

The Importance of Support Groups for People with Mental Illness

I started my first support group in 2006. I knew by sharing my illness with others who had the same issues as mine would help me better appreciate and understand that I was not alone and had others who understood the trials and tribulations that we all had in common. I organized a local support group under the auspices of DBSA (Depression Bipolar Support Alliance), a national organization based out of Chicago that provides education and assists in organizing support groups for people like me who suffer with Bipolar Illness. I started my own support group in Hampstead, NH, which became very successful and was accepted with open arms in my community. I, then, took it to the next level and represented my support group with DBSA meetings in Chicago. After participating in their annual conferences, I decided to get more involved and run for election on their National Board. A year later I was elected to the National Board of Directors. I truly believed in their mission and knew that not only could I contribute to the organization for all 20,000 members nationwide, but I could bring back to my local support group the pearls of wisdom that I learned as a national board member. After meeting all my fiduciary responsibilities and completing my term of office, I wanted to go a step further and organize my own national support organization IAMH (International Alliance for Mental Health). Within 6 months of applying for non-profit status, I was awarded a 501c3. I continued my grassroots involvement in my community and began to lecture in the northeast to people with mental illness.

If you're facing a major illness or stressful life change, you don't have to do it alone. A support group can help. Find out how to choose the right one. As I mentioned previously support groups bring together people who are going through similar experiences. A support group provides an opportunity for people to share personal experiences, their feelings, coping strategies and firsthand information about disease or treatment. Please don't think these groups are a substitute for professional help because they are not. These groups are an adjunct to your doctor or therapist who are trained professionally to guide you to the path of recovery.

For many people, a health-related support group may fill a gap between medical treatment and the need for emotional support. A person's relationship with doctor or other medical personnel may not provide adequate emotional support, and a person's family and friends may not understand the impact of an illness or treatment. Support groups may be offered by non-profit advocacy organizations, clinics, hospitals, or community organizations. They also may be independent of an organization and run entirely by group members.

Format of support groups vary, including face to face meetings, teleconferences or online. Some support groups may offer educational opportunities, such as guest doctors, therapists, nurses or social workers to talk about topics related to the group's needs. The common experience among members of a support group often means they have similar feelings, worries, everyday problems or treatment side effects. Support groups may have drawbacks, and effective groups generally depend on the facilitator to help steer away from potential problems.

When you join a new support group, you may be nervous about sharing personal issues with people you don't know. At first, you may benefit from simply listening. Over time, however, contributing your own ideas and experiences may help you get more out of a support group. Good luck.

“The Importance of Support Groups for People with Mental Illness“, Ronald G Rossetti, MBA, Article #14, Volume #1, Series #1, Internal Alliance for Mental Health (2020)