

Communication in Support Groups

JENNIFER A. GUTHRIE

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

ADRIANNE KUNKEL

University of Kansas, USA

Support groups are collections of people who provide mutual support for each other regarding a shared characteristic or dilemma (Cline, 1999). Although support groups vary in structure, membership, group leadership, modality, and goals, support groups generally are formed so members can receive support from others with similar experiences. Members can empathize with each other and legitimize experiences, share coping strategies and information, and provide a sense of community. Traditionally, support groups have been small groups of people who meet face-to-face, but with today's technological advances, thousands of support groups have been created online. Although some investigations of the efficacy of support groups suggest that there are potential drawbacks of attending them, support groups nonetheless provide a vast array of benefits for members.

Katz and Bender's (1976a, 1976b) extensive reviews of the history of support groups reveal that people have voluntarily gathered in supportive groups throughout history to meet survival needs, pursue common goals, and provide mutual aid. However, the number of support groups in Western countries has sharply increased in the past few decades. For example, Wuthnow's (1994) national survey found that up to 40% of Americans had been a member of a supportive group at some point in their lives. Current estimates for the United States acknowledge hundreds of thousands of support groups for a wide variety of issues and more than 10 million support group members. There are many potential reasons for the recent proliferation of support groups, but one such explanation is that, with industrialization and mobility, people felt a decreased sense of family and community support. Moreover, people may have become dissatisfied with the bureaucratization of professional services as well as the inability of friends or family to provide adequate support. Further, online support groups have gained significant traction due to their ability to create a sense of anonymity, especially with regard to more stigmatized issues.

The nature of support groups varies greatly, but common features of support groups help distinguish them from other sources of support such as individual therapy sessions or psychotherapy groups. First, support groups differ from individual counseling or therapy because instead of aiming to produce specific therapeutic changes, support groups primarily aim to provide emotional and instrumental support, to facilitate personal

empowerment, to increase a sense of self-control and well-being, and to alleviate loneliness or stigmatization. Support groups also differ from psychotherapy groups because they are usually peer-led and self-directed in terms of goals and focus of discussions, and are usually open forums in which members voluntarily become part of the community of the support group. Although each support group has its own rituals, symbols, and protocols, generally a support group is distinguished from other supportive interventions because there are no formally prescribed solutions or behavioral outcomes, the desired goals are determined by the group, participants help each other as they are helped, there are no time constraints, and participation in the group is voluntary.

Perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of a support group is that members give and receive support from others who share similar experiences. The philosophical foundation of support groups is that the most effective way to cope with problematic issues is to disclose information to, listen to, and learn from, people who face similar issues. Support groups provide members with opportunities to talk with multiple others who have faced the same challenges. It can be very powerful for group members to seek and give support with others who may understand their situation better than those in their outside social networks (e.g., friends and family). Sharing experiences with other group members can help normalize and legitimate experiences (both important components of effective social support), alleviate a sense of isolation, and increase feelings of understanding, validation, and a sense of belonging.

Scholars who study support groups have examined a wide array of issues and types of support groups. However, most communication scholarship has focused primarily on online support groups rather than face-to-face groups. There are numerous differences between online support groups and face-to-face support groups. First, because there are thousands of support groups online, people can choose which online support group format or community of members is most supportive for them. Online support groups allow access to those who are dealing with stigmatized situations, have little access to effective support providers in their offline network, or do not have a support group of the desired nature nearby. The anonymity of the Internet is also more comfortable for some people; this feature minimizes fears regarding stigmatization associated with the group's organizing characteristics, and it downplays any negative social markers (e.g., physical appearance or illness). Online support groups also differ from face-to-face groups because of the *disinhibition effect*, or the propensity to find more ease in discussing sensitive topics online rather than face-to-face. Online support group participation is also more flexible because members can participate at convenient times for them, and they can participate as much or as little as they want.

In contrast, members of face-to-face groups can view nonverbal cues from others participating in the group, which, potentially, is helpful when discussing emotional issues; furthermore, face-to-face groups do not have lagged response times, which characterizes online groups. Face-to-face groups also allow physical contact between members and immediate feedback; conversely, online support groups lack nonverbal cues, sometimes are hostile, and may include greater deception, as well as more opportunities to provide misinformation.

Whereas numerous scholars have focused on various support group aspects of both face-to-face and online support groups (e.g., use of symbols and slogans or the

emergence of leadership roles), many have focused specifically on the types of support most offered in support groups and which types are deemed most helpful by participants. Most support group studies have used Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) five types of support: informational (providing information or advice regarding the stressful issue); tangible (providing material help or services); emotional (expressing empathy and concern); network (expressing a sense of belonging and commonality); and esteem (expressing worth, respect, and confidence in abilities). Support groups themselves can naturally provide network support, but most studies have found that emotional support is the most frequently used type of support, followed by informational support. Other studies have shown that informational support is the most frequently used type of support; nonetheless, emotional and informational support appear to be the most frequently offered types of support as well as the types that are deemed most helpful by participants.

Other communication scholars have focused their studies on support group outcomes, typically measuring them via pre- and post-group data, group members' self-reports (e.g., questionnaires or interviews), or experimental designs that include intervention and control groups. In line with the study of social support, research reveals that support groups can influence members in both positive and negative ways. Regarding changes in affect, studies have found that support groups potentially can increase members' self-esteem, hope and optimism, feelings of validation, empowerment, and overall life satisfaction. Support groups can also decrease distress and lead to increased healthy behaviors and decreased unhealthy behaviors. Other findings suggest that support groups can facilitate the following benefits: making contacts and establishing relationships, examining and defining problems, exploring emotions and assessing past coping strategies, generating alternate solutions, implementing plans of action, and following up with members, among many other potential benefits (for reviews, see Cline, 1999; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000).

There are noted benefits for attending support groups for stressful life events or issues, but there are important circumstances that influence whether such groups might be beneficial for members. Research has found that support groups are most effective when they promote emotional expression, positive and negative evaluations, honesty and nonjudgment, identifying and valuing various levels of uncertainty, information sharing, involvement in conversation, sensemaking, and positive reappraisal. How people interpret, or appraise, stressful events has greater effects on their experience of stress than do actual stressful events. Thus, support group members should aim to help each other reappraise their situations in more positive ways; this reappraisal may help members feel less stressed and more positive. Although providing emotional support and help to reappraise a situation in more positive ways are important (especially when coping with issues that are not controllable), support groups should also aim to include some educational component or informational support since research has shown that informational support is also deemed helpful by members.

Whereas there are noted benefits from participating in support groups, there also is evidence that support groups are not as effective as other means for support. For instance, support groups may foster an environment of comparing oneself to others, which might inspire some members to evaluate their coping in terms of others'

coping and lead to negative self-perceptions. Social comparison could also lead a person in a support group to feel like a deviant compared to the other members, who may have more or less severe problems. Furthermore, participants' identification with the group might interfere with existing relationships through social comparison; for example, participants' close identification with the group might influence them to be more closed about their situation with intimate partners, family, and/or friends. Another risk associated with support groups is that they may not be deep or enduring enough to actually help with problem- or emotion-focused coping. As both providers and receivers of support, group members may suffer from emotional contagion, fatigue, or other drawbacks. Despite the potential pitfalls associated with support group participation, there is still a vast amount of research that highlights the benefits of participating in them. Research should continue to explore the communicative and interactional factors of effective support group participation.

SEE ALSO: Appraisal Theories of Emotion; Dual-Process Theory of Supportive Message Outcomes; Emotional Appraisal/Reappraisal in Social Support; Normative Model of Social Support; Social Networks and Relationships; Support Types

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Jennifer A. Guthrie is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA. She teaches courses and conducts research in the areas of interpersonal and small group communication. Her recent research examines domestic violence and social support.

Adrienne Kunkel is professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas, USA. She teaches courses in interpersonal communication, communication and gender, and social support. Her research interests include sexual harassment and domestic violence intervention, emotional support/coping processes, and sex/gender similarities and differences.