

## Peer Support Groups and Group Therapy: A Comparison

A support group setting is one where members can do just that – offer support and show understanding and empathy because of shared experiences. Since everyone in the group is a peer, there is no expert. There is no right or wrong. Each individual should feel safe enough to say what s/he feels and/or thinks and be accepted by the group.

Besides being able to vent in a support group, there is the opportunity to see that one's emotions are the same as others', not abnormal or shameful. Emotions just are. This can be liberating.

Support sessions also provide an ideal setting for problem solving. Other people's perspectives, resourcefulness and creativity are invaluable when a group member is feeling stuck and needs practical suggestions.

Finally, a support group is a social event. People should come away feeling they have met with old and new friends and had a pleasant experience. If a support group does nothing else, it should provide an opportunity for connection, creating time to counteract the isolation in which many peers live.

### Objectives of a Peer Support Group:

- Offer support through understanding and empathy
- Share insights about similarities of experiences
- Solve problems by using the combined wisdom of group members
- Celebrate good times and be there during bad ones

### Objectives of a Therapy Group:

- Observe and interpret behavior in the group to provide insight
- Analyze relationships within the group to facilitate interpersonal change
- Provide professional analysis of interactions and responses



**Important:** We do not do therapy in NAMI peer support groups.



**National Alliance on Mental Illness**

## **Important Notice on the Limitations of NAMI Support Groups**

NAMI's programs are designed to provide people who are affected by mental illness and their families with a deeper understanding of these conditions and with strategies for living well. Program participants will recognize that they are not alone, and feel empowered to advocate for better treatment and services for themselves and for family members.

NAMI programs are not intended to, and should not be used to, replace the specialized training and professional judgment of mental health professionals. We cannot, and do not, assume the roles of physician or therapist.

Self-care information and family and peer support are valuable assets in working through the many challenges faced by individuals and families who have been touched by mental illness. They are complimentary to, but not substitutes for, professional assistance.

Please seek immediate professional help if you or someone else is:

- Having thoughts of suicide or of harming others
- Unable to provide self-care for the essentials of daily living
- Abusing substances, and/or
- In danger of being harmed

NAMI cannot be held responsible for the personal use of the information the organization provides. Please always consult a trained mental health professional before making any decision regarding treatment of yourself or others.

## **Creating a Sense of Safety in a NAMI Support Group**

Creating a sense of safety is essential to the well-being of any support group. The NAMI Support Group Guidelines go a long way toward creating structure and safety for participants and facilitators. The following is a list of additional guidelines that will help ensure that participants feel that their emotional as well as physical safety is being considered. These guidelines may be shared by facilitators at the beginning of group meetings or simply on an as-needed basis.

To create and promote an environment of respect and safety in NAMI support groups we request that attendees:

1. Not bring weapons to group, even if the weapon is registered and the attendee is legally permitted to carry it
2. Not be under the influence of recreational drugs or alcohol during a NAMI support group meeting
3. Respect the stated personal boundaries of other participants both in and out of group
4. Respect that religious beliefs are very personal; therefore, religion is intentionally not a part of the NAMI support group structure. Religious beliefs, prayer and other forms of religious expression are not built into any NAMI support group meeting structure.
5. Respect the ethnic and cultural differences among individuals, even when we don't understand another's outlook or experiences. We request that attendees not joke or make derogatory comments on the topics of race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or other cultural differences.

**We thank you in advance for strengthening our group  
by respecting these guidelines.**