Overview

Have you been thinking about starting a self-help group? Perhaps you remember the loneliness and isolation you felt before you joined a supportive group, and now you want to help others discover that they are not alone. If meeting others with similar circumstances to your own appealed to you, how much more satisfying it would be to give others the same benefit. This course may help you transform your idea into a reality. The goal of this course is to enable you to plan, organize, and lead a self-help group for people who are blind or visually impaired, or one for their family members.

The first course in this series, titled “Self-Help Groups: An Introduction,” enabled you to decide whether to join a self-help group. This course, “Self-Help Groups: Advanced Topics,” enables you to decide whether to initiate and lead a self-help group. The course is divided into four lessons. Lesson 1 describes the planning involved in starting a self-help group. Lesson 2 suggests ways to arrange resources and involve people, so that the self-help group becomes a reality.
Lesson 3 discusses the leader’s or the facilitator’s role in enabling the group to function successfully. Finally, Lesson 4 explores strategies for handling problems that eventually may appear in self-help groups.

Successful completion of the first course in this series, “Self-Help Groups: An Introduction,” as well as past or current participation in a self-help group are prerequisites for this course. To complete this course, you will need the materials that The Hadley School for the Blind has provided and writing materials in the medium of your choice. You will also need your own cassette player if you are taking the recorded version of the course.

The self-directed activities in each lesson are for your personal development only. Therefore, do not send them to your Hadley instructor. You can always contact your instructor, however, to either clarify these activities or discuss your answers. To do so, just call 800-323-4238 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Central Time.

This course includes four assignments one at the end of each lesson. These assignments enable your
instructor to measure your ability to integrate the concepts presented in the lessons. Submit each assignment at the completion of a lesson, and wait to hear from your instructor before sending the next assignment. This way, you have the opportunity to apply any comments or corrections to subsequent lessons and assignments.

Complete each assignment in the medium of your choice. Then mail it to your instructor at The Hadley School for the Blind, 700 Elm Street, Winnetka, IL 60093. If you are blind or visually impaired, you may send your assignments in envelopes labeled Free Matter for the Blind, provided they are in braille or large print (14 point or larger), or on cassette or computer disk. Sighted students must affix adequate postage. To fax your assignments or to send them electronically, contact your instructor for further instructions.
Lesson 3: Leading a Self-Help Group

As the planner and organizer of a self-help group, you may be interested in assuming a leadership role as well. Lesson 1 described the planning involved in starting a self-help group. Lesson 2 suggested ways to arrange resources and involve people. This lesson discusses the leader’s role in enabling the group to function successfully.

Lesson 3 begins by defining leadership and describing the forms of leadership from which self-help groups can choose. It then examines what leaders or facilitators can do to foster positive group interactions. Familiarizing yourself with the information in this lesson will enable you to decide whether to facilitate or lead a self-help group yourself.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, you will be able to
a. describe ways to lead a self-help group
Leading a Self-Help Group

Leadership in a self-help group is a shared responsibility because, as Lesson 1 explained, each member of a self-help group is considered to be a peer. All members, including the designated leader or facilitator, are equally important to the success of the group.

If a member of the group assumes leadership, how then do you define the role? In her book, Helping You Helps Me: A Guide Book for Self-Help Groups, Karen Hill defines leadership in self-help groups as follows:

Leadership is a process that is made up of qualities of individuals, interaction between group members, and various styles of doing things. In self-help groups, facilitating is a leadership skill and style that can strengthen the group. It is a type of leadership that can be shared among group members. (p. J-4)

Although a member of the group may act as the
leader, taking on such tasks as chairing meetings, facilitating group discussions, or setting agendas, that person does not have higher status than any other person in the group.

Leadership in a self-help group may be accomplished in various ways. One way is to designate a regular group leader, generally one of the people involved in the initial planning. Another way is to rotate leadership responsibilities among members. Or, a group could ask friends or family members to assume leadership tasks. In addition, a health-care professional or an individual experienced in the field of group dynamics might lead the group.

A recent study of self-help groups for seniors who are visually impaired revealed the following characteristics of successful group leaders:

- innate qualities of sensitivity and caring
- expertise in group dynamics and process
- personal experience with visual impairment (although most professional leaders were sighted)
The study also identified leadership as the most critical factor affecting the success of a self-help group.

This section described ways of assuming leadership of a self-help group. Why not discuss with your core group some of the ways you envision leadership in your group. Then once your group is established, review your decisions periodically. You might try different leadership modes at later stages of your group’s development.

**Self-Directed Activity**

Test your knowledge of the material in this section by completing this self-directed activity. Do not send your answers to your instructor, however, as these activities are included for your personal development only.

Answer the following questions in a few sentences:

1. Why is leadership a shared responsibility in a self-help group?
2. Identify three ways in which leadership can occur in a self-help group.
When you are done, compare your answers with those that follow.

**Suggested Answers**

1. **Why is leadership a shared responsibility in a self-help group?** Members of a self-help group are peers, equally responsible for the success of the group. Therefore, members share leadership responsibilities.

2. **Identify three ways in which leadership can occur in a self-help group.** Groups may be led by:
   a. a member or members who take care of the leadership responsibilities
   b. a trained facilitator who leads the group
   c. a combination of a trained facilitator and group members who share the leadership tasks

**Fostering Group Interaction**

Whether you are a trained facilitator who has been invited to lead a self-help group or a group member who has taken on leadership responsibilities, you can take certain actions to make the group work well. This section examines strategies that keep group
interactions harmonious and helpful for all members. These include *structural strategies* and *process strategies*.

**Structural Strategies**

These are practical considerations that can positively affect group interactions. Structural strategies involve arrangements and decisions made outside the core part of the meeting. Some examples of structural strategies that promote fruitful group discussions include the following:

- Arrange chairs in a circle or U-shape, or seat people around a table rather than in rows.
- Control the group size. As Lesson 1 pointed out, too few or too many participants can hinder the flow of discussion.
- Determine the composition of your group. For example, if your group includes people of all ages, ensure that there is a balance of younger and older members so that no one is ignored or made to feel different or odd.
- Set guidelines and policies to ensure confidentiality and build trust.
• Set ground rules about behavior in meetings, such as avoiding interruptions or criticism.
• Pay special attention to newcomers by providing a prepared packet of useful information and possibly pairing the new member with a buddy.
• If members agree, distribute a phone list to promote communication among members outside of meetings.

**Process Strategies**

These are techniques that leaders or facilitators can use during the core part of the meeting to foster discussion and group interaction. Facilitators use the following process strategies as tools to promote group communication:

• door openers
• tension breakers
• effective listening
• summarizing

*Door openers* are statements that encourage members to share and generalize their experiences. They enhance group cohesion. The door opener usually follows this pattern: A participant shares a
problem or difficult situation. The leader or facilitator asks a question, starting with one of the following stems:

a. How else? For example, “How else could this situation have been handled?” or “How else could this problem be interpreted?”

b. Who else? For example, “Who else has experienced a similar situation?” or “Who else has felt this way before?”

c. When else? For example, “When else might this strategy be used?” or “When else might this interpretation apply?”

Then the leader asks another member to respond. In this way, members are encouraged to identify with and respond to the first participant’s situation.

Often, members feel as if they are alone in their circumstances—as if their situations were unique. Door openers help group members realize that other members have felt the same way or encountered similar situations. Door openers also help to elicit encouragement or advice.
Tension breakers are used to restore a member’s comfort after an emotional session. They help to move the focus of the discussion from an individual to the entire group. Several forms of tension breakers exist. One is rephrasing the problem or issue in your own words, then asking other members to respond with their comments or ideas. Another form is distraction (e.g., taking a break or changing the topic). Humor is a tension breaker that can also work well to restore comfort; however, it must be used with care to ensure that the original speaker does not feel teased or ridiculed.

Effective listening is another tool the facilitator can use to help speakers to express what they are thinking and feeling. Effective listening has several components, as follows:

a. Simple acknowledgments such as “Uh-huh” or “I see” indicate to the speaker that you are listening. Nodding and making eye contact are nonverbal forms of acknowledgments.

b. Elaborations or clarifications require the speaker to provide more information or ensure that the information provided is accurate. Simple
questions like, “Could you say more about what was going on that morning?” or “What did your friend say?” may help the speaker provide a more complete description of the experience he or she is sharing.

c. Reflections of feelings help the speaker identify the emotions associated with an experience. Statements such as, “It sounds like you’re pretty disappointed about losing that opportunity,” or “You seem to be really excited about the class starting next week,” are examples of statements that reflect feelings.

*Summarizing*, another effective tool for facilitators, closes the discussion or a portion of the discussion. You restate the topic and briefly review what people have said. Your summary should emphasize helpful suggestions or common experiences that members have shared.

This section described techniques for enhancing group interaction. These are skills that improve with practice. Therefore, why not practice by reviewing the listening techniques described in the first course in

**Self-Directed Activity**

Answer each of the following questions in a few sentences:

1. What is a structural strategy? Give three examples of structural strategies that promote positive group interactions.
2. Define and give an example of a door opener. Explain when it would be used.
3. Define and give an example of summarizing. Explain when it would be used.

When you are done, compare your answers with those that follow.

**Suggested Answers**

1. What is a structural strategy? Give three examples of structural strategies that promote positive group interactions. Structural strategies are actions that the leader or facilitator can take, outside of the group discussion, to help the group work better. For example, communicating ground
rules, distributing a phone list, or arranging seating in a U-shape are structural strategies that can promote positive group interactions.

2. Define and give an example of a door opener. Explain when it would be used. A door opener is a statement that encourages members to share their experiences and generalize what they have learned. It enhances group cohesion. A door-opener statement usually comes after a member shares a problem or difficult situation. The facilitator then asks a question that begins with “Who else . . .” or “How else . . .?” or "When else . . .?"

3. Define and give an example of summarizing. Explain when it would be used. Summarizing restates the topic of discussion and reviews the contributions that members have made in the discussion. For example, a summary might emphasize the helpful suggestions that members have made or highlight similar experiences that they have shared. Summarizing statements are used to close the discussion or a portion of the discussion.
Summary

This lesson explored the role of a leader or facilitator in a self-help group. It defined leadership and described the forms it may assume in a self-help group. The lesson also examined ways that group leaders or facilitators can keep group interactions positive. Perhaps more than any other role, leadership is an ongoing process, constantly changing as the group develops.

References


Assignment 3

Complete this assignment in the medium of your choice. Begin by giving your full name, address, and phone number. Also indicate the name of this course, Assignment 3, your instructor’s name, and the date you plan to send this assignment. Then provide your responses. Be sure to indicate the question number along with your answer. Instructions for mailing your assignment are included in the Overview to this course.

Use the information in this lesson and your own experience to answer the following items. Limit each answer to a single page or a 1-minute recording.

1. How would leadership be accomplished in your self-help group? Explain your answer.

2. This lesson discussed a range of techniques and strategies you can use to promote positive interactions in meetings. Choose two of these and describe a situation in which you would use each of these in a group. Your situation may be invented or based on a real discussion. (Do not use real names or direct quotations, to preserve confidentiality.)
Once you have completed this assignment, send it to your instructor. Then proceed to Lesson 4: Special Issues in Self-Help Groups.