

Recruitment and Retention of Support Group Participants

Introduction

Parkinson's NSW Support Groups play a key role in providing friendship, non-judgemental support and evidence-based advice for people living with Parkinson's in communities throughout NSW.

However, the success or failure of any Support Group depends on recruiting and retaining participants. Without interested and motivated participants, Groups languish and valuable community support is lost.

Community outreach, media relations and recruitment and retention all go hand-in-hand.

See the *Community Outreach* section of this *Manual* for tips on how to engage with individuals and groups in your communities to boost engagement.

See the *Media Relations* section of this *Manual* for information on how to publicise your Group, its activities and openness to welcoming new participants.

How to recruit new Group participants

People who join Parkinson's NSW Support Groups have particular personal needs in mind.

They might be newly-diagnosed and seeking information, or they may have lived with Parkinson's for some years but only just revealed their diagnosis – so they want to share their experience with others in the same situation.

Some people take a very 'medicalised' approach to dealing with their Parkinson's, whereas others are simply seeking social opportunities because they are having difficulty accessing their community.

The key to attracting and retaining participants is to identify individuals' needs and show how your Group can meet them.

Warmth, friendliness and acceptance are all important, of course. But no one will join or remain in a Group if it does not meet their needs.

When publicising your Group through the media or community outreach, be sure to provide a brief description of your existing participants and what you have to offer new joiners.

If your participants are predominantly older people, then say that so other older people living with Parkinson's will feel comfortable contacting you. The same applies to young-onset Groups, those catering for recently-diagnosed people, or Groups focusing on the needs of carers.

The Community Outreach and Media Relations sections of this Manual talk about how to get the message about your Support Group out there.

Publicity and community outreach are just the start of the process. Don't forget the basics:

1. Develop a list of points which describe your Group, its style of operating, and the benefits it offers participants.

This is your 'cheat sheet' for future conversations, to make sure you get these important messages across to people.

2. Personalise your Group by providing an individual as a point of contact, not just a generic number, email or address. Be sure to give a name – even if it is just a first name to preserve your privacy.
3. Provide a telephone number, and hours when you will be available to take calls. (Or mention that leaving a message is possible if you are not able to pick up).
4. If you are accepting inquiries via e-mail, when you write back try to obtain a contact phone number for the potential participant.

Emails are efficient and good for initial contact, but a personal phone chat will be more effective for engaging a new recruit.

5. Follow up. When someone contacts you, has a conversation and says they may attend your next meeting, don't leave it there.

Make a follow-up courtesy call prior to the meeting to remind them of the time, date and venue. And perhaps offer a lift to and from the meeting if they require it.

If someone does not show up at a meeting, or attends once and does not return, do not take it personally. Allow a few days to pass, then make a polite follow-up phone call to ask if they are still interested.

If they are not interested, it is worth gently asking why not. It could reveal information which will help you improve the recruitment and retention methods of your Support Group.

Then thank them very much for their time and input, and say you will not call again unless they request further contact, and wish them well. Some people are just not ready to join a Support Group.

How to retain Support Group participants

Again, the key to retention is meeting individual participants' needs.

The need for participant retention is one reason why the new *Support Group Guidelines* require Annual Support Group Plans to be developed and submitted to Parkinson's NSW. These Plans must include:

- Set meeting dates and locations for Support Group meetings
- Meeting topics for the year ahead
- A budget for the year ahead

Having an Annual Plan not only reduces stress on your Group Leadership Team (no more last-minute rushing around to find a speaker). It also aids retention by letting newcomers and those who regularly attend meetings what to expect.

By engaging all of your Support Group participants in the planning process, you will learn about their needs and wants.

Including their desired information, speakers, excursions and activities in the Annual Plan will better meet the needs of participants. The better you meet individual needs, the more likely it is that they will remain engaged with their Support Group.

Even with a sound Plan in place, it is a good idea to use regular meetings to check in with participants. Ask if they have any feedback on activities to date, or additional suggestions that would improve the operations and effectiveness of the Group.

For more information on Annual Support Group Plan requirements, see Section 3.6 of the *Parkinson's NSW Support Group Guidelines* in the Appendix section of this *Manual*.

An Annual Support Group Plan template is also included in the Appendix section of this *Manual*.

For advice on meeting content, speakers, activities and approaches that have worked well for other Support Groups, contact:

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