

Mental Illness Support Group Guide

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Section one:

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 of us living with and/or supporting those with mental illness, even home can be a place of great judgment and difficulty. Since Jewish culture places such a high value on achievement, real or perceived stigma around mental illness can take a stubborn stronghold, creating isolation and shame among those of us who would benefit most from caring, compassionate community. How do we engage the 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 for you 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; thank you for honoring your community through the process.

Section two:

Getting started

As you imagine undertaking this work, you may confront questions and fears about the realities of sustaining a mental illness support group. Thankfully, you're not alone; here's a list of questions to get you started 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, chances are that you have a vested interest in cultivating more community support around mental illness; that's a big part of what's needed in a group facilitator! Other qualities helpful in a group facilitator 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 people into this vulnerable 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 are likely others in your community who would be happy to help. Ask your clergy if they know of anyone who might be interested, and see if you might 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 the process on 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 holding 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're 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 so stigmatized 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 gives us 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, 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 also benefit greatly from support groups, where shared information, resources, and sharing of 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.

It's important to remember that your group may need some time to build a significant presence. If you decide to run a drop-in group, your group will likely grow over the weeks; if you run a closed group, you'll need to do all of your outreach before the first meeting. Both have their pros and cons.

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

If your group is open, you'll have the chance to grow your membership over the weeks through word of mouth, providing an ongoing resource for anyone in your community who might be a good fit. On the other hand, because the group may consist of different people 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 you'd like in a group. The group will be able to build on its 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.

Section three:

Getting Started: a Checklist

Now that you've made some basic decisions about how to structure your group, and you've found some of the support you'll need, there are details to consider.

Here's a checklist to help you break down the tasks involved in getting your group off the ground.

- Secure a monthly time and space for your group (picking 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 as possible, etc.).
- Set a timeline for your group: when will you start meeting? If it's a closed group, is there an end date?
- Will you be providing food or snacks for your group? Consider asking a local food service location for donations, or see if your synagogue might have funds for purchasing snacks. Some groups choose to have members bring in snacks on a rotating basis, or bring in vegetarian potluck dishes during holidays. You might also choose to start each meeting with a motzi, in which case you can break bread (challah) together, and then nibble on it throughout the meeting.
- Do you want to create an online community as an ongoing resource for the participants? If so, free groups are easy to set up on Facebook, Google, or any number of other places. This can also 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 do 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 your group members might face. If your synagogue isn't close to 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/newsletters at your synagogue, posters (both in your synagogue and in local businesses/community centers, if the group is open to the public), JCCs, local NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) affiliates, patch.com, etc. Make sure these posters and announcements contain all the basic information participants might need, and provide a way to contact you for any questions.

Section four:

Once You're All in the Room Together

Congratulations on organizing your group, and getting participants into the room! This in itself is a great accomplishment, and 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 deviate from it wherever you see an opportunity to meet the specific needs of your community.

Note: when your meeting falls during a Jewish holiday, you might invite your clergy to come lead discussion. This can strengthen the group members' feelings of connection to the larger community, and provide the clergy with an opportunity to know more about the participants' needs.

- *Welcome and introductions.* No matter who's attending your meeting, they may be a bit apprehensive about sharing such vulnerable material 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'll 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 the 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, you'll want to set guidelines for the space, and agree to uphold them together; each time you meet after that, be sure to bring the list back 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 empathetically with each other.
- *Sharing of stories.* You may choose to pick a topic for each meeting (e.g. boundaries, anxiety and techniques for coping with it, 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/all family members of those living with mental illness, they'll likely want to focus on sharing ideas and resources; if the participants are living with mental illness themselves, you might want to structure the check-in around how things are going, and individual problems/successes.
 - *Group discussion.* Once everyone's had a chance to share, the conversation will often start to 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 their own anxiety. If a family member is having problems with boundaries, for example, the group can share what's worked well for them. When a participant brings a technique (e.g. meditation or deep breathing) to the group, the group can also 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.

Section five:

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, 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 section four), it's important to hold group to them, both for the group's 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'll likely 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 help 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're setting aside time for reflection, quiet, and spiritual replenishment. This can seem impossible at times, but the rewards are profound.
- *Be gentle with yourself.* You're 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 will naturally have varied experiences in your group; if things become difficult for you, remember to breathe and give yourself a break.

Section six:

Resources

There exist many and varied resources for you and your group participants, whether you need emotional support, medical or legal information, or other help. Below is a list of resources for you to use, and to make available to the group participants as you see fit.

[List to be developed: NAMI resources, websites, materials, prayer, organizations, 5150/police involvement, social action organizations, etc.)