Tell us what your superhero ability is?

Something that you are good at that not many people know about you

INTERESTED SUPPORT GROUP LEADER TRAINING

PART 4 – GETTING DOWN TO THE NITTY GRITTY

AGENDA:

- Group Guidelines
- Screening New Members
- Managing Challenging Situations
- Mental Illness – Positive and Negative Language
- Pros and Cons of WhatsApp Groups

GROUP GUIDELINES TO ENSURE HEALTHY GROUP FUNCTIONING

A STRONG
FOUNDATION
IS THE KEY TO
CREATING
LONG-TERM
SUCCESS.

WHAT YOU
ALLOW
IS WHAT WILL
CONTINUE

QUICK
RECAP

SUCCESS
IS THE SUM OF
SMALL EFFORTS,
REPEATED
DAY IN &
DAY OUT.

- Group guidelines are a set of values or rules that the Group adheres to. We will cover these in more depth in part 5
- These values are a defined list of acceptable behaviours central to a healthy Support Group
- When people are aware of well-defined expectations, they are aware of boundaries, and able to communicate and act accordingly
- These pre-defined guidelines can help a Support Group Leader maintain balance in the Group, without causing conflict or unintentional hurt
- The Group's guidelines and values should be ***determined by the Group as a whole***. If the Group agrees to these guidelines, it is more likely that they will adhere to them
- Spend a minute or two at the beginning of each meeting to remind the Group of the values and guidelines, and when necessary, re-open the discussion about them to include additional points where relevant, and at times removing old values that no longer serve the Group

SCREENING NEW MEMBERS

How SADAG screens potential Group Members

When a person calls SADAG and wants to JOIN a Support Group our counsellors find out the following information:

- What type of Support Group does the caller want to join
- Where the caller lives
- Has the caller been professionally diagnosed?
- Have they gone for treatment? By whom?
- Are they on medication?
- Have they been for Therapy, Counselling etc.

We screen potential Support Group Members to:

- Remind them that a Support Group is not Therapy
- Explain it is for extra support, networking and guidance
- Make sure that the caller gets the correct help and information they need
- Find out if the caller is ready to join a Support Group
- Refer them to the correct type of Group
- Refer them to the Group closest to them
- Make sure that the Support Group will be beneficial to them and not triggering
- Make sure that they would be a good fit/addition to a Support Group

How you can screen potential new Members

Not all your Support Group Members will be referred by SADAG. People will hear about your Support Group from:

- Word of mouth
- Social Media
- Our Newsletter
- Advertising and PR

In some cases, you may need to do your own screening

- Face-to-face / over the phone
- Refer to the questions listed above
- Do you feel that the person may need one-on-one treatment first
- Do you feel that they may need assistance from a Medical / Mental Health Professional
- Do you feel they will make a good addition to your Group
- Try to be mindful that someone reaching out for help can be a really big step for them. So, starting with a statement emphasising you are glad they reached out and why you need to ask them some questions can help establish a welcoming tone.
- If the person isn't the right fit for your Group, you can explain why/ ask if you can get a counsellor to call them / or direct them to the list of Support Groups on our website.
- Keeping an intro template and a list of questions helps to make screening quicker and easier.

If you are concerned about someone who has reached out to you, and you feel they may need more help from a counsellor, please either refer them to:

- the SADAG website https://www.sadag.org
- One of our tollfree numbers 0800 456 789, 0800 212 223
- They can SMS 31393
- Let me or Tracy (info@anxiety.org.za) know – and we will arrange for a counsellor to call them
- You can also contact me for further support and guidance

Screening new Members for a pre-existing Group

When considering a new Member:

- Do you have enough space for the Member? Physically, and in regards, to available time in the meeting
- Trust your gut, if you are not sure about a new Member, explore why
- Will the person be a good fit for the Group, and will the Group be a good fit for the person?
- Let the new Member know what to expect from the Group
- And let them know about the Group's Value Statement and WhatsApp Rules if relevant

MANAGING POTENTIALLY CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Ground rules help

- If ground rules have been made and agreed on by the Group, it is easy to refer to them when someone breaks them

Phone SADAG for advice

Everyone in the Group is responsible

Having to interrupt or challenge a Member

- Use a calm and confident voice
- Reassure the person with a positive comment

When someone only talks to the Leader

- Pass the questions back to the Group
- Remind them of the benefits of talking to the Group as a whole

If a Member is talking too much:

- **Summarise their key points** and asking the other Group Members to comment
- **Interject:** "You mention some interesting points. Does anyone have any comments or would others like to share their story?"
- **Avoid eye contact** with the person - it is harder for people to take over the conversation if the Leader is not interacting with them
- **Use a timer (not ideal, but sometimes necessary, once a habit has been formed you can probably lose the timer)**

Silent moments

- Can be a sign that:
  - Members feel comfortable
  - Are taking in information
  - Dealing with feelings

If the silence runs on for too long, ask the Members:

- "Does anyone have any other thoughts about what was just discussed?"
- Or move to the next topic

The silent Member

- It is OK for Members to sit quietly and not talk too much.
- If you feel someone wants to talk, make eye contact with them
- Check their body language for hints that they may want to talk
- You can also say, "Do you have anything you want to share about the discussion? It's OK if you don't want to"
- "When you are ready to talk, we would love to hear your thoughts and feelings about what we discussed."

Incorrect information

- Don't challenge a Member when they state incorrect information.
- Instead, try to speak in a calm and soft voice:
  - "Hmm…that's not what I have heard or read. Maybe we can talk about it after the Group."
  - "I have heard differently. Let's talk after the meeting about how we can research this issue and share it with the Group at a later stage."
  - "This is a really interesting discussion point, perhaps I can ask SADAG to organise a professional speaker for us on the topic."

Crying

- Crying is an important part of the Support Group process
- If someone starts to cry, make sure they know that their feelings are normal
- If the person is unable to talk or doesn't want to, move on to another topic or person, but first try to gauge if they really want some time, or just need a minute or two to compose themselves
- Be sure to always come back to the Member after they have stopped crying and ask if they would like to continue talking about the issue
- If someone is very emotional in a meeting, you may want to start your next meeting by asking the Group if they have any 'leftovers' from the previous meeting

Jokes – Appropriate and Inappropriate

- Can break the tension when the conversation becomes very emotional
- BUT they can also affect Members coming to terms with emotions, and may stop important discussions
- Jokes about gender, race or religion should not be tolerated

Try these methods to handle the inappropriate jokes:

- Ignore the jokes and move on
- Make a comment such as: "That was really funny, but I think we need to stick with our discussion"
- It's interesting that you made a joke here. Is this something that's hard for you to unpack or discuss?

If a person continues to use jokes that make people feel uncomfortable, say:

- "This is a really important issue, and we really need to concentrate on working through it."

Sometimes people use jokes to belittle themselves or devaluate their feelings. Watch out for this, it may well be just a joke, but they also may be seeking validation and reassurance, and when no-one says anything, they feel that it must be true

Anger

- Anger is a necessary part of the Support Group Process
- It is important that the anger **is not dangerous** and that it's **not directed at any one Group Member.**

If anger continues to be part of a meeting, try these methods:

- Talk about the feelings being expressed. "You have expressed some powerful emotions. What does this bring up for the other Members?"
- Ask for a break so that you and the other Members can process and assess what is going on. "I can see that you are really upset. Let's take a couple of minutes before we continue with the discussion."
- Point out the feeling of the Member and reassure the Member that everyone wants to help. ' You are feeling angry right now."
- If the Member becomes too angry, ask them to step outside for a minute to regroup and regulate their feelings (stepping out with a co-facilitator is comforting if available)
- Try moving on to another topic, but make sure you come back to the Member when the emotions have calmed down a bit

Side Talk

- Very distracting to the Group
- Makes other Members feel like they are being left out
- Makes the Member who is sharing feel that what they are saying isn't important, leaving them feeling unheard and dismissed
- Remind the Members of the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting and use the rules when it's important.

A Support Group Leader may have to stop the Group for a moment to make a point, or interrupt the Members and ask them if they want to share

Having to interrupt or challenge a Member:

- You may need to interrupt a Group Member, if their “talk time” is dominating the Group,
- Or to challenge a Member if something they are saying is offensive, or unaligned with the Group values
- Use a calm and confident voice
- Reassure the person with a positive comment

When someone only talks to the facilitator:

Modelling is an important method to create change in the way a Group functions. If you keep encouraging Members to contribute and ‘chip in’ to the conversation, you will find that in no time the Group will adjust and share more freely

Some tips to encourage interaction in the Group:

- Pass the questions back to the Group.
- Remind them of the benefits of talking to the Group as a whole

When a Group Remember appears to be under the influence of alcohol or narcotics:

- They are disrespecting the Group as a whole
- Their behaviour can be both triggering and disruptive to the Group
- Take the person aside and let them know you are concerned and emphasise the Group guidelines about being under the influence of substances
- Let the Member know that you would like them to come back to the meeting at another time, but it would be best not to attend tonight. You may need to discuss a plan for getting them home safely

People talking all at once at the Group meeting:

- Be gentle but firm, intervene immediately by reminding the Group that people need to talk one at a time
- May indicate high emotions surrounding a topic that people are discussing. Be attentive to the topic being discussed at the time, and point this out to the Group
- It is important to set limits on people talking at once from the start, since it is a habit that can cause the Group to become ineffective as a safe, open place to share, and where everyone gets the opportunity to be heard

Help-resisting Behaviour:

- Remember each of us is at a different stage our journey, and this can affect our readiness and ability to deal with our own problems
- Accept that we can only change ourselves
- The individual resisting help may not realise that they are doing it
- Let the individual know how it makes you feel to have your ideas "shot down" or disregarded
- Be positive and supportive about the individual's ability to ask the Group for help. Encourage the person to continue talking
- May be a defence mechanism; fear of trying an alternative; fear of hopelessness; fear that nothing will work; or simply being in a place where they aren't ready to move on
- If a Member is rejecting all suggestions, try encourage them to suggest their own ideas and share them with the Group, or ask them what they need from the Group that they're not getting
- You can also ask the Group to remind the Member of different suggestions they have shared and then ask the Member if they have tried any of them.
- Sometimes help resisting behaviour can be a sign that the Member is feeling unheard or misunderstood – are you really getting what they are saying?

MENTAL ILLNESS: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

The way in which we discuss Mental Illness can have a huge impact on reducing the stigma associated with Mental Health and Suicide. By changing our vocabulary and the way we refer to Mental Health, can help alter the way others view it.

- Don't give Mental Health Care or support advice unless you're qualified to do so
- Don't go into detail when discussing Suicide or self-harm – it can trigger people at risk
- Avoid language that blames individuals for any Mental Health conditions they may have
- Think carefully about using words like suffer, struggle, challenge – create space for positivity
- Don't publish private Suicide notes or details about the Suicide
- Don't assume that all serious crimes are due to a Mental Illness

- A person who has Schizophrenia', not a ‘Schizophrenic’ or ‘Schizo’
- ‘A person who has experienced Psychosis’ not a ‘Psycho’.
- ‘People with Mental Health conditions’, or ‘people with lived experience’, or 'Service users’, not ‘the Mentally ill’, ‘lunatics’ or 'mad people’.
- Someone who ‘has a diagnosis of’, ‘is currently experiencing' or ‘is being treated for’, not a person suffering from’, ‘sufferer’, ‘victim’ or ‘the afflicted’
- ‘Died by Suicide’, not ‘committed Suicide’ (it’s not a crime)
- ‘Discharged from hospital’, not ‘released’ (it’s not prison)

Use objective, non-sensationalistic language to describe Mental Illness and Treatment.

Remember someone has a Mental Illness, they are not defined as their Mental Illness. Say “she struggles with Depression,” not “she is Depressed”. We don’t say that someone who has cancer is cancer, we say that they have been diagnosed with cancer.

SUICIDE LANGUAGE GUIDE

THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY GROUP

DO SAY	DON'T SAY	WHY?
"died by suicide" "took their own life"	"successful suicide" "unsuccessful suicide"	Because it suggests suicide is a desired outcome. No one wins if someone dies by suicide.
"took their own life" "died by suicide"	"committed suicide" "commit suicide"	Because it associates suicide with crime
"increasing rates" "higher rates"	"suicide epidemic"	Because it sensationalises suicide
"suicide attempt" "non-fatal attempt	"failed suicide" "suicide bid"	It means that someone hasn't died, they are still alive and there is an opportunity to get them help. So not dying by suicide is not a fail
refrain from using the term suicide out of context	"political suicide" "suicide mission"	Because it is an inaccurate use of the term 'suicide'

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0800 567 567

THE PROS AND CONS OF WHATSAPP GROUPS

As the world becomes more digitally inclusive, even pre-Covid, many Groups opt to create WhatsApp Groups for their Groups

As with all things, there are pros and cons:

PROS

- A WhatsApp Group can make people feel connected between meetings
- They can create a sense of community
- Members feel they have a safety net if they need Support
- Easy way to communicate important Group information
- Helpful platform to share relevant articles & self-help tips
- Platform to inspire
- Share, connect and get to know the Group better
- Almost always, someone is there to help – never alone

CONS

- Need to be closely monitored
- Regularly need to reinforce WhatsApp Group guidelines
- Can leave you feeling like a policeman
- What I consider funny, could be offensive to you
- What I may consider helpful, you may feel is dismissive
- Can make you and other Members feel overwhelmed by constant messaging. Some Members may feel they have to stay in the Group to be part of it / receive important information – but feel like the messages are all too much
- Leaves Members feeling responsible for others
- Communicating via text is easily misinterpreted without tone or physical cues
- Communication via text is easy to share / forward, hard to maintain confidentiality
- Content can be triggering
- Can become an unhealthy 'crutch' for support and connection. If a Member is in urgent need of support, or it's clear that the Support Group isn't meeting their needs, they may need some one-on-one help

Consider:

What will your WhatsApp Group look like?

- Do you want to organise a separate Group for chit chat and idle conversation, and one for important information? Or will the one Group allow for both?
- What will your Group rules be? Outlining them right at the start and posting them in your Group description can prevent people from straying
- Would you identify someone as an admin assistant?
- Will you be the only person who can communicate in your Group? This may lack personal aspect, but keeps the Group focused and highlights important information
- People's space can feel violated, and they can feel pressured if they are constantly bombarded with messages. At times they may withdraw from the Group, or leave it
- What are your rules regarding participation time?
- Is there criteria that needs to be met before joining the Group? "You have to have been screened and have attended at least two meetings" – keeping in mind this needs to remain a safe space for your existing Members

Often, Leaders will only allow Members to join their WhatsApp Group prior to attending an actual meeting. It can be very difficult to remove someone from a WhatsApp Group once you have added them.

Helpful advice

- Having a chit-chat Group that you are not part of can mean that you miss important information and are seen as separate to your Members, so the sense of equality is compromised

- Discourage sub-groups, as this can make Members feel 'othered'

- It is important to keep 'on top' of things in the WhatsApp Group, reminding one Member of a Group what the rules are, after having 'left' it when someone else posts something in violation of the rules can create a sense of favouritism

- Often after your Group has been running for a while, Members will stop coming to meetings but remain as a part of your WhatsApp Group – this can be for several reasons

    - They feel that they no-longer need the meetings, but have a sense of safety remaining in the WhatsApp Group in case they need to re-join
    - They may feel bad for leaving the Group
    - Every now and again you can announce to the Group if anyone wants to leave, they are more than welcome too.

WhatsApp Group Rules Example:

- The Group hours are 8am to 6pm – no posts should be made on this Group between 6pm and 8am, unless there is an emergency (you can choose what hours and days you are comfortable with)
- No religious and political opinions, hate speech, racism, and vulgar language is allowed.
- Respect your peers and ensure your posts are inoffensive and not inclined to provocation.
- No advertising or spam should be allowed.
- Try to be cognisant of the aim and purpose of the Group. A place where we can share and express our thoughts and feelings, troubleshoot and network with one another
- Post in one chunk of text, rather than several text chains.
- Switch to private messaging if the conversation becomes relevant to only a select few.
- Check your sources before sharing information that may be fake (or old) news.
- Do not post data-heavy videos/images.
- Bear in mind that tone and meaning can be misinterpreted in a text. Pick your words carefully.
- Rather phone someone if things feel they could potentially become tense, heated, misunderstood or misinterpreted

WhatsApp Group Rules Example:

- This is a non-judgmental environment
- We are here to Support each other
- Everyone should have equal opportunity to partake in the Group
- No lending, borrowing or giving of money
- No graphic images or videos, or images of self-harming are allowed
- Please be sensitive when sharing with third parties, content discussed in this Group. Sharing of a generic image or news article makes sense, but sharing sensitive and personal information does not. Ask yourself, "how would I feel if I had written or shared my story and someone posted it to their book club Group for their entertainment?
- Be sensitive when discussing medication, please do not mention the names of any specific medicine, and when something is out of your scope – rather leave it to the professionals. Other Members of the Group may be influenced by your opinion. Remember each person is unique and will react to treatment differently.

- Thank you, and **CONGRATULATIONS** on attending Part 4 of SADAG's Support Group Leader online training

- To continue with Part 5 of the training and/or to let us know how the training was for you please complete the following evaluation and assessment survey https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2025SGLTPart4

For more information, please email
SupportGroups@anxiety.org.za