



# The Starter Pack

A comprehensive guide to  
setting up a new self help group

**West Midlands**

**‘Making this journey alone would have been unbearable;  
travelling side by side with people who have walked this  
way before has been truly inspirational, healing me every  
step of the way.’ (Anonymous)**

## How to use this pack

This pack offers some ideas and suggestions to think about when starting a self help group. It describes the steps that you can take to help your group succeed. The Starter Pack has been written in sections, so you don't need to read it all at once. You can read the parts that interest you first and refer to other sections when you're ready.

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## Section 1: First Steps

### Step One Stop and think

Many people from all walks of life have successfully set up a self help group. Some people nurture their ideas for months or even years until the time feels right; others jump right in and find they land on their feet. There is no easy formula which guarantees success, but there are some tried and tested steps which will help to increase your chance of getting a new group off the ground.

Whatever your current situation or the time you've already spent on your plans, it is still worth taking some time now to think through why you want to become involved in self help and how your needs could best be met.

People who set up self help groups are often influenced by some of the same factors which motivate people to join existing groups. For example, lack of adequate support, the need for information and the desire to be with others who have been through something similar.

Starting and working with others to set up a self help group is very different from simply joining a group. So before taking the next step, consider where you feel your motivation lies.

People may join groups to:

- reduce their isolation and to feel less alone with their problem
- gather information and learn more about their condition
- share experiences and gain emotional support and understanding
- learn how other people cope and gain hope from their experiences

People may start groups because they:

- have not found a suitable group and now feel ready to do something about it
- remember what it was like for them and don't want others to struggle alone
- understand and value mutual support
- wish to raise awareness of their problem
- are far enough down the road in their own recovery to feel that they are in a position to help and support others

**'In helping others, we shall help ourselves,  
for whatever good we give out, completes  
the circle and comes back to us.'**  
Flora Edwards

Starting a group can bring many benefits:

- your life could be changed for the better
- you may get surprising amounts of help yourself
- you may make a new set of supportive friends
- you could become fulfilled through being able to help someone else
- you could find yourself meeting all sorts of people

- you could find yourself doing all sorts of things you never dreamed you could do

Think about possible challenges too:

- starting a group will mean demands on your time, your energy and to some degree your finances
- it may mean intrusion into your home by telephone calls, if not by people themselves
- it may well affect your family
- it can mean having to cope emotionally with other people's problems as well as your own

**Weigh up the possible demands on the one hand.  
And the likely benefits on the other.**

Think of the next nine to twelve months. Could you put some time, energy and commitment into a new group for as long as that? If you are doubtful, then it might be better to put your idea on the back burner for a while or approach the problem in a different way.

**Do you still want to start a self help group?  
Then take the next step.**

*'In union there is strength.'*  
Aesop

### **Step Two Find some people who think like you**

You will need to put some effort into starting a group but you don't need to do it alone. In fact the best way to begin is to find a few other people who share your motivation and who are willing to help you to get the group off the ground.

Make it clear that the group is not yet active and that you're looking for people to help get it started. You could produce a simple poster asking if people who share your condition or concern would be interested in helping to start a group.

Can others help to put people in touch?

- NHS professionals and social workers
- mental health workers
- community centre workers
- a practice nurse or nurse specialist

Which local organisations might know people or agree to display posters?

- your local voluntary sector development organisation
- health centres and hospital clinics
- neighbourhood community centres
- community centres for black or minority ethnic communities

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Can you advertise?

- in your local paper, through a free news item
- on local radio
- by posters in libraries, health centres or hospital waiting areas

Can national organisations help?

- by informing their local members of your plans
- by agreeing to give your group a mention on their website
- by enabling you to air your plans via their chat room or forums

*'No one can whistle a symphony.  
It takes a whole orchestra to play it.'*

H.E. Luccock

### Step Three Get together

Getting together with other people who share your condition or concern can be a very powerful experience. You may need time to share your stories and explore similarities and differences to enable you to 'connect' and feel a sense of shared experience. This will help you to establish common ground and a desire to move forward together.

It's during these early discussions that the group's aims - who it is for, what it could achieve and how it might be organised - will begin to emerge. Find out if you all want the same things from the group and whether your varied ideas could work for or against each other. It might be useful to regard these early meetings as 'planning meetings' and the members as the 'planning group'. This will help to give your first few meetings a strong focus and a sense of direction.

Discuss your aims and what you hope to achieve.

Who the group is for and what it hopes to achieve, are closely linked so you'll probably find yourself making decisions on membership and aims at much the same time. Different groups define their membership in different ways:

**Young Angels:** a group for young women with breast cancer

**EKTA:** a group for Asian women with breast cancer.

Partners and carers are welcome in some groups, whilst other groups seek to restrict their membership to people who are directly affected by the condition or concern. For example:

**Aphasia Nottingham:** a group run by and for people with aphasia.

Other groups may seek not only to define who they are for, but also to convey their approach or philosophy. For example,

**Emotions Anonymous:** helping people live in peace with unresolved problems.

The name for your group may emerge during the planning phase or may be the outcome of early discussions following the launch of the group. Don't feel pressurised into

adopting a name too early, good publicity can still be produced without a formal name. Indeed this may even work in the group's favour - some newcomers will be attracted by the notion that everything is not set in tablets of stone.

#### Sharing the load

Remember, how new members view the group is likely to determine the extent to which they take on responsibilities and share the workload. Work towards collective ownership of the group.

One thing you'll need to talk about early on is how much you'll expect people to contribute to the group, not necessarily financially but in time and commitment. This is important: self help groups work best when members share responsibilities and jobs. Encourage joint decision making and provide opportunities for people to give as well as receive, help and support.

If you begin by doing everything yourself, people may expect this to continue. Start as you mean to go on by involving everyone and sharing the jobs out wherever possible. You will discover that different people have different skills and pooling them will strengthen your group. It will also mean the group has the potential to continue should you or other key people decide, for whatever reason, to leave.

Some things you might think about together could now include:

- membership - who the group is for
- how often you might meet and where
- how and where to advertise for members
- what the group might offer
- whether to build links with professionals
- how initial costs might be met

#### **Step Four Make it enjoyable**

At each stage, try to make what you're doing enjoyable. It can be hard work starting a self help group and hearing other people's stories can be distressing. Yet self help groups are rarely sad gatherings and yours need not be. If people find they enjoy taking part, they are more likely to get involved and stay on as members. Make sure everyone is made to feel welcome and avoid cliques forming early on.

*'There's no more salutary experience than to walk through the doors of our meeting hall and find a roomful of vibrant people all enjoying themselves and getting on with their lives.'*  
Member of Nottingham Cardiac Support Group

## Section 2 Telephone and contact points for new groups

Most groups decide to publicise one or two telephone contact numbers so that new members can ring before deciding to go along to a meeting. A group mobile phone means the task of responding to enquiries can be shared within the group. This avoids the necessity to publicise home phone numbers and has the added advantage of the contact number remaining the same should someone move house or leave the group. It is a good idea to put some boundaries around when you are prepared to receive calls. One way of doing this, is to include times available in your publicity e.g.

*'Ring Jane on 0797 123 1234 between 3.00pm and 5.00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday.'*

The voicemail message may go something like this:

*'Hello, you are through to the messaging service for the Something Self Help Group. We are really sorry we cannot take your call right now. Please leave your name and number and we will get back to you as soon as we can.'*

Whilst voicemail and answer machines can be useful they do invariably increase phone costs. If you are using your own home phone number with an answer machine, your message may need to include information for friends and family as well as the group.

Some groups include an email address. Like all other communication tools, email has pros and cons. On the one hand it is less intrusive than the telephone, on the other hand it relies on one person checking the mailbox regularly. This can be time-consuming, particularly if people are seeking support as well as details about the group. If the group receives frequent requests for information, devising a standard reply may save time. Where you can, use a separate email address for the group and ensure that children and young people in the household cannot access the account.

If you are reluctant to publicise a personal telephone number on flyers and posters, a local organisation may be able to offer the group a P.O. Box Number or a contact telephone number. Try your local voluntary sector development organisation. When using an organisation's telephone number it is important to make sure that enquirers are aware that they won't be able to speak directly to a group member in the first instance. Beyond offering a contact point for potential members, stop and think. Don't rush to provide a help-line or an information service for everyone with your condition.

*'When a person is down in the world,  
an ounce of help is better than a  
pound of preaching.'*  
Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton

## Section 3 Publicity

Very few self help groups survive and thrive through word of mouth alone. Most find they need to generate positive publicity throughout the life of the group - to advertise their existence and to attract new members. Good publicity is particularly important to the success of a new group and for this reason it is worth investing some time and effort in planning your advertising campaign. When you're starting off, make sure your publicity makes it clear that you are initially looking for people willing to help get the group going. Later you can work on alternative publicity welcoming new members.

Should you find that many of your enquiries are coming from people who do not share your condition or concern, take a closer look at your publicity and consider how it could be improved to better reflect the aims of the group.

The issue on which your group is based may to some degree dictate how far you need to cast your publicity net. Groups that meet around a common condition may find it easier to attract members than groups based on sensitive or rare issues. As a consequence some groups only need to publicise locally, whilst others may find county or regional coverage essential.

### Cards and posters

When you're starting off -or if you stay as a small, informal group you can keep publicity materials simple and cheap. Later on you can produce a greater variety. Posters or cards are two simple methods that groups have found bring results.

### Cards

Cards the size of a business card can be useful for people to slip in to their pockets and refer to at a later date.

### Posters

Posters can make a big impact and reach a large number of people. A4 posters (the size of this page) seem best: big enough to be noticed but small enough to put on a crowded notice board. Sometimes A5 (half this page) are more suitable where lots of posters are competing for space, for example in doctors' surgeries. Don't forget to put a date on your poster and keep a record of where it is displayed.

Targeted publicity materials - those which are carefully designed to attract the interest of particular individuals or groups - are most effective. Take the time to look at notice boards and other group posters to see which ones attract you or hold your attention. This may help you to think about the people or groups you want to attract and the content and design of your poster.

Posters need to be clear and to the point, with easy-to-read contact details. If the name of your group is an acronym, do make sure that your poster explains what it stands for.

Groups with access to a computer can use word-processing or desktop publishing software to design and print eye-catching posters. Later, particularly if the group wants to produce a lot of posters, it might be more cost-effective to get your poster printed by

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a professional print shop. You can ask for a quote and for advice about how to keep the costs down - for example, by using fewer colours. Give some thought to the contact details given on the poster - how quickly will these be out of date or redundant?

### Places for posters

- local faith centres - churches, mosques, temples and synagogues
- libraries/local post offices
- supermarket notice boards
- corner shops/newsagents' boards
- health food shops and laundrettes
- community centres
- luncheon clubs
- hospital and clinic waiting areas
- the local gym or leisure centre
- barber shops and hairdressers
- notice boards at people's work places
- pharmacists

### Using the media

The media is very concerned with news. Just the fact that your group exist isn't usually enough to secure you a mention. Journalists are however interested in personal stories. Bear this in mind and think carefully before agreeing to a feature on your group and condition. Whilst this may give your cause wide exposure and bring in enquiries, it may also intrude upon your personal and family life in unexpected ways. Sometimes people regret taking part in interviews particularly if they feel they have been misquoted or that their experiences have been sensationalised.

- Leaf through your own local newspaper and see how and where small groups and organisations are reporting their news.
- Many local and free newspapers have pull-out sections based on neighbourhood areas.
- Don't forget the letters pages - you may be able to mention your group by responding to relevant articles or to correspondence from other readers.
- Check out any local, free magazines, community newsletters or parish magazines - they may provide free advertising.

When producing a press release for the local newspaper or radio remember the 5 Ws: **Who? What? Why? When? and Where?** Jot down your answer to each of these questions before you make contact with the media and don't forget to give them public contact details for the group.

### Community directories

When you first set up, give the group time to develop and settle before agreeing to be listed in a self help or community directory. New groups go through many changes in the

first few months and their meeting details and contact numbers may alter several times as the group establishes itself. For this reason many organisations which produce directories list only established groups i.e. groups which have been meeting for about a year. This ensures the directory carries accurate, up-to-date information which has a reasonable shelf-life.

Remember to update professionals with any new details or changes that have been made to the group, for example venue, dates and phone numbers.

### Websites

As the group develops and becomes more established you may wish to consider developing your own website. Before going ahead it is important to discuss your plans with the whole group. You may discover that there are members with considerable skills who are willing to share their expertise and others who are eager to volunteer their time and ideas. Setting up a small project team is an ideal way to start.

### Publicity for people with rare conditions

If you have a rare medical condition or syndrome, local publicity may fail to yield any results. However, people with rare conditions have found self help support through other means. Often their first port of call has been a national organisation located via the internet. National or international organisations may be able to offer:

- pen-pal and phone-pal contacts
- email groups
- internet chat rooms and virtual support groups
- newsletters
- county or country contacts
- annual meetings, gatherings and socials.

### Round-up on publicity

Try to ensure your publicity makes it clear that the group is new or in the early stages of development. In this way, you will not create too many expectations or attract people in crisis or in need of immediate support.

Each group is different. If your group can be very public you'll want to use every opportunity to advertise widely. Groups which meet around sensitive issues may wish to use more discreet methods of publicity to draw in new members. Getting help from other organisations or sympathetic professionals may provide a more confidential and supportive way for members to come forward.

## Section 4 Places to meet

Most groups decide to have regular meetings. It seems to work best if meetings are pre-arranged according to a fixed pattern, for example every Monday or the first Wednesday of the month.

Before you book a room, it helps if two or three of you go to see the venue. Don't choose just on the basis of a phone call. Think about accessibility, comfort and the general feel of the room. If it's all right, you can make arrangements about details at the same time - things like signing in to the building and opening up the room, making a drink, locking up etc. Ask about arrangements for public liability insurance and rent.

Meeting places used by groups have included:

- the local library
- someone's home
- a local community centre
- the lounge in a residential home
- a health centre
- a hospital
- a pub function room
- an hotel

### Meeting in hospitals and clinics

This can work well. Some groups choose a hospital or clinic connected to the group. Members may know the room, contact with professional workers is easy, access and parking is likely to be good and it may well be free. It may also be a good way of ensuring potential members get to hear about the group.

There could be disadvantages too:

- the group may want to discuss their feelings about professional care
- the venue may be associated with painful memories
- a professional may have to be there to unlock the room
- a particular room may be suddenly unavailable
- it may be more difficult to create a warm and informal atmosphere

### Meeting in people's homes

Nowadays, fewer groups meet in each other's homes, although some still hold their committee meetings 'round the kitchen table'. There are advantages and disadvantages to meeting in people's homes. Some groups, particularly very small groups, find that it can work well. However, not all members will necessarily want to open their home up to the group. If you are working towards attracting and welcoming a wide range of people from different cultural background and areas, you may find a more neutral venue works best.

### Timing and access to transport

It is useful to visit potential premises at the time of day that you plan to hold your meetings. Some people may feel wary of going to new places in the dark so think

about their possible concerns, particularly if your meetings are going to be held in the evening. See what parking is available, what the street lighting is like and checkout the nearest bus stop.

To pay or not to pay

A free room can sound attractive but there are some advantages to paying for a room, for example you can:

- have greater choice
- feel sure of getting the same room every time
- raise difficulties if things aren't right
- meet away from over-familiar surroundings
- be independent of professionals if you want to be

You may be able to negotiate free use or reduced rent for the first few meetings. Don't be afraid to ask for support 'in kind' - a number of groups have negotiated a free room in hotels and libraries.

Change your room if it's not right. The right room can help make your group work well. People will feel at home, you can publicise your meetings more easily and there will be a sense of continuity in what you do. You may not find out if a room is suitable until you've used it for a while. If the room is not right, don't struggle on; instead start looking for a better alternative.

*'If you are talking about changing behaviour,  
company is better than willpower.'*

Hannah Hedrick

## Section 5 Money

Try not to worry too much about money when you're starting off. Groups usually find some way around the problem and if you keep things simple you may find you don't need a great deal. You'll begin to see how much money you might need once you've worked out your aims and discussed some possible activities.

Some of the more common costs may include:

- rent
- photocopying or printing posters and publicity material
- a mobile phone and top-ups
- postage
- initial cost of refreshments
- speakers' fees or expenses

Anyone spending money on behalf of the group should always keep the receipt and pass it to the person charged with looking after the finances. You will need to discuss what the group will pay expenses for and who can claim expenses from the group. Many groups agree and document an expenses policy.

Itemised phone bills, mobile top-up cards, flat-rate monthly internet charges and the use of new keypad codes<sup>1</sup> for land-line phones, may all help to simplify expenses. Committee members are not paid for work done on behalf of the group, only for agreed expenses incurred.

### Raising funds

Most people coming to a self help group will accept that it is reasonable for everyone to make a small contribution to the cost of running the group. A flexible system may be better than a set subscription, particularly when some members are on low incomes. Groups have found that it helps to discuss and agree this early on.

Some groups raise money by:

- charging for tea and coffee
- holding a raffle at group meetings. Bear in mind that members, from particular faith groups, may not wish to participate in raffles and may feel uncomfortable about benefiting from the proceeds.
- charging an annual subscription to the group
- having a collection at each meeting

### Getting help free or cheaply

Local shopkeepers, supermarkets and businesses may all offer you some sort of support, from raffle prizes to the promise of free printing. Some groups have a tradition of not accepting any donations or grants from outside the group, others are

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<sup>1</sup> Keypad codes are entered into the keypad before dialling the telephone number. If the group has a keypad code, calls made on behalf of the group can be listed separately on members' phone bills. Contact your phone company for more information.

happy to take and ask for help. You don't always have to ask for money, you may require equipment, services or free publicity instead. This is known as receiving 'help in kind'.

Groups have successfully:

- obtained free photocopying from firms
- used rent-free rooms
- put out successful appeals for equipment on local radio
- had raffle prizes donated
- asked other organisations to include publicity about them in their newsletter or mailing

Applying for grants

When you have raised some money yourself, you could then think about making applications elsewhere. You may want to try your local Community Foundation. Find out whether your local voluntary sector development organisation has a Funding Adviser who can help you to apply for grants. Most funders will want to see a copy of your set of group rules (constitution). See Section 8 for information on drawing up a set of rules for your group.

Fundraising

There are a number of reasons why some self help groups find it difficult to hold public fundraising events. The group may be based on a sensitive issue which does not lend itself to 'going public', the group's issue may have little public appeal or members may have limited energy, preferring to put what they do have into other aspects of the group's work.

If your group decides to go ahead and fundraise, it is best to agree in advance exactly what you are fundraising for and how the money will be spent. If a group or organisation raises funds for a particular item on your behalf, it is important that the group spends that money on that item.

*'It is one of the most beautiful compensations  
of this life that no man can seriously help  
another without helping himself.'*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Section 6 Going public

Some groups begin with a few people getting together - in someone's home, or perhaps at a conference - and just keep growing from there without anyone making a conscious decision for the group to 'go public'. Other groups need to be 'launched' to let people know that they exist.

A public launch is 'news', so you might be able to get a mention in the local paper or on the local radio. Make the most of these opportunities. Tell people why the group is needed and what it offers. Remember to include contact details.

### Timing and venue

It is important to allow lots of 'run-in' time to plan a launch. It will go much better if you think through all the details. Think about the different sorts of people you want to attract and what would make it easier for them to attend. Choose your venue carefully, taking into consideration its appeal to all sections of the community. A good choice of venue is one that's central, easy to find and close to public transport. Nearby parking is helpful.

Think carefully about timing. Try to choose a time of day which will suit most of the people who might be interested in attending. Consider people's work and family commitments - would evenings work best either on weekdays or at weekends?

### Speakers

Groups often decide to invite a 'speaker' to the launch. A talk provides some good solid content and may also mean that people, who might feel uncertain, can come along without feeling they are likely to be 'roped into things'. Aim to find a speaker who knows a lot about the issue on which your group is based. Remember to check on their equipment needs and whether or not they charge a fee or expect a donation to cover their expenses. Give the speaker plenty of notice and ideally a choice of dates for the meeting

Meetings generally have four main parts:

- welcoming
- the main business of the meeting
- looking ahead
- unwinding

Well in advance of the day choose one person to chair the meeting - ideally, one of your own members. The other jobs, both beforehand and on the day itself, can be divided out among several people. If you plan to use IT equipment, for example a laptop or projector, check that:

- everything is in good working order
- power sockets are within reach or extension leads are available
- laptops are fully charged and a screen is available
- You know who to call upon if things don't work as they should

### Welcoming

Plan for at least two people to arrive at the venue well before the publicised start time to sort out any problems and welcome early arrivals. If the meeting room is not near the entrance to the building, put up some posters with arrows to help people find it.

Make sure people receive a really warm welcome. If your group is dealing with a particularly sensitive or confidential issue you may want to avoid asking people to sign in. If this is the case, raise this at the meeting, making sure people know how to re-contact the group if they don't wish to leave their contact details.

Arrange for one person to meet and take care of the speaker. You may decide to have tea, coffee or other drinks as people arrive, instead of - or as well as - at the end. Some groups decide it helps if everyone organising the meeting wears a name badge. There may be some housekeeping announcements, for example location of the toilets and the fire exit.

### The main business

People will find it helpful if one person first explains why the meeting has been called and introduces the key people involved. If you have a speaker, people will want to ask questions and discuss what they have heard.

If you don't have a speaker, the main business will be discussion. You'll probably need to plan this and to produce an outline for the meeting. Two of you could start it off, for example, by talking about your experiences, telling your story and sharing why you think a group is needed.

### Looking ahead

This might include discussion about the group and decisions on action to be taken. Remember to announce the next meeting and write up the date. There may also be an opportunity to get new people involved.

### Unwinding

Some people may have to get home but others may enjoy chatting. Others may want to use the time to ask the speaker more questions or to find out how they can get involved. Make sure that you allow enough time for this but keep an eye on the clock - launches can end on a sour note if the caretaker calls time on the meeting.

### The end result

Don't be disappointed if the numbers are not large or people don't immediately offer to become involved. You'll have made some progress towards launching your group and you will have publicised the issue on which your group is based.

On the other hand, you may have quite the opposite problem - lots of people and not enough time to talk to them properly. In either case, you'll need to be sure that everyone can get in touch with the group again. It may be useful to give people a small information leaflet with contact names and addresses to take away from the meeting.

*'Nobody can do everything,  
But everyone can do something.'*

Author unknown

## Section 7 What do groups do?

Most people go to self help groups to meet other people 'in the same boat'. They want time to talk and time to listen. They want to hear the experiences of others and to share their own story. Many will have a thirst for information and a desire to learn how other people cope. It is important to give time to this, particularly when a new member arrives.

Some groups decide to arrange additional activities such as swimming or exercise sessions -to improve health or to help people cope with stressful situations. It's best not to be too ambitious at first and don't assume everyone will want to join in. Take care not to make people who choose not to take part feel left out. An 'in-group' of people who do things together can divide a group. Some members may be on low incomes or benefits and may not be able to afford extra outings.

Activities carried out by groups include:

- exercise
- relaxation
- swimming
- armchair tai chi
- outings
- walking for health
- book clubs

Providing information

People are often desperate for information. Support meetings and informal conversations offer opportunities to gather and pass on information and there are other ways too:

- invite speakers to meetings
- show DVD's
- buy books
- collect articles and store them in a file which can be available at meetings
- contact a national organisation to receive their literature, leaflets and newsletters. (You may be required to pay or join.)
- download information from the internet

Decide what types of information your group will and will not offer. Most groups, for example, decide from the start that they will not offer medical advice and make this clear to new members at the outset. Groups can also support people by encouraging them to ask professionals for the information they need.

Develop a system for making sure that the information that your group offers is accurate and kept up to date. No matter how much you want to help, do not distribute information that may be wrong, incomplete or out of date.

Responding to difference

Where different cultural values, norms and religious beliefs exist within the group, show an interest in how people have experienced a particular issue or situation. Acknowledge and accept the differences and try not to make judgments or assumptions. Communicating well in a group takes skill, empathy and sensitivity. The skilled self helper looks for connections, those areas of shared experience – often the expression of emotions, fears and feelings that are shared across cultures, class and creed. By listening to and acknowledging difference the group is recognising and affirming another member's lived experience that differs from their own.

#### Making support meetings work

- think about the room - does it allow for privacy, is it quiet?
- agree who will chair the meeting, perhaps taking it in turns at each meeting
- welcome newcomers and allow everyone to introduce themselves
- make sure everyone who wants to speak has time to do so
- think about how people from different backgrounds and cultures may be made to feel welcome
- remember that what happens within the group is confidential
- try not to feel uncomfortable if there is silence sometimes
- try to include positive helpful experiences as well as problems
- agree a time to end
- allow time to unwind
- have tea and coffee available, at the beginning or the end.

*'In coming to the group I did something for myself.  
In listening and sharing I did something for others.  
Life gets better when I belong.'*  
Member of Depressives Anonymous

## Section 8 Group structures

How you organise your group will depend on its size and the issue on which your group is based. If your group is small you can probably combine business with the support meeting. It can be helpful to decide in advance what time you want to give to each part of the meeting - one part for discussion and support and one for business.

Business matters - making decisions about the group is important. If you ignore it, and just concentrate on trying to support each other, essential decisions don't get taken, or just one or two people decide. This may seem fine at the beginning but may cause problems as the group develops.

However, if you spend too much time on business and fundraising, people's support needs will go unmet and you may begin to lose members - it may take a little time to get the balance right. Larger groups may need to think about having a committee structure to deal with business matters and practical arrangements.

Basically, the right structure for your group is the structure that helps your group achieve its aims. Being clear about the things you want to do, and how you want to do them, will help you to think about how best to organise the group. You may also find it useful to contact other groups and find out what works for them.

If your group is thinking about starting up as a local branch of a national organisation, you may be asked to adopt a recommended branch structure. Think about this - it may be helpful from the start, or you could take on their suggestions later, particularly if the recommended structure feels too formal for now.

### Committees

A committee is a body of people the group chooses to deal with the day-to-day running and decision-making on the group's behalf. The committees may also 'action' or implement the group's decisions.

Some self help group committees meet for half an hour or so before the regular meeting, or on a different day or evening, so that the group's support meeting time isn't all taken up by committee business. Many groups have a general meeting once a year where the committee can be chosen. You can decide a time limit for holding committee posts, so that the jobs don't have to stay with the same person forever.

Some members may be less confident than others about taking on a particular responsibility - be sensitive to their needs and abilities. Working in pairs can help, especially if one person can learn from another as the job progresses. Some groups run apprenticeships, where someone who is interested in taking on a key role in the future, works alongside or 'shadows' the person currently in that role.

### Look after your money

If you are thinking about raising funds, you have probably reached the stage when you need to consider appointing someone to oversee the finances. The treasurer's job need not be as difficult as people might think, but take care in appointing a treasurer for your group. You may be able to get practical help and training with regard to

bookkeeping, accounting software and examination of your annual accounts through your local voluntary sector development organisation or, if your area has one, a Community Accountancy Service.

Regular financial updates from the treasurer should help the committee to keep abreast of the group's financial arrangements and provide a good basis for decision-making. The more open and transparent the process, the easier it is for the whole committee to share the responsibility for the group's financial affairs.

It may help to agree how often the treasurer should report to the committee on income and expenditure and the maximum amount that can be spent without committee approval. At least once a year the group should hold a review so that all members can see how the group's money has been raised and spent.

### Fundraising

You may need to know more about your duties and responsibilities if fundraising is one of your key activities. For example, you need a licence to carry out certain fundraising activities. Beware of fundraising becoming a burden. If you feel the efforts you are putting into fundraising simply aren't worth the returns, stop and take stock. A large amount of time and energy which reaps little rewards may simply serve to exhaust the group.

### Constitutions

New or fledgling groups often manage without a constitution or set of formal rules until that is, they begin to think about applying for funds. Along with the application, grant making trusts will require a signed copy of the group's rules or constitution.

A set of Rules (sometimes referred to as a constitution or governing document) contain information about the group's aims, how the committee is organised and elected, how officers are appointed, when and how annual general meetings are conducted and rules about finances and the accounts. They also include information on membership, dismissal of members and the closure of the organisation.

### Keep things simple

Constitutions need not be complicated. They are there to work for you and for the group and should reflect your needs as well as meeting the requirements of any other groups (such as funders, your group's national organisation etc.).

There are a number of 'model constitutions' which groups can adopt but many are too cumbersome and formal for small self help groups. For example, you may have rejected a committee structure in favour of the whole group making decisions together, perhaps rotating the chair and sharing roles. If this is the case, why not try writing your own set of rules? In this way you will produce something that better reflects the way you work.

If you are planning to write your own set of rules, as a minimum try and include information under the following headings. This will provide you with a simple set of rules suited to a small self help group, with modest financial requirements.

- name of the group
- aims of the group

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- how decisions are made
- who can be a member
- how finances and bank accounts are managed
- what will happen to any remaining funds should the group close

You may get help with writing a constitution, or with adopting a model constitution through making contact with your local voluntary sector development organisation.

## CHECKLIST - Group structures

- small groups can keep it simple
- try not to rush in to formal structures, think about what you want the group to do first
- learn from other groups
- make sure that aims and activities influence your group structure
- give everyone the chance to help to make decisions
- as your group grows, consider whether a committee will spread the work-load
- plan a special meeting if big decisions have to be made

*‘Whilst common experience creates the initial resonance that triggers mutual aid, it is the sharing of this experience and its exploration that enriches and deepens resonance’.*

Extract from the Self-Help Way:  
Mutual Aid and Health by  
Jean-Marie Romeder. Ottawa, 1990

## Section 9 Getting help from outside the group

It's all right to ask for and to accept offers of help from outside the group if this is what you want. You may find that help from outsiders acts as a boost to your self confidence, but say 'no' if you don't want the help or don't want help at the time it's offered.

There are times when outside help can be particularly welcome - when you first start the group and at times of change or crisis within the group. When people are helping you it shows they value self help and the support you are offering. On the other hand, if you have too much help from outside you may lose the special strength of self help groups - people with a shared experience helping each other.

It helps to be clear about what you want from professional involvement and what you can give in return. Stop and think about what sort of relationship your group might want to have with professionals. You may want them to know about your work, to value it and to support it, but you may not want professionals to be actively involved in your group by attending meetings or helping to run it. Being clear about your own needs and objectives in working with professionals also helps to keep you focussed on the original aims and intentions of your group.

Some groups change from being a support group organised and led by a professional worker, to being a self help group. If your group is making this transition, make sure that the process is carefully planned. Group members increasingly need to take on responsibility for running the group whilst the professional moves to give background support when the group asks for it.

### Local Support

Making links with other self help groups can be really inspiring and informative. Find out where they get their support from and make a note of any particular resources they have found useful. Groups based around medical issues may benefit from making links with the nurse specialist for their condition or the local practice nurse.

Your local area may have a voluntary sector development organisation which supports voluntary and community groups. They may be in a position to help you with:

- funding advice
- constitutions and policies
- lists of venues
- advice and guidance
- training

### National support

A number of national organisations provide information and support and a few employ regional development workers to support groups in a particular region. You may find it useful to look at their websites. Most will give details of branch structures and support available to groups.

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Try to avoid 'reinventing the wheel' - there may be people in other local groups just like yours whom you can visit, telephone or email.

*'Coming together is a beginning.  
Keeping together is progress.  
Working together is success.'*  
Henry Ford

## Section 10 Making it all work

It's not easy to get a self help group up and running, but the many successful groups throughout the country prove that it can be done. This section summarises some key points to keep in mind when your group is starting off.

### Confidentiality is important

Groups are more likely to flourish when members feel sure that what they say is not going to be repeated outside the meeting. Each group will decide exactly what is right for them, but there should be some agreement on confidentiality. New members need to know what's been decided - make sure that everyone knows your group's rules.

### Group members take the decisions

Decisions on how the group runs and what it does are best taken by the group as a whole. There may well be a few people who are more active than others, but they should try to make sure they don't decide what's to be done without letting other people have a chance to have their say.

### Clear aims strengthen the group

Groups that decide what they want to do and plan how they'll do it, are more likely to succeed. It will be a more satisfying and manageable group if you are clear about your aims. Writing aims down and giving a copy to new members, means they will be clear about the purpose of the group too.

### Decide who can be a member

It's fine to set limits and boundaries as to who can be a member but write it down and make your decisions clear to people who might like to join the group. It's particularly important to say whether relatives or professionals are welcome. If most of your meetings are for members only, it can help to arrange other events like an open meeting or a social event which anyone with an interest can attend.

### Keep it simple at first

Simple, manageable activities work best at first - you are likely to see results within a reasonably short time. You can always add more and more complex activities as the group develops and is ready for change. Work within the limits of your members' energies and time.

### Give and get help

Groups work well where there is no clear division between givers and takers of help. Share the jobs around as far as possible and encourage people to do things in pairs or small groups. Try to have several people, not always the same one or two, taking an active part in each meeting so that newcomers get the right idea from the start.

### Beware of the telephone

The telephone contact offers a first port of call for potential members. If callers use this as a form of on-going support, they may not feel the necessity to attend the group meetings. Try to put some realistic boundaries around the use of the phone and avoid setting up unrealistic expectations. Discuss this in the group and plan for a more

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shared approach to answering group calls by considering purchasing and rotating a mobile phone.

### Remember the new member

The warmth and comfort of a group of people who know each other well and perhaps come from a similar background can feel like a barrier to the new member. Try always to remember what it was like for you when you began. Try and make it possible for newcomers to get to the group and try to help them feel at home when they are there. Find a workable balance between the needs of new and old members.

### Have a positive side to your group

Groups often involve sharing difficulties and sadness. Give some thought to whether you can create some opportunities for people to talk about the good things in their lives, to share coping strategies and activities which enable people to feel more positive.

### Be pleased with your achievements

Stop every now and then to weigh up together what you have achieved as a group. Encourage people to reflect on how they have changed and what the group has done for them.

It's not an easy job to start a self help group and it's sometimes even more difficult to keep a group going. Be pleased with what you've done so far and be realistic about what's possible in the future.

**Good luck**

**'My first meeting replaced hopelessness with hope.**

**My second meeting replaced helplessness with new ideas.**

**It's now been three years and I am a parent leader of my group.**

**Just taking home even one small bit of information once a week**

**has given me an entire treasure chest of hope**

**to turn to when times are stressful.'**

## Appendix One: Developing a presence on the Web

As the group develops and becomes more established you may wish to consider developing your own website. Before going ahead it is important to discuss your plans with the whole group. You may discover that there are members with considerable skills who are willing to share their expertise and others who are eager to volunteer their time and ideas. Setting up a small project team is an ideal way to start.

The checklist below raises a few questions the project team might benefit from addressing early on.

### CHECKLIST - website development

- what do you hope to gain from your website?
- who is your target audience?
- what sort of information do you want to provide?
  
- will you provide an e-mail address for enquiries?
- who will respond to e-mail enquiries?
- how will you pay for this service?
- how will you respond to requests from outside your area?
- have you plans to publicise contact details for the group and if so how can you minimize the risks?
- who will maintain and up-date the site?
- will you want to create links with other websites?

Once you have explored some of these questions you can begin to consider what options are available to help you develop a presence on the web. There are a number of ways you can do this:

#### Pages on a community, do-it-yourself website

This is ideal for groups who cannot financially sustain a stand-alone website and are seeking a free web presence to promote their activities. These community websites use templates enabling group details to be added and up-dated from any computer with Internet access. Some community sites provide the facility to purchase a domain name (web address). For example the Nottingham Cardiac Support Group can be found at: [www.heartsupport.co.uk](http://www.heartsupport.co.uk). There is a charge for registering a domain name and ongoing costs but the advantage is that you can advertise your own website address on your publicity.

#### Pages on a national organisation's official website

If you are affiliated to a national organisation it may be worth making enquiries to see if they can advertise your group on their website. Some national organisations provide web pages for local groups, along with e-mail addresses for people to contact the groups direct. Others provide listings of local groups. Either way this can be an easy and quick option.

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### Build your own website

If there is no one in the group who is proficient in the use of either HTML or website-building software, you will probably need to seek professional help. Remember this could prove expensive. The planning you do prior to calling in a professional will, in the long run, save you time and money. In fact, the more planning you do the easier it becomes to make decisions on technological issues, like choosing the best hosting package (internet service provider) or registering a domain name (your unique web address).

Forward planning can also help the project team to get to grips with the technical terminology used in the design and development of websites. Knowing how best to describe what you want, and being clear about your options, will help you to communicate more effectively with the professionals you will be paying to build your website.

It may be worth speaking to your local college to check out whether any IT students could build your website as part of their course work. If this is a realistic option, think carefully about how you will maintain and update the site when the students move on.

A website should have a structure that reflects the level of expertise of those who will be responsible for maintaining it. If you are in any doubt about your ability to manage the site when the professionals pull out, it might be better to start with a page on a community website and move to the next stage as your expertise develops.

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