

Social Tract

Module on

Support groups

LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

After the completion of this module the learner should:

1. Understand the importance of support groups and their place within the context of care and support.
2. Understand the importance of trust and confidentiality within the support group.
3. Know how to plan and establish a support group.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, support Groups have been recognized for their value in providing emotional support to individuals. For those living with and/or affected by HIV and AIDS the Support Group has several benefits. Benefits include having contact with others who are experiencing similar challenges in their lives, obtaining useful information and developing different ways of dealing with the demands of HIV and AIDS. Support groups are also useful for providing information and guidance regarding the illness, and the creation of mutual support among members of the group. The main objective of the group being mutual support.

One of the key elements in HIV and AIDS Care and Support as recommended by **WHO** and **UNAIDS**, is the provision of psychosocial support. Support groups have been identified as a basic form of psychosocial support for those living with and/or affected by HIV and AIDS.

Support groups – while they may be very beneficial – are not a substitute for other psychological interventions such as counselling. Support groups could function to provide additional support to some people while for others it might be the only form of support that they receive.

2. WHAT IS A SUPPORT GROUP?

A Support Group is a structure or meeting wherein people with common challenges, concerns and needs come together to support one another in various aspects of daily living and functioning - emotional, spiritual, physical and psychological - and to share information, knowledge, ideas and experiences. Members of the group are bound by group norms, goals and objectives as agreed upon by the group. There are however different types of Support Groups (mentioned later).

3. THE PURPOSE OF A SUPPORT GROUP

Support groups may serve the following purposes:

- People can share common experiences and difficulties
- Group members can give and receive support
- It provides an opportunity for people to connect with each other and share similar problems and experiences – a vital part of the human condition
- Sharing feelings
- Learning different ways of coping
- Gaining insight into one's self
- Seeing HIV-positive people who are well and coping with their lives hence serving as a model to others
- Understanding different issues experienced by members of the group
- HIV-positive group members can be in a place where they feel accepted
- Obtaining reliable information
- Networking – members can develop relationships with others who they may need to rely on during difficult times
- Accessing referral systems

4. CONFIDENTIALITY AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Confidentiality in support groups for PLHAs is a critical issue that, if not properly respected, can prove to be a true obstacle to the success and effective running of any support group.

Here are some important tips for facilitators in instilling a strong value of confidentiality in the support group:

- While it does happen that confidentiality is occasionally broken, the support group facilitator needs to begin emphasizing the upholding of confidentiality from as early as the recruitment (or preparation) stage of the group.
- During recruitment or referral of potential patients to the support group, patients may need to be warned that they take the risk of knowing someone in the group. Whilst we hope this will not scare them away, it is hoped that they are more informed and prepared for commencing with the support group.
- The facilitator should not play a disciplinary-type, teacher role but rather encourage the group members to emphasise the importance of fellow group members respecting confidentiality. If confidentiality should happen to be broken by someone in the group, it is both the facilitator's, but primarily the group members' role to take the appropriate action to manage this situation. For example, the member who is thought to have broken confidentiality may be asked to leave. It is also useful to point out the possible legal implications for the person who discloses someone else's HIV status without their permission. There are many laws and policies in South Africa that aim to protect people living with HIV/AIDS.

Remember:

Some patients may have a lot at stake if confidentiality about their HIV status was breached. This might include stigmatization, discrimination, rejection, the possible breakdown of relationships and, at times, abuse. Other group members have to learn to respect the confidentiality of others.

5. ADVANTAGES OF A SUPPORT GROUP

Support Groups have a number of advantages. Here are:

20 Good Reasons for Support Groups

They:

1. Provide a sense of belonging.
2. Facilitate and enable expression and sharing of feelings.
3. Relieve stress – by talking about particular concerns, issues or situations, or even by obtaining useful information.
4. Nurture and build members by providing emotional support.
5. Provide mutual support.
6. Facilitate and develop different and/or new ways of doing things.
7. Expose members to accurate information regarding HIV and AIDS as well as related topics.
8. Promote and serve as a space for personal development. (for example, increased assertiveness, conflict management skills)
9. Prepare members to be comfortable with disclosure beyond the Support, for example, to spouse, family, or colleague.

10. Educate members in terms of their human and legal rights regarding living with HIV and AIDS.
11. Help prevent the increase of HIV infection.
12. Build relationships.
13. Facilitate effective communication in all aspects of a member's life.
14. Encourage a sense of hope.
15. Promote positive living.
16. Build confidence and self-esteem to deal with issues and situations.
17. Are a cost-effective way of providing support to many people.
18. Serve as a platform to start other activities, for example, income generating initiatives.
19. Provide a space to explore relationships with others.
20. Facilitate/promote networking and referral systems.

6. SUPPORT GROUPS FACILITATION

THE ROLE OF THE SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATOR

The role of the facilitator is to promote mutual interaction and support within the group. He/she should also be able to give the space to members to be able to talk about their feelings. The facilitator is also responsible to create and maintain a safe space between members so that they are able to:

- Communicate with each other
- Listen to each other with empathy
- Provide encouragement to each other
- Provide explanations and guidance
- Provide practical support

TYPES OF FACILITATION

There are different ways in which support groups can be facilitated. Here are some of them:

- Sole Facilitator
This is when there is only one person facilitating the group. Ideally, this should be someone who has been trained specifically in support group facilitation and is confident and competent enough to run a group. Often a group will be able to develop its own life and leadership, however a poorly trained or incompetent facilitator has the potential, unknowingly, to be destructive to group and individual development.
- Co-facilitation
This is where two facilitators pair up to run a support group together. They will always both be present. They will need to plan together before the group and evaluate the session afterwards. They may vary their roles whereby one is more active and the other more of an observer. This style of facilitation is handy when the facilitators are not confident and prepared to run a group on their own or where the groups are large and there are many emotions amongst group members. At times like this, the other facilitator is available to comfort emotional individuals where the group may be too large to play that role effectively. Co-facilitation is also advantageous in that when the one facilitator is not able to attend the group meeting, the other is.

- Serial facilitation

This may take place in clinics that are very busy and staff are not regularly available to run the support group. In such a case, and only out of necessity, different facilitators will run the group each session depending upon who is available. This might impact negatively on the group as it is essential that the facilitator develops trusting relationships with each group member. Try to be as constant as possible in the use of facilitators, bringing in new facilitators only when it is absolutely essential.

- Expert presenters

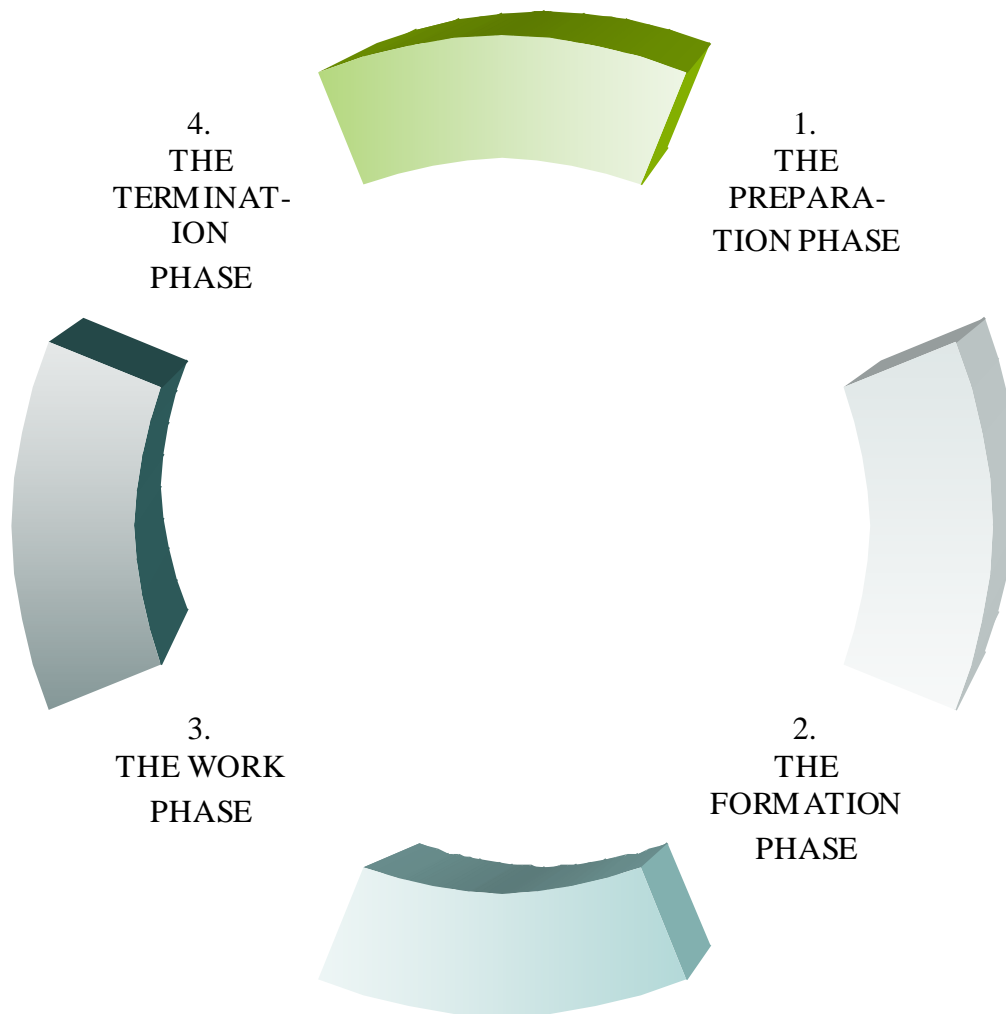
With good warning, discussion and the consent of the group, it may be helpful to bring guest or expert presenters into a group session. Primarily, this serves the purpose of providing a certain body of information to the group members. This should not be prioritised over the relationship-building and support function of the group. It can be done occasionally and where possible.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Groups move slowly, at a pace that is comfortable for the group members.
- With each meeting, members will become closer to resolving difficulties, regardless of which area of stress they are addressing
- Support group meetings should be held as agreed upon by the group, at times and on days agreed upon by the members.
- A support group is never a substitute for individual counselling and could also complement other forms of support.
- A support group may take on various forms. This is based on the needs of those in the group as well as the level of the facilitator's skills and abilities.

STAGES OF THE GROUP'S LIFE CYCLE

Think of support groups as having a life of their own. They require proper preparatory work in order for them to have good grounding for a successful and long duration. Groups will experience certain dynamics as they come together and group members get to know each other. After some time (this varies for each group), the group will reach a functional stage in which progress can be made. Some groups come to a formal end, while others might continue independent of the facilitator or organisation. This is often a sign of success.



7. PLANNING/ESTABLISHING A SUPPORT GROUP

It is important when planning a support group, to hold foremost what the needs of the members are as well as what the purpose of the group is. Effective planning of the support group is crucial as it maximizes its effectiveness and success. It is therefore useful to understand how groups work and which type would be most useful for members who wish to join.

More can be achieved if a Support Group is planned and thought through in advance rather than after the meetings have started.

Here are some important issues to consider prior to the running of the group:

1. What are the aims of the group?

This will help you to decide on the group's identity and what type of group it's going to be. For example, support for newly diagnosed HIV-positive pregnant women or ARV adherence support for people commencing treatment.

2. How many meetings will be required?

This would also require questions around what type of group it is and what the needs of the group are. Very often time-limited groups have 10 sessions.

The group may end because the facilitator needs to start another new group or the members might continue to meet on their own.

3. When and for how long should each meeting be?

Most groups meet once a week for one-and-a-half hours. Whenever this is decided upon, it is important that the facilitator is consistent and provides structure. She/he should ensure that group sessions are held on the same day of the week and commence on time.

4. Where should the group meet?

The meeting place should be a room that is not too small, or too large. A large room can be very intimidating. It should offer privacy and secure anonymity particularly in the case of HIV and AIDS. Groups could be held in church halls, the local crèche or school classroom, an office, or at clinics. The venue should be a place that will be available to the group over a period of time. Be sensitive to the group members' needs as they might not want to be connected to a venue that is related to HIV. Participants should feel safe travelling to and from the chosen venue.

5. How should we arrange the venue?

The venue should be made as comfortable as the resources available allows for it to be. Seating of group members is very important. Arrange the seats in a circle so that people can see each other. Sitting in a circle helps people to talk with each other more than if they are sitting in rows. The facilitator should be seated in the circle with the rest of the group members.

6. What should the group size be?

A group needs to be manageable and, therefore, should ideally not consist of more than 15 members. There should also be large enough so that members can continue to meet even in the event when half of the members do not make it to the group meeting.

7. Other practicalities, for example, supplying food and/or beverages, transport money etc needs to be considered. It would be necessary as part of the planning to ascertain what will be supplied to the group and who will fund the group. Once a decision has been made about the provision of food, beverages or transport money, the prospective group members need to be told to ensure they have a clear understanding about what they can expect from the group.

It has been identified that often Support Groups provide some form of a meal or drink, and that the meal is often important. Food has also been a "binding agent" around which people often naturally congregate.

However, the provision of food, beverages or transport money can create its own dynamics and difficulties and facilitators should be aware of the added dimension this can bring to the support group.

THE PREPARATION PHASE

Checklist of some important issues to discuss regarding the group:

- State confidentiality upfront, and that it starts even before the first group meeting and that confidentiality is assured for the pre group meeting as well.
- Talk about the group guidelines/contract.

- Remember that there are certain “rules” in the standard group guidelines/contract that could change when the group meets for the first time and wants to make changes to it.
- Meeting time – Discuss punctuality, attendance and venue.
- What and how things happen in the support group. Here you can talk about the list of possible topics and also hear what the person is interested in.

This meeting also allows for the facilitator to assess whether the prospective member is suitable and /or ready to join a support group.

TOPICS THAT CAN BE USED FOR SUPPORT GROUPS

The following are possible and useful topics to discuss during the support group sessions:

- Information regarding HIV and AIDS
- Disclosure
- Opportunistic Infections: symptoms and management
- Stigma, discrimination and human rights
- STIs, safer sex, re-infection and sexuality
- Pregnancy, PMTCT and child care
- Nutrition and positive living
- Treatment and Anti-retroviral Therapies (ARV's)
- Adherence
- Personal assertiveness and self-esteem
- Self help and income generation
- Bereavement
- Planning for the Future
- Death, dying and loss

N.B.: Please note that in order to acquire the necessary skills for facilitating a group, it is essential to go on a specific support group facilitation course.

