

Self-help groups

What they are and how they can help you

There are many types of self-help groups. People give these groups different names, such as support groups or discussion groups. They also have different ideas about what these groups do. This publication describes a self-help group that is led primarily by its members and compares this type of group with other groups. It also offers suggestions for forming your own self-help group.

What is a self-help group? An example

Simply put, a self-help group is any group that offers emotional support and practical help with a problem that is common to all members.

However, the type of group proposed in this publication also operates with the following assumptions:

- People can give and receive more in a group setting than they can by themselves.
- People going through difficult times feel better when they can share their feelings and experiences with others who are “in the same boat.”
- The self-help group is member-led. Group members take turns being leaders for group sessions.
- What is shared within the group is kept confidential.

Self-help groups are not new. People have helped each other and worked together since the beginning of time. You probably have read stories about

the pioneers who traveled west or the families who farmed during the Great Depression. Times were tough for these individuals and families, but they made the best of their situations by offering mutual support.

Today, self-help groups continue to be important. An estimated half million groups have formed and are organized around almost every conceivable human condition—illness, disabilities, emotional problems, or addictions.

If you think about it, you probably have been a member of a number of informal self-help groups, although you didn't realize it at the time. The first group you received from, and later gave to, was your family. As you entered school, you became a part of other groups in which you worked and shared fun—sports teams, 4-H clubs, or church organizations.

As an adult, you have joined other informal and helpful groups. You probably enjoy spending time at your friends' homes visiting about everyday life and problems. As you can see, it's natural to gather together for support and fellowship.

What distinguishes self-help groups from other groups?

Some groups, however, are formed more intentionally to help their members solve problems. A list of these groups might include the following:

- Growth/improvement group—focuses on individual rather than social change. It often uses a series

of group exercises designed to increase self-awareness and promote desired growth and change in individuals.

- Social/recreational group—primary function is to meet people and have fun; the members also often participate in an organized activity, such as volleyball, quilting, or cards.
- Educational group—meets primarily to fulfill the members' needs for information. It often makes use of discussion activities and guest speakers.
- Social action group—energies are focused on making changes in the external environment. Members often try to inform the public about political issues and influence public policy.
- Therapy group—is led by a trained professional and focuses on the emotional issues of members.

Sometimes it's hard to distinguish between the type of self-help group proposed in this publication and the groups listed above. That's because groups often are mixtures of several functions. In fact, the model of the self-help group proposed in this publication borrows many concepts from the groups listed above.

For instance, a self-help group may engage in activities that cause its members to change and grow. Often the members set aside time to socialize, perhaps visiting over dessert and

coffee. They may ask a guest lecturer to speak during one meeting, but generally the learning is more informal and group-generated. Occasionally they may become involved in some type of social action, but this is not their primary purpose. And a self-help group often helps members cope with their feelings and get group support.

But a distinction should be made here between a self-help group and a therapy group. In a self-help group, all group members are “in the same boat.” Everyone gives help to and receives help from the others.

In a therapy group, a trained leader offers group members guidance, direction, and support. He or she does not come to the group looking for help with personal or emotional problems. Thus, the therapist is able to offer his or her clients different help than any self-help group member can probably give. Therapy groups serve an important function for those who need them.

Why bother with a self-help group?

If self-help groups are a natural part of our lives and many helpful groups already exist, why bother creating or joining a self-help group?

One answer is that membership in a self-help group reminds you that you are surrounded by others who care. Sometimes, you get so busy with personal and family activities, it's easy not to make time for friends and neighbors. This is especially true when hard times hit.

During difficult times, you also may feel uncomfortable about getting together with others. You feel as though everyone is talking about your problems ... but that no one understands quite what you're going through. You may feel alone.

By intentionally taking the time to get together with others, you will learn you're not alone. As you discuss your problems with others, you will find others share your difficulties and care what happens to you.

A self-help group can offer you support you may not find in other groups. The members of a self-help group know what you're experiencing because they've been there themselves. Sometimes being with people who know from experience how you feel makes all the difference.

Even if you're handling your situation well, you still can benefit from membership in a self-help group. You can learn from others and they can gain from your support.

Also, if you're interested in becoming a peer counselor, the valuable give-and-take that occurs in such a setting is excellent experience. In other words, participation in a self-help group is the first step in preparing you to help others help themselves.

Is a self-help group for you?

Self-help groups are not for everyone. Some people cannot benefit from the give and take of a self-help group because they may not be ready to share their feelings and experiences. Or they may monopolize group discussions, not because they don't care about group members' needs, but because they need the help of a counselor or therapy group.

One way to find out if a self-help group is for you is to attend a few meetings. Then ask yourself two questions:

1. Do I leave the meeting feeling better than before I came?
2. Am I able to listen to other members of the group and offer them support?

If you answer “no” to either of these questions, perhaps a self-help group

isn't for you. You may need to talk with a family counselor or join a therapy group. Members of your self-help group or the group's initiators should have names of helpful counselors in your area.

Who can start a self-help group?

Self-help groups can be started by professionals, such as mental health workers, ministers, or extension personnel. Or you can start a group yourself.

The group probably will function more smoothly and meet its members' needs better if the members think about the group's goals at the first meeting. Making sure everyone understands the ground rules and feels comfortable with the format can prevent problems down the road.

If you have concerns about your future, you may find it helpful to share your feelings with other people. Although there are no easy answers to financial and family problems, being able to share your concerns with others in the same situation may lighten your load. You will find you're not alone. You can learn how others have dealt with their problems, and you may find you're able to help others who are experiencing tough times.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

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This ISU Extension publication was formerly published as PM 1221b.