Mental Health Foundation Australia

Support Groups

The road to recovery...

Mr. Jim Goodin
Vice Chairperson,
Mental Health Foundation Australia
Why MHFA Support Groups?

Perhaps the most successful consumer support service (support group) is that provided by ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ which established itself in Melbourne in 1947. The Mental Health Foundation Australia has always aspired to develop the sort of assistance and positive personal growth redolent of this respected prototype. Indeed, the establishment of the MHFA itself in 1930 was as a support organisation for the patients at what had until shortly before that time been known as the ‘Kew Lunatic Asylum’. For the mentally ill, these were generally harsh and unenlightened times steeped in an often benevolent but disabling paternalism.

Gradually over time the MHFA, in Victoria and through its national counterparts, has worked to reduce the stigma of mental illness and increase the dignity and empowerment of consumers/survivors. Peer support groups operate under some of the same principles as ‘AA’. People that have experienced an illness are uniquely qualified to provide non-judgmental peer support and understand the problems associated with their condition.

The twenty support groups currently operated by the MHFA allow individuals to be guided in the exchange of information pertaining to form of mental illnesses by a skilled facilitator and the ‘power of the group’. The ‘power of the group’ is a shorthand term the MHFA uses to describe the remarkable dynamic where the group takes on a wisdom and authority far greater than the sum of its individual parts. It is essential that consumers/survivors be allowed to exert influence, capacity and a shared character. At the same time always avoiding the trap of identifying wholly as being a ‘bipolar person’, a ‘psychotic person’, an ‘OCD person’, a ‘sexually dysphoric person’, an anxious or depressive person’ and so on.

Support groups can be used by consumers/survivors to help navigate through difficult short-term periods or longer time periods depending upon individual need. Each individual ‘takes’ according to need and ‘learns’ according to their particular stage of psycho educational development. In conjunction with best practice professional psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy all being skillfully interwoven, support groups provide a consumer/survivor focused ‘third leg of the chair’ to recovery and wellness.

Essential requirements for the effective operation of support groups is the conviction of all present that they will be ‘heard’ respectfully and compassionately. That they will be subject to complete ‘confidentiality’ and that all shared information and experience not leave the confines of the meeting room. That they are in ‘control’ of their experience and not forced in any way, shape or form. It is not easy to ‘blend’ these many components into an effective and healing group dynamic but that is the objective. The skill, positivity and benevolence of the facilitator is paramount.

Our longest operating support group - the Mood Disorders Support Group - established for people with depressive illness, has operated continuously since 1993. Many other support groups have branched off to become stand alone organisations in their own right - Alzheimer’s Australia, ARCVic and the Butterfly Foundation amongst them; even Beyondblue owes much of its establishment to the MHFA.

During this time of great uncertainty and stress, with COVID-19 and bushfire reconstruction foremost in the mind of Australians, the MHFA will continue to serve the community, those with mental illnesses and their families especially. Support groups will always be an essential component of our service.

MHFA Support Groups are free and do not require a referral.

REGISTER NOW: https://mhfa.org.au/CMS/support-groups
The Men’s Wellbeing Support Groups have been of great value to me as a facilitator. They have reminded me of the importance of sharing the challenges in my life to a group of supportive people. The groups are not designed to solve people’s problems yet more to identify and empathise with each other’s issues. It’s through that process that true healing has occurred.” - D.C

"Mental Health Foundation Australia’s support groups are nurturing initiatives that allow attendees to feel a sense of community and to learn from other fellow attendees, whilst providing an avenue for individuals affected by mental health struggles to be on track with their recovery. From the point of view of a support group facilitator, it is heartening to not only be a part of this program, but also to have the opportunity to witness firsthand the growth of attendees as they become more confident and happier individuals. Additionally, what makes these support groups so effective is the range of individuals who join; from those who are in the early stages of experiencing a mental health issue, those who have recovered, to those who are carers to people with mental health issues.” - A.S

"The Men's Wellbeing Support groups are a great help for my mental health. Some of the key areas of mental health I personally deal with are centered around fear, trust and a lack of courage and confidence. The group chats are really helping provide a clear space of integrity and compassion allowing me to openly share my struggles and be vulnerable without feeling out of place or embarrassed. I'm very thankful for all the support from both the leaders and fellow group members". - S.D

"I have been attending the Hearing Voices support group run by Fiona. I find her to be a skilled and experienced facilitator. She is also a strong advocate for mental health. I appreciate having the opportunity to be able to check in to see how my mental health is going and I value her judgement....." - A.L

"Nice to get into the self discovery side of things, I enjoyed that part of the group. The group were intellectually stimulating, more room to learning coping skills and very therapeutic" - L.G

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Testimonials...