**Starting and Maintaining
a Peer Support Group Manual**

Created By

May 2013

Table of Contents

Introduction to Self Help and Peer Support

What is Self Help
Self help is self-guided improvement. Some of the potential benefits of self-help groups that more professional supports may not provide include knowledge of lived experience, shared identity, meaningful contribution to others, and a sense of belonging.
Self help often utilizes publicly available information, or support groups on the Internet, as well as in person where people in similar situations join together. It is important to note that self help is participatory in nature and involves getting help, giving help and learning to help your self as well as sharing knowledge and experience.

What is Peer Support?
Peer support is about creating connections with people of like experiences in order to share support together. The focus is often emotional and practical support as well as sharing knowledge and experiences. Peer support is not about counselling or giving advice, but about sharing honestly and allowing others to learn from our experiences.

The Self Help Alliance defines peer support as helping another person move on with their life - to recover. This involves:
- Helping that person get in touch with what they think will improve their quality of life (setting recovery goals).
- Helping them to identify and remove barriers.
- Seeing their situation and circumstances differently: With hope and self determination.
- The establishment of a relationship built on trust.

A Peer is anyone with whom you share a mutual experience. That experience can include, but is not limited too, mental health diagnosis or symptoms, and involvement with mental health/addictions systems. It is the act of people who have had similar experiences with a mental illness giving each other encouragement, hope, assistance, guidance, and understanding that aids in recovery.

Peer Support Groups
Peer support groups are people coming together with the focus on the shared experience (some groups focusing on the shared experience of their mental health diagnosis, symptoms, or activity focused). Run either by staff or volunteer facilitators, they give people a chance to learn about their concern, give help, receive help, share information and knowledge, and have fun.
What peer support and self-help looks like varies from group to group, and person to person. Most are run by the participants, while some, especially in the early stages, have the support of a facilitator. Self-help/peer support can be an important element of a person's recovery and often compliments other services and supports being accessed. Each group needs to decide what works for them, and be flexible as the needs of the group grow and develop.

(Sources:

Self Help Alliance. 2013. *Peer Support*. www.self-help-alliance.com

VandenBos, Gary R, ed. 2007. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 1st ed., Gary R, ed., Washington: American Psychological Association.

Ontario Peer Development Initiative. 2010. *OPDI Definiton of Peer Support.* http://opdi.org/faq.html.

Dennis, C-L. 2003. Peer support within a health care context: a concept analysis. International Journal of Nursing Studies, 40:321-332.

Ontario Self-Help Network/Self-Help Resource Centre. 2012. *Starting a Self-Help/Mutual Aid/Peer Support Group in your Community*.)

<u>Principles of Peer Support</u>

Many peer-led groups and organizations, whether they focus on community issues or provide services to their members or the broader community, use similar principles to guide their work and their working relationships. A peer support approach nurtures social support networks and supportive communities.

Sharing Equal Status

A peer support group operates with all members committed to equal involvement and a shared responsibility for group tasks and maintenance. Groups value the input from each person. Everyone shares the common ground of the same issue, difficulty or experience and in this sense, everyone is the same.

Giving and Receiving

Group members share a give-and-take attitude. Each individual may receive support but also offers support to others. People benefit as much from helping as from receiving. Participation enhances confidence and self-esteem, from the opportunity to help others and from accepting help.

Knowing From Experience

The knowledge and understanding people gain from experience is valuable and different from that gained from study or research. Group members find the practical information and emotional insights from a shared experience both useful and comforting.

(<u>Adapted from:</u> http://www.peernetbc.com/principles-of-peer-support)

<u>Why Do People Come to Group?</u>

There are a variety of reasons people choose to attend a peer support group. Knowing your own reasons and the reasons of other group members can help the group as it moves forward.

- Information
- To exchange ideas.
- To have support of others with shared life experiences.
- To normalize some of their feelings.
- To share their experience and knowledge.
- To get some "expert" advice.
- For a personal reason not related to any of the above.
- To socialize and have a good time.

<u>Is Self Help and Peer Support for Me?</u>

Especially with the internet increasing our ability to connect with others, self help and peers support groups can be found for almost every mental health and addictions issue, medical condition, and various other life experiences. For many, self help is not a replacement for professional treatment, and is not likely to cure whatever challenges are being faced.

Despite not being a cure all, longitudinal study of self help/mutual aid organizations show that individuals who remain active with their local group experience a better quality of life, and reduced symptoms of distress when compared to individuals who had not participated in such groups. Like many things in life, you will get out of peer support what you put into it.

(<u>Source:</u> Nelson, G. 2005. *A Longitudinal Study of Consumer/Survivor Initiatives in Community Mental Health in Ontario: Three Year Follow-up of Active and Non-active Participants- Fact Sheet.* http://www.wlu.ca/documents/46464/CSI_fact_sheet_MAY_2005.pdf)

Part 1 – Planning and Getting Organized

Getting Prepared

To increase the likelyhood that your group will be successful, it is importat to begin with solid prepration and planning before scheduling your first meeting. Starting out with an understanding of self help/peer support groups, how they work and what is available in your community will help you develop a better understanding of how to start.

Suggested Steps:

Visit / contact self-help groups in your area that deal with similar concerns or are run in ways you might want to use. There are many benefits of learning from other groups, including:

- If an existing group already meets your needs, you may not need to start a new group.
- The existing group may assist with forming a "sister group"; allowing you to use the existing group and its members as a resource and support.
- The ability to learn from the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of other groups.

Talk with experienced self-help group leaders / organizers, ask them how they began their group(s) and what challenges they encountered.

Utilize 'how to' information books and packages from established groups, such as this one. There are a number of books, articles and pamphlets available on self help/peer support groups at your local library and on the internet. Existing groups and experienced group leaders may be able to recommend tools that were helpful to them.

Find like minded people, and share leadership roles and tasks as early as possible. Peer support is a group, not individual, process. At this stage, it can also be important to define your target population – who is this group for? Some examples include single parents, people with similar mental health experiences, people who abuse drugs.

Form an organizing committee/leadership team of a few individuals who share your interest in starting (not just joining) a new group. It can be very difficult for a group with only 1 or 2 dedicated people to be sustainable. Look for people who want to help because they share your enthusiasm, but who are not overwhelmed by their own challenges.

The organizing committee/leadership team should understand that they are there only to help launch the group, not to lead it indefinitely. As your group grows, it is important to allow for skill development and leadership opportunities for new members.

Questions to Start Planning

Once you have done some research and established who is on your organizing team, it is time to answer some questions about what the group will look like. Answer the questions to the best of you ability. Please note some of these issues are examined in more detail later in this manual.

Remember that self-help/peer support groups are a process, how you answer some of these questions now may change the group moves forward.

Focus of the Group:
What will your group be about?

Why do you want to start this group?

What are your hopes for the group?

What will the group be called?

What will the overall structure of the group look like (i.e. curriculum to follow, open discussion, a mix of both)?

What will the structure of each meeting look like? (Each person checks in at the beginning, at talking stick is used, individuals bring in materials/research to share, etc)

Will guest speakers or other activities be welcome?

How will you know the group is working or not working?

Logistics of the Group
When would you like the group to start?

Where will the group meet? (Neutral, private spot is ideal)

If there are costs associated with the group, where will the funds come from (i.e. Photocopying, location, advertising)?

What time/day of the week would you like to hold the group?

Who will run it at the beginning? Who will help if the regular facilitators are not available?

Group Members
How will you get people to come to the group (i.e. word of mouth, posters)?

Who will you welcome as members (Only individuals with shared experience, family/friends included)?

Will you set a minimum or maximum number of participants peer meeting (Between 3 and 15 is often suggested)?

Will members participate anonymously (not required to share full name) or will they be required to share more information about themselves?

What level of confidentiality will be expected from group members? How will issues of broken confidentiality be dealt with?

How will your group help every member to feel important (i.e. Longer term members paired with new members, rotate tasks, leadership support)?

How will members contact each other about scheduling or other group matters (Phone tree, website access, etc.)?

Goal Statements, Objectives and Priorities
Once you are able to define most of the questions listed previously, you can then decide on a goal statement for your group. A broad yet clear goal can help with recruiting members, public education and funding purposes. For example:
- To increase the quality of life and supports for people living with depression.
- To learn about supports and resources for single parents.

You may also want to include your group's objectives; activities needed in order for the goal to be reached. For example:
- To provide safe environment to share mutual support
- To decrease isolation of members by organizing regular social events

Many groups have a long list of goals and objectives they hope to accomplish during their time together. In order to optimize on these and avoid frustrations, it is beneficial to set priorities for your group's plans.
For example, though social activities may be helpful for individuals faced with depression, it may not be a top priority for the group at this time. Establishing regular meetings and developing group guidelines may be the current priority.

Part 2 – Group Work Basics

Group Skills and Characteristics Beneficial for Group Work

When starting a group, it can be helpful to have individuals who already have some group skills and characteristics. However, it is important to keep in mind that self-help/peer support groups are an opportunity for individuals to learn and develop their skills and abilities. Some groups may choose to have time and activities dedicated to developing some of these. See the appendix section for some sample activities and worksheets.

Skills Helpful in Group Settings:

Active Listening:
Actively listening is about more than just hearing the words someone is speaking. It is about truly paying attention without letting your mind wander and without thinking about what you are going to say next. A person will know you are actively listening to them if you are facing them with an open body posture, making eye contact and responding appropriately.

Reflecting
This is a way to make sure a person feels heard and understood. This can be done by repeating back exactly what a person has said or by putting the information in your own words (paraphrasing). When reflecting, it is important to focus on the emotions and not always the content.

Clarifying
It is important for group members and facilitators to ask respectful questions and clarify when they are unsure about what another group member has said.

Linking
To help build group trust and cohesion, it can be helpful to point out when members have things in common, which can include feelings, life events and more.

Blocking
Members are not going to enjoy attending a group with constant negativity and inappropriate language/behaviours. Being able to block such things in a respectful and gentle way will help keep all members comfortable, while hopefully not alienating the offender. Questions, statements or behaviours that are overly intrusive, discriminatory or interruptive should be blocked quickly.

Questioning
Though others skills such as reflecting are often more appropriate, questions can be use to keep a conversation flowing. Try to avoid closed ended questions, such as "Did that upset you?" Instead, use questions that invite the speaker to share as much as they are comfortable sharing: "Can you tell us how that made you feel?" or "Please tell us more?"

Initiating
For a meeting to get started, it is helpful to have members and/or facilitators who are comfortable initiating activities or conversations.

Suggesting
Giving advice is not usually welcome in a group setting and can create bad feelings between members if the advice does not work out. Instead, individuals can carefully suggest alternative ideas, resources, etc. as a choice and allow the listener to make their own final decision. For example "Using this service really helped me a lot, you may want to see if it might work for you too."

(Source: Corey & Corey, 2006. Group Process and Practice. Thomson Brooks/Cole.)

Characteristics Helpful in Group Settings

Not everyone will have these characteristics naturally. A successful group can help members cultivate some of these characteristics in themselves.

Courage
It can take a great deal of courage to be open and honest in a group setting. For a group and its members to grow, they will need the courage to admit mistakes, admit times when they may lack knowledge and to take charge if the situation requires it.

Willingness to Model
We all have areas in which we excel, and it can be helpful for other members if we are willing to demonstrate those skills so that others can learn. We can do this by behaving in ways that will help the group grow, and by engaging in role play activities if the situation allows.

Goodwill, Genuiness & Caring
To feel welcome, members need to know that others in the group are sincere in their care for them. Members can demonstrate this by smiling, remembering names and issues, and by showing empathy.

Belief in Group Process
Having members who are optimistic and have positive expectations of the group can go a long way. On occasion, some members may attend group because they feel that they have to – too many of these members can make it difficult for a peer group to be successful.

Openness
Openness not only means being willing to share oneself with the group, but it also means knowing what not to share. For our own comfort, it is important to remember that you do not have to tell everyone everything – only what you feel is comfortable and helpful.

Non-defensiveness
This can be challenging in group settings as one way for group members to grow is by giving and receiving feedback. It can be easy to take things personally, leading to increased conflict and challenges. A step towards being non-defensive can be to avoid phrases such as "Yes, but…" and include activities and discussions to help members develop self confidence.

Personal Power
Personal power is about having confidence and being comfortable being yourself. It is not related to having power over others, but having a sense of power within yourself. Personal power is based on strength, confidence and competence. Being a part of a group that allows a person to make their own choices and mistakes with support can go a long way to helping a person develop a sense of power over their own lives and recovery.

Sense of Humour
Humour, when used appropriately, can break tension and create cohesion. Being able to laugh at one's self on occasion helps us to accept our own faults without allowing them to become our identity. Humour that involves sarcasm, sexual content, flirting, or anything insulting and hurtful is not acceptable in a peer support group setting.

(Source: Corey & Corey, 2006. Group Process and Practice. Thomson Brooks/Cole.)

Setting the Climate for a Successful Group

The effectiveness of a group depends partly on how comfortable members feel being in the group. Physical surroundings are an important part of that comfort. Paying attention to details such as room temperature, comfortable seating and quiet surroundings can go a long way.

Seating arrangements are another important detail of physical surroundings. Arranging chairs in a circle will allow members to see every other member, making it easier to talk and listen to each other. Another way to encourage members to talk to one another might be to provide name tags, and to allow for a bit of time for informal discussions before or after meetings.

How the group was advertised can also greatly affect the climate. If posters and advertisements suggest a place for informal discussion, but meetings open with a rigid agenda, members will have a mixed message about the group, leading to limited participation.

The behaviour of a group's facilitator and/or core members also has an impact on the climate. When people are cheerful, informal and enthusiastic with an open manner, it will encourage others to follow suit. Where as individuals who are closed to new members and feel a need to control the group may lead to challenges and conflicts.

(Source: Hill, Karen. 1987. *Helping You Helps Me: A guide book for self-help groups.* Canadian Council on Social Development)

Roles within the Group

Each group will work out what the roles and responsibilities of its group members look like. Some groups set roles with clearly defined boundaries, while others wait and see what natural roles develop according to the skills and characteristics of members. Below are some samples of the types of roles other groups have used.

Standing or Rotating Facilitator

A facilitator may seem like the leader of the group, however, their role is not to be in charge. A facilitator is to help meetings run smoothly by opening the meeting and helping to determine the agenda. Despite their own views and goals for the group, a facilitator should pay attention to what the group needs.

Groups can choose to have the same facilitator(s) every meeting, rotate facilitators regularly, have one regularly facilitator and one rotating co-facilitator, or any other combination that seems appropriate. Helpful skills for a facilitator to have and develop include:

- Keeping members on topic.
- Summarizing what members have said and the direction of discussions.
- Accepting feelings as ok.
- Suggesting ways to solve problems.

Participants/Observers

All members of a peer support group, even the facilitator, fall into this role. It takes all members to make a group successful. Members can do this by:

- Actively engaging in group discussions.
- Practice and develop skills of active listening, clarifying, reflecting, etc.
- Provide honest yet kind feedback as requested.
- Seek feedback regarding personal goals.
- Assist the facilitator as needed.

Observes/Evaluators

For each meeting some groups find it helpful to have one member act as an observer. The observer can pay attention to the areas listed below, and report this observations to the facilitator or group:

- How is the atmosphere – emotionally or physically?
- How do people interact, participate, get involved?
- Do people work together and enjoy working together? Do they accept each other's differences?
- Is it a productive meeting? Is everyone happy to participate?
- Is the leadership shared, or is it only one person?

Additional Roles

Some groups choose to add other roles as needed due to the structure and organization of the group. Here are a few samples of other possible roles:

- Secretary/Recorder –keeps notes so that decisions and other important items are recorded for future meetings. If using a recorder, it is important that all members present agree to the content. Members who do not wish to have their names or identifying information in notes should have their wishes respected.
- Treasurer – some groups need to collect funds/donations in order to pay for meeting space, advertising, etc. A trustworthy person should be chosen to manage funds, and any banking needed for a group should have multiple signing officers.

(Source: Ontario Self-Help Network/Self-Help Resource Centre. 2012. *Starting a Self-Help/Mutual Aid/Peer Support Group in your Community.*)

Stages of Group Development

As a group matures, there is a continuum of stages it can be expected to go through. Some of these stages are more difficult than others. Knowing what they are and being prepared can help a group work through the frustrating times.

Forming

When people are first getting to know each other, they are often very polite and superficial in their interactions with each other. In this first stage, members are exploring each other a little while still functioning very separately. At this stage, groups are dependent on facilitators and find comfort in the structure of the group.

To consider: Be clear about expectations and outline guidelines. Do not push members to participate more than they are comfortable.

Storming

Once people have had the chance to get to know each other a little, they may be more comfortable being themselves. This can be a challenging time as people are trying to find how they fit into the group as a whole, occasionally leading to conflict and power struggles. Individuals may challenge the group structure and facilitator. However, they may not yet be willing to take on these roles themselves.

To consider: Read guidelines at the beginning of each meeting, make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak, keep to the group agenda or discuss a need to change it, offer leadership and other participation opportunities. Meetings focused on constructive feedback and conflict resolution skills may be beneficial. Remember, this too shall pass!

Norming

By this time, you should see a core group of more committed members attending group regularly. The level of openness and understanding is greatly improved and individuals are now feeling more like cohesive members of the group. The routine of the group is settling and some roles may be emerging.

To consider: New members may disrupt the flow at this point, or may have difficulties fitting in.

Performing

Members are now feeling like equal contributors to the group and are sharing leadership responsibilities well. Feedback is requested and valued. The group has become self-directed and is able to get work done. Expectations for behaviours are set, and trust among members is developing. Disagreements may still come up, but they are often easily resolved.

To consider: Rotate jobs and conduct an evaluation. Discuss with members ways to keep the momentum going.

Adjourning or Changing Purpose

Whether the groups goals have been achieved, key members move on or a crisis occurs, most groups or individual attendance does come to an end. Some groups choose to disband; others will continue back at stage one. As a group and its members mature, the purpose and goals can shift. This can be beneficial, but may also cause some disagreement.

To consider: Know this is just a part of the group process. Allow the group time to discuss what is happening and how it feels. Create a ritual for saying goodbye and enjoy the new start. If the group is continuing, rewrite goals and objectives to fit the new direction.

(Sources:

Corey & Corey, 2006. Group Process and Practice. Thomson Brooks/Cole.

Hill, Karen. 1987.*Helping You Helps Me: A guide book for self-help groups.* Canadian Council on Social Development)

Part 3 – Group Guidelines and Confidentiality

Group Guidelines

During your first meeting, and as needed, it will be important to create and review guidelines for your group. Guidelines are a collectively developed plan of agreements, goals, activities, boundaries, group practices and/or group norms.

Guidelines are important as they help the group remain clear about why they meet and what norms guide its activities. It also makes the facilitators job easier by sharing the responsibility among all participants to support good listening, avoid judgment and offer appropriate responses, thus making it everyone's group and fostering peer support.

To create guidelines for your group, you can start by asking questions such as "what do you want to see happen in this group?" and "what will make this group a supportive and safe place for you?" Make a list of the answers to form a basis for group guidelines and prioritize the answers.
From these, one or a few members can rewrite the answers in the form of potential group guidelines and then bring the list back to the next group meeting for discussion.
Once agreed upon and documented, they can be incorporated into group welcoming materials, opening remarks, and/or wall posters at each meeting. It is important to regularly review guidelines, particularly for new members, and make changes as needed.

Examples of what group members may want to happen in their group:
- emotional support
- information sharing
- inviting guests to speak

Examples of possible guidelines:
- what is said in group stays in group (confidentiality)
- start and end on time
- allow everyone to participate; no one dominates
- allow everyone the right to pass
- let one person talk at a time, while others try to listen
- honour all opinions without judgment
- share our thoughts and feelings but not advice
- refrain from discussing other members outside the group
- rotate leadership as often as the group sees fit
- no cell phones
- nothing about me without me, no gossiping

Confidentiality

Depending on the nature of the group, confidentiality can be one of the most important group guidelines. Confidentiality means that we respect everyone's right to privacy. What people share with us remains with us and is not shared with others. Personal issues are considered private unless the individual wants them shared. This will allow members to feel secure in knowing that what they share will not be gossiped about and may help people to be more open.

It is important to note that there are some limitations to confidentiality that should be dealt with by the group facilitators if the situation arises. Everyone needs to be aware that anytime a person discloses any intention to harm themselves or others, any current child abuse or other illegal activities, those discussions will not remain confidential.

Collectively, the group should decide what will happen if group guidelines are not followed by some members. Some groups start with gentle reminders for small infractions and use a 'three strikes method', others may ask a person to sit out for a set number of meetings. Whatever is chosen, it may be important to remember that individuals are coming to group for help and sometimes acting out is a cry for help.

Part 4 – First Meeting of Many

What a Meeting Looks Like

Here are just a sample of the elements you might find helpful for preparing for and running a regular group meeting. Each group should be organized in a flexible way that reflects the needs and choices of its members.

Be Prepared

A few days in advance, check that all arrangements have been confirmed. Arrive early to review goals for the meeting and set up. Be sure to leave a few set up items to be done by arriving members. Have an agenda/list of activities posted so that people know what to expect, or be prepared to write it out as a group on a board or flipchart.

Welcome People

Say hello and let people know you are glad they came.

Open the Meeting

Start on time and begin by describing the group's purpose, guidelines, and confidentiality requirements. After reviewing the agenda, it can be helpful to ask members to take a moment to bring themselves as fully into the room as possible.

Introductions, Icebreakers and Check–Ins

At the start of each group, especially in the beginning and when new members attend, introduce the facilitator(s) and anyone who has a specific role (i.e. observer, recorder, treasurer).

Icebreakers are fun activities to help members get to know each other and build rapport. There are a lot of different ice breakers, from name games to sharing more personal information. In the appendix you will find some sample icebreakers, and it may be beneficial to research your own.

Check-Ins At the Self Help Alliance, one way many groups begin each meeting is with a check-in. Each group member is invited to introduce themselves and share how their week has been, and, if comfortable, any successes or challenges that relate to the group. It is important to remember that the option to pass is always an acceptable response.

In some groups or meetings, this type of check-in is the entire focus of the group. Each member is given equal time to focus on their challenges while being open to feedback and relevant experiences of other members. This form of group can allow an individual to feel supported, and find new ways of looking at their situation.

Depending on the group's topic or the number of new members, it may be helpful to add a specific question to your check-in. Write the question on a flipchart/board and invite members to answer with only what feels comfortable. The focus of the question should be positive and encourage a small amount of self-disclosure. As the group becomes more comfortable, questions can become more personal. Here are some potential questions:

- What is one thing you hope to get out of today's meeting?
- How has your day been so far?
- What is one thing that brings you energy and joy?
- What did you do this week with what you learned in the last session?
- How would you like to be different today from how you were last session?
- Is there any unfinished business from last session that anyone wanted to talk about?

Check-Ins (Continued)
In some instances, several members may share similar challenges or emotional states. If this happens, you may want to shift the agenda to address the fears, worries or frustrations people are facing. In addition to developing the bond between group members, addressing shared concerns can also allow everyone to be more present for the rest of the meeting if people are feeling heard and supported.

Business and Announcements
It will be necessary at times to discuss practical and logistical matters. Deal with these issues quickly and clearly in order to avoid taking away from the groups momentum.

Meaningful Activity
For your initial meetings, it may be beneficial to have a special agenda to attract new members. In addition, early meetings should also include discussions of organization and group development, with an emphasis that the group belongs to its members.

After a few meetings and once the group settles in, focus can move away from special activities and toward mutual sharing, guest speakers, social events or other items meaninful to group members. It is important to allow for humour and activities lighter in nature to help people build trust and take away some of the fear and insecurity associated with difficult topics.

Close the Meeting
It can be helpful to have questions to alert members that then end of the meeting is near so that they can wrap up any discussions and share last minute thoughts:
- Before we end today, is there anything anyone wants to say?
- What did you hear yourself or someone else say that stood out for you?
- Complete this sentence: "One thing I need to practice outside of the group is....."
- How is the group going for you so far?
- Are there any changes you would like to see with this group?
- Several of you mentioned difficult challenges during your check in today. Is anyone feeling "left hanging" and has something to say before we end?

Whenever possible, end the meeting on a positive note. When people leave with warm feelings, it can help with the desire to return.
- Keep it upbeat and short.
- Restate confidentiality policy in a positive way.
- Congratulate the group for achieved goals.
- Thank people for coming.

Allow time for informal sharing
After the meeting closes, give members a chance to get to know each other better. This is also a chance for individuals to share things one-on-one that they may not yet feel comfortable sharing with the group as a whole.

(Sources:

The Canadian Council on Social Development. 1992. *Power Tools: Ways to Build a Self-Help Group. New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse*

Kathleen. 2009, *Build Bond Among Members by Checking-In.* Extraordinary Groups Blog. http://extraordinarygroups.com/blog/check-ins/)

<u>Last Meetings</u>

Whether your group is on going or has an end date, it is important to celebrate members moving on.

Endings in On Going Groups

Even if your group has no set end date, there will still be times when group members will decide to leave the group for various reasons. There are a variety of ways to acknowledge them, and will often depend on why the person is moving on and the resources the group has at its disposal.

One way is to have an occasional 'Graduation Ceremony' or 'Alumni Celebration.' These events would welcome past and present members to come together to celebrate their progress and learn from each others experiences. You can invite past members to share success stories, and current members to share positive experiences they have had in the group thus far.

If the group agrees, some time may be set aside during a regular meeting to say goodbye. Some groups may choose to write cards, create participation certificates, or do an activity to recognize the individual(s). No matter what the group decides, it is important to not take too much time away from the members who are remaining.

Time Limited Groups

Some groups know from the beginning that they will only meet for a set number of meetings. This may be due to a program being followed, space limitations or other reasons. If this is the case for your group, it is important to be clear from the beginning and to prepare members with regular discussions and reminders related to the end of the group. During your last 2 or 3 meetings, it is beneficial to have discussions about the end of the group. Some discussions topics might include:

- What supports will you access once this group is over?
- What has been most helpful about being in this group?
- What have you learned about yourself or about how others view you?
- What are some feelings you are having about this group ending?

During the last group meeting, having a special ending activity or celebration to close the group is recommended. A group may choose to have a pot-luck, or plan a group outing. There are also a number of activities a group can do to acknowledge an ending, please see the appendix for some ideas. For any group ending, take the time to recognize the positive outcomes and goals achieved. Ending on a positive note is encouraging and motivating for members.

Part 5 – Feedback and Conflict Resolution

Feedback and conflict are very important and normal elements to a group. Having our words and behaviours challenged can help us grow and change. For feedback and conflict to be constructive, there are some techniques your group can practice. If needed, you may choose to have meetings or part of meetings dedicated to activities that build on skills and techniques.

"I" Messages

"I" messages help us communicate with others and prevents us from feeling like the victim. While "you" messages often put others on the defensive, "I" messages can make it easier to hear what others are saying.

This is what an "I" message looks like:

"I feel (*feeling*) when (*this happens or event*) because (*why*)."

If the situation allows, you can also add "What I want is (*the solution*)." For example, it is easier to hear someone say "I feel worried when you arrive home late because I am afraid that something might have happened to you. What I want is a phone call when you are going to be late," rather than someone saying "Where were you? Why didn't you call? You make me so mad!"

Here are some general considerations when using "I" messages:
- Before making "I" statements, answer the following questions:
  - What am I feeling?
  - When am I feeling it?
  - Why am I feeling it?
- Use feeling words such as *uncomfortable, hurt, angry,* or *worried*.
- Using similes is also acceptable, i.e. "*I feel like a doormat when...*"
- Be specific when describing something. Instead of "...when this place is a mess" use "...when the towels are not picked up in the bathroom."
- Be specific with your reasons why; "...because wet towels in a heap start to smell."
- Avoid "you" statements, such as "I feel that you..." or "You make me feel..."

(<u>Source:</u> Thompson-Tormaschy, T. 2007. What's the Big Deal about "I" Messages?. *Psych Central*. http://psychcentral.com/lib/2007/whats-the-big-deal-about-i-messages/)

The Feedback Sandwich

Some people may still be in a place where they become defensive or anxious when receiving feedback. The "Feedback Sandwich" is one way of providing support while continuing to acknowledge a person's strengths. There are those who feel this method of feedback can sometimes lead to the issue being forgotten or buried, so keep that in mind if you plan to use it.

In this method, praise is followed by constructive feedback, which is then followed by more praise. This softens the impact of the criticism and often makes it easier to deliver the message. For example, you could say to a group member who is consistently disruptive when they arrive late, "I really admire the work you are doing in group. It would help the group run more smoothly if you could try not to interrupt the speaker if you need to arrive late. Everyone is really glad you are still able to make it."
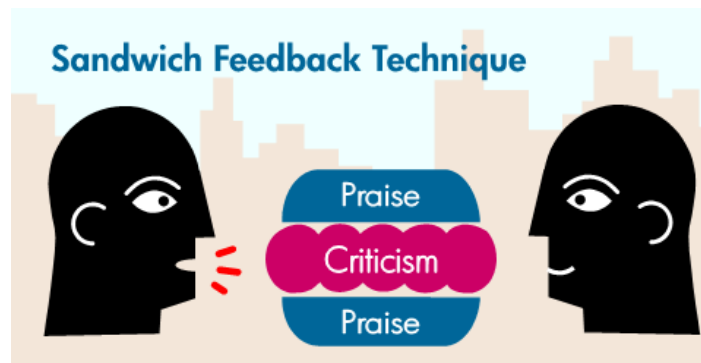
(Source: Belludi, Nagesh. 2008. *Sandwich Feedback Technique*. Right Attitudes. http://www.rightattitudes.com/2008/02/20/sandwich-feedback-technique/)

Tips Ensure Feedback is Constructive

Giving Constructive Feedback:
- Be specific about the issue.
- Make eye contact to show respect (unless group members are of a culture where eye contact is considered disrespectful).
- Use "I" statements.
- Phrase proposed changes in a positive way.

Accepting Constructive Feedback

Being able to receive and accept feedback can be more important to our growth than being able to offer feedback. We will not be able to grow and make changes if we are not able to hear what others say. We do not need to agree with all feedback we receive, but we should listen and accept feedback with an open mind.
- Practice active listening.
- Be non-defensive and avoid phrases such as "Yes, but....."
- Accept what is valid, especially if you have heard it before.
- Ask others for feedback on the same issue(s) if you are unsure.
- Say thank you for the risk they took in offering feedback and in their desire to help you improve
- Request further feedback later – "Did I improve?"

(Source: Corey & Corey. 2006. *Groups Process and Practice*. Thomson Brooks/Cole)

<u>Steps to Conflict Resolution in a Group</u>

There are many methods and activities that can aid in times of conflict. This is just one method that has worked for others. Your group may want to research other methods and be prepared with activities.

Step One: Set the Scene

Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression. If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use <u>active listening</u> skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions. Try to remember to use an <u>assertive</u> approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style when you approach issues of conflict.

- Restate.
- Paraphrase.
- Summarize.

Step Two: Gather Information

Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect their opinion and need their cooperation to solve the problem. Try to understand the motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these.
Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting group dynamics? disrupting team work? hampering decision-making? Be sure to focus on the issues and leave personalities out of the discussion.

- Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view.
- Identify issues clearly and concisely.
- Use "I" statements.
- Remain flexible.
- Clarify feelings.

Step Three: Agree to the Problem

This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You will need to agree to the problems that you are trying to solve before you can find a mutually acceptable solution.
Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems – if you cannot reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions

For everyone to be satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

Step Five: Negotiate a Solution

By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all. However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like <u>win-win negotiation</u> can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

Part 6 – Dealing with Challenges

What if No One Comes?
Depending on your community, it can take time for a group to gather momentum and attract new members. Do not be discouraged if early meetings experience a low turn out. Take some time with your organizing committee and other supports to look at ways to encourage membership.
Here are some ideas to get you started:
- Develop a brief presentation about your group's purpose, how it came to be, benefits and other important information. Offer this presentation to local organizations that would be appropriate to your topic.
- Develop and distribute a flyer throughout the community – shopping centres, libraries, grocery stores, churches, health centres, etc.
- Have registration procedures and/or a key point person that can be contacted prior to attending a meeting.

Monopolisers who talk forever
Some people may talk more than others for a variety of reasons. They could be nervous, a "show-off", or someone who rambles on without being aware of it. This can be handled by creating and enforcing guidelines around how much time each person has to talk (i.e. 3- 5 minutes), or by speaking to the person one-on-one to avoid embarrassment. Facilitators may be able to invite others to speak, or encourage a discussion/activity that allows members to provide each other with feedback.

Constant Distractions
Some members, whether they realize or not, may do things that consistently distract the group. They may bring up unrelated topics, makes noises, and move around. If a few members are behaving this way, you may want to ask members if they are bored with the group and would like to see changes.
If the distraction seems to be coming from one member, you can begin with refocusing the discussion, and if needed, speak to the disruptive individual one-on-one.

For some groups, the distraction may be external, such as outside noises and interruptions. If this is the case, the group may want to look into alterative meeting times and spaces.

Not enough real listening
Just because you hear someone's words does not mean you are necessarily listening to them. If it seems that your group is experiencing this, you may want to consider some active living training sessions.

Too much complaining and negativity
You may have one or more members who constantly complain and are overly negative. Or maybe many individuals are all having a particularly bad day/week. It can be helpful to work as a group to refocus from negative to positive. There are many activities and methods that can help people see the positive in challenging situations. Tasks such as listing common and unusual ways of solving shared problems can help. If the problem persists, it may be important to speak to the negative individuals one-on-one.

Communication Blockers
A communication blocker can often be the very act of trying to "help". In peer support, we are there to hear each other and provide support to others while finding our own solutions within and to avoid giving advice. In peer support it is often the sharing of ones own experience and the asking of honest, open questions that are of most use; questions that come from deep attentiveness, and that have no other purpose than helping the speaker listen more deeply to their inner truth.

Dealing with Silence
Some silence can be productive – members are processing something that was said and done in the group. If this seems to be the case, allow the silence to remain for a few minutes, and bring the group back with a statement that addresses the silence. For example "Many of you seem to be thinking about... I'd like to share my thoughts." In other circumstances, people may be silent because they are still uncomfortable with the group. This is when it is helpful to have members who are able to initiate conversations, invite new members to speak, or to introduce an activity.

Dealing with Challenging Topics/Situations
Depending on the focus of the group, some sensitive and challenging topics may arise. Issues of sexuality or other hot button topics (religion, politics, etc.) can bring tension to a group. Being exposed to unique views is part of the joy of group work; allowing us to grow and learn how to be tolerant of each other. Unfortunately, some members may come to group preaching and judging others. If this happens, remind the group of its guidelines and that sometimes it is ok to agree to disagree. If this is not helpful, your group may need to discuss alternative solutions.

Suicidal Ideation or Plans of Suicide
It is very helpful for your group to be aware of what to do in the case of a member expressing suicidal ideations or plans of suicide. As a group or one-on-one, try to talk about the issue only to the level you and they are comfortable with. Encourage them to call local crisis lines or go to hospital, you may even want to have a group member accompany them if possible. If they have a plan and will not call Crisis Line or go to hospital and you feel the person is a danger to themselves, call 911 for assistance.

Asking a Member to Leave
Hopefully this is not something that needs to occur often, but it can be an option if necessary. A member may be asked to leave the group if their needs are contrary to the purpose of the group, if they have been overly disruptive, or consistently disregard the group's guidelines. Ideally when a person is asked to leave, the group or facilitators have recommendations of other supports the person may wish to access.

(Sources:

Jacobs, E. Ed. 2006. *Group Counselling: Strategies & Skills, 5th Edition.* Thomson, Brooks/Cole.

Self Help Alliance. 2012. *Peer Training: Facilitators Guide.*)

Part 7 – Evaluating progress

How Do We Measure Success?
The number of people attending is not necessarily the best way to judge success of your group.
Consider these questions when you are examining what your group has accomplished:
- Do members give and receive emotional support on a regular basis?
- Do longer term members support newcomers?
- Are members avoiding judging others while providing warmth and acceptance?
- Are members 'graduating' from the group or is the group achieving its goals and no longer needing to meet?

Elements of a Successful Group:
- It feels right for you.
- It is facilitated by the members.
- Members decide on logistics issues such as dates and times for meetings.
- It is free or low cost.
- More than one person shares the work of the group (advertising, facilitation, problem solving, etc.).
- There is conflict, change and laughter.
- Membership goes up and down.
- Members graduate and celebrate.
- People make friends.
- People learn, give and receive.

Group Feedback
It is important to encourage members to provide feedback to the group on a regular basis. You can do this by preparing surveys with questions such as:
- Is the environment welcoming?
- What works for you?
- What does not work and how can we improve it?
- What were your expectations coming into this group?
- Were your expectations about the group met?

It is a nice option to do forms as people may feel better about leaving anonymous comments. Once you have the suggestions, you can share them with the group and together decide what they want, if changes are needed. See the appendix section for a sample group evaluation form.

When reviewing feedback, make note of similar responses and aim to address common issues first. Not all feedback will lead to immediate changes or may be impossible to resolve, however be sure to address all concerns and allow everyone to feel heard.

(Sources:

Ontario Self-Help Network/Self-Help Resource Centre. "Starting a Self-Help/Mutual Aid/Peer Support Group in your Community."

The Canadian Council on Social Development.1992. *Power Tools: Ways to Build a Self-Help Group.* New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse.)

APPENDIX

Part 2: Group Work Basics

Practising a Positive Attitude

On your own or with a partner, think of a time/situation that was negative and that your attitude was likely the reason for it:

Write down or act out with a group member how you could have made the situation turn out differently:

How might each of the following situations turn out if you approach them with a negative attitude?:
Car goes by and splashes slush on you.

Partner ignores you when you are telling them something important

No new members have been coming to your group.

Now go back and look at each situation with a positive attitude, how might each turn out differently?
Car goes by and splashes slush on you.

Partner ignores you when you are telling them something important

No new members have been coming to your group.

Think about a negative situation that is happening or has happened in your life. How might you approach that with a positive attitude? If you are comfortable, ask your group for suggestions.

Non-Defensive Communication

Non-defensiveness is closely linked with high self-esteem. The following exercise is designed to help empower the way you communicate with others.

Fill out the answers as completely and honestly as you can.

1) Think of a situation when you communicated defensively. What did the person say that provoked defensiveness?

2) How did this make you feel?

3) What did you say in response?

4) What is a non-defensive response you could have used? Could you have disengaged, empathized, asked questions, depersonalized?

5) What were the underlying fears or vulnerabilities at the root of your reaction?

6) Rephrase your defensive response into a non-defensive one.

(Source: CRM Films. 1994. *Communicating Non-defensively. http://www.trainingabc.com/product_files/P/Comm_Non_Def_LG.pdf*)

Active Listening: Listening Like You Want to Be Heard!

Everyone wants to be heard. Listening is an active process that requires time, patience and practice.

Here are a few tips to being a more effective listener. Be sure to add your own tips for being a better listener.

1. **Look Interested:**
   - Make eye contact
   - Maintain appropriate physical space – close enough to hear well, without crowding.
   - Nod, say "*uh-huh*" or show other physical signs you are listening.

   - _____

   - _____

2. **Listen to Understand:**
   - Reflect or restate what was said to make sure you understood correctly.
   - Ask questions to clarify.
   - Listen for details as well as the whole picture.

   - _____

   - _____

3. **Treat the speaker as someone you are honoured to hear:**
   - Quiet your own thoughts so you can hear what is being said.
   - Think about how the speaker is feeling.
   - Ask yourself – how would I want someone to listen to me?

   - _____

   - _____

4. **Be a supportive and considerate listener:**
   - Listen without judgements.
   - Be kind, gentle, and honest with feedback.
   - Avoid interrupting. If you need to, ask permission "Can I interrupt for a second?"

   - _____

   - _____

Open Ended Questions

Open-ended questions cannot be answered by yes or no. These questions often begin with "who," "what," "why," "where," and "when."

Some of the questions listed here will feel natural to you and you can practice using them in your group. Circle three or four that you feel most comfortable with and try to use them during group meetings.

5. What kind of information on _____ are you looking for?
6. What is it you want to know about _____ ?
7. What would you like to know about this topic ?
8. What do you mean by _____ ?
9. Would you tell me more about....?
10. I'd be interested in knowing....
11. Would you explain...?
12. What specifically about _____ are you looking for?
13. Would you explain that to me in more detail?
14. I'm not certain I understand.... Can you give me an example?
15. What examples can you give me?
16. What do you already know about _____ ?
17. Will you explain some key concepts, terms or vocabulary for this topic?
18. Where have you checked for information so far?
19. What would you like to know about _____?
20. When you say _____ , what do you mean?
21. Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?
22. Where did you hear or read about _____ ?
23. I'd like to help you find the best possible information. Can you tell me more about your subject?

(Source: InfoPeople. 2012. *Open Ended Questions.* http://www.infopeople.org/training/past/2002/ref_interview/Open-endedQuestions.pdf)

Part 4 – First Meeting of Many

Icebreaker Activities

Truth or Pretend?
Have each person say their name, and two things about themselves: one that is true, and one that is false. Then have the other participants guess which one is the truth.

Create-A-Name
Materials: paper, drawing materials.
Give each members a piece of paper and have drawing materials available (crayons, markers, etc). Have each person write their name in large letters, and use the letters to draw something that is of interest to them. For example, the letter "O" can be turned into a smiley face. As members introduce themselves, have them explain the meaning behind their drawings. You can have the group fold their papers to use these as name tags.

The Human Web
Materials: ball of yarn, twine, etc.
This ice breaker focuses on how people in the group are connected to each other. The facilitator begins with a ball of yarn. Keeping hold of the end, pass the ball to one of the participants. That participant then introduce themselves and shares a little bit about what brought them to group. Ask the rest of the group if they have the same reason, and pass the yarn to someone who soe.
 Once this person has made their introduction, ask them to pass the ball of yarn on to another person in the group, while still holding on to the yarn. The next person then shares how they relate (or expects to relate) to the pervious person. The process continues until everyone is introduced. To emphasis the connections amongst the group, the facilitator then pulls on the starting thread and everyone's hand should move.

Name Tents
Materials: Premade and/or blank name tents (paper folded to make standing triangle), writing materials.
Create a set of name tents prior to meeting: using card stock, print 1 statement per sheet in a way that the sheet can then be folded into a three sided "name tent". Possible statements could be:
- What the heck is going on?!
- Here we go again . . .
- Cool!
- Glass Half Full
- New Kid on the Block

Before the meeting starts, set out the name tents on a table. As people enter the room, ask them to choose a name tent that describes their frame of mind. You can set out blank name tents and have people write their own words as well. During introductions, ask people to share why they choose their statement.

How Do You Feel?
Materials: paper, writing materials, board/flip chart.
Ask the group members to write down words or phrases describing their feelings that day. List the responses on a board/flip chart. Discuss that all feelings are ok, and note similarities between responses.

(Sources:

San Diego County Office of Education. 2013. *Icebreakers and Name Games.* http://www.sdcoe.net/lret/avid/resources/icebreakers.pdf)

Miller, J. 2012. *Surly Name Tent Ice Breaker.* The People Equation. http://people-equation.com/surly-name-tent-ice-breaker/

Mint Tools. 2013. *Ice Breakers: Easing Group Contribution.* http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_76.htm

<u>Acknowledging Endings</u>

'The Gift' Exercise

Think of a gift that you have received from each member; things like hope, courage, laughter, an understanding of another's particular perspective, etc.

Then, think of a metaphoric or symbolic gift you would like to give group members—a magic mirror to see yourself as you really are, a trip to Disney Land to play with your inner child, a dog, a funny movie and so on.

You can either explain this the week before and ask group members to think about this over the week, or allow for time at the beginning of group to prepare. With one member at a time as a volunteer to receive feedback, go around the room and have each member 'present' their gift. As the gift is received, the member can talk about what that gift means to them. Go around until all members who wish to participate have had a turn.

Hope & Appreciation List

Have each member write their name on the top of a sheet followed by two columns – one titled 'Hope', the other 'Appreciation'. Circulate the sheets through the group and ask each member write something they hope for the person, and something they appreciate about the person. Remind them that this will be the last experience with that person. After it goes around, have the members read what was written, and then have them add one hope and one appreciation for themselves. Members can then take the sheets with them.

Rocks & Shells Activity

Materials: a number of rocks and shells, sand, short glasses or vases.

Have the items set out on the table before members come to group. Each member gets a glass and fills it partway with sand. Then members are instructed to select a rock or a shell for each of the other members in the group.

One at a time, each member passes their glass around the circle and all other members say something about them as they put the rock or shell in the glass. Members can voice positive attributes they noticed, recall things from group about the person they will remember, or voice hopes/wishes for the group member.

After all members have spoken about the person, the member speaks about what participating in the group has meant to them. At this time, members can select a rock or shell for them self. This process can take some time, so you may need to set time limits. You may want to have baggies for members take their glass home.

(<u>Source:</u> Terry, Leann. 2011. *Semi-structered termination exercises: A compilation from the Groups in College Counseling Centres List.* American Psychological Association. http://www.apadivisions.org/division-49/publications/newsletter/group-psychologist/2011/04/termination-exercises.aspx)

Part 5 – Feedback and Conflict Resolution

<u>"I" Message Activity</u>

Improving communication takes practice, perseverance and concentration. Practice using the "I" message formula by filling in the blanks for the following situations.

Example 1:
Your 12 year-old drops his book and coat at the front door.

Response:
I feel _____

when you _____

because _____

What I want is_____

Example 2:
You made plans to go out with a friend who arrived an hour late.
She did not phone ahead so you could make alternate arrangements.

Response:
I feel _____

when you _____

because _____

What I want is_____

Example 3:
You are leaving home for an early appointment.
Your partner used the car last night and the tank is empty.
Now you have to stop for gas, making you late.

Response:
I feel _____

when you _____

because _____

What I want is_____

Conflict Resolution - Defining Positions and Interests

When working towards a resolution to a conflict, understanding all points of view is very beneficial. On the chart, fill in the position and interests of all parties, and use the information to explore possible solutions. When working on conflicts in your own life or group, be sure to ask questions when filling out the chart and avoid assuming you know what the other would say. Continue by answering the questions below the chart in hopes of reaching a solution.

Example Conflict: One member always arrive 10 minutes late as they have to work on the day group is scheduled. To fix this, this member has suggested that the group move to a new night. So far, no other members agree and want the group time to stay the same.

	Mine/Groups	Theirs
Position	The group time/day should stay the same.	The group time/day should change.
Interests	It would disrupt everyone's schedule to change things, not just one person. A new room/location might need to be found. Advertising posters would need to be edited.	They like attending group and find it beneficial. Getting to group late is stressful, and they always arrive feeling anxious and rushed.

Why are these positions different?
>The individual wants change while the group does not.

Is there any common ground around interests?
>Both want the group to be successful.

Are there potential win-win solutions?
>The group could start with a 10-15 minute social time, so the person arriving late does not miss anything and the other concerns will not be affected.

Using the sample scenarios, or a conflict of your own, define the positions and interests of those involved and look for a win-win solution.

Sample Scenarios:
- It is your week to facilitate group. As the group meeting progresses, one member is challenging your role as facilitator and repetitively says you are wrong and interrupts. This individual has attended groups with a different format and likes the other format better.
- One member shared with another that they have been having challenges in their marriage. The other member is concerned about their friend and tells others what is happening. The first member is upset that they have been gossiped about.

Your own conflict:

	Mine/Groups	Theirs
Position		
Interests		

Why are these positions different?

Is there common ground around interests?

Are there potential win-win solutions?

Part 7 – Evaluating Progress

<u>**Sample Group Evaluation Form**</u>

1= not at all   2= a little   3=somewhat 4=very good 5=excellent

Is this a welcoming environment (friendly, supportive, etc)?
1   2   3   4   5
Is the temperature, cleanliness and room set up welcoming?
1   2   3   4   5
 When you attend groups do you feel welcomed?
1   2   3   4   5

While involved in this group do you feel safe to discuss/express your thoughts?
 ___Yes ____NO

Are your expectations being met regarding the support you received?
1   2   3   4   5

What were your expectations coming into this group?

_____

_____

Were the group guidelines shared and/or posted with the group at the start of each meeting?
____Yes ____No

In this group do you feel supported to talk/express yourself? ___ Yes ____NO

Did you receive the support you want from this group? ___Yes ___No

What can we do to improve?

_____

_____