

ADVANCED MODULE 19:

PLHIV Support Groups



LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this Module, participants will be able to:

- Discuss the overall goals and objectives of peer support groups
- Understand different types of support groups that may be helpful for PLHIV and their families
- Plan a support group meeting, including making an agenda and working with co-facilitators
- Effectively facilitate a support group meeting



CONTENT:

- Session 19.1: Introduction: Why Do We Need Support Groups?
- Session 19.2: Planning Support Group Meetings
- Session 19.3: Facilitating Support Group Meetings
- Session 19.4: Classroom Practicum on Support Groups
- Session 19.5: Module Summary

SESSION 19.1: Introduction: Why Do We Need Support Groups?

In peer support groups, members help each other to improve and better manage their situation, share challenges and discuss solutions. Members support each other to implement decisions made in order to meet their psychological, social, physical and medical needs.

Here are some of the different types of support groups:

- Adherence support groups
- Mothers support groups
- Parents and caregivers support groups
- Adolescent support groups
- Play groups for children
- Couples support groups
- Post-test clubs
- Groups for other specific populations



SESSION 19.2: Planning Support Group Meetings

Planning a Support Group Meeting – Key Steps:

- 1. Learn what support groups already exist in the community and at health facilities.**
- 2. Consult with key informants.**
- 3. Decide who the support group is for:**
 - Who will be invited to attend?
 - What is the ideal number and type of participants?
- 4. Define the goals and objectives of the support group:**
 - What is the purpose of the support group?
 - What will members gain from the support group?
- 5. Make a plan to recruit support group members:**
 - How will you let people know about the support group?
 - Will members of the multidisciplinary team at the health facility refer people to the support group?
- 6. Decide on the location of the support group meetings:**
 - Consider the location of the support group.
 - If support group meetings are held at a health facility, will members be able to get HIV services before/after the meeting?
- 7. Select convenient days and times for the support group and decide how often the group will meet.**
- 8. Decide who will lead the support group meetings:**
 - What will be the role of the support group members? (It should be participatory.)
 - If you are facilitating, what are you going to say at the beginning?
 - Will there be a secretary to record decisions made at the meeting?
 - Will there be guest speakers?
- 9. Plan the logistics of the meeting:**
 - Is there privacy at the meeting space?
 - Are there enough places for people to sit?
 - Can the room be arranged so participants are in a semi-circle?
 - Will you arrange for tea or snacks for the meeting?
 - Who will keep attendance and other records of the support group?

10. Make an agenda for the meeting. Suggested agenda items for support group meetings:

- Registration/sign-in
- Refreshments (tea, coffee, snacks, etc.)
- Welcome/opening (song, prayer, dance, etc.)
- Introductions
- Overview of the agenda
- Reminder about confidentiality
- Health talk by invited guest or facilitator
- Testimonials by members related to the specific topic
- Questions and answers
- Open discussion and sharing
- Review of key messages
- Plan for the next meeting
- Closing (song, prayer, dance, etc.)



Case studies for *Session 19.2* and *19.4*

Case Study 1:

You and another Peer Educator are starting a support group at your health facility. You have learned that most of your clients do not belong to a support group, but that they would be interested in joining one. The group will meet once per month.

Discussion questions and tasks for small groups:

1. What steps would you take to plan the support group?
2. What are the goals of the group? Who is the group for?
3. What do you want members to gain from participating in the group?
4. How will you recruit support group members and advertise the first support group meeting?
5. How will you work with other members of the multidisciplinary team?
6. Develop an agenda for the first support group meeting, which will be held in the training room of the health facility where you work.

Case Study 2:

The PMTCT nurse at your health facility notices that many of her clients are not coming back to the clinic on time for their appointments, especially after they deliver their babies. The nurse comes to you because she wants you to help organize a mothers support group at the clinic. She wants the member mothers to support one another during and after pregnancy and she also thinks it would be helpful to include a short, 15-minute health talk during each of the support group meetings.

Discussion questions and tasks for small groups:

1. What are some of the things you would want to discuss with the nurse? What about with PMTCT clients?
2. What are the goals of the mothers support group?
3. What do you want the members to gain from the group?
4. How would you recruit support group members?
5. Develop an agenda for the first mothers support group meeting, which will be held in the antenatal clinic waiting area. Include a short health talk on a specific topic.

Case Study 3:

A local PLHIV association has monthly support group meetings in their office. The president of the support group asks you to come to lead the next meeting, which will focus on adherence to HIV care and treatment. About 25 men and women are expected to attend the meeting.

Discussion questions and tasks for small groups:

1. What information would you want to know from the support group president?
2. How would you plan for the meeting?
3. What do you hope members will gain from this meeting?
4. Develop an agenda for the meeting (the meetings last about 90 minutes).

Case Study 4:

You and another Peer Educator try to learn more about support groups in the community so you can refer your clients. You learn that there was a strong support group in the community run by a local church. The support group had about 30 active members, but in the past year, the group has not met regularly and members often miss meetings. After talking with other members of the multidisciplinary team and some of your clients, you decide that you should try to work together and improve this community support group instead of starting a new one.

Discussion questions and tasks for small groups:

1. What things would you want to find out about the support group and its members?
2. What are some of the reasons you think the support group is not as active as it used to be?
3. What steps would you take to improve the support group?
4. How will you convince people to return to the support group?
5. Develop an agenda for a support group meeting.

SESSION 19.3: Facilitating Support Group Meetings

These are suggestions to help you prepare for support group facilitation.

When planning support group meetings, make an agenda and stick to it!

- Careful planning is key to the success of support groups in the long-term.
- Make sure meetings start and end on time.

Make sure to plan new learning opportunities for support group members:

- Make sure each support group meeting offers something useful to members.
- Get feedback from support group members on topics they would like to discuss during the meetings and incorporate these into the agenda.

Set up the room so that everyone is comfortable and can participate:

- Encourage participants to sit in a semi-circle to make it more comfortable to talk and less like a classroom.
- Facilitators should not stand behind a desk or other furniture.
- If possible, provide tea or a light snack for members and facilitators.

Remind participants about confidentiality:

- Support group members will only feel open to discuss their experiences and feelings if they know there is confidentiality.
- It is always a good idea to remind support group members at the start of each meeting that what is said during the meeting is not repeated in the community. Facilitators should always respect this as well!



Be a good facilitator:

- Create a safe and welcoming environment for support group members.
- Be sure to plan the meeting agenda ahead of time and practice what to say.
- Lead an introductory activity so participants feel more comfortable.
- Review the agenda with support group members and ask if there are questions. Always ask for inputs for the next meeting agenda.
- Interact with participants and engage them by moving around the room, asking questions and asking people to share personal stories.
- Encourage participants to share their own experiences and concerns.
- Make eye contact with all members of the group.
- Pay attention to people who seem shy or quiet.
- Try to discourage people from dominating the discussion. If this is happening, you could say, *“You have shared so many helpful ideas and experiences with us – let’s hear from some other members now.”*
- Stick to the agenda and keep time!

Offer on-going support and referrals to participants:

- Encourage participants to speak with you or another facilitator in private afterwards if they have concerns they do not want to share with the group.
- Know what support and services are available in the community and at nearby health facilities so you can make referrals.
- If the meeting takes place at a health facility, try to time it so members can seek services after the meeting.
- Seek support and inputs from other multidisciplinary team members and other experts on topics that you are unsure about, you are uncomfortable with or are beyond your area of expertise.
- If you think a support group member needs assistance (for example, if they are mentally distressed, suicidal, violent or the victim of violence), tell other members of the multidisciplinary team about these issues right away.

Keep records of the meeting:

- Always keep an attendance record. Remember that this should be kept confidential.
- Ask someone to take simple notes at the meeting. Note what topics were discussed, key concerns of members and any next steps. Also note the date, time and location of the next meeting.

SESSION 19.4: Practicum on Support Groups

See the case studies in *Session 19.2*.



Note: Some of the preceding information in this Module was adapted from the following sources:

The Republic of Uganda Ministry of Health. (2006). *National guidelines for implementation of family support groups in prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV*. Kampala, Uganda: Republic of Uganda Ministry of Health.

SESSION 19.5: Module Summary



THE KEY POINTS OF THIS MODULE INCLUDE:

- You play an important role in starting support groups in the health facility or in the community, facilitating support group meetings and helping others organize and recruit members for support groups.
- While there are many different types of support groups, they all should aim to provide psychosocial and emotional support to their members.
- In peer support groups, members help each other to improve and better manage their situation, share challenges and discuss solutions. Members support each other to implement decisions taken in order to meet their psychological, social, physical and medical needs.
- Careful planning is one of the keys to successful support groups. This includes having clearly defined goals and objectives for the groups and an agenda for each meeting.
- Including short health talks as part of support group meetings is one way to share information with members and encourage them to seek health services. This is also a way to get other multidisciplinary team members involved in the support group.
- Support group meetings should always be participatory and everything that is said during the meeting should be kept confidential.
- Good facilitation skills are important to successful support group meetings.
- It is important to provide support group members with information and referrals for ongoing psychosocial support, clinical care and other services.