Starting a Support Group

Step 1 – Starting Your Support Group

What is a Support Group?

A Support Group (also known as a mutual aid or Self Help group) is a tool for the empowerment of individuals who share common issues and are challenged by similar life situations. By coming together, people can provide mutual support and take the steps necessary to make positive changes in their lives.

Support Groups become banks of knowledge and experience, enabling people to cope and solve problems. Feelings of self-worth are increased, isolation is reduced and doors of opportunity and optimism are opened. Support Groups also provide an important community service by raising awareness through education, advocacy and campaigning for changes to laws and policies.

Support Groups are run for and by their members. Members determine what they need and how their needs can best be met.

Support Groups can address a number of issues such as:

- Addiction,
- Health,
- Ethnicity,
- Abuse,
- Relationships,
- Grief,
- Sexuality,
- Mental health,
- Life transitions,
- Rare medical conditions
- Building resilience, self esteem and survivor skills
- Peer mentoring opportunities
- Assertiveness training: Getting your message across effectively
- Literacy and numeracy as life skills
- Dealing with social isolation
- Understanding Anger
- Healing from childhood trauma
- Alcohol and drugs: Finding new alternatives
- Adult male survivors of sexual abuse: Early childhood issues
- Foster care leavers: Exploring the issues - is a contact register needed?
- Navigating the system: Centrelink, Homeswest, and other Government departments
- Making your will: Don’t leave home without one
- Financial planning
- Everyday law and consumer rights: Credit cards, mobile phones, and more.

Research indicates that Support Groups may improve the psychological wellbeing of participants and, in some cases, has resulted in a reduction of the use of medication and hospitalisation.

Where Do I Begin?
Once you have decided to start a Support Group, take your time, as there is no need to get things done quickly. Six weeks is adequate time to get a good response and to be prepared.

- **Define the Key Issue that the group members will meet to discuss and share**
  Is it a health condition, a disability, a social issue or an abuse issue?

- **Decide who is likely to be involved in getting the group started**
  Will you call on a health professional to facilitate the group? Is it a group of parents who see a need in the community?

- **Create a Statement of Purpose and the Aims and Objectives**
  A Statement of Purpose is a brief description of the group’s fundamental purpose, i.e. why do we exist? The aims and objectives are a list of things that the group would like to achieve, such as offering mutual support, providing information or raising public awareness.

- **Consider the Costs Involved**
  - Phone calls
  - Refreshments
  - Postage
  - Venue hire
  - Flyers
• **Seek Assistance where Possible**
  - Approach your local Member of Parliament (MP) to ask for assistance with photocopying and administration.
  - Ask for a small donation at meetings.
  - Contact your local council, as many fund causes that benefit local residents.
  - Approach your local church, council office, or library and ask for the donation of a room.

• **Pick a name for your group**
  *Try to make the name interesting, inviting and relevant to the issue.*

• **Set and Confirm a Meeting Date and Time**
  *Think of the availability of your target group when planning your meeting.*

• **Book the Venue.**
  *Things to Consider:*
  - How close is the venue to public transport?
  - If an evening meeting, are the parking area and the venue well lit and safe?
  - Do you need to provide crèche facilities?
  - Is access available for people in wheelchairs or with disabilities?
  - Do you require facilities or equipment such as a kitchen, DVD player or a whiteboard?

• **Establish a Contact Person**
  *A contact person is the first line of communication between the public and the group. He or she answers questions about the group, gives details about meetings, and provides support to interested callers. Being a contact person is not always easy, so having two or more contact people helps to share the load. As a contact person, set aside certain times of the day for contact. If people phone outside these times, consider using a message bank and return calls during your designated hours.*

• **Decide on some Group Activities**
  *Will you hold organised social outings, have guest speakers, exchange personal experiences, campaign for change or discuss the latest research?*

• **Members – Who are they?**
  *It is important to establish criteria for membership. Some people may want to invite family and friends for support, while others may only want to meet with people in situations similar to their own. It is important to first identify the group’s purpose and then go about attracting new members through advertising and word of mouth. In the early stages of the group’s development, discuss the criteria for membership, openly inviting input from all*
the members. Depending on the issue, it may also be necessary to produce a Disclaimer to give to all members.

- **Group Size**
  The issue faced by the group usually determines its size. Sensitive issues may require the group to be kept small or closed in order to provide comfort and safety for group members. Common issues may allow for a larger, more open structure. Finding a balance means, once again, consulting the group members.

- **Group Meeting Structures**
  Formal group structures involve official proceedings such as those associated with committees, are generally hierarchical and rely on a select few to make decisions. Informal structures allow all members to make decisions and alternative structures involve single purpose groups, such as lobby and affirmative action groups, telephone support, email, internet, and letter-writing groups.

### Step 2 – Finding Group Members & Getting Going

#### How to Find Members
One of the best ways of getting the message out about your group is to tell people about it.

- **Talk to others who may have an interest in the same issue.**
- **Speak to health professionals such as your GP or community health nurse as well as appropriate community organisations. They may be able to pass along information to potential members.**

Create an attractive flyer to place in libraries, churches, schools, community and shopping centres or appropriate places such as clinics, hospitals or mental health centres. Remember to first ask permission.

Run a free ad in Community Newspapers under the 'Diary of Events' section or approach your local paper and ask them to write a story about your group. Visit www.communitynews.com.au. Radio and Newspapers are always on the lookout for “human interest” stories. Find out which ones have an interest in health, social services or community activities and build a relationship with them. They may not only assist you in finding members, but may also be happy to follow the progress of your group over time. For more information on promoting your group see.
Contact ConnectGroups for help with developing your flyer and for links to media contacts and appropriate community organisations.

Your First Meeting

There is no right way to run a meeting. Be creative, or if you are nervous, work from a guide or agenda, as this can help reduce nerves and keeps the group focused.

If it is a sensitive topic you might hold an informal meeting where people share experiences over a cup of coffee. If the issue is more common, you might hold your first meeting in a park or at a cafe. The possibilities are endless.

Ensure that the meeting takes place in a relaxed, safe and friendly environment. Remember people are often sharing their experiences for the first time.

A Suggested Format for Meetings

Meet and Greet
- Greet people as they arrive
- Offer them tea or coffee
- Provide name tags or a sign-in sheet if appropriate
- Hand out a basic Information Pack, including items such as the Statement of Purpose, Aims and Objectives, a copy of the group’s rules and services, telephone numbers for professional referrals and a Disclaimer, if appropriate.

Welcome
- Open with a brief welcome and start on time
- Introduce yourself
- Explain the location of the toilet and kitchen facilities
- Clarify smoking and non-smoking areas
- Decide if you will ask for donations for refreshments
- State the purpose of the meeting – make the organisation of the meetings the topic for your first meeting
- Note the closing time for the meeting

‘Round Robin’ Introductions
- Go around the room and ask people to introduce themselves
- Ask them to state their name, their reason for coming to the meeting and what they hope to achieve
- Some people may prefer not to share their name or personal information at this stage, so let them know that sharing is not compulsory
Establish Ground Rules

Ground rules create a safe, supportive environment for all group members. It is important that these rules are established in the early stages of group development so that members develop a sense of trust when sharing personal information. Some examples of ground rules:

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the most crucial of ground rules. It is vital to recognise that some people don’t mind if others know they belong to a Support Group, but others do have a need for privacy. Members need to know that what they say will be kept private and inside the group. Confidentiality is the right of all group members, and when confidentiality is broken, the group needs to decide what action to take. It is important to console the person affected, and to minimize any possible impact.

One person speaks at a time

It is important that all members are given an opportunity to speak and be heard. It may be a good idea to allow each person 5 minutes to speak without interruption. It is important to listen to each other with respect, and allow expressions of feelings without threats or criticisms by others. Groups should agree that put downs, personal attacks and sarcasm are not appropriate for group meetings.

Starting and finishing meetings on time

Start and finish meetings on time. While some members may be flexible about times, it is important to recognise that others have busier schedules and may need to organise their lives around meeting times.

Brainstorm Aims and Objectives

Aims and objectives are a list of things your group wants to achieve. They provide guidelines and are a useful way of identifying your group to prospective members, health professionals and service providers. Have a brainstorming session to identify your goals and objectives, and then narrow the list to the main goals that are achievable. As the group grows, members might consider new projects or directions.

Closing the Meeting

Have a 'Round Robin’ to allow members to comment on one positive aspect of the meeting as well as on one aspect they found challenging. Ensure each person is allowed to speak and be heard. This gives everyone food for thought for the next meeting. Set a date, time and place for the next meeting and delegate any tasks. After the first few meetings, decide how often the group will meet, and get input from all members. Try and
keep the meetings at the same time, day of the week and venue if possible. This allows members to plan their lives accordingly.

Ensure that people know they have the opportunity to attend a few meetings before feeling obliged to join.

- If all members agree, exchange phone numbers.
- Thank people for coming.

Step 3 – Maintaining & Growing Your Group

Ongoing Group Development

Once the group is up and running, attention must be given to keeping the group on track. By this time people will be assisting with various tasks involved with maintaining the group. Most groups start by providing mutual support, but members may now decide they want to change their aims and objectives, add a new service or change direction. This can be an unsettling time, so it is important to so consult your members and assess their support before making any changes.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an ongoing process that contributes to maintaining a good understanding of a group and its development. It allows members to detect problems and act on them before they have an impact. By evaluating the first several meetings, you will get an idea of how well the group is taking shape and whether any adjustments need to be made to enable it to work more effectively.

A checklist might include:

- Is the group meeting its aims and objectives?
- Is the group meeting the needs of individual members?
- Are people able to have their say and be heard?
- Are the activities appropriate?
- Is there a healthy flow of members or an unhealthy turnover?
- Is the overall feeling positive?
- Are members supporting each other?
- Where did members find out about the group?
- How wide is the group’s support base?
- How many organisations are referring people to the group?
- Does the group wish to incorporate?
- Does the group need to review task delegation, ground rules and contact rotation?
Membership

If attendance becomes low, look for possible reasons. Do you need to further promote the group? Have you forgotten a key organisation that might offer referrals? Ensure the group is meeting the needs of the members. Possibly implement a simple questionnaire.

It is important to let members know their attendance is valued. Phone those who have attended previously and let them know they were missed and that you hope to see them again. If you are concerned that the reason for non-attendance is due to the group process, a phone call can provide useful feedback. Encourage these people to come to the next meeting to raise their concerns and perhaps create some ‘agreed to’ healthy changes. It is common for groups to have periods when membership attendance drops off, especially around school holidays.

Lastly, recognise that people’s needs do change and their reasons for joining the group may have dissolved, or are not being met. It is also important to realise that one group cannot meet every individual’s needs and that it may not be a negative reflection on the group when this occurs. The group can only do what is humanly possible within its limitations.

Research

Keep abreast of the latest research that relates to your group. Google Alerts are an excellent way to receive information. Research findings can be used in press releases, to support lobbying and funding applications, and to campaign for change.

Promote Your Group

It is important to spread the word about your group to as many people as possible. This helps to create awareness about the issue, gather new members, gain support and perhaps rally the community into action. Your promotion will benefit from careful planning.

Ways to promote your group:

- Create a unique angle or ‘hook’ to help in selling your story. Think carefully about how much of your personal life and that of the group you want to share, as the media will often want a photograph to add the human interest element.
- Start creating a Media Contact Book by building up a profile of newspapers and local radio stations, including key contacts, deadlines etc.
- Once you have the ‘hook’ and the details of your story worked out, ring and speak to the editor. Aim for an interview and follow up with an email or fax outlining the particulars of the group.
- Consider using talk back radio, websites and emails, as well as guest speakers and expos to spread the word about your group.
- List in Directories (become a member for free and list in the on-line ConnectGroups Directory). You will get noticed by professionals and service providers who can then refer members to your group.

A Patron
A patron is a well-known community figure who provides their name in support of a group or issue. A patron can be used to open events, to advocate on behalf of the group, or simply as a name to add to your promotion material. In some cases patrons provide financial assistance to the groups they represent.

Administration
The best way to keep members updated and involved in the group is to establish an administration system and share responsibilities.
- Maintain a secure, confidential database containing each member's address and contact number
- Keep a notebook for recording meeting information, i.e., minutes
- Keep financial records
- Keep attendance sheets for meetings
- Keep a correspondence book for letters sent and received
- Maintain an information file containing up-to-date information on the group or related issues, as well as media clippings
- Keep a Policy Book on ‘How to do Things’

Planning Days
Hold a Planning Day to keep a group on track and focused on the group's aims and objectives. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss new directions and to establish priorities. Planning days also give group members the opportunity to provide input and to be a part of the decision-making process.

Finances
An important aspect of maintaining a Self Help group is managing financial matters. This includes managing membership fees, room hire costs, donations, etc. It also involves fundraising and seeking out grants.

Incorporation
The decision to incorporate is a group decision. Incorporation provides a group with a legal identity and relieves members from liability for authorised acts of the group. It provides access to certain benefits, such as tax exemption and tax deductible status, and gives the group eligibility to apply for the majority of grants available.
To become incorporated a group must establish a committee and draw up a constitution. The constitution sets the rules and regulations for the conduct of the group’s activities and the relationship between members. It is an involved process that requires time and attention to detail. Further information on incorporation and a model constitution can be obtained from the Department of Commerce.

**Funding**

A group may benefit from a grant or ongoing funding to maintain its services. The process of applying for, administering and acquitting a grant can be involved and complicated. You may need to seek assistance from someone who has had experience in these areas. Funding can help the group move out into the community and increase awareness of its activities.

There are a variety of ways to obtain funds:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grants</th>
<th>There are grants that are available to community and Support Groups. Contact ConnectGroups for a more comprehensive listing, and visit our Useful Links page. Grants are regularly advertised in The West Australian newspaper and other media.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>Large-scale fundraising events are a challenge and can prove a burden for the group. Something simple and fun, that uses established events, can help build up a sense of achievement and encourage friendships. Some ideas may be found at <a href="http://www.fundingcentre.com.au/subscribe">http://www.fundingcentre.com.au/subscribe</a>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations</td>
<td>Do not be afraid to ask people for donations, particularly when you have contacts through work or friends. A group can also seek ‘in kind’ assistance in the form of a venue for example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
<td>Sponsorship involves an organisation or company providing financial support to public events or to assist with the production of brochures etc. In return, usually the group will acknowledge the sponsor’s information on its brochures or other printed materials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Letting Go

A natural part of a group’s life cycle is its termination. If group members are in agreement then the group will need to take appropriate steps to disband. Important points to consider when dissolving a group include:

- Informing all group members
- Informing appropriate support agencies and funding bodies
- If the group is incorporated then it must follow the dissolution procedures as set out in the group’s constitution. The Department of Commerce can offer advice on this matter.
- Archiving your group’s information for future groups.

Group Promotion

The Media

Maintain media coverage by introducing new angles and continuing effective relationships with the media contacts you have established. Submit a follow-up story to update the group’s progress. Encourage established group members to use word of mouth to spread the word. Consider distributing a Newsletter or E-Newsletter. Use free advertising options, such as community announcements and information bulletin boards to promote special planned events. Remember to continue updating your Media Contact Book.

Networking

Every time you speak to someone about your group, you are forming a new network. Always speak well of your group and describe it clearly. It is important to consistently network throughout the group’s life to ensure its ongoing development and maintenance. Networking builds the profile of your group, allows for the sharing of valuable contacts and information, gains support and referral, establishes effective working relationships and helps to build a sense of community. Some methods of networking include:

- Holding an Open Day
- Attending networking events and other Support Group meetings
- Participating in expos or fairs
- Inviting people to group meetings and events
- Making telephone and email contacts
- Visiting other agencies to identify shared issues and ask for referrals

Networking contacts include community organisations, service providers, funding bodies, politicians, government bodies, interested businesses, other support groups and professionals.
Support Groups can benefit professionals by keeping them informed of the issues relevant to the group, providing a resource for members seeking additional support, and referring group members to professionals who are supportive of the group and its philosophies.

In turn, professionals can refer members to your group, connect your group with appropriate community resources, attend a meeting as a guest speaker, keep the group updated on the latest information relating to the issue or include group information in their practices or in professional publications.

Newsletters
Producing a regular Newsletter or E-Newsletter is a great way to keep people informed and up-to-date on group news and events. It can be used to share members’ stories, provide the latest information and research about your group’s issues, keep isolated members in the loop, and announce upcoming meetings and events. Keep it entertaining and do not include too many formal articles or financial reports.

Your Newsletter can be distributed by mail, by hand, via email or on your website. Depending on the nature of your group, distribute to local council members, schools, medical professionals or other like-minded groups.

You may also wish to promote your group through the Newsletters of other organisations or groups. To find out what Newsletters are available to promote the group’s issue, contact organisations that specialize in your area of concern and see if they will publish information about your group or event. This is an effective way to target professionals and enlist their support.

Website
Using a website to promote your group means that your information will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A website can provide information and research about your group, an E-Newsletter, a Calendar of Events, a Chat Room, and will also help attract new members. It is also an effective method of communicating to isolated or disabled members who cannot attend meetings. It is important to regularly update your information as this will reflect the dynamic energy of your group.

It is possible to build your own websites free of charge, visit [http://www.wix.com](http://www.wix.com), [http://www.webs.com](http://www.webs.com) or [http://www.weebly.com](http://www.weebly.com). If you’re not confident with technology you can take a short course at a local educational institution, or contact one of the Internet Service Providers which offer commercial website design.
courses. Consider contacting an Information Technology student who may assist you for a small fee in order to gain experience. For a professionally developed site, you will need to contact a Website Developer and depending on the complexity of your site, costs will vary significantly.

Alternatively, contact other organisations or groups that are familiar with your group issue and see if they would be willing to publicise your details on their website or provide links from their website to your own.

Developing an Online Support Group

The internet overcomes barriers of distance, time and disability, and finding people online is sometimes easier than finding people in your community that share the same issue or interest.

First, do a little research to ensure that nothing else exists online that addresses your particular issue. Try typing keywords into search engines such as Google and Yahoo to see what you can find. Find a favourite from the websites below and then follow the instructions to find a group to join. You may need to register with the websites by creating a username, password and providing an email address. A useful place to set up an online support group is here: http://groups.yahoo.com

If you cannot find an online support group that meets your needs, you may want to consider creating your own online group. Look at other online groups to see how they are set up and how they are run.

Formats for online groups include:

- **Email Mailing Lists** – This is more private and discussions take place via emails sent amongst the group members.

- **Newsgroups** – This is an internet public discussion forum or bulletin board that is open to the whole world.

- **Chat Rooms** – This is different from a mailing list or newsgroup, because it is live.

You should have the following basics for your online group:

- Newsgroup, Chat Room or Email Mailing List
- Owner/Manager Contact Information
- Area for rules, resources and associations
- Additional space or areas for group specific information
The accessibility of your group is very important in the group’s effectiveness and success. You must be very careful online with sharing details about your group and group members. How much information you share will depend on the topic of the group. If you are dealing with sensitive issues, you would not share much information about your members. If the issue is a common issue, sharing would be more acceptable.

Do not make any personal information viewable by the public or non-members. Deciding what information is viewable will let potential members know how you will handle sensitive information and will let visitors know it is a serious group. Most importantly, get a free web based email address and do not give out personal emails.

For a group to be effective, the group should have at least the following information available for viewing:

- Date the group was started
- Joining information (ie. Open to all, or restricted and must be a approved, or by invitation only, etc.)
- Number of members
- Schedule of meetings or chats (are they open to non-members?)
- Mission Statement (information about what the group offers to members and potential members)
- Group associations with others

You must have some basic rules of etiquette or a set of rules to enable participation. The rules are limits that are placed on the group as a whole so that it can do its job, offering the support, understanding and information that the members joined to find. It is a good idea to include consequences of rules that are broken. Some rules to consider include:

- No unacceptable language – offensive, hate, derogatory
- Will you allow advertising? – yes or no
- No off topic messages
- Email or membership status
- Activity levels of membership – are lurkers accepted?
- Political and religious views – yes or no?
- Complaints – how are they handled

Include a welcome message informing potential members about your new group and let them know what your group will offer (friendship, support, information etc) and the purpose for creating the group. Remember to update regularly so that your information remains current.
Once you have created your group, you can usually have it listed in a Directory. Yahoo! Groups, MSN Groups and AOL Groups all have this feature. You can then submit your details to a search engine.

Open three browser windows and go to your group’s home page in one, and two search engines in the others. You will then need to create a description of your group that will inform searches of what it is and also draw them to your group. You must then concentrate on the keywords. These are the words that people enter when using a search engine. Think about the words you would use if you were searching for your group. Many people misspell words, so add misspelled words as well.

Online groups can provide individuals worldwide with support, understanding and information, as well as improve their overall quality of life.

**ConnectGroups Contact Details:**

- **Telephone:** (08) 9364 6909  
- **Rural Freecall:** 1800 195 575  
- **Email:** info@connectgroups.org.au  
- **Web Site:** www.connectgroups.org.au  
- **Postal Address:** PO Box 1209 Booragoon WA 6154  
- **Actual Address:** 10 Almondbury Road Booragoon WA 6154

**ConnectGroups Services:**

- New and Existing Support Group Development, Telephone Information Line, Information Forums, Facilities and Equipment Hire  
- On-line Directory of Support Groups and Community Organisations, E-News