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## **Growing a Successful Support Group** By Anne Mosbergen

People join support groups for mutual aid and support. Like any group, support groups need some organizing and structure. As facilitator, it will be helpful before your first meeting to review your knowledge of how groups work. Your lifetime of experiences will be an asset in preparing for your leadership role.

To make sure your program meets the needs to the group, conduct a needs assessment of the group. With that information, develop goals and objectives; plan ahead; implement; and evaluate the outcome.

In support groups, it is better that leadership be a shared function, where members are looked upon as equals who have important contributions to add to the group. Each member can perform a leadership role to keep the group going. As facilitator, you will need to observe and determine which members enjoy the various leadership roles. Some may like greeting people, others may be comfortable and skilled in leading discussions, and yet others can summarize discussions. Others may just want to be involved in distributing literature or in meeting registration.

I recommend that facilitators provide a registration sheet for members to write in their names, addresses and phone numbers. Keep this information confidential. This registration helps facilitators contact members, when necessary. The information helps you to memorize names and develop closer relationships with members –this is important if you want to share leadership roles with members.

A facilitator encourages members to give opinions, take action and to look back at what they have accomplished. Here are some do's and don'ts for facilitators:

DO help guide the climate for the group—stay away from pitying and whining. Affirm members' self-management skills.

DO ensure a pleasant setting—with comfortable chairs, room temperature, etc.

Allow for adequate breaks during the meetings. It is important for members to stretch and take a break to prevent information overload.

Set the tone of the group where each individual is heard and treated with respect.

Actively listen to what members say and accept their feelings. For those who seem to be arguing or are —Yes, but... types, pick a positive self-management skill from their narrative, affirm it and move on to the next member.

Observe nonverbal communication (facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, head movements, hand gestures and postures) and pay attention to quiet members. Silence can

mean shyness, discomfort, inner conflict, disapproval, anger or may be a sign of passive acceptance. Establish a confidentiality rule—everything mentioned at meetings are not to be repeated elsewhere.

Use of self-disclosure to model openness (—I have had FM for 5 years... That sounds like what happened to me.) But don't dwell on yourself. Avoid —one-upmanship (—You think you've had problems, this is what I've been going through...)

Promote group problem-solving and consensus, draw on the group's wisdom to provide information.

Facilitators are not required to know all the answers. It's all right to say —I don't know—how do you think we can get this information?)

Promote group cohesiveness by linking group members and pointing out common interests and shared feelings among members.

Stimulate group discussion. Make sure everyone has a right to participate equally. When one member monopolizes, step in and stop it, diplomatically. (—Mary has had a chance to say how she feels, how do others feel?)

Involve members to work together to run the group. Ask for volunteers (or if you don't get any, discuss responsibilities with members whom you know will be good team leaders or will follow through on tasks.

Mix the group's activities and ensure that they are relevant to members' needs. Activities should be flexible and not repetitious. Members stay more involved if there is a feeling of friendship and cohesiveness in the group.

Make meetings lively and upbeat. Each meeting should have some aspects that are familiar as well as some that are new. You may need to balance lectures with discussions. The more members actively participate, the more they learn and are satisfied.

Offer a variety of meeting formats as they provide a fresh perspective to the meeting. So balance lectures with discussions, demonstrations, brainstorming, role-playing, panel presentations, etc.

Celebrate holidays and the group's founding day. Celebrate with a group potluck.

Thank members continually. Thank the presenters—do it verbally and with notes.

Remember that groups change over time, so program accordingly.

*(From 1997-2009, Anne Mosbergen was a facilitator of two fibromyalgia support groups in Los Angeles County. One met in Santa Monica and the other in Culver City. Anne was diagnosed with FM in 1995.)*