

Peer-Based, Self-Help/Peer-Leadership

Whether your chapter is just starting, rebuilding, or you have been doing this thing we now call DBSA for as long as you can remember, it's always good to revisit the basics from time to time. In this article we will take a look at some of those basics.

Peer-Based, Self-Help. These are not just nifty words or an overused slogan, but are the foundational pillars upon which we base who we are and what we do as a DBSA chapter. Lets start with some definitions.

Peer-Based. Websters first definition of PEER is: one that is of equal standing with another." In the DBSA context, a peer is a person with a mood disorder (a patient or consumer) or a family member of someone with a mood disorder. Another distinction of peer is that we are not pros — physicians and other mental health professionals. Peers are not those providing treatment. If degreed or credentialed mental health professionals participate in DBSA groups, they always must do so as peers — patients or family. So then, **peer-based** simply means that every thing we do, we do as a peer. Whether its leading our chapters, facilitating discussion groups, etc. its all done from the perspective and within the context of a peer.

Self-Help. Simply, helping oneself. We tend to say that at our meetings we are here to help each other. To be more accurate, we are here to assist, encourage and enable each other in helping ourselves. Here are some important distinctions:

- DBSA groups are not **professional help**. We are not degreed or credentialed professionals, and do not diagnose or provide treatment. We do not do what the professionals do.
- DBSA groups are also not **peer help**. We are not an alternative to professional care or a 12-step program. While there are some similarities to such programs we have no steps, program, or official guide book. We are not peers taking an active roll in another peer's quest for wellness.
- DBSA groups are **SELF-help**.

Why is self-help an important distinction? Each person's path to wellness is uniquely their own. Wellness is each individual's own personal responsibility

and as peers, we really cannot guide anyone else to wellness. We can, however, assist, encourage, and enable each other in our own individual pursuit of wellness, and we can choose to make the journey to wellness in the company of others.

If we were to put forth a definition of a DBSA peer-based, self-help support group it might look something like this: A gathering of peers who assist, encourage and enable each other in helping oneself. Each one follows his or her own unique path to wellness, and chooses to make that journey in the company of others headed in the same direction.

On a national level, DBSA does many things for the benefit of those with mood disorders and their families. They assist over 1,000 local support groups, publish, advocate, hold conferences, and much more. We on a local level can do many of those same things, but at the core of DBSA local chapter functioning there are 2 essential pillars: peer-support and education.

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Peer Support. People with mood disorders or family members of people with mood disorders, gather together to share what we have in common. The primary vehicle is the peer discussion group, which is or should be the main feature of most chapter meetings.

Education. The purpose of education is to enable each other to become informed consumers. To do this, we need, among other things, to learn about mood disorders — the official definitions, typical symptoms, common treatments, etc. This is done through educational materials (booklets, pamphlets, newsletters, articles, recommended books, etc.), presentations by area mental health professionals and videos, and peer-interaction (learning from each others' experiences and insight).

Peer-Leadership. How do we apply the above concepts to chapter leadership? To start with, we're talking about peer-leadership. Peer-leadership is more than just those in leadership being persons with a mood disorder or family members. It is also the perspective from which we view leadership and the method by which we do leadership. We can also think of peer-leadership as leading from within. The concept of peer-leadership can be somewhat difficult to grasp — for us, and for those who attend our meetings. We naturally think of leadership as being from

without, leaders and followers. This is reinforced in the therapeutic setting: doctor/patient, therapist/client — leader/follower. But chapter leadership, just like chapter meetings, is not a mirror of the therapeutic setting. We as leaders are first and foremost peers, and as such, the position of our leadership is not out in front of the group but from within the group. Leading from within.

Leading from within is not easy or automatic; it takes thought and effort. The reason why many of us are chapter leaders is because we are the ones who stepped up. We saw the need and took action, picked up what others had laid down, or grasped what was being passed on. Because we stepped up where others held back, we need to be aware that our perspective and perceptions may not be equal to that which is most common to the group. We need to make a conscious effort to remain peers even though we are chapter leaders. We maintain our position as peers and the peer-to-peer nature of our groups through our perspective of leadership and method of leadership.

Let's go over a few principles of peer-leadership:

Focus on the Basics. As we've already mentioned, at the core of what we do are two pillars, peer discussion groups and education. All the rest are add-ons. You can look at it this way: as a chapter leader, the core pillars are your primary focus. You take care of the basics and let others handle the add-ons. If no one steps up to take the responsibility for the add-on, the group may not be ready for the next step — yet.

The natural dynamic of a peer-based self-help group is somewhat bipolar — there are times of enthusiasm and gusto, and others when nothing gets done. As a peer-leader, we need to live within the means of our groups. All the "add-ons" happen when the group is able.

Do not outpace the group. This can be hard, it's easy for a leader, especially one who started a group to out pace it, but when that happens it's not good. Remember, stragglers become drop outs. Some points to consider:

- Allow the group to operate on its own timetable — try not to expect or force it to operate on yours.
- Nurture your group's own internal inertia, don't

pull it uphill or compel it to take on too much.

- Avoid starting what the group as a whole cannot maintain in your absence.
- Ask yourself: "Should I perpetuate that which the group is not maintaining?" If it's anything other than the basics, maybe it's time to give it a rest or scale back a bit until the group builds its momentum.

Now, there is a balance here. We must encourage the forward motion of the group, but we need to remain within the group, and not get ahead of it. If we get ahead of the group, we have stepped out of the role of peer-leader. If you ever find you have outpaced your group, backtrack and rejoin it.

Avoid Isolation. Don't go solo. If at all possible do not be the only one in primary chapter leadership. Remember, as leaders we are still peers and not professionals, so it really is okay that we don't know how to handle every situation or problem that may arise. When we have problems, we can turn to other group leaders, chapter professional advisors, and leaders of other chapter. We can and need to profit from the experiences of others.

Don't let it go to your head. This can be really hard. If we have spent a lot of time in depression, our position as leader may be one of the few things we feel good about. But we need to be careful and not allow our role as leaders to be

an essential foundation of our self-worth. If we do we may become dependent on it. If we become dependent on it, we may be tempted to defend it, and that may put us in an adversarial situation in the group. Leadership is also not a part of our treatment. As a leader, we naturally infuse the group with our personality. Be careful that this doesn't go too far. Remember, it's not "our" group, and as leaders we must always lead as peers.

To be an effective DBSA chapter leader, we do not need an advanced degree, in-depth study or an extensive internship. What we need is relatively simple: to always be peers. Add to that knowledge of the foundational principles and a willingness to follow guidelines.

That may sound overly simplistic, but I don't believe that this peer-based, self-help thing we do should really be any more complicated than that.

Leaders are first and foremost peers and lead from within the group, not out in front of it