

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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HOW TO START A SELF-HELP GROUP IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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BASIC STEPS & SUGGESTIONS

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 first 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 in the Sourcebook 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 (you can often find your local community helplines by calling your United Way at 1-800-411-8929). If you do have a local self-help clearinghouse in your area (see Chapter 6), 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 make the same mistake that some professionals make in professionally-run groups--of thinking 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 may be the following:
 - *Defining the purpose(s) (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.
- *Help 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, obtaining newspaper coverage by calling editors, beginning a newsletter, 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.