

WHAT ARE THE FIRST STEPS?

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams."

— Henry David Thoreau,
19th-century American writer

Whether you are starting a self-help group or building a barn, doing a bit of initial planning can save you lots of time and work later. Here are some things to do first:

Don't reinvent the wheel. Find out what others are doing that is similar to what you want to do (see steps 1 to 3 on this page).

Think shared leadership. Work with others as you form the group (see steps 4 and 5).

1 Visit self-help groups in your local area.

Choose groups that deal with concerns similar to yours or that use methods you might use. Some ideas:

Ask yourself if one of these groups can meet your needs. You may not need to start another group.

If the only obstacle to your attending an already existing group is place or time, consider forming a "sister group" that meets elsewhere or at another time.

Learn from each group's strengths and weaknesses. Be quick to learn and slow to judge.

2 Talk with experienced self-help group leaders.

Visit or phone founders and leaders of self-help groups in your area to learn about their experiences in starting a group. Ask them how they got it off the ground and what problems they encountered.

3 Obtain "how to" packets from established groups.

To locate groups that will send you start-up literature, contact your local or national self-help clearinghouse or check a directory such as *The Self-Help Sourcebook* (see Resources, page 8).

4 Work with others.

Avoid the superwoman or superman role. Sharing leadership and rotating tasks as early as possible help you distribute the work and prevent burn-out. You will also be demonstrating what self-help is all about: it's a group, not individual, process.

5 Form your initial organizing committee.

Gather together a few other people who share your inter-

est in starting (not just joining) a new group. These people will become your group's initial organizing committee. This committee will do most of the initial planning for your self-help group. Here are some suggestions on how to identify effective co-founders and spark their interest:

Seek out those who are representative of your self-help group's desired membership. For example, an initial organizing committee made up of people of varying ages and races is more likely to attract a diverse general membership.

Ask people to volunteer only to help launch the group, not to lead it indefinitely. This will make it easier to attract people who are struggling with their own problems. They can become more involved at a later time.

Find tasks other than serving on the initial organizing committee for those who want to be involved from the outset but who are too overwhelmed by illness or other factors to be effective leaders. For example, ask them to create a mailing list.

