running mutual help groups is available based upon the specific need.

One of the primary purposes of the Clearinghouse is the development of needed new self-help groups. Therefore the Clearinghouse can provide additional resource materials, along with both networking and consultation services - in response to the specific needs of those interested in starting a new group. If you wish to receive free consultation services and you are not already receiving them, please call us.

In any case, we wish you the best of success in your work. We sincerely hope that your experience, understanding, and use of mutual aid self-help groups proves rewarding to you and those whom you serve.

"My years as a medical practitioner, as well as my own first-hand experience, have taught me how important self-help groups are in assisting their members in dealing with problems, stress, hardship and pain... Today, the benefits of mutual aid are experienced by millions of people who turn to others with a similar problem to attempt to deal with their isolation, powerlessness, alienation, and the awful feeling that nobody understands."

- C. Everett Koop, MD (1992)

"What we know about helping has been largely based on artificial interactions between professionals and clients, usually in an office, laboratory, or hospital.... Much of what goes on in the natural environment... is quite effective in solving problems in living for most people."

- Julien Rappaport, Ph.D., in his article, "Collaborative Research with a Mutual Help Organization"

"A major issue surrounding the involvement of professionals in the initiation of self-help groups concerns the maintenance of the group's autonomy. Consumers and citizens are all too often socialized to occupying passive or subservient positions when relating to professionals. This issue is especially critical in agency-based supports groups." - A.M. Jaeger, R.S. Slotnick, & M. Schure in "Toward a 'Self-Help/Professional Collaborative Perspective' in Mental Health."

"The support of and assistance provided by professionals to self-help groups can be of enormous value."

- B. Newsome & M. Newsome, "Self-Help in the United States: Social Policy Options," Urban and Social Change Review, Vol. 16, 2, Summer, 1983.