

# So You Want to Start a Support Group

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When people are suffering, safe, healthy relationships make a world of difference. Relationships that offer:

- ♥Heartfelt encouragement
- ♥Faithful companionship
- ♥Compassionate understanding
- ♥Wise and caring support
- ♥Can provide blessings of refreshment and hope even during the dark days of a difficult journey.

These special relationships may be with close friends and family members. Some people may have several such relationships. Other people may have no one. Whether or not a person already has such relationships, a support group can help fill important relational needs that are hard to meet under the pressure of difficult circumstances. When people who walk the path through suffering come together to share their lives and experiences—their triumphs as well as pitfalls, the glimpses of hope as well as the heartbreaks—they provide and receive help through one another.

## Answering the Call

There is no shortage of need for support for people who are suffering, but you want to be certain that starting a support group is the right thing for you to do at the present time. If you think you may be interested in starting a support group, please prayerfully consider these key questions:

### **Why do I want to do this? Is it the right thing?**

Some people want to start a group because they know they need one. While there is nothing wrong with that, your motivation needs to be bigger than your personal needs. You need to care deeply about meeting the needs of others and be committed to following God's leading in meeting those needs.

Some people want to start a group because they believe their experiences can benefit others. This, too, can be a good motivation as long as you realize that your personal experience isn't the "answer" for everyone. In a support group, people benefit one another—sometimes "giving," sometimes "receiving."

### **Should I be doing this? Is it the right time?**

Not everyone who experiences suffering or cares deeply about helping others who hurt should start or help lead a support group.

If your treatment protocol will require periodic treatment for an extended time, if you have children living at home or other family members who need your care, or if your job has a demanding travel schedule perhaps the responsibilities of forming or leading a support group need to be in the hands of others.

## Forming a Support Group

- Establish Your Leadership – needs to be shared
- Determine the Logistics
- Plan Your Program
- Design Your Communication/Promotion
- Special Considerations
  - Acknowledging the Diversity of Needs
  - Providing Day to Day Support
  - Managing Sharing Time
  - Responding to Financial Needs
  - Sharing Medical Advice
  - Clues for Professional Intervention

Beneficial support groups come in all varieties and sizes—there's no one-size-fits-all. But there is a structure to the process that can help you start well.

## **Establish Your Leadership**

Leadership needs to be a shared responsibility. You don't want a support group to flounder because the "leader" can't sustain the effort. So a leadership team of at least 2 people each of whom have specific responsibilities is most helpful.

People have different ideas of what a support group is, what it should provide, and how it should function. So before any meetings are held, the leadership team should discuss and write down the mission, priorities, essential beliefs and values for the group.

Some of the questions this process will address may include:

- Will your group focus on the needs of people with a specific illness, depression, or disability?
- Who is welcome to attend the meeting? Is it for patients only, or may family and friends or caregivers participate?
- How will your group handle out-of-meeting needs such as offering prayer support or assistance for urgent needs?

## **Determine the Logistics**

Where is the best setting for your support group? A home, a church, a medical office or hospital, a public building (such as library meeting room)? A home provides an inviting, comfortable setting. A church, office, or library may not offer as inviting an atmosphere, but it may be more accessible to people.

When is the best time, frequency, and length for your meetings? This depends on the availability of your selected facility and the times when support group members are most likely to be able to participate (physically as well as emotionally/spiritually).

What supplementary services might be needed to facilitate attendance? Child care if your group is likely to include parents of young children, easy wheelchair accessibility, or transportation if your group is likely to include people who suffer from physical limitations or seizures that prevent their driving, for example.

## **Plan your Program**

Every part of the support group meeting should fulfill a purpose in enabling participants to feel welcome, safe, informed, cared for, and valued so that they will discover how to live through their difficult experience with greater peace and success (however they may define it). As you plan the format of your meetings, consider the time frame and how you will conduct the following components:

- Fellowship time and refreshments
- Introductions and announcements
- Program
- Group discussion
- Personal sharing
- Group prayer
- Closing

It will also be helpful to determine a focus or topic for each meeting. In some cases, you may be able to have a speaker present a program and initiate group discussion. In other cases, you will need to choose resource information or study materials to facilitate group discussion.

You will also need to give someone the responsibility for facilitating the meeting—keeping on schedule, implementing whatever formal teaching may take place, redirecting conversations (the gatekeeper).

### **Design Your Communication/Promotion**

The right people need to learn about your support group. How will you let them know about it?

- Church bulletins or websites
- Information in provider's offices
- Lists or websites with local service groups, local newspapers or community websites
- Once a person becomes part of your support group, how will you communicate?
- How much information do you need to know about people in the group (and will they be willing to share)?
- Will you have a website with meeting cancellations or will you use a phone chain or establish another policy?
- Do you need phone numbers/email/addresses?
- How informed does your group want to be of hospitalizations and deaths?

### **Special Considerations**

At times, providing a healthy, supportive atmosphere in the midst of diverse needs may seem like tip-toeing through a mine field. So before you start, it's important to consider how you will respond to the challenges that every support group faces.

### **Acknowledging the Diversity of Needs**

Some people are more needy, self-focused, or difficult than others. Some people have most of the personal, relational, and financial resources they need to face their difficulties while others desperately hang on, barely able to survive. Some people have a hard time respecting other people and will step on others' toes. Some people will need far more help than a support group can provide and will need encouragement to seek professional help.

### **Providing Day to Day Support**

There will be times when a daily phone call, note, or prayer from someone in the support group will be very helpful to a person in need. Determine ahead of time what support your group is capable of providing. Will a specific person (or several) be assigned to provide support for a specific period of time or will the support you provide occur naturally through the relationships that develop within the group?

### **Managing Sharing Time**

Some people will tend to dominate a group, and you don't want your group to be all about one person's needs, one person's experience, or one person's solutions. You may need to set time limits on how long one person may speak. You may need to establish boundaries on how much "advice" is permitted during times of group sharing (what people do outside the group is their personal business). You may need to remind people of the private nature of what is shared in the group.

### **Responding to Financial Needs**

This will come up. Although a support group is not responsible to meet the financial needs of its members, there may be times when an individual or the group may want to meet a specific need of a group member. It will be helpful to determine ahead of time how you will handle such needs.

### **Sharing Medical Advice**

This will happen during the course of sharing and encouraging one another. Everyone has an opinion regarding alternative, traditional, and spiritual remedies for healing. A support group, however, is not intended nor is it qualified to provide medical advice, so set guidelines for how you will handle the discussion when it goes in this direction.

### **Clues for Professional Intervention**

People who live under the stress of acute or chronic illness, depression, or disabilities may at times have personal needs that go far beyond what a support group can provide. At times, an individual may need counseling or professional intervention (such as suicide prevention), so it is essential that you develop a list of local professional and pastoral resources to which you can refer people with acute needs.

### **Additional Information and Resources**

[www.endurance.org](http://www.endurance.org)

[www.healthcentral.com](http://www.healthcentral.com)

[Creating and Facilitating Peer Support Groups](#) (see website – Help for the Hurting)