

Diabetes Support Groups

The purpose of this section is to give an overview of the steps involved in planning a Diabetes Support Group. Keeping in mind that there is no one recipe for starting up such a group, we are presenting some ideas that may be helpful.

Benefits of belonging to support groups

There is no doubt about the benefits derived from self-help support groups—they help people cope with a wide variety of stressful problems in life. There are support groups to help people deal with addictions, illness, bereavement, promote positive parenting, caregiving, and much more. A general characteristic of support groups is that people find strength from giving and receiving help from others who share the same experiences.

In regards to support groups for people living with diabetes, Sylvia, the facilitator of a Diabetes Support Group that has been running successfully for twelve years, was asked why she started the group in the first place. She explains,

“I started the group because I had questions that I felt only another diabetic person could answer.”

According to the *National Mental Health Consumers’ Self-Help Clearinghouse*, the benefits of belonging to a support group of any nature are numerous. Scientific research reveals that such groups help persons deal with a wide range of issues by:

- Find comfort in knowing that they are not alone
- Increase their practical knowledge about diabetes
- Help them cope with their life-long journey of having the disease
- Replace self-defeating thoughts and actions with wellness-promoting activities
- Provide relief in times of crisis

- Empower persons to take control over their lives
- Offer realistic hope for the future
- Improve self-esteem
- Decrease hospitalizations

Features of support groups

Support groups can also be called “self-help” groups, whether they are helping people deal with addiction, disability, parenting, bereavement, disease, or other stressful life problems. The make-up of these groups share some common characteristics:

- 1. It's people helping people** – While people help one another, they help themselves while sharing and combining their knowledge. As a result, persons feel that they have more options, hopes are lifted in this atmosphere of co-operation.
- 2. The group is run by its members** – Because support groups are created by “ordinary” persons, and its members decide on its course of action based on their needs, it truly provides each member with a communal sense of belonging.
- 3. The group is composed of people who share the same problem** – Because all group members are living with or are affected by the disease (e.g. through a spouse, friend or family member), this provides a powerful sense of community.
- 4. It is a voluntary non-profit organization** – People give their time, skills and know-how (e.g. culinary talents) to organize regular meetings that have no membership fees. (if there are fees, these are minimal).

Steps to starting a self-help support group:

Step #1: Research “What is out there already?”

Take advantage of existing resources because someone somewhere has already done what you are trying to do. You can avoid spending a lot of time with unnecessary groundwork (or ‘re-inventing the wheel’) by doing some of the following:

- **Find out what groups exist in your area.** It is very likely that there already is a support group of some kind with a leader you can call upon for advice. If you do find a diabetes support group, ask its facilitator if you can attend a meeting to get a feel for how it is run. It is very likely that the facilitator would be more than happy to share their group’s sources of materials, speakers, etc.

The origin of one diabetes support group

In the Algonquin community of Timiscaming, Quebec, Lorna the local CHR, explains how their diabetes group started:

“As a CHR, I was pretty active in working with diabetics. People would come to see me and talk about their diabetes and ask me to find specialists for them. I ended up approaching the Band Council with a request to change my job description so that I could work in diabetes prevention. That is how the diabetes support group began in our community.”

Step #2: Seek help from others “Reach out”

Don't feel that you have to do everything by yourself. There are others who are sharing the same problem as you and would love to help form a support group if they had the opportunity. Many successful self-help groups have been started by ordinary people-- people whose only qualifications are that they are dealing with a particular life problem, are concerned about themselves and others, and are committed to finding solutions.

Some ways to find others who share your concerns are:

- Send out/post a notice inviting others to join in to help start a group
- Mail copies to or telephone people whom you think would know others like yourself
- Make announcements on the local radio station and at local gatherings (e.g. Bingo games)

Do not forget to seek the assistance of professionals such as doctors, nurses, clergy, and social workers—they may be helpful in a variety of ways. Sylvia explains whom she reached out to when she started the Diabetes Support Group in Kahnawake, Quebec:

“I received help from the Diabetes Nurse Educator. I also wrote to the director of the local social- community services and the doctors at our health centre to inform them of what I was doing.”

Step #3: Find a time and place “When and where?”

Look for a meeting place that will be free of charge. You may find space at a local school, church hall, community hall, health/hospital centre, or social service agency. If you do not expect large attendance, consider meeting in group members' homes.

As for the best time to hold meetings, you can speak to the attendees to find out the best time suited for them. Regarding this aspect of programming, consider the following words of advice given by Ruth, the Diabetes Support Group facilitator with Native seniors in Toronto:

“We have our meetings every first Thursday of the month and this was determined by the group. We’ve been operating for a few years now and it has taken time for the group to develop. Sometimes, only five people came, but we were meeting those peoples’ needs. Now, we have a core group of ten people with others who come and go.

The key to the success of any kind of support group is consistency—same place, same time, same attitude.”

Sylvia offers similar advice:

“If you are to start something up, stick with it. Be consistent.”

Step #4: Publicity “Get the word out”

You can follow the suggestions found in *Step 2: Seek help from others* to publicize your meetings. When support group facilitators were asked how they announce their meetings, they made the following comments:

“When we first started up our group in the city, we sent faxes to different Native organizations.”

“We have our sessions announced on the radio 3-4 times a day on the day of the meeting.”

“I personally call each person to remind them about the coming meeting. I think that works because we have good attendance.”

Step #5: Holding meetings “What do you talk about?”

A general survey was conducted with Diabetes Support Group facilitators from across Canada as well as an Internet search on the questions: “*What do you talk about at meetings?*” and “*How long are they held?*” The search came up with the following information:

Meetings are held for 2 hours at the same time and place. For example, *the 3d Monday of each month from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.* Agendas differ, as various facilitators explain:

“The meeting begins with introductions and importantly, we talk about how we are feeling. We give support and some are in denial.”

“We usually have a speaker who speaks on a topic requested by the group. Then there is a discussion followed by a snack. The social part comes in at the beginning of the discussion when the participants get a chance to talk with the presenter.”

“We talk about how everyone is feeling, what is current as it relates to diabetes. Our main rule is ‘Whatever is said in the room stays in the room’. Then we have a speaker where we might have a nurse or a pharmacist to speak about “new medications on the market”. We try to have a speaker every month. Coffee is served and we do not have formal breaks.”

“The first hour, we have a presentation and in the second hour, there is a discussion on what was presented. A snack is offered at some point. Our meetings are educational and preventive in nature and the program is designed in conjunction with the Diabetes Educator.”

Recipe for success

If you ask yourself the question, “*Why have diabetes support groups been so enduring?*”, the recipe for success include the following ingredients:

- A **person** that is ordinary, but very dedicated
- Volunteers** who are sensitive to the needs of people living with diabetes
- A consistent **time** that suits everyone’s needs
- A comfortable **place** to meet
- A gathering of smiling, supportive and compassionate human beings reaching out to help one another**

Additional Resources

**1. “*Starting Self-Help Groups*”
National Mental Health Consumers’
Self-Help Clearinghouse,**

Ideal for those wanting to, or have already, established a self-help group. It contains an outline of the steps to take and is linked to “Self-Help Tool Kit” which contains more detailed information about starting a group.

Website address: **<http://www.mhselfhelp.org/self.html>**

**2. “*Self-Help Sourcebook Online*”
American Self-Help Clearinghouse**

Free, electronic version of this 344-page book can also be purchased directly from the American Self-Help Clearinghouse. The Self-Help Sourcebook Online is a database that includes information on over 800 model groups as well as information on starting groups.

Website address: **<http://mentalhelp.net/selfhelp/faqs.htm>**

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