Gathering or social time

Welcome people and break the ice

Have one or more members of your start-up volunteers greet people as they arrive and thank them for coming. Encourage new-comers to sign in on the list provided, including telephone and e-mail address, if available. Keep in mind, though, that no one should be required to leave contact information if he or she doesn’t feel comfortable doing so. Volunteers can invite guests to have refreshments if these are available and help introduce new-comers to others in the room.

Special note: Keep track of how many people have arrived so that you can quickly and easily decide how many groups you will need to split into in the future. DBSA recommends that you have no more than 10-12 participants in each support group.

Welcome

Bring people together, get their attention, and provide a focus point

What you might say:

“Hello, everyone, and thank you for coming tonight. We know that it may not have been easy for you to make the decision to attend. My name is Katie, and I’d like to welcome you.”

Add any needed “housekeeping” announcements: where people can pick up materials, location of restrooms and water fountains, when the meeting is scheduled to end, etc. Even if the same people attend the support group regularly, it is important to offer a formal welcome to everyone.

Review what will happen at the meeting

Move the group to the “business” part of the meeting, give everyone the same information and expectations

What you might say:

“Now it’s time to review the format and schedule for the meeting. Tonight we will follow a procedure recommended by DBSA and designed to give everyone an opportunity to participate as they are comfortable. First we will check in, when each of us will have an opportunity to introduce ourselves by first name and tell us why you have come to this meeting.”
“After the Check-in, we will have a talk about our mood disorders and share experiences, personal feelings, information and strategies for living successfully with these illnesses. The discussion will last until [time] when the meeting will end.

“Before we begin to talk with each other, I’d like to review the guidelines for our discussion.”

State the DBSA support group guidelines (you can find a copy of the guidelines on page 12 or page 38). Stating guidelines at each meeting is valuable for many reasons. It insures everyone is responsible for following the same guidelines and helps people learn and commit to the group standards.

This is also the time for the facilitator to outline her/his role. “To facilitate” means “to assist or make easier.” Facilitators, therefore, assist the group by making easier the conversations and sharing that goes on at self-help meetings.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Check-in</th>
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<td><strong>A chance for each person to find out who else is at the meeting, share what issues they’d like to discuss and know that they’re not alone.</strong></td>
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Each person has an opportunity to introduce themselves by their first name and tell the group why they came to the meeting that day.

What you might say/hear:

“**My name is Mary, AND …**
- I think I might be depressed – I’m not sure.”
- I’m here to learn more about …”
- I’m just here to listen.”
- I just spent two weeks in the hospital.”
- I want to know how I can make my brother stay on his medication.”
- I was just diagnosed with bipolar disorder and need more information.”
- I just can’t go on the way I have been.”
- My doctor told me I should come to this meeting.”
- My medication just isn’t working.”
- [Crying]
- [Silent]

The facilitator briefly reacts to each person as a way of acknowledging his or her presence. Don’t start discussion of specific questions or topics at this time; keep the introductions going. **It is natural for some people to want to tell their whole story now, but it is essential that the group facilitator remind each person that this is a check-in time only and that everyone will have the opportunity to talk more soon.**
What the facilitator might say after each person has an opportunity to speak:

- “Thank you, Mary.”
- “We’re glad you’re here.”
- “Thank you for sharing that.”
- “Each of us has a lot of questions. We’ll be talking about [particular subject of interest] more after we’re done checking in.”
- “It took a lot of courage for you to come here tonight – thank you.”
- “No one is required to speak. We’re glad you’re here.”

Open group discussion

The heart of why a DBSA support group exists

Sometimes a topic of common concern has been identified during the Check-in, and the facilitator can begin discussion using this topic. For example, if several participants have expressed frustration about communicating with their family, the facilitator might say, “It sounds as if a number of us are having challenges in working with our families. As we go around the circle tonight, you are all welcome to address the challenges or successes you have had in communicating with your family along with anything else you’d like to discuss. Perhaps we can determine a number of possible approaches for ourselves in dealing with this concern.”

The facilitator can also begin discussion by asking if anyone would like to be the first to share or just ask the person to their left or right to begin.

Close the meeting

Bring closure to the session

How to do it:

- Give a 10- or 15-minute notification before discussion is scheduled to end.
- Ask members to make any final comments or summaries.
- Briefly summarize what has happened at the meeting.
- Ask the group how they feel the meeting helped them and how they plan to move forward toward recovery before the next meeting. Sample questions include:
  o What will we take away from the meeting that will help us?
  o What will we commit to doing as we move forward into the week?
  o What new strengths will we explore?
  o What part of our recovery or wellness plan will we work on this week?
- Announce next meeting date/time/place OR (if this is your first meeting) get commitment from attendees to meet again and determine date/time/place.
- Encourage new attendees to attend 3 or 4 times before deciding whether a support group is right for them or not.
• Encourage attendees to tell others about the group, including their doctor/other mental health professional.
• Ask for volunteers to help with the next meeting.
• Refer to fact sheets or other information/materials that are provided to participants.
• Thank everyone for coming.

**Discussion Starters**

If you’re having a hard time getting conversation going during the open group discussion, consider asking participants to share their thoughts on a particular topic when it is their turn. Again, no one dictates discussion, but introducing possible topics at the beginning of the meeting is a great facilitator tactic. Some potential topics are:

• Recognizing the signs of a mood disorder
• Talking to a therapist or doctor
• Working with medications
• Effects of the illness on family and friends
• Fears members share
• Stigma members face
• Doing things that make you feel good
• Non-medication techniques
• Adhering to your treatment plan
• Relationships

**Tips for Facilitators**

During discussion, facilitators do only what their position calls for: facilitating smooth discussion. The main role of the facilitator is to be an active, supportive listener and to receive support from the group as well. To do this:

• *Restate* – Members need to know that others have been listening. Restating what others say in other words is the simplest way to let them know you are paying attention.
• *Question* – Ask questions that seek more information or clarify what a member has said: “Maurice, can you tell us more about … ?”
• *Redirect* – Ask other group members to respond to what has been said: “I wonder if anyone has some thoughts about what Jennifer has just shared.” This can be a good technique for drawing out quieter group members and involving them in the discussion.
• **Reflect** – Identify the feelings that underlie what is being said. This is done in an intentionally tentative way: “It sounds as though …”

• **Validate** – If you have experienced some of the feelings being expressed by a member, say so and tell them you understand why they feel that way. You can do this without agreeing with someone or condoning unacceptable behavior.

• **Summarize** – Review what the conversation has been about up to the present. This puts things in perspective, refocuses discussion, and shows where discussion can go.

• **Share** – Facilitators shouldn’t forget that they are also group members. They should share feelings and experiences when it is their turn.

There is nothing wrong with silence at any time during the discussion. A break in conversation allows people to reflect on what was said and collect their thoughts. Silence sometimes encourages people who haven’t talked to speak up.

The facilitator should be prepared to deal firmly but kindly with individuals who are hypomanic, hostile, antagonistic, discouraged and depressed. Remember that everyone in the group, including you, has experienced difficulty in their lives. Strive to be patient, kind and empathetic, but remember that the purpose of the meeting is to provide productive support for everyone. If one individual is dominating discussion, for example, it is appropriate for the facilitator to intervene and move on to another member of the group. In this situation you may want to try some of the following statements:

- “It sounds like there’s a lot going on in your life right now. Let’s hear from a few other people and then if we have time at the end of the discussion we’ll come back to you.”
- “I think we’re clear now about your ideas, John. Who else would like to respond?”
- “It seems we’ve moved from the original topic. Is that what we want to do?”
- “Do you have an opinion about that, Jane?”
- “Let’s share the air to make sure everyone’s getting a chance to participate.”

If someone appears to be unable to participate productively in discussion, is in crisis or suicidal, be prepared to summon assistance or make sure that the individual in question gets the help they need from another resource.

**Empowering Others through Good Facilitation**

Many of us who get involved in leadership roles have a tendency to be problem-solvers and like to offer advice in order to help people. As a facilitator though, our
role is actually to help get out what others need to get out, not to solve their problems or even offer advice. This can be very difficult for many of us, especially if people seem to be asking for our advice. Here are some statements you may want to try using to make sure you’re facilitating conversation rather than giving advice.

- “What experiences have other people here had that Sean might find helpful as he deals with this?”
- “Out of all the problems you’ve talked about tonight, which one is most important?”
- “What are some things you think would help? Does anyone else have additional ideas?”

As you continue to put questions back to the group and the individual you will likely be surprised at how many possible solutions they can come up with. And, added bonus, everyone leaves feeling like they hold the power to change their lives in their own hands!