

8 SELF-HELP AND MUTUAL AID

- **what is self-help?** **67**
- **why self-help groups work** **68**
- **drug self-help groups** **69**
- **listing of self-help services** **70**

what is self-help?

The term 'self-help' is a little misleading. It implies that people participate in an effort to help only themselves, when in fact an essential feature of self-help groups is that people help one another. Many terms such as mutual aid, mutual self-help, reciprocal support and peer support have been used to describe self-help and all these terms appear to refer to the same, if not similar concepts.

Self-help is a way to deal with problems or conditions, such as drug problems, hardship, stress, stigma or pain, that people face from time to time. Handling these problems with other people who have lived through them can help us cope and discover ways for improving the condition.

The following list comprises the basic principles and characteristics of self-help groups.

- They are a voluntary gathering of people who share common experiences, life situations or problems. Members offer each other emotional and practical support based on the unique perspective only available to those who have shared these experiences.
- They build on the strengths of their members. The knowledge base in self-help groups is experience-tested and grounded in the wisdom that comes from struggling with problems in authentic ways.
- They are run by and for group members. Helping is at the centre of all this: knowing how to receive help, give help and help yourself. Underlying self-help is the basic theme: 'You are not alone.'
- They include discussion, education, sharing of information and experiences and other activities that promote mutual support and empowerment.

- They are open to people who have experienced the problem, the situation or have an identity in common with other members. Professional providers may participate in the self-help processes at the request and sanction of the group.
- They require no charge for participation, although a nominal donation may be requested to cover expenses.

why self-help groups work

Over the past 20 years there has been a growing body of research evaluating the effects of self-help/mutual aid groups on participants. Most research studies have found important benefits of participation.

Much of the strength of the self-help movement derives from its spirit or ethos, especially its emphasis on self-determination, empowerment and mutual support. The following helping processes have been identified as the effective ingredients in self-help groups.

conveying a sense of belonging

Participating in a self-help group offers opportunities for gaining a sense of belonging. Being a part of the group helps people connect with others who know how you feel and know what you are enduring. It is a special empathy different from professional help.

empowerment

Empowerment happens when one is able to take action for oneself and on behalf of others. In self-help groups, the first sign of it is a growth in self-confidence based on the notion that there is 'strength in numbers'. Within a group of people who face the same problem, members encourage each other to mobilise resources and take control.

achieving insight

Participants regard self-help groups as a safe place to self-disclose, because the problem or concern is taken for granted since it is a condition of membership. Even difficult disclosures trigger empathic understanding and feelings of identification (the 'me-too' response). This safe and non-judgmental atmosphere allows group members to arrive at new insights into self and the problem.

the helper-therapy principle

The helper-therapy principle states that giving help to someone else is the best way of being helped. For example, a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) member who provides support to another NA member may benefit more than the helpee. Being the helper is of benefit because:

- the helper feels good about having something to give;
- it is an active role and the helper feels less dependent;
- the helper feels useful and competent; and
- it gives the helper a sense of being in control and capable of doing something useful.

communicating 'lived experience' and role modelling

Self-help groups offer a learning exchange for sharing of specialised information and perspectives that people gain when they live through and actively deal with the problem or condition. Self-help group members who have integrated the information and have become competent in handling the problem are said to have developed experiential expertise. These experienced group members who are skilled in coping with or resolving the problem become role models and a source of hope to newcomers because 'they have already made it'.

'giving' support

'Giving' support is generally regarded as the most important function of self-help groups and has been described as caring and helpful relationships, mutual self-disclosure and empathic understanding.

The concept of 'mutual' support has also been defined to encompass the learning of coping strategies, having a sense of community or 'we-feeling', dealing with stigma, getting factual information, attaining a spirit of hope, and attaining self-confidence. Therefore, support appears to be a collective term for many of the helping processes that characterise self-help/mutual aid groups.

drug self-help groups

Drug self-help groups vary in the degree and type of change desired by members. Some groups, for example the 12-Step program groups, have a primary focus on behaviour change. For example, Narcotics Anonymous (NA) provides help and support to anyone with a desire to stop using drugs. NA self-help groups exist to help problem users to learn how to live drug free and to help group members maintain abstinence from drugs.

Other groups take on a role that focuses on education and advocacy, as well as the provision of support. For example, drug user groups have taken the lead in many countries in providing information concerning the risks of drug use and how to reduce them. In many instances, drug user groups have gone on to provide services such as needle exchange and the distribution of other risk reduction supplies such as condoms, swabs and clean water. Moreover, many of these groups have advocated strongly for law reform and improvements in the systems of treatment and care for drug users. Supporting people to be more assertive, to push for their rights and to help change an 'unjust system' is an important focus for many self-helpers.

Whatever the orientation of self-help groups, be it personal change or supportive/educational, advocacy functions, they have several essential themes in common. Self-help emphasises self-determination, self-reliance, self-production and self-empowerment. Self-help also reaffirms basic values such as having a sense of belonging and being cooperative. The focus is anti-elite, anti-bureaucratic and anti-impersonal. Self-help/mutual aid mobilises the internal resources of the individuals and groups where participants become 'prosumers', that is, they are the consumers as well as the producers of help and services.

The self-help movement reminds us of the importance of like minded groups in meeting our needs. For drug users and their families, Victorian self-help services offer a number of opportunities that range from advocating for your rights and helping to improve negative community attitudes, to accessing knowledge and developing new skills, on to receiving support for personal behaviour change.

listing of self-help services

SHARC (Self Help Addiction Resource Centre Inc.)

(See full listing in Chapter 9, *Drug and Alcohol Agencies*)

140 Grange Road, Carnegie 3163

Ph: 9573 1700

SHARC is a self-help organisation, which combines professional help with the self-helpers' own experience to provide services. SHARC provides residential programs for young people with significant drug use problems, counselling and peer support groups; education and training; research; and consultation services. Other SHARC services include APSU, Family Drug Help and Family Drug Helpline (see below).

APSU — Association of Participating Service Users

140 Grange Road, Carnegie 3163

Ph: 9573 1778

APSU works to increase consumer participation in public health and service delivery programs and research studies in the field of addictions.

Family Drug Help

140 Grange Road, Carnegie 3163

Ph: 9573 1780. Web: www.familydrughelp.sharc.org.au

Family Drug Help is a service for parents, family and friends of people who use drugs or alcohol. It provides access to support groups (see Chapter 15, *Quick Guide*), assistance with establishing new groups, and a resource centre.

Family Drug & Alcohol Helpline

Ph: 1300 660 068

Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm, the helpline is staffed by trained volunteers with personal experience of the impact of alcohol and other drug use on families and friends, with referral to counsellors and agencies available. Courses for families and access to a network of support groups also available. After hours calls are re-directed to DirectLine.

A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous)

1st Floor, 36 Church Street, Richmond 3121

Postal Address: PO Box 136, East Melbourne 3002

Ph: 9429 1833.

Web: www.aa.org.au

People with alcohol problems seeking sobriety.

Al-Anon

GPO Box 5458, Melbourne 3001
 Ph: 9642 3330 (after hours message service)
 Email: alanonsva@netspace.net.au.
 Web: www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia/

For family members, relatives or friends of persons with a drinking problem.

Alateen Family Groups

GPO Box 5458, Melbourne 3001
 Ph: 9642 3330 (after hours message service)
 Email: alanonsva@netspace.net.au
 Web: www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia/

For young people who have relatives or friends with a drinking problem.

Marijuana Anonymous

PO Box 60, Fitzroy 3065
 24-hour Help/Infoline:1300 762 348
 Email: info@marijuana-anonymous.com
 Web: www.marijuana-anonymous.com

For men and women for whom marijuana use has become a problem.

N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous)

GPO Box 2470, Melbourne 3001
 Ph: 9525 2833
 Web: www.na.org.au

For men and women for whom drugs have become a problem. Meeting times are available on website.

Nar-Anon Family Group (no Victorian branch)

PO Box 1189, Lane Cove NSW 2066
 Ph: (02) 9418 8728
 Web: www.naranon.com.au

For family and friends whose lives are affected by drug abuse in a loved one.

New Life Program (formerly WFS — Women for Sobriety)

43 Carrington Road, Box Hill 3128
 Ph: 9890 7755; 1800 630 010 (country callers)

Self-help recovery program for men and women who are experiencing difficulties with alcohol and drug dependency. Can be used simultaneously with other self-help groups. Help available 24 hours per day.

Relatives Against the Intake of Narcotics (RAIN)

PO Box 1449, Geelong 3220
 Ph: 5243 6176

For family and friends of problem drug users. Can provide literature and referrals for assistance.

other groups

There are other groups that have used the self-help approach to establish their organisations and provide services with a strong self-help component in Victoria. Some of these groups are listed below.

Addiction Recovery Centres Inc. — Oxford Houses

(See full listing in Chapter 9, *Drug and Alcohol Agencies*)

26 Jessie Street, Moreland 3058

Ph: 9386 0911; mobile 0418 992 787

Web: www.oxfordhouses.org.au

Establishing three-quarter houses for recovering addicts.

MARP (Maroondah Addictions Recovery Project Inc.)

(See full listing in Chapter 9, *Drug and Alcohol Agencies*)

17 Clarke Street, Lilydale 3140

Ph: 9737 6540

Email: marp@marp.org.au

Web: www.marp.com.au

Providing a range of services, including a residential program with AA meetings as an important component.

further assistance

Collective of Self Help Groups (COSHG)

PO Box 251, Brunswick East 3057

Ph: 9349 2301

Email: info@coshg.org.au

Web: www.coshg.org.au

If you are having problems locating an appropriate group, the Collective of Self Help Groups may be able to assist.