

8 Support groups

Meeting with others who share a similar experience can be a source of support. This is especially true for situations that are hard or uncomfortable to talk about.

Being with others rather than being alone can bring some comfort. Hearing others speak about their experiences can help you think about your own. For example, when parents who know the grief of losing a child lead a support group, sharing the hard experience they have gained can help other participants feel less alone and overwhelmed.



A group can also address specific problems together. This increases the possibility of creating change and increases the benefits of the healing companionship of working with others.

Support groups help in many ways

Recognize feelings. People often hide their feelings or do not even recognize they have them because they think their feelings are bad, shameful, or a sign of weakness, or because in their family or culture, people tend to hide or ignore feelings rather than talk about them. Hearing others talk about feelings can help people recognize and think about their own.



Before, I blamed myself for my husband's anger issues and problems with alcohol. I thought: Why would I want to talk with anyone about my failures? But my neighbor brought me to her group where everyone had a partner who drank too much. I began to realize it was not my fault, and making excuses for my husband was not helpful for either of us.

Know you aren't alone. Sharing with and listening to other people, in person or online, often shows that others have faced similar situations, provides relief and comfort, and can give you ideas about what to do next.



We all had grown up witnessing abuse and alcoholism but we had never talked about it with others or worked through how it affected us. It was a huge relief to share our stories.

Get support. Feeling bad can make you feel drained and discouraged. Meeting as a group gives people energy and ideas, helping everyone cope with their daily problems. Group members can also check in with each other between meetings.

In our church-based group, when someone has a rough day, one of us will pray for her with a beautiful affirmation, describing out loud all the positive things about her, calling forth the strength she needs to heal. The person feels totally supported, and listening gives us all focus. Even though we all have our problems, channeling our collective love makes bearing them easier.



Understand the causes of problems. By talking together, we come to realize that many people share problems that need a common solution. This helps identify root causes in society and stops us from just blaming ourselves.

Identify solutions. Groups can come up with possible solutions to problems, evaluate them, and decide what to do. They can also help us think about the obstacles that might get in the way of a solution and how to overcome these.



I was ready to come out to my family about my sexuality but was worried about how it would go. Hearing how others in our group kept their family relations intact was a relief and helped me see what I could try with my family.

Recognize strengths. The group can ask: “What are you most proud of?” and “What do you think you handled well?” As people get to know each other, they will also be able to remind each person of all their strengths and skills and how they have handled distressing feelings and overcome challenges before.

Build power together. Acting together is always more powerful than acting alone. When a group identifies a community problem to improve, knowing that some or all of you can work on it together makes fixing it seem more possible.

Celebrate, commemorate, and have fun. Build community by celebrating birthdays or other occasions, and do other activities besides talking. Change things up! Bring in someone to lead a healing technique, or have members take turns organizing games and energizing activities. A group focused on personal goals, for example, staying sober, might mark reaching a milestone with a song, food, or a simple gift.



Sometimes people are sent to a group without it being their idea. Others try out a group and decide it's not for them. It can be the right decision when someone chooses to leave a group when it isn't a good fit. Groups work best when people want to be there.

Starting a support group

Anyone can start a support group. It just takes a few people who can meet regularly and have something in common. People may get together because they share the same challenges or have similar experiences, or because they live in the same neighborhood, have children at the same school, worship at the same church, or work at the same job. Sometimes a health worker or teacher will start and participate in a group, but often professionals are only involved when they are invited to attend a meeting as a resource person. A group needs to discuss and agree upon:

When and where to meet. It helps to have a quiet place with enough privacy to make people feel comfortable talking, perhaps a space in a community center, library, school, or place of worship. Choose a meeting day and time that allows the most people to participate. Make sure the space is accessible for someone with mobility issues, and see if providing childcare or anything else will make it easier for more people to join. If the group meets online, or mixes being in-person with being online, see if tech advice or access to digital devices is needed. Get help getting online from human-i-t.org or pcsforpeople.org.

What you hope to do. Have the group choose the topics to talk about. Give everyone a chance to express what they would like from the group: to talk about feelings, to share ideas about facing certain situations, to learn healing techniques, or something else. Try to keep expectations realistic. Support groups can be helpful in many ways, but they will not fix everything. (See pages 143 to 145 for ideas about handling the stresses that may arise in support groups.)

Share ideas about preferred words. Talk about any specific words that people would prefer to use or not use, so everyone is aware of these concerns. Even if there are differences in opinion about how people understand and use certain words, the group can commit to respect how each member wants to talk about themselves.



In our group, even though everyone had gotten a diagnosis saying they were "mentally ill," some preferred saying they had survived trauma, had a spiritual emergency, had mental distress, or had other ways to refer to it. We talked a lot about how some terms ignore or erase who people are. We agreed each person could use the words that worked for them and that group members would work to respect that.



Group agreements. While agreements can be added or changed as you go along, it is good to begin by deciding on basic rules so everyone feels safe about participating and sharing. One basic agreement might be to keep group discussions private. Another might be to avoid judging people or telling them what to do. Other agreements might cover what happens at meetings (see pages 135 to 137): how will members take turns to run meetings, give everyone a chance to speak, support careful listening and not interrupt each other, and commit to starting meetings on time. The group may also want to emphasize specific values, such as honest communication, humility, kindness, respect, or sobriety. The group can discuss whether additional people can join and if so, how that should happen.

If the group has been organized through a school or other institution or by an individual with legal requirements to report certain kinds of information to police or government authorities, it is important that everyone understands this before the group starts. Types of situations that may require reporting include a young person talking about harming themselves or saying they have been abused.

Running support group meetings

Sometimes one or two people will be the group leaders and facilitators, but many groups share and rotate these responsibilities among all members.

Beginning the meeting

Beginning each meeting in the same way can help people transition from their previous activities to join in common purpose. Try different ways to start the meeting so the group can decide which they like best. Some groups start with each person saying something they are grateful for. Others start by stretching together, saying a prayer, or taking a few quiet moments to write or draw as a way to gather thoughts and “reset,” perhaps in response to the question: “How do you feel right now?” If people check in to say how they are feeling, it may become clear that someone needs special attention that day.

When a group is beginning, it is important to review and remind everyone of the ground rules and see if there are agreements to add or change. When there are new participants, everyone will feel more comfortable when you take time for introductions and give a basic description of how the meeting will proceed.



When people don't know each other, invite everyone to mention aspects of their identity they want others to be aware of. For instance, in some groups the introductions include everyone sharing the gender pronoun they use: they, she, or he.



Especially when groups are new, find simple ways to make people feel more comfortable and learn each other's names. For example, ask the group to get up and sort themselves into alphabetical order by first name or by the month they were born. It takes only a few minutes and gets people to talk and accomplish something together.

Encourage participation

Group discussions work best when everyone participates fully and equally, even if this doesn't come naturally to everyone. Good facilitators draw people out and make everyone feel that their ideas are valuable and worth sharing. This is especially important when people have been made to feel shame about aspects of their educational, cultural, or economic backgrounds.

Here are some strategies to encourage participation:

Pay attention to seating. Arrange people to sit in a circle or some other way where everyone can see each other.

Use a talking stick to take turns. An American Indian tradition is to use an object like a talking stick that is passed among speakers. Everyone listens to and does not interrupt the person holding the stick. If the stick comes to a person who does not want to speak, they pass it to the next person.

Give people a moment to prepare their thoughts. Allow time to think quietly before starting a discussion on a major issue or decision. This helps people prepare and feel more confident to speak.

Be aware of people who are quiet or shy. It can take time for people to feel comfortable sharing, so while you should not pressure or force people to participate, you can make it easier. One way is to ask everyone to write questions or comments anonymously and then read them out loud without saying who wrote what. Also, try going around the room giving everyone a turn to speak. Invite shy people by name to speak if you sense they are ready.

Create small groups. Discuss issues in groups of two or three people, then have them report back to the larger group. People may feel more comfortable speaking with only one other person or reporting on a group opinion rather than stating their own.

Create a story or drawing. Make up a story about a situation similar to those experienced by members of the group. Hearing about the experiences of others can help a person deal with situations they face. The leader can start the story, then ask another member to continue it, and so on until everyone has contributed something and the story is complete. The group can also act out the story as it is told or make a drawing of it. You can ask each person to write or draw in their own notebooks as a way of gathering thoughts or reactions to the collective story.



Use art, theater, movement, and music. Spark people's creative energy to encourage participation. Drawings, songs, and skits can encourage collaboration among group members and can also be a way for a group to share their ideas with the broader community.

Build capacity and leadership. Allowing people to explore different roles in meetings can help them discover what they are good at. People can take turns leading the group, sending meeting reminders, planning activities, preparing food, or gathering supplies. Sharing different tasks helps people gain experience and encourages involvement from shy people. Draw upon people's strengths and acknowledge everyone's hard work along the way, not just the outcome.

Be a good listener and show interest in what people say (see pages 26 to 27). It may help both individuals and the group if you briefly echo the main point of what a person said so they know they have been understood. Then invite the next person to speak.



When someone says something that doesn't make sense to me, instead of correcting them or giving my opinion, I ask: "Can you say more about why you believe that?" or "Can you explain more about those feelings?" This shows I value what they have to say and also helps me understand.

A balance of voices. Using terms like "step up" to encourage people who usually speak less, and "step back" for those who tend to talk more, can help build awareness of participation styles. Find kind and direct ways to ask people to step up and step back such as: "Thanks for adding that. Would someone we haven't heard from like to go next?" The group can also talk about how people who know they talk a lot can count to 10 before asking to speak, creating some space for shyer people.

Keep the conversation on topic. If someone strays from the topic, first acknowledge their input: "That's a good point." Then invite them to relate what they were saying to the topic at hand: "How does that affect you feeling anxious at work?"

Know yourself. Chapter 9, "Helping ourselves to do this work" (see page 143), expands more on how group facilitators and others in a helping role can think through everything they bring to their work. For example, when starting a group or running a meeting, it helps to be aware of your own thoughts and feelings about the topic. Ask yourself: "What about this topic makes me uncomfortable or upset? Do my feelings or experiences affect how well I can listen without judging others? How can I make sure I encourage others to think for themselves without imposing my own opinions?" Also, be aware of how others in the group may see you. Perhaps some women will have a hard time trusting men, or it will feel uncomfortable to have people with one racial, ethnic, or cultural background being directed by someone of another background.

Welcome emotions. Gently encourage people to openly express what they are feeling, recognizing that not all members of the group may feel comfortable opening up until the group has built more trust.

HOW TO Help people identify and talk about their feelings

Ask questions to help the group talk about feelings and how they affect us:

- What are the main feelings behind the experience just shared with us—what did we hear? For example, feeling sad, helpless, fearful.
- Are there social causes for those feelings? For example, if we were brought up to be ashamed of ourselves or to believe that asking for help shows weakness.
- How is the person coping with these feelings?
- What can we do to provide support?



I often remind myself and the group that each person's feelings are unique and we need to respect and accept what is different for each of us as well as what we have in common.

I start meetings by asking everyone to close their eyes, tune into what is happening inside them, and choose 1 to 3 words that express how they're feeling right now.



I try to make it easier to talk about emotions by saying: "When I was first told that everything I was feeling meant I had severe depression, I felt even more hopeless." Then I ask: "Did anyone else feel this too? Did anyone feel relief instead?"

I watch people's body language for clues about what the group needs. If people are looking away, frowning, or dozing off, I ask group members to say how they are feeling or what is going on for them. Then we can all talk about what to do.



When a person in the group shows distress

Support group discussions can stir deep feelings. As a person speaks about their thoughts or experiences, they may get very emotional. The group can help the person acknowledge and accept their feelings. The facilitator can say something like: “It’s OK, take the time you need, we’re here for you.” Or they can call on someone else and come back later to the person who was upset.



If a person expresses a more painful or uncontrollable emotion, it may be good to separate the person from the group and talk privately with them to check on their safety, evaluate if there might be a crisis, help them process their emotions, and ask about any other support they may need. You can also ask them if there is something they might want right now that the group can provide. This could be to hear supportive thoughts from others, receive hugs or prayers, decide to sit quietly for a while, or step out of the room to take care of themselves.

If the facilitator leaves the group to pay attention to the person in distress, ask another person to lead the group and check in on how everyone is feeling. The group could discuss the emotions, thoughts, or concerns the group member’s distress has brought up for them. Another strategy is to ask everyone to move to a new place in the circle. This literally changes people’s point of view and allows a reset.

When the person feels stable enough to participate again or rejoins the group:

- Let the group know what the person said would feel useful to them and limit the group’s response or support to that.
- Lead the group in a breathing, moving, or meditative exercise (see pages 31 and 140), or a song or prayer that can unify the group. Be sure to choose an activity that is acceptable to the distressed group member.
- Allow the group to move on naturally, discussing the topic at hand or moving on to another. If this member has a pattern of taking a lot of time and attention, it’s OK to openly invite the group to continue: “While David takes his time with this, let’s start again with others who are waiting to speak.”
- If the group becomes frustrated with the distressed member, it’s OK to lead a discussion about those feelings and dynamics. Instead of accusing or blaming them for doing something “wrong,” look for a way to have them reflect on what happened, such as: “Can you say more about how you expected us to react when you said that?” This way of “calling in” the person instead of just criticizing them can demonstrate care and an effort to repair the relationships while also building healthy expectations and boundaries for the group.

ACTIVITY Pause and reset

This can be done individually or as a group. By stopping to relax for 1 to 5 minutes as a group, people can learn how this technique can be used anytime, on their own or when supporting others.

Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, hands resting in your lap. Close your eyes.

Ask yourself, “What am I thinking and feeling now?” Notice your thoughts and emotions, and how different parts of your body feel.

Listen to your breath as it goes in and out. Put a hand on your stomach and feel it rise and fall with each breath. Tell yourself, “It’s okay. Whatever it is, I am okay.” Continue to pay attention to your breath for a while and feel yourself become calmer.

Continue to pay attention to how your body feels and reflect on how you feel overall. Open your eyes and return to the situation, better able to cope.



Not all support groups look the same

Support groups come together for different reasons and what a group does can vary a lot. Groups can create feelings of connection when people feel drawn together by shared identities or have similar life challenges. Support groups do not have to focus on talking, or at least not all the time. Groups can gather to create art or writing or move, dance, or exercise together.



Writing for healing: Telling your story

While no single kind of therapy or group will work for everyone, building trust among group members is critical. That trust often develops more easily among people with shared experiences and shared needs. *The Women's Initiative* of Charlottesville, Virginia, provides a variety of free support groups and counseling using a mix of approaches to meet the unique healing needs of all women, including those who identify as Black, Latina, and LGBTQ+. Their offerings include:

- a group counseling “Sister Circle” program for Black women and other women of color
- a “Life-Giving Gardening” program for people just beginning to plant the seeds of their desired mental health changes
- a Spanish-language *Bienestar* (Well-being) program focusing on self-care skills
- a variety of safe spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can connect, heal, and have fun



When I saw the notice for this writing group, I thought, “That’s not for me! I’m no writer!” But the counselor at The Women’s Initiative encouraged me by explaining how the instructor combines meditation and body-based healing practices with an examination of our experiences of adversity and trauma as a way to transform pain into personal growth and healing.

I decided I could at least give it a try. The Writing for Healing facilitator was welcoming, inclusive, encouraging, and not at all pushy. Most of the other women had no experience writing either so I felt no pressure from them, just support. In each session, we would read and discuss a poem or an excerpt from an essay or novel that showed the transforming power of personal storytelling. And we would also try a body-based breathing or stretching exercise to help process the strong emotions we were feeling.

*The group made it possible for me to focus my thoughts and put them on paper in a productive and safe way. And it felt good to read my story to the group and then later celebrate the publication of *Challenge into Change*, a book collecting our writings. That book is a testimony to all who search for the light within to endure hardship on a journey toward hope and healing. Processing painful memories and shaping them into prose and poetry feels bold and empowering. We can share our stories about how we struggle, and share how we find our strength to keep going and to thrive.*