

Strategies for Support Group Leaders: How to Effectively Start & End Your Support Group Meetings

How you start and end your meetings can make a profound difference in the experience your members have and how they leave the meeting feeling and may determine if they choose to come back. In his book, “Effective Support Groups, How to Plan, Design, Facilitate, and Enjoy Them,” author James E. Miller outlines the following starting and ending strategies for support group leaders or group facilitators.

How does a facilitator practice “starting”?

While a facilitator may be responsible for beginning various parts of a meeting, their major “starting” functions relate to launching the first meeting of the group and then getting each subsequent session off the ground. Several thoughts apply to this task:

The meeting actually begins as soon as the first member enters the room. The cues participants initially receive will very much influence how they respond to this experience. Will the facilitator remain seated and occupied with reading something, or will they move around the room and greet newcomers? Will people be introduced to one another, or will they be left to do themselves? Traditionally, a good facilitator is also a good host or hostess.

The opening moments after the official welcome are a critical period. The stage is set by how the facilitator addresses the group and begins the task at hand. Is this person relaxed or nervous? Is the pace leisurely or hurried? Is the time ahead made to sound interesting? Does the environment feel safe? How does the facilitator regard the group members? These impressions will last a long time.

People who are joining a support group usually appreciate an early opportunity to experience “groupness,” through one that is not too forced or artificial. In a small group, that might mean everyone doing something together – perhaps introducing themselves in an innovative way around the circle. In a larger group, it might mean dividing into small circles of three to five people to begin fashioning that closeness.

Many groups utilize a start-up ritual as a way of uniting people and entering together a time which has been set apart for a special purpose. A poem or other short writing might be read aloud or recited. Some groups sing; some repeat a prayer; others join hands around the circle. Some facilitators are adept at leading centering exercises, guiding their group in quiet, non-threatening ways to relax their minds and bodies as a way of opening to the time before them. Another option is to let a different group member suggest and lead a start-up ritual each session.

When a group meets for the first time, it’s natural for members to feel awkward and jittery. Similar feelings can occur with any group, no matter how many times they’ve been meeting, if pain is present or fear dominated or sadness hangs heavy. At such times, it’s confirming and even claiming when their facilitator acknowledges the effort it takes for group members to do what they must do

each meeting time. People feel appreciated and esteemed when their determination and courage are validated.

What helps as much as anything is for the facilitator to have found a way to start himself or herself before being required to start others. Perhaps that can be done before arriving at the meeting, or by spending time alone in the room before anyone else arrives. Some facilitators have quiet music playing in the background until the official start of the meeting, knowing it helps create the desired atmosphere.

How does one practice “ending”?

The facilitator is responsible for making sure not just that meeting end on time but they end well.

That means as little as possible is left unfinished or unsaid. Participants ought to feel generally comfortable with what has happened and be ready to make the transition back to life outside the group.

One kind of ending involves individual sharing, which is usually more appropriate with smaller groups. In the order they wish or going around the circle, group members make a common response.

An option is to complete a sentence like, “what I will take with me from this session is...” or “The main lesson I learned today is...” or “What I most want to say to the group today is...”

Another kind of ending, which may be in addition to or instead of the first, involves doing something simultaneously. A song can be sung, or a poem or prayer spoken. Members might join hands as they sit, or stand for a group hug, arms around one another’s waist or shoulders. The best endings are often those that come from the suggestions of the members themselves. These ending then become a part of their story as a group.

It is important, whatever you decide to do, to be sensitive to people’s comfort levels - some are more open to physical touch than others.

The above is an excerpt from “Effective Support Groups, How to Plan, Design, Facilitate, and Enjoy Them,” by James M. Miller and published by Willowgreen Publishing. To learn more about James M. Miller or to purchase this or one of his books or video tapes please visit his website www.willowgreen.com.

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