

or that they're somehow strange or abnormal for feeling the way they do. By participating in a support group, people usually discover that their problems and feelings are not so unusual or weird and that many others struggling with the same problem feel the same way.

### *Support groups work*

- In one study, four out of five (82%) members of a depression self-help group said they coped better with their illness after they joined. Members who'd been with the group the longest scored the highest.
- Forty-three companies participated in a study to determine the best method to help employees quit smoking. Some companies used a self-help group format while others showed employees a video and gave them a manual to read. Employees of companies that used support groups were nearly twice as successful at quitting smoking than employees where only the video and manual were used (41% vs. 21%).
- Elderly widows and widowers who attended a grief support group had lower levels of depression and grief than widows and widowers who did not attend a group.
- Another study found that the more AA groups a patient attends after treatment for alcoholism, the longer the patient will remain abstinent.

### *Find a group that's right for you*

Many support groups are held in churches, schools, community centers, homes, hospitals, alcohol or other drug treatment centers, or in clinics that specialize in the group's focus. Established groups such as AA or Al-Anon (for those who are affected by an alcoholic) may be listed in your telephone directory. You might also look in the

"Community Events" or "Health" sections of your local newspaper, or contact your company's employee assistance program or your school's student assistance program for information on groups in your area.

If you feel uncomfortable in a group after you've attended a few meetings, look for another group. There are subtle differences between groups. Seek out a group whose members are much like yourself.

And if at first you don't succeed, do try again. Millions of people find comfort and recovery through self-help groups. But self-help is like many other things in life — you get out of the experience what you put into it. If self-help isn't working for you, talk to a professional or someone from your employee assistance program.

**WorkLife Solutions**  
**Employee Assistance Program**  
**(330) 965-1234**  
**[www.eap4me.com](http://www.eap4me.com)**

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# SELF-HELP GROUPS





Each year, thousands of people turn to self-help groups for support while facing a life challenge. Many such groups follow a 12-step format based on the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). According to AA literature, if the 12 steps are put into daily practice, they can help people let go of the least effective characteristics of their personality and coping styles, and make room for more workable behaviors and self-care techniques.

Research shows the 12-step format to be very successful at helping people overcome or cope with life's problems. There are groups for those with physical conditions such as diabetes or cancer. Other groups address depression, grief, sexual orientation or divorce. Children and partners of alcoholics meet in groups all over the world. Still others might focus on getting through challenging life events such as adopting a child or caring for an aging parent. There's a group for almost any behavioral, medical or lifestyle condition.

Self-help groups are a safe, welcome place where someone can find:

*Social support.* Many people feel alone or isolated when faced with a life problem. Self-help groups offer support during a difficult time.

*Insight.* As group members share their stories, others may gain perspective on their own problems.

*Education.* Group members may share new research articles, books or other developments with members. Professionals also may be invited to speak, offering new perspectives on managing a problem.

### *What happens during a group*

A person might feel anxious or wary when attending a group meeting for the first time. But after the initial fear of the unknown has worn off, most new

participants feel comfortable, welcome and glad that they decided to attend.

Most group meetings follow a similar format: After members have gathered in a circle or around a table, a volunteer may open by reading the group's statement of purpose. There may then be a short reading from a book, such as the *Big Book* of AA. Each member takes a turn reading a brief passage from the book. Anyone who doesn't want to read may simply say, "Pass."

After the reading, group members then go around the table, explaining what the passage means to them and how it applies in their lives. After all members have had a chance to speak (again, someone who chooses not to speak can simply say "Pass"), the group may join hands and conclude by reciting a phrase or saying that's relevant to that group.

### *Why self-help groups work*

There are several reasons why self-help groups succeed in helping people overcome life challenges. Among those most often mentioned are:

*Helping others is helpful.* Offering someone

positive regard and supportive statements is helpful by itself. Some groups use the statement, "Helping someone up the hill puts you closer to the top."

*Positive role models.* Veteran members of the group are a source of support and encouragement to newcomers.

*Accessibility.* Anyone from any walk of life can attend a group. Self-help groups do not charge a fee; participants are asked to make a small donation (usually about \$1) to cover the cost of materials, room rental or refreshments — but only if they can afford it. And support groups of many different types meet in almost all communities.

*Acceptance.* Some people become isolated with their problem. In a self-help group, a person may feel truly understood and accepted for the first time in his/her life.

*Anonymity.* Most groups are anonymous, which means who you are, where you live or what you do is not revealed.

*Normalization.* When people have problems and don't talk about them with others, they may end up feeling like they're the only ones who feel this way

### *Self-help groups*

- Share a common concern regarding a behavioral or medical problem or life event
- Are governed by the members in attendance
- May use counseling or medical professionals as resource people, but not as leaders
- Provide non-judgmental emotional support
- Gather and share accurate and specialized information
- Have a fluid membership — newcomers are helped by veterans and become veterans who may outgrow the need for a group
- Request no fee

— Adapted from *International Polio Network*