

# RENEW & REFLECT

quick tips from SLIconnect

## Priest Support Groups: Recommendations and Resources

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The process of establishing and maintaining a peer support group of any kind can be challenging. There are unique considerations for priest support groups, including geographic distance, schedule challenges and day-to-day stressors of pastoral ministry. Taking the time to plan and design a support group that meets the participants' needs can positively impact the group's longevity and vitality as well as maximize the interpersonal and developmental benefits for the participants.

### **Designing the Support Group**

First, decide on the purpose of the support group. Examples include building fraternal relationships with peers, dealing with grief, stress, spiritual support, celibate chastity, anger, emotional competence, pastoral issues, or administrative skill building. Then discuss group leadership, format and other logistical considerations:

#### *Leadership*

- Facilitator-led: professionally facilitated
- Peer-led, fixed: one member is selected to lead every meeting
- Peer-led, rotating: members take turns leading; this is the preferred format for most peer support groups
- Mixed type: both facilitated and peer-led, depending on the meeting

#### *Discussion format*

- Curriculum-based: best for learning based on assigned readings
- Topic-based: best for a goal-directed group
- Open forum: no predetermined discussion topics; best for peer-to-peer support
- Mixed: provides for variability in group wants/needs

#### *Membership*

- Members: decide who is eligible to join the group, keeping in mind the potential negative effect of dual and/or hierarchical relationships among members
- Open: new members can join at any time, excluding one-time visitors/guests
- Closed: the group does not receive new members after the first meeting
- Number of members: five to eight participants is ideal for a support group

### *Meeting schedule*

- Frequency: weekly or bi-weekly, depending on the group's needs; monthly meetings are too infrequent to provide consistent support
- Day/date & time: fixed (e.g., 1st and 15th of the month); interval (e.g., every second and third Thursday); or variable according to group needs
- Length of meeting (fixed or variable)

### *Group duration*

- Time-limited: group meets for a predetermined duration; e.g., months, number of meetings, until an event happens, etc.
- Continuous: group meets according to group schedule without a preestablished termination date

### *Meeting venue*

- Venue should be private enough to promote authentic interaction; a parish room/hall or a private home/rectory is ideal
- A fixed venue can be easier logistically, but rotating among member homes/parishes can facilitate a sense of shared investment in the group, especially when meeting attendance requires travel for some members

Member roles and responsibilities are also important to address. Below are some examples of different roles and responsibilities for group members:

- Organizer – the person who guides initial design and setup of the group. This role is no longer needed after the first meeting, as group ownership and administration ultimately should become a shared task among the members.
- Point of contact – the member responsible for communicating important information to members. This person functions as kind of coordinator at the group level, keeping lines of communication open and ensuring all participants are aware of important information.
- Leader – the person who begins, facilitates, and ends a meeting. As noted above, it is recommended that members take turns acting as the group leader.
- Host – the member responsible for receiving members at the venue and coordinating logistics such as food, access to the venue, etc.

Finally, it is essential to develop some simple guidelines to establish clear expectations for participation, such as:

### *Confidentiality\**

- Determine whether the membership is public or private, e.g., members refrain from divulging the identities of other members
- Discuss what is and what isn't to be shared, e.g., group members may speak to non-members about their experience of the group provided they disclose nothing learned from or about other members.

## *Etiquette*

- Technology – consider asking members to silence devices and put them in a basket or other separate space to prevent interruptions during the meeting
- Listening/interruptions – encourage participants to listen attentively and refrain from interrupting or talking over other members
- Non-judgement/acceptance of differing opinions – remember that support groups are not designed to change the opinions of others

## *Attendance`*

- Ask members to make an initial commitment before deciding to leave the group, e.g., attend a minimum number meetings or participant for a minimum number of months
- Determine whether missing a specific number of meetings results in being asked to leave the group

## **Administration of the Support Group**

### *Opening/closing*

- The leader can begin the meeting by inviting each member to share on topics such as his general well-being, events in his life, or topics he wishes to bring up at the meeting.
- When closing the meeting, the leader can summarize the themes discussed, ask for feedback about how members felt about the meeting and remind members of the next meeting place and time.
- The meeting should typically begin and end on time.

### *Considerations for group discussion and interaction*

- When sharing, participants should be encouraged to focus on the present, using “I” statements. When speaking about others’ behavior, members should focus on their personal experience of the behavior, rather than focusing on the other person or on the action taken.
- Empathy – the other members can show support through verbal and non-verbal expressions of empathy, offering reactions that communicate they have some understanding of what the other person is thinking or feeling.
- Challenge – offering challenge can be an important part of supporting group members. To challenge another member, a participant requests and receives permission before offering challenge.
- Collaborative problem-solving – participants may help solve problems if the person sharing has asked for such help. Problem-solving is not offering direct advice or instruction; it is helping clarify what the person wants to accomplish and helping him identify ways to achieve that goal.
- Members should try to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate in self-disclosure.

### *Ongoing evaluation and feedback*

- Verbal – members are invited to share what they do and do not like, appreciate, and value about the group and offer feedback to the whole group about how to make the group useful and meaningful.
- Written – the point of contact can periodically solicit anonymous written feedback from group members on topics such as what could make the group more useful, the members' subjective sense of feeling comfortable in and supported by the group, general likes and dislikes, etc.

### *External involvement*

A circumstance may arise that requires outside consultation. In this case, the assigned point of contact should communicate the nature of the request and severity of the issue with diocesan or community leadership.

## **Resources for Enhancing Support Groups**

- Bennett, A. and Bennett, L. (2011). *The Emotions God Gave You*. Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press.
- Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. S. (1992). *Boundaries: When to say yes, how to say no to take control of your life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Harshman, N. F. (1992). *Learn Your Story, Find Your Power: Using Emotional Awareness to Enrich Your Self and Your Relationships*. St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press.
- Lencioni, P. (2004). *Death by Meeting*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Middleton-Moz, J. (1990). *Shame and Guilt: Masters of Disguise*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.
- Neal, A. and Neal, P. (2011). *The Art of Convening: Authentic Engagement in Meetings, Gatherings, and Conversations*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Powell, J. (1998). *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? Insights into Personal Growth*. Allen, TX: RCL Benzinger.
- Wick, R. J. (2015). *Availability: The Challenge and the Gift of Being Present*. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books.
- Young, A. (Producer). *The Place We Find Ourselves* [Audio Podcast]. Retrieved from <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/adam-young/the-place-we-find-ourselves>

\* Confidentiality may be limited, however, in accordance with locally mandated reporting laws, in cases such as expressions of intent to harm self or others, or child/elder abuse or neglect.