

# ADAA

HELP YOURSELF:

## A Guide to Organizing a Self-Help Group

Revised by Rita Clark  
ADAA National Consumer Chair  
March 11, 2001

# Now That You've Decided To Go Ahead....

## **ASSESS RESOURCES CAREFULLY**

Assessment of your situation will shape the directions and scope of your group.

1. What kind of area do you live in?  
Suburban/urban
2. Are there other groups in the area?
3. Is treatment available?

## **SOME KEY PRINCIPLES**

Having defined the scope and purpose of your potential self-help group, as well as your role in it, two essential principles should be kept in mind as you develop your plan of action:

- Always try to recruit others to help you
- Plan to keep it simple

## **ALWAYS TRY TO RECRUIT OTHERS TO HELP YOU**

This will make a big difference in terms of sharing the burden of the initial publicity work, finding a place to meet, etc.) Equally important, many people – not just phobics – feel more comfortable if there is someone else with whom to share the anticipatory anxiety of sponsoring an initial meeting or project that may or may not succeed. If feeling trapped in meetings is a phobia that affects you, work hard in advance to find a co-chairperson to help lead the meeting. This gives you an out and presents an opportunity for shared leadership.

If you do not know any other people with anxiety disorders, you may be able to get help in the following ways.

1. Publicize your interest in your local paper, either in the health announcements or under community affairs.
2. Contact the public information department of your local health department, mental health department, or Mental Health Association. Public agencies can be very helpful; don't overlook them!

3. Professionals can be a good source for referrals. Be sure they understand that your self-help group is not going to attempt to provide or supplant professional therapy.
4. If possible, have a starting committee of people with anxiety disorders and perhaps some professionals (if you wish) too sponsor your initial meeting. If this isn't feasible, because you are in a very rural area, for example, then go it alone and see who shows up. Plenty of groups have been started this way. You are not alone!

### **PLAN TO KEEP IT SIMPLE**

"Keep it simple" is a cornerstone of the world's most successful self-help organizations, like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Keeping this rule in mind will save you many hours of work and debate, enabling you to focus the group's energies where they belong: on the recovery efforts of each member.

While it is tempting at the outset to envision an organization starting off with lots of structure, prestigious board members, and all kinds of services, these activities distract from the real work at hand - one-on-one support - and could require funds and energies far beyond what are likely to be available to your group.

# Self-Help Is a Process

“What should happen in a group meeting?”

“How will I know what to do each week?”

“What if nobody talks?”

“What should our purpose be?”

“How do I know if I’m doing the right thing?”

These are the questions we hear most often from people planning to start an anxiety self-help group. Understandably, they are nervous about jumping into a project that has no firm ground rules. The answers to the above questions lays in understanding the process of mutual aid self-help. Once you understand a few key concepts, you’ll know what needs to happen in your meetings. It is up to your collective imagination, dedication, and energy to do the rest.

In establishing an anxiety self-help support group, your goal is to enable members to participate in the process of mutual aid. That is, each member lends support to every other member who is struggling toward recovery. The way this process of mutual aid is carried out will determine whether your group succeeds in helping others to recover.

These key concepts are at the heart of the mutual aid self-help process:

- **Share leadership**
- **Set goals**
- **Deal only with agoraphobia, panic disorder problems**
- **Stay neutral on treatment issues**
- **Focus on the process of mutual aid, not personalities**

## **SHARED LEADERSHIP**

Each member of the group is responsible for contributing toward the recovery efforts of other members of the group as well as working toward his or her own recovery. In that sense, all members are empowered as leaders, although one person may act as the facilitator.

## **SET GOALS**

Goal setting is an essential part of recovery and enables members to focus on steps toward recovery rather than uncomfortable symptoms.

Research studies have demonstrated that goal setting is an important tool in the recovery process. It is the foundation of an effective self-help group for four reasons:

1. It gives members something specific to do to help themselves toward recovery.
2. Progress toward recovery can be measured in terms of goals achieved, however modest they might be.
3. It engages the member in the most effective form of personal treatment: confronting situations that elicit the feelings of panic.
4. Most important for the group, it provides an activity for the group that can be repeated week after week without becoming repetitious or boring because, while the process is always the same (members report to the group about the goals they've reached and setting new ones), the stories and circumstances are always changing as new goals are identified and tackled.

This process is essential to keeping the group going because it provides a topic for each week and presents the opportunity for members to give mutual aid. The member shares his struggle with other members (thus asking for support) and they provide support by making suggestions about how to achieve the next goal. Sometimes sympathy and encouragement are needed when a member's efforts for the week produce disappointing results.

Groups that do not integrate goal sharing into their group process will quickly tire of dreaming up new topics for discussion every week. In addition, members will become frustrated by their lack of progress despite attendance at the meeting.

## **DEAL ONLY WITH ANXIETY DISORDER PROBLEMS**

In the group setting, deal only with members' anxiety problems, regardless of what else is going on in their lives.

## **STAY NEUTRAL ON TREATMENT ISSUES**

The more flexible and open the group is toward various treatment approaches, the better. Neutrality is essential on issues such as medications, use of therapist, and other aspects of treatment.

If a group becomes dogmatic about treatment issues, it runs the risk of alienating members who are following a course of treatment that differs from the one endorsed by the group. Furthermore, heated debate over which approach is the best is likely to lead to divisiveness in the group and destroy the sense of unity and mutual aid. Stick with an approach that emphasized practicing, avoid miracle cures, and focus on supporting members' goal setting, regardless of differences in treatments.

## **FOCUS ON THE PROCESS OF MUTUAL AID NOT PERSONALITIES**

Personality clashes are sometimes unavoidable when groups meet. These may be power struggles, disagreements, or just tension where two members simply do not like each other. However, the effective group will direct attention away from these issues, acknowledge that all members deserve the support of the group (so long as they don't disrupt the group) and focus on the positive contributions they can make toward the mutual aid process.

***The next step is to launch your group and put these principles into action!***

# LAUNCHING YOUR GROUP

When possible, your first meeting should begin as an event, presenting a speaker of interest to people with anxieties and its treatment. It will attract more people than an initial self-help meeting because it is open and more comfortable with those who have trouble attending meetings. It requires no commitment to attend the event; and there is a certain sense of anonymity for the social phobic person who is not yet comfortable with jumping into a self-help group right away.

## HOW TO KEEP A GROUP GOING

First remember that groups wax and wane; successful groups have lasted from nine months to five or more years. The life span of the group is going to depend on many variables. Some variables, you can control (such as the amount of outreach you do, how you work with the media, how conscientious you are in encouraging new members and new leaders. Some variables, you cannot control (such as the actual need in your area for this kind of a self-help group, the emotional readiness of your members to pitch in to keep the group active or unforeseen events occurring in the lives of the members).

Don't set yourself up for a sense of failure by determining in advance that the group will be a flop if a certain number of people do not show up for every meeting, or if the group doesn't remain active for more than a year. Commitment is very difficult for some members.

### Important Tips

1. Keep bringing in new members
2. New leadership is essential
3. Intersperse scheduled meetings with special activities
4. Have Guest Speakers

Self-Help Group Web-Listing Application Form

Group Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Leader: First: \_\_\_\_\_ Last: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting Address: Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Can this meeting address and phone number be given out to the public? Yes No

Mailing Address: Attn: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Is there a fee for the group meeting? Yes No Fee amount\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation \_\_\_\_\_

How long has your group been in existence? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is the group open to? \_\_\_\_\_

How often does your group meet? \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Is the group a local chapter of a national or statewide organization? Yes No

If yes, please name to organization \_\_\_\_\_

How many of your participants are current members of ADAA? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of your participants are aware of the existence of ADAA? \_\_\_\_\_

Would any like to become member of ADAA? Yes No

Does your group utilize ADAA's information materials? Yes No

If yes, which Materials (s)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please mail Completed form to address above, or fax to (240) 485-1035