

# Support Groups

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**by Mary Lou Leavitt, Britain Yearly Meeting**

Asking for a personal support group, like asking for a meeting for clearness, is a way of recognizing and validating the interdependence of an individual and a community, be it at work, in one's Meeting, or elsewhere. A group of this kind embodies and can make explicit the theology of networking—that we can make God real for each other by giving and receiving loving attention. I give here two examples of support groups from my personal experience. The first is formally constituted, connected with my paid employment (by London Yearly Meeting as Peace Secretary working at Friends House); members are reimbursed for expenses incurred in participating. It could be adapted to the needs of a paid worker such as a warden or an unpaid office-holder such as a Clerk. The second is a much looser web or network, geographically dispersed and completely voluntary. There are many other variants, especially of this last model.

## **I—Support Group focused on a single employee at work**

### *Purpose:*

- To give loving attention to the focus person, as a whole person but with particular reference to their job.
- To meet regularly and listen to how it is with that person and that job.
- To ask questions both challenging and supportive to help the focus person clarify any feelings, thoughts or choices they may have in relation to their work.
- To be available as sympathetic listeners in a crisis.
- To help generate practical options when the focus person feels panicky or stuck. (My support group has been known to force me to open my diary and write my holidays, in ink!)
- NOT to make policy about the job itself but to help the focus person think clearly about priorities

### *Time:*

The group meets four or five times a year, usually for about three hours on an afternoon in the members' or focus person's homes. Occasionally, we have a 'special'—an all day meeting with a specific focus, e.g. evaluation of the first three years in the job, dreams and visions, etc. Once the group met in the focus person's office to see and feel the work environment, and then went out to dinner.

**Size:**

The group was originally four, now three. Three's fine, but it puts quite an obligation on each member not to miss a meeting. Members of the group were nominated by the focus person in consultation with the officebearers of her Management Committee and confirmed by the Committee; one is a Committee member.

**Method:**

One key is that the focus person has no responsibility for convening the group, or determining its agenda. This responsibility rotates among the other members of the group; one to convene, suggest an agenda and facilitate, a second to take notes (the third resting this time). The person whose turn it is to convene usually rings round the other members for ideas for an agenda, which is formally agreed at the start of the meeting (but never adhered to very strictly!). If we're sharing a meal, the convener also sorts out who will bring what, so that the host (and especially the focus person) never has to provide.

Each meeting starts with a brief settling time for worship. The core of the meeting is often simply time for the focus person to say what's been happening over the last three months. Members of the group listen, question and comment. *"Is the balance right for you in the job?" "What do you do for relaxation?" "What has been particularly difficult?" "What do you feel you've done well?"* Just being given space to speak helps the focus person to step back for a moment and clarify thoughts and feelings. Sometimes there is a particular aspect of the job the group chooses to focus on: time management, developing a specific strength in the work, planning for a difficult time ahead.

Towards the end of the meeting a date is set for the next one and possible items for the agenda are discussed.

People take their own notes during the meeting of things which strike them as important, but one member of the group also writes formal notes "for the record." These are filed as part of the focus person's Committee work and simply record what topics were discussed rather than a detailed account of what was said. We see ourselves as leaving a record for future generations about our pioneering work! The note-taker sends a draft to the focus person, who may amend it before having it typed and copies sent to the group. Confidentiality is extremely important and needs to be meticulously respected.

On several occasions the focus person has asked for special meetings with one or two members of the group to thrash out a particular problem. We also use the telephone a lot, to check in with the focus person and for the focus person to share some particular crisis or triumph. Often a listening ear is enough!

## **II—Mutual Support Group**

Here there is no focus person or focus team for whom the group exists to give attention and support. Instead there is a mutual and reciprocal commitment of friendship between all members, and support is given and received by each in equal measure. Some guidelines and suggestions:

### ***Size:***

Seven or eight seems a good number, since there will then always be some feeling stronger, when others are in need. Having too many in the group inhibits sharing and stretches the attention.

### ***Commitment:***

Often there is a common bond of activity (e.g. non-violent action in a particular cause) or circumstance (all young parents, all in similar stressful jobs). Geographical proximity helps but is not essential. The commitment needs to be a conscious choice and requires continuing effort and attention—it doesn't just happen. It can be helpful to give the group a name, and thus an identity—although boundaries need to remain flexible enough to include partners or family (preexisting or newly acquired) from time to time.

### ***Regular contact:***

This can be achieved by meeting for an evening, day or weekend. One group I know of meets on the thirteenth of every month, whatever day of the week that is. Another rarely meets at all as a whole, but different pairings and triplings happen often (with some care that no one is left too far out on a limb too long) and regular contact is maintained by phone and postcard.

### ***Active care for one another:***

A mixture of cards, phone calls, flowers and prayer, for example, will develop as appropriate. Members of one group have a practice of remembering and upholding one of their number by lighting candles in their homes when they know that that person is going through a rough or challenging time: job interviews, illnesses, exams. When one member of this group changed jobs, the others gathered round, took her to a beautiful place, named the strengths they saw in her which she would carry from one job to the next, offered their own strengths in support, and made a solemn, laughter-filled and prayerful occasion for her to lay down the old tasks and move forward towards new ones.

### ***Share on many levels:***

Include time to do something or go somewhere together (an outing, a walk, all helping someone paint or move or put something together), time to share food, time for each person to share

what's important at the moment in their lives, time to relax, time to reflect on the group and renew commitment, time to laugh together. Responsibility for planning and providing needs to shift around the group, so it's not always the same one or two people pushing to make things happen; if this doesn't seem to occur naturally, the group may need to adopt a structure which ensures a regular rotation of tasks.

— This material is from the publication *Meeting Needs*, Britain Yearly Meeting

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