

Tips on Establishing a Support Group

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1. Find a safe and neutral meeting place. A church hall, convent, rectory, school or library is ideal. Private homes can feel “unsafe” for some who may be hesitant about going to a “stranger’s” home and because of children, doorbells and phones can distract. It can also be awkward to ask people to leave one’s home at meeting’s end.

2. Set up a formal schedule and location. Set up and stick to a schedule of weekly, bi-weekly or monthly sessions at a set location. Regular times and a regular place are prime concerns. Don’t cancel or change unless necessary. If a change is made, give notice immediately to everyone involved.

3. Establish a core leadership group. Make sure more than one person is involved to help avoid minister burn-out; provide alternative leadership if a leader or his/her children are sick; make sure no one person “owns” the ministry; and ensure that the group will not disintegrate if the “leader” moves on.

4. Offer training to session leaders. Training will ensure that the true meaning of the support group is perpetuated in the ministry. Contact your local Family Ministry Office or NACSDC for training advice and assistance.

5. Begin publicity two months before the first support group meeting. Send notices to local parish bulletins, radio stations of all venues (rock, talk, country, classical, pop, urban, public, etc.), diocesan and local newspapers, cable and network TV stations and mental health groups. Check Yellow Page listings if in doubt.

6. Hold a full meeting on initial date. Begin and end on your published schedule whether one person or 300 attend. Your support group must always communicate the value and importance of each and every person who attends.

7. When there are more than 16 people in a group, divide into smaller groups of 8-12, each with a trained facilitator. Smaller groups give all an opportunity to express themselves. Try to keep the same people in the same group at each session so members will know one another.

8. Be consistent in structure. Every meeting should follow the same dependable format:

- Greeting and importance of confidentiality
- One person at a time will speak
- No advice; just sharing of experience
- Everyone speaks in first person
- No judgement
- All have equal sharing time
- No one forced to share
- Announcement of next session at end
- Refreshments and social events after session

9. Before the session, the leader(s) should ask God to guide their words and actions. Suggested: “God, help me to shut up when I need to.”

10. After sessions, the leaders should ask God to be with the participants. Suggested: “God, help my brothers and sisters who are in need as I have been in need.”