

Mental Health America's



Support Group Facilitation Guide

2016

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Support Group Basics

A Support Group can be defined as a gathering of people with common experiences and concerns who meet together to provide emotional and moral support for one another. They encourage a sense of community, a source of empathetic understanding and provide an avenue for establishing social networks. Meetings can take place in person, over the phone or online. Some groups are ongoing, while others have a predetermined start and end or total number of sessions for the group.

Meetings are directed by the Support Group **Facilitator**. They have the charge to guide group members in a healthy and purposeful discussion that will help them address the issues for which the group is designed. Support groups can be facilitated in a variety of formats, including having different types of facilitators.

Groups that are structured as “Self-Help” are often organized and managed by members only. There are no professionals who facilitate the group aside from the members, known as “Peers”.

Peer Facilitators are those who have actually lived the experience being addressed by the group. They are open about their experiences and use them to connect with group members on a personal level. While they are generally not considered accredited professionals, many Peer Facilitators hold the credential of Certified Peer Specialist. The CPS receives in-depth training on the concepts of recovery, peer support, and how to utilize their own journey of recovery to assist others. Mental Health America offers the National Certified Peer Specialist credential with the highest standards of knowledge, training and experience in the country.

The benefit of Peer Support Groups is the comfort and comradery resulting from knowing that everyone there has some experience with the issue at hand. It creates a non-judgmental atmosphere for people to be able to express their feelings and share their experiences with others who can relate. Traditionally, self-help groups are not the same as “group therapy”. In peer support and self-help groups all members maintain mutuality. If a member (including the facilitator) does hold a formal license or credential, they still participate in the group as a peer rather than as a clinician.

Groups structured as “Professionally-Facilitated” are usually organized and facilitated by professionals who do not share the members' first-hand experience with the group issue. These professionals can be mental health practitioners, psychologists, social workers, religious officials, etc. Others are conducted by individuals who do not have personal experience with the group issue, nor are they credentialed as a service provider. They are specially trained as Expert Facilitators.

Within these categories, there are generally three format models for support groups.

- 1) Curriculum-Based: These are frequently psycho-educational groups, a model which incorporates both illness-specific information and tools for managing related circumstances. They stress health, collaboration, coping, and empowerment through information. In curriculum-based groups, there are several planned topics to discuss over time. Topics are arranged in a pre-determined order of presentation. Books,

articles, or other literature related to the topics are distributed and used to guide group discussions focused on each topic in relation to the group members' recovery.

- 2) Topic Focused: Discussions are focused on recovery in relation to one topic area, but are often less structured than the curriculum-based format. Topics can be rotated based upon the interests of the group members. Questions related to the topic are posed to the group. Written materials may be provided to aid in discussion. Members are asked to share their opinions or personal experiences with recovery as related to the written material.
- 3) Open Forum: The structure of the other two models does not apply. Seldom is there a pre-arranged agenda for the meeting. Because these groups are usually open for participants to "drop-in", there may not be rules regarding regular attendance. Discussions uniquely unfurl based upon the interests and needs of the group members for that particular meeting.

Support groups are a powerful resource for individuals dealing with illnesses or other challenging situations. The format model and facilitator type should be selected based on the needs, focus and purpose of the support group.

Facilitator Functions

Group facilitators work to promote the processes that help the group meet its goals while ensuring that the structures, norms, and culture in the group environment are favorable to the accomplishment of the established goals. This includes taking appropriate action in response to the status of the group and its members. Facilitators also stimulate discussions designed to support and encourage progress for the group as a whole and for each member as an individual. Their main function is to foster communication among the group and to model effective interaction that members can emulate. Facilitators also provide an example of how to share in the group. They:

Maintain a Safe Environment

This involves both physical and emotional safety. The facility that hosts the meeting needs to meet basic needs for the group. As appropriate and available, this includes easy access (including accommodations for members with physical limitations), comfort (such as climate control, proper ventilation, etc.) and accessible restrooms. Members should also be made aware of the locations of Emergency Exits and other instructions in the event of an environmental emergency.

Keeping the environment emotionally safe is equally important. Facilitators will ensure confidentiality is being respected, group boundaries (structure, schedule, roles, etc.) remain intact, and that members are protected whenever possible from situations that are highly triggering, threatening or otherwise unsafe. If these

situations occur, facilitators need to ensure the necessary actions are taken to restore safety and support any individuals affected.

Ensure a Supportive Environment

Diversity can be a great asset for a support group. It allows for a variety of perspectives and ideas to be presented. Diversity can also pose a challenge to group cohesion, particularly if there is a sole individual in the meeting that does not identify with the dominant demographic. Demographic composition elements such as age, social class, education levels and languages can impact a member's ability to relate to other members. With a mixed composition, facilitators need to plan ways to aid members to manage concerns about their differences if they arise during meetings. The facilitator should use their mediation and communication skills to promote ways of understanding and accepting differences. It is part of the facilitator's role to foster an environment that is inclusive of all members by highlighting commonalities more than differences.

Bolster Affect Exploration

Support group facilitation necessitates discernment of the inward disposition of group members and aiding members in exploring, interpreting and reflecting on individual and group affect. Scanning the room, looking at individual members during group interaction, allows the facilitator to be aware of verbal as well as nonverbal cues. Verbalizing some scans can be a useful tool to inform the group of commonalities the facilitator has recognized.

(e.g. “Jack, I noticed you were nodding your head to Jill’s comment. Can you relate to what she shared?”)

When facilitators perceive a tense atmosphere in response to a particular subject, it is important to assess the advantages and disadvantages of continuing with the subject.

(e.g. “I can tell this is difficult, but if it’s okay, I think we should try to explore this a bit further. Other members might be experiencing similar feelings, so it could benefit all of us to stay with the feeling a little longer... So you’re feeling angry?”)

Facilitators can support the group’s affect by offering validation of the members’ feelings. This acknowledges that the facilitator is attuning to individual and group needs.

(e.g. “It makes sense that you would be saddened by that.”)

Facilitators can help the group by identifying specific feelings. Pointing out behavior changes is a technique facilitators can use to do this. Asking a question rather than making a statement about the person’s affect might prompt a more reserved person to be more involved in the discussion, giving the group an opening to assist the member in exploring the feeling.

(e.g. “Joe, you seem to be fidgeting more whenever we talk about this. Are you feeling anxious?”)

Helping members to be more aware of how they are feeling in the meeting can benefit them outside the meetings by encouraging them to pay closer attention to their feelings on a more regular basis. They may even begin to notice patterns a reoccurring feeling

with particular circumstances or events. This is also true for the group as a whole. In time, facilitators may recognize repetitions in the way the group responds to a certain topic. Cognizance of the group's affect will enable the facilitator to identify areas of concern for the group and provide relevant supports.

Leadership

Members look to the Support Group Facilitator as a leader. Facilitators serve as a model of appropriate group behavior and as a resource for the group. Facilitators provide a tangible example of effective interpersonal interaction and relational connections. Unfortunately, some members may become dependent on the facilitator. To reduce the dependency, facilitators can delineate tasks to individual group members. Since being the facilitator can be viewed by members as a leadership position, it is important to remember that accentuating and emphasizing their individual abilities and strengths will increase their own leadership skills and help them take more initiative for themselves.

Facilitator Skills

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a skill as “a learned power of doing something competently: a developed aptitude or ability”. There are various skills that must be developed in order to be an effective support group facilitator. These skills can be adapted to fit the facilitator’s own style and personality.

Self-Care

Managing the wellbeing of a Support Group starts with managing the wellbeing of its facilitator. This must be every facilitator’s first priority. One of the building blocks of self-care is self-awareness. Successful Support Group Facilitators are aware that their own situations and experiences may impact their facilitating. This is particularly true for Peer Facilitators, whose personal health conditions, or the health conditions of a loved one, can color their responses. There may be times when a facilitator needs to remove themselves from the role of facilitator in order to take care of themselves. If the physical or emotional energy it takes to facilitate the group becomes detrimental to the facilitator’s wellbeing, then they need to be prepared to bequeath that responsibility to the co-facilitator or another designee.

Facilitating a support group is not as administrative or passive as it may seem. It is often very emotionally involved. This applies intensely for Peer Facilitators. The potential for triggers to arise affects everyone, even the most experienced facilitators. This potential is one of the reasons facilitators must practice the art of self-care.

Included in self-care is Emotion Regulation. This is a broad set of skills and abilities that help keep the emotional system healthy and functioning. Good emotion regulation includes the ability to:

- ❖ Recognize that you are having an emotional response.
- ❖ Understand what the emotional response is.
- ❖ Accept your emotional responses rather than reject them or react to them with fear.
- ❖ Access strategies that allow you to reduce the intensity of the emotion when needed.
- ❖ Engage in goal-directed behavior when upset.
- ❖ Control impulsive behaviors when upset.

By practicing these techniques, facilitators will be better equipped to handle the challenges of being emotionally involved and impacted. Maintaining a healthy emotional life is important to overall health and sustaining effectiveness as a facilitator.

Emotion Regulation is only one of many facets of good self-care. Physical, intellectual, social and spiritual health are also parts of individual wellness. They entail:

- ❖ Getting proper exercise
- ❖ Maintaining balanced nutrition
- ❖ Having sufficient quantity and quality of sleep
- ❖ Receiving preventative and ongoing medical and dental care
- ❖ Staying home and resting when ill
- ❖ Engaging in creative activities or learning new things
- ❖ Having and utilizing a strong social network consisting of healthy relationships
- ❖ Resources for support and stress relief

- ❖ Taking care of global and personal surroundings
- ❖ Forgiveness of self and others
- ❖ Understanding personal beliefs, values and ethics to guide decision-making and overall approach to life

The Self-Care Wheel, created by Olga Phoenix, is an affirming and positive tool that facilitators can use to manage stress and increase life satisfaction. The self-care exercises and healing modalities provided in the Self-Care Wheel affords facilitators a simple and effective starting point to develop an individual self-care plan that is personalized, preventative, and sustainable.

Some facilitators may encounter personal barriers to self-care. These often stem from unhealthy attitudes, habits and beliefs. Some of the most common are:

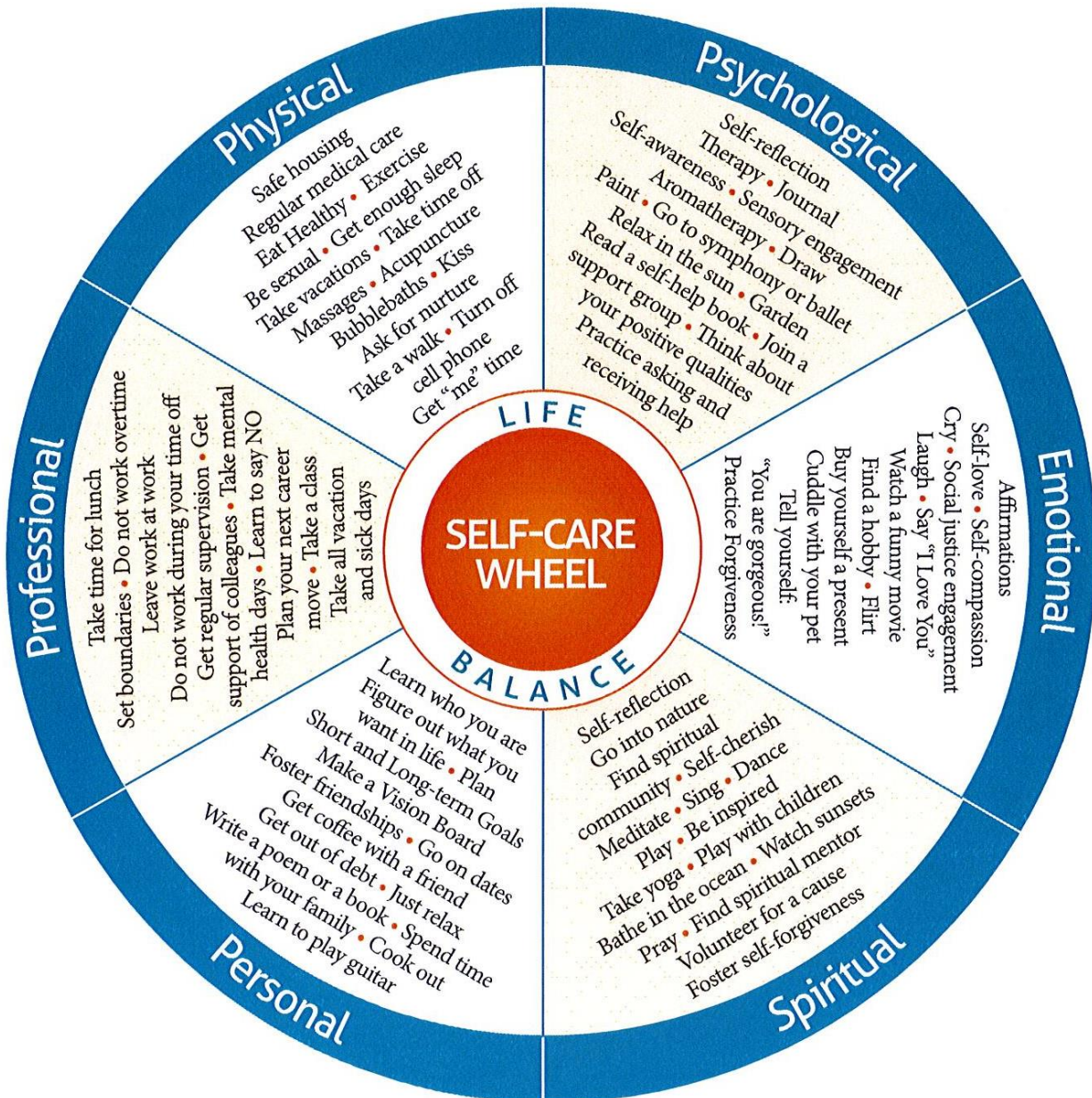
- ❖ Feeling Overwhelmed – With its multiple components, self-care can seem like an astronomical task. It may feel as if it is too complex or simply too massive of an undertaking. Developing a self-care plan and gradually implementing it will help facilitators adjust and adopt self-care into everyday life.
- ❖ Time – Living in a fast-paced and often demanding society, packed with parent-teacher conferences, work meetings, housekeeping and home improvement projects, leaves little time to stop and relax. Despite tight schedules, facilitators must find time to do the things that will get and keep them well. Activities for self-care do not have to be time consuming or done all at once. They can be done in small increments of time spread throughout the day.

- ❖ **Minimizing the Importance** – The perceived value of self-care plays a major role in the facilitator's development and implementation of an effective self-care plan. Many people engage in self-care activities only when they feel they need to. It is much more beneficial to practice self-care as a preventative measure rather than as a reactive response. When facilitators develop a habit of taking care of themselves, it also provides an example for group members to follow.
- ❖ **Guilt** – Particularly for individuals with low self-esteem, focusing on the self is viewed as selfishness. Thus, they feel guilty about taking time for themselves. On the contrary, self-care is the best thing facilitators can do to help another person. When the facilitator is at their best, both they and the group will benefit. The reverse is also true. When the facilitator is not well, it will diminish their ability to facilitate effectively and have a negative impact on the group.
- ❖ **Resources** – It is a widely believed myth that self-care is too expensive because the activities always cost a lot of money. In actuality, the opposite is true. There are countless things people can do to take care of themselves that cost very little or even nothing at all. Nature walks, bubble baths and meditation are just a few examples of self-care activities that are either free or inexpensive. Additionally, it may be helpful to set aside a small budget for other activities that do have a cost associated with them.

The consequences of self-neglect can be enormous. They range from wearisome stress that erodes health to burnout so debilitating

that facilitators are forced to walk away from their position or from the group entirely. For the sake of the facilitator, and the group, self-care is both fundamental and indispensable.

SELF-CARE WHEEL



This Self-Care Wheel was inspired by and adapted from "Self-Care Assessment Worksheet" from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP (Norton, 1996). Created by Olga Phoenix Project: Healing for Social Change (2013).

Dedicated to all trauma professionals worldwide.

www.OlgaPhoenix.com

<http://www.olgaphoenix.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SelfCare-Wheel-Final.pdf>

Effective Listening

A way of showing concern for group members, and that fosters cohesive bonds, commitment, and trust; Effective listening tends to reduce occurrences of interpersonal conflict while increasing the likelihood that when conflicts do emerge, they will be resolved with a solution favorable to all involved. In addition, by truly listening to the people in the group, facilitators will understand the reasons for the behavior and personality of each member. This allows facilitators to be more effective at motivating them, to be sensitive to and meet the need for encouragement, and to quickly recognize when the individual is experiencing difficulty in the group.

Effective listening is actively assimilating the information provided by a speaker, showing interest, and providing them with feedback so that he or she knows the message was received. Effective listeners show speakers that they have been heard and understood. Active listening techniques aid in listening effectively:

- ❖ **Reflecting back words, thoughts and feelings** – The facilitator reflects back the words, thoughts and feelings of the group, while subtly emphasizing their own words
(e.g. “It sounds as if you’re saying you want to change the way you’ve been handling this issue.”
or “You sound like you are very disappointed.”)
- ❖ **Respond with affirmations** – Validate the speaker by responding with affirmations. Not only does this boost the

speaker's self-esteem, but it also helps them feel understood and stay positive.

(e.g. "It seems like you handled that well." or "It sounds like you were affectively assertive. I remember you've previously said that was something you found difficult.")

- ❖ **Clarification** – Help the speaker clarify their thoughts and messages by reiterating what they said and asking clarifying questions using their own words.

(e.g. "I think you mentioned earlier that you 'don't want to work in this field anymore', now you have said that you are 'hoping to take on more responsibilities at work'. Which most accurately reflects your current wishes?")

- ❖ **Summarizing** – Every so often, facilitators should paraphrase what the speaker has said to ensure there is a clear understanding of their message. This also helps other members of the group follow along.
- ❖ **Eye contact** – Without staring, maintain eye contact with the speaker to indicate active listening and interest in what is being shared. Be especially mindful of maintaining eye contact if other members of the group are being distracting. For example, facilitators should not break eye contact to look at another member entering or exiting the room or to repeatedly look at a watch while someone is

speaking. Group members tend to become distracted if the facilitator appears distracted.

- ❖ **Positive facial expressions** – Judgmental expressions like head shaking and frowning need to be avoided. Instead, encouraging and empathetic facial expressions like smiling and looks of empathy should be given. These are positive ways of responding naturally to the group
- ❖ **Slight Gestures** – Using physical expressions of listening, like nodding the head, lets the speaker know they are being heard and understood.
- ❖ **Body posture** – Leaning slightly towards the speaker and keeping arms unfolded in an open body posture further demonstrates interest and receptiveness.

Successful facilitators listen to understand the group; not just to the verbal communication, but also for the feelings and emotions and even for what is not being said with words. Effective listening gives the group the space to talk freely and explore without interruption or fear of judgment.

Communication

Defined as the process of imparting knowledge or exchanging opinions, feelings, or ideas through speech, writing, gestures, or other medium; Communication includes listening, speaking with plain language using non-clinical verbiage and appropriate body language. In order to establish clarity in their messages, facilitators also need to make sure their words, gestures, facial expressions and tone match each other.

Problem Solving

Facilitators will need to use their skills to discuss and explore problems that are experienced on the individual and group level. There are some practical steps facilitators can take, or lead the group through, to help resolve problems.

- ❖ Identifying – Facilitators can help members recognize the existence of a problem and the need to make decisions and take action to resolve it.
- ❖ Specify the problem – Before a solution can be found, the details of the problem must be understood. Facilitators, along with the group, can figure out what is happening and what should be happening instead.
- ❖ Pinpoint the cause(s) – Addressing only the effects of the problem will lead to repetitions of that same problem. Group members may need help to screen out the superficial issues and look for potential underlying causes to what may appear to be obvious.
- ❖ Explore feasible approaches – There is almost always more than one way to solve a problem. When brainstorming for creative solutions, no judgment should be passed on any ideas. It may be helpful to right down the possible solutions as they are collected.

- ❖ Select an approach – When deciding on the best approach for a group issue, facilitators and members need to contemplate which approach is most likely to provide a long-term solution in a realistic and timely fashion. Any risks or resources associated with the approach also need to be taken into consideration. For problems on an individual level, the final decision must rest with that individual.
- ❖ Mediation – Facilitators are to be neutral in the problem-solving process. In order to allow alternate options to be explored, they suggest to the group that there are multiple ways of looking at an issue.
- ❖ Implementation – Recognizing the problem, identifying options and selecting a solution are just the beginning. Until the resolution is enacted, the problem will remain.
- ❖ Asses Outcomes – Once the plan of action has been implemented, it will be important to follow up to see how well the solution is working. For issues on an individual level, the members can provide accountability regarding follow-through on the plan, as well as provide helpful feedback. For group issues, reflecting on its own processes and results keeps the group effective.

It is also important for facilitators to note that when evaluating a problem, language can make a difference. Simply changing the term “problem” to “issue” or “situation” will help change attitudes about what is going on. Facilitators can help members reframe

their problems into opportunities and use the group as a tool for problem-solving.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is generally a group issue. As such, everyone in the group needs to take part in resolving it. The facilitator can aid this process using various strategies.

- ❖ Prevent conflict (when possible) – While not every problem is foreseeable or preventable, there are some that can be avoided, or at least minimized, before they occur.
- ❖ Address each issue as it arises. If a solution is not reached right away, it may be appropriate to take a break from it and return a short time later.
- ❖ Speak in the affirmative, stating what is wanted instead of what is not wanted.

(e.g. “Please limit discussion to those present in the room.” vs. “Do not talk about people who are not here.”)

- ❖ Suggest possibilities and recommend ways to move forward. This is often better received than complaints or criticism.
- ❖ Speaking in first person will be important as individuals and facilitators share their feelings.

(e.g. “I feel frustrated when I get interrupted. I would like to be able to finish sharing my

perspective.” vs. “**You** make me frustrated when **you** keep interrupting me. **You** need to stop it.”)

- ❖ Try to engage all members. Groups and their members are much more likely to implement solutions they had a part in shaping.

Learning to deal with conflict in a positive and constructive way, without excessive stress, is an important way to improve well-being as well as relationships. Conflict can be damaging to the group by sparking negative feelings between members and misappropriate energy that’s needed elsewhere. It can also deepen differences and diminish group cohesion. Alternatively, well-managed conflict can be constructive by helping members to release emotions and stress, and resolve any tension. This process of reconciliation allows those involved to use it as an opportunity to increase understanding and find a way to collectively progress forward.

Boundaries

Facilitators are to maintain appropriate boundaries. Important aspects are experiential knowledge and confidentiality. Essential to the successful functionality of these features is the proper application of boundaries. Relationship boundaries are established to promote trust, increase safety, demonstrate respect, develop a working alliance (rapport), and provide structure to the helping relationship. They create clarity and predictability for the individual, the facilitator, and the group as a whole.

It is important to recognize that boundary issues are not the same as boundary violations. Violations generally refer to clear laws, policies or rules. They include, but are not limited to abuse, exploitation, and sexual or romantic relationships. Boundary issues may not always be expressly defined and thus may take the form of individual, situational limits. They are inevitable, ongoing and sometimes flexible.

Boundary limitations for Peer Facilitators are different than those of Professional Facilitators. The key distinction in Peer-Provided Support Service is its unique potential value of disclosure and mutuality. Peer Facilitators must be careful not to start using boundaries to separate themselves and then fall into the same power dynamics as a traditional helping relationship.

Boundaries are not intended to be a barrier, but rather the framework for a healthy and productive relationship. Additionally, dual roles may lead to conflicts of interest that can jeopardize the individual and group connection. It is not advisable for facilitators to act as sponsors, payees or medication/treatment adherence monitors. Peer Facilitators have some flexibility, but are not to act in these roles during group meetings.

The importance of co-creation or negotiation of conditions should also be noted. It requires a conversation that is ongoing throughout the relationship. Subjects of discussion should include mutuality, respecting one another's time, personal space, how one would like to be addressed, topics considered to be "off limits", cultural/religious or other considerations on how to BE with one

another. Everyone needs to state their limits and restate or redefine as necessary.

Managing Disruptive Members

Support group facilitators must utilize a balanced combination of control and benevolence. This assertive compassion involves keeping the focus on the disruption itself, instead of the member(s) causing the disruption. It allows the facilitator to directly address problems with the group without insulting or offending members. Initially, facilitators may want to simply pose the correction to the entire group without singling out specific members. Referring to the group's pre-established guidelines (sometimes called the "Comfort Agreement") can be helpful. For example:

- ❖ When a member is often late to meetings, casually remind the group how important punctuality is to maximizing the benefit of the group for every member.
- ❖ When a member is monopolizing the discussion or frequently interrupts others, give the floor back to the original speaker.

(e.g. "I'd like to go back to Sue for a minute. I don't think she was finished talking. We want everyone to have equal opportunity to share.")

- ❖ When someone brings up inappropriate subjects that are offensive in nature or otherwise incendiary.

(e.g. “It doesn’t seem like this an appropriate discussion for this group, so we are going to move on. For those who would like to continue this conversation, feel free to do so after the meeting.”)

- ❖ When triggering language is being used.

(e.g. “I recognize this is a meaningful topic for people to be able to talk about and I am also sensitive to the fact that it may pose a trigger to some. Please be considerate when choosing your words and avoid being overly detailed in your descriptions. It is part of our guideline of respecting one another.”)

- ❖ When a member continuously digresses to irrelevant topics, redirect the focus to the purpose of the meeting.

(e.g. “How does that relate to recovery and what we’ve been talking about today?”)

Facilitators must be able to determine if disruptions can effectively be addressed to the entire group or if speaking to the member in private outside of the meeting is better. Individuals that become combative or unresponsive to feedback and correction may need to be excused from the room. Sometimes a quick break is sufficient to allow for de-escalation and the individual may be able to return to being a positive, contributing member of the group. During this break, when facilitators take the disruptive person aside privately, they must firmly, but politely, state how their behavior is

disturbing the group. It must be made clear that the disruptions have to cease. Concurrently, facilitators should seek to find out what the underlying issues might be that are causing or contributing to the behaviors. Facilitators can then see if there are alternate ways to address that individual's concerns. If this is ineffective or does not appear to be a viable option for that particular situation, the member may need to be excused for the remainder of the meeting. Each situation should be handled individually and include input from the group. Confronting the member holds them accountable for their behaviors and actions. It also helps attend to how those behaviors might be influencing others in the meeting.

Handling Crisis Situations

Being familiar with a variety of strategies to deal with predictable incidents improves the ability to implement them if and when the need arises. This is especially true for facilitators who may have to act quickly in crisis situations. A member in distress needs immediate support, regardless of what was planned for the group. Timely assistance can prevent issues from progressing further and will build stronger trust within the group.

Things like disclosure can raise feelings in people that the group may not be in a place to handle; therefore, facilitators will need to ensure that support is readily available for both the group and themselves. There will be times when the facilitator may need to ask for help. This may include the aid of a co-facilitator, counselor or other resource. It is important to recognize that even with the most thorough plans, not every possible problem can be predicted.

The main thing is to prepare for the most common problems and have resources available for the rest. There are many organizations that offer free support to individuals in need. Hotlines provide immediate emergency support or counseling to people in crisis and are generally available around the clock. Most will be able to facilitate additional care or intervention if necessary. Warm-lines also provide these services, but on a non-emergency basis. They typically have set days/hours of operation. In the event of an emergency, facilitators should refer to hotlines, as a warm-line may not provide an immediate response. Both of these services are usually operated by trained volunteers. Other organizations, such as Mental Health America, are also available to direct facilitators and group members to the appropriate resource(s).

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Self-Reflection

Every good facilitator knows there is always room for improvement. Through reflective practices, the facilitator will be able to build upon their strengths and progress in areas of difficulty. It requires facilitators to:

- ❖ Be open to group reviews and suggestions from other facilitators, as well as organization leadership (if applicable).
- ❖ Be aware of when they need to step aside from primary group facilitation. If the facilitator is not well or too upset, it will hinder their ability to be effective and will likely impact the members also. At this point, it is best to have a co-facilitator step in.
- ❖ Embrace mistakes. A facilitator's willingness to look at and admit their mistakes will strengthen the group's trust in them while also providing a model of resiliency.
- ❖ Support and learn from each other. This can be done even without a formal structure by simply attending groups facilitated by someone else. Networking will also provide an avenue for learning.

In order to be successful and effectual, all facilitators need to identify resources that can help them grow as individuals and as Support Group Facilitators. Having a constant evaluation of process, complete with debriefing and feedback from the group, will produce progress for the facilitator and advancement for the group toward its goals.

Co-Facilitation

Support groups can be conducted by either a single facilitator or by two people who work together as co-facilitators. The use of co-facilitation, especially in peer support groups, can be beneficial to both the participants and the facilitators. Some of the benefits include:

- ❖ Capitalizing on Diversity – Having co-facilitators working as a team allows each one to impart their own expertise using their gifts and resources, while complimenting the other's strengths. Facilitators each come with their own styles and experiences (both professional and personal), which can make for a more in-depth assessment and understanding of the group's process.
- ❖ Accommodating Large Groups – The size of the group can impact its effectiveness. If there are too many participants present it will be challenging to make sure everyone has an opportunity to share without feeling rushed. In larger groups, there may be too many details contending for the facilitator's attention. Co-facilitation will allow the group to be broken down into two smaller subgroups, which will encourage more intimate discussions.
- ❖ Modeling – Positive interactions between co-facilitators serves as a great example for group members of how to conduct themselves in the meetings. When group members witness the collaborative, supportive and respectful

- relationship between the co-facilitators, they will have a better understanding of what is appropriate. It then becomes easier for them to adopt these kinds of behaviors, both inside and outside of the meetings.
- ❖ Keeping Focused – Having variety in intonations, interaction styles and physical presentation helps to retain the attention of the group. It keeps members from getting bored with just the one facilitator. It also gives each facilitator a chance to rest and re-focus as needed.
 - ❖ Affording Mutual Support – Facilitating a support group can expend large amounts of energy, especially when addressing tough topics. Co-facilitation can reduce the intensity of the impact that would have with just one facilitator. It also provides each facilitator with an additional resource for support and encouragement.
 - ❖ Partnering in the Process – Co-Facilitators provide an extra pair of eyes and ears to gauge the reactions and responsiveness of individual members during meetings. While one facilitator maintains connectedness and eye contact with the speaker, the co-facilitator discreetly surveys the room to observe the facial expressions or body language of the other members. Co-facilitators also provide extra hands to manage problems with the physical environment, distractions, crisis situations, and various other issues. They also provide reinforcement when a member of the group is unresponsive to redirection or correction given by the other facilitator.

- ❖ **Stability** – Having a co-facilitator allows the group to continue if one facilitator is unable to attend a meeting. When possible, this should be announced in advance so members can trust the commitment of each facilitator to the group and to know what to expect from facilitators.
- ❖ **Transition** – If group leadership changes, co-facilitators can prepare the members for this transition by helping the group process the loss of one facilitator while learning to relate to a new one. Co-facilitators remain the constant to maintain the close relationship between group leaders and members. They also help the new facilitator to acclimate to the group.

When working with facilitation partners, preparation is needed in order for the team to work together fruitfully . Planning ahead will provide each facilitator a way to understand how their piece fits into the puzzle. Many strategies exist that will help

co-facilitation work smoothly.

- ❖ **Relationship Building** – Facilitators should make an effort to get to know each other. In doing so, they can build a genuine and nourishing relationship where considerate and constructive comments or suggestions are appreciated and discords are resolved in positive ways.
- ❖ **Balancing Each Other** – Facilitators should familiarize themselves with their partner's style of facilitating and be informed about their triggers. When each facilitator

communicates what they feel they are best at and what they are most challenged by, it empowers the team to leverage strengths while minimizing the effects of weaknesses.

- ❖ **Communicate Details** – Facilitators need to discuss whether, when and how to interrupt each other. They should plan ways to signal each other and share the intricacies they encounter and observe in the group.
- ❖ **Inclusion** – If one facilitator has taken the lead role in leading the meeting, they should make it a regular practice to include input from the other co-facilitator. Keeping both facilitators engaged throughout the meeting will ease transitions for group members when facilitation roles change.
- ❖ **Debriefing** – Both facilitators should set aside time after the meeting to process and evaluate the group. These sessions give co-facilitators an opportunity to decompress and to receive feedback from each other. In this process, they will learn more about and from each other, which helps them develop an increasingly positive and genuine relationship to model to the group.

Together, co-facilitators are essentially a team working to meet certain objectives, which mirrors the functions of the support group. When co-facilitation is done correctly, group members will be able to sense the synergy between the facilitators.

Preparing for Meetings

When getting ready for support group meetings, facilitators need to arrive early enough to set up the room and make sure other logistics are taken care of.

- ❖ Chairs should be arranged in a shape wide enough for latecomers to enter with minimal disruption and with sufficient space to accommodate members with wheelchairs or service animals.
- ❖ If refreshments are provided, they should be placed on a side table. Consideration should be given to the types of refreshments provided as some options are not well suited for all groups. For Example:
 - Crunchy snacks, such as chips, that come in bags that rustle can be distracting or make it difficult for the group to hear what someone is saying.
 - Drinks that contain stimulants like alcohol or caffeine can impact a person's behavior or ability to participate in the meeting without causing disruption or discomfort to other members.
 - Foods with lots of spices can affect those with sensitivity to strong odors.
- ❖ Any literature or reading material to be picked up by members should also be placed on a side table and away from the refreshments in order to protect them from damage in case spills occur. It is also helpful if facilitators familiarize

themselves with the documents they are providing to the group. These materials need to:

- Have concepts presented in a format that is easy to understand.
- Be based on the most current information available.
- Be applicable to the demographics of the group (age, gender, etc.).
- Work for different literacy levels.
- Have their contributors/sources acknowledged.
- Provide sources for further information, when possible.

Getting prepared for the meeting also goes beyond the logistics. Facilitators must also prepare themselves mentally and emotionally. A well-organized meeting environment coupled with facilitators who are grounded and focused sets the atmosphere for a productive meeting and a healthy support group.

Starting and Ending Meetings

Each Support Group will have its own format and structure based upon the needs of the group. Suggested items to include at the beginning of the meeting are:

- ❖ The Welcome – Facilitators may want to start the meeting by simply welcoming the members and introducing themselves. This is also a good time to inform the members of what the facilitator’s role is and is not. Facilitators should also explain the purpose/mission of the group. The meeting agenda, as well as the start and end times for the meeting and any other “housekeeping” announcements may also be included in the welcome portion. Let members know where to find materials for the meeting, extra literature, restrooms, water fountains, emergency exits, etc.
- ❖ Review the Guidelines – The Support Group Guidelines need to be clearly stated at every meeting. This practice should continue even if there are no new members present. Everyone needs to know the guidelines and everyone is responsible for following them. Facilitators may find it helpful to display or distribute written copies of the guidelines. Especially if new members are present, the guidelines should be read aloud before beginning discussion. Facilitators can ask the group for a volunteer to do this. If a particular member seems to have problems remembering the guidelines, they could be tasked with reading them for the group at each meeting.

- ❖ Icebreakers - These activities can be used to get folks focused, settled in and to start connecting with the group. A simple game or introduction prompt can bring members together as they learn more about each other. These activities are best when focused on something positive.

(e.g. “Please tell us your name and two things that make you unique.”)

Facilitators also bring closure to the meetings. Suggestions for ending a meeting include:

- ❖ Providing 10-15 minute notification before discussion is scheduled to end.
- ❖ Inviting members to make any final comments.
- ❖ Having the group share how they feel the meeting has helped them.
- ❖ Encouraging new attendees to try out the group for 3 or 4 meetings before deciding whether it is right for them or not.
- ❖ Making mention of the literature or other materials that have been used in the group or provided for reference.
- ❖ Briefly summarizing what has happened at the meeting and any conclusions or consensuses the group has reached.
- ❖ Announcing the location, date and time of the next meeting.

Conclude the meeting by expressing appreciation to the group for their presence and participation. Facilitators should also encourage members to support one another in between meetings and reach out when needed.

Support Group Guidelines

Every support group must have guidelines for individual and group expectations. It is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that everyone in the group understands and adheres to them. While specifics may vary, there are some basic items that should be included in the guidelines for every support group.

- ❖ **Demographic Requirements** – Most support groups are designed to reach a specific population (e.g. Veterans, individuals in recovery from addiction or a specific illness, abuse victims, seniors, etc.). Having a participant present that does not identify with the pre-set common thread for the group can disrupt group cohesion, make other members uncomfortable, and present additional challenges. Additionally, people who do not fit the criteria for the group will not get their needs met and should be referred somewhere more appropriate.
- ❖ **Confidentiality and Its Limitations** – The general rule for support groups is that group members are prohibited from disclosing anything that is shared in the meetings. This includes divulging the identity of members who were present. Confidentiality also extends to the personal data of the members. If collected, their names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses must be protected. Some members may be comfortable sharing their contact information, but this should always be left to their discretion. The group also needs to discuss what will happen if

confidentiality is breached. Limitations to confidentiality occur in the event of:

- A member expressing intent to harm themselves or others
- Suspected child abuse or neglect
- Suspected elder abuse or neglect
- Suspected abuse of a disabled individual

❖ Safety Requirements – Based on the nature of support groups, many possibilities exist for individuals to become triggered or feel unsafe. Clear support group guidelines about what can and cannot be said or done in meetings will aid the facilitator in maintaining a positive atmosphere. These guidelines may address restrictions on providing graphic descriptions or “war stories”, being in possession of weapons and members who come to the group under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs.

❖ Group Etiquette – It is imperative for everyone to understand the expectations for respect and personal responsibility. These guidelines address common courtesies.

- Listening without interrupting
- Avoiding personal or side conversations during the meeting
- Acceptance of differences (including social, cultural, linguistic differences or where an individual is in their recovery journey)
- Respecting each other’s opinions

- Refraining from judging people
- Using first-person language (“I” statements)
- Sharing the group’s time so that everyone who wishes to share get an opportunity to do so

In addition, there may be guidelines that are specific to the needs of the group. Members can also participate in identifying guidelines they feel would benefit the group. Together, these guiding principles are sometimes referred to as the group’s “Comfort Agreement” and may address areas such as:

- Clarifying the role of the facilitator(s)
- Starting and ending time for meetings
- Cell phone use in the meeting room
- Taking breaks
- Attendance expectations (if applicable)
- Taking notes during meetings
- Understandings reached about giving and receiving support, instructions or advice.

As the foundation for the safety and efficacy of the group, the significance of the Support Group Guidelines cannot be stressed enough; yet it is also vital that facilitators apply them with understanding and compassion.

Suggestions for Facilitators

Connecting with group members is crucial. How facilitators approach and respond to different scenarios can help strengthen the group bond. There are fundamental concepts facilitators may benefit from invoking.

- ❖ The most important factor in any support group is access to support for the facilitator(s) as well as the group. Professional and reliable supports should be identified before starting the support group.
- ❖ Lists of resources and contact persons should be reviewed frequently and kept up to date.
- ❖ Sources of additional information should be easily accessible.
- ❖ Facilitators may want to have a process in place for following up with members who stop attending the group. This process should be respectful and non-invasive.
- ❖ In a healthy support group meeting, the facilitator starts the conversation and makes sure it stays focused, but the members do not respond solely to the facilitator. The discussion should have a natural, conversational flow. Members will respond to other members and even help start or guide the conversation.
- ❖ Addressing people by their names helps everyone learn each other's names and conveys that the facilitator cares what happens to each member. Name tags might be a useful tool.

In groups where anonymity is an issue, facilitators can encourage sensitive or reluctant members to use an alias.

- ❖ Facilitators need to stay aware of when structure is needed. They are to summarize or explain when necessary and decide when to extend a discussion or when to move on to the next topic.
- ❖ When noticing who talks and who doesn't, facilitators should be careful not to press people too much, particularly with newcomers. If someone who has been quiet does share something, encourage more discussion at that point and be sure to include members who appear bored in the discussion.
- ❖ Facilitators are to practice self-regulation. Knowing when to talk and when to let others talk is significant. Facilitators can get their thoughts across, but also make space for members to engage in the conversation. This allows for increased participation of group members. Self-regulation also applies to facilitators in being comfortable with periods of silence in a meeting.
- ❖ Facilitators possess a distinctive ability to inspire. Encouraging members to remember and focus on their victories, no matter how small they may seem, can help make for a stronger and more confident group.
- ❖ Exemplifying pertinent characteristics and proper preparation will ensure successful facilitation and a successful support group.