



C2 REVEALING GOOD PRACTICE

Establishing community support groups

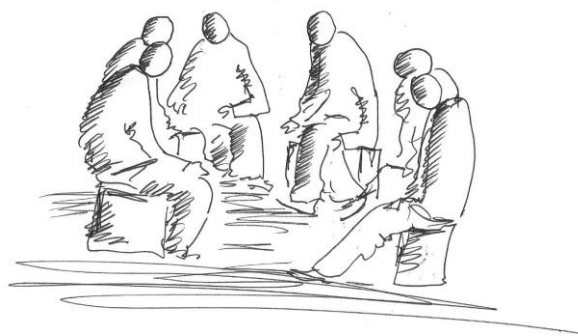
At a glance

- Before starting: think about who the group is for, when and where you will meet and potential costs.
- Find out about what local support services, such as counselling, are available.
- Choose an experienced facilitator with the right skills, attitude and approach. Ideally, they should be supported, supervised and/or mentored by a skilled professional.
- Getting started: allow the group to get to know each other and agree their own ground rules. Encourage communication and clarify objectives and expectations.
- Prepare for the introductory meeting.
- Prepare for unpredictability and potential conflict.
- Develop a sense of ownership within the group.
- Facilitate a group that is 'therapeutic' (leads to healing for the members of the group).
- Ensure confidentiality.
- Be aware of, and prepared for, potential problems.



Why use this tool?

People facing difficult situations often find comfort and strength in spending time with others going through, or who have been through, something similar. Support groups allow people with common concerns and needs to share their experiences, difficulties and feelings.



Support groups may be particularly useful in contexts where people experience rejection, stigma and discrimination arising out of issues such as Ebola, HIV or sexual violence. As a result of stigma, people may experience loneliness and isolation, fear, anxiety and guilt. Being part of a support group may help to reduce these feelings. Support groups provide emotional support and friendship. People are able to confront their difficult situations more effectively, and find healing and ways of meeting their needs, in an understanding and caring environment. People in groups can share information, knowledge, ideas and experiences. Through talking and listening, being supported and supporting others, people are often able to move forward with their lives with renewed strength.



A brief description

This tool provides guidance on setting up and facilitating an effective and therapeutic community support group.



Explaining the words we use

Aggression – hostile, violent or destructive behaviour

Confidentiality – when information shared is kept within the group and not shared with people outside of the group

Counselling – a process whereby a trained professional helps someone deal with problems through listening, asking questions and giving advice

Objective – not influenced by personal feelings or opinions

Prejudice – an unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough information

Psychological – the word used for things related to our minds

Therapeutic – when a process or action is intended to bring healing



Keys to success

Communication: for a support group to succeed, it is crucial that participants feel able to talk freely and interact with each other.

Confidentiality: this is one of the most important components of a group as it creates trust among the members. It is important for members to feel 'safe' to share very personal feelings or concerns.

The facilitator must know his or her limits: when issues arise that need medical or professional intervention or support, the facilitator should refer to a doctor or trained professional.

Mutual respect: it is extremely important for the facilitator to encourage respect between members of the group and to ensure that people speak and act in ways that are kind and respectful towards other group members.

Examples of types of groups:

- Survivors of gender-based violence
- People living with or affected by HIV
- People affected by Ebola



What to do

Before starting

It is helpful to think through the following questions before setting up a support group:

- Why are you forming a group?
- Who do you hope your group will attract? Are there enough people affected by the issue to form a group? It is recommended that groups are set up to be gender specific. This will contribute toward trust, sharing and openness within the group.
- How many people will it include? (between 8 and 12 people is an ideal size)
- Where will you meet? Is the location accessible for everyone, including people with disabilities?
- How often will you meet? What time will be most convenient for group members?
- How much time will you need?
- What are your aims?
- Will there be a cost? (there might be transport costs for people living further away which will need to be considered)
- Who will facilitate the group?
- What local services are available in your area that may be able to help you? For example, clinics, counselling services and specialists on certain issues.

The role of the facilitator

The facilitator plays a very important role in establishing a support group. He or she is usually an experienced volunteer with basic training in psychosocial support. Often people who have learned to cope with a certain problem can become good role models and facilitators. Over time, the role the facilitator plays will decrease and the group can become self-sustaining.

An effective facilitator needs to have a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, and must be able to prevent their own emotions and beliefs affecting the group process. The facilitator should, if possible, have ongoing support and supervision from a highly skilled person who can provide input and assist with problems that might arise. Such people might be part of the local Government or a professional body. In some contexts, facilitators may be able to provide support and supervision to each other.

The facilitator needs to ensure discussions do not go outside the levels of their own competence, training and experience. For example, if there is someone in the group with mental health issues such as depression, and the facilitator is not a trained counsellor or doctor, he or she should refer them for more professional support such as counselling.

Characteristics of an effective facilitator:

- Approachable and patient, reliable and dependable
- Able to understand other people's emotions
- Able to communicate and facilitate communication between others
- Involvement with, and commitment to, people affected by the issue
- Have a positive attitude towards themselves and group members

C2 ESTABLISHING SUPPORT GROUPS

A person is unlikely to be a good facilitator if they themselves have experienced trauma but have not yet dealt with it, or if they have other unresolved emotional issues. The facilitator should also not be someone who gossips, has prejudice against certain people or groups, or stigmatises certain people or groups. The support group needs to be able to ask the facilitator to step down from their role if they are facilitating in a way that is harmful towards any members of the group.

The guidance and suggestions that follow are intended for a support group facilitator.

Getting started

- Form your group. Invite those who you think will benefit. While support groups are intended for certain people (who have experienced or are experiencing a particular difficulty or trauma), ensure that no-one is excluded on unfair grounds (for example age, ethnicity or disability).
- At your first meeting, start by explaining the purpose of the group and allow members to introduce themselves. Enable the group to get to know each other in a relaxed way.
- Allow the group to establish their own ground rules. These could include:
 - Confidentiality - everything that is shared in the group should stay within the group
 - Attendance - all members should attend sessions regularly
 - Punctuality - everyone should respect the agreed starting time of each session
 - Mutual respect - members should respect the opinions of others in the group
 - Participation - all members should make an effort to participate in discussions
 - Listening to others - everyone has the right to participate and contribute ideas. The rest of the group should listen to the person speaking. Only one person should speak at a time.

These can be revisited and updated from time to time. The group should discuss how they will resolve issues, if any guidelines are not followed.

- Encourage communication amongst the group from the start. It is crucial that participants talk and interact with each other.
- Clarify the group's objectives. Every group will have different aims, goals and activities. It is up to the members to determine these. They should decide what they would like to discuss and what they want to get out of the group. As group members may not know of possible themes or topics that could be covered, you could help to guide them on this.
- Clarify expectations: Sometimes people joining groups have wrong or unrealistic expectations of the group. They may expect material goods, jobs or money, or even to find magical cures. When these expectations are not met in the group, people feel disappointed and leave the group. It is important to explain very clearly at the start what may realistically be achieved through the group.

The operational/working phase

Preparing for meetings

It is helpful to have an agenda or topic for each meeting. Groups may decide to prepare topics in advance of the next meeting, or to decide what to discuss when they meet for each session. You could consider inviting a guest speaker to provide inspiration at certain times. It is important for members to be able to share with the group how they are feeling on a

particular day. If there are matters that require immediate attention it is usually best to be flexible and address such issues.

Preparing for unpredictability and potential conflict

Though some groups may be very structured, unpredictable things often occur in groups and you should be prepared to deal with these situations. For example, conflict might arise within the group and there will be difficult times. Conflict can be difficult to manage, but if handled effectively, it can lead to growth for individual members as well as the group as a whole.

Developing 'ownership' within the group

Groups develop differently depending on many factors including how open or closed they are, what timeframe they have etc. It is important to reassess the group's aims regularly. Once members become more familiar with each other, and as trust develops, the facilitator can become less active in the group. At this point group members tend to take more responsibility and feel a sense of 'ownership' of the group. They may want the group to develop into something new. For example, many income generating groups and other activities grow out of support groups.

Facilitating a group that is 'therapeutic' (leads to healing for group members)

A group is likely to be therapeutic when participants are able to openly express their feelings, emotions and thoughts in an environment based on mutual respect and trust. Try to direct the discussion towards topics or problems that have potential for therapeutic impact. Not all topics have the same impact on how participants think, feel and act. Often topics with more therapeutic potential (such as relationships, marriage, family) do not emerge naturally. The facilitator should try to encourage the discussion towards these themes without pressuring or breaking the harmony within the group.

Ensuring confidentiality

This is one of the most important components of a group. Confidentiality within the group creates trust among the members. It is important for members to feel 'safe' to share very personal feelings or concerns.

Being aware of and prepared for potential problems. For example:

Prejudice: Nobody should feel judged or criticised for sharing what they think or feel. Differences of opinions should be discussed openly, and everybody's thoughts should be respected, no matter how different.

Unacceptable behaviour: Behaviour is unacceptable when it breaks the group's ground rules or causes offence, for example, aggression, disrespect, swearing or drunkenness. The facilitator needs to look at reasons for the behaviour and the group should together decide how to address the situation.

Poor attendance and late arrival: These are common problems. The reasons for these things should be looked into and the group can decide how to deal with them. In some cases, support may need to be given to group members.

C2 ESTABLISHING SUPPORT GROUPS

Scapegoating: This happens when one member is blamed for different problems that might arise in the group. It allows the rest of the group to continue relating in a harmonious way, at the expense of the targeted member. If this happens it is important for the facilitator to recognise it and intervene to deal with the problem while remaining objective and neutral.

One member dominating the conversation: If this happens, the facilitator should think about *why* the individual is talking so much, assess the level of interest of other members of the group, and try to assess the therapeutic potential of this person's contributions. To intervene, you could ask the rest of the group what they think, or ask a new question.

Discrimination: It is very important that individuals with specific vulnerabilities do not feel excluded from joining the group or participating. This could include people with disabilities or people from a different ethnic group. It would be good to discuss this during the first session and lay down a common understanding.

Ending a Support Group

The process of how a group will end is largely determined by whether it was set up for a specific length of time or whether it was an open-ended group. It will also depend on the emotions of those in the group. If it is time-limited, the facilitator will need to help prepare members when the time for ending is approaching, as they might feel sadness or anxiety about the future. When a group ends people should be encouraged to develop support systems outside of the group.



Finding out more

- International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2009) Community-based Psychosocial Support: Training Kit <http://pscentre.org/topics/training-kit-publications>
- World Health Organisation (2005) Mental Health and HIV/AIDS, Psychosocial support groups in antiretroviral (ARV) therapy programmes http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/43199/1/9241593105_eng.pdf

Related tools:

- A1: Revealing stigma towards people with disabilities: information for facilitators [A1: *Discrimination & inclusion-1*]
- A1: Revealing HIV: information for facilitators [A1: *Health & HIV-1*]
- A1 – Revealing violence against women and girls: information for facilitators [A1: *Gender-1*]
- A2 – Tackling HIV stigma [A2: *Health & HIV-3*]
- A2 – How HIV affects livelihoods [A2: *Health & HIV-4*]
- B – Attitudes towards disease and different [B: *Discrimination & inclusion-1*]
- B – Loving the outcast (Bible study) [B: *Discrimination & inclusion-2*]
- B – Caring for widows and orphans (Bible study) [B: *Discrimination & inclusion-3*]
- B – Disabilities – knowing our true value (Bible study) [B: *Discrimination & inclusion-4*]
- B – Each of us is special to God (Bible study) [B: *Discrimination & inclusion-5*]
- B – HIV and AIDS and the glory of God (Bible study) [B: *Health & HIV-3*]