

General Guidelines for Facilitators of Mental Health Support Groups

For many people joining a group of any description can be a daunting experience therefore the initial welcome they receive is crucial. Everyone, whatever their reason for attending the group must feel accepted and welcomed and the facilitator will set the tone for this atmosphere of welcome. If you decide that you would like to serve tea and coffee it may be best to do this as people arrive. This can provide a simple distraction for shy or nervous people and if you allow 10-15 minutes for refreshments it allows people to be a few minutes late without feeling uncomfortable. It would be best to ask someone else to take responsibility for hospitality leaving you free to be 'present' to those coming in.

The arrangement of the room will add to the feeling of welcome, try to arrange seating in a circle with a simple focal point e.g. bible, a candle, plant or a few flowers, and an icon or statue. Try to ensure the room is adequately heated...I know that this is sometimes difficult if you are on church premises, but there is nothing worse than sitting in a group and feeling cold. Be attentive to people's needs for example; if you know that someone only drinks herb/fruit tea do your best to provide it. If another has a back problem provide a cushion. Simple gestures that attend to people's needs, within reason, will foster an atmosphere of kindness and generosity.

If you are using church property be sure to check out practical issues beforehand such as:

- Opening up the premises, who has responsibility for keys etc
- How to switch on/off alarms, heating, boilers etc
- Not all parish kitchens are clean! Make sure you have tea towels, cloths etc and check policy for litter. [In my parish you need to take your own rubbish home as there are no bins]
- Check church policy on using candles, some premises do not allow naked flames
- Be very clear with the PP about start and finish times of meetings
- Are there any other health and safety issues you need to be aware of e.g. fire exits

Say a few words of welcome and make sure everyone feels at ease and comfortable. For the first couple of sessions it is a good idea to allow everyone the opportunity to say their name and introduce themselves. Explain the outline of the evening which should run along these lines.

A few moments of silence

An opening prayer to set the theme

The group prayer:

Let us pray together, Lord as we gather to listen to your Word,
Help us to listen to you and each other with compassion and understanding.
Help us to respect and accept each other just as we are. Amen

NB this prayer encompasses the spirit of the group which is to come together to listen to the word of God and to share with each other some of the difficulties faced when living with a member of the family affected by a mental illness. All the sharing must be held in the strictest confidence to enable trust, fellowship, and friendship to develop.

The group prayer is followed by a reading from the Gospel and then a time for sharing. Invite others to read the Gospel or lead a prayer, although it would be best to do this before the group settles so that no one is embarrassed or 'put on the spot'. It is important to remember that not everyone is confident at reading in a group. As facilitator it is your role to ensure that everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak and there are some suggested starter questions for each session. These questions may offer a different perspective for attendees who may see their circumstances as overwhelming, negative and deeply distressing. It is important to try to maintain a sense of balance in the group and gently help people to recognize positive aspects in their circumstances. Remember we are a people of hope, this does not mean that we will not experience difficulties but ultimately...all will be well. However difficult the sharing may be always try to end the session on a positive note.

If someone discloses something which gives you cause for concern you may like to have a quiet word with them when the group meeting ends. There are cards with helpline numbers available which you may pass on. If it is a practical issues that a parish group such as the SVP may be able to help with then ask if they would be interested in some practical help. Prayer will play an important part of your own preparation and I would encourage you to pray for the members of your group on a regular basis. If your parish has any prayer groups particularly intercessory or rosary groups ask them to intercede for the group, they do not need to know details of who attends, and ask them to pray for you! We all need God's help constantly.

Below I offer some suggestions for your personal prayer.

Lord Jesus

I give you my hands to do your work.

I give you my feet to go your way.

I give you my eyes to see as you do.

I give you my mind that you may think in me.

I give you my spirit that you may pray in me.

Above all, I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,

So that it is you, Lord Jesus, who live and work and pray in me.

Lord, You call us to follow you;

Not to drift through life,

But to choose what our lives will be.

You call us to build our lives on love, love for ourselves,

For others, for You.

Send your Spirit on us so that we can really see ourselves as we are.

Put us back in touch with the deep needs of our hearts,

For You made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless

Until they rest in You.

Help us to respond to your call, today and every day.

For this reason I fall on my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name. I ask God from the wealth of his glory to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all God's people may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love. Yes, may you come to know his love-although it can never be fully known-and so be completely filled with the very nature of God.

To him who by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of: to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever. Amen

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