Parent to Parent of PA

Starting/Running Support Groups

Determining the Format, Frequency and Location
Your staff will need to decide what type of format to use, how often to hold meetings and where to hold them. There are advantages and disadvantages to the two most common formats.

Formats

Time Limited Groups - Meet within a set timeframe. (6 weeks, 12 weeks, etc.), have a definite curriculum, and are closed to new members after the initial meeting.

Advantages

- Therapeutic value because of time constraints.
- Sense of urgency and commitment about group tasks.
- Structure is comforting to members.
- Trust is established quickly because members do not change.
- Easier to staff up and find professional volunteers.
- Almost always and educational component to each meeting.
- Less chance of burnout for facilitators.
- Once program is instituted can be easily repeated with little or no change.
- Specific goals can be established.
- Can be springboard to ongoing support group.

Disadvantages

- First meeting is very difficult and high anxiety is experienced by facilitators and members.
- Need extra volunteer to answer phone the week prior to the first meeting.
- Take more organizational time.
- Need well defined goals and detailed planning.
- Require more delicate timing or announcements and press releases.
- Usually require more printed materials and are more costly.
- Information and delivery can become stale.
- Number of attendees is uncertain unless pre-registration is required.
- Require a six to twelve week commitment from facilitators/volunteers.
- Have no "veteran" members as role models and contacts for new members.
- May give too much information in too little time for some members to process.
**Ongoing Groups** - Meet regularly throughout the year, have no set curriculum, and accept new members at any time.

**Advantages**

- Takes less organizational time per meeting.
- Are more flexible in meeting the needs of individual members.
- Usually have "core members" who welcome new members and serve as role models.
- Can alternate between just support and educational/support meetings.
- Members have more say about topics and speakers.
- Members are encouraged in taking an active role in welcoming new members.
- Less threatening to new members because there are no expectations from members or group activities in which to participate.

**Disadvantages**

- Less commitment from members.
- Less urgency in making progress.
- Less structured, more chaotic.
- Difficult to establish goals.
- Difficult to judge progress of members.
- Risk burnout of facilitators, especially if phone calls are a part of the job.
- More difficult to find facilitators.
- Continual searching for good speakers and relevant topics.

**Frequency**

**Time Limited Groups**

- Most are scheduled periodically in six twelve week sessions.
- The more consistent the schedule the better because: It will be easier attracting participants.
- You are likely to be more prepared and organized.
- Referral agencies will become familiar with and feel good about referring people to you.
- Those you serve will be able to plan and work it into their schedules.
- Day and night times should be made available if possible so that those that work at night, can't afford babysitters or don't drive at night are not penalized.
- Also, some thought might be given to weekend groups and few available.

**Ongoing Groups**

- Usual meet weekly, biweekly and monthly
- It is important to take into account your population and the time other similar groups meet.
- Be aware of all similar groups in the community. If you know of two other similar meetings that meet on the first Wednesday and the Third Thursday then you might want to consider the second Tuesday, the first Monday or a weekend time.
- Support should never compete; instead, they should work together to provided the most comprehensive array of times and locations possible.

**Location**

- Again, consider your population and location of groups.
- It is important for continuity and community, referral that the place you choose be consistent for as long as possible. Try to get long term commitment from the facility.
- Try to find a room with comfortable movable seating, warm (not bright) lightning, enough space to allow for refreshments and reading material, a podium and room for, if not built in, blackboard and screen.
- Large, time-limited groups will need space to setup multiple tables.
- Try to find a place with low traffic.
- Some of the places you might consider are Churches, Hospitals, Colleges, Libraries, Social Service Organizations Conference Rooms, City Recreation Centers, Conference Rooms of Professional Buildings, Social Workers, Psychiatrist, or Psychologists offices.
- Always allow time for approval by a board or other governing entity. Sometimes such an approval can take several months, but can be worth the wait.
- Look for sites that accessible to people with disabilities (ex: ramps, handrails, barrier free)
- Consider room for childcare.

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