

15 Steps to Starting an HIV Support Group (Guide for a Peer Advocate)

1. Keep your meeting at the same place and at the same time during the beginning weeks. Have your meeting even if no outside guests show up. Sometimes it will take a few weeks for you to start getting participants on a regular basis.
2. Create flyer about your group and post at clinics, other agencies, churches, supermarket, etc.
3. Make phone calls to interested participants.
4. Search for volunteers to lead your support group.
5. Make a welcome kit for new participants: include a confidentiality agreement, contact sheet, fact sheet about HIV, and an outline of the general format of group meetings.
6. Make a sign-in sheet, and have participants sign it at every meeting.
7. Create group agreements on the first day of group and post the agreements at every session.
8. Have different topics available for each group meeting.
9. Provide incentives if possible.
10. Conduct a needs assessment every six months.
11. Providing food is very important; if you don't have money for food, then do a potluck style, or see if there are near-by restaurants willing to donate.
12. Choose a point person for the support group - someone who doesn't mind sharing their contact information or screening new participants.
13. Create a crisis plan in case your participants have serious issues going on in their lives.
14. Make a list of possible outside speakers for group meetings
15. Give everyone a contact sheet with names and phone numbers of participants who do not mind sharing their information with group.

Tips:

- Observe time limits. Start on time and end on time so that members feel you are reliable. If they should have babysitters, they will be able to work with them easier.
- Be up front if no child care is available, let members know ahead of time if children are welcome and if not, don't make exceptions.
- Be prepared to have you or your co-leaders do most of the speaking at the first few meetings until your members begin to feel comfortable with each other.
- Free space can sometimes be found at the local school, churches, non-profit and social agencies or at member's homes.
- Place chairs in a circle and close enough that all members can hear.