

Self-help groups

The role of organizer in a self-help group

Self-help groups can be started by professionals, such as ministers, mental health workers, and extension staff members. Or they can be started by individuals or couples.

Sometimes, self-help groups spring up by themselves. One or two couples take the initiative and invite friends and neighbors to a get-together. Other times, families sense the need for a group but require the help of a professional to get the group going.

But no matter who starts the group, the organizer is responsible for three initial tasks: recruiting members, locating resources, and laying the groundwork for the group. Completing these tasks is crucial to the continued success of the group, but this does not have to involve a major time commitment from the organizer.

Initial responsibilities

Recruiting members

Your most important function as organizer is to recruit members. To complete this task, you need to know how to contact and select potential group members.

How to recruit

You might find you can contact some potential members by holding awareness meetings and then asking interested people to sign up for group sessions at these meetings.

Advertisements and announcements on community bulletin boards or in local newspapers also may be helpful recruiting tools.

But usually it takes more personal contact to get interested people to actually attend group sessions. Phone calls, letters, or visits to potential members often are more effective than newspaper ads or posters.

Whom to recruit

Size. A self-help group can be composed of a varying number of couples or individuals. However, those who have worked with self-help groups suggest having around five to ten members.

Fewer than five members may work if most of the members are active and talkative. If more than ten members are interested, it may be wise to form two groups. When too many people are in a group, some will not have a chance to talk.

Focus. Who should be in a group? You need to balance considerations about selecting the best members for a group with concerns about excluding people who might want to attend.

A basic guideline for recruiting members is that a self-help group forms to help members with a common problem. Thus, the people you select should share similar concerns.

If you have doubts about whether a person or a couple would benefit from participation in the group, talk with someone who knows the individual(s). If you know the person(s) well and still are unsure, seek advice from a counselor or someone who has experience with groups.

You also should read the ISU Extension publication, *Self-help groups: What they are and how they can help you* (SP 150), prior to recruiting any members. It explains in more detail the focus of a self-help group and who might benefit from participation in such a group.

Remember, including someone who won't fit into the group will not help that person and may create problems for the group.

Locating resources

Before the group meets, contact some local counselors, such as ministers or mental health professionals. You need two or three who would be willing to take emergency calls if someone in the group experiences an emotional problem the group can't handle. You contact these counselors not because you expect difficulties to arise but to be prepared in case they do. Names and phone numbers of these referral sources should be provided to group members at the first meeting.

It also is helpful to think of a few resource people in the community who might be willing to speak at a meeting if the members want a guest lecturer.

Laying the groundwork

After recruiting members and locating resources, your next responsibility as organizer is to lay the groundwork for the group. You do this by selecting a place and time for the first meeting and by conducting the first meeting.

Choosing a meeting place, time

When looking for a suitable place for your first meeting, consider such factors as space, location, and atmosphere. Finding a pleasant and relaxing first meeting spot may make the difference in whether members feel comfortable being in the group.

However, also consider that people may be more willing to attend a first meeting at a community meeting place (more neutral territory) rather than in a home.

A good way to determine a meeting time is to ask the people you've invited what's convenient for them.

Conducting the first meeting

The first meeting is crucial because it sets the stage for the group's future. During the first meeting, you are responsible for telling group members what a self-help group is and what they can and cannot expect from participation in the group.

More specifically, you need to cover the following topics during the first meeting:

1. Explain the goals of a self-help group. You may want to pass out copies of the extension publication, *Self-help groups: What they are and how they can help you* (SP 150), to group members as you discuss these goals.
2. Set basic ground rules, such as confidentiality, shared leadership, and acceptance of feelings. Pass out copies of *Guidelines for a self-help group* (SP 151).
3. Determine a time and place for subsequent meetings. The group needs to decide whether to meet in a private or public location. Homes often are cozier than churches or community centers, but members may not want to prepare for home meetings. It's possible to alternate between private and public locations.
4. Choose discussion materials or topics for subsequent meetings. The group should decide at the first meeting whether they will use already packaged discussion materials, develop their own materials, or use a mixture of both kinds of materials. Remind them that some topics may best be presented by a community expert—a mental health worker, lawyer, social worker, etc.

One prepackaged set of materials has been developed by ISU Extension for use by farm families. It's called *Neighbor to neighbor: Self-help groups* (SP 152 to SP 159). This packet includes discussion starters and short leader's guides.

These materials are available from the ISU Extension Web site (<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs>). If the group decides to use these materials, you as organizer need to obtain them.

In addition to pointing out the existence of such prepackaged materials to group members, you also can help the group make a list of other possible discussion topics and resources. While informal discussion of problems is helpful, it is probably best to include some time for focused discussion.

5. Decide on a group format. One effective format is a round-robin approach. In this format, group members volunteer to take turns hosting the group and leading the discussion.

The job of the leader is to introduce the topic, keep the discussion going so everyone has a chance to speak, and conclude the meeting. Keeping the conversation going usually means just asking members to respond in turn to a question or to share an experience. It does not mean making any lengthy formal presentations.

If a member feels uncomfortable about leading a discussion, he or she may want to choose a topic that lends itself to a guest speaker. Or members can share leadership responsibilities—a team approach—with one member preparing coffee and the other leading the discussion.

6. Remind the group to include sharing time. In addition to planning time for discussion of topics or listening to a guest speaker, the group needs to set aside about one hour for sharing.

This sharing could take place after the group's discussion and a short break for stretching and refreshments.

During sharing time, each member should be allowed to speak if he or she wants to. Tips for keeping the discussion going and facilitating equal time among members are given later in this publication. If the *Neighbor to Neighbor* materials are used, suggested questions for the sharing time are included. The sharing time also can be unstructured, with members responding to the general question, "How has your week gone?"

7. Discuss how to handle special needs before they occur. As feelings and experiences are shared within the group, some members may need additional support beyond what the group setting can provide.

For example, this may mean an individual or couple will need to spend time after the regular meeting listening and giving support. Or it may mean that a group member should contact the counselor who has agreed to be a resource for the group.

Group members shouldn't become alarmed if a member needs special help. Rather, they simply need to offer their concern and make the necessary contacts as good friends would naturally do.

8. Discuss group policies for membership and attendance. Members need to decide whether to limit the group to the original membership or to occasionally accept new members. The group will want to balance concerns about trust versus willingness to

include others who need a group. It takes time together to build trust in a group. This building must begin again when new members join.

The group also should decide whether it will meet only when everyone can attend or meet at set times even though some members can't attend. Some degree of trust may be lost if the group is different each time. However, insisting members be there every time may limit membership.

9. Agree upon a length of commitment. Some groups meet for a specified number of meetings while others continue indefinitely. You may want to have the group agree to meet at least three to six times initially. Then, at the end of this time, have them decide whether they wish to continue getting together for another specified amount of time.

It also may be important to have members agree to say goodbye to the group if they need to drop out before the end of the sessions. Remaining members may feel uncomfortable or hurt if an individual or couple drops out with no explanation.

Potential problems

At the beginning of a self-help group there is apt to be much "testing the waters" and little group cohesiveness. As individuals or couples initially come together, a number of questions will be running through their heads: "What is this group?" "Who are these people?" "How will I be treated?" "Can I trust these people?" "Will this group help?"

If you establish a good foundation for the group during the first meeting, much of this initial hesitancy should disappear. Little by little trust will be built. And in time, a high level of group cohesiveness and acceptance should develop.

However, problems can occur. Some common ones include:

- domination of the discussion by one or two members.
- differing ideas about the purpose of the group.
- declining group membership.

When one or two people monopolize the discussion, leaders may need to help involve the entire group. Some groups find it helpful to use a kitchen timer or some other device to indicate "time is up."

Another way to encourage everyone to participate is to give each member five to seven poker chips or pennies at the beginning of the meeting. Every time a person speaks, he or she places one chip into the center of the group. When a person's chips are gone, so are his or her times to speak. This doesn't have to be strictly followed. The chips merely remind people to take turns talking.

A person who monopolizes the discussions may need more help than a self-help group can give. The group may need to help this individual find a therapist or therapy group. However, seeking help from a counselor or family agency should not exclude a person from membership in the self-help group. This person may want to continue to belong to the group even if he or she seeks additional help.

Group members may find it useful to consult the extension publication, *Encouraging a friend to seek professional help* (PM 1214), for some tips about how to approach a group member who needs additional help.

Problems also can develop when a few members want to focus on purposes different from those of the original self-help group. It is the responsibility of the discussion leader to keep the group focused on the topic at hand. If the group cannot do this, even with help from the leader, the disparate members may want to form a new group, such as a social-action group.

If the group is having difficulties because it's getting too small to offer enough support, the group might consider recruiting new members. The remaining participants, possibly with your help, can identify potential new members from the community.

The organizer's continued involvement

Your primary responsibilities as organizer of a self-help group are to make initial contacts, locate resources, and lead the first meeting. The information provided by you during this meeting should answer many questions members have, establish the framework for a successful group, and enable the members to share responsibility for group leadership during subsequent meetings.

If you are a professional and formed the group, you should continue to offer **background** support after the first meeting, be available occasionally to help solve problems that may come up, and provide referrals to appropriate counselors if the need arises.

You may want to offer to meet with the group or with representatives from the group on a monthly or bimonthly basis to work out problems or offer suggestions. But don't attend subsequent meetings unless you're specifically invited. Otherwise, the group will never develop into a true **self-help** group.

If you are an individual or couple who started the group to get and give support, your close involvement with the group probably will continue after the first meeting. But, as you participate in subsequent meetings, make a special effort to share the leadership role with all group members.

In order to get a self-help group started, you must do some initial legwork and conduct the first meeting. But, if you set the stage properly, the group will develop and function on its own, depending on you only for minor leadership support.

See also *Self-help groups: What they are and how they can help you* (SP 150) and *Guidelines for a self-help group* (SP 151).

Also available on the World Wide Web:
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/pubs>

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