



# Guest Speakers for Self-Help Groups

Self-help groups bring people together who share common life experiences for support, education, and mutual aid. Groups often benefit from inviting guest speakers to attend meetings to discuss a variety of topics. This guide is designed to provide suggestions on valuable types of speakers and tips on identifying appropriate experts to share information.

## Best Practices

Follow the Society's self-help group standards regarding [minimizing risk](#) to group members and the Society when selecting speakers and program topics. Use the appropriate [Community Disclaimer for Peer Connection Participation](#) for your group meeting and make every effort to offer unbiased, well-rounded programs.

Whenever possible, ask guest speakers to volunteer their time and knowledge. The Society's group expense reimbursement does not cover speaker fees/honorariums.

- Virtual Groups: Connect with your staff partner to invite other area virtual groups to join in on your guest speaker presentation. This is a great way to increase your audience size.
- In-person Groups: Does your meeting space provide access to AV technology and internet connection? If yes, would a speaker be interested in visiting virtually? This can create opportunities for speakers who are not able to get your group meeting in-person due to distance or larger timing conflicts (i.e., travel time after work or on the weekends). A 30-minute virtual presentation may be easier for a speaker to schedule if they don't have to factor in travel to/from your meeting location.

## Guest Speaker Considerations

Connect with your staff partner to discuss the appropriateness of guest speakers before "booking" their presentation. Not all speakers are appropriate, and certain types of speakers are not allowed. The [Non-National MS Society Relationships FAQ](#) resource provides information regarding research, pharmaceutical and medical marijuana speakers. Should you be approached by potential speakers, connect with your staff partner to talk through considerations and appropriateness.

The Society's [Find Doctors & Resources](#) Tool can be helpful for identifying a variety of provider types in your area. The tool also provides general contact details for outreach to provider offices. The Society also has relationships with providers across the country. Work with your staff partner to identify providers with an interest in speaking at groups.

Tap the experience and contacts of your group members because a member's personal knowledge of a speaker is usually a good reference. Also, a potential speaker may be more likely to respond to someone they know personally. Does someone in your group know of a local professional (e.g. a physician, therapist or lawyer) who is knowledgeable and can be approached?

## Identifying Speakers & Speaker Topics

### National MS Society Resources

- The Society provides a variety of toolkits that are arranged as bundles of educational materials about a specific topic. These topics and tools can be used to lead discussions within your group. You can access these materials on the Peer Connection Volunteers webpage [here](#).
- Host a program using Society curriculum materials. Topics may include [Pathways to Wellness](#), [Black MS Experience](#), and [Hispanic/Latinx Experience](#). Connect with your Staff Partner to explore possible topics, speakers, and how the Society can support funding.
- Utilize [on-demand educational content](#) including Society virtual programs & webinars (either during a live presentation or via recording) can provide education via professional speakers on a variety of topics. Your staff partner can assist with identifying on demand materials available based on topics of interest- reach out to discuss opportunities to utilize speakers in this “out of the box” way.
- Local Society staff to discuss resources available through the Society, upcoming and ongoing programs, Society events, etc.
- Representatives from another Society self-help group to speak about their group’s best meetings, discussions, speakers and other successful activities they have had.

### Healthcare Specialists

Healthcare specialists can speak on a plethora of topics including MS specific topics (i.e. managing new and/or progressing MS symptoms, how to make the most of your appointments, MS medications, clinical trials & local research, open ended Q&A conversation with group members) as well as general topics related to staying well & overall health.

- Neurologists
- Physician Assistants
- Psychiatrists
- Urologists
- Nurses
- Nutritionists/Dieticians
- Rehabilitation Professionals: can discuss a variety of topics including strategies for energy conservation, safety considerations, and aids for daily living.
  - Physical Therapists
  - Occupational Therapists
  - Speech Therapists
- Mental Health Professionals: licensed professionals can discuss a variety of topics including active listening, conflict management, stress management, relationships, resilience, depression, & emotional reactions.
  - Social Worker
  - Mental Health Counselor
  - Psychologist
  - Marriage & Family Therapist

- Professional Associations & Licensing Boards- can include associations for psychologists, social workers, nurses, doctors, county medical society and other areas of interest.
- Local pharmacists can speak on a variety of topics, including drug interactions and taking medicines wisely.
  - Keep in mind that the Society does have guidelines related to providing [Medical Advice and Medicine Sharing](#) as well as for [working with other organizations](#), including pharmaceutical, research and marijuana dispensaries.
- Local colleges and universities—write, email or call the chairperson of a specific department related to your group’s interest. For example, contact the Psychology Department for speakers to address stress, the Nursing Department for self-care instruction, etc.

### Community Resources

- Local social service and government agencies and hospitals—sometimes they already have lists/brochures of possible speakers; contact the public/community relations department.
- Local Government Agencies— Social Security Administration, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Disability Rights Centers, Centers for Independent Living, Councils on Aging, Assistive Technology Organizations, etc.
- Lawyers—especially those specializing in discrimination law, financial planning, insurance, and disability law.

### Wellness & Recreation

- Bring an exercise therapist in to demonstrate Tai Chi, Pilates, Feldenkrais, seated aerobics, or other exercises appropriate for people with MS (NMSS waivers are required).
- Alternative health providers could speak on herbal medicine, meditation, yoga or another complimentary or alternative therapy. Be sure to follow Society’s guidelines for [minimizing risk](#) to group members when exploring this option.
  - Do not allow alternative practitioners to demonstrate on a group member (e.g., having a bee sting, chiropractic manipulation, etc.).
- Music Therapists
- Recreational Therapists
- Invite a Parks and Recreation, Forest Service, or Parks Department staff member to speak about their programs for people with disabilities within your state/county/community.