

Practicing Hospitality in a Recovery Group

By Jane Mountain, MD

Merriam Webster Online defines hospitable as “given to generous and cordial reception of guests.”

Paying attention to issues of hospitality can result in a more effective group and a better experience for those who attend. Hospitality requires practice in order for it to become an essential characteristic of any group. Three hospitality issues your group may want to consider are communication, consistency and confidentiality.

Communication and Hospitality

The welcoming of group participants begins long before a meeting by making clear the time, location and purpose. No matter how your group invites individuals to attend, it will be important to give accurate information about the meetings. Have a point of contact to convey essential information about your group. Newsletters, emails and websites can help get the job done, but many guests will want to speak to a live person before attending the group. If there is not a willing individual to assume this role, you may want to ask an existing local organization to be your contact point. Make sure that staff has

information about your group and its scheduled meetings. Call monthly or quarterly both to thank them and to make sure they understand the information they have agreed to convey.

Communicating hospitality begins before the day of the meeting, but don't forget to make people feel welcome before, during and after the meeting. Here are some ideas:

- Before meetings:

- Have a greeter at the door to welcome guests and to answer questions and give directions.
- Actively encourage members to greet guests and each other.
- Provide literature or a display for two reasons: first, for their educational value; second, to provide a distraction for those who have difficulty mingling in groups.

- During meetings:

- Inform attendees how to have their needs met. Restrooms, drinking fountains and the designated smoking area need to be accessible. Provide drinking water in the meeting room.
- State clearly what activities will be taking place and

introduce leaders at each meeting.

- Encourage visitors to return several times before deciding whether the group offers what they are looking for.
- If possible, provide a quiet room for those who feel uncomfortable during the meeting.

- After Meetings:

- If you meet in a large building, make sure people are comfortable finding their way out and that they are not left alone in the parking lot.

Consistency and Hospitality

Place and time of meetings will probably need to be stable. Some groups start out by meeting in different locations or at varying times. Unfortunately doing so makes it difficult to invite new people to the group. When someone new is invited, that person may not come until months after the initial invitation. By then the group has moved on to a different location or perhaps to a different time. Similarly, do not cancel a meeting except when your whole region is shut down by weather or there is an emergency.

Never cancel if the group expects low attendance at a particular meeting. A first-time guest will not appreciate arriving at an empty building. Low attendance is an opportunity for the group to build its sense of community. The key is to stay focused on your mission rather than becoming discouraged by a low turnout. Such meetings can

become real confidence builders for the larger group if they are used as an opportunity to get to know each other better.

Confidentiality and Hospitality

For recovery groups, confidentiality among group attendees is an essential ingredient of hospitality. Your group will find it difficult to attract visitors and returning members if it does not have a clearly stated confidentiality policy that is observed by its members. The policy may be a simple statement, such as “Who you see and what you hear at meetings should not be shared outside the group”. Members must understand and respect that some do not feel comfortable sharing until they are assured of confidentiality. Others may not wish to disclose their diagnosis to others.

The decision to disclose is a complex one because such disclosure may result in job loss, relationship changes or the uncomfortable circumstance of being defined solely as a person with bipolar disorder. Confidentiality within a group assures respect for individuals and a regard for the potential consequences of self disclosure.

Other confidentiality issues involve the group’s relationship to the larger community. Some groups may have a confidentiality policy which states that names of clinicians will not be mentioned. The rationale for this is twofold:

- Choice of a clinician is a personal decision. Finding an appropriate fit with a clinician may take time and may require effort over time. One

person may work well with a specific clinician, but that clinician may not be the best choice for another person in the group.

- The group could be seen as endorsing a specific clinician or as damaging a clinician’s reputation after hearing only one side of an interaction.

Including relationships to clinicians in a confidentiality policy does not mean that members cannot engage in problem solving around relationships with clinicians. Rather it reinforces the recovery focus of the group which is that of encouraging active participation in one’s treatment.

In defining confidentiality for your group, keep in mind that it is an essential part of hospitality to individuals attending the group. Hospitality issues also affect the group’s relationship to its larger community.

Practicing Hospitality

Providing hospitality in a recovery group setting takes careful attention and practice. Communication, consistency and confidentiality are three elements of hospitality that can enhance your group’s outreach to visiting and returning guests. They can help establish a good working relationship between your group and the larger community.

For more about recovery and bipolar, return to the homepage at www.beyondbipolar.com.

Article posted with permission from the International Society for Bipolar Disorders (ISBD) *The Global*, Volume 5, Issue 1 (2004).

Website Resources

American Psychiatric Association, www.psych.org

American Psychological Association, www.apa.org

Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, www.cabf.org

International Society for Bipolar Disorders, www.isbd.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, www.nami.org

Depression and Bipolar Support, Alliance www.dbsalliance.org

Stanley Medical Research Institute, www.stanleyresearch.org