

SUPPORT GROUPS

In the beginning human beings banded together in groups or tribes in order to insure the survival of our species. The groups were concerned at the very basic levels of food, protection and shelter. Since that time human groups have expanded their focus to include social interaction, emotional support and therapeutic change. These needs continued to be met within the family or tribal unit until fairly recently in our history.

As the American society has evolved and we have become more and more transient as a nation, we have seen a lot of the old supports disappear. As people began moving west, functional groups such as those involved in things like barn-raising and quilting began to take place in communities. They fulfilled a specific community purpose of getting a task completed and at the same time fulfilled the people's needs for social interaction and emotional support.

In our present times people rarely live in extended family groups or generational neighborhoods anymore, but we still have the same needs for group interactions as our ancestors did. The types of groups we need have changed over the years to better reflect modern times and the psychological needs of our complex society. We now have specific groups referred generically as "support groups" which address the diverse issues facing people today. Support groups are defined as those groups of people with common experiences and concerns who provide emotional and moral support to one another.

Support groups have proven effective in many diverse situations. They tend to fulfill the need for reassurance that I am not alone in my problem. There are others there who have experienced similar difficulties and they are better able to understand my situation than people who have never experienced it before. Not only will I find the understanding and support, many times I will be given specific help in problem solving. Others may have tried and true solutions that they have already tested successfully, saving me the time and pain of floundering through on my own. I will also be able to see what methods have been tried and failed to work, saving me the time of making those same mistakes. There is a sense of belonging and community in a support group, being around others who understand and can support the attempts in changing behaviors and/or thoughts.

One of the biggest challenges facing people today is knowing whether or not their perceptions about a situation are based in reality or not. A group can help with the reality check and can steer folks in a more productive direction.

Alaska is considered by many to be the last frontier. Because of the vast distances involved and the lack of roads it is frequently difficult to maintain contact with families and friends, whether they also live in Alaska or whether they live in lower 48. Many people move up here and find themselves impossibly far away from any supports they may have established and few know where to turn if they begin to experience problems with issues such as alcohol and drugs, domestic abuse, depression, parenting, relationships etc. Women especially seem to be more vulnerable to this sense of isolation and loneliness and they feel the lack of the support systems they left behind.