

# New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

In NJ: 1-800-367-6274 or 1-800-FOR-M.A.S.H. (Mutual Aid Self-Help) \* [www.NJgroups.org](http://www.NJgroups.org)

## DEVELOPING SELF-HELP SUPPORT GROUPS: TEN STEPS & SUGGESTIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

- Edward J. Madara, M.S.

Among the variety of roles that professionals play in support of self-help groups - which range from providing referrals, to being a guest speaker or serving as a group advisor - no role is more challenging and productive over the long term than that of helping to create a new, free, on-going self-help group. It appears that about one out of every three self-help groups is started with some help from a professional. By the very nature of his or her work and specialty, the professional is in a favorable position to identify and link persons who have the potential to start a mutual help group. For most professionals helping to start a free, on-going self-help group, the task involves their assuming what very well may be a new type of professional role--that of a consultant in a group organization. The following serves as an overview of ten basic steps that the professional can follow in helping self-help groups organize. These are suggested guidelines that have proven helpful to many professionals. It represents one general approach. Actual group development and the sequence of steps may vary slightly, based upon choice of a particular self-help group model or other special circumstances, preferences or opportunities. The ten steps are to:

1. Acquire a Basic Understanding of Self-Help Group Dynamics and Benefits. The professional who contemplates starting a self-help group is probably already aware of the general needs for such a group (e.g., social support, experiential knowledge, normalization, shared coping skills, helper-therapy, positive role models, etc.) and has recognized the way in which the group could supplement professional services. The professional needs to familiarize him/herself with the basic understanding of self-help group dynamics, and how they differ from professionally-run therapy or support groups. For a better understanding as to how self-help groups operate as mutual help organizations, the professional can refer to readings on mutual help (call our Clearinghouse for material, as well as for our free group development consultation services). Another way to learn is simply to attend a local self-help support group that has meetings open to professionals.
2. Assess Current Groups and Models. If you have determined that a need exists for a particular type of self-help group, check as to what national or model self-help groups may already exist for that problem. At the same time, you also want to confirm that there is no local chapter or similar group already existing in your immediate area. A variety of these national and model self-help groups print development manuals or helpful "How to Start" guideline materials that you should obtain and review.
3. Identify Persons Interested in Starting a Group. Identify at least two former/current patients or clients who have experienced the problem, and who express an interest "in starting" a group. Simply having persons interested "in joining" a group is not sufficient. Ideally you will want to include "veterans" who have had greater experience at coping with the problem and are willing to help others. Some opportunities for locating potential group founders include: contacts with other professionals and agencies; announcements at the conclusion of educational programs or conferences on the topic; and registration of your specific group interest in starting a group with your local self-help clearinghouse if there is one.

4. Form a Core Group. Once several persons have been identified, the next step is to have a preliminary meeting to organize these group "co-founders" into a "core group." The professional will want to confirm their interest and emphasize that this is a "mutual help" effort to create a mutual help group. All members of the core group should be expected to contribute in some way to the development of the group by sharing in the work. They should make this commitment to one another, possibly for a specific period of time.
5. Clarify and Negotiate the Relationship. It is important at this preliminary meeting to clarify the professional's role in relationship to the development of the group. The most appropriate role for the professional to assume at this stage is that of a consultant. A common pitfall for professionals is to continue at this time to play the traditional role of leader, which promotes ongoing dependence on the professional, while also stifling the member's own sense of responsibility and ownership that spark the very energy and dynamics of most mutual help groups. The role of the consultant, the types of assistance available, and a time frame for providing consultation, should be explained and agreed upon with members of the core group. The consultation would focus primarily on group organization, but also might include help in resource identification, skills building, program development, and collaboration in problem solving. As in the case of any consultant, the professional provides advice and counsel, but does not assume responsibility for leadership, decision making or group tasks, unless the group requests such assistance. Some groups refer to this as being "on tap, not on top." The importance of the members themselves taking responsibility for the group, and the professional serving in an ancillary role, is key.
6. Advise on Planning and Publicizing First Public Meeting. With the consultative relationship established, members of the core group should turn their attention to their first project - the first general meeting of the self-help group. Core group members should share responsibilities for the meeting. This they can do by sharing tasks such as serving as co-chairpersons, making arrangements for the meeting space, serving as greeter, making refreshments and coffee, etc. Shared responsibilities reduce the high risk of "one leader burn-out" that is often faced when only one person assumes the responsibilities. More importantly, at that first meeting core members will "model," by their shared volunteer activities, what mutual help is - not one person doing it all, but shared responsibilities and contributions by members. Core group members can begin work on publicity, letters to the editor, putting notices in church bulletins, printing and distribution of flyers, etc. The professional can assist in promoting referrals to this first meeting by contacts with other key professionals, agencies and associations.
7. Assist at the First Meeting. A professional's participation in the first meeting may vary from providing moral support to core group members who are chairing the meeting (and not even attending), to addressing the group as a guest speaker. The role should be minimal in order to allow the group members to exercise and develop their own group competencies. Time should be allowed for all members to introduce themselves and to describe the needs they feel the group might address. It will take several meetings of trust-building before members take more initiative in contributing to group discussion and work. At the close of the first meeting there should be general consensus on the needs for a group and agreement on a suitable site and time for a second meeting. It is easier for people to remember future meeting times if they are held on a particular day of the week or month, e. g., the second Thursday of the month.
8. Advise on Plans for Subsequent Meetings and Continued Organizational Development. The format for future meetings should include a portion of time devoted to the "business" of developing the organization, as well as discussion. Many groups include guest speakers, films, or special service projects as part of their educational program for members. For example, one service would be the establishment of an audio tape library of guest speaker presentations. Another would be development of a lending library of books and medical articles on the specific problem the group addresses. Future projects may include

community education and visitation programs. The organizational structure for the group may be as formal or informal as members prefer--with or without elected officers and written by-laws. But general guidelines for group meetings and discussion, which the professional can help the group develop, are often helpful. Another helpful resource that the group can begin to develop is that of a professional advisory committee. The group itself may decide to establish several working committees, e.g., program, publicity, or study committees, to examine needs that were prioritized at the first meeting.

9. **Identify and Address Any Special Problems.** With any consultation there often is the need to "trouble-shoot" or address new problems as they arise. The professional, as a consultant, can be very helpful in advising the group of solutions to problems that they may encounter, e. g., handling a member who dominates discussion, or increasing membership through better publicity. Problem solving should usually be a collaborative effort with members. It is also important to note the responsibility for addressing these problems should continue to be focused on group competencies, rather than too quickly providing professional intervention at times critical to group development.
10. **Review and Evaluate Your Role.** At the conclusion of the consultation time period, an assessment of the consultation and a reassessment of the professional role should take place jointly between the consultant and consultee. If the group is operating without problems, the consultation may be terminated. At the request of the group, the professional may remain available on an ad hoc basis as a consultant. He or she may also assume a somewhat different role, such as a resource or agency liaison person who may continue to attend meetings to answer questions related more to their expertise rather than group process issues. At other times the professional may be called upon to assume additional temporary roles, such as serving as a trainer in skills-building.

In summary, an important factor in the development of a viable and self-sustaining mutual help group is the need for the professional to assume a consultation role. This permits the group members to assume responsibilities for the operation of the organization, for exercising and developing group competencies, and for addressing the felt and unmet needs of its members. The extent to which members perceive the group as "their own" will directly determine the amount of responsibility they take for it and the amount of investment they make in it. The importance of self-help, as ultimately reflected in the members' ability to take responsibility for the group, is crucial to developing and realizing many of the unique benefits that self-help groups have to offer. Feel free to call our Clearinghouse with any questions you may have, or for various how-to "how-to" flyers for the group co-founders whom you're helping, and additional suggestions on how to help them to start their own self-help support group.

*"My years as a medical practitioner, as well as my own first-hand experience, have taught me how important self-help groups are in assisting their members in dealing with problems, stress, hardship and pain... the benefits of mutual aid are experienced by millions of people who turn to others with a similar problem to attempt to deal with their isolation, powerlessness, alienation, and the awful feeling that nobody understands... Health and human service providers are learning that they can indeed provide a superior service when they help their patients and clients find appropriate peer support." - former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, MD, who also served as a member of Compassionate Friends, an international self-help group for bereaved parents, following the sudden death of his own college age son.*

*"Mutual support groups, involving little or no cost to participants, have a powerful effect on mental and physical health... The psychological and physical health importance of this diffuse community is striking... The self-help movement, both in face-to-face and virtual arenas, has tremendous therapeutic potential."*  
from *American Psychologist* feature article "Who Talks?: The Social Psychology of Illness Support Groups" by K. P. Davison, J. W. Pennebaker, & S.S. Dickerson, (55) 2, pp. 205-217, 2000.

*"One of the most important capabilities of community self-help groups is that ordinary people can develop such groups in their local communities when none exist, and subsequently their group usually serves as an extraordinary resource to many in that area for several years. I still find it amazing that to start a group, a person doesn't need a grant, an agency, or even an office - just the inspiration and a few other people who share their experience and hope. What significantly helps in providing such inspiration is a person's knowledge of an existing national organization or a model group, which can provide them with basic information so they don't have to 're-invent the wheel.' "*

- E. J. Madara, "Mutual Aid Self-Help Group Developments" *Community Psychologist*, 39 (3), 2006, p. 21.