Perinatal Support Group Guidebook



Kansas Department of Health and Environment

Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute

Kansas Maternal & Child Health

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Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute administers Kansas Support Group Services, a website that helps people connect with peers, support groups and support resources available locally, statewide, and nationally. The website includes information on support groups and resources that can be important on the journey of parenthood and includes topics specific to perinatal mental health and substance use, as well as general physical and mental health, self-care, recovery, and much more. This database is available 24/7 and is searchable by location or specific topic. It also contains a "toolbox" of resources for anyone--peer or providers--wishing to start or maintain a support group. WSU Community Engagement Institute staff are available to help provide more information and resources, as well as provide technical support for group development as needed. For more information, visit the website at: www.supportgroupsinkansas.org, or contact us at supportgroups@wichita.edu or 800-445-0116.

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FOREWORD



Approximately 1 in 5 women will experience perinatal mental health disorder during pregnancy or postpartum. These disorders are among the most common complications of pregnancy, yet these conditions are significantly underrecognized and undertreated. Perinatal mental health disorders include depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and postpartum psychosis. Women who experience perinatal mental health disorders are more likely to experience perinatal substance use disorders, and vice versa. The causes of perinatal mood and anxiety disorders are complex and multi-faceted and include a combination of biological and psychosocial risk factors. Perinatal mental health disorders impact people of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds, but the rate of perinatal mental health disorders increases among low-income parents and people of color, with black women experiencing symptoms as much as double the rate of white women. Non-gestational parents are also at risk of perinatal mood complications with 10% of fathers experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Untreated perinatal mental health disorders (PMHDs) can have long-term negative effects on the individual, their partner, the child or children, and overall family functioning. Fortunately, effective, evidence-based treatments are available. These treatments include individual therapy, couples or family therapy, group therapy, medication, and peer support. Accessing affordable mental health care, however, remains a significant challenge for many Kansans. In addition to under recognition, barriers include inadequate insurance coverage, cost, transportation, childcare, mental health providers, culturally competent care, and stigma. Peer support groups play a critical role in reducing isolation and stigma while providing validation, encouragement, and perspective. Research indicates that participation in peer support can prevent or lessen the severity of perinatal mental health disorders. Offering accessible peer support groups to perinatal families provides an essential lifeline during the transition to parenthood.

The Kansas Chapter of Postpartum Support International (PSI) is dedicated to promoting awareness, prevention, and treatment of perinatal mental health conditions across Kansas. We are committed to serving and advocating for families of all races, ethnicities, genders, religions, sexual orientations, and income levels. We are pleased to endorse this guide, developed by the Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute, as a foundational resource for offering perinatal peer support. We recognize that effective peer support must be tailored to the unique needs, cultures, and strengths of local communities. Supporting individuals experiencing perinatal mental health challenges—and facilitating trauma-informed, responsive support groups—requires specialized training. Therefore, in addition to the strategies outlined in this guide, we strongly encourage support group leaders to pursue further training in perinatal mental health and group facilitation through reputable organizations such as Postpartum Support International, Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance (MMHLA), or GPS Group Peer Support©. We also encourage support group leaders to connect with one another and with the Kansas Chapter of Postpartum Support International to troubleshoot challenges, share strategies, and build a supportive network while providing this vital service. For more information or to connect with the Kansas Chapter of Postpartum Support International, please visit www.psichapters.com/ks.

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INTRODUCTION

This guide has been developed to provide information and guidance for those looking to start a perinatal support group. Too often, there is a recognized need and a desire to provide support for this population, but a lack of guidance around how to make this desire a reality. This guide provides practical tips and ideas to consider for creating and maintaining a support group, specifically for the perinatal experience. The information shared will apply to both individual community members and providers of services (therapist, doctor, nurse, etc.), looking to start a group that will be beneficial for all involved.

What is Peer Support?

Peer support is a process where those with a similar lived experience, such as postpartum mental health or substance use recovery, can work together in supporting one another. Peer support is mutual support. Support is provided relationally, based on the experience that those involved share. Peer support does not focus on providing answers; it provides support along the journey. It serves to reassure a person that their experience is valid, and they are not alone. Peer support is connection with the purpose of understanding and empathizing from a place of shared experience. Peer support is oriented in the belief that people are strong, whole, resilient individuals and that healing happens in relationships.

What is a Support Group?

While peer support can happen in a variety of formats (formal and informal, one-on-one, groups, etc.), this guide will focus specifically on support groups. This type of group allows members to support one another with their firsthand knowledge and experience. One example of this could be a group of parents experiencing postpartum depression meeting together to share how the depression impacts them, ways they cope and resources they have discovered along the way. Support groups are NOT intended to primarily distribute information or provide therapy, though support groups may be experienced as educational or therapeutic at times. Support groups are not meant to be a replacement for clinical services. Both clinical services and support groups are valuable and should be available for those who choose to participate. Though support groups do often complement various kinds of treatment, there is usually no requirement that members also be receiving other services.

Do Support Groups Work?

The short answer is: YES! Support groups can provide a sense of community and inclusion for many people. According to the Mayo Clinic (2020) and Postpartum Support International (2021), there are many potential benefits of participating in a support group, including:

- Feeling less lonely, isolated, and/or judged
- Reduced stress, depression, and/or anxiety
- Having a safe space to talk openly and honestly about feelings
- Improvement in coping techniques during challenging experiences
- Gaining a sense of empowerment, hope, and/or control
- Getting practical feedback about treatment and/or options, depending on the support group
- Learning about healthcare, economic, and/or community resources such as mental health centers, local pregnancy centers, and options for various types of housing and support
- Connecting to others who relate to experiences and can give encouragement

Support groups are not a substitute for professional care.

BEGINNING CONSIDERATIONS

What is the Shared Experience?

Support groups form in many ways and for many different reasons. Some examples of what this may look like include:

- A person who has reached out for support and been unable to find a relevant group may decide to start one themselves.
- A need for support may be recognized based on current events or data trends, such as increased depression rates.
- Professionals who provide services may see an unmet need in their practice and form a group to help better support those with a specific experience.

Identifying the shared experience of the group is important in determining what a new support group might need to look like and how the group will move forward. Examples of this shared experience can include things such as (but not limited to):

- Depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges
- Pregnancy or Infant Loss
- Addiction
- Parenting as an LGBTQ+ person
- Others

Keep in mind that this shared experience is what sets a support group apart from other types of groups and services. Many challenges people face that draw them to seek support are challenges that face people of many different backgrounds. Engaging such a group of individuals together brings with it a rich diversity of perspectives and knowledge. A pregnancy loss support group, for example, may be made up of people of different genders, income levels, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. They are not the same in every way, but have the shared experience of pregnancy loss, and can use this experience as a tool to support one another.

What Already Exists?

Finding out what already exists in the community is a great way to keep from "reinventing the wheel." If a group already exists, it may be best to get involved and/or refer others to this resource. Some ways to identify existing support groups include:

- Ask those associated with the need in the community if they know of any groups. This may be individuals, providers, agencies, or organizations. For example, community mental health centers, your primary care physician, the local health department, or public library might have information about support groups in your community!
- Check websites to see if they have a list of local, state, or national support group options.
- Postpartum Support International (www.postpartum.net offers a variety of groups to meet the unique needs of perinatal individuals.
- Support Groups in Kansas (http://supportgroupsinkansas.org/) offers information on support groups and other resources in Kansas on a variety of topics.
- Kansas Parent Helpline (https://1800childrenks.org/) is a free and confidential support that can assist you in finding helpful resources and supports in your area. You can search the online

directory or call 1-800-CHILDREN to find variety of support services, ranging from healthcare services to legal services to housing services.
- Use the search function on the various social media platforms, like Facebook and X, to help find other groups in your area or connect with other support group facilitators.

When it comes to social media searches, it's important to remember that each platform uses different methods for searching. For example, the Facebook search function is more generalized than the X search function or the Instagram search function. However, you can filter search results on X in a way that you cannot on Facebook. Much of the information gathering process, especially on social media platforms, will be finding the right combination of words and/or filters to find potential groups and participants! Examples can include:

- **Facebook:** "postpartum support group," "new mom support group," and "new parent support group"
- **Instagram**: "postpartum resources," "perinatal resource," and "new mom support"
- **X:** #postpartumsupport, #perinatalmentalhealth, #perinatalgroup

After learning what other support is available in the community, an important question to ask is *"What is going to make this group different?"* Successfully starting and maintaining a support group requires a significant amount of time and energy - time and energy that could be directed toward other things if there is already an appropriate group in place.

What is the Purpose?

Before many of the group details are decided (when or how long to meet, for example), your group should have a clear purpose for existing. This purpose will guide you as you figure out the details (who, what, when, where, and how) of the group. Naming the purpose of your group means naming the "why" behind it. A group with a vague purpose for existing is likely to be short-lived. Some questions to consider include:

- What made you consider starting a group in the first place?
- What is the shared lived experience that the group will be formed around?
- What might providing support look like related to this experience?
- What is the community you are serving (local, county, online, etc.)?
- What do potential group members want?
- How will this group differ from what is already being offered in the community?

After spending some time considering these questions and reviewing the information in this section, it may be helpful to write a purpose statement for your group. This can serve as a reminder of the group purpose for you and for others. You may also hear this referred to by another name, such as a "mission statement" or "need statement."

Writing a Purpose Statement

Let's imagine your goal is to start a support group for mom's struggling with perinatal mental health disorders (PMHDs) . Below are some questions to consider and answers for this example group.

- What is the purpose of this group?
    - To create a safe space for moms to share their struggle and receive support.
- Why do you feel this group is needed?
    - To connect moms who may feel alone in this experience.
    - There is a lack of access to this type of support in my small community.

    - All other available groups have a high cost associated with them.
- What do you want to accomplish?
    - Creating a space where moms feel free to share their everyday experience in a non-judgmental atmosphere.
    - Creating a space where moms experiencing similar challenges can support each other, learn new coping skills, and be reminded that they are not alone.
- Describe your ideal group in one sentence (your purpose statement). Examples include:
    - The group will be a space for moms experiencing postpartum depression to come together, share their struggles, and receive support from those experiencing similar challenges.
    - To provide a space for new and expectant mothers to connect and support one another as they navigate through PMHDs
    - This group will provide a safe space to discuss the challenges of being a new parent and to receive support from others parenting a new child.
    - This group will help adoptive parents connect with and receive support from each other to help manage stress involved with having recently adopted a child.
    - To support fathers experiencing postpartum depression by providing a stigma-free space to discuss stress, mental health, and other challenges.

What Type of Group Facilitator Will Be Used?

Another important consideration when starting a new group is what type of facilitator to use. The role of a facilitator (often called a group leader) is to prepare for, convene and lead members through the group process. When determining what may be best for your group, consider the following options:

- **Peer:** Someone who has their own lived experience with the specific issue that the group is formed around. Often peers do not have a specific degree or license but bring a unique understanding of what members may be experiencing. They participate in the group process as a member - as someone who can give and receive support based on shared experience.
- **Provider:** Someone who has a degree and/or license or certification that allows them to provide a specific type of service to individuals (a doctor or therapist, for example). Providers do not necessarily share the lived experience of the group, but they could (for example, a mental health provider who has also experienced depression). Providers incorporate information and experience from their professional training into their role as facilitator and may be expected to maintain professional boundaries related to self-disclosure. In a group setting, a provider will use their professional knowledge and skills to lead members through the group process.
- **Peer Professional:** Someone who has lived experience AND has gone through a formal training and certification process to be able to provide peer support services. This role may be called a "peer specialist," "peer mentor," or other titles. They bring an impactful combination of personal understanding and experience providing services to other individuals and groups. Peer professionals have been trained how to use their personal experience to connect with and support others. They bring the perspective of someone who has "been there" before and can relate to others using their own story. They are living proof that recovery and growth can and do happen, and they have been trained to walk through this process with others as well as how to lead members through a group process if desired. Peer professionals play an incredibly valuable and unique role that brings together the perspective of a peer and the skills of a provider.

- **Co-Facilitation:** A process where more than one-person (usually two people) work together to facilitate the group. This can happen with any combination of peers, providers, and peer professionals. Some benefits of co-facilitation include:
    - Having a diversity of experience and expertise available. This is even more apparent when a group is co-facilitated by a provider and a peer or peer professional.
    - Opportunity to model positive behavior and interaction with others.
    - Bringing a combination of professional knowledge and lived experience to the table.
    - Allowing a facilitator to spend one-on-one time with a member if needed while the other facilitator continues leading the group.
    - Providing an opportunity for the group to continue if a facilitator needs to step away from the role for a bit or miss a meeting for personal reasons.
    - Allowing co-facilitators to support one another and share the energy required to facilitate a support group.

Will There Be a Curriculum?

The question of curriculum is one that is often on the minds of those looking to start a support group. It is not necessary to have a formal curriculum, but some groups may find it beneficial. Making the decision about whether or not to use a curriculum is one that should be made while considering the needs of group members and the purpose of the group. If it is decided that a curriculum may be beneficial, it can be helpful to start with an internet search and see what content or suggestions come up. While there are many informal support groups or informational websites and examples, many formal group models or curriculums cost money to purchase or require in-person facilitator training. If you are associated with a larger organization or if there are well-known models for a specific type of support group, you may be able to find existing curriculum online.

RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION OF YOUR GROUP

Recruiting Group Members

A support group exists for its members. No matter how well thought out a group is, it will not be beneficial to people if they do not know it exists. Some suggestions for reaching potential participants include using both local and online media.

Local Media

Useful mainly to those who will be hosting an in-person group in a specific area.

- The local newspaper or other press may be willing to print a story on the group or use the information for community awareness. When discussing this, it is best to avoid calling it an advertisement, as these often require a fee.
    - It may be especially beneficial to connect with local press and organizations following an event in the community or world that may have others thinking about the importance of support. This may include things such as a recent death by suicide in the area or a larger world event such as a pandemic or war.
- Printing informational posters and flyers about the group and placing them around the community is another way to advertise. Placing information in places outside of various settings can be helpful in reaching a wide variety of people and situations. Examples of possible places to post or share information include:

    - Schools
    - Shelters
    - Churches
    - Community centers
    - Medical Provider offices / exam rooms
    - Post offices
    - Libraries
    - Jails
    - Bars
    - Probation offices
    - NA/AA locations
    - Coffee shops
    - Shopping establishments
    - Hair salons / Barber shops
    - Grocery stores
- Reach out directly to professionals in areas related to the topic of the group and provide them with printed information. Some examples of this include:
    - Healthcare settings such as OB/GYN offices and pediatricians
    - Local community mental health center
    - Local health department
        - Some local health departments offer a WIC Clinic, Home Visiting Services, etc.
    - Pregnancy, breastfeeding, and parent support centers
    - Childcare center staff and directors
    - Local doulas

Online Media

When trying to promote a group online, it is important to include helpful information that is easy to find. The following strategies may be useful:

- Create a webpage and/or social media page with the following information:
    - Purpose/mission of the group
    - Description of what meetings are like
    - Meeting information (or instructions on how to get meeting information)
    - Contact information and/or a contact form
    - Link to the group's other pages if applicable. If you have both a webpage and a social media page, they should link to each other.
    - General information about the focus of the group and/or a link to a relevant organization (e.g. research about signs of PMHD and/or a link to Postpartum Support International: www.postpartum.net)
    - Offer additional resources from reputable resources such as: blog posts, articles, short videos
- Use keywords to improve visibility in search engines. Using commonly searched words or phrases may help the group page become more visible when people search the internet for related topics. Some tips for finding these common words and phrases include:
    - Notice what other people are asking

        - Do an internet search for your topic (such as “online perinatal support group” “postpartum support” or “support group for new moms”).
        - Scroll down until you see a box titled “People Also Ask” or “People Also Search.” This will usually be after the first 5-10 results on the page.
        - These are common searches related to what you typed into the search box. This may give you an idea of what people are searching for related to the topic.
        - Consider whether it may be appropriate to incorporate any of these topics or specific language into your website or social media pages.
    - Pay attention to autocompleted words
        - Do an internet search for your topic (such as ““online perinatal support group” “postpartum support group” or “support group for new moms”).
        - Type slowly and notice the words and phrases appearing below as you type. These suggestions are based on common topics that others have searched before.
        - Use some of these suggested and common words or phrases on the group’s webpage if appropriate.

Social Media

- Ask pages of related organizations, service providers, or other support groups to share information about yours
- Add information to local groups for moms on social media
- Ask people to share your posts, retweet, etc.
- Make sure your page is complete (a description, tags, appropriate photo, descriptive name, etc.) and that the information is current
- Make posts regularly (such as twice a week or once every other week)
- Cross-post between social media pages (for example, tweet “See event photos on Instagram” or “Watch an update on Facebook Live”)
- Use hashtags
- Place information about support groups on relevant websites. This is a great way to reach those who are looking for support groups via the internet. Conduct an internet search for support groups on the topic and see what comes up. Are there websites that you could potentially post information on or ask the website to post for the group? Examples include:
    - Local health departments or pregnancy centers
    - Websites related to parenting or child-care resources
    - Postpartum Support International (PSI): https://psichapters.com/
- Other tips and tricks:
    - Different platforms have different search methods – Facebook and Instagram can be more generalized searches than X, which works better with hashtags. Keyword search examples:
        - Facebook: “postpartum support group,” “new mom support group,” “new parent support group”
        - Instagram: “postpartum resources,” “perinatal resource,” “new mom support”
        - X: #postpartumsupport, #perinatalmentalhealth, #perinatalgroup
    - A quick internet search can provide information on popular or trending hashtags – this can help with cross-posting

Other Opportunities

- Find out if there is a resource guide used by social service agencies in your area that lists local support groups and ask about being included. This guide may be in printed form, digital form, or both. This can help get information into the hands of related professionals who may be willing to refer clients. Some places to find information about resource guides or similar opportunities include:
    - Searching online for a social service resource guide in your area
    - Talking to your local community mental health center, health departments, hospitals, and other locations where relevant services are likely to be provided

Promoting the Group to the Community

Connecting with the larger community outside of the group can have many benefits. This "community" might be a physical one or an online or virtual one. Making these connections can help to increase participation in and awareness of the group, decrease stigma, and link members to other valuable support options. If interested, spend some time researching organizations on a local, state, national or international level that relate to the group. Often connecting with these larger organizations can provide benefits, such as:

- Additional support and resources
- Greater visibility during online searches
- Credibility to those searching for support groups
- Access to a tested curriculum or model for facilitators to follow

The power of networking cannot be underestimated when it comes to spreading the word about a group. This could include sharing information with professionals, other support groups, agencies, churches, and others who may have an interest in the work the group is carrying out. Conversations, emails, phone calls, targeted flyers, and other forms of media can be an important way to get valuable information to this audience. Connecting with local United Way, health coalitions, ministerial alliances, food pantries, WIC Clinic, or early childhood service providers can also be useful as they may serve your potential group members.

Equally as important as sharing information is the willingness to follow up with those interested in referring members to your group. Being willing to speak at a board meeting or training or returning emails or phone calls promptly are examples of simple ways to show you believe in the important work that the support group is carrying out.

GROUP STRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Type and Length of Group

As the idea of the group begins to form and take place, one of the decisions that needs to be made is whether the group will be open or closed. Though some may have different definitions for what these words mean, generally "open" and "closed" refer to who can attend a meeting and when they are able to join as a member.

- Open groups—open for members, family, and friends
- Closed groups—only current and potential members with the specific lived experience may attend

Once you have considered the type of group, a next step can be determining when participants can attend as well as the length of your group - both for the group as whole and for individual meetings.

When it comes to the length of the group overall, there are two main options: a time-limited group or an ongoing group. The differences are described below:

Time-Limited Group	Ongoing Group
Usually a certain number of weeks or meetings.	Continues on an ongoing basis with no end date
Usually works best for situations like divorce or bereavement experienced at a particular time	Often works best for long-term issues such as chronic illnesses or substance use disorders
May occur according to a schedule (ex: bereavement group that takes place every 6 months)	Continues regular schedule year-round
May not be available at the time someone is experiencing need for support	Always available to those who find themselves with specific need
Requires planning for and leading a set number of meetings and may be recurring.	Requires planning, leadership, and content preparation on an ongoing basis.
Often follow specific curriculum or program format	May or may not follow specific curriculum

Consider your group's purpose and its likely attendees when deciding on the length of the group. Neither of these types is better than the other, just different.

Another consideration when thinking about the length of the group is how often the group will meet. This should depend on what members find beneficial. It can be discussed at the first meeting and brought up in discussion as needed. Many groups meet once a month or every other week; some meet more or less often.

Meeting Structure

It can be beneficial to have a meeting structure that remains the same every time. This does not mean that every meeting must be exactly the same, but that the overall structure and schedule is the same each time. This helps members know what to expect from the flow of the meeting and promotes an environment that feels safer and more predictable for those involved. A suggested structure includes the following elements:

Welcome - What this looks and sounds like may differ from meeting to meeting. Examples include:

- Welcome the group and introduce the facilitator(s) at the beginning of the meeting.
- Members introduce themselves and share what they are hoping to gain from the meeting today.
- Members check-in by answering a prompt such as *"describe how you are feeling today in 3 words"* or *"give us a one-sentence update on how things have been going for you."* This will help gauge how people might be feeling that day and if anyone has a specific concern that might need discussed during group time.

The time this takes will differ depending on the number of members; typically, 15-20 minutes is a good amount of time for a group of 5-10 persons to share.

Agenda

- At the first group meeting, members should be led through the process of creating group agreements together (see section below for more information). At the beginning of each of the following meetings, these agreements should be reviewed, and members invited to discuss any edits or additions they feel are needed.
- Give a brief overview of the plan for the meeting and any specific topics or activities.
- Invite the group to add to or modify the agenda to make it more relevant and effective for them today.
- Consider ways to address the feelings in the room and allow all voices to be heard. This may include asking for input on the agenda vocally, inviting members to fill out paper suggestions, or offering choices of agenda topics/activities and inviting members to vote on what they would like to discuss that day.
- If you have a printed agenda or any educational materials/handouts, this could be a good time to share them with the group as well. One example of a meeting agenda is included, below:
    - https://www.nationalmssociety.org/NationalMSSociety/media/Greater-New-England/Resources/Files/Agenda-Template.pdf

Group Working Time

This is where the bulk of the group discussion and support work will take place; it will also take up the greatest portion of time. If there was input shared during the agenda check-in that you feel needs addressed or if anyone has a concern they have been waiting to share, now is the time to bring it before the group. The facilitator should be mindful of time and promote engagement by members while also being aware of members who may be using a lot of the time for their own issue. If there are no pressing concerns and there is an activity planned in the curriculum for that day, this is where it will take place.

A note: This is where the power of group support happens organically, and where impact is likely to occur. That being said, this part of group meetings can often be anxiety-inducing for facilitators because it is often the most "unplanned" part of the group process.

Closing

- As the meeting comes to an end, leave time for members to share briefly and give feedback over the group time:
    - What went well? What did not go well?
    - What might be helpful to change for the next meeting?
    - What do members want more/less of?
    - What can the facilitator do to be more effective?
- Any necessary reminders should be made here. Remind members of the next meeting time and location. It can be helpful to have a space for members to mingle and chat informally after the formal group meeting ends. This can be done in an in-person or virtual environment (leaving an online "room" open for a set period of time after each meeting, for example).

Group Agreements and Expectations

Establishing group agreements requires participation and input from all group members. These may also be called group norms, ground rules, or other names. In creating a safe space for support, it is important to ensure that people feel that their stories, perspectives, and feelings will be accepted, as well as not shared outside of the group unless permission is given. Discussing expectations as a group is vital to creating an environment of safety and sharing. When thinking about what good perinatal peer support

might look like, it may be helpful to think about the principles provided by the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, found at https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/psp/. Other things to note:

- Ideally, creating agreements should involve participation and input from members. They are a mutual effort that should be agreed upon by all.
- In some circumstances where members come and go, agreements can be offered to the group at the beginning of each session with an invitation for members who are present to indicate their agreement, share concerns or offer additional agreements for the group to consider.
- Group agreements should be established at the first group meeting and shared at the beginning of every meeting. This ensures new members have the opportunity to be aware of and agree to the expectations. In addition, everyone present has an opportunity to review and recommit to them.
- The group should be encouraged to address violations of the group agreements promptly when they occur. Holding to these can help create an environment of respect and safety.
- It can be helpful to have agreements posted or in handout form, so they can be referenced as needed. In a virtual setting, this may be done by posting in the chat box of the virtual platform or by sharing the list via email.
- Group agreements may include things such as: confidentiality; allowing persons to finish speaking; when is it appropriate to interrupt a speaker; refraining from shaming or judging; avoiding certain trigger words/using language that reduces chances for triggers; cell phone use; etc. Agreements stated in the affirmative of preferred actions or behaviors rather than stated in the negative of what is disallowed are often most effective.
- It can be helpful to have norms posted or in handout form, so they can be referenced as needed. In a virtual environment, this may mean posting the norms in the chat box or sending via email on a regular basis.
- As agreements are reviewed meeting to meeting, any changes should be updated and shared with the group, so everyone has an updated reference.

It should be noted that confidentiality in a group CANNOT be guaranteed by the facilitator. There are many actions that can be taken to help support an environment where members feel safe sharing with each other. This should be considered when creating agreements in order to help address questions such as what members will do if they see each other in the community outside of the group setting. There may be specific rules related to privacy and/or confidentiality that apply to peer professionals due to their employer and/or certification. Because of this, conversations as a group around these topics may need to look different depending on the facilitator.

Examples of Group Agreements

Examples of group agreements and guidelines used in a variety of group settings are included in the Appendix. These specific sites and groups are not endorsed by or affiliated with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment or Wichita State University but are used as examples for learning and education purposes.

Starting the Conversation

Initiating a conversation about group agreements will look different for every group and facilitator. Some general language is provided below as an example and can be adapted to the needs of the group and the experience of the leader.

- "As we begin, let's take a minute to think about how we want our group to operate. Setting some group guidelines from the start can help ensure an environment where all of us feel valued and able to share and provide support to one another. We will participate in a discussion together and come up with a list of group agreements. It is important that everyone is able to give input and participate in creating this list. The agreements will be reviewed each meeting to remind us of our commitments to each, and to make sure any new members have an opportunity to contribute as well. If at any time someone feels that the list needs edited or added to, we can discuss this as a group and make any changes that everyone agrees upon. This list may include things like confidentiality, sharing of time and space while in group, use of specific language or avoidance of certain words or phrases, not interrupting others, etc. I will write them down as we go and make sure everyone agrees on the list before we leave. I can provide others with their own copy at the next meeting if they feel that would be helpful. Does anyone have any questions? What would be a good first agreement for us?"

Safe Space, Brave Space

Support groups want to be a "safe space" in the sense that those present feel able to share their stories, concerns, and support for others without fear of judgement, personal attack, or other negative consequences. While this term still applies and is no doubt relevant, there is another term that some consider to also be fitting for the work of a support group: "brave space." The term "safe" is often associated with a feeling of comfort, but growth through sharing and supporting others is not always comfortable. It requires significant effort and a willingness to step out of our comfort zones. A "brave space" recognizes the work of personal change or acceptance that is necessary and perhaps risky or vulnerable. This term does not deny that physical, psychological, and emotional safety are essential; it challenges us to share and support others in a way that might at times be uncomfortable, but that ultimately supports us to grow. As stated by Aroa and Clemens (2013), *"…brave space is more congruent with our understanding of power, privilege, and oppression and the challenges inherent in dialogue about these issues…"* (p. 149). Some things to note related to creating a brave space include:

- Every group member and facilitator will bring with them their own personal triggers, biases, and deeply held values-often without realizing it. This will greatly impact the way that members go about doing the work of the group. Navigating these as a facilitator must be done with great consideration for the safety of all involved.
- It is important to consider topics of discussion and issues from various perspectives. This ties back to the reality that everyone attending will have a different story and experience of life that forms the way they view different issues. Someone who was raised in a family involved in the mental health system, for example, may have a very different view of clinical services and supports than someone who has never interacted with this system.
- Openness is key. If we are to learn from each other and give and receive true support, it is vital that we remain open to alternative ideas and experiences.

Microaggressions

Another item to note when thinking about creating brave spaces is the impact of microaggressions on the group environment. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021), a microaggression is: "a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority)." Examples of microaggressions are shared, below.

Microaggression	Possible Message Received
A person of color being asked where they are *really* from.	That person doesn't belong here and will always be a foreigner in this country.
A black woman being told they are very articulate.	People of color are not as articulate or speak "wrong."
A white person saying that they don't see color.	A person's racial/ethnic experience is not significant and they should assimilate to the dominant culture.
"Oh, you're not breastfeeding?"	A person who is not breastfeeding their child must be doing something wrong.
"Oh, you co-sleep?"	A person who co-sleeps with their baby is not a good parent.
"Well, our family is against vaccines."	Vaccines are bad, and so are the people that use them.

While often unintentional, microaggressions can have a real impact on members' sense of safety. Members may feel unable to be themselves, like they are being targeted or that parts of their identity are judged negatively. Some tips for avoiding microaggressions include:

- Reflect on your own attitudes and expectations.
- Do not expect others to be an expert on anyone's experience but their own. Do not ask them to share about or speak for experiences of an entire group (ex: speaking for all people of color, women, etc.).
- Listen carefully to what others have to say and remain non-judgmental.

It is important to address microaggressions when they occur rather than acting like they did not happen. This may be done as an entire group or one-on-one, depending on the situation. When addressing what occurred, it is important to communicate clearly and respectfully. Remember that the goal is to address the situation in a way that works toward creating a safe and brave space for all. As Gonzaga et al. (2019) shared, some strategies for having this conversation include:

- Asking questions to learn more about what the speaker meant:
    - "I am wondering what makes you think that?"
    - "What makes you believe that?"
    - Avoid asking "why" questions, as these can increase defensiveness.
- Paraphrase and reflect back what you have heard:
    - "I hear you saying…"
    - "It sounds like you think/believe…"
- Reframe the situation
    - "Could there be another way to look at this?"
    - "What would happen if…?"
    - "I'm wondering what message this is sending. Do you think you would have said this to a white person?"

CHOOSING A GROUP'S LOCATION

Will the Group Meet In-Person or Use Another Format?

When it comes to deciding whether a support group will be in-person or will use a different format, it is important to return to the purpose that has been named for the group. What is the need for support and what does the target community served look like? There are pros and cons for all types of groups, and one is not universally better than another. Some potential benefits and challenges for both in-person and other formats include:

Format Used	Potential Benefits	Potential Challenges
In-Person Meetings	• Can see facial expressions and body language of members when participating in discussion • Opportunity to engage in hands-on activities together in the same room • Easier to ensure privacy during the group meeting (closed doors, etc.) • Likely to have higher levels of participation and continued attendance by members	• Finding a location that is accessible and available to all members
Other Formats (virtual meetings with video, virtual meetings without video, and conference calls)	• Opportunity to remain anonymous if desired. • Ability to include those outside an area of reasonable driving distance • May be more flexible with member's schedules • Does not likely require transportation	• Requires consistent access to technology (phone, computer, internet, etc.) that may come with an associated cost. • Difficult to ensure privacy from others during group meetings • Difficult or impossible to read facial expressions and body language

Choosing an In-Person Meeting Place

The physical meeting space of a group can have a major impact on those attending. This space is vital to providing an open, welcoming, accessible, and non-judgmental environment. The meeting room should

be safe, inviting, and appropriate for the group size. Some things to think about when choosing a meeting space include:

Accessibility

- Is the meeting place accessible for those with walkers, wheelchairs, service animals, or other needs that may exist for members?
- Are there ways for group members to find transportation or rideshare?
- Is it a location that people will be seen entering or exiting? Is this a concern for your group?
- Will there be space for the conversation of the group to remain private from those around if you are in a public space?

Privacy of Space

It is important to think about how a space will provide privacy for group discussion. It may also be beneficial to keep signs that display the name of the group to a minimum-or to use a name that doesn't obviously state the purpose of the group. For example, "Growing Hope" may be more appropriate than "Postpartum Psychosis Support Group." The name of the group should be one that encourages hope and healing-not one that may be associated with shame or other negative stigma.

Atmosphere

It is helpful to place chairs in a circle or around a table or push several tables together to promote connection and eye contact. In this way, members may face each other, and the atmosphere is open, friendly, and supportive. Availability of a kitchen or a sink can be helpful for providing coffee and other refreshments, while a table may serve to display any pamphlets, articles, announcements, or other printed materials. A small amount of storage space can also be helpful for storing supplies. Though all of these things may be helpful, they are not necessary to host a successful group.

Visible signs (such as a sticker in support of the LGBTQ+ community) may help to show that the atmosphere is intentionally non-judgmental. Indicators such as these may be especially helpful if the group is located in a place that has a history of being unwelcoming to marginalized groups in the past.

Possible Meeting Places

1. Libraries
2. Community organizations or agencies such as Community Mental Health Centers, Red Cross, Rotary, Lions Club, Kiwanis, YMCA, or Senior Centers
3. Churches and synagogues
4. Social service agencies
5. Local Health Department
6. Community centers or municipal buildings
7. Restaurant or coffee shop meeting rooms
8. Schools or colleges
9. Members' homes
10. Hospitals, especially if the group is health related

Choosing a Virtual Meeting Place

Virtual support groups can be held through video call, conference calls, private social media groups, apps, or other methods. Of these, video chat is often structured most similarly to an in-person meeting and requires scheduled meeting times. Other types of virtual support could also have scheduled times for people to post/comment/message each other for live conversation, or members could contribute

and respond over time as they are available. When deciding on a platform, it is important to research things such as costs, features, and accessibility for members. Some questions to ask may include:

- Is there a cost to this platform?
- Do members have access to reliable internet and device, such as a phone, tablet, or computer?
- What features are available on this platform? This includes things like video, chat functions, etc.
- Do members need to have a specific type of email or account to participate?
- Are there things to consider regarding safety and privacy for members?
- Are there needs among group members for there to be an interpreter or be in an audio-only or video-only format?
- Do members use assistive technology to communicate? Is that technology compatible with the online platform?
- Do members speak different languages? Are translation services needed?
- Is there a way to follow up with members if someone gets disconnected or the meeting ends abruptly due to technological difficulties?

Regardless of what method is chosen, virtual support groups make an impact by facilitating human connection and a place for members to share their experiences who may otherwise not be able to gather together in the same physical location. Many free and paid options for platforms are available, including these common platforms:

Conference Calls

- No Cost Conference (nocostconference.com)
    - Regular phone lines, no internet needed
    - Available 24/7
    - Includes conference call number to give out
    - Up to 500 people
    - Sign up with email
- Free Conference (FreeConference.com)
    - Regular phone lines and also option to do video conferencing online
    - Supports up to 1,000 people over audio and 5 on video with free version
    - Video includes screen sharing and whiteboard
    - Can pay each month for added features like more online participants
    - Sign up with email
- Free Conference Call (Freeconferencecall.com)
    - Regular phone lines
    - Phone conference or video conference
    - Free call recording and free mobile app
    - Sign up with email

Video Chat/Meeting

- Zoom
- Skype
- Google Hangouts
- Google Meet
- Ring Central
- Jitsi

Apps for Video and/or Messaging

- Hey Peers
- WeAreMore
- Slack
- Facebook

***Please Note**: Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute, the Kansas Connecting Communities Program, and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment do not endorse any specific services or applications listed. The lists above are examples of technology that can be utilized when providing support; there are many options available. It is important for those interested in using similar technology to make themselves aware of any details involved, such as fees, contracts, or limitations.

If it is decided that a group will be hosted virtually, consider ways of ensuring a secure environment free of hackers (or "Zoom-bombers," as they are often called). This potential challenge can occur on any platform, but there are steps that can be taken to safeguard against it. Some general security tips are shared below:

- Investigate settings. Within the platform and device you are using, look for the ability to:
  - Disable recording and screenshots within the platform.
  - Join the meeting by a link instead of downloading an app or signing into an account that requires personal information (such as an email address or phone number).
  - Make the meeting password protected.
  - Use anti-virus software.
  - Use private browsing windows.
  - Change privacy settings on the device and within apps/browsers.
  - Create secure passwords.
  - Use a setting that allows the group leader to approve/deny access when participants ask to join the meeting.
  - Have the group leader learn how to digitally "remove" someone from the meeting if necessary.
  - Mute participants or turn off their video if needed.
  - Turn off any additional features you are not using, such as file transfers, private chats, annotations, etc.

Additional Tips for Virtual Groups

Headphones can be a helpful way to ensure only the participant can hear the group's discussion and not others who may be in close proximity of them. It is appropriate to ask participants to use headphones, if they have them available, especially if it seems like there are others around who may be able to hear. It can be beneficial to purchase some low-cost headphones to be lent out to participants, if at all possible.

The ability to see and be seen by other group members can be very beneficial. If someone does not have a webcam or is having trouble adjusting the settings needed on their computer, it may be helpful to follow up with them and provide guidance around this. This can look like:

- Lending an existing webcam from you or your organization to the person as long as they are participating in the group
- Purchasing a new webcam to loan out if resources are available

- Talking through computer settings with the person and having a "test" meeting with them to ensure their camera is working properly

If helpful, develop a specific "checklist" for participants to use when they join each virtual meeting. This can include a few short questions, such as "Are there others around me?" or "Am I wearing headphones or in a space where no one is likely to enter during this time?" Questions should help participants hone in on whether now is an appropriate time to join the virtual group or if it may be better to wait until the next meeting. Participants can develop questions and/or checklist as part of their group agreements.

FACILITATOR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

"Group facilitators work to promote the processes that help the group meet its goals while ensuring that the structures, norms, and culture in the group environment are favorable to the accomplishment of the established goals." -MHA Facilitation Guide

The facilitator's job is to move the group through the support process together, not to be the expert or have the answer to problems that occur. They remain neutral, draw out input of all group members, and encourage healthy, effective communication and problem-solving. Group facilitators work to manage the group process and overall environment of the meeting. They do not focus on delivering content or teaching skills (though this may occur at times) but focus instead on creating an environment conducive to the work of the group and helping to lead members through the group process. This is what makes the role of a facilitator different from that of a trainer, teacher, or other roles that may seem similar. Shared below is information on types of facilitators:

- **Peer:** Someone who has their own lived experience with the specific issue that the group is formed around. Often peers do not have a specific degree or license but bring a unique understanding of what members may be experiencing. They participate in the group process as a member - as someone who can give and receive support based on shared experience. There are opportunities for peers to receive training specific to the unique role of leading a support group. Trainings may have a cost associated with them, but there are likely trainings available at little to no cost. For example, the PSI Social Support Webinars are pre-recorded and available at $30 per session at: https://postpartum.z2systems.com/np/clients/postpartum/event.jsp?event=252&
- **Provider:** Someone who has a degree and/or license or certification that allows them to provide a specific type of service to individuals (a doctor or therapist, for example). Providers do not necessarily share the lived experience of the group, but they could (for example, a mental health provider who has also experienced depression). Providers incorporate information and experience from their professional training into their role as facilitator and may be expected to maintain professional boundaries related to self-disclosure. In a group setting, a provider will use their professional knowledge and skills to lead members through the group process.
- **Peer Professional:** Someone who has lived experience AND has gone through a formal training and certification process to be able to provide peer support services. This role may be called a "peer specialist," "peer mentor," or other titles. They bring an impactful combination of personal understanding and experience providing services to other individuals and groups. Peer professionals have been trained how to use their personal experience to connect with and support others. They bring the perspective of someone who has "been there" before and can relate to others using their own story. They are living proof that recovery and growth can and do

happen, and they have been trained to walk through this process with others as well as how to lead members through a group process if desired. Peer professionals play an incredibly valuable and unique role that brings together the perspective of a peer and the skills of a provider.

- **Co-Facilitation:** A process where more than one-person (usually two people) work together to facilitate the group. This can happen with any combination of peers, providers, and peer professionals. Some benefits of co-facilitation include:
    - Having a diversity of experience and expertise available. This is even more apparent when a group is co-facilitated by a provider and a peer or peer professional.
    - Opportunity to model positive behavior and interaction with others.
    - Bringing a combination of professional knowledge and lived experience to the table.
    - Allowing a facilitator to spend one-on-one time with a member if needed while the other facilitator continues leading the group.
    - Providing an opportunity for the group to continue if a facilitator needs to step away from the role for a bit or miss a meeting for personal reasons.
    - Allowing co-facilitators to support one another and share the energy required to facilitate a support group.

Building Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is exactly what it sounds like: sharing leadership roles and responsibilities among all members, not just the designated “leader” or “facilitator.” This allows members the opportunity to exercise their own skills, participate more fully, and take a new level of ownership in the group process. Sharing leadership in this way helps keep facilitators from burnout and is a way to maintain a group that is healthy, engaged, and thriving.

Facilitators can work to intentionally build shared leadership from the start of the group. While the group is still in its earliest stages of formation, set the precedent of sharing tasks and resources, so there are at least two people taking responsibility for what has to get done. In the short run it may seem easier to do things completely by yourself, but that pattern is easy to set and hard to break. The identified leader then becomes the expert, and the "best person to do it," at the cost of mutual aid and joint ownership.

Once the group is up and running, change in a planned way can be helpful (i.e. weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually). This may look like changing the person who starts and ends meetings, arranges speakers, sets up refreshments, or others. It may also look like people changing roles bi-weekly or monthly. A co-leader can serve to help the leader during the first week or two of the designated period, and then take primary responsibility themselves, "breaking in" the next co-leader at the same time. This strategy applies to many tasks and helps create an atmosphere of participation and shared leadership.

Managing Group Disruption

There may be times where the behavior of an individual or the group as a whole seems to be disrupting the work of the group. It is important to address this disruption (real or perceived) when it occurs, and ensure that the response is focused on the action or behavior rather than the individuals involved. Some tips for addressing situations such as these are shared below:

Refer to the Group Agreements

Group agreements will be the anchor for the group and the primary guide to navigating instances where people may be uncomfortable with the way others are sharing. It is important to develop these agreements from the beginning of the group before these instances occur. That way, expectations are

set before challenges arise, and the agreements can serve as a clear guide of what members expect regarding behavior within the group setting. For more information on developing agreements, see above section.

Ensure that the group agreements have been developed and are being reviewed at each session. This review may include things such as reading the agreements aloud, posting a copy of the agreements in the virtual chat box, handing out copies of the agreements, or others. Remind members what the agreements say about actions or attitudes and that everyone has committed to follow them.

- Example: "In our group agreements, we agreed to support and encourage each other, while supporting each person in making decisions for their lives. Let's make sure we are doing this."

Redirect the Conversation

If a topic or language used seems to be negatively impacting the group, it is important that the situation be addressed directly and respectfully. It may be beneficial to have an initial discussion about how to handle this while creating group agreements. This can help create a sense of responsibility within the group and may help members to self-intervene versus relying solely on the facilitator. Part of that discussion may include:

- What can members do if they feel a topic is inappropriate or distressing?
- Are there specific topics members feel strongly about not discussing in the group setting?
- Is there specific language members prefer to use or not use?
- What do boundaries and relationships within the group need to look like?

If a topic or language arises that appears to be negatively impacting the group, it may be appropriate for the facilitator to help redirect the conversation.

- Example: "I'm noticing that some members here are looking down and fidgeting in their chairs. Perhaps this discussion isn't helping us support each other well today. What do you feel would be the best way to move forward?"
- Example: "How we describe our experiences matter and using language such as this can get in the way of others hearing us fully. In our agreements, we committed to respecting each other. One way of demonstrating respect might be to refrain from using language that is potentially distressing. What do others think?"

If a person's contributions or behavior is overtly threatening to themselves or others, the facilitator may call for a short break and have a discussion directly with the participant. This could be a time to check in with the person, remind them of the importance of boundaries in creating and maintaining a safe space for support, and asking what might be needed to allow them to return safely to the group. If absolutely necessary, call for emergency assistance. This should occur if the threat is immediate and there is no other option for maintaining the safety of those present.

Refocus the Conversation

When conversation starts to drift off-topic, make a statement or ask a question to refocus the discussion on the meeting purpose.

- Example: "Can you connect these thoughts to our group and [discussion topic] that we've been talking about?"

It may also be helpful to have the group agreements posted in a prominent place during the meeting to serve as a visible reminder. This may mean placing them in the chat box in a virtual group, or on a whiteboard in a physical meeting.

Encourage Participation

When a member is interrupted or ignored, or when a member talks much more than other members, invite others to share what thoughts they are having related to what is being said and invite those who have been more talkative to spend the next 5-10 minutes listening to what others can add to the discussion.

- Example: “Let’s pause and let Sarah finish her thoughts. We want to make sure everyone has an opportunity to share.”
- Example: “Thanks for sharing your experiences, Juan. I’m curious what others might have to add?”

Addressing Individual Members

There may be instances where the behavior of one member seems to be leading to disruption in the group. If addressing the group as a whole is ineffective or is not a good option for the situation, the facilitator may choose to talk with a member individually. Requesting a five-minute break can help members de-escalate and give the facilitator an opportunity to talk with an individual member. Take this time to explain how the behavior seems to be affecting the group, and that it cannot continue for the sake of the group. Try to understand what issues are contributing to the behavior and learn about how that person feels about it. There may be ways to address the individual’s needs in a way that may also prevent a specific behavior.

Managing and Caring for Self

The work of facilitating a group is emotional work, and it is important to recognize certain responses and work to stay emotionally regulated as a facilitator. When you recognize that you are having an emotional reaction to something occurring in the group, some options for staying regulated include:

- Take a few deep breaths
- Accept the reaction as it is without judgement or plan to correct it
- Take a short walk or break if needed

Self-care on the part of group facilitators is essential to maintaining a healthy group. Self-care for facilitators means that group leaders become intentional about preventing and addressing stress at every level of their personhood (physically, mentally, spiritually, etc.). This can include feel-good things like a bubble bath or a long walk; it also may include more difficult things like setting appropriate boundaries, saying no when necessary, or seeking help from a professional. Group facilitators may share the group’s lived experience or provide support for others who do, therefore the work of leading a group can require a great amount of emotional and physical energy.

Group facilitators need to be aware that their own experiences, situations and biases may have an impact on how they interact with members in a group. It is important to be aware of these things and know when they may need to remove themselves from the role of facilitating in order to take care of themselves.

Communicating Effectively

General Tips for Leading Discussion

The job of a group leader is not to take charge of the discussion or to make every decision. A group leader is responsible for ensuring discussion can happen in a safe and supportive way. While there is no perfect formula for leading discussion in a group, some general tips are included, below.

- Participate in developing group agreements and ensure that they are developed mutually and followed by all members. These agreements are developed at the first meeting and should be read aloud at every meeting and edited as needed.
- Promote discussion by asking open-ended questions instead of yes/no questions.
- Encourage members to use active listening.
- Encourage others to talk and to share about themselves, but also be willing to share about yourself as well. This encourages conversation and helps develop trust within the group.
- Encourage members to address the group as a whole when sharing instead of having side conversations with other members.
- Offer support to other group members and encourage them to offer support to each other. Ways to do this include:
    - Acknowledging the feelings expressed by the person sharing.
    - Using body language such as eye contact, facial expressions, or touch when appropriate (such as a pat on the arm). Always ask permission before using any form of touch.
    - Listening attentively and empathizing where possible.
    - Thanking the person for sharing when finished.

Trust and Learn from Silence

Silence is not something to be avoided in a group setting; it is a valuable tool that can be used to help move the group forward. It can create a space for members to think and reflect, or to regulate emotions they may be experiencing. A few extra seconds of silence can allow members to figure out exactly what they want to say before sharing, or quieter members of the group extra time needed to feel comfortable before speaking up. Silence can give a sense of ownership and responsibility to members once facilitators stop trying to fill in the gaps.

One example of a practice for utilizing silence can include waiting 10-15 seconds after a member shares. This might include the leader counting (either forwards or backwards) internally or singing a pre-determined song in their head. If no one else responds, the leader could offer support to that member and/or ask the other members questions to prompt them to offer support. (Example: *What can we say to Rhonda right now that might help?"* or "*Annie, what do you think about what Juan is going through?"*)

Tips for Non-Video Virtual Discussion

Encourage members to:

- Participate. The more members ask questions and share with each other, the more everyone benefits.
- Write posts thoughtfully and kindly (in addition to considering the message of the post, avoid obvious typos, SHOUTING in all caps, etc.).
- Be careful using humor, which can easily be misunderstood without tone of voice. The use of emojis and/or different font styles/colors can be helpful when trying to convey humor.
- Acknowledge others' posts. This can mean commenting or replying to the post, but also something as simple as a quick emoji, or "like" to show that you have seen the post and appreciate the person's contribution to the conversation.
- Identify themselves when they post (the platform may do this automatically).
- Respect each other. Remember to respect others' privacy and others' opinions. It is okay for there to be disagreements, but the tone and language should remain calm and respectful for the purposes of giving and receiving support.

Tips for Virtual Discussion

- Have two co-leaders if at all possible. This allows one person to lead the discussion and the other to facilitate the technology (for example, if someone needs to be muted due to an echo or background noise or is having trouble joining).
- Make sure members are familiar with the features of the video chat platform (such as the chat box and audio and video controls).
- Read chat comments out loud, especially if some people have joined by phone only.
- Remember that it is not always possible for everyone to see the entire chat history at once. If there is important information in the chat you want to be sure everyone sees, be sure to post it in the chat multiple times and reference it verbally when appropriate.
- Keep in mind that some people tend to respond less to questions when online. To encourage discussion and acknowledge those present:
    - Say members names frequently and let them know you see them "Jasmine, thanks for your thoughts…Can you explain that some more, Adam?... Olivia, I see you came off mute, would you like to add something?"
    - Ask questions directly to individuals.
    - Ask for other methods of responding such as the chat box, giving thumbs up, air high fives, etc. Don't assume silence means agreement. Lend space for those who may not wish to (or may not be able to) participate verbally.
- Use tools available in the platform, such as polls, chat, "raise hand", or breakout rooms.
- Have people journal thoughts on their own paper and then discuss together.
- Have one member share their screen and then type ideas shared by the group so everyone can see the list.
- Utilize shared documents where everyone can contribute. This may differ depending on the platform capabilities and may not always be possible.

Active Listening

Active listening is a process where one person can come to understand how another feels about a subject or situation. Listening in this way allows us to hear what others are actually saying to us and not just what we might want to hear. When used in the context of group, it helps others to feel heard, known, and accepted without judgement. Active listening involves being present, using nonverbal cues, and asking questions:

- Be Present
    - Active listening requires listening in a completely neutral manner, without judgement
    - It is important to listen without assuming or planning your response
    - Being present means not having an answer and being comfortable in silence without the need to "fill" it
- Use Nonverbal Cues
    - Over half of communication is nonverbal-more than just what we say
    - Sitting with an open body posture and using an even tone can help communicate a non-judgmental attitude
    - Smiling, nodding, and making comments such as "uh-huh" can show that you are listening and interested (these small verbal cues are especially important in phone and/or virtual support where other nonverbal cues are not possible)
- Ask Questions

- After listening, offer a short summary of what was heard and ask if your summary is correct. This is a way to show that you listened and is a good way to check your understanding. If you get it wrong, it gives the speaker the opportunity to correct.
- Don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions to better understand what is being said
- Example: "earlier you said… could you tell me more about what that means?

Using "I" Messages

"I" messages are a method of communicating that focuses on the speaker's feelings and beliefs instead of the person they are talking to. Using this type of communication can help keep the listener from getting defensive and can instead promote a healthy conversation about what is happening. The structure of an "I" message shares the feeling or concern, followed by the reason or cause.
For example:

- I become concerned when you make a decision before hearing all the facts.
- I feel hurt because you didn't ask me what I thought.
- I need everyone to focus so we can finish on time.
- I feel anxious when I hear bad things on the news.
- I'm concerned about you and wonder if taking a few deep breaths together would be helpful?

KEEPING A SUPPORT GROUP GOING

Maintaining a support group requires a significant amount of time and energy. Group leaders and members are encouraged to remember the following:

Remember to Share

The concept of sharing is central to the development of a successful support group. Sharing helps produce a cohesive group and group ownership. It sets the tone and establishes an atmosphere of openness and togetherness. Examples of areas where sharing should be emphasized include:

- *Sharing responsibility for the group* – It is important to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility. Group structure should communicate that member involvement is needed and welcome; do not assume that members know this. Create a climate that encourages members to feel responsible for the group and welcome to share their skills and talents.
- *Sharing leadership* –Discover the talents of group members and give them opportunities to exercise them. A major strength of a support group is that no one person must have all the skills or shoulder all the responsibilities.
- *Sharing rewards/failures* – Take time to acknowledge and praise members for their contributions to the group. If you want people to participate, reinforce participation when it occurs. When mistakes are made or opportunities missed, avoid blaming. It is of little value to dwell on what might have been.

Remember to Be Realistic

The group will not always be "successful" in its activities or with the people that come into it. Although support groups are effective for many, they are not a cure-all. Avoid idealizing the group. Be realistic about members who eventually decide to leave the group; it does not mean you have failed.

Remember that Groups Develop in Stages

Support groups are like other groups in that they have developmental phases. Recognizing which stage the group is in may help to navigate challenges that arise. The four stages of group formation are:

- *Forming* – This begins when people try to find others who share their problem/concern. Meetings are characterized by no set behavioral patterns and discussions are not too open.
- *Norming* – The group begins to consider developing relationships with other groups or helpers in the community. Meeting routines begin to develop. Discussion is becoming more open. Friendships begin to develop. Members begin to agree about the purpose of the group and what activities are needed to carry it out. Expectations about appropriate group behavior develop.
- *Storming* – Some might call this the teenage phase of a group. Disagreements about purpose, group activities, and expectations appear. It is a period of questioning.
- *Performing* – This represents the stage when the group finally gets down to business. Roles for members are set and usually happen without anyone having to orchestrate it. Expectations are clear. The purpose and activities of the group have been accepted. Greater trust has developed and discussions become more open. The group is not free from disagreements, but they tend to be less severe.

It is important to note that these stages are not linear. Groups may go through these phases quickly and sometimes seem to skip a phase or return to earlier stages. How long members attend the group may also impact this process. For example, if the group has more fluid attendance, there may be more forming and norming. Groups with memberships that are long-term may linger in the storming and performing stages, and new members may find that fitting in feels more difficult. The process of going through these stages may cause the group discomfort, but it should be remembered that this is also part of a group's evolution.

Remember to Assess and Reassess

Given the ongoing developmental nature of support groups and the fact that some problems will arise, groups need to become intentional in evaluating their goals and practices. Groups should periodically "take their temperature" to gain feedback and check on member satisfaction. Although this may feel risky at times, the long-term benefits like increased member participation and goal clarification usually outweigh potential risks.

Remember That Support Groups are About Shared Experience

Remember that the group exists to provide support around a shared lived experience. Research shows that one of the most consistent drawing factors of a mutual support group is the emotional support and sense of community they provide. Whatever else the group does must never become a substitute for mutual support. As our world becomes more impersonal and our lives more complex, people facing problems and life-disrupting situations will be searching for a kind word, a listening ear, or an understanding nod. These are things that support groups do very well!

Prepare for Group Meetings

Taking a small amount of time to prepare for group meetings before they happen can help the meeting to run smoothly. Ensuring that some of the practical aspects of a meeting are taken care of means that the group can focus on what they came together to do: support one another. Below are some tips for how to prepare for an in-person or virtual meeting.

Preparing for In-Person Meetings:

- Arrive early
- Make sure chairs are set up
- Set out refreshments (if applicable)
- Check the thermostat and whether the windows are open or closed
- Know where the restrooms and emergency exits are located
- Have a watch or clock within view
- Have any needed materials ready (agendas, flipchart, sticky notes, pens, etc.)
- Consider having nametags available

Preparing for Virtual Meetings:

- Complete a test run of the technology.
- Make sure all the members have the needed information to access the meeting (link/password/call-in number).
- Set up your space: check for good lighting and a quiet background.
- Look at the angle of your camera, and prop up your device with books, etc. if needed.
- Consider using headphones or a headset for better sound quality and to avoid picking up background noises.
- Have things nearby to help you focus (for example, a drink, snack, agenda or notes).
- Let members know ahead of time if they should have any supplies ready (such as pen and paper).
- Treat the meeting like an in-person meeting (have an opening and closing, show up on time, dress acceptably, don't check emails and texts during the meeting, etc.).
- Be understanding that some people may not want to show their video for various reasons.
- In order to include members with limited access or desire to use technology, see if your platform allows members to participate through a phone call.
- Set a password for your meetings and try out other features of the platform that help protect the meeting and provide a more safe and secure environment.

Welcome New Members

The decision to attend a support group may not come easily for potential group members. It may be preceded by many things such as a family crisis, diagnosis of a chronic illness, or personal loss. Whatever the circumstances, it may be safe to assume that potential group members bring to the first meeting a mixture of emotions about attending the group. It is important to be intentional about making others feel welcome. Some ways of doing this may include:

- Designating someone who has been a long-time group member to welcome new members. If possible, this person should arrive early and be ready to greet new members - whether it is in person or on a virtual platform.
- Remembering to introduce new members to everyone present at the meeting.
- Giving new members the opportunity to contribute to the group. They may want to share their concern at the first meeting or they may not. In either case, respecting their wishes will likely help them feel at ease in a group situation.
- Reviewing agreements of the group sometime during the meeting. This can be helpful to both inform the new members and refresh returning members.

- Be clear about what communication between group members looks like. If yours is a meeting where names and contact information are exchanged between members, invite the new member to add their information to the list. Let them know if there is a primary way of communicating with group members between meetings (email, phone, text messaging app, etc.) and how often they can expect to be contacted (weekly, daily, etc.).
- As much as possible, the member should be welcomed by the same people at the next meeting. Seeing familiar faces may help ease anxiety of members, even if it isn't their first meeting.
- Be patient and allow new members time to participate and share as they feel comfortable. Do not push or command but invite and encourage participation.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROVIDERS

Peer Support Groups Enhance Professional Care

Professionals, and the specialized knowledge they have, are valuable resources for people as they seek to improve and manage their health and wellbeing. Even with this resource, true change requires people to live out recommended lifestyle changes on a daily basis. Peer support groups help with this challenge by connecting people with others who share similar experiences. This connection allows people to encourage each other and share insights and perspectives only gained by experience. Examples where peer support is beneficial include (but are not limited to) chronic disease management, stress management, diet, exercise, perinatal mental health disorders, and addictions. When professionals encourage those they serve to participate in a support group, they are helping them take the lead in their own health and wellness which leads to an improvement in outcomes and better relationships between clients and professionals.

Professionals Can Support the Work of Groups

Professionals can support the work of groups in many ways, including:

- Encourage participation in peer support groups (either existing groups within the community or by providing space for groups at your practice).
- Recognize value in the knowledge and experience shared in peer support groups.
- Recognize that peer support groups can help in ways professionals often cannot. They do not take away from the value of professionals; they work alongside professionals to provide additional support.
- Look for peer support groups in the area and ask for information about their purpose, meetings, etc. Have this information on hand to share with those you see in your practice. One way to find this information is to search the database located on the Kansas Support Groups Services website, found at http://supportgroupsinkansas.org/support-groups
- Work to create connections among support groups, professionals and organizations.
- Participate in groups by endorsing them, being a guest speaker, or a group advisor.
- Encourage other professionals to make referrals and promote peer support groups.

Talking About Support Groups with Clients

Connecting those you serve with supports in the community may involve conversations that seem uncomfortable or intimidating. Unfortunately, this may keep some providers from talking about these subjects at all. The truth is that talking about support groups with clients when appropriate is a

necessary way to provide the best care possible for them. Below are some tips to remember when having this conversation:

- Tie the need for support back to the person's goals or problem shared. It is important to be clear and explain why you feel a group may be appropriate. This communicates concern as a provider and shows that you care about the challenges the person has shared with you.
    - "Thank you for sharing with me about your mood swings and anxiety. It seems that these things are making it more difficult for you to handle being a new parent. Support groups can be helpful in managing stress and connecting with other parents who might be facing similar challenges."
- Make it clear it is a choice. Providers may recommend that someone participate in a group and may provide them with information, but it is not a requirement or demand. It is important to make this clear during the conversation. People have a right to choose to participate or not participate, and a right to choose a group that works best for them.
    - "It's really up to you."
    - "It's not a requirement, just a thought."
    - "It's up to you if you want to check this out, but it might be helpful."
    - "I have a list of groups available in the area and online; would you like their information?"
- Explain the conditions. It is important that people understand they are not committing to attending a group forever or to attending a meeting. Just because they get information from you doesn't mean they must follow up or choose to participate in a group.
    - "If you're interested, I can give you the contact information for the group today, so you can learn more and decide if you are interested in attending a first meeting."
    - "You might go to one meeting and decide it is not a good fit; if so, you do not have to attend a second and you can always try a different group if you feel that's a good decision for you."

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Group Members in Crisis

Knowing how to address crisis situations in the context of a support group is very important. If a group member comes to a meeting and is presenting signs of a crisis, they are in immediate need of support, regardless of what may have been planned for the meeting that day. According to NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (n.d.), signs of a crisis include:

- Inability to perform daily tasks, bathing, getting dressed, etc.
- Rapid mood swings
- Increased agitation, risk-taking/out of control behavior
- Abusive behavior to self or someone else
- Isolation from school, work, family, and friends
- Loss of touch with reality
- Paranoia

Group leaders should NOT ignore these signs (whether they are observed through behavior or spoken of in discussion) and carry on as if nothing has happened. A person in crisis needs immediate assistance and support from those around them. Actions may include things such as:

- Call 911 if the person is a danger to themselves or others and you need assistance immediately.
- Call or text 988 to reach the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
- Provide a listening ear and support in a non-judgmental way. Assure the person that they are not alone, that you care for them and are here to walk with them. Remind them there is help available, and that they are strong enough to get through this time.
- Ask if the person has a support person they would like you to contact.
- Ensure that the person receives help or has a plan to receive further help before leaving the meeting.

After the person has received help, it is important to acknowledge what has happened within the group. Seeing someone in crisis may have brought up difficult feelings or memories for other members. Take time to discuss what others are feeling, provide support within the group context, and provide information on other community resources (such as clinical services or warm lines) if appropriate for those in need of additional support.

APPENDIX

Examples of Group Norms

- Establishing group agreements in group therapy — with example agreements: https://blog.changecompanies.net/establishing-group-agreements-in-group-therapy
- Ground Rules Guidelines: https://pflag.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PFLAG-Facilitation-Ground-Rules.pdf
- Support Group Rules: http://fairfieldocdgroup.freehostia.com/mtg_flyers/group_groundrules.pdf
- Support Group Ground Rules: static.medicine.iupui.edu/divisions/iucar/content/roybal/TCL%20Support%20Group.pdf

Example of Questions for Group Process

- Questions for Group Process: drive.google.com/file/d/1cWQCpOAENzXh7p7S-q3B0RU8lZcpp_k5/view

Example of Agenda for Group Meetings

- Group Meeting Agenda: https://namisonomacounty.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/193/2021/10/Support-Group-Agenda-and-Guidelines.pdf

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kansas Connecting Communities: offers perinatal mental health consultation, referral support, implementation support, and ongoing training webinars and scholarships to care professionals. Visit https://kansasmch.org/kcc-home.aspx call 1-800-332-6262, or email kcc@kumc.edu for more information.

- Learn more about KCC training here or apply for a scholarship to cover training registration costs.
- Some trainings eligible for scholarship include the Group Peer Support (GPS) training program: grouppeersupport.org/training/

Kansas Support Group Services: supportgroupsinkansas.org

- Support Group Toolbox: supportgroupsinks.org/support-group-toolbox/

Kansas Department of Health and Environment Maternal and Child Health Toolkits:

- Maternal Warning Signs: kdhe.ks.gov/504/Maternal-Warning-Signs
- Perinatal Mental Health: kdhe.ks.gov/520/Mental-Health
- Perinatal Substance Use: kdhe.ks.gov/600/Perinatal-Substance-Use

Postpartum Support International: postpartum.net

- Kansas Chapter: psichapters.com/ks/
- Coaching for Support Group Leaders: postpartum.net/resources/socialsupport/

Research

- Relationship Between Social Support and Postnatal Depression: researchgate.net/publication/9005461_Relationship_Between_Social_Support_and_Postnatal_Depression
- Seeking Social Support and Postpartum Depression: A Pilot Retrospective Study of Perceived Changes: sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0266613819300099

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