



## WORKING WITH PROFESSIONALS: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR SELF-HELPERS

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Self-help groups can work with professionals in a variety of ways. The success of this relationship depends upon the clarity of what you ask of the professional. It is, therefore, important that you know what you are asking the professional to do, and that you are clear about the outcome of this request. A good way to start is to consider how to make your request. When approaching the professional, ask in a way that establishes you as the expert on your group's needs; "We need help making a decision; we need advice on this matter; we need an objective outside opinion." It is also important to respect the professional's need to be needed, so ask in a way that shows that you value the professional's opinion. It would be fortunate to find a professional who understands and values the unique philosophy of mutual aid self-help. You may find, however, that you will have to educate and sensitize professionals to your philosophy. This can be done by inviting them to attend your meetings, sharing your success stories regarding overcoming a particular obstacle (i.e., maintaining sobriety, facilitating passage of laws to stop drunk drivers, widows overcoming bereavement, etc.), or forwarding articles on self-help and its effectiveness. Once you have identified a professional that you would like to work with, consider the following as a summary of suggested roles they may play, while working with your group.

**1. Group Development** - Many interactions between professionals and self-help groups occur at this stage. Professionals can be quite useful with helping to start a group. They are often in a position of being able to assess the need for a self-help group. They can be helpful in identifying families/individuals with a common interest. They can provide organizational assistance and may act as catalysts by encouraging potential self-helpers to start a group. Although some self-helpers have found it useful to limit professional involvement to the developmental stage, there may be a need to assess whether lay leadership (if it has been established) can address the needs and direction of the group, or if further professional involvement is indicated in a manner which does not jeopardize lay leadership.

**2. Existing Groups** - There are several roles which professionals can share with groups once they have been established. Groups can decide whether to have an ongoing relationship, or one in which the professional is used on an "as needed basis." Here are some of the possibilities:

- **Linking agent** - The linking agent has the task of building awareness and understanding. This person provides information and referral services to the group by linking the group in need of resources with the formal service delivery system (e.g., linking groups in need of office equipment with corporate donors). The linking agent also acts as a referral source by identifying individuals with a common interest to one another (e.g., physicians referring newly diagnosed mastectomy patients to one another with possibility of starting a support group).

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- **Consultant** - The consultant has the task of providing technical assistance in areas of need. This can be in the form of providing the latest information regarding research and development, to sharing skills in community organization, group dynamics, and communication. Consultants can provide information on accessing educational resources and can suggest how to resolve organizational issues. An example of this might be assisting with the publication of a brochure or directory. Consultants can also advise groups on sustaining membership and doing outreach to recruit new members.
- **Mediator** - During times of intragroup conflict, professionals can act as objective third parties when all other avenues have been explored in conflict resolution. They may act as safety valves in handling potentially explosive situations. (This must be done with group approval/sanction in order to be effective.)
- **Advisor** - Professionals may be called upon to act in an advisory capacity. This role is very similar to that of consultant except for the time commitment involved. A consultant may be called upon on an as needed basis, whereas an advisor's assistance can be ongoing. An example of this would be professionals serving on a self-help group advisory board.
- **Researcher** - A professional can be called upon to do research on any issues the group feels are appropriate (e.g., the benefits of self-help group participation versus isolation, or how membership in A.A. helps members stay sober). Research can also be used to help determine when mutual aid groups are not appropriate.

**3. What is in it for the Professional?** - You may be challenged by this question when approaching professionals. Professionals can benefit from collaborative efforts with self-help groups in a number of ways:

- Self-help groups can provide valuable training experience for professionals in terms of what is a "normal/appropriate" response to life transitions. Often professionals only see "abnormal/maladaptive" behavior, so their perspective is distorted. An example would be visiting a veterans' group and observing their exchange as opposed to seeing individuals in therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Self-help group members can participate in research activities.
- Increase in agency funding from outside resources by providing logistical support to self-help groups such as lights, room, printing, mailing, food, educational workshops, joint ventures, etc.
- Opportunity to get to know target population.
- Opportunity to increase visibility via group newsletter, public speaking opportunities, working with the media.
- Opportunity to increase referrals.

When benefits accrue to both the professional and to the group, the relationship is reciprocal. Such an environment encourages cooperation rather than competition. This is the ideal. It is, however, always good to evaluate and re-evaluate your progress so that you and your group are not co-opted or exploited. If you feel you are being exploited, you may want to reconsider utilizing a professional and/or seek other options where available.



In summary, self-help groups can become actively involved with professional helping systems if the focus is on working together cooperatively. Professionals in this relationship can enhance their skills, while expanding their understanding of self-help. A good measure of success is derived from our ability to work alongside one another with admiration, respect, and realism about what each seeks to achieve.

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