



## What is a Self Help Group?

### **Introduction**

There is no universal definition of what a self help group, support group, or self help organisation is. People all over the world use different terms to describe particular groups, sometimes using the term 'self help support group.' Other groups do not favour being called a self help or support group, preferring the term 'organisation'.

Sometimes self help and support groups are placed under the same umbrella; the only distinction being that if the group is begun by an individual professional or a professional organisation, it is called a support group.

There is no right or wrong. Terminology is often interchanged according to the preference of the person using it. However, it is easier to identify particular types of groups if there is a common view.

### **The Self Help Queensland View**

Self Help Groups are formed when people with the same issue or health condition come together to support each other, share information and advocate on their own behalf. The group can be large or small (say 3 to 30 members) formal or informal, funded or unfunded, social or activist.

Group members may opt to engage in one or a number of activities such as providing practical, emotional or social support to members, publishing educative material such as videos, newsletters, brochures, websites etc, lobbying for better services, fighting stigma, fundraising for research, advocating on behalf of members, raising community awareness and many others.

People often start self help groups because they perceive a gap in existing health care or other services. They want to help smooth the path for others by sharing the knowledge and experience they have gained on their own journey. The decline of informal community networks such as extended family and friends can also be a factor in the development of self help and support groups.

Characteristics of self help groups are that:

- members share a common issue or condition
- the group is managed and maintained by members
- there is no professional supervision (but may be supported by a health service or professional)
- everyone is equal
- members support each other mutually – the giving and receiving of support is reciprocal
- there is no fee for services (other than membership fees)

Researchers have spent decades analysing what constitutes the key characteristics of self help groups and organisations. There is no universal definition.

From the available research, Self Help Queensland has attempted to put forward a simplified consensus view of what self help groups, support groups, self help organisations, therapy groups and support group programs are.

### **What is a support group?**

A support group generally refers to a group which is managed or facilitated by a person who does not share the same issue or condition as the members. They may or may not be a professional person with expertise in the particular issue. The generally considered view is that the facilitator is the 'expert'. No matter how skilled or supportive the facilitator is, by nature of their not having the condition, there is automatically a power imbalance in the dynamics of the group.

### **What is a Self Help Organisation?**

Self help organisations or associations usually describe larger self help groups which are more formally structured and developed; often with local chapters or branches. They are usually incorporated, carry other forms of legal status, and may employ paid staff.

### **What is a Therapy Support Group?**

A therapy support group usually refers to a group which is facilitated by a leader who is a mental health or other health professional. The focus and direction of the group usually lies in the theoretical orientation of the leader. The size of the group is usually limited to around 7 to 10 members. The duration of therapy is dictated by the goals of the therapy. There is usually a fee for service.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is a Support Group Program?**

A support group program usually describes a 'course', or number of 'sessions' which brings people together for the benefit of receiving specific information relating to their condition or issue. It is usually advertised, facilitated by a professional, has a limited life span, and members are 'participants'. (eg 2 hours per week for 8 weeks) There is no expectation that relationships will be sustained after the program has ended. However, sometimes participants who wish to stay connected do continue on to form their own self help groups.

### **What a Self Help Group is Not**

- Self help groups are not places to go to receive a service from others.
- Self help groups are not to be confused with self help books and guides which concentrate on changing individual behaviour.
- Self help groups are not set up and run by professionals.
- Self help groups are not therapy or counselling groups.

The World Health Organisation has adopted the definition of self help groups put forward by Katz and Bender (1976)

"Self help groups are voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change.

The initiators and members of such groups perceive that their needs are not, or cannot be, met by or through existing social institutions. Self help groups emphasise face to face social interactions and the assumption of personal responsibility of members. They often provide material as well as emotional support; they are frequently 'cause oriented' and promulgate an ideology of values through which members can gain an enhanced sense of personal identity."<sup>2</sup>

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Parker, Elizabeth "Toward an Understanding of the Experience of Members of a self help group" Powel (1987) Page 17

<sup>2</sup> Katz, A and Bender E (1976) "Self Help Groups in Western Society: History and Prospects" Journal of Applied Behavioural Science, 12 (3) Page 130