

The British Columbia Association of People Who Stutter

Presents

STARTING - RUNNING & MAINTAINING A SELF-HELP SUPPORT GROUP

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STARTING - RUNNING AND MAINTAINING A SELF-HELP GROUP

Chapter 1

The initial work of starting a self-help group has been said to be the easiest element of all aspects of forming a successful, long-term self-help group. Running and maintaining a successful self-help group has endless pitfalls, drawbacks, discouragements and disappointments; however, and by far the toughest part, is keeping a strong, active membership over a long period of time. This manual will go over all three of these aspects and attempt to set in motion a pattern of procedures and suggestions that will help you with the ground work to start a group; lay the basic foundation of the group's goals; getting the meetings up and running; then, tackle the most difficult element of self-help groups; maintaining a healthy group environment that will be attractive to new members and keep existing members over the long term.

Before we get into the broad spectrum of running a self-help group, two things must be made clear about self help organizations: namely, determining the purpose of the group and how that purpose or goal is to be achieved in a group setting . Once these two stipulations have been separated, clarified and established, it is of the utmost importance that you stay within your group's guidelines and principles. If the purpose and long-term goals are not established right from the onset of your first meeting, the mission of your group will fall apart very quickly and so will your group membership.

Self-help groups can have varied purposes far beyond that of what most people can imagine; yet, be achieved while operating under the same guidelines and principles. That is to say, more than one person getting together to lend emotional support to others who are in the same emotional frame of mind or life style but, not necessarily having the same illness or affliction. A feeling of not being alone in one's anguish or troubled life can create a major emotional uplift for a person who is suffering from severe emotional trauma or a physical impairment.

Divorce, death, illness, speech impediments and crippling physical impairments are examples of some of the foundations for lending emotional support to others. Stuttering, though well hidden for the most part, can lead to a lifetime of emotional trauma and lead to a life of social withdrawal and loneliness. Losing the use of one's legs or entire body, such as a quadriplegic, can have a crippling emotional consequence on a person's life, and many times the victim's entire family. Finding out that one has an incurable illness, will emotionally devastate most people. This is where self help groups come into play and can perform a major role in helping a person through and dealing with their troubled times. Talking with or lending a sympathetic ear to someone who is going through the same emotional state or illness usually gives the troubled mind a feeling of not being alone in the world with his or her problems.

Now let's start separating the various types of self-help group scenarios. This is where you attempt to establish a set focus on one condition or area that is important to you and your future group. Generally speaking, it will not help someone who suffers with a very severe speech impediment to join a support group that supports people who are battling with a fatal illness. Someone who has just gone through a long and very bitter divorce will gain little from discussing his or her problems with a group of people who have become quadriplegics.

Before you misinterpret the meaning of the above paragraph, a few words of clarification need to be added here. Certain illnesses and/or afflictions can create similar physical impairments, social drawbacks and emotional trauma. Thus, it can be said that you need not focus on one specified circle of support for only one specific affliction. This will be discussed in further detail in the chapter of "Setting your goals."

Chapter 2

Establishing the agenda and goals of your group

Setting up and following a specified agenda or platform is vital to keep any group from collapsing in on its self. It is in this area that many support groups have high membership turnovers or fail completely. Many well meaning groups or group organizers try to accommodate more than one spectrum of support, either out of compassion or to enhance their membership count. Do not fall into this trap. You must clearly determine what the objective is that you want your new support group to accomplish. Will it be a simple mandate of just having people with similar difficulties get together to discuss their problems or, will the goal be to administer some sort of professional therapy and emotional cleansing? At first the two may appear to be the same, however, the later requires a much different and a more complex approach to self-help or support work..

A gathering to discuss one's particular area of difficulty is much different than having a group of people getting together to gain an educational or broader understanding of their problem and how to correct or deal with it. The later can include the technical side of the problem (affliction or impairment) and how and why it manifests its self. The simple discussion group's goal is primarily to unload and share pent up emotions and to learn how others have dealt with their difficulties. The more technical or professionally run group will delve into why those emotions are there or what is creating the disturbing emotions and how to correct them. The simple discussion group is a sharing of experiences and possibly to help others to understand that they are not alone

in the world with their problems or feelings. The therapeutic group is more of a professional learning and correction experience. The latter is generally, and should be, mediated and organized by a professional in a particular field. The simple get together group, can be likened to an open social gathering that does not center itself around therapeutic work or counseling.

For a smaller group, it is best to aim for a more social and/or thought sharing atmosphere. This is not to say that the group cannot occasionally step into a more therapeutic tone on occasion. This should be done however, only when a licensed professional is in attendance. This will be discussed in a later chapter. For the person who is starting a self-help or support group, it is imperative that a goal or mandate be laid out in the first couple of meetings. Don't fall into the trap of a haphazard make it up as you go scenario. If you do this, your group will have no set direction and will end up with confusion and a mismatch of agendas and ideas that will appease one or two members while leaving others on the outside. If your group's members know precisely what the group is all about, the group's continued success over the long term is greatly enhanced.

A non-therapeutic support group can vary its agenda to a much broader extent than a professionally run therapeutic support group. The non-therapeutic support group can operate under a much more relaxed, social atmosphere and can be involved in events that have little or nothing to do with the affliction that the members are dealing with. In a sense, this type of group can accomplish as much as an expensive, professional therapeutic support group.

The best route to take in the planning stages of a new support group that is more to the social side of thing, is to have two or three people sit down and lay out an achievement goal scenario then, a long term plan to effectively achieve that goal or goals. When you lay out your group's initial agenda or goals properly, keep in mind that you are in essence, planning the long-term future of your group. It would also be a benefit at this stage to come up with a name or a suggested name for your group that would help to identify the group's agenda and social aspect. There is no law or rule that states that you must use the name of a particular affliction or handicap in the name of your group.

It is strongly suggested at this point that, a concentrated effort be made to stay away from the fatal flaw of doing all of the planning on your own. To not follow this golden rule will invariably lead to a personally owned group that will very quickly lead to the feeling of intrusion if and when one of the new members tries to change the original criteria of your ideas. A like-minded small group of people is by far the best route to take in the initial discussions of organizing your group's proposed agenda and its long-term goals.

Chapter 3

Where and how can you find or attract new members for your new group

A group cannot be called a group unless it has members or, more commonly termed, a membership. Before you can justifiably call yourself a group, you will need to find others who share the same vision for the support group and the perceptions that you are trying to establish. As stated previously, this is usually the easy part of running a self-help group. Though a rather daunting and disheartening venture at first and many times that follow, finding members for your new group becomes easier as you learn the ropes and as your group builds a viable reputation that people will see in a positive light. This is where an open approach to your agenda can mean the long-term success of a support group. A strong, successful group can and will attract many new members merely by word of mouth or through the public activities it is involved in and is successful at achieving.

If you live in a province, state or a country that has a provincial, state or national organization that offers support to the same classification of group or affliction that you are interested in, the first thing to do is to contact that organization and find out what agendas or program it follows and what sort of support they will offer you to help get you started. Most provincial, state and/or national organizations can and will be eager to offer their help to get your group started and, in some cases, will even go as far as to financially support your efforts in starting a local self-help group.

A word of caution must be added at this point when discussing parent organizations. Some national, provincial or state organizations are geared more to centralizing everything towards their own particular organization or agenda and your group can end up becoming a group solely to support the parent organization. In fact, in some cases, your group can even end up being not much more than workers for the parent organization. Be careful of what you commit your new group to and/or what will be expected of it by the parent organization over the long term. The best way grasp a quick answer to this is to ask yourself this simple question; "do children normally support their parents or do the parents support the children?"

The above statement by no means intends to suggest that you should not seek to affiliate your new group with a parent organization. In most cases, a bona fide parent organization can be a tremendous source of support and free information, and will go out of its way to help you in the many aspects of building your group. Most provinces in Canada, along with most States in the USA and other countries around the world, have parent organizations that can be a great benefit to your local group. Just be careful to have a clear understanding of the long term commitments involved when affiliating your group to any other group or organization.

At the beginning, you have to find out all the sources from which you can gain new members. Contact the specialists or possibly therapists in the field that you are interested in focusing upon. For instance, if your group is to support people who have speech difficulties, contact as many speech & language pathologists in your area as you can. Possibly, your provincial or national organization can assist you with this or they can give you names, addresses and phone numbers of specialists who work in that particular field. The national, provincial or state organization can also give you names of people who live in your local area who may enjoy or benefit from your support group's activities. If the national, provincial or state organization refuses to divulge any names that it has to people living in your area, give a second thought of that organization's commitment to helping your group.

Newspapers, and TV ads can draw new members for you; however, these two medias can be a rather costly venture that has proven in the past to be a little less than fruitful. Almost all radio stations have public service announcements during non-prime time hours. Leave pamphlets or brochures in doctor's offices or at medical clinics. Hospitals, community centres, schools, libraries are also great sources for dropping off pamphlets and brochures. For people who stutter, clinics that offer therapy programs for those who stutter will gladly pass information on to their clients about your new group. Remember, most people who have attended an intensive therapy program and/or private therapy session are encouraged to join, or at least contact a local support group.

I suppose a warning about professional confidentiality would be appropriate here. Most private practicing, professional Speech and Language Pathologists or, public, clinical program directors will not give you the names of their clients. This a professional protocol that should be respected by your group at all times. What you can do however is ask the therapists or program directors to pass your group's name, and contact people to their clients. In the majority of cases, those who attend speech therapy programs are encouraged by the therapist to attend support groups between clinical therapy or refresher sessions.

When trying to build a membership for your group, always keep in mind that patience is a virtue. New members will usually filter in slowly. Some will attend one or two meetings then disappear never to be seen or heard from again. At the same time, others will enjoy the group atmosphere and continue to attend your group's activities. It may take a few months or even up to a year to build a core membership of people who find your group truly helpful and worthwhile attending. Likewise, some will not get much out of the group's gatherings or agenda. Possibly, some are just not ready to deal with their problem in front of others, while others may have been waiting for a chance to get their personal, emotional battles out in the open. As with any self help support group, you are dealing with individual character traits and emotional behaviours. It is imperative that you keep this in mind at all times and be willing to make many sacrifices

to fulfil the needs of the broad range of personalities that will join or pass through your group.

Once you have found all the avenues of finding and recruiting new members you will more than likely need to keep the membership drive active. It is rare that even a good support group will have a long-term assembly of same members. Your members will continually fade in and fade out so your membership drive activities will most likely be an ongoing procedure.

Chapter 4

Your support group's long term program and agendas

This chapter will be the longest and most important chapter of this manual. The following chapter deals primarily with keeping your group active and most importantly, attractive for its members over the long term. By far, the vast majority of self-help groups fail because of repetitive activities, which understandably leads to boredom. Let's face it, no one wants to meet and listen to the same story or do the same thing over and over and over and over again for weeks and months on end. The formulation of your agenda will be the foundation of keeping your group strong and in sustaining a satisfying membership count over the long term.

As stated previously, if your group is not a professionally structured group, you do not have to pin point its agenda to one centralized area or mandate. A support group that fundamentally deals with stuttering does not have to discuss and center only on stuttering at all meetings or in the group's activities. Repetition will very quickly lead to an atmosphere of boredom that will quickly steer your group to the fatal ending that most well meaning groups suffer from.

Repetition & boredom

The range of possibilities for creating activities for your group is limited only by you and your group members' imaginations. The more varied and interesting your group is, the more likely you are to attract new members. More importantly however, you will be able to keep your existing members around for the long term.

The following paragraph cannot be expressed strongly enough to all groups or group organizers. Repetition and boredom is the number one reason for the failure of all support groups. It is imperative that you remain acutely aware of the pitfalls of repetition and boredom with every move you make within your group. Gear all your agendas and goals with these two factors at the forefront at all times.

If it is your premise to create support for those who stutter it goes without saying that the principle foundation of your group will be for those who have speech impairments. This does not mean however that the problems surrounding speech impediments need to be the one and only focus for your agenda. A person who lives with a speech impediment is equally capable of doing most activities that a fluent speaking person is capable of.

This is where open-minded group organizers shine and make the difference between a successful support group and failed support group. A group that supports those who stutter can create hundreds of activities that are connected or may have a bearing on stuttering but are not dealing directly with the affliction. Does this sound confusing? More than likely at first glance the context of the previous sentence will cause you to read it again before you piece together what is behind its meaning.

The Initial Group Planning Meeting

Before we go any further with this, it may be prudent to discuss the initial organizational meeting and its suggested outcome. You will more than likely have no more than one or two others at the first meeting; however, everything usually starts with two or three people hashing over a broad range of ideas and concepts. The ideas that this small group comes up with will go through a myriad of changes before a united line of thought begins to take shape. Be prepared for a few heated discussions and debates before you get to lay on the table a clearly defined cooperative line of thought. Keep in mind that very few humans think exactly the same or decipher things in the same manner. No matter what your initial concepts and ideologies are, when you present them to someone else or to a group of people, some or many of your initial ideas will more than likely be sent to the wayside. Whatever you do however, do not take a hard line stance on any issue or idea or, remain non-relenting. There will be times when one or more of your ideas just may work even better when integrated with someone else's ideas. Always be prepared to give and take with patience and always be open to seriously consider of the feelings and ideas of others. Another very important thing you should do during your initial meetings is to write down and record all the ideas that are being bandied about. Many of these not so

attractive or seemingly frivolous ideas, at the time they were suggested, can turn out to be very useful as your group evolves into a full-fledged support group.

Focusing on the three types of agendas

The first item that must be discussed during your initial concept meeting is the criteria and ultimate long-term goal of your support group.

(1) Will your meetings or get-togethers be geared to a tightly structured program focused solely on stuttering, such as refreshing target skills and fluency shaping?

(2) Will they be structured to a more professional level of non-clinical but professional therapeutic work or,

(3) will your meetings be geared to more of a social group setting that is more on the relaxed side of a set of rules; however, will still include some structured fluency skill work during part of the meeting?

It is important that you choose only one of the three that have been mentioned above. You may of course combine a little of each to get the best out of all three; however, your group would be best served by choosing one concept and sticking to that concept over the long term. Combining a bit of all of the different types of group agendas can become a little confusing at times and you will more than likely run into split groups or some members wanting to attend only certain parts of your meetings.

(a)

The first program scenario mentioned is geared more to a long term practicing of fluency shaping target skills and is by far the most difficult to run if you are not a professionally trained Speech and Language Pathologist. This type of setting for the most part, is firmly structured and is prone to becoming repetitious and can cause some members to become bored with the ongoing repetitive process. There is another factor that comes into play with this type of group that you should be well aware of and understand and appreciate the complications and drawbacks involved. In the past twenty-five years, therapy for the affliction of stuttering has spread like an octopus's tentacles. Most people who have attended an intensive therapy program for stuttering treatment, recognize the terminologies of prolongation, easy breathing, easy onsets and the smooth blending of words. Though these fluency-shaping skills are being used as the primary base of the various fluency-shaping programs, clinicians have changed the language used to identify the skills, the techniques of how they are administered and applied.

Thus, we have ended up with a broad range of terminologies, variations of the administration and applications of the fluency shaping skills and when they should be used.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, a group that wants to structure their program agenda towards refreshing fluency skills will run into a rash of problems while trying to deal with these varying types of therapies. As stated, the base skills are still being used, however, if four or five of your members have been through five differing fluency programs, you will more than likely run into long winded discussions of whose program works the best. Not only can the discussions turn into disgruntled and defensive posturing; the group can spend all evening trying to learn everyone else's procedures and techniques. In short, this is practically an impossibility without the author of a particular program being in attendance. There is also another major problem with this type of group that must be mentioned here. A strong-minded member of the group will more often than not turn into an amateur speech therapist and end up coaching everyone on the usage of fluency skills. This problem by itself can and will cause endless problems, a dysfunctional group and lost members.

(b)

The professionally run therapeutic self-help group is the most structured of the three. These groups are normally run or administered by professionals or under professional direction. These groups are usually run on a pay as you attend criteria or are a required extension of an individual's therapy program. Though this group setting can be very beneficial for certain types of individuals and afflictions, the social aspect of these groups is substantially limited. These types of groups should be left to the professionals and those who are well educated in a particular specialized field. To save twenty or thirty pages in this manual, the professional group setting will be left to the professionals and those who know the best scenarios under which this type of group should be run. That is not to say that a professional group setting cannot benefit from this manual.

(c)

A loosely structured, socially oriented support group (one that is a little on the relaxed side of a set of rules but, still includes some fluency skill practicing) will by far be the most successful of the three types of groups. This type of group will also be the easiest to maintain and manage over the long term. The socially oriented group can begin with a round of fluency skill warm ups; however, you can also vary your meetings to the more social aspect of doing things. Be careful not to lock yourself into immovable steadfast rules. Leave this type of program setting to those who want to run the more tightly structured style of meeting. The socially relaxed support group can have almost any type of meeting structure they choose from meeting to meeting.

One thing that should be kept in mind though, most of the activities should involve the encouragement of some level of verbal communication. As was stated earlier, even though the activity does not have to deal with stuttering directly, you should make a reasonable attempt to include a varying degree of a communicative setting as possible. This will be discussed a little more in depth in, “Chapter 6” Suggested Support Group Activities

Setting up the criteria of your group

At your first meeting to organize the self-help support group, it would be best to have a stand up flip chart or blackboard to jot down ideas as they come to mind. It is advisable to write down ideas under a given title. Some ideas may seem to be a bit far out at first; however, as strange as it may seem, these initial and seemingly silly or insignificant ideas can actually become very useful ideas when combined with other ideas later on. Once you have a range of ideas on paper, your group can now start to narrow down the long term goals and main focus that you and your initial members would like your new support group to follow or achieve. It may be in your best interest to go over the three types of groups again and work from there to ascertain the style of support group that you want to run. You can combine a few scenarios of the three groups on occasion; however, it would be advisable not to try to deal with a more professional level unless you have free access to a Speech and Language Pathologist. The reasons for this will be explained a little further into the manual.

Your first meeting should include some thought of how structured you want your group rules to be. That is to say, do you want a President, a Vice President or Vice Chair Person, a Secretary, a Treasurer and so on? All of these positions can help to run a "meeting" more smoothly; however, you must ask yourself, are you going to be running meetings or support group activities? If your group becomes relatively large or there are considerable financial funds to manage, you may then need to consider a more formal board of governors to direct some aspects of your group.

1: The frequency and location of your meetings should be established at your first or second meeting. A central location should be seriously considered so all members end up traveling a close to equal distance. Your group can also consider alternating your meeting places.

2: How long do you think you would like each group meeting to last? The great thing about a social type support group is that the get together times do not have to be set in stone. You will find that a more structured group will start at a certain time, like an appointment; then, everyone is gone within five minutes of the end time. The easy and relaxed atmosphere of a socially structured group is more conducive to close and long-

lasting friendships. This aspect in itself can be a tremendous boost to someone who has spent much of their life withdrawn from general society.

3: Because you are a group who lends emotional support to those who stutter, don't be too quick to eliminate others who have speech difficulties other than stuttering. Others who have speech difficulties can, and more than likely, will have the same burden of emotional baggage that a person who stutters carries around. Remember, as a general rule our fluent society usually does not separate speech difficulties into categories. Their general line of thought is, "Speech problems are all the same no matter what the cause or manifestation".

4: Do you want your group to become a charter member of a parent group? In some cases, if the parent group is supportive to its charter or affiliate members or groups, then it would be to the benefit of your group to become a charter member of the parent organization. Remember the notes and warnings about parent organizations at the beginning of this manual. Look before you leap!

5: Do you want to charge a fee for belonging to your group? If so, establish why and how much?

6: If your support group chooses to become a charter member of a parent organization, this usually means that your group, as a name, is a member of the parent organization but not your group's individual members. It is normal that a smaller group's membership be asked to join the parent group on an individual basis. You must appreciate that the larger membership base of the parent organization the greater the benefits will be to its individual charter members in the long run.

7: Do want your group to be seasonal or operate on a year round basis? In most cases, you will find that many of your members seem to vanish during the warmer summer months. This is due mostly to family oriented summer activities. In a sense, this is a good break for everyone involved in your group in that it frees up your members to enjoy the warm weather of summer. Another consideration that the new group's organizers may want look at is the boredom of year round meetings and gatherings. How many bowling teams bowl twelve months of the year? How many other sporting activities such as bridge clubs, chess clubs, horseshoe clubs and/or cribbage clubs function twelve months of the year? A two or three month break does have its benefits.

8: The following concept is one that your group should consider very seriously; fund raising and financial endeavors. Almost all groups require financial funds at some time or another. With a support group for people who stutter, funds to pay the expenses of some of your programs will almost be a certainty. Before you start into financial planning however, go over the section on suggested group activities and ascertain what

your group will most likely be involved in. From this list, you can compile a broad overview of the approximate expense of the activities that your group might incur. There is also something that you should consider at this point as well, some people love to do fund raising work while others detest the task. This is where a good leader plays a major role within your group. Let's do a little facing of the truth square on here: most people who stutter do not like approaching the public so, finding someone in a group of stutterers to go out and canvass for funds, takes patience and understanding. What this all leads up to is, don't set your financial aspirations too high until you get to know the personalities of most of your members.

Once you have laid the foundation of what you want your group to be, along with its long term goals, your membership drive can begin in earnest. Don't give up because of almost certain frustration with this one. Finding people who stutter who are willing to become involved in a social group can be arduous and at times, very discouraging. Once you get a core membership group established, you will find that word of mouth and your reputation within the Speech and Language Pathologist community, will bring in most of your members. In reality however, persistent advertising and phone work is tough to replace.

Chapter 5

Your first real support group meeting

This is where things start to fall into place and your new support group finally begins to become a reality. Before we go any further with this however, something that is imperative to the long-term success of your group must be discussed here: that is peer group leadership and the night and day difference between a leader and a boss.

A person who is boss does not mean by any stretch of the imagination that that person is a leader. A boss is someone of higher authority who represents the interests of a peer body, such as a profit-oriented company. He/she is the one who designates another or others to complete a task on behalf of the peer body and pays little in the way of consideration to the other person's ideas. A person who has been designated as a boss, is the authority figure above the rest of the workers or group who he/she manages. The members of the working group are answerable to the boss and no one else.

On the other hand, a leader is someone who leads others by example, patience, consideration of the feelings of others, listens to the views of others and will share responsibilities of leadership. A good leader does not demand results, he/she encourages results. A true leader will mediate controversy in fairness and will assure that all others have an equal opportunity to speak their opinions in order to solve the controversy. A good leader will not rule a judgement on his/her peers but, will lead or mediate his/her peers to bring about a fair and acceptable judgement that will solve an issue.

At your first support group meeting you must do two things at the onset. Explain the new support group's agenda and long-term goals; then, you must explain the role of peer leaders and how they will be designated or appointed. Will your group be group shared leadership or authoritarian rule; you can't have both and expect to be successful for the long term

From this point on, it will be supposed that you have chosen the group leadership method over the authoritarian ruler.

It is strongly suggested that if you want a group-oriented agenda, now is the time to embark on that route. Present to the new membership the plans and goal that the founder/s of the group have come up with. Ask for member input at all times and get their approval. You must now remember that the new group is now as much their group as it was yours when you came up with the initial concept. The approval or acceptance of your initial concepts does not have to be 100% unanimous; however, it should be a majority of agreement. Once you have put this part behind you, you can now begin the actual activities of your new group and take the first step of turning your fledgling concepts in to a bonified, self help support group.

The general practice of most self-help support groups is to open all meetings with a self-introduction amongst the members or some other form of verbal dialogue. This practise, unfortunately, simultaneously bares the negative and positive sides of stuttering and may have negative consequences for a new member. A stutterer who has lived most of his/her life hiding from groups or situations because of the fear of humiliation, will be no less humiliated by being forced speak in front of your group. Keep in mind, a new member will be amongst strangers upon his first attendance within your group and will, with all probability, be suffering tremendous anxiety because of this long feared situation. A compassionate leader should do the honours of introducing the new member and adding a little information about the new member's background. It is always important to keep in mind that, as a support group, your members are there to find support not only for themselves but for other members as well.

If you have entered into a close relationship with a parent organization, you may want to invite someone from their board of directors to give a short presentation to your new

members. This can go a long way to cement a good relationship between the parent group and your new chapter.

Refreshing fluency skills at the beginning of each meeting

This is one of the most positive aspects of support groups for those who stutter. As stated in a previous chapter in this manual, be prepared for a multitude of varying skill usage and variable terminologies used to identify them. The best thing that can be done here is to accumulate some experience from two or three meetings to find a common skill that all members understand and are familiar with. For the most part, slowing down the speech patterns, gentle onsets and relaxed breathing are still used as base skills in most fluency shaping programs. If this is still true at the time of forming your support group then, you may want to focus a little extra emphases on these particular skills. Time will definitely be your teacher with this so be patient and most of all be willing to wait to find out what your group understands and accepts most readily.

How long you will want to spend on fluency shaping during a meeting will be up to the group to determine. Some may feel they need a little extra practice time to get their skill proficiency back on track while others may tire of the process very quickly. It is almost impossible to please everyone at the same time or all the time so, this calls for a little ingenuity and diplomacy. Your group can create activities that allow those who want to spend a little extra time on focused skills yet, at the same time, not harness and/or restrict those who do not want to spend an hour doing fluency skill work. Possibly one or two members will be willing to sit with the member/s who would like to extend their skill practice time and have a quiet conversation or even do skill focus work. This will free the other members to get on with other group activities that have been designated for that particular meeting.

There must again be a strong warning included in this section. All too often, one or two of your group's members will have the tendency to take on the role of a speech therapist and start coaching or teaching fluency skills. This can lead to many dangers, setbacks and disasters for someone who stutters and/or has not completed an intensive therapy program. There have been actual instances where a new member who has never been to a therapist for his/her dysfluency, has been given the full range of therapy by a well meaning but amateur speech therapist. This is a perilous practice that your group must firmly insist on not allowing to happen or get involved in.

Chapter 6

Suggested Support Group Activities

This section will deal with a list of activities that your group can become involved in or with and enjoy immensely. Many of these activities can be used to raise financial funds for your group while others can be used as public relation tools. Some of the ideas and activities can be steered towards public education. Just because your group was set up as a support group for people who stutter, does not mean that your every minute and every hour must focus on the affliction of stuttering. To do so, would soon turn your group into a boring, repetitive assembly that would be certain to drive away members and subsequently, the group would ultimately fail.

As was mentioned previously, though many of these activities are not directly related to stuttering, ninety percent of the suggested ideas and activities require anywhere from a minimal amount to a great deal of verbal effort. Organizing anything that includes the public, will usually require verbal exchange with strangers. Your group can use each and every one of these activities as transfer exercises.

Before you move onto the activities list, take a minute to contemplate the responsibility that your group has as support group for people who has a speech impediment. Never force another member into a speaking situation that is too great for him to overcome. Never use the tool of embarrassment to get one of your members to enter into a speaking situation where great fear and anxiety are sure to overcome him or dismantle his self-esteem. Be patient, encourage rather than push, consider the consequence before placing too much pressure on another member to speak to a stranger or a group. Neither you nor your group will benefit from being overly persuasive when trying to get another member to enter into adverse situations. Sometimes it is a tremendous plus to for members to work in teams with the more apprehensive members working with the bolder. At times, courage can be compared to an infectious disease.. You can catch the illness just by being around someone who has the illness. Courage in most instances works the same way.

The social aspect of your group activities can be as in the following suggestions. These suggestions can also be connected to fluency skill transfer practice. It is strongly advised to steer your group away from getting into discussions concerning politics or religious beliefs and ideologies. Both of these topics are usually deep-rooted, personal

ideological opinions and can create tremendous dissension amongst even the closest of friends.

Group meeting discussions that can be used for skill focus

- 1: General news of the day discussions.
- 2: Discussions about sporting events.
- 3: Card or board games.
- 4: Impromptu speeches (sort of an open mike time)
- 5: Male/female perspectives on issues.
- 6: Discuss experiences of why fluency therapy works or, does not work.
- 7: Modern day business practices compared to yesteryears.
- 8: Standards of living.
- 9: Modern TV programs and quality of the programs.
- 10: Have reading circles to read from books on any issue that the group is interested in.

Group membership activities

Many, if not most people thrive on challenges and/or competitions with other peer members. These are great activities that most group members look forward to. Some of these activities do not have to be in the form of indoor meetings. Some of the activities require teams while others are a one to one challenge. Some of the activities can be presented by representatives from each group

Activities can include:

- 1: Designate a particular member or, set up teams to research a particular project or subject and present a paper to the membership by a certain date. This can include historical events, well known public figures, medicines or how oil and natural gas goes from being buried deep under ground to heating your home or fueling your car. The list of topics for these research projects is almost endless, and the projects can be very informative..
- 2: Discuss papers posted on Internet sites that concern stuttering or anything else that is of general interest.
- 3: Outdoor club activities are a very popular event with many support groups. Your members can form bowling teams, archery outings, hiking clubs, horseshoe pitching teams, etc."

- 4: Cribbage or bridge clubs can be formed.
- 5: Art clubs can be formed within your own group.
- 6: Swimming or exercise groups are a popular exercise activity.
- 7: Toast Masters groups can be formed or joined.
- 8: A diet club is always a popular thing in our modern times.
- 9: Chess and checkers and/or darts are making a big come back within clubs.
- 10: Traveling groups between like-minded support groups has always been very popular within groups and clubs.

Item #2 is a very worthwhile and educational activity in that your group is exposed to many views and concepts from around the world about stuttering. Because Internet sites come and go every month, the existing URL sites will not be listed in this manual. The members however, can do their own research and draw papers from the various web sites to discuss at group meetings. Just remember that many of these Internet sites are promotional sites to push a product or a personal ideology. Another cautionary measure should be added here as well. Many of the discussion papers on the Internet are not authored by trained professionals.

Public speaking and speakers

This area of activity can have a multitude of purposes. These activities can be used as public relation tools, moneymaking tools, transfer activity goals to self-esteem builders.

- 1: Public speaking contests are a popular group activity and can be integrated into a provincial or state contest event.
- 2: Bringing in outside speakers to present to your group is always of great interest to almost any group of people.
- 3: Finding ways and places for speakers from your group to present.
- 4: Inviting SLPs to do presentations to your group. These topics can include how your communication or hearing (audio) system works and so on.

- 5: You can invite medical or law students from local universities and colleges to speak to your group.
- 6: You can invite a well known speaker to present on behalf of your group or celebrity, you can invite the general public in to hear his or her presentation.
- 7: If your group has access to a well known, professional speaker, a larger facility that can hold a large audience can be rented and an admission fee may be charged. Your group can turn such an event into an annual fund raising event.

Listed above are just a few of the activities that your group can become involved in. An imaginative group can come up with hundreds of activities to make the group interesting and a positive gathering of people to be part of. The core reason for forming and carrying on the group is important; however, you don't have to follow a strict set of guidelines that restricts your group's activities. Have fun with the group. Make sure your group is a fun and a positive place to gather.

Chapter 7

Dealing with a difficult member

This is a difficult situation that most groups will suffer through on more than one occasion. For the most part, certain types of over bearing personalities can cause irreparable damage to your group if not confronted and dealt with immediately. This usually pertains to a problem member who has an abrasive manner, which is usually combined with a strong or aggressive personality. This type of people is driven by a need to control all those around him or her. This types of personality will manipulate the group until it is under his or her control and can quickly devastate a group of any kind if not brought into check immediately.

Patience or kind and gentle words rarely work with this type of personality. It must be made absolutely clear to this person that this group is a member oriented and structured group and "no one person" can be nor will be the boss. Usually, if the problem member finds that he or she cannot gain control of the group, the person will most likely leave because their need to control usually over rides their need for support.

On the other hand, if the problem member does not quit and persists in causing dissention within the group, the group leader should call a special meeting and strongly encourage the group to deal with the unsettling situation without further delay.

The group may decide to revoke the problem member's membership or, confront the member to let the person know he or she must conform to the membership's, group aspect or leave. To let the problem continue to fester within the group is like letting a cancer go without treatment. It will slowly kill the group.

Chapter 8

Effective or Ineffective: Into Which Classification Does Your Group Fit

The following is a good guideline to follow to judge the group's successes or to discover indications of pending problems. If you approach the members of your group with some of the questions below, you will get an idea of how well your group is manifesting its self. Never hesitate to make changes for the sake of appeasing your pride.

Effective Support Group

All group members share in the policies and goal achievements of the support group.

Group sharing of personal problems are encouraged. Ridicule is frowned upon and is mostly absent from the group

A group consensus is sought for important decision making;

Open communication is encouraged at all times.

Meetings are viewed as informative and a place where member can freely voice their opinions and ideas.

Problem solving is shared amongst the membership.

Patience and understanding is the hallmark of your discussion periods.

Leadership rolls are shared by all members of the group as much as possible.

Members are encouraged to approach the general membership about a problem that may be within the group.

There are group evaluation discussions periodically.

If changes are asked for, the changes are accepted or at least discussed in good faith.

Ineffective Group

Leadership rolls are artificially appointed by a person who dominates from behind the scenes.

Iron fisted and non-flexible rules are forced upon the membership.

Criticism is frowned upon and discouraged.

Only certain ideas are allowed to be expressed; feelings are suppressed or ignored.

Only ideas that are pleasing to a few strong-minded members are considered.

Leadership is delegated amongst a close knit few.

Childish obedience rules are placed upon the group

A member has proclaimed ownership of the group.

All ideas, agendas and goals are controlled by a controlling authority figure.

Goals and programs set by an authoritarian member are inflexible.

Group communications are controlled by only one or two members of the group.

No sharing of outside communications with the group.

Members are required to be answerable to an authority figure in the group.

Problem solving is controlled or by one authority figure in the group.

The highest authority single handedly evaluates the group.

Meeting agendas are controlled by one authority figure.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Starting, running and realizing the long-term success of a support group takes tremendous dedication, patience and time commitments. Discouragement is an all too frequent problem you will have to deal with and overcome as your group grows and evolves. A well established and successful group however can create many years of satisfaction and be of great benefit to even a group with a small number of members. If you follow the general concepts in this manual you should be able to form and find success in your support group's goals and achievements.

Be prepared for up and down growth periods and don't look for instant success at the onset. Set the goals for your new group to advance in stages. Don't dream big and achieve little. Nothing can be more discouraging than to continually fail to reach projected goals.

Always create new goals for your group so your programs or goals do not sit in an idle mode.

Make the group is a fun, interesting and a challenging setting to be part of.

Be acutely vigilant of racial separation or problematic members or inner group animosities.

Most importantly, be particularly guarded about repetition or boredom within your programs and activities

Don't be hesitant about moving towards solving an inner group problem. Allowing a problem to continue unabated will eventually become more difficult to rectify.

Don't be a controller. You can be the group's founder and silent leader but, be willing to share the group's concepts and growths through the ideas of all members.

Strive at all times to make your group as interesting as possible to all personalities and races of the group's membership.

Good luck with your aspirations and goals.