Parent to Parent of PA
Starting/Running Support Groups

Potential Problems
Some problems which may occur with any support group are out of your control. Others relate to the group and/or individual participant and can be handled or diverted if caught in time. Being aware of the following potential problem may reduce the likelihood of their occurrence.

Too Few People -- Some support groups have a more difficult time finding members than others. If you have too few people, those who attend may feel obligated to talk even if they are reluctant. A meeting can be a struggle. You may want to explain that in this circumstance each member will be given more time to share stories and interact with each other.

Too Many People -- When more people show up than expected it can be an indication of the group's effectiveness, but it can cause problems. There could be too little time allotted to each member resulting in a rushed, 'cramped' meeting, particularly if a speaker is planned. If this happens, split the group into two with a mix of old and new members. Have the co-facilitator or another staff member take over the second group, or you may ask two experienced members to facilitate both groups while you move between them.

The Dominating Member -- This is the member who takes too much time, asks too many questions, or dominates the topics under discussion. You can reduce the likelihood of this happening by reviewing the ground rules before each meeting, and setting a clear agenda. If you know the person's background, you can divert the person by saying a line like... "Bob, your anger at the authorities is normal... Jim, didn't you have a similar experience?..." and then turn to Jim.

The Imposing Member -- The Imposer feels that his or her coping skills, religious outlook, or general solutions are absolutely correct. Comments like "Here’s how to handle that", "This is what you need to do now", or "If you have faith..." will tip you off. You can usually prevent 'imposing' by catching the first occurrence and saying something like: "Well Jane, it sounds like you found something that works for you. Now, what are some things that worked for the rest of you?"
**The Inadequate Member** -- Often a new member, who after listening to everyone else's story, feels that their experience is negligible. This can result in a reluctance to tell self-perceived insignificant stories at future meetings. The person may even drop out of the group. Consequently, it is very important from the first phone call, to ensure that the stories and pain or joy of each member is unique and valid.

**The Dependent Group** -- This group is characterized by low participation and energy. The members just sit there. No one offers to begin, disclose, share ideas or participate in topic discussion, yet they come to the meetings. In other words, the members are dependent on the facilitator or another group member for direction. In this type of group, a "dominating member" is a hero. This is a real problem and if not fixed, the group can develop into a Social Group instead. To overcome this, you must instill a sense of ownership in each member. Begin by delegating certain tasks that the staff takes care of, such as bringing refreshments, managing the library, setting up the room. Other assignments to give members are compiling book lists, bringing in magazine or newspaper articles, or doing book and movie reviews. This type of group of a real text for the facilitator.

**The Social Group** -- This can develop when, after many meetings, no new members appear and everyone feels comfortable with each other. The meetings tend to start later and later because everyone is visiting, and 10 minute breaks stretch to 20. Stories are hurried through. Topic discussions turn into bull sessions. Should this occur, you need to look closely at the progress of the participants; perhaps, some no longer need to be there. This is a particularly difficult and dangerous problem, as it suggests the group, including the facilitator, has lost its effectiveness as a self-help group. When a new member does attend, there is a real possibility that he or she will feel excluded from the group and not come back. Should this happen, you must reestablish control of the group. At the next meeting, cut the story telling period and schedule a speaker who will dominate the evening. Not who objects and who doesn't. It is time to shake up the group.

**Note:**
It is important to distinguish between the social and 'stuck' member. A member who is truly stuck may need a referral. A social member may need to be retired from active group participation by perhaps asking them to join the staff or suggesting the formation of an alumni group. There are some members of groups that attend meetings for 7-10 years. This news can have a devastating effect on a new member joining to learn coping skills. It is very important to identify this type of group and seriously reassess the group's purpose and progress.
This information may be used without compensation so long as the copy is not used for profit or as training materials in a profit making activity such as workshops, lectures, and seminars, and so long as this paragraph is retained in its entirety. Information developed by TLC Group, Dallas Texas and adapted for parent group use by Parent to Parent of PA.