

# Starting a Diabetes Support Group

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## What Is a Diabetes Support Group?

A diabetes support group is a self-help group that can provide educational, social, and emotional support for people affected by diabetes. Some groups may raise funds for diabetes activities and research, but this is not necessary.

## What Is the Role of the Support Group Leader?

In the early stages of support group development, the leader can be involved in organizing and publicizing the group. Ideally, the leader has partnered with other community members who are interested in diabetes, including health care professionals, people with diabetes, media representatives, representatives of faith communities, and civic or voluntary organizations like the Lions Club. These individuals can become the advisory board for the group. With other organizers, the agent can help to develop a list of all the “experts” that can be called upon to present to the group.

If the leader may also want to contact members of this group to see what they would like the support group to offer and when and where the support group should meet.

Ideally, as the support group becomes established, the leadership of the group will come from its members. The leader can continue in a supportive role helping with some of the education programs, publicity, and leadership development.

## Having a Successful First Meeting

The success of the first meeting will heavily depend on how well it has been publicized. The entire advisory group should brainstorm about this plan so that everyone will get personally involved in promoting the group. Questions to consider are the following: How do people learn and get excited about local activities? Is there a local community calendar in the newspaper or on television or radio? Are there places where people will easily see posters announcing the meeting (pharmacies, doctors’ offices, senior centers, public health departments)? Would special invitations to key people be worthwhile?

Choose a meeting place that is nonthreatening and comfortable. A medical facility may not be the best location since it can appear sterile and can be associated with unpleasant memories. Make sure that there is adequate space and that another group will not interrupt you. Look for a place with plenty of well-lit parking for those who may have vision problems.

People often prefer meetings that are on a Tuesday or Thursday evening. For the first meeting, try to avoid holidays and summer vacation time.

Choose someone to preside over the meeting. The best choice is someone who is respected in the community and who is willing to make a commitment to the group. Whoever presides at the first meeting will need to explain the group’s purpose, its

tentative plans, and give some ground rules for the group. Someone should take minutes so that a continuing record of the group's progress is kept.

First impressions do count, so the tone and future direction of the group will depend a lot on the success of the first meeting. To attract a crowd, you may wish to invite a special speaker on a popular topic. Some support group leaders initially offer the Right Bite Diabetes Cooking School or Walk-a-Weigh and then build the support group from those who attend if they are interested in continuing. No matter what program is featured, make sure the refreshments that are served are appropriate for someone with diabetes.

## **What Are Some of the Ground Rules?**

Here are some of the guidelines that seem to help a group become successful:

### **Shared Leadership**

If a group has enough interested people to continue, members should elect officers as soon as possible. A large group may need subcommittees like publicity, program planning, membership recruitment, and bylaws. This allows the group to take over responsibility for continuity and decision making. If the group is reluctant to assume leadership, at least assign nonthreatening tasks to various people. This may include becoming part of the advisory committee for 6 months, preparing refreshments, introducing a speaker, or taking meeting notices to different locations.

Besides establishing a leadership structure, the group will need to choose a consistent time and place for its regular meetings. Having a consistent time and place reduces the risk of members forgetting or being late.

### **Confidentiality**

Members must be assured that whatever they say or hear in the group will be held in confidence by all who attend.

### **Equal Opportunity to Contribute**

Members should understand that everyone should have the opportunity to share their ideas at the meeting. Time should be allotted during and/or after each program for discussion. No one will be forced to contribute, but members should understand that one of the benefits of the group is to share experiences and information with each other about diabetes.

### **Acceptance of Others' Feelings and Ideas**

Knowledge and experience of diabetes can differ, so everyone should show respect for everyone else's ideas. If inaccurate or controversial information is shared, a health care professional, ideally, will be there to clarify issues. If no health care professional is present, the Support Group Leader can offer to research this information with a Health Specialist or another trusted health care provider, so that research-based information can be provided to group members.

## **Substituting Group Meetings for Doctor Visits**

Members must understand that support group meetings are not a substitute for regular medical care from their health care team. Members should realize that there are many ways to treat diabetes and that information that they get from the group should be checked out with their health care team before any changes are made in their established treatment plan.

## **Leaving the Group**

Out of courtesy to the group, members who plan to stop attending should inform the group. This will help reduce anxiety over the missing person and will help to evaluate how well the group is meeting the needs of individual members.

## **What if the Group Falls Apart?**

All groups take a while to get going. If there is no leadership, commitment to the group may be unpredictable. It may take as long as 6 months to a year to get a core group established. Organizers will have to be patient and continue to evaluate how well the group is doing. That is why it is important to get as many people involved in the planning and leadership of the group from the beginning.

To promote group involvement, ask each member to recruit at least one new member. Give a prize to the person who brings in the most new people. Be sure to introduce and recognize new people at each meeting. Most important of all, plan interesting, fun meetings with activities to attract a good audience.

All groups have ups and downs. The Support Group Leader can help the group leadership resolve inevitable conflicts and help with membership recruitment if interest wanes.

If the group does not continue, don't give up. The time and mix of people may not have been right. Keep the list of interested people, and consider starting another group later. Sometimes an idea just needs time to gestate. Keep looking for new people and issues that may make a new group more successful. Evaluate carefully what didn't work with the first group, and try to overcome these challenges the next time. Don't be afraid to ask people how the group could have been more successful. Especially seek the input of those who left the group or those that should have been interested in the group but didn't become involved.

## **In Summary**

1. Diabetic support groups can provide educational, social, and emotional support for people dealing with diabetes.
2. Careful planning that includes representatives of the target audience can help the group become successful.
3. Ideally, support group leadership should come from its members.
4. Group development takes time. All organizations have growth and stagnant periods. If the group is unsuccessful, try to determine what happened, and see if starting another group is feasible.

