



newsletter for nurturing support groups

Volume 5, Number 6
September-October 1984

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 30th issue of **WE**, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support. Does your group use **Suggestion Circles**? I have been meeting with teams of editors who are collecting and editing six books of Suggestion Circles for parents. From these circles I have learned once again what valuable information parents have to offer other parents.

From the editors I have learned exciting new insights into why Suggestion Circles are important; how they are different from Brainstorming; and a wealth of ideas on how to lead Circles.

I have a new understanding of the power of the Circles and a new respect for the subtleness and potency of good Circle leadership skills, which I may have been taking for granted. In this issue I share this wealth with you. The examples are drawn from the parenting books, but those of you who are using the Circle in other classes and in business will understand that these leadership principles are the same for all groups.

Sincerely,

Jean Illsley Clarke
Editor

Suggested Format for Group Meetings

Place _____
Date _____
Time _____
Person in Charge _____

Program:

- Opening activity that offers everyone a positive personal message
- Ground rules
- Celebrating wins and sharing problems
- Asking for support
- Practice skills, new learnings, play
- Suggestion circle
- Plan the next meeting
- Resentments and Appreciations
- Closing activity that offers everyone a positive personal message

facilitator training Workshops

May 13-17, 1985

Regina or Moosejaw, Saskatchewan

June 17-21, 1985

Plymouth, MN

July 15-19, 1985

Seattle, Washington

September 16-20, 1985

Germany

All led by Jean Illsley Clarke

A week-long workshop for people who want to . . .

- Facilitate the **Self-Esteem: A Family Affair** parenting model, or
- Improve group leadership skills for working with growth, education or support groups.

Write to **WE** for details.

Transactional Analysis Institute

Jean Clarke, Brenda Schaeffer, Russell Osnes and Ted Harrison announce the formation of a training institute for people interested in Transactional Analysis. For further information, see the enclosed brochure.

HELP!

Dear Readers,

If you have some Suggestion Circles about parenting, please share them with us for the Suggestion Circle books. I want to see your Circles! Let me hear from you! I want to be knee deep in Circles! If you are the first person who sends us that particular Circle, and we use it, we will put your name and city on the Circle AND we will send you a copy of the book in which your Circle appears.

Send your Circles to **WE**, and I will forward them to the editor. Be sure to put your name and city on the Circle! We can't credit you if we don't know who sent the Circle!

Thanks,

Jean Clarke

P.S. It's OK to send Circles with only two or three responses. We will get the rest.

What is a

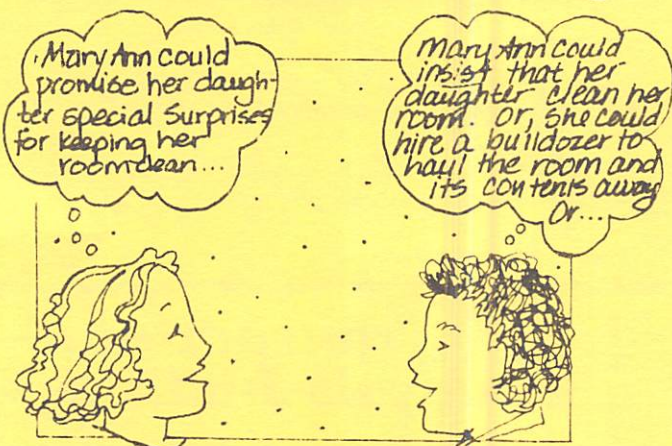
SUGGESTION CIRCLE?

A Suggestion Circle is . . .

1. a problem-solving tool that offers high-quality alternatives
2. a powerful way to share information and ideas quickly
3. a way to help honor someone with a problem
4. a way to meet the needs of individuals in the group without tying up the group for extended periods of time
5. a way to include everyone in the group.

How Do You Lead a SUGGESTION CIRCLE?

The Same as Brainstorming?



The Suggestion Circle and Brainstorming are both techniques for collecting ideas. Brainstorming stimulates creativity. Suggestion Circles bring out the wisdom of the group.

Suggestion circle*

When the person asking for help seems to be seeking information about alternative solutions to a specific problem, use the suggestion circle to activate clear thinking and tap the wisdom of the group.

1. Contract with the person to be a listener, to accept each suggestion with no comment other than a "thank you" response.
2. Ask that person to state one problem in a clear, concise way.
3. Ask someone else to make a written list of the suggestions so the listener can give full attention to listening.
4. Ask the people in the suggestion circle to center their bodies, think carefully for a moment about their possible solutions to the problem, and to each give one high-quality, one or two sentence "You could. . ." or "I would. . ." suggestion. They are not to comment on or evaluate each other's suggestions.
5. When the suggestions have been given, remind the listener to take the suggestions home and decide which to use.

A suggestion circle of twelve people takes from three to five minutes to complete.

SUGGESTION CIRCLES OR DISCUSSION?



"How do I know when to lead a Suggestion Circle and when to suggest a discussion?" Each has specific advantages. A discussion provides time for social interaction, for getting to know people, for expressing feelings and concern, for offering empathy and for developing intimacy.

The disadvantages of discussions are that they take an indeterminate amount of time and they sometimes become competitive rather than helpful. People may play *win-lose* as in, "If you don't like my idea, I'm no good (or you are no good)." They sometimes make *comparisons* as in "Her suggestion is better than his." They may play *right-wrong* as in, "It isn't fair for you to consider our ideas equally — mine is right and his is wrong." Sometimes they play *King of the Hill*, as in "My idea is the only one that counts." All of these competitive interactions tend to draw attention from the ideas to the people and block the free flow of ideas.

The quality of contributions to either a discussion or a Suggestion Circle depends on the level of competence of the people in the group. During a discussion, the person with the most helpful ideas may not share them, because people contribute to a discussion according to their habits of speaking and sharing, not according to their level of expertise.

A Suggestion Circle has the advantages of efficiency. It exposes people to a maximum of options in a limited period of time. It is also an effective way of gathering information from each person present.

It is not advantageous to use the Suggestion Circle if people are wanting leisurely social time more than they want ideas or options.

Brainstorm*

When the person requesting help seems to be asking for a wide variety of creative, horizon-expanding options, use the brainstorm technique to invite a large number of options and stimulate the creativity of the group.

1. Ask the person to state one problem in a clear, concise way.
2. Ask the group to close their eyes and imagine they are in a time and place where this problem is solved, then to open their eyes and think about possible solutions for the problem.
3. Ask each person to write down five or six possible solutions.
4. Write the first suggestion from one person's list on chalkboard or newsprint. Ask everyone in the room to brainstorm off that idea — to give every idea that she thinks of without evaluating its possibility or practicality.
5. Repeat the first idea from each other's list and as many more as the person requesting ideas wants or as the group wishes to take time for.
6. Give the lists to the listener for evaluation. If she wants help with the evaluation and the group agrees to help:
 - a. Ask the listener to set guidelines and ask the group to evaluate each idea in turn. Or,
 - b. Group ideas into categories, and select the two or three most valuable ideas from each category.

A brainstorm session takes from five minutes to several hours to complete.

* From *Who, Me Lead a Group* by Jean Illsley Clarke, Winston Press, 430 Oak Grove, Minneapolis, MN 55403.

Suggested Activity

Practice Dealing with Barriers

During a Circle, people sometimes throw up barriers to the success of the Circle, often without meaning it. To strengthen your ability to lead a crisp, helpful Suggestion Circle, practice handling barriers in a supportive situation.

Practice on your support group or collect a group of friends or colleagues to help you.

- Write each barrier on a separate slip of paper. Use the barriers listed below or use your own.
- Give each person a slip and ask people to role play the barrier on her slip.
- You lead the circle. Deal with each barrier as it is presented.
- After you have finished the circle, ask people to tell you what you did that worked well. Record that information. Celebrate your skill. Ask people to tell you what you could have done to strengthen your leadership. Write those suggestions down and think about which ones you will use.

Practicing this exercise not only increases the skill of the person leading the Circle, but also strengthens the ability of each person in the group to contribute to an effective Circle.

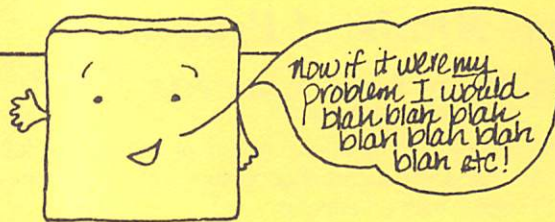
People throw up barriers when they:

- Ramble
- Say, "Mary Ann's idea is best."
- Say, "There is no solution anyway."
- Distract from topic.
- Put in their own problems.
- Talk to neighbors.
- Go on and on about their own problems.
- Ask for more information after Q is started.
- Say, "I tried that."
- Change the topic.
- Play "Ain't it Awful."
- Get out of turn.
- Play, "I have another suggestion, and another and another."
- Don't pay attention — read a book.
- Interrupt.
- Offer more than one suggestion.
- Attend to someone else.
- Disrupt.
- Get in a power struggle with the leader.
- Comment, "Your answer was really good."
- Comment, "I didn't like any of those answers."
- Make a value judgement on the importance of the problem.

When the person with the question rambles, restate the question and say, "Is that what you meant?" or ask the person to choose one specific part of the problem for this Circle.

For example, Claire says, "I want a new career. I've tried lots of things and I've gone to college and I'm buried in credits, but I don't know what I want. I looked for a different job last fall but I didn't find anything that I wanted." You could say, "Claire, would you like people to suggest resources you could use to help you choose a new career?"

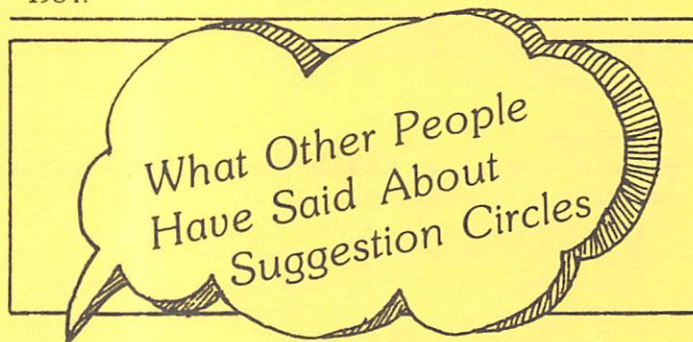
If the person offering the suggestion uses more than two sentences, interrupt immediately and say, "Please give your answer in one or two sentences." If a person says, "I agree with Vicki," interrupt and say, "Please give your suggestion even if it is similar to one we already heard." Or you could ask people to write their suggestions on a card and then read it and hand it to the focus person. This may intimidate poor writers and poor spellers.



Most of these barriers can be dealt with by saying, "Remember the rules of the Suggestion Circle" or, "Remember the ground rules," and then repeating the rule that applies. The leader can walk around the Circle and face each person in turn in an attentive, respectful way and say, "Do you have a suggestion?"

What if, after the Circle is complete, someone says, "You can try all those ideas on your kid if you want, but they won't work. We've tried them all!" You can say, "Different things work in different families. Vicki will decide what she wants to do." You might add, "Would you like a Circle? People in this group have lots of ideas."

The list of barriers was collected at the Yakima and Seattle Suggestion Circle book editor's meeting at Packwood, March 1984.



"A small, attractive, cloth-lined basket with a handle can be handed to the person requesting a Q. The leader can say, 'Here is your basket so you can gather (collect) all the gems you'd like from the group.'"

The leader is powerful when she stays in charge; even when she makes a mistake and needs to start the Q from the beginning again."

Judy Popp, Yakima, WA

"The leader can stop, 'ERASE ERASE' with hand motions and start fresh with a commitment to stay with the structure."

Gail Davenport, Alderwood Manor, WA

"The structure is powerful enough to handle any 'tricks' — if the facilitator stays with it. The leader can use body language to stop interrupters, without putting them down, to focus the groups' attention on the person with the problem."

Nat Houtz, Seattle, WA

"I learned that the Suggestion Circle makes the bold assumption that people have needs, that they can get them met, that others can help and that the process can be done quickly. . . That there is trust that the requester now has plenty of options and can do what is right for her, but in addition the requester has also, with every suggestion circle, emmersed herself in a process that implies that there are lots of ways to solve problems. The Suggestion Circle is an elegant technique."

Maggie Lawrence, Edmonds, WA

"Suggestions don't happen without a leader."

Darlene Montz, Yakima, WA

What Kinds of Problems Can You Use Circles For?

Circles can be used for many kinds of problems. The following are Circles that deal with another person, with developing a skill, and with coping with an attitude.

Example I

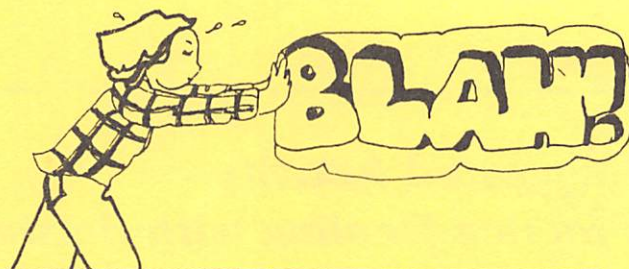
My baby is fine all day, but has a crying spell of 2 or 3 hours in the evening.

- Know that it is a typical time for babies to cry and typical behavior for many babies.
- Lie down and let the baby lay on your chest. Rotate with the baby's father during this fussy time.
- Try everything obvious, then let her cry for 10-15 minutes.
- She may cry herself to sleep.
- Take a shower with the baby.
- Dance around to music. It helps her to burp!
- Lie the baby down tummy first on a warm hot water bottle or heating pad.
- Play classical music.
- Talk to her, use your voice to soothe her.
- Lay her on the dryer while it is running.
- Turn on the vacuum cleaner.
- Take her for a ride in the car.
- Put her in a swing.

Example II

M. wants suggestions to help her summarize and be concise in both writing and talking.

- Stop after your explain it once.
- Explain once, then go back and condense.
- Collect thoughts first, then put it in only 3 sentences.
Sentence 1) Say what you think
Sentence 2) Say what you feel
Sentence 3) Say what you want to do
- Tape record yourself and then critique.
- Contract with someone to write down what you say and then review it.
- Relax first and keep in mind that people want to hear you.
- Join toastmasters.



Example III

How to fight the blahs*

- Count your blessings.
- See a funny movie or TV show.
- Read a joke book.
- Go for a long, brisk walk.
- Spend a weekend in a deluxe hotel with breakfast in bed.
- Listen to beautiful music.
- Read a very good and engrossing novel.
- Exercise a lot.
- Rent a convertible and ride with the wind around you.
- Go to the airport and watch the planes land and take off.
- Buy a new and exciting game for your video machine.
- Look at old family albums.
- Sing songs around the piano with friends.
- Get a haircut.
- Go for a swim.
- Buy a dog or cat to keep you company.
- Get some new tapes or records.
- Buy something you have always wanted.
- Fix up your house.
- Go to an art museum.
- Meditate.
- Clean out your closets or bureau drawers.
- List your assets and accomplishments.
- Call a special friend who always makes you feel happy.
- Take a deep, warm, bubbly bath.
- Eat a large piece of chocolate cake.
- Blast the stereo machine and sing along at the top of your lungs.
- Spend some time at a religious retreat.

* Thanks to **Boardroom Reports**.

WHAT IF THE SUGGESTIONS ARE TERRIBLE?

HAVE YOU EVER had a nightmare about being a leader of a group where nobody had any helpful suggestions? Three teachers of parents of toddlers were discussing the possibility of leading a Suggestion Circle in which none of the suggestions was helpful. They made up the following nightmare scenario. A mother of healthy, active fifteen month old twins comes into class and asks for a Suggestion Circle. Her problem? "What can I do instead of hitting my boys? I need ways to help them grow and to take care of my anger." The responses:

- What do they do when you hit them?
- Why do you feel like hitting?
- Well, why **not** hit them?
- Threaten to leave them.
- Tie them up.
- I scream at mine a lot.
- Throw something at them.

Suggestion

As you can see, the leader of this "bad dream" circle did not follow the rules for Suggestion Circles. These are not suggestions about how to solve a problem, they are platitudes or violent alternatives. The leader should have intervened after

the first suggestion and said, "Our task is to suggest solutions. Please make a suggestion about what to do instead of hitting, or pass." A leader can **use the rules** of the Suggestion Circle to protect the person with the problem from less than helpful offerings.

But, you may say, what if the group does not have the necessary experience or knowledge to make suggestions? What if I am teaching a group of court-ordered, convicted child abusers and someone asks for suggestions on what to do instead of hitting and everybody passes? In a group of this kind, it is important to **do some teaching before you run a Circle**. After you have identified and listed a variety of ways parents can handle children without hitting, you could invite people to try a Circle on which of those ways to choose for a particular situation. "I am driving in the car and my kid is screaming. What can I do beside hit her?"

Another option is to **add an item to the Suggestion Circle rules** that specifically addresses the given situation. If people have been suggesting violent actions, you could say, "Since our purpose in being here is to find better ways of parenting, all suggestions are to be something other than hitting or screaming." Or, "Since it is against the law of this state to abuse children, we will not include suggestions like hitting, pinching or sarcasm."

Suggestion Circle

? • One problem,
one sentence



Think
One best suggestion,
one sentence
(no violence)
Write



• Thank you

• Think, choose and use

Leadership Checklist

for clean, clear leadership of a Suggestion Circle

by Deane Gradous

- _____ **I explained clearly to the people in the group how a suggestion circle works. (I may have decided to run one for myself first with a new group.)**
- _____ **I posted the suggestion circle poster.**
- _____ **I helped the focus person to clarify his or her situation so that I, the focus person, and the group held a common understanding of the problem.**
- _____ **I made a contract with the focus person to listen to all the suggestions offered and to say "Thank You" but that is all, and I supported the focus person in keeping that contract.**
- _____ **I made clear that the "thank you" was for the person's willingness to give a suggestion and was not a comment on the quality of the suggestion.**
- _____ **I reminded the group to offer their best (high quality) ideas, one at a time, in a concise sentence or two, and I praised them for doing that.**
- _____ **I reminded myself and the group of the ground rules, particularly the right to pass, and enforced them as needed.**
- _____ **I offered the opportunity to have someone in the group write down the suggestions for the focus person.**
- _____ **I returned to group members who passed the first time around in case they wished to offer a suggestion later.**
- _____ **I invited the focus person to consider the suggestions and to use them in a way that fit for him or her with the invitation to do something about the situation and report back to the group, but with no pressure to do so.**
- _____ **I ran the suggestion circle in 3-10 minutes, depending upon the size of the group.**
- _____ **If there were more than 20 people, I divided them into groups of 10 to 15 and got others to help lead so we could run simultaneous circles.**

WHY USE SUGGESTION CIRCLES?

What are the benefits to the individual person who asks for a circle. Is the circle of value to the other people in the group? What are the benefits for the group? How does leading Suggestion Circles benefit the leader?

Individual

There are many rewards for the individual seeking options. The person with the problem:

- gets the benefit of the experiences of a whole group of people
- may get help in clarifying a fuzzy problem
- experiences the support that comes from having a group of people take his problem seriously
- receives reassurance that there is more than one of two possible solutions to his problem
- gets encouragement to take responsibility for the resolution of his problem
- is offered repeated invitations to think clearly

Others

Everyone participating in the circle has the chance to practice:

- evaluative thinking
- attentive listening
- clear and uncluttered communication skills

In addition, others have the opportunity to listen carefully to and respect the values and experiences of each person present.

Group

The efficiency of the group is strengthened by the fact that it has a quick way to address a wide variety of problems. Repeated comparisons of open discussions and Suggestion Circles in the same group reveal that one 3 to 5 minute Suggestion Circle usually yields more options than a 20 minute general discussion. The effectiveness of the group is increased by its ability to tap all of the resources of the group in an efficient way.

The general health and well being of the group is enhanced by the honoring of all individuals that the Suggestion Circle structure provides.

Leader

The benefits to the leader include:

- the opportunity to offer help within a structure that protects her from the expectation that she will be an authority
- protection from the temptation to talk at length on a subject about which other members of the group may also have information
- protection from the flattery of a group that expects the leader to have all the right answers and the hazards of their anger when she doesn't
- a way for her to rechannel group members who play the following disruptive games:

Yes, But. . . Your ideas won't help me.

Poor Me. . . listen while I tell you at great length how awful things are for me.

What If. . . As long as I tell you what could happen I won't have to accept responsibility for solving my problem.

If It Weren't For Him. . . I am not responsible. If only the other person would change, the problem would be solved.

Ain't It Awful. . . Let's talk about how bad the whole world is so I can avoid my responsibility in solving this problem.

Mine's Bigger. . . I don't want to help you solve your problem, I want you to listen to how much worse things are for me than they are for you.

Why Not Use a Suggestion Circle?



If the purpose of the meeting is to pass time or to make individual social connections, a Suggestion Circle would not be helpful. It would also not be useful to a person whose purpose is to establish ~~authorization~~ ^{authoritarian} rather than democratic leadership.

WHY IS THE SUGGESTION CIRCLE SUCH A POWERFUL TOOL?

People who use circles notice many aspects of the power of the tool. Obviously, a Suggestion Circle:

- includes everyone,
- honors everyone,
- does not degrade anyone's ideas,
- encourages clear, concise thinking and speaking, and
- is efficient.

One aspect of the power of the Circle that may not be as obvious, is the fact that it encourages and expects the person who receives the suggestions to utilize and expand thinking ability. Not only is the person responsible for evaluating and choosing or rejecting ideas, but the circles often contain conflicting "good advice." For example, the question is, "What should I do about my teenage daughter's room? It is a mess most of the time." One response is, "Review the housekeeping rules with her, set consequences and carry through." Another is, "Close the door."

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Considering conflicting responses often helps the person move from a stuck, helpless feeling to one of decision and action.

What If People Don't Want To Use Suggestion Circles?

There are three main reasons that people in your group may not want to use Suggestion Circles. The first and most obvious is that they may not, in fact, want to solve the problem; they may just want to spend some time talking about it. Many people enjoy



passing time with a little social discourse of "Ain't it Awful" or "My Problem is Worse Than Your Problem." If this is the case in your group, structure some social time before you bring the group focus to problem solving.



A second reason that a person may resist a Suggestion Circle is that he may be in the stage of working with a problem where he is determined that there is no solution or that only one or two possible solutions are acceptable. This is called "Either-Or" thinking and those of us who think we "never" use it are probably kidding ourselves. When we are hanging on to this type of thinking, we need a Circle, very much, but not right now. Later when we are willing to hear, we will welcome the many options that a Circle provides.

The third reason that people don't want to use a Suggestion Circle is that they have not yet experienced the power of the Circle or that they have been subjected to Circles that were poorly led. You can assess the quality of the Suggestion Circles you lead by using the "Leadership Check List."

SHARE THE CIRCLES

Pearl Noreen teaches Parents Education classes at Shoreline Community College in Seattle. She keeps a copy of each Circle and files it in a three ring notebook according to topics noted on divided sheets. Pearl carries the notebook to each class. When someone asks for a Circle, Pearl leads the Circle and then offers the notebook so the person can read the suggestions other classes offered on similar problems.

So long as our assumptions are in place, there isn't much room for anything new. When we cling to old assumptions, we risk losing our power.

How Does the Suggestion Circle Fit In a Support Group Meeting?

The habit of using the Suggestion Circle at each meeting reminds people that they can get help for a problem even if someone else has bigger problems, if their problem doesn't seem to fit into the theme or thrust of the meetings, or if their problem is difficult for them to talk about.

If someone has an urgent problem, put the Suggestion Circle first on the agenda. This encourages the group to express caring and to respond to a personal problem and still get on with the meeting.

Resentments and Appreciations

If it is time for a meeting to close and you haven't completed the agenda or finished the expected tasks, should you skip asking for Resentments and Appreciations? No, probably not. In fact, a half minute for Resentments and Appreciations, which are listened to attentively without verbal response, will allow people to vent their frustration at not completing tasks, to focus their attention on what was accomplished, and will simultaneously provide an honoring closing activity. Remember to express your own feelings if you want to.



Opening Activity for Considering Options ♥

Hand out name tags. Choose a partner; make a name tag for her and ask her to tell you one time when someone appreciated a suggestion she had made. Introduce your partner and tell the group about the suggestion she made if she is willing for you to share that information.

Closing Activity for Celebrating Options ♥

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting. Ask for Resentments. Listen to Resentments; do not defend or explain. Ask for Appreciations.

Hand out 3x5 cards and ask each person to write, "Remember, you always have options" on a card and sign it. Stand in a circle. You read your card to the person on your left and hand it to them to take with as a reminder. He reads to the person on his left and gives his card to that person. Continue around the circle. Say good-bys.

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WE

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Suggested activities

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

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newsletter for nurturing support groups