

Opening Our Eyes
Is this for you? A depression support group (DSG)
by Nan Dickie

You may wonder if a support group for people who experience depression would be good for you, or perhaps for a friend or loved one. To find out, read on!

I started a depression support group (DSG) in Salmon Arm ten years ago. We met twice a month for an hour, and many people found great benefits by attending for either a while, or for a long time.

Early on, the group adopted the motto:

“We’d rather share with strangers who understand, than with friends or family who don’t.”

These “strangers” soon became special friends.

There were three rules for our meetings:

- Strict confidentiality
- Participants were not required to speak (they could simply listen)
- We did not advise, criticize or judge anyone. Rather, we shared our experiences—concerns, fears, successes and difficulties, useful tactics, opinions about mental health services, and so on.

I would suggest a topic at the beginning of each meeting, and then each person (who chose to speak) checked in for a minute or so saying how they were doing at that time (or over the past two weeks) or they spoke to the topic I had introduced. When a new person joined us, other participants would say what their particular diagnosis is with brief details during the check in, so the new person knew he or she is among like-individuals. New participants were usually comfortable by the end of the check in.

Then we would discuss the topic as it related to our personal experience. Inevitably, this morphed into another (and another...) topic important to participants. I kept a list of all the topics we had discussed—and there were dozens of them!

To be fair to the person speaking—to “give them the floor” so to speak—we used a “talking stick.” This stick was passed from one speaker to the next. An individual could put up his or her hand when someone was speaking, and the talking stick would go to them when the current speaker was finished. This procedure worked very well. It gave the shy person a chance to get his/her thoughts together before speaking; no one was allowed to interfere or interrupt if there was a brief silence when someone was holding the stick.

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We ended each meeting with a check out, when participants would say whatever they wanted (if they indeed chose to share): for instance, how the meeting was for them, how they felt about the next couple of weeks, or what they would like us to talk about at a future meeting.

We welcomed friends and family of a new participant to his or her first meeting. Some new participants found that this support was necessary and/or useful. The parents, siblings, children or friends of participants always gained more understanding of their loved one's disorder as a result of their attendance at this first meeting.

At each meeting we would have between 6 and 16 participants; the average was 10. Any size of group worked well.

We never had any group or individual issues of any sort for the seven years this DSG operated. Each participant was very respectful of everyone else, and the level of trust was high.

Our group welcomed anyone who would like to discover what a depression support group is all about. Some people came once. This was absolutely fine. We found that most people did return, as these meetings helped them significantly.

DSGs are very effective, are life-giving and can be life-changing. Find out on this web-site if there is one in your community or nearby. You'll be glad you did.
