

Professionals and Self Help Groups Working Together

Introduction

Some self help groups value and want professional involvement in their group.

Many professionals have been slow to accept self help groups as an effective adjunct to main stream care. There is considerable evidence to suggest self help groups are a valid means of allowing individuals to take responsibility for their own health issues and that involvement in them often produces better health outcomes.

Self help groups' commitment to democratic processes often casts them as a threat to established power structures such as health professionals and policy makers.

The experience of self help groups shows that professionals can play a positive role in the activities of the group, developing skills and encouraging partnership in decision making.

Groups often see professionals as 'expert', and therefore not equal to members. This power imbalance requires the careful development of a good working relationship between professionals and groups so that they can complement each other and gain mutual benefits.

Professionals can build capacity without dependency by sharing their range of skills with the group from the sideline, acting as a kind of 'consultant'. This allows the group to grow, develop and ultimately take charge of its own affairs.

Professionals playing an indirect, non-authoritarian role provide the most assistance to self help groups. This role and the principles by which it will be managed need to be discussed and agreed early in any partnership. This is much better than trying to change the role or level of involvement of a professional once group norms have been established. ¹

There are considerable mutual benefits to be gained when self help groups invite professional assistance. The group remains free to conduct its own affairs and make its own decisions without interference – the supportive professional standing to the side, providing their expertise when called upon. In this context, 'professionals' refers to people who become involved with the group because they may have an interest or experience in the issue that is particular to the group. They become involved because of their profession, and do not generally share the issue common to other members. Sometimes it is their workplace that sees value in their supporting the group, thereby providing the opportunity for the professional to lend their support.

The capacity of self help groups to develop and grow can be enhanced by utilising the skills of professionals. Professionals, in turn, benefit from their contact with groups. The expertise of people with a living experience, their feedback on service delivery, knowledge of barriers to accessing services etc is vital information for professionals seeking to be responsive to community needs.

Forms of support that self help groups might seek from Professionals:

- Provide resources eg meeting rooms, help with photocopying, transport
- Use networks for connecting the group to other organisations, resources
- Help group members develop skills such as facilitating meetings, keeping records, producing flyers/newsletters on computer, debriefing, conflict resolution
- Assist with group promotion
- Act as a guest speaker
- Provide information that may be hard to access – professional journals etc
- Act as a sounding board for group ideas
- Help plan strategies
- Act as an advocate for the group
- Help with applying for grants – writing funding submissions
- Write letters of support for the group
- Act as a mediator if conflict arises
- Share tips for meeting activities – icebreakers, energisers etc
- Provide advice on how to use the media

As in all relationships, partnerships between self help groups and professionals need to be supported by transparent, respectful and timely communication.

References

¹ Derived from a presentation to the 11th International Congress of Human Genetics, Brisbane, Australia, August 2006. Text by KM Summers and S Smyllie, Self Help Queensland. Updated 2009.

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