

GUIDELINES FOR PARISHES
SETTING UP A SUPPORT GROUP
FOR THE SEPARATED AND DIVORCED

Catholic Charities' Counseling Services
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A. TYPES OF GROUPS

Definitions

Self help groups are voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing about a desired social and/or personal change. Self help groups emphasize face-to-face social interactions and the assumption of personal responsibility by members.

Characteristics of a Self Help Support Group

- ❖ They are small-group or face-to-face interactions
- ❖ They are spontaneous in origin
- ❖ They may have a variety of functions and characteristics
- ❖ There is a personal interaction
- ❖ The groups supply a reference, a point of connection and identification with others

There are other types of groups that are not support groups:

Therapy groups are facilitated by a trained therapist and are designed to affect individual growth and functioning, using the group as the mode of operation.

A discussion group treats topics rather formally. Topics are often chosen/designated prior to the meeting.

An information group provides information regarding an issue or an organization in the community.

Education groups are organized to provide instruction to selected people on specific topics.

People in problem-solving groups come together for the purpose of discussing and finding solutions to common problems.

Task-oriented groups are set up to accomplish a specific task. They may be committees or Boards of Directors.

Social groups are organized for the purpose of helping people to get to know each other and have a good time doing so.

Social action groups are set up for the purpose of helping to change conditions which effect them and society.

B. EXPLORING LOCAL NEEDS

Some Possible Questions:

1. Do individuals contemplating divorce come to talk to parish staff?
2. Are you getting requests for services from separated or divorced individuals?
3. Are you in communication with parishes/congregations in the area about their needs for the separated and divorced?
4. What possibilities for collaboration are there with these parishes or other agencies and groups?
5. What other parish-based support groups or other services for the divorced and separated are available in your area?

C. PARISH SPONSORSHIP

It is important to find out from the parish/es, as soon as possible in the planning stages, what their involvement will be. Ask for the following:

1. Provide facilitators.
2. Pay for facilitator training, or have someone in the parish be trained as a trainer.
3. Provide supervision of facilitators.
4. Provide space for meetings.
5. Provide a budget to cover the costs of speakers, coffee, workshops, PR, conferences, mailings, and office supplies.

D. SUPERVISION

Definition

A number of facilitators meet on a regular basis to process how the individual feels about his/her facilitation, as well as assess the activity of the support group.

Many groups consider it valuable to have a 10 minute debriefing meeting after each support group meeting in order to process any difficulties that may have arisen in the meeting so the facilitators will not have to "take it home."

Two Types of Supervision

1. Supervision with a staff person from the parish as a supervisor — staff person is responsible for convening supervision meetings and for ongoing support to facilitators.
2. Peer supervision — facilitators meet without staff person from the parish, but one facilitator is appointed as "main" facilitator and is responsible for convening the supervision meetings.

Possible Format for Supervision Meetings

1. Check in.
2. Personal assessment of facilitation ("successes" and "difficulties").
3. Assessment of support group (What are some of the problem areas? Are they moving along, or are they stuck?).
4. How tasks are being handled (shared responsibility).
5. Review the process used for each support group meeting.
6. Input (optional).

Duties of a Supervisor

1. To convene supervision meetings.
2. To keep in contact with the parish staff person, pastor, or Parish Council.

E. SUGGESTED FORMATS FOR GROUPS

Open Groups

In open groups there is frequent orientation to new members and reorientation of the group to its purpose and to the focus of the content. In open groups new members are allowed to enter the group at any point. Usually open groups are long term, ongoing groups.

The advantages of such a group may be:

- ❖ People can try it once.
- ❖ You get the walk-in traffic.
- ❖ They can bring a friend.
- ❖ One can deal with a crisis situation.
- ❖ Maintenance.
- ❖ More social things probable.
- ❖ A place to belong and meet people.
- ❖ Good for newly divorced to see that there can be growth when they meet others in a group.

Closed Groups

A closed group is most often used for groups in which interrelationships among members are of primary importance. It is also useful for people in the initial stages of separation and/or divorce. It is a time-limited group giving time to members to develop trust in, and the ability to relate to others. Usually new members are not allowed to join once the group begins, but if they are, the decision must be made during the preparation stage as to when new members can come into the group. In some cases the decision as to when new persons may enter is made by the group members themselves.

The advantages of a closed group may be:

- ❖ Bonding, trust.
- ❖ Opportunity for closure.
- ❖ Commitment is good for them.
- ❖ Deal with specific issues.
- ❖ Easier for facilitator to commit to time.
- ❖ People would most likely be in the same place, because there are no new people coming in to deal with.

F. CHOOSING FACILITATORS

Some Guidelines

The facilitator should:

1. Be mature.
2. Be past the initial hurting stage of their own divorce.
3. Have some basic listening skills.
4. Be non-judgmental.
5. Have some leadership skills.
6. Have an attitude that people have the "answers" within them, therefore, not be an advice-giver.
7. Have a sense of warmth and friendliness.
8. Be willing to go to facilitator training.
9. Be willing to give a scheduled amount of time.
10. Be willing to participate in supervision.

Recruitment

Issuing a personal invitation, not a general announcement of your need for a facilitator is a more desirable method. Recommendations from parishioners and parish staff are helpful. If a general invitation is made, be sure there are some specific qualifications mentioned.

Job Description

A job description should always be provided for facilitators. This should include the expectations of duties, qualifications, time required, length of commitment, training provided, and the supervisory plan.

G. FACILITATOR TRAINING

It is important that all facilitators receive facilitator training no matter what their prior experience, training, or education, in order to provide a common base for all facilitators.

Catholic Charities Office for Separated and Divorced is a resource for people looking for a support group. We'd like to know that the people we refer are being sent to a group in which the facilitators have been adequately trained. We list these groups in each issue of our newsletter.

At one time Catholic Charities offered regular sessions for training of facilitators. It was brought to our attention that the cost of sending new facilitators every year for training was getting to be cost-prohibitive to the parishes. In February of 2000 we began offering a training for people who would be trainers of facilitators in their own parishes. This makes it possible for parishes to have their own trainer on hand to train facilitators of all types of support groups.

The cost of this 20 hour training is \$200, and information is available by calling 651-215-2218. Arrangements can be made for the training to be done on site if there is a number to warrant such.

H. RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACILITATORS

1. To attend the training for facilitators.
2. To attend meetings of facilitators on the local level.
3. To participate in supervision.
4. To co-facilitate the support group.
5. To be responsible that the following tasks be done to prepare for support group meetings:
 - a. coffee, setting up the meeting room.
 - b. hospitality/transportation.
 - c. contact individuals by phone if necessary.
 - d. programs (Some of these can be done by committees).

I. SUGGESTIONS FOR PR

1. Write announcements for church bulletins and parish newsletters (churches of the area . . . all denominations).
2. Talk to contact persons from other churches.
3. Contact agencies in the area.
4. Let the Office for Separated and Divorced know the time and place of the meeting to be used as a referral and to be put in the newsletter "Gatherings."
5. Put posters in churches.
6. Use neighborhood papers.
7. Use grocery store bulletin boards, restaurants, book stores, etc.
8. Establish a mailing list.
9. Establish a group newsletter.

J. MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

1. Some groups will plan social events, some of which could include children. Make sure this not is part of the support group time.
2. It is suggested that all people are invited to the group, not just Catholics or parishioners.
3. Many times it is necessary to refer people to some other service agency. Don't try to handle these issues yourself.
4. Periodic evaluations may be helpful from the support group.
5. Some groups have steering committees to guide the direction and activity of the support group.
6. The Office for Separated and Divorced can be helpful to you, and you are welcome to call for consultation.