

General Information about Groups

As you prepare to start a group, there are some factors to consider about the purpose and structure of the group. These will depend on the setting, and the people involved, and what they seem to need. If you are operating within another organization (such as a mental health center, psychosocial rehabilitation agency, or consumer-run drop-in center), the values of the organization may affect your choices.

Some Defining Features of Groups

Drop-in Groups vs. Set Membership—With drop-in groups, people can drop in as they feel like it, or as they need to, and you will have different participants at each meeting. With set membership groups, you have people sign up for the group, and have the same participants each time. It can be hard to build on past information or group experience with drop-in groups, and hard to build relationships and create continuity. On the other hand, it also means that you may have fresh new perspectives each week, and it creates an open atmosphere that can feel welcoming to some participants. For others who may want to develop a sense of safety and trust by meeting with the same group of people, a set membership group might be more comfortable. It is possible to set up a kind of compromise between these, in which there is set membership for a few weeks in which a particular topic is covered, and then the group opens up again for new participants.

Leadership Structure—There should be clarity about what sort of leadership structure your group will have. Peer-led groups are groups in which the leader or organizer is like the other group members in an important way (e.g. the leader is also a person with a psychiatric disability). Participants often find it easier to open up and trust someone who shares their struggles. A group might also be organized or led by an "outsider" or professional (such as agency staff, or employment counselors) who may bring specific expertise or resources to the group. It is also possible to have a group where there is no leader per se, and the group members set the agenda together and monitor how things are going. Your group might have one kind of structure for the entire life of the group, or you might vary it meeting by meeting, depending on the topic. For instance, you may want to bring in an outside expert for one session to teach about Social Security benefits, but then have another session in which there is open discussion (with no leader) about job search frustrations. It is important, however, that the participants in the group understand whichever leadership structure is being used so they know what to expect.