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Seeking Connection: The Benefits of Support Groups

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When confronted with challenges, such as a serious health condition, a loss, or major life transition, our most natural impulse is to turn to others, our family and friends, for solace and support. Many people find additional value in being with others who are confronting a similar situation and who know first hand the trials and difficulties they are experiencing.

The Mayo Clinic website lists a number of benefits of participating in support groups:

- Feeling less lonely, isolated or judged
- Gaining a sense of empowerment and control
- Improving your coping skills and sense of adjustment
- Talking openly and honestly about your feelings
- Reducing distress, depression, anxiety or fatigue
- Developing a clearer understanding of what to expect

There are many types of groups, as well as different formats and styles. Because the purpose of joining a group is to meet your individual needs, it's important that you select one that suits your temperament and preferences. Mayo Clinic staff advise, "Plan to attend a few support group meetings to see how you fit in. If the support group makes you uncomfortable or you don't find it useful, try another one. Remember that even a support group you like can change over time as participants come and go." ¹



Sponsored support groups may have a trained facilitator, or be offered through an organization, such as a hospital or community agency. These are often led by professionals, such as a social worker or other counselor.

Peer support groups, on the other hand, are led by others with similar experiences, such as being diagnosed with a physical or mental health condition, grieving a significant loss, caregiving for an elderly relative, and so on. According to www.SAMHSA.gov, these groups offer several advantages. “By sharing their own lived experience and practical guidance, peer support workers help people to develop their own goals, create strategies for self-empowerment, and take concrete steps towards building fulfilling, self-determined lives for themselves.”²

Groups may be offered in person or virtually. PsychCentral.com offers tips on what to look for in an online support group: “Finding the right online support group or therapy group may not happen immediately, and that’s OK. To set yourself up for success, make sure to research before committing to a session. If the group is peer-led, read reviews and recommendations from members.” To find groups led by licensed therapists, they recommend resources such as the American Group Psychotherapy Association³.

Whatever you are looking for, support groups can be found through various sources, such as asking your physician, checking newspaper listings, asking friends, and going online. Both Kaiser Permanente and Sutter Health offer health and wellness support groups, while Marin Health and Human Services offers a lengthy catalogue of support groups.

¹<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/support-groups/art-20044655>

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²https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tacs/peer-support-2017.pdf

³<https://psychcentral.com/health/online-support-groups-help-me-heal-me>