

ORGANIZING A MENOPAUSE SUPPORT GROUP

Step I

Get a group of women (4-10) together to talk about Menopause. This could be a group of friends or those organizing the group could put up notices in community centres, libraries and/or churches or advertise in their community newspaper. The women can be those who have gone through menopause and are willing to share their experiences, those who are going through menopause now and those who are interested in learning what to expect in the future.

Step II

Points to be covered in the first meeting:

1. When, where and for how long to meet? (Can be in someone's home or in a room at a community centre, library or church.)

2. What do women want from the group?

Information?

- Sharing knowledge that women in the group have
- Doing research and discussing findings at the group (libraries often have outdated books but may have recent articles. Women's centres will have more recent articles and information)
- Inviting a speaker
- Getting a film or slide show (there aren't many about menopause but check with your local distributor of short films or your library)

Opportunity to share feelings and experiences; support?

Discussion of topics of interest?

3. Deciding the agenda for the next meeting will help women to come prepared. The group may decide on a particular piece of reading to be done by everyone by the next meeting. Sometimes it is useful for one woman to take responsibility for organizing the next meeting. This may mean going to the library to look for reading material, preparing an informal presentation on a particular topic and/or acting as a "chair" at the meeting. This responsibility can be rotated at each meeting. Planning ahead for each meeting is usually a good idea.

4. It helps to agree on how informal or how structured women want the meetings to be. A group of friends may be most comfortable in an informal situation, but if women don't know each other (and sometimes even if they do), some agreed upon structure or format will help the meetings to move along smoothly. These are some suggestions for a format which many women have found useful:

- Start with a round of names (until women know each other) and a brief statement of how each woman is feeling.
- When discussing a topic, go around the room so that each woman gets a chance to talk (although it is okay for a woman to "pass" and not feel pressured to talk) before having a general conversation.
- End with appreciations (letting someone know that you

appreciate a piece of work she has done for the group, or something special she shared with the group, or whatever). This ends the meeting on a pleasing and positive note.

5. It is very important to make an agreement that any personal information shared in the group will be kept strictly confidential.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR GROUP SESSIONS

Session I

Some possible topics to start discussion:

- What do we know about menopause?
- How did we learn what we know?
- How do we feel about going through menopause? approaching menopause?
- Do we talk openly about menopause with family/friends/co-workers?
- What do we feel when we have a hot flash and what do we do?
- Does sex interest us more or less now?
- Is our relationship with our mate/friends/children changing?
- How do we feel about getting older? How does our society view older women? How are we portrayed in films, TV, comic strips?
- What do we enjoy about getting older?

Session II

The symptoms and physiology of menopause: gathering and sharing information and experiences.

Session III

Treatment of menopausal symptoms: Hormone Replacement Therapy (pros & cons); natural non-drug treatments; tranquilizers.

Session IV

Other health care issues: breast self-exam; pap tests; hysterectomy; contraception; nutrition; exercise; doctor-patient relationships.

Session V

- Evaluation of what has happened so far: what has been learned? How useful has it been?
Where next? Does the group want to keep meeting? For support? For further discussion and study of common problems and concerns, health-related issues? How can group members share what they have learned with other women? Starting new groups?

Resource for Groups

Facing the Change of Life: A resource kit available from Planned Parenthood Newfoundland/Labrador, 203 Merrymeeting Road, St. John's Newfoundland A1C 2W6

GUIDELINES FOR GROUPS

The purpose of the group is to create a safe, non-threatening, non-judgmental environment where women can learn from each other and feel free to speak about feelings, whatever they are, without fear or embarrassment. Some guidelines are:

1. Every woman should have a chance to speak without being interrupted.
2. No advice-giving (unless asked for).
3. Give positive feedback freely. Honest support and validation for feelings, struggles, attempts to change and successes strengthen us for further changes. Be sure that positive comments are given only when meant sincerely; people can usually detect insincerity, and it weakens the ability of the group to give support if there is not a feeling of trust that people will be honest with each other. The group can be a place to celebrate our successes.
4. A common problem in leaderless groups is that one or two people can tend to dominate the discussion. Some ways to deal with this problem are:
 - When you have chosen a topic for discussion, do a "round." This means to go around the group and give each woman a chance to talk before there is a general discussion. Women can "pass" if they have nothing to say; no-one should feel pressured to talk. These rounds can be time-limited, with each woman having, for instance, 5 minutes (or whatever time the group decides) to talk about her feelings and opinions about the topic.
 - In a general discussion, if you notice that one or two women are not saying much, check with them to see if there is something they would like to say. Many women hold back out of shyness or not wanting to interrupt when their contribution would be valuable to the group.
5. There should be respect for each woman's right to make her own choices about her life. The group is an opportunity to learn from each other and gain information to help make those choices.

RESOURCE FOR GROUPS

Helping Ourselves: A Handbook for Women Starting Groups is available by mail order for \$5 from the Women's Counselling Referral and Education Centre, 348 College Street, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1S4