



Support Group Savvy

by Kristine Dwyer, Staff Writer

“In helping others, we shall help ourselves, for whatever good we give out completes the circle and comes back to us.” — Flora Edwards

According to Webster’s dictionary, the word “support” means to give courage or faith to; help, comfort; to carry the weight of; to give approval to, be in favor of or uphold. All of these words describe the framework around which support groups are built. They offer a place for caregivers and families to learn together, deal with feelings of frustration, sadness or isolation, and “link arms” with others that have a mutual understanding. Support groups can also validate a caregiver’s identity and give them permission to care for themselves throughout the caregiving journey.

A caregiver support group provides information about helpful resources as well as generates camaraderie. Seasoned caregivers can share their collective wisdom and help those who are less experienced to contend with the difficult aspects of caregiving. Finding home care services, pre-planning legal affairs, applying for financial help, or preparing to move a loved one into a care facility can all be daunting events, yet group members can help each other to take these steps.

There’s another important benefit that a support group can provide. People facing a similar experience need to find hope for the future, laugh about the “humorous” aspects of their lives, enjoy social activities and have fun together! What better group of people to connect with than those who walk in the same shoes?

Why Join A Support Group?

The advantages of joining a support group are limitless. Some of the best reasons to join include:

- ◆ Sharing common experiences and learning coping strategies
- ◆ Exploring and sharing solutions to problems
- ◆ Finding emotional outlets and receiving support from peers
- ◆ Forming new friendships and discovering a sense of community
- ◆ Developing new skills through education
- ◆ Helping others while still helping yourself

Finding a Local Group

Acknowledging the need for support and then locating a group are the first steps in becoming involved. Hospitals, rehabilitation centers, churches, nursing homes, and local chapters of disease-specific programs such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, MS or cancer often sponsor support groups. These groups may be advertised through the local papers, on the radio, at clinics, on community bulletin boards or through the local social service or Area Agency on Aging programs. Meetings may be scheduled on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, during daytime or evening hours. Since caregiving can fully consume one's daily schedule and limit participation, many programs may offer on-site or in-home respite care for the care recipient to allow caregivers the freedom to attend a group.

Types of Groups

Support groups focus on a myriad of needs and topics across the nation. These include caregiver support, living with acute and chronic diseases, grief and loss, self-help, mental health, parenting, and many more. Yet, all groups have one thing in common; they address the emotional, physical and often spiritual aspects of a disease process or life experience and members uphold each other through a common bond.

Groups may feature formal speakers, focus on open discussions or even sponsor social opportunities, recreational activities, and fundraisers. Most groups are open to the public and participants are free to join at any time, while others may offer an education and support series for a period of six to 12 weeks.

A medical professional, social worker, psychologist or even a former caregiver usually facilitates support and education groups. A trained and effective facilitator should be empathetic, keep the communication flowing, address personal needs, have knowledge of resources and balance the discussions between those members who may tend to monopolize the group and those who are less assertive.

Successful support groups appear to thrive if they use the following guidelines:

- ◆ Label the group a “coffee chat” or “breakfast club” if the word “support” does not draw attendance.
- ◆ Attentively listen, show respect for each other and uphold the importance of confidentiality.
- ◆ Involve members in leadership and group direction to ensure that members “own” the group.
- ◆ Embrace new members and maintain present ones through a mentor system.
- ◆ Offer a combination of sharing and growth opportunities through open discussions and educational speakers.
- ◆ Strive for a positive and comfortable atmosphere that allows for open sharing where people can feel accepted and needed.

New Trends

In this day and age there are numerous options available that go beyond the scope of the traditional group meeting. The biggest growth is in the area of technology through online computer support. If you’ve ever been interested in joining a caregiver support group, but find it difficult to personally attend a meeting, online groups may be the answer.

The Internet offers many opportunities for individuals to “meet” online, problem-solve, share information and experiences and ultimately receive support. Online groups offer several formats such as discussion forums, message boards, chat rooms, and email discussion groups (called “listservs”). Some Web sites offer groups that are staffed by trained professionals, while others are run by caregivers, family members or patients themselves. Online support groups can be accessed, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This is a plus for caregivers and the like who can’t find quiet time until the late hours of the night.

Generally, online participation is free and can be accessed through any computer system, although registration may be a prerequisite to joining an online group. Be sure to read each site's guidelines for participation and their privacy policies, learn how to enroll or un-enroll, and identify who sponsors the group.

Caregivers and others report that they prefer the flexibility, convenience, anonymity and value of connecting with and hearing from a large, diverse group of people online. They can find a community of support right at their fingertips from peers and professionals across the nation and even throughout the world.

Another invaluable feature of the computer age is the wealth of knowledge that can be accessed online. Useful resources, newsletters, connections to disease-specific sites, medical and research updates and self-care tips are just a few examples of additional wisdom available on the internet.

Attending a Group Together

Chronic conditions become family conditions and what affects one will in some way affect others in the family system. For this reason, many settings encourage family participation to gain information and support. Some support groups, such as those for Parkinson's disease, MS and cancer, especially encourage caregivers or "care partners" to attend meetings along with their loved one who is living with a disability or chronic illness. Learning together and receiving support together keeps people focused and helps to equalize the disease experience for all who are involved. This mutual encounter offers immeasurable benefits to both parties and creates a solidarity that can carry couples and families through the peaks and valleys of a health condition.

Caregiving is like a kaleidoscope that continually changes dimensions with each turn. Throughout this uncertain journey, receiving support from others may be the one constant factor that keeps you on track. Whether you attend a group alone or with your loved one or prefer to find support online, choosing a support group that feels right for you is the most important decision.

Search for support groups available online or try these suggested sites for Internet support:

- ◆ www.caregiver.com
- ◆ www.cancercare.org
- ◆ www.alz.org
- ◆ www.parkinson.org

Kristine Dwyer is the Caregiver Consultant and Group Facilitator for Carlton County Public Health, Cloquet, Minnesota

Visit <http://caregiver.com/regionalresources/index.htm> to find or list a caregiver support group in your area.

Copyright © caregiver.com, Inc. 1995 - 2010. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission from www.caregiver.com. Contact information: caregiver.com, 3350 Griffin Road, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. 33312