



PREVENTING BURNOUT AMONG SELF-HELP GROUP LEADERS

A self-help leader is usually a dedicated group member who volunteers to guide the meetings and coordinate the extra administrative duties needed to ensure the group's existence. In this position of added responsibility, self-help group leaders may experience the same potential for burnout as professional helpers.

Results of a research study conducted by the Self-Help Network indicate that self-help group leaders do experience burnout, but at lower levels than among professional human service workers. It is thought that the mutual support system which exists in a self-help group may act as a buffer against stress for leaders in dealing with leadership roles. By using the group as a sounding board and drawing on the available emotional support, leaders may alleviate some stress. Members should remember that leaders need support in conducting leader activities as well as in dealing with the difficulty which originally brought them to the group. There are two specific situations which may create tension and possible leader burnout:

Role Ambiguity - All group members should understand the role and responsibilities of the leader. Uncertainties about the scope of the leader's duties may result in confusion regarding the level and range of duties the leader should assume. Stress may be avoided by developing clear descriptions for members who have leadership responsibilities. By involving all members in the process of developing and clarifying job descriptions, any sense of ambiguity related to leader roles should be eased.

Role Conflict - A more challenging circumstance occurs when a leader's personal values conflict with the role as leader or with the goals of the group. This problem can be addressed through open, honest, non-emotional discussion, which focuses on issues and works toward compromise. To reduce leader role conflict, it is important to discuss openly with current and potential leaders any explicit or implicit values reflected in the leadership responsibilities. Addressing concerns as a group and reaching compromise prior to assuming leadership tasks will help to reduce the potential for role conflict.

It is essential to realize that it is not unusual for one or both types of conflict to develop within a group. The key is collaboration in working through the challenges in a supportive environment. Identifying responsibilities and solidifying common values may provide a renewed sense of ownership within the group.

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