

MENTAL ILLNESS SUPPORT GROUP GUIDE



Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

— Exodus 3:5

MENTAL ILLNESS SUPPORT GROUP GUIDE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction:

Why start a mental illness support group in your synagogue?3

Getting started:

Am I qualified to lead a mental illness support group?4

**I'm not sure I want to do this on my own. Can I work
with a co-facilitator?4**

How will I find people to join the group?4

Should my group be open/drop-in or closed?5

A Checklist for Getting Started6

Once You're All in the Room Together.....7

Self-Care for Facilitators9

Resources / Prayers and Blessings10

Support Group Principles — A Model12



INTRODUCTION

Why Start a Mental Illness Support Group in Your Synagogue?

For so many of us, Jewish community is a home that we build together. Yet for those living with and/or supporting people with mental illness, even home can be a place of great judgment and difficulty. Since Jewish culture places a high value on achievement, real or perceived stigma around mental illness can create isolation and shame among those who would benefit most from caring, compassionate community. How do we engage core Jewish values of tikkun olam, of sharing resources with our most vulnerable populations, and of creating a true home for all members of our synagogue communities?

This guide is intended to be a resource as you work toward bolstering support for those living with mental illness, and their family members, in your own community. When dealing with isolation and stigma, community can be a salve unlike any other. When we know that others share our struggles, our personal burdens start to give way to relief. Through sharing of resources and experiences, these groups can begin to effect change around health, social change, community visibility, and even economic hardships.

Imagine a group at your synagogue where all individuals could experience:

Acceptance around the realities of our lives

Being heard, instead of taking on others' anger, shame, fear, or denial

Education and awareness around mental illness

Compassion based on humanity, not on status or achievement

Community support replacing feelings of isolation



In this guide, you'll learn about the logistics of starting a group, the process of reaching out to isolated and/or stigmatized community members, how to create safety and community in the group space, how to care for yourself in this process, and what resources exist to help you along the way. Welcome to this generous, supportive, and rewarding work. And thank you for honoring your community through the process.

GETTING STARTED

As you begin this work, you may confront questions and fears about the realities of sustaining a mental illness support group. Thankfully, you're not alone. Here are some questions to help you start thinking about how you want to go about it, so that you'll have the support and guidance you need.

Am I qualified to lead a mental illness support group?

If you've read this far, you probably have a sincere interest in cultivating more community support around mental illness. That's a big part of what's needed in a group facilitator! Other helpful qualities are compassion, an ability to speak in front of others, a capacity to hold people in the group to agreed-upon guidelines, a compassionate and attentive ear, and the warmth to welcome vulnerable people into this process. You don't need to be an expert on all forms of mental illness, though you (and/or your co-facilitator) should have some experience with a family member or loved one with mental illness, and some understanding of local resources around mental illness support.

Of course, if you'd rather not facilitate, there likely are others in your community who would be happy to help. Ask your clergy if they know of anyone who might be interested; perhaps you can work in a supporting role to another group facilitator.

I'm not sure I want to do this on my own. Can I work with a co-facilitator?

Absolutely. Some people (such as social workers, trained facilitators/mediators, therapists, etc.) may feel equipped to take on the process alone; others will want to have a partner in leadership. Co-facilitation is a wonderful way to share responsibility and accountability, and can ease the pressure you might feel in creating a safe and confidential space for your group members.

If you'd like to co-facilitate, start by reaching out to your community online, in a synagogue newsletter, or in person. Be sure to check in with your clergy, as they are likely to know who in the congregation would want to join you. Chances are good that you'll find someone who's eager to help; many people are more likely to volunteer if they know they'll have support and partnership in their efforts.

How will I find people to join the group?

Since mental illness can be stigmatizing and isolating, people may not be eager to come forward and join a group at first, even if that group could provide much-needed support. Again, ask your clergy; other congregants may have approached them in confidence already, looking for a group exactly like the one you're starting. Many people living with mental illness also find community online; the anonymity provides a safe and protected way to get involved, test the waters, and develop trust with others. Try reaching out via

email lists or online groups and listservs. (If you're not familiar with social media, ask for help from someone at your synagogue.)

Try reaching out via email lists, or online groups and listservs, to extend a welcome to your group. (If you're not familiar with social media, ask around for someone at your synagogue who can help.)

Family members of people with mental illness can benefit greatly from support groups, where shared information, resources, and stories can make all the difference. Some groups do well with a combination of participant types; some work better with just family members, or just those living with mental illness. Consider the needs and expressed interest in your own community, and remember that you can make changes and tweaks throughout the process.

Your group may need time to build a significant presence. A drop-in group likely will grow over time; for a closed group, you'll need to do all outreach before the first meeting. Each has its pros and cons.

Should my group be open/drop-in or closed?

If your group is open, you will increase membership through word of mouth, providing an ongoing resource for anyone in your community who might be a good fit. However, since different people may attend from week to week, you may not be able to build trust as easily as in a closed group. A drop-in group provides a great service to changing communities, though the work may not go quite as deep as in a closed group.

In a closed group, you'll secure commitments from all participants beforehand, making sure they understand the expectation that they'll attend all or most meetings. You can also cap the number of participants. Participants can build on work from previous weeks and develop trusting relationships to sustain them through the year. On the other hand, closed groups limit community access to this wonderful support system. You'll have to examine your own priorities, and perhaps get input from your community, to decide which of these two options will work best.



CHECKLIST FOR GETTING STARTED

Now that you have made basic decisions about how to structure your group and found some support, there are details to consider. This checklist will help you break down tasks involved in getting your group off the ground.

Secure a monthly time and space for your group (having a regular day, such as the first Wednesday or second Thursday of each month, is helpful in getting consistent participation). Consider typical work hours and room/building accessibility (ramps for wheelchairs and scooters, armless chairs, scent-free environments, etc.).

Set a timeline: When will you start meeting? If it's a closed group, is there an end date?

Will you provide food or snacks? Consider asking a local food service for donations, or ask your synagogue if funds are available for purchasing snacks. In some groups, members bring snacks on a rotating basis and vegetarian potluck dishes on holidays. You might choose to start each meeting with a motzi, in which case you can break bread (challah) together.

Do you want to create an online community as an ongoing resource for participants? If so, free groups are easy to set up on Facebook, Google, or other places. This can be a great way for people to set up much-needed support visits with one another. If you choose this route, you'll need to be available to moderate comments as needed.

Will your group be open to the public, or restricted to synagogue members? If you keep it open, you create an opportunity for interfaith sharing, which can be very gratifying. If you choose to keep it within your synagogue community, you'll have a smaller, potentially more intimate pool.

Will your group be open to those living with mental illness, their family members, or both?

Consider transportation issues. If your synagogue isn't near public transportation, an online group (see above) can be a great way to set up carpools and rideshares. •

How will you publicize your group? As suggested above, online outreach is a great way to connect with those who've been historically stigmatized. You might also try announcements in your synagogue web posts and newsletters, as well as posters. If your group is open to the public, post notices on patch.com and local news outlets, and hang posters at JCCs and local NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) affiliates and in local businesses and community centers. Make sure posters and announcements contain all basic information participants might need, and provide your contact information for questions.

ONCE YOU'RE ALL IN THE ROOM TOGETHER

Congratulations on organizing your group and getting participants into the room! This is a great accomplishment — you've set the stage for support, information and resource sharing, and building trust. Below is a sample meeting agenda; use this as a guideline and feel free to alter it when you see an opportunity to meet specific needs of your community.

NOTE: When your meeting falls during a Jewish holiday, you might invite your clergy to lead the discussion. This can strengthen feelings of connection to the larger community and allow clergy to learn more about participant needs.

Sample Meeting Agenda

- **Welcome and introductions.** Some participants may be apprehensive about sharing with new people. Welcome them warmly and express your appreciation for their presence. Then, starting with the group facilitator, ask each person to introduce themselves by name. There will be time for sharing of stories and experiences later in the meeting.
- **Opening prayer and/or reading.** Reciting some words together can help to focus the group and bring people together, laying the groundwork for the work ahead. Depending on inclinations of your participants, you might choose a Jewish prayer (such as a motzi, with some challah) or a secular one; you might also choose to have participants bring in readings meaningful to them.
- **Setting guidelines together.** The first time your group meets, set guidelines for the space and agree to uphold them together. Each time you meet, bring the list with you, preferably on a large poster that participants can reference easily. You'll be responsible for holding participants to these agreements. Some important guidelines might include:
 - Start and stop on time.
 - Adhere to absolute confidentiality (what's said in the meeting stays in the meeting).
 - Avoid interruptions and crosstalk.
 - Adhere to agreed-upon time limits.
 - Speak from the "I" perspective.
 - Keep stories in the here and now; avoid rehashing extensive histories when possible.
 - If you've spoken a lot during a meeting, step back and allow others to speak; if you've been silent, consider allowing others to hear your valuable perspective.
 - Raise your hand to speak.
 - Allow for silence as needed.
 - Commit to engaging compassionately with each other.

- **Sharing of stories.** You may choose to pick a topic for each meeting (e.g. boundaries, techniques for coping with anxiety, etc.), or you might allow a more fluid structure, where participants can connect with one another organically. Either way, a good way to start the discussion is to go around the circle and offer each person space to share some of their story, holding them to a time limit you'll choose based on the number of people in your group. If the group is largely family members of those living with mental illness, they'll likely want to focus on sharing ideas and resources. If participants are living with mental illness themselves, might want to structure check-in around how things are going and individual problems and successes.

- **Group discussion.** Once everyone has had a chance to share, the conversation often will flow naturally from what people have said. If someone shares that they've been experiencing debilitating anxiety, for example, you might start a discussion about how other participants handle anxiety. If a family member has problems with boundaries, the group can share what's worked well for them. When a participant shares a technique (e.g. meditation or deep breathing), the group can choose to practice it together.



- **Summary/closing thoughts.** As needed, it can be useful to sum up what's been shared in the group, especially if important techniques and information have been exchanged. You might also choose to do a final check-out, where everyone in the circle says one word to sum up their feelings in that moment.

- **Closing prayer.** Again, choose something meaningful for the group, whether it's traditional liturgy or secular readings.

SELF-CARE FOR FACILITATORS

You're doing a tremendous mitzvah by organizing this group, and it can be a taxing process at times. Difficult feelings may arise for you in the group setting — perhaps a certain participant triggers painful memories for you, or a difficult dynamic arises between participants (or between you and a participant), etc. As you help cultivate a space for others to explore their feelings, it's of paramount importance that you set aside time and space for your own feelings, so that you remain whole in this process.

Some key points:

- ***Know your boundaries.*** When you've set guidelines within the group (see Page 7) it's important to hold the group to them, both for their sake and your own. Your own boundaries might also include placing limits on the amount and/or style of contact group participants may have with you outside of the group setting; think this over, and decide what will work best for you.
- ***Make sure you have support outside of the group.*** Whether it's a therapist, a friend, a partner, or anyone else, you likely will need someone with whom you can decompress and process feelings that arise for you in this process.
- ***Get help if you need it.*** If you feel overwhelmed or burned out by leading a group alone, find someone who can co-lead with you. Look to your synagogue community to find someone who might help.
- ***Take time for yourself.*** If, like so many of us, you lead a very busy life, make sure you set aside time for reflection, quiet, and spiritual replenishment. This can seem impossible at times, but the rewards are profound.
- ***Be gentle with yourself.*** You are never responsible for fixing anyone's feelings. If someone becomes upset with you or the group, you can show empathy for what they're feeling, but it's essential that you not take it as a reflection of your success or failure. Participants naturally will have varied experiences in your group. If things become difficult for you, remember to breathe and give yourself a break.

RESOURCES / PRAYERS AND BLESSINGS

There are many and varied resources for you and your group participants, whether you need emotional support, medical or legal information, or other help. The following may be helpful as you develop your own handouts, prayers, and resource lists.

- These websites may be used to help your group members find help with their mental illness.

Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA, Beit R'fuah:

http://www.betham.org/sites/default/files/Mental%20Health%20Resource%20Listing_0.pdf

Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, CA, P'tach Libeynu:

<http://www.openourhearts.net>

- The following prayers may be used by support groups to start and close each meeting. B'eit Refuah's group begins with a meal and the *motzi*:

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu
Melech haolam,
Hamotzi lechem min haaretz.*

Our praise to You, Eternal our God,
Sovereign of the universe,
Who brings forth bread from the earth.

A Prayer of Healing for Mental Illness

May the One who blessed our ancestors bless all those who live with mental illness, their care-givers, families and friends; May they walk in the footsteps of Jacob, King Saul, Miriam, Hannah and Naomi, who struggled with dark moods, hopelessness, isolation and terrors, but survived and led our people. Just as our father, Jacob, spent the night wrestling with an angel and prevailed, may all those who live with mental illness be granted the endurance to wrestle with their pain and prevail night upon night. Grace them with the faith to know that though, like Jacob, they may be wounded, shaped and renamed by this struggle, still they will live on to continue an ever unfolding, unpredictable path toward healing. May they not be alone on this path but accompanied by their families, friends, care-givers, ancestors and the Divine presence. Surround them with loving-kindness, grace and companionship and spread over them a *sukkat shalom*, a shelter of peace and wholeness.

And let us say: Amen

*Rabbi Elliot Kukla
Bay Area Jewish Healing Center*

Mi Shebeirach - Healing Prayer

May God who blessed our fathers and mothers,
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,
grant blessed healing to all those members of our congregations
and members of our families
who struggle with mental illness.
May God be with them in their illness
And give them patience, hope, and courage.
May God so endow their attending physicians and therapists with insight and skill
That they be soon restored to health and vigor of body and mind.
May God be with their families too

And grant them patience, hope, and courage.
May God remove their anger and wipe away their feelings of guilt.
May God endow them with a full life and with love
That they too enjoy health and vigor of body and mind
May God bind up their wounds
That they may enjoy many a simchah and than God
For the blessings of health, let us say, Amen.

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We sing together at closing:

Mi shebeirach avoteinu
M'kor habrachah l'imoteinu
May the Source of strength who blessed the ones before us
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing and let us say, Amen.

Mi shebeirach imoteinu
M'kor habrachah laavoteinu.
Bless those in need of healing with r'fuah sh'leimah,
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit, and let us say, Amen

Debbie Friedman, 1987

SUPPORT GROUP PRINCIPLES - A MODEL

NOTE: These Principles are used by P'tach Libeynu support groups and were customized from similar Principles used at B'eit Refuah.

We provide a place for peace, solace, refuge and support, where we can share openly, honestly and confidentially.

1. Privacy is essential. Nothing is to be repeated outside of the group.
2. Be respectful of others in the group and empathize with their situations.
3. Be sure everyone has time to share, no one should dominate the group.
4. See people as individuals, not as illnesses.
5. Recognize that mental illnesses are brain disorders.
6. Aim for better coping skills by learning from each other.
7. Find strength in sharing experience within the group.
8. Do not give advice, but share what has worked and what hasn't worked.
9. Accept everyone's pain without judging it as less than one's own.
10. Forgive oneself and others and reject guilt.
11. Embrace humor as healthy expression.
12. Accept that we cannot resolve all problems, but do foster personal independence.
13. Expect a better future in a realistic way.
14. Nurture hope.