



## CHOOSING A SUPPORT GROUP THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Support groups can be an important source of emotional support, and they can be a great way to see what works for others and learn about local services

Support groups are a way for people with a common experience to help each other and learn from each other. There are support groups for people with any experience of mental illness or substance use, support groups for people with a specific diagnosis, support groups for family members and friends, and more.

These groups can be very helpful and many people find comfort in knowing they are not alone. Support groups can be an important source of emotional support, and they can be a great way to see what works for others and learn about local services.

Support groups are offered by community organizations, mental health service providers, schools, campuses, hospitals, clinics, and other support agencies. There are different kind of support groups. Peer support groups are led by people with lived experience who facilitate group meetings. Peer supporters often have training in facilitation and support, but they may not be able to answer complicated questions about health concerns outside of their own experiences. More formal support groups may be led or co-led by health professionals, so they can provide more information but may not be able to offer the same empathy or 'feel' as a peer support group. Some groups are strictly meant for people with a specific diagnosis or experience, others are open to loved ones, and still others may be open to a mix of experiences (your own or a loved one's). If you aren't sure what to expect from a particular group, contact the organizer or host organization to learn more so you can decide which groups to try based on your preferences and needs.

This info sheet focuses on support groups that meet in person. For considerations around online support groups, like privacy, see the Evaluating Information on Mental Health and Substance Use info sheet at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).



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## A CHECKLIST

Use these questions as a guide when you talk to a support group facilitator for the first time. You may have to attend a meeting in person to completely answer your questions and get a sense of what the group is like.

1. Is the group accepting new members?
2. What are the criteria to attend?
3. Where does the group meet?
4. What time does the group meet at and for how long do meetings usually last?
5. How often does the group meet?
6. How many people usually attend?
7. Is the group affiliated with any organizations or programs?
8. Does the group do anything to protect confidentiality of its members (e.g., only using first names or agreeing not to talk outside the group about other members)?
9. How does the group structure its meetings? What does a typical meeting look like?
10. What kind of experiences are usually seen at the meeting (especially for groups that welcome a broader mix of members)?
11. What topics are included in discussions?
12. Who runs the group? What are their qualifications?
13. Is the group secular (non-religious) or faith-based?

## CHOOSING A SUPPORT GROUP

Not all support groups are created equally, even within the same organization. A helpful support group empowers its members to take good care of their health by providing good-quality and reliable information. The knowledge that's shared can help members better manage their problems, learn about the health problem, and seek treatment or other supports. Depending on the type of support group, the knowledge offered may be based mostly on personal experience. If that's the case, remember that experiences and results vary from person to person.

Talking about problems without seeking solutions can be an important way to share frustrations and feel heard or understood by others. But groups that only offer a space to discuss problems or complain can encourage unhelpful coping strategies. Ideally, a support group should leave people with a tool, skill, connection, or new perspective that helps them tackle a problem or make some sort of progress towards a health goal.

Good support groups will always have a facilitator you can contact for more information. The guidelines on this page can be used to help you decide whether a particular support group is worth trying out.

## AFTER THE MEETING

After you have attended one or more support group meetings, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the group make me feel included and supported?
- Do I feel safe and comfortable sharing my experiences and thoughts with the group?
- Do I feel like I am respected in the group?
- Do I understand what's expected of group members? Does the group have clear rules or guidelines?
- Am I learning helpful ways to cope with my concerns or support a loved one?
- Am I being provided with good, helpful information?
- Do I enjoy the group?
- Do I see benefit in being part of the group? Do I feel better after attending meetings?
- Do I have any concerns around confidentiality? Do I feel like my privacy is being respected?

If you have found a very good support group, you will answer yes to all or most of the above questions. If most of your answers are no, you may need to evaluate how well the group fits your expectations or goals.



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It's normal to feel a bit nervous going into a new group, and it may take a few meetings to feel comfortable sharing your thoughts or experiences with the group. Simply listening can also be very helpful. Many people have an especially hard time opening up about mental health or substance use challenges. A good group facilitator or leader understands this and will help you feel comfortable and included even if you aren't ready to share everything.

However, if at any point the group makes you feel unsafe or disrespected, it may not be a good option for you. Not every group will be a good fit for everyone, and that's okay. Your goal is to find a group that supports you and makes you feel comfortable, and it may take a few tries to find the best fit.

## HOW TO FIND A SUPPORT GROUP

For a listing of mental health support groups in British Columbia, call the Mental Health Support Line at 310-6789 (do not enter an area code) 24 hours a day from anywhere in BC.

- In the Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley, Sea-to-Sky, Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island, you can search for support groups at [www.bc211.ca](http://www.bc211.ca) or call 2-1-1
- Talk to your health care team for suggestions or advice. They may have good recommendations
- Email [askus@heretohelp.bc.ca](mailto:askus@heretohelp.bc.ca) for information and referrals from the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information

### These are other resources for:

#### Substance Use

Call the Alcohol & Drug Information and Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441 (province-wide) or 604-660-9382 (in the Lower Mainland) for information about local supports for substance use concerns.

#### Mood Disorders and Related Issues

For mood disorder and related issues (depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD), find a directory of the Mood Disorders Association of BC's (a branch of Lookout Housing and Health Society) support groups at [www.mdabc.net/peer-support-groups](http://www.mdabc.net/peer-support-groups). Groups are located across BC. They also offer support groups for families and friends.

#### Eating Disorders

Visit Kelty Eating Disorders at [keltyeatingdisorders.ca/treatment-options/support-groups](http://keltyeatingdisorders.ca/treatment-options/support-groups) for a list of support groups across BC.

#### Families and Friends

If your loved one is an adult, find a directory of the BC Schizophrenia Society's support groups at [www.bcscs.org/monthly-meetings-calendar](http://www.bcscs.org/monthly-meetings-calendar). Groups are located across BC and are for family members of someone with any mental illness. If your loved one is a child or youth, connect with the Institute of Families for Child and Youth Mental Health, which runs In the Know monthly education and networking sessions for parents looking for support in communities across BC. See [www.familysmart.ca/programs/in-the-know](http://www.familysmart.ca/programs/in-the-know).



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Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.

**Visit the CMHA BC website at [www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca).**

CMHA BC is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners are funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

**For more information, visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)**