



Project	: KLASS Website	Segment	: Support Groups
Article	: The importance of establishing Peer Support Groups.		
Prepared by	: Andrew Tan	Version	: 1.1

Next to our families and loved ones, all of us value the friendship and comfort provided by our close friends. These are the people to whom we can confide in about our lives, our loves, our jobs, our fears and aspirations. They are the ones who can tell us off when we do something wrong. They are the ones we run to when we seek emotional strength or a good cry. The ones to whom we bitch about what irritates us ... and after, have a good laugh over a teh tarik.

Although support groups have existed in our lives, we usually do not identify them as such. We usually call them our pals, our gang, our posse, etc. No matter what we call them, in our hearts we know how truly important they are and the role they play in our lives.

When it comes to a time when we hear some unwelcome news from our doctors and physicians, we can choose to hold the emotions inside - the fear, the confusion, the anger, the frustration, the sadness and the multitude of questions. Or we can seek the help of someone.

This person can be a professional who will be able to answer all your questions on the options, treatments and other medical possibilities. This person can also be someone who can understand and empathize – someone who can help in the necessary process of acceptance.

Sometimes we may prefer to speak to someone who has been where we are. Someone who had also received such news, accepted it and has moved on with their lives. There are many such people out there. We read about them in newspapers and magazines. They are the people who have initiated support groups and services for groups addressing issues as diverse as alcoholism, drug abuse, stroke, cancer, spousal abuse and rape, to mention a few.

How large is a Support Group?

A new support group does not need to start out as an intensely structured organization.

You only need two people.

One person must be ready and able to help – the Counselor. And one who is ready to seek a willing ear – the Client.

The Counselor is identified by the doctor as a patient who has been able to overcome the difficulties during the treatment process and have come out psychologically and emotionally stronger. This person would be a “success story” who can be an example of how the disease can be managed.

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The Counselor should be willing to allow their phone number to be passed to the newly diagnosed patients.

Nothing happens until the Client is ready to call and accept support.

What happens in the Support Group?

As in most cases, the anonymity of a phone call is reassuring for the Client as they can be sure that their identity is not revealed until they choose to do so.

The Client may have many questions and seek advice on how to take their medications.

Questions covering side effects, opportunistic infections, life expectancy may also be asked.

What is most important is to realize that the Client may speak about seemingly unrelated or unresolved issues in their lives. They should be allowed to voice their feelings as during the initial stage, the feelings of confusion, worry and self loathing is compounded by frustration and the loss of self confidence.

Allow them to release all these pent up emotions at their own speed.

This is necessary due to the fact that many Clients may not have been able to share the news of their HIV positive status with any family members or close friends.

Friends and family who do not have a correct understanding of how the virus is spread can harbour a fear of contracting the disease.

The fear of being ostracized, abandoned or disowned is very real as can be seen by the numbers of people who end up in hospital wards, homes and hospices throughout the world.

The only way to overcome this is through education and information.

What are the benefits of a Support Group?

As the contact between the Counselor and the Client continues and a sense of trust is developed, the Counselor may indicate the existence of larger Support Groups.

Depending on the Client, the one-to-one contact with the Counselor may continue for some time.

There will come a stage when either the Counselor or the Client can suggest a face-to-face meeting. This is the manifestation of the confidence and trust the Client has in the Counselor.

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In later meetings, other Clients may be invited for a casual chat over coffee or tea. In this relaxed setting, all are allowed to speak their mind. As in most cases, this is probably the first opportunity the Clients have had to be able to openly discuss their thoughts with anyone other than the Counselor.

For the Client, the meeting of other infected persons can bring about the realization that they are not alone.

The benefit of these sessions can be judged from the feedback from the Clients when the Counselor calls a few days later.

Some Clients may experience a sense a relief and may initiate another session.

Through the exchange of phone numbers, the Client's own network of resources for help and support increases.

For the Counselor, the dependence of the Client on only one person is lessened as they meet other people.

How else can a Support Group grow?

As every person develops at their own speed, Counselors can regularly remind them that there are many organizations that allow an even greater sense of reassurance.

In these settings, they have the opportunity to engage in discussion about all aspects of facing treatment options, managing the side effects, remembering medication schedules, learning about good nutrition, developing skills in handling stress levels and in general living a full, rich life.

The Client becomes more self confident in the realization that they are still a valuable and capable human being who is worthy of respect.

As their sense of self worth increases, they can be encouraged to get more involved in the organization of activities for the larger group.

Empowerment of a Support Group.

The Clients who have shown growth in self confidence and have developed an interest in helping others can also be encouraged to apply to participate in skills building workshops, seminars and conferences.

These opportunities set a good example for others to follow. Eventually the Clients themselves can take on the role of Counselors and lead their own group.

Always remember that Support Groups are like gardens. They always need to be tended to and be allowed to grow and flourish. The beauty of life is always rewarding.