



Depression and Bipolar
Support Alliance

Starting a Family and Friends Support Group

Mood disorders affect millions of people each year. The millions diagnosed and living with the symptoms of depression and bipolar disorder are not the only ones affected, however. Their family members and friends are affected too.

Many people who have a close friend or a loved one diagnosed or experiencing the sometimes harsh symptoms of a mood disorder focus their energy, attention and nearly all of their effort on helping that friend or loved one. Others are frightened away, and remain distant from the person experiencing the illness. Still others report feeling hurt, helpless, overwhelmed, confused, sad, guilty and ashamed because of their loved one's illness. No matter the reaction, these family members and friends need support and comfort as they walk the often challenging road to wellness along side their loved one.

To start a support group specifically for family and friends, it is best to look to the family and friends already involved with the chapter first.

DBSA chapters are well known for offering support and comfort to people living with mood disorders. All chapters offer at least one peer-led, self-help support group. Many chapters have found great benefit to offering specific separate support groups solely for the family members and friends of those with the illness. With support groups for not only the people with the illness, but also for their support system, DBSA chapters can help build understanding and support for everyone touched by these disorders.

The support group(s) specifically for family members and friends should be run with the same guidelines, structure and framework that all other support groups are run.

To start a support group specifically for family and friends, it is best to look to the family and friends already involved with the chapter first. Ask any of them if they would be willing to lead simple discussions with other family members and friends on a trial and interim basis. Many chapters have found offering this option on a trial basis is a good way to determine whether the family and friend participants will be fulfilled with this technique.

To further assist the family member or friend that volunteers to lead this new group, consider connecting them with one of DBSA's Resource Chapters that has successfully implemented specialized support groups, like those for family members and friends. Also, provide the volunteer with resource materials that can assist with facilitation skills, conflict management techniques, and overall group dynamics. This information can be retrieved from the Chapter Leadership Guide or the Chapter Management Website (www.DBSAAlliance.org/ChapMgtEntrance.html).

To grow your family and friend support group, try promoting it through the patients in your chapter. Suggest that everyone bring a family member or friend to participate if they have someone available. For many, friends are easier to approach at first than

family members are, and this is a good way to begin building that support structure that is so important to living well with a mood disorder.

The support group(s) specifically for family members and friends should be run with the same guidelines, structure and framework that all other support groups are run. The content of the discussion that takes place in this family and friends group may be different, but the value and set-up are the same. Family members and friends that serve as support systems need time to discuss ways to best help their loved one. They also need to discuss ways to keep themselves healthy. Many chapters report that family and friend participants find they can use the experience and wisdom of others in the group to stay well, and to learn how best to assist their loved one down the path wellness.

A Step-By-Step Guide to Starting a Family/Friends Support Group

1. Recruit a volunteer to lead a new family/friends support group from the current participants' supporters.
2. Ask each chapter participant to promote the new group to their family and friends (provide written information for participants to take home).
3. Provide facilitation and resource materials to the volunteer who will serve as facilitator of the new group.
4. Secure space for the new family/friends support group to meet.
5. Host the first few family/friends support groups using the same guidelines that are used for other DBSA support groups.
6. Orient other family/friend participants to serve as facilitators of the support groups.
7. Continue to promote the new family/friends support group through the community, health care providers, newsletters and other publicity efforts.
8. Be sure to let DBSA's national office know about your new group!