

# New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

---

375 E. McFarlan St., Dover, NJ 07801 \* 1-800-367-6274 or 973-989-1122 \* [www.selfhelpgroups.org](http://www.selfhelpgroups.org)

## PROMOTING WELLNESS & RECOVERY THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS

*Barbara J. White*

### WHAT IS RECOVERY?

Recovery is a journey, not a destination. According to William Anthony, Director of Boston Center for Psychiatric Rehab, recovery is “a deeply personal, unique process of changing one’s attitudes, feelings, goals, skills and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one’s life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.” Recovery is not the same as getting better. People are not necessarily recovering from their illness, but they are taking back control of their lives whether or not their problems can be eliminated. There are no rules or road maps for this trek...everyone’s journey of recovery is unique. It is an individual path that starts with the notion “It’s time to get on with my life!”

### WHAT PEOPLE NEED TO HELP THEM IN RECOVERY

Even though every person’s road to recovery is different, there are a few basic needs shared by all who impart on this journey. They include:

- **Hope** - Hope is essential for recovery. Hope “springs from a sense of the possible.” (Adams & Partee, 1998). Without hope, recovery can seem out of reach. Unfortunately, many persons who have gone through the mental health system have been left without hope—being repeatedly told that they would never be able to lead normal, meaningful lives. But hope IS a reality. Hope involves having goals along with the motivation and a plan to achieve them.
- **Social Support** – Recovery needs a supportive environment in which to thrive. People need others who have faith in their abilities, who understand and provide encouragement, and who will empathically listen to them. They need supporters who believe in them and will support them in their quest to recover.
- **Empowerment** – Persons in recovery are recovering from a loss of self, a loss of power, a loss of meaning, and a loss of hope. They need to regain a sense of self-management and self-direction. People need a sense of self and a sense of meaning in their lives. They need to be the ones making the decisions for their futures, their treatments, their goals and dreams for they are experts on themselves. To be the master of your life is to be truly empowered!
- **Education** – Persons in recovery need to educate themselves about their illness, their diagnosis, triggers, available treatments, medications, community resources, and anything else that affects their well-being. This allows them to be not just active, or reactive, but a proactive participant in the management of their illness and their lives. The better a person understands what they are dealing with, the better they can help manage their own symptoms, build courage and determination, and stay on the road to recovery.

Once committed to the idea of wellness and recovery, what better way to start than to join a self-help support group!

### HOW SELF-HELP GROUPS PROMOTE RECOVERY

Self-help groups give members and opportunity to discuss their experiences and to share their thoughts on their lives, their feelings, and recovery. These discussions may be focused on the process by which people can recover from, and learn to live with, their difficulties.

- **Hope through Positive Role Models** – Imagine just receiving a diagnosis that has left you feeling alone, scared, unsure of the future, or of just getting out of the hospital feeling as though you are a failure with no hope of ever recovering your life. You walk into a support group and meet a member who has a similar diagnosis as you who is running the meeting, looking very confident, and “put together.” What a beacon of hope that member is for you! The truth is, every group member can be a role model. “The gift that people with disabilities can give each other...hope, strength and experiences as lived through the recovery process...a person does not have to be fully recovered to serve as a role model. Very often a person who is only a few ‘steps’ ahead of another person can be more effective than one whose achievements seem overly impressive and distanced.” (Patricia Deegan, PhD 1988, Dir. Training and Education at The Nat’l Empowerment Center). “The ones that are behind on the recovery journey may serve as a useful reference point helping the person recognize their achievements while the ones ahead can act as an inspiration.” (Pettite & Tiolo 1999)
- **Social Support and a Sense of Community:** For many, attending a support group brings an instant sense of community and connection; knowing that “you are not alone.” Many people feel isolated and alone after being diagnosed with a mental illness. Being able to talk about how having a diagnosis has affected their life among others who truly understand can increase a sense of belonging, purpose and self-worth—all of which promotes positive mental health. Listening to others tell their stories (especially the success stories) can help others to start to feel hope for the future because others have experienced, and overcome, adversity. They also learn that their own experiences are seen as normal. It is very powerful indeed to be able to share one’s story in an atmosphere of trust and understanding without the fear of being judged or ridiculed. Members can experience the feeling of acceptance and understanding, often for the first time, by people who truly understand because, they too, “have been there.”

For many, an important part of mental health recovery is sharing experiences and coping strategies with others who have been there. Researchers Young & Ensign, after interviewing persons who had experienced serious mental health problems, remarked upon “the tendency of people to speak primarily about their relationships with other people with psychiatric disabilities when discussing significant relationships in their lives. Although relationships with family members were mentioned by several participants, the majority reported that it was their relationships with other people with psychiatric disabilities that were the most meaningful and supportive.” (1999)

- **Empowerment** – Support groups are empowering on so many levels and in so many ways. “Helper’s therapy” occurs naturally in self-help groups. Members help other members by sharing experiences, coping skills, strategies for recovery, as well as listening, validating and accepting. This results in a “helper’s high”—the good feeling that comes from lending a helping hand to another. This phenomenon aids in an individual member’s sense of empowerment and a heightened sense of self-esteem. Many group members have spent years on the receiving end of many relationships (therapists, counselors, possibly family members) which can be dispiriting and devaluing. When a person gets to reciprocate and help others, the experience makes ones feel valued and worthwhile. Persons who have faced stigmatizing experiences usually feel shamed or demoralized, but in a support group, this “liability” is uniquely turned into an asset. What was once a stigmatizing experience is now seen as an asset—a shared experience where all members of the group can learn coping skills from it.

Support groups are also empowering in that they provide members with the opportunity to take on new, meaningful roles. Helping to run a group, even if the responsibilities start small, can help restore a person’s sense of meaning and purpose. According to several studies, persons in recovery who take on leadership roles or accept other responsibilities within a support group are more likely to recovery. Ideally, the groups support their members in rediscovering new roles and responsibilities, which have been lost, which in turn helps them to gain back control of their lives.

Additionally, through the encouragement of self-advocacy and group advocacy, members learn how to take an active rather than passive role in their recovery and wellness. In addition, members can be empowered through learning to problem solve and making decisions for themselves with the guidance of other group members. They can learn about different treatments available.

- **Knowledge & Education** – Groups convey two types of knowledge: the professional knowledge (research findings, literature from agencies, etc) that is oftentimes shared during the group, as well as “street” or

Another benefit from the sharing of knowledge and coping skills is that it gives members choices—allowing them to choose for themselves which tools and strategies would work best for them. This adds to the sense of self-direction. Many people, after having experienced a breakdown, find themselves with few extra resources. But self-help groups are accessible without fees or forms. They can be very effectively used as supplemental treatment to other programs or as a safety net after treatment has ceased. Many groups are also anonymous so members don't have to give last names.

## **MAXIMIZING THE COMPONENTS OF WELLNESS IN GROUPS**

Self-help groups, by their very makeup, do a great job in promoting wellness and recovery in persons experiencing mental illness, physical disabilities, or other life altering events. But they could do more. Many of the benefits of self-help groups come in the form of hope, support, education and taking personal responsibility for recovery. With some tweaking of a group's format, a subtle change in leadership roles and responsibilities, a well thought out mission statement, focused group discussions, sensitive group guidelines, and the addition of specific wellness and recovery group activities, self-help groups have the potential to offer a greater positive impact for persons in recovery. Here are some ideas:

### **Create and Keep a Safe and Trusting Environment**

In order for any recovery to occur in a support group, members must feel safe enough to share their ideas and feelings—especially at a meaningful level. Without trust, group discussions become meaningless. In order to ensure a feeling of safety and trust, it is necessary to:

- **Reinforce the importance of confidentiality among members:** Members will not share at the deep, healing levels if they are afraid that others will talk outside about their personal feelings and experiences outside of the group. Have a group discussion on what confidentiality means to your members—you may be surprised how differently people define the term. If confidentiality is ever broken, deal with it immediately. Take all breaches seriously and make sure that the person whose confidentiality was breached is safe and has the proper coping mechanisms to deal with the issue.
- **Make members feel welcome and accepted:** Welcome every member at the door with a smile. Make sure that members don't judge or criticize anyone else's ideas. Remember to try to understand the "world view" of others, their cultures, beliefs, and experiences. Beware of "group think" where new ideas are not welcomed by the veteran group members. Discourage cliquish behaviors among group members.
- **Use and Teach Active Listening Skills:** There is no greater gift that you can give another person than to listen...really listen to them. Listening conveys a powerful message of validation and interest. By listening, you help others to sort out their thoughts so they can make better decisions for themselves. And listening to them validates for them that their issues are worth talking about. In order to listen actively, pay attention to both the verbal and non-verbal cues. Lean towards the person. Nod your head or say "Uh huh" to let the person know that you are listening. Clarify what you heard the other person say, by asking such questions as "I understand that you felt frightened in that situation. Is that right?" This gives the speaker the opportunity to say, "Yes, I was" or "No, I meant to say that I was frustrated." It also lets the speaker know that you really heard them. You can also ask questions to get more information. What greater gift can you give someone than to say, "Tell me more." Be empathetic not sympathetic. Put yourself in the other person's shoes, but don't walk their path for them! Since storytelling is so integral to the core of self-help groups, it is extremely important the group members learn to listen to each other without distraction, pre-conceived ideas, assumptions, or misunderstandings.

- **Use Discernment Instead of Judgment:** Discernment is a neutral stance--simply noticing observable facts (e.g. “Whenever Joe talks he seems to not want, or know how to, stop talking to let others have their turn.” Judgment, on the other hand, assigns right or wrong, good or bad, which casts blame (e.g. “That Joe is such an ignorant blabber mouth!”) Trying to deal with challenging behavior using methods that cause shame and guilt seldom work effectively.
- **Structure the Group with Wellness & Recovery in Mind:** During the initial check-in, have members focus on something positive (e.g., “One good thing that happened to me since the last meeting was.....”) Use small group exercises and ice breakers as a fun, informative way to discover strengths, wellness tools, prevent problems, develop bonds, etc. At the end of the meeting, have members answer a positive, thought provoking question such as, “The main lesson I learned at this meeting was.....” or “I am going to look for my strengths this week by.....”
- **Keep in Mind the Needs of the Members:** All people have certain needs. As a facilitator, you can help your members to feel welcome, comfortable, valued, safe, understood, cared for, interested, etc. You can help build strong relationships between members. Provide hope at every opportunity. Encourage members to stay with the group to give back to the newcomers. Use person-first, non-medical language. Have honest, direct communication. Confront others with sensitivity when necessary, and never allow others to be hurtful to each other. Discourage stigma and discrimination among members.

### **Encourage Goal Setting**

Setting goals for the group as well as for individual group members can be very helpful in the recovery process. Goals help to instill the promise of hope and recovery (or acceptance). This can include setting goals for group discussion (e.g., “tonight we will focus on our strengths”). During discussion, keep the group on track.

- **Begin with Your Mission/Vision Statement:** Many groups have mission or vision statements that include phrases such as “...so that others do not have to suffer alone,” or “...in the hope that we might find a cure,” or “...so that recovery may occur.” If your group includes a message of hope and recovery in it, and the group stays on goal by periodically revisiting its mission and evaluating the group, then this can help members chart a course to recovery.
- **Set Group Goals:** As a group, set goals that will help both the group and the individual members grow. Involve all of the members in this process and let members decide which parts of the goal they will help achieve. Such goals may include outreaching to the community and professionals to teach them about your condition, illness, situation, etc., or developing a member-written book on the symptoms, recovery methods, recipes, etc. that can help others stay well.
- **Encourage Members Set Individual Goals:** These goals can be either week-to-week goals (e.g., I will lose 2 pounds before the next meeting.) or yearly (or longer) goals (e.g., “I would like to be employed part-time by the end of the year.) But keep in mind, these goals need to come from the individual themselves. Without taking personal responsibility for the goals, achievement is not likely. The group members, however, can help each other to break down all of the things that need to be accomplished to achieve parts of the goal, and each individual activity. This can be done using group and/or individual exercises. Goal setting and goal achieving can be vicariously beneficial as well. Hearing about the successes of other’s with the same diagnosis can serve to inspire hope.
- **Celebrate Small Gains** – Whenever a member sets and meets a goal, use it as a cause for celebration. Don’t wait for huge gains—even the smallest step forward counts towards the journey forward.

### **Promote Positive Problem Solving:**

“Good sailors aren’t made on calm seas.” (Author unknown) Sometimes it is forgotten that problems are a part of life...not a symptom. Set backs and relapses can feel overwhelming and devastating at times. As a group leader, helping the members to overcome and learn from problems can be a very useful recovery tool.

- **Exchange Experiential Knowledge:** The group discussion is often referred to as the “heart” of a self-help group. Being able to talk about one’s inner most feelings are tantamount to what a support group can offer. Most groups are structured so that each member has a chance to speak. Afterwards, the other members might be encouraged to share (using “I” statements) the strategies that have worked for them. This encourages an exchange of coping strategies as well as helping members to feel good about themselves. Not only they persons looking for answers, but they are also helping others at the same time. In a support group, their liability of a diagnosis suddenly becomes an asset because they can share their experiences and solutions with others.
- **Encourage Personal Problem Solving:** Problem solving is not about giving advice. After a member has shared their personal story or problem, but before the other members chime in to share their own experiences or suggestions, the leader might ask the speaker such open-ended questions as “How can we help you?” or “What kind of assistance are you looking for?” The leader (or other members) might also ask, “What have you tried already to help solve your problem?” “What worked?” “What didn’t?” “What else would you like to try to solve your problem?” Certainly before you automatically turn the discussion over to get other members feedback or suggestions, ask the speaker, “Would you like feedback or suggestions from the other group members?” If the answer is no, this should be respected. If they would like suggestions, encourage members to phrase their experiences in “I” statements such as, “When I isolate I find that calling my friends really helps me. What helps you?” Remember, the ultimate goal of a support group is to help people to become self-reliant individuals armed with the tools to help them deal effectively with their problems.

Discourage advice giving but encourage an exchange of ideas, suggestions and strategies that have worked for others. In order for persons to achieve self-determination they must learn to make their own decisions—to decide what is right for them. With this comes personal responsibility for self. Allowing a person to come to their own decision (usually with hearing how others coped) helps build a sense of personal control, empowerment, and self-esteem.

- **Turn “Failures” into Learning Experiences** – Not all goals will be met; nor will all steps be going forward. Encourage group members to see the learning experience in any attempt made that was not fulfilled. If a member has a problem, have them ask, “What can I learn from this?” Allow them to role-play how they might have acted differently. Help them to identify the problem. Help turn bad experiences into learning experiences, which helps build self-esteem and confidence. Brainstorm different solutions and have the person choose an approach. Have them evaluate the approach and choose another if necessary. Lead a group discussion on “Lessons Learned from Failures” to teach the members that good can come from failure.
- **Focus on Strengths and Solutions to Prevent Pity Parties** - Although people need to vent frustrations, deal with anger or talk about problems, group leaders can also guide people toward thinking and talking about possible solutions. For every problem that is brought up, problem-solving strategies can also be utilized to leave the person (and the other members, for that matter) with hope and a possible solution. Have members talk about their own personal strengths. Share your strengths with others. And give members the opportunity to tell each other what strengths they find in each other. This helps members to see themselves, not as victims, but as survivors. Use a recovery focus such as “What do you do to deal with your problems?” This prevents turning the group into a pity party and venting unproductively about problems. If venting occurs, which is commonplace, turn the discussion into identifying challenges and actively problem solve them. There are many small group or individual exercises that can help a person (or group) to brainstorm solutions to difficult problems. These exercises can be used inside or outside the group, either individually or in groups.
- **Use Wellness & Recovery Activities In the Group** – There are hundreds of small group exercises, individual programs and group activities specifically geared toward wellness and recovery. They might include problem-solving exercises, activities that uncover individual talents, WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Program), group decision making, etc. Bring some of these into the group to encourage members to discover and use many type of wellness tools. (Hundreds of group exercises can be found on the internet,)

## Help Develop Social Skills

For many self-help group members, belonging to a group may be a way in which to learn real-life social skills.

- **Teach People How to Be Good Group Members:** Although it may seem to be a natural activity, learning to be a good, respectful group member (or leader) may take some time and effort. The leader can help facilitate this transformation by developing good ground rules for the group, being an effective role model, and dealing with bad behaviors swiftly and fairly. Group members might learn such skills as active listening, empathy, acceptance, etc.
- **Be Part of the Group** – As the leader, remember that this is also your group and that you should share your problems and solutions—just like any other members. But keep in mind that you should never talk longer than the other members. Also, as a leader do not patronize, teach, lecture, or be the “know it all.” Empower the other group members by letting them be an integral part of the group.
- **Demonstrate Conflict Management and Mediation Skills** Although most group leaders are not trained in conflict management or mediation, many learn how to handle difficult behaviors in a fair and effective manner. Through active listening, exploring “win-win” situations and dealing with difficulties quickly, leaders can teach other group members some of the fine art of negotiation.
- **Change Difficult Behavior Into Knowledge** Some group leaders will take advantage of difficult behavior and turn it into an educational opportunity for the entire group. As an example, a group might have several members who continuously cross talk or hold “second conversations” during the regular meeting. The leader might opt at one point to suggest, “Since we seem to have a little extra time tonight, I would suggest that we have a group discussion on how cross-talking affects us individually.” There have been no finger pointing or name calling. Just the opportunity for group members to tell each other how this behavior affects them. “Whenever anyone else talks while it is my turn to speak, I feel like no one is interested in me.” The offenders will learn how their behavior affects other people negatively; something they might never have thought of before.
- **Discourage Stigma and Discrimination:** Many group members have felt the wrath of both internal and external discrimination and stigma. Ensure that group members always treat each other with respect, not only as individuals, but also as someone who may be at a different point in their quest for recovery. Keep in mind any cultural differences, personality traits or varying life experiences. A self-help group needs to be encouraging and nurturing and there is no room for added discrimination. Celebrate the differences!
- **Don’t Allow Coercion, Over-Controlling Behaviors and Restrictions To Reign** – Many members who have been through the mental health system or who have been hospitalized have a long history of others using coercion, restricting and over-controlling behaviors thus stripping the individual of their sense of self. Don’t let this happen in your group. Allow only “I” statements to prevent members from sounding controlling or coercing.
- **Empower Each Other in Simple Ways** – Feeling empowered is an essential part of the recovery process. Part of empowerment means taking personal responsibility for one’s own decisions. Let all group members make decisions. Allow people to contribute to the running of the group. Make sure that all members listen respectfully to each other without judgment, and show concern and care for each other.

## Develop Leadership, Shared Leadership and Shared Responsibility

Shared leadership is very important to the success of a self-help group, and critical in helping members progress on the road to recovery. Here are some ways in which group leaders can help others to take on more leadership roles.

- **Encourage Leadership/Participation:** Since it has been proven that persons in support groups who take on leadership roles fare much better in their recovery journey, encourage all of the group members to take on some responsibility for the group. These can be small contributions such as making the coffee or putting out the literature. When a person feels ready, s/he can take on larger responsibilities such as greeting new members at

the door or co-facilitating. But even the smallest contribution can be empowering, helping a person to reconnect to others, and offer meaningful activities.

- **Break Down Responsibilities and Delegate Work to Other Members:** Group formats are usually made up of many activities (e.g. welcoming members, reading the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, making the coffee, etc). These responsibilities can be handed out to several members so that everyone feels like an integral part of the group. Shared responsibility allows every group member to feel as though he/she has contributed toward the functioning of the group.
- **Make Meeting Format Scripts:** For groups that have a very specific format that is repeated each meeting, scripts can be made so that any member may volunteer to lead the group by just following the script. In many groups, this leadership role is rotated among the members so that everyone gets a turn at running the group.
- **Don't Be the Expert:** In order to have members learn to support and be supported by other members, do not set yourself up as the expert. Discourage it when members only make eye contact with you. If anyone asks you a question, throw it back into the group to allow someone else to answer it.

## WHAT IS WELLNESS?

Wellness is a lifestyle that incorporates a self-determined balance of healthy habits such as getting adequate sleep, eating nutritious foods, avoiding excess alcohol and recreational drugs, having a strong, support system, engaging in meaningful activities, doing exercise, etc. Science has studied the fascinating mind-body connection where our thoughts and feelings impact upon our immune system helping us to resist disease. Additionally, wellness behaviors such as proper exercise have a positively impact on our mental health. It would make sense that a group of people emotionally supporting one another in wellness would be truly beneficial.

## HOW SELF-HELP GROUPS HELP PROMOTE WELLNESS

- **Large Variety of Wellness-Focused Groups:** There exists a large variety of groups focused on specific areas of wellness. These include weight loss, smoking cessation, alcohol or drug abuse, diabetes education, stress reduction, and all types of illnesses and disorders. These groups run the gamut of professionally-run educational groups to member-run group discussions on the emotional impact of the disease, to advocacy and/or community education groups focused on community education or prevention strategies.
- **Wellness Activities:** Groups for arthritis, weight loss, stroke, diabetes and others have many activities to help patients feel better, gain strength or mobility, or to live better with the ailment.
- **Prevention Activities:** Many groups include a prevention component for both their members as well as for persons unaffected by the condition.
- **Peer Support is Stronger than Willpower.** Sharing stories, offering suggestions and tools, and mentoring have been found to promote healthy behaviors. Support groups can reinforce healthful changes and persuade members to change their behavior in order to live a fuller, healthier life. Also, group members tend to have higher medication adherence than those who do not go to groups.
- **Education Helps People Gain Greater Control:** With the wealth of knowledge on the internet, people are beginning to educate themselves more about their health issues. This, coupled with the experiential knowledge shared by groups members (coping strategies, resources, what works—what doesn't) can help people keep abreast of new treatments, research and medications. This shift in the locus of control also adds to feeling of empowerment, self-determination and independence.
- **Having Meaningful Rituals** – Many groups have rituals or “check outs” during their meetings which solicit positive responses. Some questions that members may respond to before the end of the meeting might be: “This one thing I’ll do for myself this week is...” “The main lesson I learned today is...,” “This week I will look for strengths in this part of my life...,” etc.