



Tools For Starting a Caregiver Support Group

By Kristine Dwyer, LSW

Starting a caregiver support group takes time, energy, organization and an ongoing commitment. It is not a one-person job but it does usually need at least one energetic, organized person to start the group and share enthusiasm for its success. Here are some useful suggestions for developing your own caregiver support group:

Select a group facilitator that has a background in gerontology, social work, nursing or other human service field and has knowledge of caregiving resources. Look for someone who is empathetic, a good listener and assertive enough to balance the group to encourage participation and prevent monopolizing conversations.

Choosing the proper meeting site may depend on space and availability, however, accessibility and personal comfort are two important factors to consider. Some suggestions are: public library, hospital, senior center, church, or a community room in a senior housing building. All of these places should be available free of charge. Some groups have met in a place where they can also bring their loved one/care receiver such as an adult day care center or a public library reading area.

Review group interaction guidelines that set the tone for confidentiality, a non-threatening environment, openness to freely share, avoiding side conversations, interruptions and giving each person a chance to speak.

Be careful to stay focused on the purpose of the caregiver support group and not to turn meetings into gripe sessions. Try to keep a positive atmosphere

that not only offers support during difficult times but also brings options and hope for caregivers. For example, the National Parkinson Foundation suggests that their support groups be self-help groups run by and for people with a common challenge or life situation. The group is not for therapy or a 12-step program.

Choose a time and date that will be most convenient for caregivers. Monthly groups during the late afternoons or early evenings have been the most popular or you may wish to alternate day and evening meetings. Brown bag lunch gatherings or dessert events can also be successful. The length of the meeting time should not exceed two hours. Plan at least a month ahead to allow time for advertising the group and maintain a consistent schedule.

Announce the caregiver support group through community event calendars in the local newspapers or on cable networks, post flyers at the library, grocery stores, clinic waiting rooms and other public places or send announcements to churches, dining sites and service organizations that reach out to caregivers and seniors.

Expect the attendance of the group to ebb and flow especially in the early months as the group is forming. Encourage family members as well as friends to attend the meetings. A core group may begin to emerge after several months as participants find mutual support and bond with others in the group. Regular attendance also increased when tasks were delegated and participants played a part in the group such as helping to set up the resource table, bringing treats, handing out nametags, or welcoming newcomers. Another option is to offer free blood pressures or prize drawings for massages, meal coupons or other items that support caregivers and encourage attendance.

As the group develops, keep it small. The purpose of the group is to allow time for each person to listen and share, but this becomes more difficult if the group size exceeds 12. You may want to consider splitting the group if it becomes too large and impersonal.

Spend the first few meetings getting to know each other and identifying the needs and interests of the group. Educational speakers, videos and

presentations can be scheduled later on. Some groups have decided to alternate between having a speaker one month and open discussion the next month.

Create a buddy system and a phone roster so that participants can call upon each other for help and support between group meetings.

Finally, remember that each group is as unique as its leadership and members. Make the most of that uniqueness and build on the group's strengths and ideas. Caregiver groups are designed to offer mutual support, resources, education and hope for the future.

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