

# HOW DO WE GET ORGANIZED?

*"The American Revolution didn't just happen. It was organized."*

*-- Si Kahn, musician and grassroots organizer*

Gather together your initial organizing committee for a planning meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to decide in general terms what your self-help group is about and where it is going. You can then present your ideas at the first general meeting for feedback and revision.

Use the following steps to form an agenda for your planning meeting. The first 11 steps guide you through making general plans; the last 5 help you organize the first general meeting.

## **1** Define your group's shared concern.

This concern might be a medical disorder, mental illness, loss, disability, addiction, family issue, or other life experience that you share with others. Examples include AIDS, depression, unemployment, autism, gambling, adoption, and breast-feeding.

## **2** Decide who your group's members will be.

At the beginning most self-help groups include only

those who have the shared concern or problem. Family, friends, relatives, and visitors can be included at a later date.

## **3** Establish the group's initial focus.

Don't try to do everything at once. Consider focusing on only one or two activities at first. Here are some suggestions to choose from:

- Share feelings and experiences.
- Trade information and resources.
- Exchange new ways to solve old problems.
- Reduce stress and anxiety by having a good time.

Allow your group to develop slowly. Groups that choose to do public education or take social action may find it helpful to delay these activities until they are well established.

## **4** Try to keep it small at first.

Since discussions are usually the main activity of a new group, it is wise to try to keep the size between 4 and 15 people. This is large enough to bring a variety of experiences to the group, yet small enough to allow everyone a chance to participate.

## **5** Pick a name.

This can be fun. Although you may want the name to define your purpose or area of interest, a touch of humor can be appropriate. One

group of people with leg amputations named their group Prosthetic Education and Group Support (PEGS).

Be sure to make the name inviting. "Parents Supporting Parents" may be more appealing than "Parents Overwhelmed by Their Kids."

## **6** Define your relationship with "professionals."

Members of a self-help group are sometimes told that they cannot run their group without a professional "expert" at the helm. Not so!

Since self-help groups do not practice medicine or conduct psychotherapy, the real experts are the people who have the problem. They become more powerful and healthy by learning how to help each other as well as themselves.

However, professionals (people with technical expertise who do not personally have the problem or illness) can be very helpful. For example, a physician or educator can serve as a guest speaker, spread the word about the group, or provide you with technical information.

## **7** Establish levels of anonymity and confidentiality.

In an *anonymous* meeting, people are given the option of not revealing their full names. In some instances, this is very important (such