



How to Solve Problems in Your Group

From time to time your group may experience challenges that require a response. The following are examples of problems that may be experienced by a group with suggestions on how to respond.

1. BURNOUT

Burnout occurs when a person takes on more work than they can handle. Frequently when people start a group they want to do everything they can to improve their situation. While there may be a clear need for a group it is important to be mindful of all your commitments and not to over-extend yourself. If burnout occurs the group may lose a key contributor.

2. BE AWARE OF BOUNDARIES

It is important to establish the boundaries of your group. For example, Support Groups should not confuse their role with counselling or therapy. While the group may prove to be therapeutic to members, it should not exist to counsel or provide therapy. If your group deals with a sensitive issue it is important to have a list of appropriate professionals for referral. If you are unsure about an issue or situation it is best to contact your support resources.

3. SHARE THE LOAD

There will be members who want to be given a role and to be included in the group's development. It is important to recognise their need for involvement, and to acknowledge their work so that they feel they are valued contributors. Encourage participation from all members, recognising and utilising an individual's skills and abilities. Delegation of responsibilities is also essential to avoid burnout.

4. CONFLICT

Anticipating conflict before it occurs helps immensely. By taking things slowly and remembering to have fun, the group can work to avoid the negative outcomes of conflict. There are several factors specific to Support Groups that might contribute to conflict situations.

Reasons for Conflict

Lack of Communication

Lack of communication is often the result of misunderstandings about the purpose of the group, what it hopes to achieve and the way it should work. To avoid these kinds of misunderstandings the group needs to have clearly identified aims and goals. It is important that these aims and goals are regularly reviewed by members and are made available to any new or potential members.

Communication can be improved by allowing group members time to get to know each other through socialising on a more informal basis. Members may find conversation flows more freely over a cup of coffee or a shared meal, providing an opportunity for more honest and direct communication. Groups may also benefit from using a 'Policy Book', which is a written record of all group agreements on 'How To Do Things'.

Power Struggles

When a group is functioning well, many members in the group are involved and active, taking equal responsibility for sharing the work load. Sometimes the original members of the group may find it difficult to 'let go' of these responsibilities, even though they may want to do so. It is important to recognise that the person who carries the bulk of the work can also hold a lot of the power within the group.

To avoid these kinds of power struggles, it is important to acknowledge the work of the original group members while discussing the distribution of roles and tasks amongst other members. This process is not only important in the early stages of the group's formation, but also at regular intervals throughout group's life. Set aside time to discuss the work and time involved and regularly rotate any heavier tasks.

It is important to remember that conflict is sometimes unavoidable but when handled carefully it can be used as an opportunity for group members to grow in mutual respect, trust and understanding. Conflict can also provide an opportunity for open communication and creative thinking. When conflict does occur there are a number of steps that the group can take in order to survive it and move on to healthier dynamics and happier members.

Working Through Conflict

Acknowledge and Define the Conflict

Recognising and acknowledging that a problem exists is the first step in resolving it. One suggestion is to conduct a 'Round Robin' to find out if the members of the group recognise that there is a conflict and how they define it.

Brainstorm Ideas for Solutions

A brainstorm is the process of writing down everyone's suggestions as to how to solve the problem on a whiteboard or butchers' paper. A brainstorm can be allocated a time-frame of approximately ten minutes. The scribe should write the ideas down as they are worded without comments from other members. Sometimes they may seem silly or crazy, but just expressing them can lead to a more creative outcome than was originally anticipated.

Refine the Solutions

When you have finished brainstorming, you can begin to discuss the ideas. Cross off any ideas with which the members of the group don't agree. It is important that those people who are most strongly affected by the conflict agree with the solution reached.

Choose the Best Solution

The best solution is the one that meets the needs of the group and brings a sense of calmness to the group and its members.

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