

## What is Self Help/Mutual Support?

Self Help/Mutual Support is a process of sharing common experiences, situations or problems. Self help is participatory and involves getting help, giving help, and learning to help yourself as well as sharing knowledge and experience.

There is no charge to participate in most peer-led support groups, although some groups may ask for a nominal donation to cover expenses, but it is never required.

Self help groups continue on an ongoing basis, are voluntary in nature rather than mandatory, and are open to new members. Self help activities are run by and for the participants. The primary purpose of self help is to provide emotional support, practical support and information exchange.

## Characteristics of a self-help/mutual aid support group Compared to A professionally-led or "hybrid" group.

	Self-Help/ Mutual Aid	← 1 2 3 4 5 →	Professionally- led
<b>Knowledge emphasized</b>	personal experience		training/education
<b>Type of Leader(s)</b>	"one of us"		"outsider"
<b>Focus of meetings</b>	mutual support		guidance
<b>Structure</b>	informal		formal
<b>Decision Making</b>	everyone		led by facilitator
<b>Resources Used</b>	volunteer and "in-kind"		paid staff, fees or funding
<b>Duration</b>	ongoing		time-limited
<b>Evaluation</b>	decided by members		often required by funder

## What about quality of care?

Just like there are good professionals and bad professionals, there are good self-help groups and bad self-help groups. The level of care which a self-help/mutual aid group provides its members is based on qualities such as shared leadership, open communications, respect, clear boundaries and confidentiality.

It is also important to recognize that each group is unique and a good group for one individual may not be right for another.

## Evaluating a group

Is this working for me? Once you have visited or joined a group you may want to evaluate your experience. Every group and every individual is unique. No group will offer you everything, but it is worthwhile to consider what you like best, and what you would like to change in a group (this evaluation can be an individual and/or a group process). Depending on your conclusions, you might work to make improvements within the group, or look for support elsewhere.

Components of a good group:

I feel safe to open up and talk.

I feel supported.

I learn, give, and receive.

I make friends.

I can be a leader too.

I can leave the group or rejoin when I want to.

I feel safe to address feelings of tension or conflict when they arise.

There is discussion of conflict (when it arises).

There is change and laughter.

Members graduate and celebrate.

Membership goes up and down.

It feels right for me.

Source <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/shfacts.pdf>

Information on confidentiality <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/factsheetonconfidentiality.pdf>

## Comfort Agreements or components of one are often used in peer support groups

Some usual parts of a “Comfort Agreement” might include:

- **Confidentiality** – What is said in the room stays in the room
- Be gentle and supportive with each other
- **Share the air** and be mindful of how much you’re sharing/speaking during meetings (Allow others to speak who are less extroverted)
- We **do not discuss other group members** when they are not present (even out of concern). This guideline ensures privacy of group members and avoids gossiping.
- **Respect diversity** (this includes ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual preference/identity and differences in ability)
- Respect differences of opinion
- Be Non-judgmental and keep an open mind
- Be gentle if offering advice, and offer only if asked – Say something similar to “When I experienced something similar to your experience I tried this\_\_\_\_\_. Do you think that might help?”
- **Own your Experiences** “Use I language” Remember that while we share this disorder, each one of us has dealt with it differently and have used different coping skills and management styles to deal with this issue
- **Avoid side talk** and be respectful when others are speaking
- **Participation is voluntary** and you should never feel obligated to share
- If you are late, please sit down quietly and join the current conversation when it is appropriate
- Avoid graphic details about self-harm or other destructive behaviors that may trigger yourself or others