

Self-Help Group Meeting Structure Guide

Meeting structure for National MS Society self-help groups can range from loosely structured discussion groups providing social connection and emotional support to more formally structured group meetings focused on providing education and connection to community resources.

The group focus and format are determined by the group leader and can be adjusted with group member input and feedback at any time.

The following activities are common to many self-help group meetings and can be used as a guide for structuring your meeting. These activities work for both virtual and in-person group meeting structures.

Open the Meeting

- Leader(s) should begin the meeting at the advertised starting time.
- Some groups open their meetings with a formal statement of the group’s purpose and/or welcoming statements. Affiliated National MS Society self-help group meetings help all members to recognize and share their strengths, successes and hopes, not just their problems and challenges.
- Share & review the [Community Disclaimer for Peer Connection Participation](#) and [Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Statement](#) to set a welcoming foundation for the group. These statements help familiarize everyone with group confidentiality and establish an inclusive foundation for trust building within the group space.
- This is a great time to review any pre-established group ground rules and guidelines.

Greetings & Welcome

- In-person groups: Greet and welcome members when they arrive. If possible, recruit a volunteer group member to assist with this task.
- Virtual groups: Verbally welcome all attendees as they join the virtual space.

Introductions

- This is especially appropriate for new groups forming to help members get to know one another and learn about common concerns. We also recommend that group leaders incorporate introductions when new group members are attending for the first time. Offer members the option to “pass” if they would rather not introduce themselves.
 - In-person groups: Going around the room, each member can introduce himself/herself and may state their reasons for coming to the group.
 - Virtual groups: Leaders should use prompts to assist virtually attendees to know when it is their time to speak (i.e. “John, we’d love to hear from you now. After John, we’ll hop

to Kathy and then Sarah”). Since virtual “seats” vary on everyone’s personal screens, it is key that the leader guide conversation contribution opportunities.

Meeting Focus

- Time for group discussion, education, and information sharing.
- Additional group leader support resources are available, including [Guest Speakers for Self-Help Groups](#) and [Self Help Group Meeting Topics and Conversation Guide](#). Please review these resources for additional guidance and suggestions on these topics.
- Sharing experiences: Time should be allotted for the sharing of personal experiences and helping each other. You can review [Active Listening](#) and [Solution Focused Conversation](#) guides to assist with guiding group conversation dynamics. Below are some ways to structure the discussion.
 - Round Robin: Ask a question or ask participants to complete a statement and go around the group as each person responds, giving everyone a chance.
 - Brainstorming: Ideas are shared in a spontaneous way. Creative thinking is encouraged by not judging any ideas shared by others.
 - Change exercise. Describe a current situation, describe what you want it to be in the future, list the things that hold you back, things that could help you move forward, what would be affected by the change and the steps needed to bring about the change. This can be used to discuss an individual’s personal dilemma or a generic situation. The [Solution Focused Conversation Resource Guide](#) provides additional talking points, considerations, and resources related to this type of discussion.
 - Role-playing. Acting out a situation (e.g. how to communicate effectively with your doctor) can be helpful and fun. Some participants enact the role-play while others observe and can react or comment.
- Business section: This time is set aside for any business the group wishes to take up, such as planning activities, arranging for future meetings (choosing discussion topics/ guest speakers, etc.), making announcements, etc.
- Refreshments:
 - In-person groups: Serving optional refreshments after the meetings provides a time for informal meeting and conversation.

Close the Meeting

- Close meetings on a positive note. It is recommended to have a consistent signal to indicate the meeting is formally closed.
- Thank attendees for attending and participating in the conversation. If applicable, thank any speakers for donating their time and expertise to share information with the group.
- Provide any details related to the next meeting.