Using a Support Group

Almost everyone has concerns that are hard to talk about with family or friends. A support group can introduce you to others who understand what you’re going through.

Most support groups focus on a specific topic, such as living with cancer or diabetes, overcoming alcoholism or substance abuse, or caring for a parent who has Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease. It may take a little research, but you can almost always find a support group to help you with your concern.

What are support groups?

Support groups are discussion groups that let people share ideas on a topic that’s important to all the members. They’re usually small enough that everyone has a chance to join the conversation.

Many support groups meet regularly in places such as hospitals, Ys, houses of worship, community centers, or private homes. Most cost nothing to attend or require only a small donation (such as $1 to $3) to cover the cost of expenses. Many online support groups are available as well.

Some groups have a leader, such as a therapist or other counselor, who makes sure everybody has a chance to speak. Other groups have no leader or let members take turns leading. Whether or not they have a leader, support groups are different from “group therapy,” which is sometimes part of an ongoing counseling program and is always led by a mental health professional. Support groups usually cost much less than group therapy and don’t require members to make a commitment to attend a certain number of meetings. You can attend as infrequently or as often as you like.

Types of support groups

You can find a support group that deals with almost any health or emotional concern, including some rare or unusual diseases or conditions. Depending on your
needs, you may want to join a support group for people who are looking for help with concerns similar to yours. There are groups for a wide variety of concerns, including:

- losing weight
- quitting smoking
- getting out of debt
- overcoming alcohol or substance abuse
- living with a person addicted to drugs or alcohol
- living with a medical condition such as cancer, stroke, or HIV
- caring for an older adult who has Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease
- helping a child or teenager with a disability, an eating disorder, or special needs
- coping with the loss of a parent, spouse, or other close relative
- dealing with separation or divorce
- moving forward after losing a job
- single parenting
- living with an emotional concern such as depression, phobias, low self-esteem, or post-traumatic stress disorder
- gambling

Support groups can follow any of several different models, which include:

**Informal discussion groups.** Many support groups are informal discussion groups that meet in private homes or elsewhere and don’t have a strict format for meetings. Some have a set discussion topic for each meeting, and others allow people to bring up a variety of subjects. Often the leaders are peer volunteers, and if there is a fee, it is usually very small.

**Institutional groups.** Some support groups are organized by institutions, such as hospitals, mental health associations, and national organizations for people with specific health or emotional concerns. These groups may involve both group discussions and talks by experts, such as doctors or therapists.

**Twelve-step programs.** Twelve-step programs follow or adapt the format used by Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and similar programs, which encourage people to follow a 12-step program for recovery from an addiction.
These groups require members to maintain strict confidentiality about what people say at meetings and who attends. They do not have a professional leader, but are run by peer volunteers who have faced the same issues as the group members.

**Online support groups.** Online support groups may have “real time” discussions in chat rooms or may allow people to post questions or concerns on a message board that members can respond to at their convenience. These groups can be helpful if you have a busy schedule or a medical condition that would make it hard for you to attend face-to-face meetings. Make sure you join a group with a password-protected site or page, and choose a username that won’t reveal your identity.

**Finding a support group**

Support groups aren’t always called “support groups.” They may be known as discussion or self-help groups or may go by a different name altogether. This means that when you hope to find a group, it’s a good idea to tell people exactly what you’re looking for—for example, a group for breast or prostate cancer survivors or for parents of children with autism. Here are some ways to get started:

**Check your local newspaper or its website.** Support groups may list their meetings in the calendar of events, especially in smaller weekly or community newspapers.

**Talk with a friend or co-worker who shares your concern.** A friend or co-worker who shares your concern may know of groups even if they don’t attend meetings. For example, someone whose mother has Alzheimer’s disease may know about a group for people who are caring for parents with that disease.

**Get in touch with national organizations that focus on your concern.** Many of these have local chapters that include support groups. National groups may also have online discussion groups.

**Ask a therapist, social worker, or clergy member for ideas.** If you’re seeing a counselor regularly, your therapist may be able to refer you to a group. If not, you might call the social work department at a hospital. Many groups meet at houses of...
worship, so clergy members can often give you other ideas.

**Visit the Inspire website.** Inspire has partnered with the mental health clearinghouse Mental Health America to provide password-protected online support groups for a vast array of concerns. And you don’t have to be a U.S. citizen to join.

**Search online.** Search for “support group” and your concern (such as, “asthma,” “divorce,” “debts,” “infertility,” or “eating disorders”). Or, look for a national organization that deals with your concern and see if it has links to support groups. You’ll find a helpful A-to-Z list of links to groups for many types of concerns if you search MedlinePlus for “local and national support groups.” Before joining any online group, check to see if it’s run by a for-profit or nonprofit group and if group leaders’ credentials are posted.

**If you can’t find a support group in your area, consider starting one.** Find a friend who is dealing with the same issue, and then network with neighbors and friends. You could place an ad or announcement online or in the local paper or put up notices on bulletin boards in your community. Talk with local schools, community centers, and houses of worship to arrange a meeting place.

**What to expect from a support group**

Depending on their size and purpose, support groups can offer anything from emotional support to practical tips on filling out insurance forms or finding an assisted-living facility for an aging parent. They also give you a chance to help other people by sharing what you’ve learned with them.

While support groups can offer help for people coping with medical, emotional, and other issues, remember that they are not a substitute for the care from a physician or mental health professional. If you decide to join a support group, tell your doctor or counselor.

**Try more than one support group.** Support groups can vary so widely that you may need to visit more than one to find the right group for you.
Find out the “ground rules.” Some groups have written rules about things like confidentiality or taking turns speaking. If these don’t exist, ask if the group has any informal policies or procedures that people usually follow.

Go to several meetings before you decide whether to attend regularly. Try different programs and meet a variety of members. You may have gone to a meeting that wasn’t typical of the group.

Ask to be put on a mailing list. Many groups have email newsletters that include more than just notices of meetings. If you can’t attend every meeting, you might pick up helpful information from these.

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Finally, keep in mind that support groups exist to help people to learn from each other. They work best if everybody contributes. Speak up if you’ve learned something about dealing with your concern that’s helped you a lot. One of the best things about a support group is that even if you’re going through a tough time, you can still make a big difference in the lives of other people.

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