

*A seasoned support group facilitator once said, "People who call me don't usually know what they are looking for. They just hurt and know they need something. I talk with them for a while, and if I think my group can help I invite them to a meeting. I always call after the first visit. I encourage them to come back because the first time may have been too unsettling for them to really get anything out of it. Sometimes I suggest they consider more direct professional help if the need seems too great for the group to handle. Mostly, I want them to know I care about them. I think caring is largely what support groups are all about."*

We couldn't agree more.



NATIONAL FAMILY CAREGIVERS ASSOCIATION

Empowering family caregivers

Building community

Speaking up authentically with the voice of experience

Advocating for the well-being of family caregivers and their loved ones

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## Support Group Guide

*For Family Caregivers*

Helpful Ideas  
For Family Caregivers  
From NFCA

A frequent question asked by family caregivers is: “How can I find a support group?” Unfortunately, there isn’t a simple answer. It depends on so many things. This guide will help you sort through some of these questions and hopefully locate a support group that meets your needs.

### How can a support group help?

Although the answers may be intuitive, it never hurts to review them. Some benefits are:

- A safe haven for sharing true feelings
- A place to make new friends
- Information about resources and coping mechanisms
- Advice on what lies ahead
- Help in dealing with family members

### What makes a support group effective?

While any given group may or may not work for you personally, there are characteristics that make some groups more effective than others. These include:

- A caring atmosphere and trust between group members
- A clear structure and purpose
- Agreement on group rules, including confidentiality
- A good facilitator

Many groups rely on trained professionals, but the background of the facilitator is less important than their ability to devise and use an appropriate structure, identify resources, set group rules and offer empathy and concern.

### Where to find a support group

Some logical places to look include:

- The social work department of hospitals
- Adult day care centers
- The voluntary health agency that deals

with your loved one’s condition, i.e. ALS or National MS Society

- Area Agencies on Aging
- Your faith community
- Parent to Parent—USA

### Types of support groups

Support groups can be organized in any number of ways. Although effective support groups have similar characteristics, their organizing structures can be very different. It’s important to understand them so you can decide which best meets your needs.

■ **Condition-Specific** These groups focus on a particular disease, disability, or condition such as cancer or heart disease. The advantage of these groups is that they offer access to excellent up-to-date information on the condition as well as information about local resources.

■ **Family Caregiver** These groups are founded on the shared experience that comes from being a family caregiver, and all the emotions that accompany that role. Because their focus is on you, these groups are especially appropriate if you are feeling isolated and need to have your feelings validated.

■ **Relationship-Oriented** If you want to talk to others who are caring for a spouse, a parent, a partner, or a child, regardless of their medical diagnosis, the relationship-oriented groups are made to order for you.

■ **Family-Centered** Closer to a therapy group than a support group, family-centered groups work to improve communication and strengthen the entire family as it copes with the illness of one of its members.

■ **Advocacy** A current trend is for support groups to include some advocacy activities, or connect with advocacy groups in an effort to help the larger community of family caregivers.

This can be a healthy outlet for your frustration and energy.

■ **On-Line** On-line groups offer the advantage of allowing you to connect with others from your home. For someone in a rural area, or someone dealing with a rare condition, electronic connections may be the only way to be in touch with others sharing a similar struggle.

### Questions to ask

Remember, joining a support group is an experiment. Here are some questions to ask about the group before going to your first meeting.

■ **Who sponsors/runs the group?** A group established under the auspices of an established organization is a pretty good indicator that there will be an appropriate structure and reliable operation.

■ **Who is the facilitator?** Talk to the leader if possible, and outline your concerns and interests. Ask about the leader’s background and training.

■ **What is its organizing principle?** If you are newly dealing with a disease or condition, you may need information and resources that a condition-specific group can offer. If you have been caregiving for a long time, you may need a place to let down your hair.

■ **What is the makeup of the group?** Where and how often does it meet? What is expected of you? Can you just listen? What are the rules of confidentiality?



For more information about the National Family Caregivers Association, visit [www.thefamilycaregiver.org](http://www.thefamilycaregiver.org) or call **800/896-3650**.