

NEW JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUP CLEARINGHOUSE

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KEEPING GROUP MEMBERS FROM THE START

One of the major concerns that many self-help group leaders have is getting and keeping group members. It is important to remember that all groups have a certain degree of member turnover—it's just the nature of groups. However, whether it is getting new persons to become members of your group, or retaining old members, there are several steps that can be taken to increase the chances of people returning to your group.

Make Newcomers Feel Welcome from the Start!

As with any growing self-help group, new people come to your group from time to time. In order to encourage the newcomer to return and become a member of the group, there are several measures that can be taken. Keep in mind, however, that regardless of what your group does, not all newcomers will return to the group. That is just a fact of life. However, to ensure that most return, consider the following:

- **Group Contact Person:** Making newcomers feel welcome first starts with the group's contact person. As a contact person it is important to:
 - **Educate the person about your group** (what it does/does not do). Give the caller a realistic view of your group.
 - **Listen to the caller** (but only to a certain point): Let the caller talk about his/her situation—but don't let them talk too much. Instead, let them know that others in the group have had similar experiences to theirs and if they come to the group they can find information, hope and courage. **If you talk too long, the caller may "get a meeting" on the phone and will no longer have any need to go to the group!**
 - **Be empathetic:** Let the caller know that you understand what they are going through. Talk a little about yourself and your situation—but don't talk too much.
 - **Put the caller at ease:** Make the caller feel as if he/she has a new friend in you so that when they attend the meeting they will already know someone and won't be alone.
- **The Greeter:** Every self-help group should have a member (a facilitator, contact person or any group member who volunteers) who greets new people at the door. This sets up a welcoming atmosphere right from the start. You can lose a potential member in the first minute if the new person is left floundering by him or herself.
 - **Personally welcome each new person at that door.** Remember: It takes tremendous **courage** to go to a meeting for a first time. Learn a little bit about their story and the primary reason they have come to the meeting. Introduce them to other members of the group right away—especially any with similar circumstances. If a person walks into a meeting for the first time and is not greeted by anyone, especially if no one smiles at them, they will feel isolated, uncertain if they are in the right room, and probably will never come back. You can lose a potential new member in the first thirty seconds of when they walk in the door.

- **Provide information:** Have information about the group available for the newcomer. This will help the newcomers feel more at ease and educate them on “group behavior.” If you have ground rules (especially group confidentiality policies), meeting structure, upcoming events, group history, or other information about the group, newcomers will feel more comfortable knowing how the group will run, what activities are planned (which might entice them into coming back) and what is expected of them.
- **For the Facilitator:**
 - **Encourage them to participate in the group (if they want):** Find out if the newcomer has any special talents or interests that might help the support group. See if they may be interested in helping out in some way to help make them feel like a part of the group. The more the group feels like “the group’s group” and not just belonging to a leader or clique, the more apt a newcomer will return or participate.
 - **Discourage “spilling” of one’s story.** Some newcomers tend to “spill out” their story—it might be the first time that they can talk about their problem with others who truly understand. However, when they get home they think, “Gee, I just told a bunch of strangers some very personal information and now I am too embarrassed to ever go back to the meeting!” To help alleviate this problem, make sure that the newcomers know that other members have had very similar experiences and that others understand what the newcomer has gone through. After the meeting, thank the person for being so honest and validate their feelings. Tell your personal story and how the group helped you.
- **Other Group Members:**
 - **Avoid cliquish behavior:** Sometimes groups feel exclusive or cliquish to newcomers. Don’t allow “older” group members to stand around in small, unapproachable cliques before the meeting—mingle with the newcomers. Include newcomers in any after meeting socials. If newcomers perceive cliques or subgroups within the larger group which do not feel accessible to them, they may not come back.
 - **Let them know that you understand what they are going through:** When people come to a group for the first time, they do not know the stories and experiences of the other group members. Let the new person know that you truly understand what they are going through. Be encouraging and share some techniques that have worked for you. Never discount their feelings—validate them.
 - **Thank them for coming!**
- **Some Additional Ideas for Helping Newcomers:**
 - **Newcomer’s table:** Some groups have a newcomers table which might include: name tags (in a different color than regular members), markers or pens, membership forms, newsletters, literature on the group, copy of the ground rules (especially issues such as group confidentiality policies), donation box.
 - **Newcomer’s group:** Some groups have a special group just for newcomers which might occur just prior to the regular meeting, or in a separate group that runs concurrently. The newcomers

group orients members to the support group culture and community, lets them meet new people who are also newcomers, teaches the rules, regulations, and expectations of your group.

- **Some Newcomers Won't Come Back** no matter what you do. Expect this and don't blame yourself. Some reasons include:
 - Emotionality too much
 - They feel better just knowing others have same problem
 - They might not be a group person
 - They may have had unrealistic expectations about what a self-help group could and couldn't do.
 - If the newcomer "spilled" out everything, they may be too embarrassed to come back.
- **Evaluate Your Group to Distinguish Between Routine and Unhealthy Member Turnover:** Sometimes a group has a significant turnover of people who attend one or two meetings and then never return. This could be a sign that something is seriously wrong with the group, and if it coincides with other members (or your own) feelings of frustration or needs not being met, it is definitely time to evaluate the group. Here are some possible reasons for rapid turnover in an existing group:
 - **Meetings are too negative** – The group has become just a complaint session, or "pity party" with little or no constructive support
 - **Meetings are too boring** – The group only covers old ground, or the format does not allow for new members' input.
 - **Leadership too domineering** – The group doesn't feel like it belongs to enough people.
 - **Meetings feel shallow** – The group doesn't get at underlying issues of its members, or doesn't give opportunities for meaningful personal sharing (which can sometimes grows out of having too many outside speakers).
 - **Meetings feel threatening** – The discussions are too heavy or intense and members are frightened away by angry confrontations that don't seem to get resolved, or by disruptive members who are not dealt with well by the group.
 - **Confidentiality and trust** –Do members trust their fellow group members to protect their privacy? If not, members will be very careful about what they say, or else leave the group.
 - **Meeting doesn't feel "safe" or "comfortable"** – Are members disrespectful to each other? Do they give advice instead of comfort? Do they verbally attack each other during the group discussion? If so, newcomers will not feel safe in participating in the group discussion; therefore probably won't return.
 - **"Group think"** - Do group members trust the other people in the group enough to express their true feelings about something? Would they feel excluded or rejected by the group for taking an unpopular view, expressing a "minority" opinion? In other words, is there a "party line," a set of group attitudes and believes that is very hard to deviate from without being ostracized?
 - **Difficult members** – In some groups there can be a person who somehow becomes identified as "difficult," "oppositional," or in some other way bothersome and disruptive to the group. How does the group handle this? How a situation like this is handled—humanely or insensitively—can

either encourage members to stay with the group, or leave because they know that the shoe can always be on the other foot, and at some point they may be seen as the difficult member!

- **Love, joy and hope** – An important part of the self-help group experience is feeling the relief of not being alone, the joy of helping others, and the hope of seeing what can be done in the future. In evaluating any group it is important to look at the positives connected with it, and weigh these against the negatives, Is the group a place where people express love and caring for each other? Is the underlying tone one of hope and encouragement? Can people see humor in themselves? Is there laughter in the group?

REMEMBER!

- Make members **feel welcome** right from the start.
- Encourage **member involvement**. Let them know that this is “their” group.
- Ensure that the group feels “**safe**” and “**comfortable.**”
- If you want new people to come back—**make them glad that they came.**

New members will decide for themselves how they feel about your group—many times without providing feedback. When you evaluate the group (whether as a leader or as a group) make your evaluation honestly. How well your group meets the needs of new members will affect whether or not you have an unhealthy turnover of members.