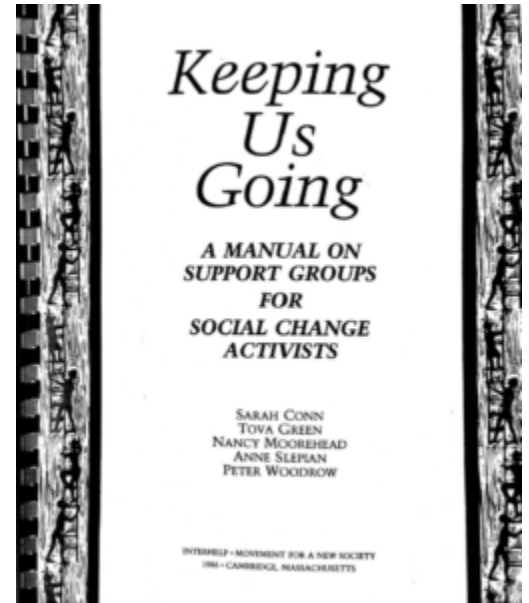


Keeping Us Going: A Manual on Support Groups for Social Change Activists

Are you a social change activist with any of these problems or struggles? Is this Manual For You?

- Time management
- Despair/hopelessness
- Developing or improving personal leadership
- Getting motivated to do important reading/studying
- Avoiding "burnout" or overcommitment
- Dealing with conflicts with fellow activists
- Choosing priorities in political work
- Confronting sexism, racism, classism, homophobia
- Procrastination
- Figuring out long- and short-term strategies for change
- Coping with demands of family/lovers, jobs, and political work Feeling "stuck" or bored in your political work
- Needing a longer term plan for your work
- Getting the help you need to take difficult steps



These are some of the common difficulties faced by many of you who describe yourselves as social change activists. This manual is for you.

This brief "how to do it" manual is offered to people who are dedicated to long-term social change and who are looking for ways to sustain themselves in that work. We can imagine support groups of the type described here being used in a variety of settings, but this manual is oriented towards activists.

This is a "working" manual. If you are not already part of an activist support group, we hope you will use it to form one.

If your group is underway we hope the manual will give you fresh ideas or help you prevent or solve problems that may arise.

In future versions of this manual we would like to include stories of how support groups have worked for a variety of people. We would love to hear of your experiences. Email info@interhelpnetwork.org with any stories or suggestions.

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CHAPTER ONE: WHY SUPPORT GROUPS?

The Context - Long-term Struggle for Change

These are not easy times for people committed to fundamental change within our society and throughout the world - for those who want to help make the world just, safe, and peaceful. For many of us this work represents a life-long commitment. How do we sustain ourselves through the inevitable hard times? We are working against powerful and wealthy forces &dash how can we hold onto our faith and resolution? Where do we recharge and renew our commitment?

Many people have managed to continue activist work without a structured support group. However, few people who devote their lives to such work do it without some regular source of reflection, challenge, and affirmation - necessary ingredients for sustained and effective efforts for change. Too often we are confronted with feelings of isolation - even from those with whom we work closely.

Support groups are one way to give regular attention to each person's social change work - to reflect on directions, goals, effectiveness, rough places and growing points, to challenge each other - taking into account all dimensions of our lives.

What Is Support?

Someone once said that "support is standing so close behind your friend that the only way she * can move is forward."

Support is saying "Julie, you are on the right track, you are thinking well about your work. Keep it up!"

Support is saying "Marty, have you thought about this aspect of the question? Try looking at it this way."

Support is saying "George, it looks to me as though you have lost track of your basic goals for this work. I also sense that you are on the edge of burn-out, pushing yourself too hard."

One common myth about support is that it only means giving unquestioning affirmation. However, effective support is often in the form of loving challenge based on seeing a person and her life clearly and thinking carefully. This kind of thinking is more helpful than cheers or criticism. Most of us have to relearn how to give and receive support effectively since it is not taught to us.

We like to imagine a time when giving and receiving this kind of loving attention to each other will be a natural part of our lives, something for which we do not need a special time and place. But for the moment, we have found that we do need to give regular and somewhat structured form to learning and practicing the caring art of support.

What is an Activist Support Group?

An activist support group is a small group of people who meet regularly to give and receive reflections on each other's lives and work. For the purposes of this manual, we are discussing groups formed specifically to assist people to work more effectively for social change. We are convinced, however, that personal relationships, family life, jobs, and explicitly political work are all part of social change work.

As we engage in social change work, personal growth, including the pain involved, is an important part of that work, and is intimately intertwined with it. As many have discovered, having an understanding of the larger picture expands the context in which personal growth takes place. Issues which you thought were your own personal craziness become another signpost on the road to social change.

Sometimes people need help to deal with the issues from the personal growth end. At other times they need assistance with the "action" end of it. It is quite common for someone to ask for help dealing with the feelings about the actions needed. Sometimes they need help with actual skills. These are all parts of the process of social change and should be integrated. Our lives are already too fragmented.

Therefore, support groups do not look at only one dimension of a person's life, but give attention to the emotional, the political, the spiritual - and sometimes the material! Most support groups focus on one or more of three basic elements: emotional support, support for action, and educational support.

A. Emotional Support

The kind of emotional support involved here is not therapy although it may include some therapeutic methods of listening and drawing out feelings. The group may focus particularly on feelings and difficulties that get in the way of **effective social change work**, or feelings which arise as a natural part of such work, such as fear, anger, frustration, or joy. Emotional issues regarding personal relationships, family life, or jobs are dealt with as they affect a person's social change work. Of course, personal lives have a strong impact on social change work and cannot and should not be separated from it. For the activist support group, however, the emphasis is on work for change.

Ellen came to her support group with a problem she had experienced in her work with a local nuclear disarmament group. She felt that others in the group did not appreciate the skills and experience she was offering. Her support group was able to see that a similar pattern was going on in her family. Ellen had recently expressed ambivalence about a trip to see her brothers and sisters whom she had not seen for over a year. As the oldest of seven and with her parents dead, she had slipped into a role of "taking care" of her siblings without being asked - so she felt unappreciated in that arena also. The support group helped her figure out strategies for new behavior. After the support group meeting, she not only had a more relaxed trip home, but was able to participate more effectively in her political work.

B. Support for Action

A support group can help a person clarify goals, set directions, and take action. It can also help solve problems on specific difficult situations. It can encourage people to look at longer range strategy questions. It can focus on areas of skill and leadership development for each individual. The group might also decide to undertake action projects together.

Nancy had recently started working with a Central America action group. They were in the process of planning for a major direct action, including the possibility of large numbers of people committing civil disobedience. The police in the city had a reputation for treating people very roughly. Nancy was concerned that the action group was not providing any training or preparation activities for people planning to take part in the civil disobedience. She had been a nonviolence trainer years before, but felt rusty and shaky about putting herself forward to initiate training workshops for the action. Her support group helped her identify other trainers with whom she could work. They also helped her devise a strategy for gaining approval in the action group for the training work.

c. Educational Support

Some support groups encourage learning as a primary focus.

The group might attend workshops or seminars together, read and discuss a book or books together, or ask members of the group to share special knowledge or expertise. Many people have come out of the educational system with little sense of personal power regarding learning. Support for gaining information and understanding of an increasingly complex and technically dominated world can be a crucial element of support group life.

The members of the "Bridge" support group were all interested in anti-racism work. They started by each reading a novel or book by a person of another race, coming to support group meetings ready to share their new insights. Occasionally they all read the same book and discussed it. Once or twice they went to cultural events by black artists. Later, they began to think together about strategies for working on white racism and then took steps to put these strategies into action.

What Is the Role of Support Group Members?

Support group members do not have to be experts. That is, they don't have to act as therapists or as organizational consultants. Some things they do need to do are as follows:

1. Listen!!
2. Appreciate
3. Challenge
4. Suggest
5. Identify Resources
6. Solve Problems

These are skills involved in the loose and over-used term "support." Over time, support group members learn how to balance appreciation and encouragement with clear and clean challenging. But 75% of the role is listening and encouraging a person to think for herself about her life - supporting the self-directed process of growth, learning, and change in which we are each engaged.

How are Support Groups Different from Other Types of Groups?

In the past fifteen years there has been a proliferation of groups for many purposes. For instance, women's groups have proven useful for helping women understand how society is structured. and that they are not alone in feeling inadequate or angry. The success of small

groups for other purposes has led us to see how they might be helpful to social change activists. But how are activist support groups different from consciousness raising groups, therapy groups, and affinity groups?

Consciousness-raising groups assist a better understanding of elements of the world we live in - and how certain groups (for example, women and men) interact. While such groups develop a personal sense of social relationships and the dynamics of oppression, they are not necessarily organized to support the actions of individuals for social change.

Most therapy groups are oriented towards individual change and usually deal with feelings as an individual matter, not as part of a social system that needs change. Some schools of therapy (notably feminist therapy) do promote an analysis of oppression as part of the therapeutic process.

Affinity groups are most often formed among people who are planning nonviolent direct action (sometimes including civil disobedience). They are a way to organize subunits within a large action. They provide a structure for decision-making and a "home base" in which to deal with feelings of fear or other concerns that arise in a potentially alienating large group situation. While they certainly have an action and social change orientation, they are rarely structured to give regular, ongoing attention to each individual's work and growth.

In a support group, on the other hand, someone says, "This is my life, this is the change I am trying to effect, this is my personal struggle in that work - help me to think about those elements and how they all fit together." A support group lasts at least for a few months, preferably longer, allowing group members to get to know each other well and to watch the fascinating process of change.

Accountability is another special element of a support group that is not always available elsewhere (especially for those of us who do social change work as volunteers). The support group is in a good position not only to encourage and challenge, but also to keep checking back on the goals people set in the group. The support group takes the goals and the individual seriously.

Unlike most other settings, a support group can combine and connect our spiritual, psychological and political selves - in the combination or emphasis that is exactly right for the members of the group.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW TO START AN ACTIVIST SUPPORT GROUP

So you want to start a group. What do you do? This chapter will take you through the steps, from deciding you want to start a group to a sample agenda for the first meeting.

A. Thinking About Who Should Be in the Group

The first step in forming a support group is to decide who you want in it. This is an opportunity to build on old friendships or turn some acquaintances into allies.

Consider the following:

1. When looking for people you would like in your group, be sure that they share your political perspectives and activism; that you like them; and that you respect their thinking (especially their ability to think about you and the others in the group - see #4 below).
2. Go after what **you** want. The best way to guarantee a support group you feel good about is to take initiative to form it. On the other hand, don't ask people to be in the group because you feel you "ought" to.
3. Form a group with some element that holds it together - a common interest, common values, a common experience, a common political outlook, even a common oppression. Once the group gets going, this will become less important, but at first there needs to be some explicit bond among people.
4. Choose people who are able to think clearly about each other - to be insightful about the struggles of each person. Over the long haul each person must be able to pull their weight as a thinker/listener, even though we all have periods of difficulty. One way to ensure this is to look for "peerness" - the sense of relative equality among you. Groups with very unequal skills or experience may not always work well.
5. Look for people with the same basic goals, expectations, or needs for the group. Check these at the start and periodically throughout the group's life. If goals and expectations get out of kilter, the group will not survive long.

B. Getting the Group Started

Now that you have thought about who might be in your group, you are ready to get started. Start by identifying one person you know you would like to invite to be in a support group with you. Share your interest in forming an Activist Support Group with her inviting her to join. For example:

Abby: I'm glad you could have lunch with me, Sara. I wanted to talk with you about an idea I have.

Sara: Great! I always enjoy your ideas.

Abby: I've enjoyed working with Martinville Peace Action, but sometimes I feel lost. We always meet in in big groups, and we're so busy organizing rallies and benefits that we rarely have time to discuss how we *personally* feel about this work.

Sara: I know exactly what you mean. It's busy, busy, busy all the time! I've worked with some of those people for years and still feel like I don't know them, or they me.

Abby: Sometimes I feel discouraged and confused about what directions the peace movement should go in - or where I could best put my time and energy. I feel I need a place to talk about more personal things with other activists. Do you know what I mean?

Sara: Sort of. Tell me more.

Abby: Well, I was thinking that a small group of us could meet regularly to help each other think about our political lives. Would you be interested in trying this kind of group?

If the first person you ask is not interested, think of another person and ask her. Keep asking until there are two of you excited about forming a group. Then think together about a few other people to invite. Activist Support Groups have succeeded with as few as three or four people. Some groups are as large as ten to fifteen. We find that three to five people is best, because attention to each individual is so important.

Group formation can be a tricky business because people often have difficult feelings about being chosen or left out of groups. Sometimes people feel hurt or angry when they hear that a group is forming, but they are not being invited to join. We have found that it pays to be honest and forthright from the start. Do not invite people out of guilt - you will only pay for it later. It will help to be clear with yourself why you are not choosing someone to be in your group. Often your reasons hold good information for the person - that you can find a constructive way to share if necessary. (See Appendix A on "Giving Feedback"). If you wish, you can help someone form their own group.

C. The First Meeting

First meetings of any group are important because they influence people's expectations about what is possible in the group. We suggest the following goals for the first session of a support group:

- Get to know one another better.
- Clarify the purpose of the activist support group.
- Share each person's goals and expectations for the group.
- Agree to a process that will meet people's needs.

We suggest the following agenda outline for a first meeting.

First meeting (About two to three hours for 4 to 5 people).

Introductions - (About two minutes each). Share how you know each other, where you live and the work you do.

Agenda Review - The person who planned the meeting should explain the plan, get agreement to it. Write the agenda on a large sheet of paper, so that everyone can see what's planned and more easily give input to the process.

Why an Activist Support Group (About 10 minutes each) - Each person says what she would like from the group. Have you been in a similar group before? What is hard for you lately in your activist life, that you might want to discuss with the group in future sessions?

Brainstorm - (Five to ten minutes) - While one person writes on a big sheet of paper, other people say their fantasies or ideas or wishes for what the group might do together. Be a little wild - this is just to get ideas going, not to make a plan. You do not need to agree.

[In brainstorming, the object is to generate as many ideas as possible in a stated period. To avoid the usual censoring or judging that interrupts creative thinking, the rule is that no one comments on ideas offered during the brainstorm. You can evaluate the ideas later].

Agreements - (Discuss for fifteen to thirty minutes).

Decide together:

What

does the group want to do together - the basic balance of emotional, educational and action support, based on the sharing and brainstorm above (see also the "Meeting Format Smorgasbord" in Chapter Three)

How often

to meet (anything from once a week to once a month is common).

How long

for each session (One and a half to four hours is common. A potluck meal can be added).

Where

to meet. Some groups take turns hosting to share the burdens of transport and hosting. Others prefer to always meet in the same place, if it's more convenient.

How to divide the time

in group meetings. How many people will get individual time in each meeting and for how long? (See Chapter Three for different format ideas).

Commitments: (About twenty to forty minutes for discussion). ---

Set a trial period after which the group can evaluate and people can leave gracefully if they choose to. For example, the group might decide to meet every other Wednesday from 7-10pm, for five meetings, and then have an evaluation session.

One person (or more) may realize in this first discussion that this group is not right for them, for any one of a number of reasons. For instance, Monica wanted a study group, not a place to share feelings. Or Jorge wanted to meet weekly and everyone else wanted to meet monthly. Or there is someone in the group who annoys Jan terribly. Every person should feel free to say no. It is important to start out with a sense of excitement and common goals. As people agree to a trial period, ask them to make a commitment to stick with it, and to take responsibility for speaking up for their own needs.

Next Meeting

(Five minutes).

Choose a place, time, and someone to plan and facilitate the next meeting. (See Chapter Three for description of facilitation and other roles in groups). Exchange names and phone numbers.

Evaluation

: (About ten minutes – leave ample time) How did this session go for people? What did people enjoy? What could be better for next time?

Now your Activist Support Group is launched!

D. Suggested Agenda for Second Meeting

Check-in

(About ten minutes) Each person tells a highlight of the weeks since the last meeting, and/or something about her day and how she is feeling now.

Agenda Review

(Ten minutes)

The person who planned the meeting has done some thinking ahead of time about issues for the group to address. She presents a suggested agenda to the group, asks for additions or changes, incorporates them into the agenda, and gets agreement from the group to proceed.

Activist Stories

(About an hour)

Each person takes about ten minutes to talk about significant events in her life as an activist, including her family background, when she first began to be aware of and to care about political issues, when she felt effective, and a few key successes and failures in her activist work.

Setting Priorities

(Twenty minutes)

Working with the list generated at the first meeting about what the group might do together, the group chooses a focus or a format for the next several meetings. (See the "Meeting Format Smorgasbord" in Chapter Three).

For example, the group might decide to focus on learning about the global climate disruption for the next several meetings, to spend half an hour each time sharing information from reading or other sources, and then to give each person time to deal with feelings about the situation.

Or, the group might choose to divide the time equally among members for the next few meetings, in order to help each person set goals for their political work for the next six months.

Next Meeting

(Five minutes)

Choose a time, place, and facilitator.

Evaluation:

(Ten minutes)

What was most useful about the meeting? Least useful? What would they change and how?

Closing

: (Five minutes)

Do some activity to reaffirm the sense of connection in the group, such as sing a song or take a few minutes of silence.

CHAPTER THREE: SUPPORT GROUP TIME: STRUCTURE & CONTENT

We have already discussed the purpose of support groups and given some notions about how to get them started. This chapter will offer some ideas about the structure and content of support group meetings.

A. Basic Ingredients of Support Group Meetings

Most support groups we know of include several basic ingredients in their meetings: time for group business (time and place of next meeting, facilitators, evaluation, etc.); time focused on individuals in the group; and time for group discussion of an issue or topic.

Throughout the rest of this chapter we will refer to "individual time" or "focus time." Both of these terms refer to time set aside in the meeting to give attention to the life and work of one group member.

B. Making the Best Use of Your Focus Time

We've all heard that "what you get out is what you put in." We find that the focused time and attention available through support groups is rare and precious. It is most effective if careful thought is given to how to use the time well.

1. Choose a Topic

In preparing for a support group meeting, think about what issue or problem will fit the time you can expect at the next support group meeting. Choose an area of your life and work that is of real concern to you at the moment. In our experience, if you can focus on a specific question, rather than a broad or vague topic, the time will be more satisfying. For instance, you might choose to focus on how you exercise leadership in a particular direct action campaign, rather than on your broader leadership questions. If the support group feels there are broader questions that should be addressed, they will bring them up!

2. Decide What You Want from the Group

Once you have picked a topic, figure out what you want from the group (ideas, feedback, suggestions, problem-solving, appreciation, attention to feelings). For instance, you might say to the group, "I want to take the first ten minutes to describe the juicy conflict in our campaign group, then I want to hear your ideas and suggestions for the remainder of the hour."

3. Presentation

Think for at least a few minutes about how to present the issue - so that precious time is not wasted figuring out what to say. If you have a lot of information to present, write it up ahead of time and provide copies, or write it on large sheets of paper with felt tip pens.

C. How One Group Did It

At one meeting of a support group Anne asked the group to help her devise a strategy for getting a satisfying job with political content. She presented her long term goals for political work and the specific aspects of a job that she wished for. The group gave her feedback on her strengths and growth areas and helped her set realistic goals for a job.

Nancy was dealing with a difficult situation at her job.

She started her time by saying, "I want five minutes to scream, then ten minutes to think out loud, and then fifteen minutes for the group to give me ideas and suggestions."

Cindy asked the group to think with her about her tendency to isolate herself in groups where she is taking visible leadership. The group listened to her describe what happens, then helped identify the feelings and behavior that were consistently getting in the way. Finally, they worked with her to figure out a new approach and how she could get support for trying it.

Peter used the group to help him work out a strategy for building a coalition among groups working on South Africa and on Central America. He shared some of his fears about reaching out to new people who are different from him. The group made suggestions for first steps and made a commitment to check back with Peter at later meetings to see how the work was coming.

How the Group Might Respond

Sally finishes her brief presentation of her situation saying, "so, there's a brief outline of my dilemma with the Task Force and upcoming meeting with the City Manager. Now I want your reactions and suggestions." The group might respond in the following ways:

Empathy and Affirmation

"Sally, that sounds like a real tough situation! No, you're not crazy - I think anyone would be having a hard time. Your observations about the chairperson seem perceptive and sensible. Understanding people is a strength of yours."

Help Thinking Through Options

"Sally, would it help if you thought out loud about the pros and cons of your three possible strategies? I'll take notes as you talk so you can look at them later."

Suggestions

"Sally, you listed three possible action strategies, but I really see a fourth. Would you like to hear it?"

Observations on Personal Style

"Sally, it occurs to me that this is the third situation you've described where you lost your temper with a Task Force member. It seems this anger really gets in the way of your political work. Do you want to talk about that?"

D. The Content of Individual Time

Individual or focus time in a support group is at the crossroads of the personal and the activist realms.

We have suggested throughout this manual that support groups are devoted to each person's struggle to be effective in their activism. In this context, personal issues are particularly important as they further activist work.

Individuals can use their time in the group to do any of the following specific things:

1. Solve problems that arise in activist work.
2. Set long-term goals as a social change agent.
3. Identify personal difficulties that get in the way of the most effective work possible. What would it take for you to act powerfully all the time?
4. Assess skills and knowledge and set learning goals.
5. Evaluate your leadership abilities - strengths and weaknesses. Set goals for leadership development.
6. Explore issues that are key problems for many people, such as money, families, particular oppressions (as experienced by women, people of color, gays, working class people, etc.).

E. A Meeting Format Smorgasbord

Outlined below are several different formats for Support Group meetings. They are quite varied in their flavor, timing, and style. Pick and choose among them, invent your own, take elements of several and try a new format. It's your group!

1. Equal Time

Using this format, a group gets together and quickly checks on how each person is feeling to help people bring their attention to the group and away from other things. They then divide the remainder of the time for the meeting equally among the group members.

2. Shorts and Longs

This group finds that the "Equal Time" format cramps their style. They like to give a couple of people longer time each meeting and shorter time to the rest, so that they can go deeper with the "long time" people. At a typical meeting Nick and Brenda get forty-five minutes of "focus time" (attention on them) each, while Jim and Claudia get twenty minutes each on a more limited topic. At the next meeting the time allocations are switched so that Jim and Claudia get "long time" while Nick and Brenda get "short time."

3. A Focus on Sally

In this format almost all of the "focus" time of each meeting is devoted to one individual. This allows the group to look at a variety of factors in that person's life and explore issues deeply. Each of the other group members do a brief update with particular attention to any agreements, homework, or commitments made at previous meetings.

4. On the Spot

This group uses no pre-set agenda or time structure, but responds to the need of the group members at the time they meet. They start with a quick check on how people are doing and what their concerns or needs are from the group. They then work together to build an agenda that will get most of the needs met. [Note: while this format may work for some groups, there is a danger that those who are more articulate about their needs or who have deeper "problems" will get more of the group's attention. If you use this format, be aware of the balance of who gets time].

5. Topic Time

Another common format for support groups is to choose a topic of common interest to all group members - an issue that each confronts in her work - and devote the meeting to a discussion of it. The group usually provides time for each person to reflect on her own personal experience and/or visions (models) on the subject. Common topics: leadership, class dynamics, sexism, other oppressions, strategy in social change efforts.

6. Learners Unlimited

Did you ever have a group of friends with whom you studied, in high school or college? Perhaps you helped each other understand concepts and discussed exciting new ideas. Some support groups are formed around learning together. They often start with one topic for several months (U.S. policy in Central America, for instance) - and then shift to other topics of interest or move on to action. In a variation, at the end of each meeting the group chooses a topic for the next meeting, asking each member to read something on the topic to share.

7. The Clinic

We have heard of a group which uses a variation of "Shorts and Longs" above. The group formed around a common work interest. They spend time in each meeting to do a "clinic" on one or two specific problems that group members have encountered. One person lays out the problem and the others offer suggestions, first brainstorming alternative ways to handle the problem, then discussing them. If appropriate, the group might then do roleplays to tryout some of the suggestions.

For example, a support group of trainers focused on the considerations when training people of a different race, ethnic, or class background from the trainer. First the group brainstormed all the possible "wrong moves," and then went on to generate appropriate strategies and attitudes.

Finally, they did a series of roleplays with members of the group taking on the roles of trainer and training group participants.

8. Large Groups: Divide and Prosper

We have heard of support groups with as many as fifteen people (although most successful groups we know of have four to eight). Since some attention to individuals is a crucial element of the support group, most of the larger groups spend at least part of their meeting time in smaller groups of three to five (or even in pairs).

9. A Day in the Life

A full luxuriant day of thinking and challenging is this group's style. They get together less often, but set aside a whole day. Their format involves a series of steps as follows:

- a) each person quickly explains the basic issue she wants to deal with, then
- b) the other members give initial quick "brainstormed" feedback in the form of concerns or considerations on the issue,
- c) everyone takes time to reflect alone - using the list of concerns from the group,
- d) the group gets back together, divides the time equally and goes as deep as time allows on each person's issue.

10. The Two-day Spiritual Journey

We know of a group that gets together every three months and takes two days to worship together, meditate, search for guidance, and take time to look at each group member's journey as a spiritual and political person. The members of the group live at some distance from each other, but all have similar jobs within religious institutions - they find a lot of common themes to discuss.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT MAKES GROUPS WORK?

Groups need clear goal and structure, an atmosphere of trust, and good facilitation in order to be effective. These issues are referred to as "group process." This chapter outlines some key elements of group process, and includes a section on how to deal with some common difficulties in groups.

A. Establishing Clear Agreements

It's important that your group members agree about such issues as:

- * How frequently and for how long your group meets.

- * How to deal with lateness.
- * Where to meet.
- * Whether and when to add members.
- * What the content of meetings will be.
- * How decisions will be made.

Some of these issues need to be addressed in the first meeting (see The First Meeting in Chapter Two). Others can wait until later. Take time to discuss differences and reach clear agreements about these issues; you will learn more about one another's wishes, needs and boundaries. This process also helps you clarify what to expect of one another and learn to negotiate.

B. Group Decision-making

There are many ways of reaching decisions in groups. Peace and social justice groups often make decisions by consensus, a process through which the whole group seeks a decision to which all members can agree. Other ways include voting and "deciding by-not-deciding." There are excellent descriptions of the consensus process in Resource Manual for a Living Revolution and Building United Judgment. (See Appendix B, "Written Resources")

Take time in your group to choose which method or methods you want to use.

C. Creating an Atmosphere of Trust

Trust grows in a group as people get to know one another more deeply, learn to deal with differences and resolve conflicts, and respect decisions that the group has made. In early meetings, leave time for people to tell their stories in some kind of structured way (for example, each person takes ten minutes to tell her history as an activist, or to talk about what makes her afraid, or a time when she felt powerful).

In every meeting it helps to take time at the beginning to "check in," to say something about how each person is feeling that day.

Trust may be eroded unless group members feel assured that personal things they say will not be repeated outside the group. Such an agreement to "confidentiality" is important to establish early in the life of the group.

Differences may develop into conflicts unless they are stated and addressed. It helps to develop an expectation in the group that feedback will be given with respect, and in a balanced way (see Appendix A, "Giving and Receiving Feedback").

D. Group Participation Skills

Even when a group has a designated facilitator, the more every participant assumes some responsibility for moving the group forward, the more satisfying and effective meetings will be. Skills that enhance the process of support groups include:

1. Speak directly and personally

Say what *you* think and feel about the issues being discussed.

Avoid generalizations and jargon. Be specific and use examples.

Use "I" language, stating observations, not assumptions. (See *A Manual for Nonviolent Communication*, by Marshall Rosenberg, listed in Appendix B: "Resources")

An example of "I" language:

"I feel frustrated and resentful when our meetings go past ten o'clock. I would like us to keep to our agreement to end by ten o'clock."

NOT

"People are being really irresponsible about keeping to time. Meetings have been running over constantly and everyone gets upset, but no one does anything about it."

2. Allow for silence

Build in a moment of silence after each person speaks. This can cut down on interruptions and allow people to take in fully what each person says. It helps people to really listen rather than compete for time to talk, prepare what they will say, or look for openings.

3. Allow for variety of expression

People have different ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings. Respect each person's style.

For instance, some people require time to think before speaking. In a group where other people operate at a fast pace, a more deliberate person would begin to feel lost and unheard.

4. Balance appreciating and challenging one another

No one receives enough appreciation, especially in political work. Almost everyone suffers from feeling that she is not doing enough. Be sure each person receives specific, verbal, appreciation for whatever she is doing. Each person may also need a challenge to take the next step or try something new.

5. Respect feelings

Talking about current difficulties may bring up old feelings about family, work, and past successes and failures, including feelings which seem unrelated to the current situation. The group may take time to talk about these feelings, or help members decide how those feelings can get dealt with outside the group. We help each other become more effective activists by dealing with feelings, both past and present.

6. Keep on track

When you think that a discussion is going off on a tangent, say so, and remind others of the topic you were discussing.

7. Respect time

If you have agreed about how much time your group will spend on various agenda items, each group member can take some responsibility for paying attention to time, and not leaving it solely to the facilitator to keep things moving.

E. Roles that Help a Group Function Well

We have found that a group functions well when someone is thinking systematically about what the members of the groups need, what is happening in the group (interactions among members), and what steps need to be taken to move things along. This role can be shared by everyone in the group, but it is also useful to designate particular roles for specific meetings. If

you rotate the roles among all group members, each person gets practice taking responsibility for the group's life and health.

Some of the roles that can be played by group members are described below. Not all of them are necessary at all meetings, but if the group is having difficulties, they may become more crucial.

1. Facilitator

The facilitator's task is "to help the group accomplish a common task; to move through the agenda in the time available and to make necessary decisions and plans for implementation. A facilitator makes no decisions for the group, but suggests ways that will help the group move forward." (See *Meeting Facilitation: The No Magic Method*, listed in Appendix B)

The facilitator plans the agenda, either before the meeting or with the group at the beginning of the meeting; pays attention to each group member during the meeting, noting when people are withdrawn, or disruptive, or inattentive; keeps the meeting moving; and plans a closing. Since this is a lot for one person to do, the group may want to designate a "vibes watcher," and a timekeeper.

The group may also wish to have a note taker for parts of the meeting.

Most people can develop the skills needed to facilitate a meeting. Each group will need to decide whether facilitation will be rotated, done by the same person each time, or whether the group will function without a designated facilitator. If someone is new to facilitation, or weak in certain skills, have her co-facilitate with someone who has more experience or complementary skills.

2. "Vibes Watcher"

The job of the vibes watcher is to notice what is going on; decide whether to bring it to the group's attention; describe to the group what is happening; ask what they want to do about it; or give attention to specific people.

When Chris was vibes watcher, he noticed that Joan, who was facilitating the meeting, had gotten engrossed in a discussion with Mary, and was losing her focus on the whole group. The other two members of the group looked sleepy and restless. After Chris mentioned it, the group decided to go on with the discussion, but suggested that Joan ask someone else to facilitate for that part of the meeting.

3. Timekeeper

The timekeeper lets the group know when the time allowed for a topic is nearly over, and when the allotted time has been used up. The group can then decide to move on to the next topic, or it may choose to stay longer with the first topic.

F. Typical Problems and How to Solve Them

Groups may get off to a good start and then fall apart.

Difficulties often arise in these areas: goals, boundaries, differences not dealt with, individual styles, and interpersonal conflicts or sub-groups.

1. Goals

The group may flounder without a purpose or diverge from its stated purposes. It may no longer be meeting the needs of the participants. The best remedy is to take time to clarify the purpose of the group at the beginning, and any time later on when it becomes fuzzy. It may be helpful to plan to do this at regular intervals, such as every six months.

2. Boundaries

People may want to leave the group, or join the group once it is underway. Some members may be erratic in their attendance. When someone wants to leave, or does leave, take the time to deal with it, leave time for goodbyes, and talk about the person's contributions to the group. A member's departure is a loss to the group, and may bring up feelings.

When considering the addition of new members to the group, think about such things as the optimum size of your group and what qualities a new person could bring to the group that might balance those of people in the group. Surface and deal with any reservations people have. Come to consensus as a group so that you can truly welcome a new person.

Erratic attendance may be a sign of low commitment to the group. Your group may want to have as one of its shared agreements an understanding about attendance, how many meetings a member may miss, and whether someone will phone absent members.

3. Differences not dealt with

Every group is bound to include people with some differences. Acknowledge those differences, whether they have to do with age, gender (men and women), class backgrounds, racial or religious backgrounds, parents and non-parents. The more you learn about one another, including learning about one another's backgrounds, the more you will be able to appreciate and trust one another. Many of these differences have led to oppression in the past or in the present. Your group may want to read about or share your own experiences with oppression and how to get beyond it. (For a good discussion of the nature of oppression, see [No Turning Back](#), listed in Appendix B)

4. Individual Styles

One person may talk too much or ramble. Another person may have difficulty expressing feelings, and always say "everything is fine." Someone else may be seriously depressed. If any of these behaviors bothers you, talk about it in the group, with care and respect.

In early meetings of his support group, Jeremy noticed that Larry joked every time someone in the group expressed strong feelings, and invariably drew the attention of the group to himself. Jeremy became increasingly annoyed with Larry and decided to bring it up in the group. When he did, he found that others were also irritated, and that they were also concerned about Larry. Larry disclosed that he had recently learned that his father needed surgery, and that his worries kept him from listening to others in the group. Jeremy encouraged him to take time in the group to talk about his situation. Larry's behavior changed!

5. Interpersonal Conflicts or Sub-Groups

Sub-groups may emerge when two or more members have an intense personal relationship (they may be lovers or ex-lovers, or have a long history), when several members of a group share other activities or friends, or have something else in common.

In one group of three, two of the women were lesbians and the third was married and heterosexual. She felt uncomfortable talking about her relationship with her husband, thinking that the lesbians wouldn't be interested or sympathetic. When she was able to discuss this with the others, it enabled the three women to talk about their differences and their liking and appreciation for one another.

When interpersonal conflicts arise in your group, acknowledge them. If you cannot resolve them, you may want to invite someone from outside your group to facilitate one or two meetings to help the group deal with the conflict (see Appendix B, "Resource Manual").

G. Celebrate Your Group

Support groups should not just focus on work and difficult issues. Take time to have fun with each other and include more lighthearted activities in your regular meetings. Some suggestions:

1. Break Bread Together

Food is a wonderful community builder. Many support groups include meals in the meeting times, as potlucks, or prepared by a few members.

2. Celebrate Anniversaries

Birthdays or the anniversary of the group itself are great opportunities for taking time out for more frivolous activities. Have fun!

3. Acknowledge Successes

The hardworking members of your support group are committed to difficult long term struggles for social change. Use the group to acknowledge how you are each making a difference.

Be specific. If some special event takes place (a campaign has a success, someone gets that perfect job) have a celebration. In general, we need ongoing ways to affirm the real steps forward we make, even if the journey is a very long one.

4. Disbanding is Fine: Appreciate and Evaluate

Even the best of support groups may come to a point of ending. Group members may encounter changes in their lives. People move away. The group may also serve well for a time and then become less relevant to its members. Or the group may decide to disband because of internal conflicts that cannot be resolved.

No matter what the cause for a group's ending, there is a lot to be gained from a careful evaluation. Schedule a special meeting to wrap up. It can include time for people to reflect on what they have learned from the group, and to share some of the ways the group has been helpful to them. Look also at ways the group did not function well and why, in order to carry *learning* rather than bad feelings into other groups and situations. Take time to appreciate each other.

EPILOGUE: How This Manual Was Written

This manual was written by people involved in the [Interhelp Network](#) and in [Movement for a New Society](#) (see Appendix C for brief descriptions of both). Both of these groups have been using support groups as a basic organizing structure.

This manual is also a revision of an earlier work called "Starting a Nuclear Support Group," compiled in January 1984 for Newton Action for Nuclear Disarmament by Sarah Conn, Tova Green, Nancy Moorehead, and Anne Slepian. That original manual received enthusiastic response from activists in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, prompting the authors to work on a more thorough version. Meanwhile, Movement for a New Society had been experimenting with models for activist support groups. Peter Woodrow joined the other authors to add reflections on experience in MNS.

We appreciate the many suggestions and experiences of our colleagues in the Interhelp Network and in Movement for a New Society. Some of those who gave us specific feedback and suggestions are: Matt Becker, Carol Bragg, Shepherd Bliss, Barbara Cohen, Pamela Haines, Joe Havens, Mona Nelson, Fran Peavey, Carol Pertofsky, Sarah Pirtle, Betsy Raasch-Gilman, and Mary Watkins.

In writing this manual, we used a support group model. We scheduled meetings with clear agendas, and always began with a "check-in." When interpersonal conflicts arose, we dealt with them. We respected our differences in time available for this project, and our differences in writing styles. Peter worked better alone. Tova was able to write more easily when she scheduled time with Anne to write in the same room. We have finished the project appreciating each other for the work we have done.

APPENDIX A: GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Most differences between people in a group can be resolved if they are dealt with openly, rather than avoided. This short appendix describes the skills involved in giving feedback clearly and constructively.

GIVING FEEDBACK:

- Be specific and direct. Report exact behavior rather than general impressions.

Instead of "Michael, I don't like how you always take over discussions," you might say, "Michael, you have interrupted me twice in the last five minutes and I am frustrated. I would like you to wait until I am finished before you jump in."

2. The above example also illustrates that it helps to include what you *observed*, how you *felt* about it, and what you would like the other person to *do* differently.
3. Use words that describe *your* feelings. For instance, "I feel angry, relieved, frustrated, sad," rather than words that sound like blaming to some people ("ripped off, dumped on, used, boxed in") or any phrase that starts "I feel you _____"
- Express caring. Affirm that you are giving feedback because you care about the other person, want to work with them more effectively and improve the relationship.

"Suzy, I'm upset because you missed the last meeting and didn't call to say why. I really want you to be a part of this group, and I miss you when you are not here."

5. Be immediate. Give feedback as soon after something happens as possible. Later it is harder to recall and does not have the same impact.
6. Deal with one issue at a time. Even if there are many things you want this person to change, people get overwhelmed and defensive if you give them a big list of problems. Avoid pulling out all of the times in the past that the person did a particular irksome thing, or all of the *other* ways that they have annoyed you in the past.
7. After giving your feedback, be prepared to empathize with the feelings of the other person, even if she states those feelings in an angry or defensive manner. Often people misunderstand even well-expressed feedback. Ask her to try to repeat back to you what she heard you say. You may have to go through several rounds of listening and restating before you understand each other.

RECEIVING

FEEDBACK:

1. Concentrate on listening. You do not have to respond.
2. Repeat the gist of what was said out loud and ask for clarification.

3. If you choose to respond, do it in a non-defensive way. This can include what you feel, why you feel it, and what you want from the person giving you feedback (as in #2 and #3 above under "Giving Feedback").

For example: George might say "How could you be so stupid as to think I don't care when I'm giving up my only free night to come here?" A better alternative would be: "I feel hurt when you assume that I don't care. I had a hard week and was very depressed and felt that I shouldn't come to a meeting in such a bad mood."

1. Empathize with the concerns the person expressed.

George says, "I know I feel disappointed too, when someone doesn't show up for a group that is important to me."

1. Even if you don't agree with some of what the person is telling you, see if there are "grains of truth" you can agree with. Try to work out some action steps together, things both parties can do to change or support the other's changes.

APPENDIX B: WRITTEN RESOURCES FOR SUPPORT GROUPS

Being scanned in and edited. Coming soon.

APPENDIX C: INTERHELP & MOVEMENT FOR A NEW SOCIETY

See the

[Interhelp Network Website](#)

and the [Movement for a New Society Wikipedia page](#).

APPENDIX D: ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This manual was written in 1986, and the authors' descriptions have not been updated since then. - editor

Sarah A. Conn is a clinical psychologist, a member of the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Psychological Association, a committed activist, and most importantly, wife, mother, sister and friend.

Tova Green is a psychotherapist, consultant, cellist and song writer. She has been teaching skill-oriented courses and workshops to human service workers since 1971. Her work with Interhelp has included three years of serving on the Interhelp Council (board), and leading Despair and Empowerment workshops and trainings in New England, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Japan, and Australia. She has been part of an Interhelp support group for four years.

Nancy Moorehead is Coordinator of Chapter Development for Physicians for Social Responsibility in Washington, D.C. She has been involved in the Sanctuary movement and has travelled to Nicaragua and El Salvador with Witness for Peace. She is an inspiring song leader, workshop facilitator, and trainer. Nancy has served on the Interhelp National Council for two years and has been involved with Interhelp for four years.

Anne Slepian loves to sing and dance. She performs with Libana, a women's ensemble exploring traditional women's music and dance from many cultures. She also helps organize tenants' councils with the Massachusetts Union of Housing Tenants. Her choices have been guided over the years by several excellent MNS activist support groups. She was involved with Interhelp in its early days.

Peter Woodrow is a nonviolent social change activist and a member of Movement for a New Society. He works on conflict resolution and nonviolent direct action campaigns as an organizer and trainer. He also works with private voluntary organizations on international relief and development programs, with particular experience in Southeast Asia.