



That individuals who have had the same life experiences can help each other is the basis of peer support. Peer support groups provide a complement – and, for some people, an alternative – to traditional, professionally-guided, talk therapy. Peer support groups are a place to make friends; find people who will advocate with you and help you advocate for yourself; a place to discuss and obtain information on important topics such as medication, disability benefits, family relations, spirituality, and others.

Members of support groups can work together on ways to improve the mental health system and to counter the economic and social discrimination that people with psychiatric disabilities face. The idea that peers are often the people who are best qualified to provide services and support is gaining widespread acceptance among public officials, mental health professionals, and family members – as well as among people with psychiatric illnesses themselves.

Following are some of the benefits of peer support groups, compiled by the National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse in [*Starting a Self-Help/Advocacy Group*](#):

- The act of joining together with others who have “walked in their shoes” enables individuals to recognize that they are not alone, that other people have had similar experiences and feelings.
- Individuals in the mental health system often do not have the support of family and friends. Self-help groups can provide the support that may be missing from their lives.
- Self-help groups offer a safe place for self-disclosure.
- Self-help groups encourage personal responsibility and control over one’s own treatment.
- Helping others gives group members a sense of their own competence.
- In contrast to professional/client relationships, members of self-help groups interact as equals.

Peer support groups are also a place for people with mental illnesses to have autonomy. Although professionals may provide a supportive role, especially during the beginning, ideally the professionals will eventually separate themselves from the group. Decisions should come from the entire group and authority should be distributed.

Peer support groups are inclusive: As long as a safe environment is maintained, people are accepted whether or not their behavior or ideas fit with the other members of the group.

What makes a good meeting?

First, **find a space** where everyone feels safe and comfortable. Potential locations include the local library, churches, the YMCA, schools, community centers, and coffee shops. Find out where the local Alcoholics Anonymous chapter meets; it may be a good place for your group. The location should be wheelchair accessible and close to public transportation.

Plan the agenda before the first meeting and distribute it to all members. List the agenda items according to priority and allot each one a certain amount of time.

Before the meeting, choose a facilitator, whose role is to keep the group focused. **Assure that leadership roles and responsibilities are shared among all members.** Someone may be asked to keep time; someone else may take minutes (although self-help group meetings may not require minutes). Another person could coordinate the provision of snacks and group members can take turns bring refreshments to the meetings.

After a **brief welcome**, a discussion of **ground rules** – including **confidentiality** – and an overview of the **purpose** of the meeting, the group members can introduce themselves briefly and answer such questions as, “What is one thing you’d like to see come out of this group?” and “What is something positive you did this week?”

Next the facilitator may ask if anyone has any pressing concerns that they would like to discuss. **A meeting may consist of people sharing concerns and support, or it may be organized around a speaker or a specific topic.**

Below is a possible agenda for a two-hour peer support meeting:

- Welcome, discussion of ground rules and meeting overview: 5 minutes
- Introductions: 10 minutes
- Support: 50 minutes
- Business, e.g., decision-making, projects that the group wants to address, etc.: 30 minutes
- What needs to get done before the next meeting? Figure out tasks, delegate responsibilities, decide on the next meeting time and place: 10 minutes
- Wrap-up: 10 minutes
- Circulate contact list, pass out literature, close meeting: 5 minutes

Active Listening

Even with a well-planned agenda, things can go awry if members are not respectful of and attentive to one another. Below are some tools for active listening from the National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse [*Tools for Developing a Self-Help Group*](#):

- **Restating.** Repeat what the speaker said in your own words. This reassures the speaker that he or she has been understood.
- **Questioning.** Ask questions to clarify details, sort through possible inconsistencies, and gather further information. Demonstrate that you are interested and that you care about understanding the speaker.
- **Focusing.** Describe what the conversation is about. Put the speaker's thoughts and ideas into a larger context.
- **Reflecting.** Identify what you perceive to be the speaker's underlying feelings.
- **Validating.** Legitimize a person's statement by indicating that what they have said makes sense to you.

Resolving Conflicts

In any group, conflicts are bound to arise. Here are some tips, also from [*Tools for Developing a Self-Help Group*](#), on how to resolve conflicts courteously.

- **Flare-ups.** If two group members get into a heated discussion, summarize the points made by each and then turn the conversation back to the group.
- **Grandstanding.** When one group member seems to be monopolizing the conversation, give the speaker credit for his/her contribution and ask the speaker to reserve his/her other points for later. Ask the group if they would like to comment on what the speaker has said.
- **"Broken Record."** If any individual has repeated the same point several times, assure the speaker that his/her point has been heard. Repeat the point a final time and ask the group if they want to continue discussing it.
- **Interrupting.** When a group member is interrupted, step in immediately and ask the interrupter to allow the speaker time to finish his/her thought.
- **Criticism.** If one group member is repeatedly critical and the criticism is legitimate, validate his/her feelings but encourage him/her to work toward change and focus on the positive. Try assigning the individual an achievable task that addresses his/her concerns.

For more information about starting and funding a peer support group, check out the

[SELF-HELP TOOL KIT](#)

on the National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse web site:

www.mhselfhelp.org