

Template for Starting a Vitiligo Support Group

Starting a support group takes a lot of time and dedication. The ground work definitely needs to be in place before your first meeting is held. This guide will be a prime example of how a Peer mediated Vitiligo support group meeting should be conducted.

First order of business is to make sure a proper group name is selected. Be careful in choosing this name because you don't want people to feel that it is a religious group, a group only for people of a certain age or even socioeconomic class. The group should be one that people of all walks of life can attend without feeling disassociated. If your group is associated with a larger entity such as a large support organization, clinic or hospital, it will add a sense of validity to your group. You can choose to not be affiliated with another entity but if you choose to do so, make sure the organization your representing is a reputable one. Structure is Key to the success of any support group so make sure every group administrator plays a beneficial role. For example: Team Leader, Secretary, Treasurer, minute keeper, photographer, etc.

Being that your support group will be for the Vitiligo and non Vitiligo public alike, it's crucial to make sure your group is held in a suitable location, and if possible, one that is free of charge. Safety and accessibility are also important factors to consider. Libraries, Hospitals or large communal areas close to public transportation are perfect places for hosting a support group event. Advertisement is just as important as the location in which the meeting will be held. Digital and Hard Copy Flyers can be created to be distributed in public places such as: Dermatology facilities, hospitals, newspaper ads, various forms of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), email and of course word of mouth. Each flyer should state: The group name, date, time, address, contact telephone numbers and a focused topic for the meeting. No matter how many RSVP's you get, it's so important to contact those individuals 2 days before the event to make sure they are coming. That way you will know how many beverages or food items to order and how many people to accommodate for. If you don't have the people you don't have the meeting. It's that simple. So make sure the undertaking of making a phone call to ask if they will be in attendance gets done.

Every group needs a budget, and in order to have some type of budget for a meeting if you plan on having food, some light snacks or refreshments, fund raising needs to be done on a consistent basis. If the entity affiliate you're associated with can fund the effort, it would also be a great way of providing a pleasant environment for your guests in attendance. Bake sales, walks, reaching out to big businesses and other means of fund raising can be used to fund your efforts.

Now that all the ground work is complete, you can now have your very first support group meeting. It's imperative that you, the facilitator, arrive to the meeting site nice and early. Make sure your projectors are working if you decide to do a power point presentation, chairs are arranged in a group appropriate style (I particularly like the ½ circle arrangement), food , snacks and drinks are properly laid out and there is a sign in sheet prepared to keep track of all attendees. Decorations are also a very nice touch and a plus.

As I said before, each meeting should focus on a topic of discussion. For example: Depigmentation methods, Positive and negative effects of NBUVB, Vitiligo in the media, etc. An agenda also needs to be created to keep your attendees abreast with the day's program. Meeting etiquette is important so make sure to stress at the beginning of every meeting to save private conversations and turn phones off while the meeting is being conducted. If they would like to do otherwise after the meeting, it's fine. Remember you are running on a strict schedule so make sure you stick to the agenda and try your very best not to have the conversation deviate. I personally like to have a meet and greet at the start of every meeting.

Those with Vitiligo should be encouraged to meet their Vitiligo Brothers and Sisters. Not everyone at the meeting will be comfortable with, "The skin they're in", so gauge the room and allow group members to be expressive themselves as they see fit. After 15 minutes of meet and greet, I like to introduce myself and my constituents, then go around the room asking all members to state their name, where they are from, how long they have had Vitiligo and how they heard about the group. Ice breakers are a great way of encouraging dialog in a somewhat awkward group setting.

After introductions are made, I jump into the topic of discussion, making sure to stay within a certain time constraint. Meetings are usually 1 hour to an hour and ½. At the end of each meeting, I ask if anyone has any issues they would like to discuss or if they have anything to say. If not, I conclude the meeting and let everyone know when and where then next meeting will be. If that information is not available, I let all attendees know that I will contact them via email about the next meeting. It's a wise decision to make the support dynamic didactic so you can have one meeting at the library, then have a movie night or group picnic in the park. Turning it into a social even can help bridge some of the gaps members might have feeling comfortable connection with each other. Follow up calls should be made after the meetings to get honest feedback as to how the meeting went, if they liked or disliked it and if there's anything we could do to improve.

"Be the change that you see in the world"

-Mahatma Gandhi

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