



Ways to Start a Support Group

Translated into plain language by Helen Osborne, 2006

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Thank you for your interest in starting a support group. A strong support network helps people with new amputations adjust to limb loss. Starting a support group can be very rewarding. But it also can be quite a challenge. Here are ways the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) suggests you get started:

- Find the right people
- Make a plan
- Find a convenient place and time to meet
- Have your first meeting
- Communicate with members
- Spread the word about your support group
- Keep your support group strong.

Find the Right People

Most support groups begin with just one or two people. You likely have the interest, energy and enthusiasm to get started, but can use some help. One way to find the right people to work with is by talking with others about your support group ideas. Often, people are willing to help once they speak with an enthusiastic person like you.

Here are some people you might want to talk with:

- People with limb loss
- Family members and friends
- Prosthetists, doctors, counselors, and other rehabilitation professionals
- Clergy and other religious leaders.

Make a Plan

- **Know why you want to start a support group.** This can be for any or all of these reasons: to help others cope with limb loss, teach ways to manage after an amputation, or be a friendly place where people can practice new skills.
- **Learn about the needs of potential group members.** Some support groups are quite general, such as for all people with limb loss. Others are more specific, like groups just for parents of children with amputations. Groups can even offer special programs, such as peer visitation. Decide who you are trying to help and then make a plan to meet their needs.
- **Decide on a meeting format.** Some groups are mostly social, with lots of time for people to meet and talk. Other groups are more formal, with guest speakers or teaching programs. Talk with potential members and leaders about formats to try.

- **Build trust.** Support groups exist to help members, not promote certain products or health centers. You build trust by talking about many resources, not just one. You can do this even when you meet in a donated space or are given free supplies.

Find a Convenient Place and Time to Meet

- **Look in your community for free or low-cost meeting space.** This may be in a library, senior center, service club or other public place. It might also be in a private facility such as a hospital, independent living center or rehabilitation center.
- **Make sure that the place where you meet is accessible to people with disabilities.** This includes ramps into and out of the building, as well as doorways and aisles that are wide enough for wheelchairs. Also make sure that there is enough parking for people with disabilities.
- **Choose a convenient meeting date and time.** Sometimes, this is hard to do. You can almost always change a meeting date if a lot of people cannot attend.

Have Your First Meeting

The first meeting may be quite different from all others. This is the best time to discuss an action plan. At your first meeting, you might want to:

- Elect officers such as president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer
- Write meeting minutes (notes about what happened)
- Choose a group name
- Set goals (what you hope to accomplish)
- Agree on a time and date for the next meeting.

Communicate With Members

Support groups need to communicate with all their members. This may happen once a week, once a month, or just a few times each year. You can communicate through phone calls, letters, postcards, e-mail or online newsletters. Any or all of these ways help spread the word about your support group.

Spread the Word About Your Support Group

You might want to invite people to meetings, or ask them to join your group or read about the great work you are doing. Here are some ways to help spread the word:

- Create a poster or flyer. Ask if you can post this in your local hospital, rehabilitation center, orthotic and prosthetic facility, diabetes clinic, senior citizens center or center for independent living.

- Talk about your support group with health professionals. Ask if they would include your flyer in their mailings.
- Ask health professionals to speak at support group meetings. One way to find a speaker is by asking the health professionals you work with.
- Think about doing a public service announcement for radio or television. Call your local stations for more information.

Keep Your Support Group Strong

- Meet on a regular basis – the same time each week or month
- Meet in a central location – one that most people can get to
- Have programs that are of interest to your members
- Combine formal educational programs with informal social events
- Offer special programs, such as peer visitation
- Divide support group tasks among a group of people.

Ways to Learn More

The ACA can help you get your support group started. To learn more:

- Call the ACA toll-free at 1-888/AMP-KNOW (1-888/267-5669)

- Visit the ACA Web site at www.amputee-coalition.org
- Read the *Starting a Support Group* packet. You can get this from the National Limb Loss Information Center by calling: 1-888/AMP-KNOW (1-888/267-5669).

You might also want to contact your state's Attorney General's Office or Secretary's Office for information about starting a nonprofit organization.

“Amputees need to learn and share experiences with other amputees.”

Mary Smith, founder of an amputee support group

****Translated from *Starting a Support Group: The Basics*, by NLLIC Staff, Amputee Coalition of America (ACA).**