Facilitating the Support Group
Many skills go into effectively facilitating a support group meeting. Actual facilitation begins before the meeting starts and ends after the meeting is over. During the meeting itself, there are specific techniques successful facilitators use in listening and probing. Suggested ideas in this section have proven to be helpful in running and facilitating the support group.

Before the Meeting

- Establish an atmosphere and comfortable environment for participants by: Arranging the seating so everyone is comfortable. Seating arranged in an oval, circle or rectangle is most effective.
- Subduing the lighting if possible. If the room has a rheostat, turn it down. If not, see if some of the lights can be turned off or removed.
- Have an agenda or list of activities posted so people know what to expect.
- Greeting each participant. A support group staff member should warmly greet each participant with a "hello" at the door and show them where the seating and refreshments are.
- Know who is coming. If possible, fill out a profile card on each participant upon first contact. By reviewing these cards before each meeting, you will know the story of each person and the particular strengths and needs they have. Respect privacy and confidentiality, let people know they can reveal information later when they are comfortable and know more about the group.
- Try to personally greet as many attendees as possible before the meeting to put a face with the name so you can call on them by name during the meeting.
- Introduce members to each other, pointing out commonalities they might have such as the same profession, interests, children the same age, etc. You may have this information from the profile card.
- If possible, seat new members next to or close to the support group staff person they spoke with on the phone. It will make them more comfortable being close to someone familiar.
- Personally set the tone of the group. For many participants the persona of the facilitator at the first meeting will set the tone of the meeting. If the facilitator is quiet, with a sad countenance, the group may take on those
characteristics. If the facilitator is open, warm, humorous, the group will unconsciously adapt that behavior.

- Use male and female co-facilitators when possible so both sexes have role models.

**During the Meeting**

- Begin with announcements, ground rules and meeting agenda. Use written notes to avoid omissions and rambling.
- Lead the group to a more emotional or intellectual level by reading a short poem, letter, or quote you think is meaningful and appropriate.
- Introduce the topic of the night and ask everyone to tell their story and their thoughts or feelings on the topic.
- If possible, start with a participant who has been to the group before.
- Focus on each person as they talk.
- Encourage active participation by all members in the group.
- If others ask questions or jump in, you will need to bring the group back to the next person.
- If several members change the subject and most seem interested in the new direction, you may be flexible and go along. If most members are not interested in the new subject, then restate the topic with the next person.
- If someone starts crying, let them go. Usually they will stop themselves and it gives the group the message that tears are okay. If they can't stop crying or ask you to go on, do so, but try to bring them back in at a later time.
- If a participant should break and suddenly leave the room, someone on the Support Staff should follow and comfort them.
- Take a break about half way through the meeting, or when people seem fidgety.
- If someone is talking too long, try to find a good place to step in and summarize what they are saying and go back to the next person or the person who was talking. This is where knowing names is helpful.
- If the atmosphere becomes oppressive, try to lighten it up with humor. A good group is able to laugh or cry, a good group ebbs and flows.
- A good facilitator will say very little and model good listening to the group.
- Leave on an up beat note.
- Restate your group’s policy about confidentiality.

**After the Meeting**

- End the meeting when everyone has a chance to speak and the formal discussion seems to be over.
• Allow everyone to talk informally for a few minutes. If it goes on too long, inform them that the room has to be locked up.
• Encourage the exchange of phone numbers. Suggest that some participants may want to continue their discussion at a nearby coffee shop. Networking and the establishment of an intra-group support system is extremely important.
• Try to thank everyone individually for coming.
• After everyone has left, have a "debriefing" meeting with the support group staff, or set a time for the meeting within the next few days.

Co-facilitating
Co-facilitating can be tricky. Learning to work together in harmony is an art -- it takes time and hard work.

Here are some suggestions.

• Male and female co-leaders are ideal for member interaction and attracting new members.
• One facilitator is designated the "main facilitator" and does most of the verbal facilitating. The other facilitator monitors the group dynamics and helps bring someone 'in' that the main facilitator may have missed.
• The main facilitator can change from meeting to meeting.
• Make sure that, combined, you are saying very little.
• Never contradict or embellish your co-facilitator's work or interaction with a member.
• Always talk after the meeting about what happened and each other's feelings.

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