



NEWSLETTER for NURTURING SUPPORT GROUPS

march-april, 1980
volume 1, no. 4

Welcome to the fourth issue of **WE**, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support. This issue includes:

- a suggested format for group meetings
- suggested activities for group meetings
- Sally Dierks' suggestions for ways to respond to discounting
- Sheila Hartmann's example of how to use a Suggestion Circle to help focus on people's needs
- Nancy O'Hara's reflections on five years in a support group
- the importance of "The First Three Minutes"
- thoughts on Resentments and Appreciations, and
- Judee Hansord's information on how you can order this newsletter

If you have ideas about how to make this newsletter more useful for yourself or if you want your ideas included in the newsletter, write to Judee Hansord or me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jean Illsley Clarke

Jean Illsley Clarke, Editor

THOUGHTS ON THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

by Nancy O'Hara

Hugs, hot dishes, roses, child care, notes, daisies, a mushroom shell, and a lace butterfly. These are some tangible gifts I have received from my support group.

Some of the intangible gifts I have received are words of comfort, encouragement, and praise, a timely phone call, and the physical and emotional warmth of gentle friends at a painful moment. One of the most precious gifts I have is a growing faith in God that can no longer be denied. I have experienced my faith through this group of women as they love and accept me as the unique person I am and the person I am becoming.

I have also given to my support group. I have given house cleanings, time to plan retreats, prayers, and boxes of Kleenex. I have listened sensitively and compassionately when someone described the intimate and painful experience of death or divorce. I have also contributed a yearly lecture on each person's responsibility to the group's success. This speech usually arouses both groans and giggles.

We have celebrated together at a wedding, prayed together through a difficult birth, laughed together at retreats, cried together through tragic death, sewed together on quilts, and rejoiced together at our five year anniversary celebration.

When I think back over the last five years, I treasure the moments I have shared with individuals and with the group. Some of my most cherished friendships have begun in this group and flourished as a result of sharing many ideas, feelings and opinions. At times we have struggled to stay together, but we have learned about ourselves and each other in the process.

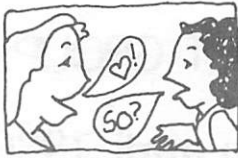
When I think about the future of my support group, I feel excited, yet scared. I feel scared knowing we have shared a variety of difficult experiences and wonder what others lay ahead. I feel excited knowing my life has already been greatly enriched by this group. I know I will continue to touch and be touched by this group and the experiences we share.

(Nancy O'Hara belongs to a support group at Hennepin Avenue Methodist Church in Minneapolis, MN.)



Me Important? Of Course I Am!

by Sally Dierks



It is celebration time and Joan tells about a special letter she received. "I got a letter with a daisy from my daughter and she said she loved me. Isn't that wonderful?" "Children are supposed to love their parents," Mary counters, and Joan has that old familiar feeling. "What did I do wrong? I wanted her to share my enjoyment, but she doesn't think my letter is important."

Have you ever shared a celebration, expected a "Cheer", got a "so what?" and then felt less important—discounted? If you have had this experience, you are not unusual or unique. For whatever reason, some people do discount or make less of other people's experiences and feelings. And some people, like Joan, do feel discounted or less important as a result. Joan says, "I'm there. What do I do now?"

One reason for joining a support group is to have a place where new behavior can be experienced, practiced, and supported. This is a place where feedback is expected and received as support. Joan has decided this is the time and place to behave in a different way, to respond to her discounted feelings instead of ignoring them. What are some things she can do?

Joan can tell how she feels, what she believes. She can show herself and she can decide she is worth it. Not responding to a discounting statement is the same as endorsing the statement. Joan sighs, "How do I say I am important, make myself visible without being rude and hurting other people's feelings?" One thing Joan could do is to say, "The letter is important to me. I feel good when I read it." This is a clear, non judgemental reply. This statement takes into account Joan's feelings and the importance of her daughter's letter, and says nothing to degrade or lessen the importance of Mary's beliefs. The emphasis of the reply is Joans, her feelings and her beliefs. "Yes, but what if Mary believes my statement discounts her?" Joan asks. Mary can choose to hear this statement in different ways. It is Mary's personal interpretation and Joan will have no control over her interpretation.

Another alternative is to say, "That is an interesting thought about children loving their parents. I want my children to love me and I appreciate them telling me so." Again the response is identifying what you want, how you feel, and honoring Mary by acknowledging you heard her.

Affirming your importance does not mean taking importance away from others. There is no limited amount of "importance." There is enough to go around, and claiming your importance may help other people find ways to feel important without putting down other people. Verbalize your importance. Believe you are important. You will help yourself and you will help the group. Do it.

Some typical discounting situations are when a person:

- uses all-encompassing words like, "All children love their parents"
- walks away while you are talking to him
- minimizes the importance of your news by immediately telling you his news; in response to your trip to Florida, for instance, he tells you of his trip to France.

HURRAH FOR MEETING NEEDS ... BOO FOR PERPETUATING A GROUP JUST FOR THE SAKE OF A GROUP

by Sheila Hartmann

Mary Jane has been in a support group for several months. She used to look forward to Tuesday evening meetings—the camaraderie; the exploring of ideas; the sharing of problems and celebrations; and the laughter. But lately, she'd found it harder to attend. She had too many things to do, and when she did go she got there late and usually left early.

She decided to tell the other members of the group. They just didn't make it interesting enough for her; the group wasn't doing what she needed it to do.

Mary Jane told the group members what she had been thinking and how she was feeling. The person leading the meeting asked Mary Jane if she wanted a Suggestion Circle* to look at the alternatives. She agreed, and stated her problem. The following are some of the responses offered to Mary Jane, a person who was not getting what she needed:

- You could tell the group what you want.
- You could find another group.
- You could blow up balloons and put suggestion messages inside them.
- You could ask the group how many of your needs they are willing to meet and then plan where and with whom your remaining needs will be met.
- You could discover ways of getting what you need out of whatever is offered.
- You could collect information on their wants and needs from other group members. Are the group members going in the same direction?
- You could plan the next meeting.
- You could make a list of how the meetings would be more interesting for you.

Mary Jane listened and thanked the group. She didn't know what she would decide to do, but she felt reassured that the group respected her needs and expected her to find ways to meet them.

P.S. During the following week Mary Jane read through the suggestions she had received and thought about her needs in relation to the group. She decided that she had outgrown the group. The decision felt right—they were an exciting group of people who had played an important part in her life. Their purpose was to meet peoples' needs, not to make her fit their group, and now she was choosing to go in another direction.

*See WE Vol.1: How To Use a Suggestion Circle

WE Vol.1, No.2: How Can I Get Group Members To Do Their Share?

WE Vol.1, No.3: Interrupting-Honoring

SUGGESTION CIRCLE



THOUGHTS ON LEADING AN ACTIVITY ... THE FIRST THREE MINUTES

y Jean Clarke

If you are leading an activity and you planned it, had materials ready, thought it through well, and then people didn't respond the way you thought they would, what can you do? One thing you can do is to consider the first three minutes. Consider what you said or did just before you started the explanation of the activity and exactly how you presented it.

Seemingly unimportant looks or words can signal a group that you do not respect what you are doing or that you think they need this whether they like it or not.

- I don't think you will like this.
- I'm not sure this is going to do any good.
- I don't really understand this myself.
- Nervous laughter.
- Deep sigh with eyes rolling toward the ceiling.
- Come on, let's get this over.
- This is what you have to do.

Communications such as these are often picked up by a group and reflected back in a lack of commitment to the activity or some kind of active sabotage or rebellion. Some questions from the group are clues that you may have been giving signals you didn't intend. For example:

- "What good will this do?"
- "I don't agree with this whole thing. Where did you get it?"
- "Why do we have to do this?"

If you can't recall exactly what you did at the opening, and often people cannot, ask a friend to observe you closely the next time you start an activity and to report to you exactly what you did and said. Another thing you can do is to use a tape recorder, although that will give you only words, laughter and voice intonations. Nonverbal signals require a videotape or another person to report to you.

If you wish to improve the way you open your part of the support group activity, experiment with saying exactly what is true. For instance, "I'm not sure I understand this and I'm scared. Are you willing to try out this exercise with me anyway?" Or "I have an activity that will take about twenty minutes and will give us a chance to know more about each other. It is a survey. Will you join me?"

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call for help

Their motto is "Call on us, we're right in your neighborhood." Their name is Hennepin County Community Services Department, and their job is to give information and assistance to people who need help. They keep track of all of the agencies that are available to help solve problems and they called **WE** and urged us to give you their phone number, 348-2105. They have tackled and resolved some mighty complex problems, so if you live in Minnesota in Hennepin County, remember that number. If you live in Ramsey County the number is 298-5351.

suggested activity

Do a Group Survey

Hand each person a sheet of paper with a survey question printed at the top. The questions will collect information about group members that others do not already know. Some sample survey questions:

- List all the geographic areas where you have lived.
- Where were you on New Year's Eve in 1970?
- What was your favorite fairy tale or fictional character when you were seven or eight years old?
- List all the different vocations that you have been trained for or have done.
- If you could travel to any country in the world, which one would you choose?
- What is your middle name?
- What is your astrological sign?
- How old were you and what happened at your favorite birthday party?
- If you could add one room to your house, by magic, what would you use that room for?
- Who are the three most inspirational people you have known?
- Who are the three most influential people in your life, whom you have never met?

Each person gets an answer from every other person in the room. Then the group listens to the results of each survey, or chooses questions they would like to hear the answers to; those who took those particular surveys read the answers.

Option: Any survey questions and answers that are not shared at this meeting could become part of the next meeting.

♥ OPENING ACTIVITY THAT OFFERS EVERYONE A POSITIVE PERSONAL MESSAGE

Go to each person in the room and whisper your wish for that person in his or her ear.

♥ CLOSING ACTIVITY THAT OFFERS EVERYONE A POSITIVE PERSONAL MESSAGE

Hand each person a sheet of small self-sticking labels with at least as many labels as there are people in the group. Ask, "Will you write two or three positive words describing a person on a label and then go and stick the label on that person? Will you do that for everyone in the group, including yourself?"



SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR GROUP MEETINGS

Place _____ Date _____
time _____ Person in charge _____

Program:

- ♥ opening activity that offers everyone a positive personal message
- ♥ Celebrating wins and sharing problems
- ♥ practice skills, new learnings, play
- ♥ suggestion circle
- ♥ plan the next meeting
- ♥ Resentments and Appreciations
- ♥ closing activity that offers everyone a positive personal message

♥ APPRECIATIONS and RESENTMENTS ♥

by Jean Clarke

Ask the people in your group why Resentments and Appreciations are important to them. Here are three of my reasons.

1. Since the focus of Support Groups is positive, Resentments and Appreciations provide a built-in time and place to recognize the grubby side of life without wallowing in it.
2. When I devote my time and energy to someone else, by choice, and put aside some of my own wishes, Resentments and Appreciations provide a time when I can claim all of my feelings.
3. Regular use of Resentments and Appreciations discourages gossip and reminds me to let people know what I appreciate about them.

On October 19-20 we in the Wayzata Community Church Support Group went on our first overnight retreat. We went to Koinonia Retreat Center in Annandale, Minnesota. Each of us was responsible for some part of the retreat time. The results? Twenty-four hours of quality time, deeper trust level, enjoyable, meaningful activities, and fun!

—Betty Beach

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Published by Judee Hansord
Marnie Lilja

Layout Design by Marnie Lilja

\$15.00 per year (6 issues)

WE

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- Suggested activities
- Thoughts on theory and purpose of support groups
- News from other support groups

newsletter for nurturing support groups