

Tips on Keeping a Support Group Going

- *Keep track of your group's progress.*
From time to time, ask members for their feedback on how the group is going. Find out how useful they find it, how comfortable they feel, and their likes and dislikes about the group. Use this information to make adjustments.
- *Share responsibility for the group.*
Letting others take leadership roles helps them feel more committed to and invested in the group. Make sure members know their help is appreciated. Since you may find it's often easier to do things yourself, asking others in the group to take over some responsibilities can be trying. However, no one person should have to do everything, and sharing responsibilities will help you avoid burnout.
- *Be sure everyone has a chance to talk.*
Some people are naturally more talkative than others. Asking questions to get quiet members to speak up is important. It's also crucial to keep the more vocal members on-topic and gently remind them to let others have a turn at times.
- *Emphasise the importance of confidentiality.*
In order for your members to feel safe enough in your support group to self-disclose and work through problems, they need to feel sure that nobody is going to be telling people outside of the group about the group's discussions. Make sure this is well understood by everyone.
- *Encourage outside contact among members.*
Members can offer support to each other outside of meetings. The "buddy" system, used by groups like AA, encourages members to take interest in one another's well-being and form relationships outside the group.
- *Keep recruiting.*
If you have an open group, make sure you continue to get the word out. Groups can stagnate when the membership remains the same all the time, and if members who leave are never replaced your group will not survive.

- *Share rewards and failures.*
Let members know that you appreciate their contributions. When people make mistakes, don't place blame. Don't heap all of the praise when something goes well on any one person - or all of the guilt when things go badly.
- *Keep a realistic perspective.*
Don't idealise the support group. There may sometimes be people that your group won't be able to help; this doesn't mean your efforts are futile. Also, when members leave, it doesn't mean you've failed them. Usually it means that they have used the group as much as they think is useful and moved on with their lives.
- *Remember that this is a support group.*
The dynamics of a group may change over time - for example, it could become more social in function, or it could change focus in terms of topic. No matter how the group changes, your group's primary purpose is to provide support and understanding to its individual members.

Although a support group is not a therapy group – and tends to be informal – there are some simple considerations:

1. Please turn off (or put on silent/vibrate) all cell phones and put pagers on vibrate.
2. What is shared in this group stays in this group. Ask group members for their commitment to confidentiality.
3. All feelings are okay. Feelings are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. We do not need to rescue people from their feelings. When feelings are heard with respect and empathy, people can begin to resolve these feelings. Remembering these things about feelings will help this group to be emotionally safe. Feelings do not need to be interpreted, analysed, or judged.
4. Respect people's physical boundaries. Ask permission to hug or touch. Listen while people are sharing.
5. Only one person speaks at a time--please do not interrupt or talk over others. Respect people's opinions. Ask permission to comment on something someone else has shared or to ask them a question. It is fine to let others know that you would rather that they did not comment on what you shared.
6. This group is a safe space for all religious and spiritual belief systems. Please be respectful of this. It is not all right to use the group time to try to convince people about any specific religion or spiritual belief system. It is, of course, fine to share how your belief system may have been supportive and helpful to you.