

Nurse Led Support Groups: A Path to Community and Healing

Lana Bolhouse, PhD, RN, FCN Board Member at Large, OK-FCNA



Faith Community Nurses (FCNs) promote the physical, mental, and spiritual health of people in religious congregations and other faith-based communities. Often, these groups include people who are lonely because to the death of a loved one or experiencing angst due to changes in their life situations. In March 2025, the Faith Community Nursing Association of Oklahoma (FCNA-OK) sponsored their annual conference focused on assisting people who are experiencing loneliness.

One of the recommendations for nursing intervention was the provision of nurse-led support groups. Facilitating support groups is one of the many services an FCN can contribute to their community, yet all nurses have the skill and opportunity to organize support groups for people with specific needs. The following is a review of the basic information needed to establish a support group.

History of Support Groups

Throughout the ages, people have naturally formed support groups based on the specific needs of their community. Healthy, extended families are a universal source of encouragement and survival. In the absence of familial bonds, close friends

and coworkers may provide the support needed.

In Biblical times, Jesus chose twelve disciples to assist with His earthly ministry. Bible stories describe the way the twelve supported each other and Jesus. In modern times, Pratt, an internist working with TB patients in Boston, used group therapy in 1905. In the 1940s, mental health professionals began using support groups to assist struggling workers following World War II. More recently, Alcoholics Anonymous has incorporated self-help groups as an integral part of the successful program to address a variety of addictions.

Currently, many health care organizations focused on specific chronic illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer's Disease have implemented support groups for patients and family members. Some churches offer support groups for divorced or grieving people. These groups have become a common strategy for meeting the needs of a variety of people in challenging situations.

Each of these types of support groups have a common purpose: to utilize group dynamics and support to assist individuals who are struggling. Support groups can be led by professionals, such as experi-

enced nurses familiar with specific patient populations.

Group Dynamics

The principles for organizing effective support groups are based on group dynamics, also known as team building. One component of group dynamics is the leadership style of the group leader. Traditionally, the three styles of leadership are autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. Autocratic leadership is defined by an individual assuming complete control over the group. The democratic leader encourages active participation by members, while the laissez-faire leader sits back and allows the group to proceed. Many self-help groups are led by members of the group, called peer leadership. The leader of a group may choose any one of these styles or use them interchangeably as indicated by the group dynamics and needs of the group.

Another important group concept is the role of the members. Some roles focus on tasks and actions to achieve group goals. These actions include sharing ideas, offering ideas, checking understanding of the members, and suggesting direction for the group to take. Other roles are social in nature, focusing on the relationships between members. These behaviors may include encouraging participation, facilitating communication, observing the process, relieving stress of the group, and mediating conflict among members.

Curative Factors

The theorist best known for the explanation of how groups work is Yalom. He posits components known as curative factors: imparting vital information, offering hope, and recognizing that other members have experiences like theirs. Group members may take on roles much

like their family of origin. Members may choose to embrace the desired behaviors of other group members. Learning related to interpersonal relationships may occur. Groups may provide an opportunity for catharsis. These curative factors are the reason for the success of the group process and team building.

Additional considerations: A support group increases the size of one's community and point of view. This may result in a decrease in loneliness or enhance the ability to withstand the challenges of life. In addition, participation with others may decrease the stigma attached to the conditions of group members.

Starting a support group

The first step in establishing a support group is a comprehensive assessment to identify the needs of potential group members and the necessary structure to ensure success. A crucial step is to establish a working relationship with the leadership and staff of the church or other sponsoring organizations. Key decisions involve identifying the target population for group membership, selecting the location, setting the meeting times, and determining the number of sessions to be scheduled. Groups can either designate a specific number of sessions or an open-ended format. These considerations offer valuable insights for future planning and potential members.

Conclusion: Support groups are an important intervention to the successful ministry of Faith Community Nursing and can be an important intervention for all nurses in a variety of settings or workplaces. Nurses possess the skills, experience, and knowledge necessary to address the needs of individuals and communities they serve. ■

References:

Buffum, Martha and Madrid, Erica. 1995. *Group psychotherapy: Psychiatric Nursing: Biological and Behavioral Concepts*. Philadelphia: W.B. pp. 487-506

Yalom, Irvin D. 1970. *The Theory and Practice of Group Therapy*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Worrall, Hugh et al. 2018. *The effectiveness of support groups: a literature review*. Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health-Papers part A. 5441.



**NORTHWESTERN
OKLAHOMA
STATE
UNIVERSITY**



- ✓ 95% NCLEX-RN first-time pass rate for traditional BSN program
- ✓ 100% FNP certification first-time pass rate for the past cohorts
- ✓ Traditional BSN | Online RN-BSN | DNP

**Applications
open for all
programs**



NEW

4 WEEKS

OF FREE PATCHES,
GUM OR LOZENGES
FOR YOUR PATIENTS

VISIT OKhelpline.com

TEXT READY to 34191

CALL 1-800-QUIT NOW

1 800 QUIT NOW
1-800-784-6888 OKhelpline.com

TSET
TOBACCO SETTLEMENT
ENDOWMENT TRUST

SoonerCare