

## Self Help Groups

Self help groups are set up by or for people living with HIV and exist around the world. Self help groups can be a great source of support, help and advocacy for positive people both locally and nationally.

### Self help groups can provide:

- Emotional and social support at home or in group sessions
- Opportunities to meet and share ideas and practical information with other people living with HIV
- Training in education, public speaking and counselling skills
- Opportunities for earning an income through setting up income-generating projects such as sewing or raising chickens or rabbits together and sharing the profits
- Empowering each other to do things like negotiate condom use or stand up to abuse
- A basis for advocacy and campaigning.

### Setting up a self help group

It is essential that founder members be clear about the main purpose of the group. Will the group be a support group for newly diagnosed people? Or will it concentrate on education and campaigning work? In general, income-generating projects should not be mixed with psycho-social support groups as they are not always compatible. Whatever the groups' aims are, they should always be discussed with new members.

Women and men with HIV and AIDS may have quite different needs and concerns, depending on how long they have known they are HIV positive, their state of health, their financial situation and family responsibilities. Many women prefer a women's group. Others feel it is important to involve men.

To ensure that everyone attending the group is encouraged to participate and feels safe, it is useful to agree how group members will work together. This can be achieved by agreeing on some ground rules.

The following guidelines are ones other groups have found useful:

- Respecting the need for confidentiality
- Striving for non-judgemental attitudes and behaviour
- Being open to the varied experiences of group participants on the grounds of race, religion, sexuality, or drug use
- Offering each other constructive feedback, and using language which is accessible to all group members
- Respecting each other's feelings and views
- Ensuring that the group is welcoming to new members. Sometimes older members forget how scary it can be going to a first meeting
- Meeting a new person outside a formal support meeting to explain what happens in a meeting
- Thinking about where to hold support meetings in order to make women feel welcome and safe
- Considering whether women will be able to maintain their privacy if they attend a support group

Some positive women desperately need material support such as money or food. Make sure that it is made clear to new women if your group cannot provide money or food. Do you have information about other organisations which can respond to these needs?

Meeting in a group may not always be appropriate. Some positive women are afraid for their own and their children's and families' safety if their HIV status becomes known. In this situation it may be necessary to visit someone in their own home so confidentiality is not breached. In other situations, support through phone calls works well.

Support groups and self help groups can play an important role in advocacy. It is easier to be open and involved in prevention and care when we join together. Our strength is multiplied and we give each other confidence. Self help groups demonstrate to the world that people with HIV are living positively. Together we are more able to demand changes and help each other at the same time.