Facilitating Support Groups

Support groups are among the best and most popular approaches to empowering and connecting people. In support groups, participants can open up, realize they are not alone, heal old hurts, set new goals, learn new skills, take charge of their lives, and become leaders themselves. For many people, a support group is the best arena for these kinds of changes.

Leading a support group can be a rewarding and growth-enhancing activity. However, it can also be very challenging. This article discusses ideas and approaches to facilitating an effective support group. It addresses the planning process before the group begins, an overview of leadership skills and activities, ways to include people with communication impairments, difficulties and challenges that may arise, and evaluation of the group.

Support groups have changed millions of people's lives for the better. This structured group interaction is particularly useful for people with disabilities to learn to direct their own health care, become more communicative with providers, understand and assert their rights and become active partners in their own healthcare.

Planning in Advance

The Power of Support Groups

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Planning in Advance

Goals of the Group

Start your planning session by thinking about the goals of the group. Goals may change with input from members. However, facilitators should decide in advance what they want the group's objectives to be so they can better orient members. Goals of a support group can include the following:

- Sharing stories, thoughts, ideas, and emotions
- Listening and learning about commonalities and differences
- Breaking debilitating isolation and realizing that no one is alone with particular feelings and experiences
- Deepening understanding of personal or social issues
- Grappling with difficult life experiences
- Exploring new ways of learning or acquiring new skills

**Group Members Having Contact outside the Group**

Depending on the goals of the group, some facilitators encourage practicing support skills or socializing outside of the scheduled meetings, while others may explicitly discourage this. Thus, whether or not group members can share contact details or consider going out after or between regular group meetings for social or specific types of interaction should be clarified early by discussion and/or clear guidelines.

**Qualifications for Support-Group Leaders**

Support-group leaders must have good organizing and follow-through skills, be able to set relevant goals, be good listeners, be welcoming, confident, and empathetic, and hold high expectations for others. They should be respectful, warm, genuine, relatively calm when facing interpersonal conflict, and willing to ask for help when necessary. Support-group leaders should be prepared to make referrals to community resources, if appropriate, and be able and willing to evaluate the group.

**Prerequisites for Leading Support Groups**

An essential prerequisite for successful support-group leadership is experience as a group member. Leaders need to become familiar and relaxed with the dynamics of group interaction. Challenges can arise, including conflict between group participants, and observing veteran leaders address these challenges is helpful to the leaders-in-training.

Experience with meetings or trainings taking place in work settings, for example, is different from experience with support-group dynamics, which encourage emotional sharing. Potential leaders can find opportunities for group experiences in faith-based, personal-growth, and recreational activities, 12-step programs, adult-education classes, and other venues. Individuals who are not experienced with group interaction need to make sure they have a co-leader who is.

**Shared Leading**

Having two co-leaders facilitate a support-group meeting helps the group because two individuals are observing and responding to the group's dynamics. Co-facilitating provides the group's leaders with the benefit of jointly planning the meeting's logistics and gives them the opportunity of constructive debriefing after meetings. Sharing leadership of support-group meetings also means there is a backup if one leader is absent.

If the co-leaders have comparable experiences and similar skills, the group leadership can be shared. If one individual has more experience as a leader, the other person can function as an assistant or apprentice leader and hone his or her leadership skills. To avoid unnecessary competition or confusion between co-leaders, they must decide in advance who will function as the main leader for the group series or for a specific group meeting. The designated main leader then has to exercise his or her best judgment in consultation with the co-leader.

Some groups rotate leadership duties and responsibilities. This approach has definite advantages. For one, it allows everyone the opportunity to think broadly about the group's goals, plan meeting logistics, facilitate meetings, and be exposed to a variety of leading styles. Changing the group's leadership after several months can also revitalize the group. Although rotating leadership may be enlivening and educational, it
can have disadvantages as well. Possible drawbacks include leadership styles or goals that confuse the group and compromise long-range outcomes and group safety.

Solo leadership can be difficult, especially if conflict arises (see the section on Group Challenges). Sole responsibility for leading a support group can be a lonely job and result in early burnout, but can work if no qualified person is available to co-lead. Solo leaders, though, need to make sure to get help with the logistics of the meetings and ensure they have someone to talk to occasionally about how the group is going, especially if leading the group gets difficult.

Regular Planning

Support-group leaders should initially discuss their expectations of the group, finances, logistics, and how they will share the authority and responsibility of the leadership role. Leaders may need to keep some records, such as contact information, attendance, participant roster, finances, issues raised, difficulties and solutions, ideas for future meetings, participants' ideas, input, and evaluation. Leaders should plan whether group sessions will include only predictable activities or can have spontaneous and/or creative activities.

Leaders also need to think about topics in advance and plan approaches to the meetings. They can pose topics for discussion, and eventually, group members might even become a good source of inspiration for topics to discuss and share. Group leaders have to allow for time spent in meetings brainstorming topics for future discussion. Depending on the kind of group, facilitators may want to invite speakers, watch movies, or share reading materials as stimuli for sharing and learning. Arriving at meetings without clear ideas about the topic or focus should be avoided. In many groups, "What shall we talk about tonight?" doesn't inspire confidence, and may make participants feel uneasy. It may be effective, however, to change the group-session focus spontaneously, depending on what participants are excited or concerned about. Leaders need to communicate regularly in person or by phone or email to plan meetings that reflect what is currently happening in the group.

Finite or Open Duration, Closed or Open Membership

Facilitators should determine in advance if the group meetings will be open-ended or have an ending to be determined. Also, leaders must decide whether group members can drop in or are requested to make a commitment to attend every meeting.

Logistics

Leaders must plan in advance for the group's logistics. These include finding a space to meet; deciding how often and when to meet; coordinating with organizational calendars as necessary; organizing reminder calls or emails; arranging rides or transportation and parking; considering disability access and accommodations; planning finances, including whether to charge participants a fee and who will collect it, whether leaders will be paid, and whether to provide refreshments; and deciding who will set up, clean up, and lock up. Eventually, after the group is underway, participants will likely help with logistics.

Outreach

Outreach or recruitment for the group can be done through flyers, bulletin boards, email or postal mailings, newsletters, ads in newspapers, announcements and presentations at community centers and events, and word-of-mouth via already interested members.

Leading Skills and Activities
Ground Rules

Ground rules are part of the structure of successful meetings. They need to be in place prior to the first meeting. Leaders may open the first meeting by stating the ground rules and making sure that every participant understands and agrees to them. Leaders may even decide to restate the rules at the beginning of every meeting to refresh participants' memories. Restating them is certainly a must if the meetings are open-ended and have an open enrollment.

Depending on each support group's logistics and goals, ground rules will vary from group to group. However, the following areas are applicable to the majority of group meetings:

- **Confidentiality**
  A request for confidentiality allows group members to feel more comfortable sharing or discussing sensitive issues. Confidentiality is highly important for most support groups. Inform and ask that group members agree that information shared at the meetings is not to be repeated outside the group. It is not possible to guarantee that all members will respect this and regular reminders will be helpful, especially if the group is open to new members.

- **Positive Regard**
  Positive regard is the assumption that everyone is doing the best she can. Leaders can remind the group's participants that everyone's viewpoint is formed by his or her own personal history and values, and that these should be respected.

- **Good Listening**
  Group members may feel the urge to offer each other suggestions and advice. Facilitators can counteract this urge by encouraging participants to listen to each other without giving advice or interpreting what they hear. Equally helpful is teaching them to assume that everyone knows best what she needs, and deserves the space and support to figure it out on her own. Sympathetic comments, such as "I know how you feel," may be appropriate or not, depending on the goals of the group. Group leaders need to remind members that overenthusiastic sympathy may be felt to be patronizing or distracting, and that good listening is the best way to promote open sharing and an empowering group experience.

Styles and Modes of Leading

Conducting or structuring the interactions between group members can be done in various ways and these often can be combined. Yet each style has its advantages and disadvantages. Leaders can develop a repertoire of styles to use with different kinds of groups or participants.

- **Conversational Discussion Style**
  Most people are already familiar with conversational discussions in small groups, such as at parties or in classrooms. This style of interaction encourages people to speak up when they feel comfortable contributing. The disadvantage is that those with more confidence may dominate the discussion, and those with less confidence, for reasons such as language facility, race, class dynamics, age, disability, gender, etc., may end up being silent. Often, silent members want to participate, but feel hesitant. The facilitator can direct non-confrontational questions at individuals, calling on people by name to draw quieter members into the discussion. Passing around a "talking stick" (or any object) makes it more obvious in the group who is doing most of the talking and helps encourage more equal sharing.

- **Taking Turns**
  Establishing a practice of taking turns, such as going around the circle or making sure each member gets a random turn, ensures that everyone has a chance to actively participate. Turns can be timed precisely with a clock or timer, or be estimated. With the latter, leaders are responsible for paying attention so that informal, untimed turns are approximately equal. For many, taking turns is a welcome contrast to ordinary conversation because it easily enables fairer distribution of
sharing. The disadvantage of having participants take turns is that members may, at first, feel restricted or stilted in responding or connecting with each other. Similarly, the restriction on crosstalk during turns may make some people feel overly controlled. Turns can be alternated with open discussion to allow the advantages of both.

- **Following a Script or Prescribed Agenda**
  Some group programs offer preset agendas with scripts or designs that prescribe a step-by-step plan for learning or sharing activities, with varying degrees of optional or individualized activities. These can help less-experienced leaders successfully facilitate groups. The downside is the lack of spontaneity or creativity in responding to group members' needs or preferences.

- **Listening Pairs**
  Including short timed "listening pairs," or dyads, within a group of six or more participants can greatly enhance the effectiveness of a support group. Having group members meet in listening pairs for a few minutes, within a one- or two-hour meeting, has many advantages:
  - It encourages members to connect with each other individually, creating stronger relationships between participants, which in turn greatly enhance the group's closeness and rapport.
  - It allows focused listening, which encourages people to share more deeply than they might feel comfortable doing in the larger group.
  - It takes good advantage of meeting time, enabling more individual focus than is typically possible in the larger group.
  - It offers a variation in the activities of the group.
  - It teaches and reinforces good listening skills in one-to-one interaction.
  - It gives the leaders time to observe and rethink the group dynamic.

Sometimes group leaders or members object to breaking off in pairs because they assume that everyone in the group would want to hear everything that's being said. But the advantages of occasionally using listening pairs are well worth the trade-off of sometimes missing other participants' comments.

Some participants may find dyads logistically difficult, due to mobility issues, limited space, or distraction from the noise of several pairs talking at once. Planning for specific needs in advance can help accommodate people who may otherwise not get to enjoy this opportunity.

Listening pairs may easily regress to conversation and mutual interruptions. Inviting members to stick to the role of "listener" and "speaker" helps remind them of the rare and helpful resource of receiving the full attention of a respectful listener.

**Openings and Closings**

Opening group meetings with a go-around has several functions. Since support groups often focus on painful issues, sharing positive experiences in the beginning can contribute more of a balanced view. For example, leaders could ask group members to share something that went well for them that week. Beginning the meeting with a go-around gives each person a voice and visibility in the group and helps "break the ice" for less confident people; each person will have spoken and thus speaking up spontaneously later in the discussion might be easier. Go-arounds give an opportunity to share personal information that might not emerge in discussion, so members can get to know each other better.

However, some people feel "put on the spot" in a go-around. People with differing language backgrounds, shy personalities, speech impairments, such as stuttering, or people with autism or other kinds of hidden disabilities may feel uncomfortable with the whole group focusing on them during the opening. Leaders should allow anyone to pass on their turn. Reassure everyone that it is alright to just listen. Leaders can approach people individually before or after the group meeting and ask if there is a way to make participation more comfortable.
Group meetings also benefit from a focused closing, such as a brief go-around where each member shares a comment, such as a positive reflection on the meeting. Group facilitators should avoid asking for evaluative comments or feedback at the end of the meeting because responses can degenerate into complaints or criticisms, without time to address them, because the meeting is over. (Feedback is important, just not at the very end of the meeting. Leaders can suggest that people offer constructive suggestions at a time when they can be considered.) Here are some suggestions for a focused closing:

- Share one thing that was moving or useful from this evening's meeting.
- Say one thing you appreciate about someone else in the group.
- What's something you're looking forward to this week?

Shared Responsibility

Group leaders need to allow a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for brief announcements and questions, such as where drinking water or the bathrooms are located, inquiries about refreshments, finances, logistics, reminder calls, or emails, rides, and plans for clean-up, etc. Encouraging members to share in the logistics of the meetings often enhances participants' commitment and gives them a sense of belonging. It also lets them share some of the responsibilities and work of organizing the meetings.

Group Members Leaving

Leaders should decide in advance on how to handle people leaving the group mid-series or mid-meeting (and whether to ask them to say goodbye); how to solicit feedback from all participants, using a questionnaire or evaluation session, for example; how to determine criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the group; and whether to have some kind of certificate or final party or event at the end, if a finite series of meetings is planned.

Keeping an Eye on the Time

Leaders must keep an eye on the clock, so they will have enough time to address important group business and end the meeting with a focused closing. Leaders who find themselves often running out of time can ask a participant to help remind them unobtrusively about the time. For example, facilitators could arrange for a participant to signal how many minutes remain before the end of the meeting.

Creativity

Groups benefit from a variety of activities to keep participants' interest. Dependence on the same kind of verbal sharing can eventually become tiresome. Use of readings, games, poetry, music, singing, arts and crafts, videos, or occasional group excursions can keep people committed and engaged, and invite creative contributions from members. Group leaders can ask participants to help generate ideas for creativity, to bring songs or arts-and-crafts materials, etc.

Humor and Fun

People need to laugh! Opportunities to laugh about difficulties and serious topics are precious and necessary. Facilitators need to think about ways to lighten up the group discussion with jokes, silliness, skits, play, or games. It is usually worth the risk of making adults feel a bit embarrassed or childish in order to have them try creative approaches to fun. Leaders can also invite participants to take turns generating ideas and opportunities for humor and fun.

Bringing Objects or Photos
Group leaders can invite members to occasionally bring personal items for a show-and-tell session. Members can bring a few family photos or treasured objects to share with the group. Making show-and-tell activities part of the group meeting helps personalize as well as make more vivid the sharing of life stories.

Including Participants with Communication Impairments

All human beings need contact with others to learn, grow, and flourish, and to become more confident about relationships. Group leaders should never assume that individuals who cannot talk or who do not communicate in the usual ways do not want to interact with others or participate in groups. People with communication impairments may in fact long for contact with others, because they are often isolated or limited from ordinary conversational communication with friends, family, and the general public. Like everyone else, they can benefit from group interaction and socializing.

Defining the Population

People with communication impairments include those who have hearing or speech or cognitive impairments, developmental disabilities, are deaf-blind, or stutter. This population is particularly vulnerable to abusive interactions with caregivers. Abusive individuals may take advantage of someone who is less likely to disclose abuse, and this unequal power dynamic is exacerbated with people with communication impairments, making them more likely targets. Thus, they must be included in abuse-prevention learning activities.

Focusing on Inclusiveness

The typical focus of support groups is on talking and listening. Of course, people with communication impairments face barriers to free-flowing verbal interaction. However, support groups can include many different kinds of interaction in addition to verbally sharing information. Interactions can include listening to and making music and rhythm, watching movies, doing artwork, engaging in movement, dance, and physical play. Opportunities for laughter are especially important.

Yet not every person with a communication impairment will or can benefit from a support group. For example, some people with autism (though not all) may not enjoy group interactions. Still, the majority of people with communication impairments are unnecessarily excluded from group activities. With some advance planning and allowing for necessary accommodations, support group leaders can include people with many kinds of communication impairments. A host of websites and printed materials pertaining to specific impairments and offering accommodation information are available. For example, topics addressed are sign language interpretation, assisted listening devices, computerized communication boards, facilitated communication, and other technologies.

Resources

- Strategies for Teaching Students with Communication Disorders. http://www.as.wvu.edu/~scidis/comm.html
Although it is crucial to include people with communication impairments in group interactions and socializing, it is equally important not to assume that they (or individuals with any kind of impairment) should only be grouped with their own kind. Disabled children and adolescents are often grouped with like peers in school, resulting in limited interaction with their non-disabled peers. Adults who stutter or have difficulties formulating their thoughts, for instance, may participate in therapeutic groups for purposes of practicing communication. While consistent group interactions may help these people improve their speech patterns, it is not the same as socializing, sharing, or learning broader social skills. Furthermore, grouping people with certain impairments may actually make interaction more challenging since accommodations are needed for both expressive and receptive communication.

Keeping disabled people together also reinforces damaging stereotypes, which become internalized by those targeted. People with communication impairments can be objectified as "them," and not viewed as fully human. Even services providers may sometimes forget that their clients are people first, with the full range of interests, needs, and characteristics that brings any group of people together. Individuals who happen to have communication impairments also have many interests and preferences, and they, just like individuals without impairments, want to meet people who share these interests. To help boost self-esteem and empower disabled people to live good, strong lives, it is important for people with disabilities, their teachers, and parents to find opportunities for interesting and fun interaction with the broadest range of people possible.

Group Challenges

Deeper Sharing

Sometimes group members reveal a deeper level of sharing than expected. This can be considered a compliment to the group and to its leaders for creating a safe atmosphere for participants to open up and reveal personal struggles in order to move beyond them. While this level of sharing can contribute to a deepening of the group dynamic, it also can lead to some challenges for the leaders.

Disclosure of Painful or Unexpected Information

Group members sometimes surprise other participants (and often themselves) by revealing painful stories or disclosing sometimes shocking personal information. For example, members might share suicidal or homicidal thoughts or talk about recent divorces, deaths, prison terms, abortions, or suicides of loved ones. Other loaded issues that could arise include infidelity, psychiatric or disability history; gay, lesbian, or transgender identity; past or current alcoholism or illegal drug use; stories of abuse or criminal history; or terminal medical diagnoses given to group members or their loved ones. This level of sharing may or may not be welcomed by participants and, depending on the focus or goals of the group or prevailing community values, such disclosures can create confusion, embarrassment, or dismay. Others in the group may not know how to respond, causing an awkward silence or shock to ensue. Sometimes members will make (directly or indirectly) a request for help that isn't expected or may exceed the group's abilities to respond adequately.

Here are some suggestions for how group leaders can respond to unexpected disclosures:

- Thank you for taking the risk of sharing your story/such personal information with us/the group.
• Thank you for sharing that with us. I know some of us, including myself, may feel a little uncomfortable (or upset, distressed, sad, etc.) hearing that and do not know how to respond, but we really appreciate your honesty and the trust you have in us by sharing this information.

• Thank you for being open with your information/story. I know others in the group would like to be of support to you. (Depending on the goals of the group, ask if she would be willing to speak individually after the meeting.)

If the response is yes, leaders might ask:

• (Name of individual) has shared some very personal/difficult information (or asked for help). Would anyone in the group like to connect with her about this after the meeting?

If no one responds, facilitators could add:

• That's okay, how about you and I talk about some options after the meeting is over.

Dominating Members

Sometimes a group member dominates the discussion, but appears unaware of taking more than her fair share. One approach to address this imbalance is by saying, "Let's give the quieter members a chance to talk." If that doesn't work, group leaders might want to take the person aside after a meeting. They can mention that they noticed she has a lot of interesting things to say, but are concerned that others in the group are silent or not opening up as much. They can ask the individual to engage other group members by suggesting she ask more questions of others.

If a group member is really dominating and appears unable or unwilling to control her enthusiasm, leaders may need to set some limits. They can suggest a finite number of times the individual in question may comment in the group, 4 times per meeting, for example, or that she speak only for a specific length of time per meeting, say 5 minutes. Usually people who tend to dominate the discussion feel embarrassed about this tendency and are actually grateful if it is brought to their attention. Most people really want all participants to share equally.

Conflict between Members

Sometimes group sharing and discussion can reveal disagreement in opinions and cause conflict between group members, or can even bring up differences in deeply held values. Sometimes comments from one person can trigger old resentments or upsets that a second person ascribes to insensitivity, but are actually just a reminder of something painful from long ago. At times, even a casual comment can be misinterpreted as oppressive, sexist, racist, or in some way discriminatory.

Group members may also make thoughtless comments, oppressive jokes, or reveal unawareness and be unable to apologize sufficiently to defuse an upset. These upsets can snowball in the group, as other members are made uncomfortable by the tension and may react emotionally themselves. Upsets can occur even if the focus of the group is intended to be benign sharing.

Experienced group leaders can anticipate conflicts between group members and stay relaxed and encouraging. The most productive attitude for leaders to take is that conflict is not necessarily detrimental to the group's process. Moreover, if handled with relaxed and reassuring guidance, working through conflicts can help group members connect more deeply with each other and promote growth, increased trust, and a greater willingness to share.

Why Conflict Arises
A certain degree of conflict in an ongoing group is inevitable. For some people, a support group seems to be a natural trigger for upset feelings and subsequent conflict. All of us find ourselves at times annoyed or ticked off by others, often people we have a close relationship with, but sometimes by strangers, co-workers, or casual friends. This process of "getting our buttons pushed" can be explained in the following, simplified way: We have all been hurt earlier in our lives. Important needs did not get met in our families of origin. Insults and injuries have occurred throughout our lives, and while some were aimed specifically at us as individuals, others were more systemic mistreatment, such as sexism, racism, or disability discrimination.

This backlog of previous hurts is not typically present in our consciousness, but it is waiting to surface. We all have an unconscious desire to recall these old injuries, reveal them to others, and get help with recovering to the point of reframing them from an adult perspective. But until we get a chance to elicit those old hurts and reflect on them repeatedly, they will continue to arise as raw emotional pain. We are usually not aware that the current situation is just triggering old pain, because it flashes back as if it were fresh. And since typically we first experienced the pain as a victim targeted with mistreatment, we often tend to repeat that stance, blaming someone else for causing us pain.

In a support-group setting, the casual comment or interaction triggering our old pain to resurface is generally benign. Even if the content is less than thoughtful, it likely will not warrant a strong reaction from us in the present. However, since the present occurrence reminds us of some distant, unconscious distress, we do react. Indeed, for most people and most upsetting incidents, the old pain lurking in the unconscious greatly distorts many of our interactions in the present, even if the current interaction was in some way "off" (meaning unsatisfactory or inappropriate), for example. The old pain makes it much more difficult to sort out what is really going on in the present. Yet bringing it to the surface can be a growth-promoting experience if it is handled well.

A support-group setting can become a productive arena for this process of defusing old pain. It invites people to share and reflect on their experiences, positive as well as negative, and to express their feelings in an environment that is meant to be caring and thoughtful. Yet two challenging developments may take place:

1. People may unconsciously decide to feel emotionally safe and eager to show their old pain to this unusual gathering of people who offer to listen and care.
2. The interactions in a group will not always go smoothly, because people are people. We all have our ragged edges, history of hurts, and areas of unawareness, and we are not always sensitive to everyone's needs. Thus, old disappointments arise from early family life, where our own loved ones sometimes failed to offer unconditional caring and respectful listening.

These two factors can create a "double whammy" of an unexpected safety to feel and express typically hidden emotions, potentially pleasing as well as alarming to participants, and a setup to feel disappointed that the "perfect (unconditional) caring" we've always hoped for isn't here either.

With some groups, these factors can be discussed and explored in advance, so that members are better prepared when their buttons get pushed. If the focus of the group is charged or controversial, upsets are even more likely to happen. Participants will inadvertently remind each other of painful experiences they may have forgotten or repressed, and the level of upset is likely to be high when sharing a fair amount of painful experiences.

In most community support-group settings, particularly those run by inexperienced leaders, this potentially turbulent process may seem mysterious and overwhelming. The new relationships being formed in the group may not yet be strong enough to handle such intense emotions and conflicts, which sometimes can seriously disrupt the group. Leaders can prepare in advance by role-playing possible scenarios and incorporating the suggested responses in the following section.
Tips on Handling Conflict

Here are some techniques leaders can use to help ease conflict:

- Rather than ignoring the conflict, it is better for the group leaders to openly acknowledge that the conflict exists and is difficult for them, too. They can say something like, “This tension is difficult for us, too. Please bear with us while we try to handle this appropriately.”
- Remind other group members to offer relaxed, generous attention and request that they try not to get pulled into the conflict.
- Don’t take sides. Suggest to members that a conflict is potentially an arena for insight and growth, not a debate about who is right or wrong. Feelings are not right or wrong, feelings are feelings.
- Adhere to positive regard for all involved. Remind all group members that people are doing the best they can.
- Ask the members in conflict to hold off the debate until after the meeting, or alternatively, to consider just letting it go. If someone refuses to comply or insists on demonstrating control through shouting or demands, the meeting must end.
- Do not attempt to resolve the upset while group members are still agitated, because it often leads to further conflict. People do not think clearly when they are angry and they may end up making further provocative comments.
- Never attempt to remove one member engaged in the conflict and continue the meeting with the rest of the participants. This is too upsetting for everyone and has a potential for serious repercussions. If upset members seem likely to regain their composure, then leaders may proceed with the meeting.
- Do not accept other members’ attempts to negotiate, but let them know that the main task is to help their fellow participants calm down, so they can think and act more rationally. Those not involved in the immediate conflict can help the participants in disagreement by modeling a calm and thoughtful temperament.
- Suggest the group as a whole take a 5-minute cool-off break to help defuse the tension. The cool-off break will give group leaders a moment to think or strategize about what to do after the break. Leaders can ask the other group members to keep the following in mind during the break so that they can help keep the group together:
  - Not to dwell on the disagreement during the break, since it could fan the flames of the conflict and sometimes even cause individuals to take sides. A polarized group is very difficult to reclaim as a connected whole.
  - To focus their attention on something neutral, move around a bit, or get a drink of water or some fresh air.
  - Not to roll their eyes or make comments in support or disparagement of either or both the sparring members. Remind participants that upsets happen, and that they need to hold positive regard for everyone.

When the group reconvenes, leaders can suggest an exercise, a guided meditation or deep breathing exercise, a reading, poem, or song -- something that changes the tone. They might say something like, "We know this may seem a bit contrived, but given the upset, we find it helpful to refocus on something lighter to remind us of our goals here." Leaders need to prepare in advance activities that will help diffuse conflict and redirect the group's attention.

Dealing with Troublemakers

If group members seem prone to getting into conflicts, leaders can use subtle ways to facilitate a relatively positive attitude change. If possible, they can sit near the individuals, make frequent eye contact, offer an occasional positive comment, or suggest a logistical task that gives them a visible role. Leaders should not avoid contact with someone who seems disruptive. This will backfire. Sometimes individuals who seem to
be looking for trouble will respond well to additional appreciation, validation, and inclusion. They might even be able to relax a bit, decide they belong, and rise above their usual difficulties with relationships because they feel cared about. Leaders need to value members who may be typically regarded as marginalized people. They are precious. Their presence reassures everyone that all are welcome and important. They are specifically the individuals group facilitators wish to benefit from the group's support and resources. Leaders need to avoid holding an "us and them" attitude towards anyone in the group. We are all "us."

Apology is Powerful

One of the greatest resources to help people when they are upset is apology. People who feel hurt want acknowledgment of that hurt. Just saying, "I'm sorry that what happened just now was painful," can sometimes defuse the difficulty. Sometimes people resist apologizing because they didn't do anything wrong. Using an apology does not necessarily mean an admission of guilt; it is an acknowledgment of the other's hurt. Group leaders can model relaxed and forthright apology in the group.

Brief Listening to Upset Members

If one or two participants engaged in the conflict are extremely agitated, group leaders can try to arrange to listen to one or the other for a finite time, five or ten minutes, for example. They need to make sure to time the responses and stop the persons at the end of the allotted time. Leaders should not ask or expect people in disagreement to listen to each other, especially not right away. That rarely works. If there is only one leader, she can suggest the parties involved each take a 5-minute turn. If a relaxed, skilled listener is among the other members, the leader might enlist her in the listening role, not as a negotiator or problem solver, but as a neutral listener who will help defuse the upset.

Group leaders need to be careful not to get pulled into listening, either individually or as a group, to one person's upset for a lengthy time period. Some people may try to maneuver others into listening to a long diatribe. This is rarely productive.

If the Meeting Must End Early

If an upset member insists on refocusing on the upset or is demanding a resolution, leaders should not comply. They can stop the meeting and inform the upset member that they will speak to her at another time when tempers have cooled off. If necessary, group leaders can suggest intervention from a more experienced facilitator. Leaders do not need to listen to someone rail at them. Instead, they need to walk away, saying, "We're really sorry, but this feels unproductive and hurtful to us."

If the group leaders feel significantly challenged by the upset, they can remind themselves to use "I" statements (non-judgmental comments framed as "I feel scared/confused/uneasy/unclear, etc.") , which reduce inflammatory or blaming behavior by requiring individuals to take responsibility for how they feel, rather than holding someone else responsible. Leaders should avoid saying anything judgmental, which could imply that a specific individual was the main or only cause of the upset.

Group facilitators benefit from apologizing to the other members for shortening the meeting and suggesting that they try not to take sides or gossip with each other about what happened. Leaders can suggest that if group members feel upset about the conflict, they might want to debrief with someone outside the group. Group facilitators also need to remind all present to adhere to the confidentiality agreement: not to share names or disclose other group members' personal information. Leaders can encourage participants to focus on past upsets that might have been triggered by the current conflict.

If the Leader Gets Hooked
Group leaders can also have their old feelings triggered by interactions in the group and may end up making inappropriate comments. If this happens occasionally, it is important that they apologize to the group for getting triggered. It is not wise to pretend it didn't happen. This will backfire and the group will likely dissolve. It is best for the group to understand the simple truth that everyone can get pulled in sometimes, and then move on. Modeling apology is a powerful lesson for the group. The possibility of leaders getting triggered reinforces the advantage of co-leaders. If one gets pulled in, chances are the other can remain calm and continue to think clearly.

However, if group facilitators often get triggered, if they find themselves deeply upset and dwelling on the interaction, if they get into conflicts with their co-leaders, or if they allow their upsets to threaten the safety or continuity of the group, they may not yet be ready to be group leaders. Similarly, group leaders who blame others in the group for their emotional reactions need more experience observing experienced leaders -- and observing and working on their own personal history and emotional reactions. It's part of the growth process and doesn't mean they won't become good leaders.

**Check-in After an Upset**

Before the next meeting, leaders can check in with the individuals who experienced conflict and listen to them for a few minutes to find out if they are able to move beyond the upset. Facilitators can also encourage the individuals to reconnect with the person with whom they had the conflict, without having to necessarily resolve all of their differences.

**Asking Someone to Leave**

Unfortunately, some individuals hold on to their upsets, pinning them onto others in the group. Their presence in the group may make other members' participation impossible. If that occurs, group leaders may need to make the difficult decision about whether the upset person can remain in the group or if it is better for all involved if she takes a break from the group. If leaders must ask someone to leave the group permanently or temporarily, doing so in person and outside the group meeting time will be best. Group leaders need to be prepared to listen, within limits, and then adhere to them. They can also offer to refer the individual to another community resource, if possible.

**Difficulties Can Be Useful**

Group leaders should not be discouraged by difficulties. Although the difficulties described in the previous paragraphs are rare, they do occur sometimes. Leaders should not assume any given group will be immune from conflict. Even the nicest people get upset in relationships. Leaders can view facilitating a group that experiences conflict among its members as an opportunity for their own growth as leaders and human beings.

Sometimes difficulties arising in group settings can be rewarding and enlightening to participants. For example, some group members may be able to break through their agitation and actually thank each other for helping them uncover and clarify old hurts. Other group members can learn from witnessing upsets and exploring their sensitivity to them. Leaders need to be careful not to assume that the occurrence of disagreements and tensions means the group is not successful. It may be a sign of success! The facilitators' attitude that conflict can be positive will help the group ride out the difficulties and reach for more closeness, deeper sharing, and growth.

**Evaluation**
Leaders can evaluate the group's successes and challenges in order to learn from the experience and plan for the next group. Evaluation can be done by leaders alone or with input from group members. Evaluations can be solicited on anonymous feedback questionnaires or informally in discussion. If feedback is requested, leaders can ask participants to frame their answers as constructive suggestions rather than as disappointments. Possible questions for constructive feedback might include the following:

- What went well in this group?
- What were the benefits for you?
- What were your favorite parts?
- What might be done differently the next time?
- What suggestions do you have for future groups?

### Rewards of Leading Support Groups

Support groups have changed millions of people's lives for the better. Participants can open up, realize they are not alone, heal old hurts, set new goals, learn new skills, take charge of their lives, and become leaders themselves. For many people, a support group is the best arena for these kinds of changes. Support-group leaders can feel great pride and satisfaction in facilitating these opportunities for participants. The rewards are worth the challenges. With experience, leaders can become more effective and powerful in facilitating positive changes in participants' lives.

Map to Access was created by the Health Access and Long-Term Services (HALTS) program of the World Institute on Disability (WID). [http://www.proyectovision.net/map/book/export/html/42.html](http://www.proyectovision.net/map/book/export/html/42.html)