

Using a Support Group

•What are support groups?•Types of support groups•Specific groups for your needs•Finding a support group•What to expect from a support group

Almost everyone has concerns that are hard to talk about with family or friends. A support group can introduce you to others who understand what you're going through.

Most support groups focus on a specific topic, such as living with cancer or diabetes, overcoming alcoholism or substance misuse, or caring for a parent who has Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease. It may take a little research, but you can almost always find a support group to help you with your concern.

What are support groups?

Support groups are discussion groups that let people share ideas on a topic that's important to all the members. They're usually small enough that everyone has a chance to join the conversation, and they maintain certain rules, such as confidentiality, to keep the groups safe.

Many support groups meet regularly in places such as hospitals, places of worship, community centres, or private premises. Most cost nothing to attend or require only a small donation to cover the cost of expenses. Many online support groups are available as well.

Some groups have a leader, such as a therapist or counsellor, who makes sure everybody has a chance to speak. Other groups have no leader or let members take turns leading. Whether or not they have a leader, support groups are different from "group therapy," which is sometimes part of an ongoing counselling program and is always led by a mental health professional. Support groups usually cost much less than group therapy and don't require members to make a commitment to attend a certain number of meetings, as some formal treatment programs do. You can attend as little or as often as you like.

Types of support groups

Support groups can follow many different models, which include:

Informal discussion groups. Many support groups are informal discussion groups that meet in private homes or elsewhere and don't have a strict format for meetings. Some have a set discussion topic for each meeting, and others allow people to bring up a variety of subjects. Often, the leaders are peer volunteers, and if there is a fee, it is usually very small.

Institutional groups. Some support groups are organized by institutions, such as hospitals, mental health associations, and national organizations for people with specific health or emotional concerns. These groups may involve both group discussions and talks by experts, such as doctors or therapists.

Twelve-step groups. Twelve-step programs follow or adapt the format used by Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and similar programs, which encourage people to follow a 12-step program for recovery from an addiction. These groups require members to maintain strict confidentiality about what people say at meetings and who attends. They do not have a professional leader but take turns in rotating service positions such as group secretary or treasurer.

Online support groups. Online support groups may have “real time” discussions in chat rooms or may allow people to post questions or concerns on a message board that members can respond to at their convenience. These groups can be helpful if you have a busy schedule or a medical condition that would make it hard for you to attend face-to-face meetings. Make sure you join a group with a password-protected site or page and choose a username that won't reveal your identity.

Religious or spiritual groups. You can find a local religious or spiritual group for general support or to assist you in connecting to a greater meaning in your life or finding individuals with a similar set of beliefs to your own.

Specific groups for your needs

You can find a support group that deals with almost any health or emotional concern, including some rare or unusual diseases or conditions. Depending on your needs, you may want to join a support group for people who are looking for help with concerns like yours. There are groups that serve a wide variety of concerns, including:

- caring for an older adult who has Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease
- coping with the loss of a parent, spouse, or other close relative
- dealing with chronic pain
- dealing with separation or divorce
- gambling
- getting out of debt
- helping a child or teenager with a disability, an eating disorder, or special needs
- living with a medical condition such as cancer, stroke, or HIV
- living with a person addicted to drugs or alcohol
- living with an emotional concern such as depression, phobias, low self-esteem, or post-traumatic stress disorder
- living with mental illness
- dietary changes
- moving forward after losing a job
- overcoming alcohol or substance misuse
- single parenting
- smoking cessation

Finding a support group

Support groups aren't always called "support groups." They may also be known as discussion or self-help groups, or they may go by a different name altogether. This means that when you are looking for a group, it's a good idea to tell people exactly what you're looking for—for example, a group specifically for breast or prostate cancer survivors or for parents of children with autism. Here are some ways to get started:

Talk to a friend or co-worker who shares your concern. A friend or co-worker who shares your concern may know of groups even if they don't attend meetings. For example, someone whose mother has Alzheimer's disease may know about a group for people who are caring for parents with that disease.

Get in touch with national organizations that focus on your concern. Many of these have local branches that include support groups. National groups may also have online discussion groups.

Ask a therapist, social worker, or clergy member for ideas. If you're seeing a therapist or a counsellor regularly, they may be able to refer you to a group. Many groups meet at places of worship, so clergy members can often give you other recommendations.

Search online for "support group" and your concern (such as "asthma," "divorce," "debts," "infertility," or "eating disorders"). Or look for a national organization that deals with your concern and see if it has links to support groups. Also, try checking your local community website or groups on social media. Before joining any online group, ensure you know about the group. For example, the credentials of those who are leading the group, or whether or not there are fees associated with attending.

If you can't find a support group in your area, consider starting one. Find a friend who is dealing with the same concern and then network with neighbours and friends. You could place an ad or announcement online or put notices on bulletin boards in your community. Talk to local schools, community centres, and places of worship to arrange a meeting place.

What to expect from a support group

Depending on their size and purpose, support groups can offer anything from emotional support to practical tips on filling in insurance forms or finding an assisted-living facility for an aging parent. They also give you a chance to help other people by sharing what you've learned with them.

While support groups can offer help for people coping with medical, emotional, and other issues, remember that they are not a substitute for the care from your primary health care provider or mental health professional. If you decide to join a support group, tell your doctor or counsellor.

Try more than one support group. Support groups can vary so widely that you may need to visit more than one to find the right group for you.

Safeguard your privacy. Make sure that the group adheres to a confidentiality agreement so that you can feel safe knowing that what you say in the group will be kept in confidence.

Find out the “ground rules.” Some groups have written rules about things like confidentiality or taking turns speaking. If these don’t exist, ask if the group has any informal policies or procedures that people usually follow.

Ask to be put on a mailing list. Many groups have email newsletters that include more than just notices of meetings. If you can’t attend every meeting, these will keep you informed of any helpful information you miss.

Finally, keep in mind that support groups exist to help people learn from one another. They work best if everybody contributes. Speak up if you’ve learned something about dealing with your concern that’s helped you a lot. One of the best things about a support group is that they show you that even if you’re going through a tough time, you are not alone.

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Sierra Barker, BA, MACP, CCC

Canadian Certified Counsellor, Senior Clinical Content Writer