HEALTH BASICS

Support groups

Support groups bring people together to share experiences and practical help around health or life challenges.

WHAT IT IS
A group offering shared experience, information, and mutual support

WHERE IT COMES UP
Diagnosis, treatment, recovery, caregiving, disability, or bereavement

WHY IT MATTERS
Can reduce isolation and strengthen practical coping

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or replacement for healthcare

WHO TO ASK
Healthcare team, social worker, counselor, or relevant charity

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No medical test; assess leadership, privacy, and safety

Overview

A support group is a gathering of people who share a health condition, disability, caregiving role, loss, or other life experience. Members may exchange practical information, describe what has helped them, and offer emotional support.

Support groups are not diseases or diagnoses. They are one possible source of social and practical help. You may use one alongside medical care, counseling, rehabilitation, or community services.

Groups can meet in person, by telephone, through video calls, or in online forums and messaging platforms. Some are open to anyone, while others limit membership to people with a particular diagnosis, treatment, age range, identity, or role.

A group may be led by a trained professional, such as a counselor or nurse. Others are peer-led, meaning the leader has personal experience of the issue. Some groups combine both approaches.

Support groups are different from group therapy. Group therapy is a form of treatment led by a qualified mental health professional. A peer support group may be helpful, but it is not automatically therapy and may not be clinically supervised.

How it works

The structure depends on the group. Members might take turns talking, discuss a planned topic, invite a speaker, or share information about local services. Some groups focus on conversation, while others include activities or education.

People often learn from hearing how others handled appointments, work, family conversations, treatment side effects, accessibility needs, or everyday tasks. Personal experience can provide useful context, but it does not replace advice based on your own medical history.

Good groups explain their purpose and ground rules. These may cover respectful language, confidentiality, advertising, contact outside meetings, and how the group responds when someone is in distress.

Confidentiality means keeping personal information private. A group can ask members to do this, but it cannot guarantee that every member will comply. Privacy is especially difficult to control online, where posts may be copied, searched, or shared.

You do not usually have to speak at your first meeting. Many groups allow new members to listen. A group may also let you attend once before deciding whether to join.

There is no medical test that shows whether a support group is suitable. The best fit depends on what you want, how the group is run, and whether you feel respected and safe.

Why it matters for your health

A diagnosis, long-term condition, disability, treatment course, addiction recovery, caregiving role, or bereavement can affect more than physical health. It may change relationships, routines, work, finances, or how connected you feel to other people.

A support group can make an unfamiliar experience feel less isolating. Members may share practical questions to ask at appointments, ways to keep records, or information about transport, benefits, rehabilitation, and community services.

Some people find that a group helps them describe concerns more clearly or feel more confident taking part in healthcare decisions. Others value being able to talk with people who understand the situation without needing a long explanation.

Benefits are not guaranteed. Research on peer support covers many different conditions and group formats, so results are mixed and cannot be applied equally to every person or every group. Some people prefer individual counseling, support from family or friends, practical services, or no group support at all.

Choosing not to attend a support group does not mean you are handling your health incorrectly. It is an option, not a required part of care.

What can go wrong

A group may be a poor fit. For example, its focus may be too broad, too narrowly defined, strongly religious, mainly social, or centered on experiences that do not match yours. You can leave a group that is not useful.

Members may share inaccurate medical claims. This can happen in groups related to cancer, chronic pain, fertility, mental health conditions, eating disorders, substance use, disability, or other health concerns. Be cautious if someone tells you to stop treatment, change medicine, buy a product, or avoid professional care.

Some groups may be connected to a business or person selling supplements, tests, coaching, or treatment. Commercial involvement should be stated clearly. Pressure to spend money, recruit others, or provide personal financial information is a warning sign.

Privacy can also be lost. Avoid posting identifying details unless you understand who can see them and how the platform uses information. Details such as your full name, address, medical record numbers, photographs, or appointment documents may reveal more than intended.

Group discussions can sometimes feel upsetting or overwhelming. At a routine appointment, consider telling your usual healthcare professional or counselor if participation is making anxiety, low mood, sleep, recovery, or treatment decisions harder to manage. You can also pause attendance or try a differently structured group.

A support group is not an emergency service. If you or someone else may act on thoughts of suicide or violence, cannot stay safe, or has a life-threatening medical emergency, contact local emergency services or an appropriate crisis service immediately rather than waiting for a group meeting or reply.

What you can do

Start by deciding what you want from a group. You might want emotional support, practical information, contact with people at a similar treatment stage, or help with caregiving or bereavement.

Possible places to ask include your healthcare team, hospital social work service, counselor, rehabilitation service, patient organization, public health service, or a charity focused on the relevant condition or situation.

Before joining, check:

Ask whether you can observe a meeting before sharing personal details. After attending, keep a brief note of whether you felt listened to, respected, pressured, or distressed. This can help you decide whether to return.

Check medical claims with a clinician or pharmacist who knows your situation. Keep a list of any treatments, supplements, tests, or medication changes suggested by group members, but do not act on them solely because they worked for someone else.

There is no test, score, or certificate that proves a group will help you. If you do not want group support, there may be nothing you need to do.

- Who runs or moderates the group
- Whether leaders have training or relevant lived experience
- Who may attend and whether membership is screened
- What privacy rules apply, especially online
- Whether meetings cost money or promote products
- How medical misinformation and harmful behavior are handled
- What happens if a member needs professional or emergency help

Common questions

Do I have to talk about personal details?

Usually not. You can ask about the group's expectations before attending. A respectful group should allow you to decide what to share.

Are online groups safe?

They can be useful, especially when travel, disability, location, or scheduling makes in-person meetings difficult. However, online privacy cannot be guaranteed. Review membership controls, moderation, search visibility, and platform settings before posting.

Can a support group give medical advice?

Members can describe their experiences, but those experiences may not apply to you. Diagnosis, testing, treatment, and medication decisions should come from appropriately qualified healthcare professionals.

What is the difference between peer support and counseling?

Peer support is based mainly on shared experience. Counseling is provided by a trained

professional using an established therapeutic approach. Some groups offer both, but the roles should be explained clearly.

Can family members or caregivers attend?

Some groups welcome them, some run separate caregiver meetings, and others are only for people directly affected by a condition. Ask the organizer before attending.

What if I dislike the first group I try?

You can leave, try another format, or choose a different kind of support. One uncomfortable or unhelpful group does not show that every group will be the same.

Sources

- National Cancer Institute. Support Groups . Information on types of support groups, possible benefits, and finding a group.
- MedlinePlus. Support Groups . US National Library of Medicine health information and links about support groups.
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- Repper J, Carter T. A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services . Journal of Mental Health . 2011;20(4):392-411.
- Hoey LM, Ieropoli SC, White VM, Jefford M. Systematic review of peer-support programs for people with cancer . Patient Education and Counseling . 2008;70(3):315-337.