

# PLAIN TALK ABOUT MUTUAL SELF-HELP GROUPS

More than ever, we are faced with pressures and demands that produce anxiety and leave little time for relaxation. The attempt to keep pace with our ever-changing society can leave us anxious and confused. In an effort to exercise more control over the quality of our lives, millions are turning to the resources of shared experience and support found in mutual-help groups.

## What Is It?

Mutual help has been practiced since families first existed. As social beings, all of us need to be accepted, cared for, and emotionally supported; we also find it satisfying to care for and support those around us. Within the most natural "mutual help networks" families and friends establish the one-to-one contact so important to our happiness and well-being. This informal support is such a basic part of our social character that we are apt to take it for granted, but it clearly influences our ability to handle distressing events in our lives. Many of our daily conversations are actually mutual counseling sessions whereby we exchange the reassurance and advice that help us deal with routine stresses. In fact, research scientists have found that there is a strong link between the strength of our social support systems and our health. Many studies show that such support helps prevent ill health and promote recovery when an illness or accident does occur.

The personal support we receive from family and friends, however, is only one part of the support network that helps sustain us through life. As we develop socially and intellectually, we tend to associate with others who have similar interest and beliefs. In groups such as religious congregations, civic and fraternal organizations, and social clubs, members benefit from a shared identity and a sense of common purpose. Some informal groups are aimed primarily at social enjoyment. Other consumer-oriented groups come together to bring about social change; through combined efforts, the group can often promote or accomplish what the individual, acting alone, cannot. Our reasons for joining groups may vary considerably, but each member's presence and participation adds to the strength of the group; the group is then an instrument for mutual services to the total membership.

## Why The Need for Mutual-Help Groups?

The Twentieth Century has advanced human knowledge and achievement at an astonishing pace. It has also produced social changes which affect our traditional support patterns. Living in a highly mobile society, we rarely enjoy the benefits of a permanent community and long standing stable relationships. People today are apt to live in more than one home before adulthood. As adults, they may hold a series of jobs requiring them to form new friendships in new locations. Their families (parents, brothers, sisters, grand-parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws), once close, are now separated by distance, and the emotional and practical support they gave is no longer available. And, perhaps most significantly, divorce is separating millions of families each year. Despite these changing social patterns, our needs for stability and support remain constant. We are likely to feel a sense of isolation, questioning "What role do I play in such a vast, impersonal world? Where can I find other people like me?"

More than ever, we are faced with pressures and demands that produce anxiety and leave little time for relaxation. The attempt to keep pace with our ever changing society can leave us anxious and confused. In an effort to exercise more control over the quality of our lives, millions are turning to the resources of shared experience and support found in mutual-help groups.

## What Is The Purpose?

The estimated half-million mutual-help groups in existence deal with almost every human problem. There are three types of groups: 1) the self-care groups for those suffering from physical and mental illness (there is at least one group for nearly every major disease); 2) the reform groups for addiction behaviors (particularly the 11 anonymous 11 groups such as Alcoholics, Gamblers, and Overeater\$ Anonymous); and 3) advocacy groups for certain minorities (handicapped, elderly, etc.). Mutual-help groups frequently have multiple functions. Self-care groups often lobby for reforms in professional care; self-reform groups are also involved with self-care; and minority advocacy groups address many economic and social issues. But for the enormous diversity of problems they address, all mutual-help groups have the same underlying purpose: to provide emotional support and practical help in dealing with a problem common to all members. The ability to adjust to a difficult situation or life change requires empathy from others far more than it does sympathy.

There is a special bond among people who share the same troubling experience; it begins when one person says to another, "I know just how you feel." Knowing that someone else truly understands one's feelings by virtue of having 11 been there" brings a sense of relief; one's pain is no longer a solo burden. Stepping into the security of such a group of people can be like coming home for those who have been too long isolated by their private, painful concerns. Each mutual-help group provides an atmosphere of acceptance that encourages its members to share their sorrows, fears, and frustrations; from there, they can begin to communicate more openly, view their problems more objectively, and find more effective coping strategies.

## What Is The Structure Of Group?

The structure of mutual-help groups and the way they serve their members depends primarily on their goals. Each local group determines its own programs and meeting schedules. Typically, groups hold regular meetings in church halls, public buildings, or other no-rent or low-rent facilities. Many small groups meet in a member's home. Programs for those meetings can include group discussions, study groups, visiting speakers, and other activities that inform the members and help to build their confidence. To supplement the personal support gained from meeting together, the groups frequently offer additional services. Newsletters published by both parent organizations and local groups report individual success stories, treatment updates, and other information about the group's concerns. Some groups maintain a hotline service so that those who need it have constant access to information and an understanding ear.

Others, particularly those focusing on addictive behavior or emotional disorders, use a "buddy system" so that members can count on familiar, one-to-one encouragement between meetings. Some groups, such as those that deal with a rare disease and have small memberships in various areas, have a correspondence referral system to put members in touch with one another. Although some mutual help groups receive funding from government health agencies and public contributions, many are entirely self-supporting through members' voluntary contributions or minimal dues (average \$10-15 yearly). Since

members run the groups, there are seldom any professional salaries or overhead costs (although an office administrator or secretary is sometimes necessary). Some groups will even refuse outside contributions on the grounds that it would compromise their independent status.

### **What Happens At A Meeting?**

For the millions currently benefiting from the resources of mutual-help groups, the process began with a tentative exploration, a first meeting. Letting people know how hard it is to deal with problems alone, or exposing a previously guarded pain may be frightening; thus many approach their first group meeting with their defenses up. All new members wonder what the group can do for them and what it will ask in return. Experienced members, aware of these mixed emotions, use every possible means to encourage new members to feel relaxed and welcome. A veteran member may begin a conversation and offer literature that outlines the group's purposes. In an atmosphere that is friendly, compassionate, and accepting, new members soon realize that their participation is voluntary with no strings attached -no commitments, no enforced disclosure, no group constraints. There is an unwritten code of confidentiality within the group, and each member's privacy and dignity is respected. Every one is given the freedom to draw on the strength of the group as needed and to extend steps to recovery (such as the 'Anonymous' organizations), members proceed at their own pace, within their own limits. Group disapproval of those who stumble in the march toward recovery is rare because everyone knows how difficult it can be.

To those new to a mutual-help group, being with others like themselves, successfully getting on with life despite their problems can be the best encouragement of all. Who are the "others" who provide the positive examples that keep the group together? If they have passed a crisis or gained confidence in coping with their hardship, what further need do they have for shared support? While there are no levels of distinction among the members in a group, there are always those who are stronger, more experienced, more committed to the group's goals and more able to give of themselves. These "helpers" often assume leadership roles, continuing to receive comfort and encouragement while helping others. There is a natural tendency among those who have derived benefit from the group to want to perpetuate the cycle of being helped and helping. For the helpers, who lead, organize, reach out to others, and bolster the group's morale by their own example, reward comes in seeing the progress of others. Says one group member, "I've been there and know what it's like. I could have been saved twenty years of misery if there had been a group to help me."

### **What About Professional Help?**

Mutual-help groups do not intend to replace physicians, therapists, and other skilled professionals. Rather, the groups' function is the belief that many of our physical and mental health needs go beyond the bounds of formal care measures. Some who received treatment for an illness have taken only the first step to recovery; learning to adjust to life in a weakened or disabled state becomes the greater challenge. Others must deal with a lifelong handicap or chronic illness; for them, the practical problems of everyday life can be overwhelming. Those afflicted with mental or emotional illness require the continuing, patient support of others to help them along the road to recovery. These conditions do not indicate a failure on the part of professional caretakers but the reasonable limits of their ability to serve our needs.

People are now taking a more realistic look not only at the formal care system but also at their own responsibility for self-care. Mutual-help groups use the knowledge gained from a conflict or crisis as a valuable tool for building better ways to manage it. Some mutual-help groups avoid formal professional guidance or consultation, although many have benefited from the informal help of professionals. Despite the distance maintained between the groups and their professional counterparts, each recognizes the role of the other: groups encourage their members to seek or continue with the professional help they need, and many physicians and other service providers actively endorse group programs as an appropriate extension of care.

### **Finding The Group You Need!**

You may already have heard about a mutual-help group that deals with your concerns. There are a number of ways to get more information. Some of the larger groups are listed by subject in the phone directory, and the names and phone numbers of many more are available from hospitals and local health and social-service agencies. If you're interested in a group that does not have a unit in your area, its central office will provide information on organizing one. Directories of mutual-help groups can usually be found in public libraries, and more comprehensive information and assistance, including how to organize a group, can be found through the organization reference books listed in this Resource Directory.

The important thing to realize is that mutual-help groups are there to be joined, organized, or explored for better understanding. They're economical and effective. And, most importantly, they can reassure you that you are not alone. There are others who do understand and are anxious to share their experience and support with you.

*This material was written by Norma McCormack under contract No.BPA8501 8-001 from the National Institute of Mental Health. Reprinted by the American Amputee Foundation.*