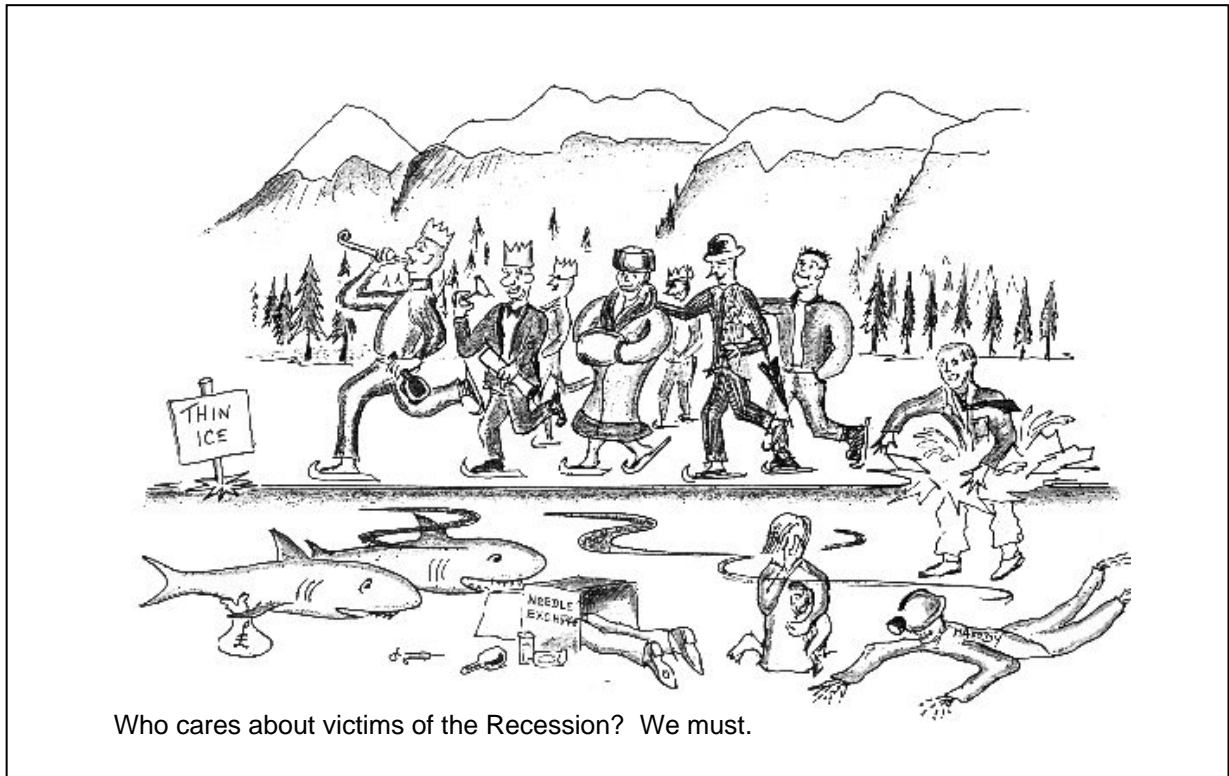


CHURCHES' SUPPORT GROUP ON UNEMPLOYMENT

**SUPPORT GROUPS FOR THE UNEMPLOYED:
HANDBOOK FOR LEADERS AND HELPERS**



Part 1: Starter Pack

Part 2: Resource Pack

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Online Edition 2005

Since the original Handbook was written the Internet has developed offering new channels for sharing information and networking between individuals and groups. This offers a fast, low cost way of communicating needs, ideas and resources for individuals and groups in communities in distress or crisis.

The first online edition is available in PDF format on the Eos Life-Work website at: www.eoslifework.co.uk/csgu.htm

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Tribute:

Sadly Jonathan Oglesby died soon after the second edition was published leaving a young family. His contributions to his church and the unemployed in his local community were extended by his contributions to this handbook and live on in the hope he gave to others during the 1990's Recession. DW.

Introduction to the Third Edition (2001)

This Handbook was originally prepared in autumn 1993 as part of the CSGU's response to the unemployment crisis in the depths of the UK Recession that lasted from 1991 - 1995. Part I was the first edition published January 94. Part II was added in the Second Edition in March 1994.

In winter and spring 2001 many rural communities are now in crisis in the UK due to a winter and storms, floods and the epidemic of Foot and Mouth Disease. Support groups are often a spontaneous response to many forms of crisis in communities or groups with shared adversity including unemployment, health and other problems.

This Handbook developed out of the practical experience of local support groups with input from concerned professionals. It contains many practical suggestions and some important cautions, primarily for volunteer leaders and helpers, but also for formal organisations including churches that may wish to help and encourage them.

This Third Edition is offered as a resource for other communities in crisis. Hopefully local Support Groups for the employed, self-employed and they families in rural communities may reduce the risks of unemployment in communities in crisis.

Many local families and workers may be effectively unwaged through the current crisis if not technically unemployed. From our shared experiences in the Recession the value of social and emotional support and mutual aid, as well as practical financial support, cannot be emphasised enough for people and communities in crisis.

In some periods of crisis people may find courageous or imaginative ways of coping, like setting up support or campaigning groups, or giving new energy to existing groups. The new initiatives that will emerge in many rural communities this year may have valuable insights and new survival strategies as happened during World War 2 and the Recession.

If these new insights can be shared they may make an important difference to many lives and communities, not matter how the rural economic changes. Networks of support groups will provide ways of sharing these ideas and resources. Churches and ecumenical groups have local facilities and extensive community contacts that can offer many contributions to communities in crisis. This Handbook was developed by church and non-church organisations working together so that it can be used by leaders and helpers in a wide range of support groups.

The Internet offers a new and very fast way of extending these networks. We hope to develop an online version of this Handbook to support these networks with facilities for groups to share new issues and ideas related to the current situation.

Dai Williams, Editor
March 2001

Preface to the First Edition

Churches' Support Group on Unemployment
Surrey & North East Hants

Various church groups are emerging to offer counsel, help and support for the unemployed and their families. We have produced this *Starter Pack* as Part I of a *Handbook for Leaders and Helpers* who are thinking of setting up new groups. Parts of it may also be of interest to established groups. The *Resource Pack* in Part II includes additional information on group activities, handouts and reference information.

We would like to pay tribute to those groups that have risen to meet the needs of the unemployed in our area. Because this is a comparatively affluent region the unemployed (over 40,000 in mid-1993) are largely unseen and hence too easily ignored or forgotten.

We would also like to thank these groups for sharing their different approaches which have provided the basis for this *Starter Pack*. We plan to produce further information and suggestions for group activities in Part 11 of the Handbook later this year.

Our mission statement is as follows:

The CSGU is an ecumenical Christian group which seeks to help churches and related organisations in Surrey and NE Hants in their ministry among the unemployed by:

- 1. Informing their leadership of the serious nature and impact of the issue.*
- 2. Encouraging the formation and growth of local support groups and networks.*
- 3. Bringing together the human needs with resources of skill and experience.*
- 4. Providing appropriate information, proven materials and effective training.*
- 5. Supplementing provisions by the State, Local Authorities and other organisations in this field.*

Our aim is that those facing or experiencing unemployment might have their lives transformed by practical Christian support and biblical insights.

For further information write to:

CSGU
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INDEX TO PART 1

Topic	Page
PART I: STARTER PACK	
Aims of the Starter Pack	1
1. The Support Group Concept	
Community Needs and Options	1
Examples of support groups for the unemployed	2
The role of Christians and Churches	5
2. Forming a group in your area	
Assessing Local Needs	6
Basic issues to consider	8
Willing hands	10
Initial aims and objectives	11
Practical resources	12
3. Helping Processes	
Helping the Group	13
Helping Individuals	15
Befriending	16
Advising	16
Counselling	18
Helping the helpers	19
4. Getting Started	
Contacting potential members	21
Planning the first meeting	21

INDEX TO PART II

Topic

Page

PART II: RESOURCE PACK OF ACTIVITIES & INFORMATION

1. Introduction to Part II

Matching Activities to Needs

2. Extra Notes for Leaders and Helpers

Using resources and talents in the Group

Using visiting speakers

Networking with other groups

Listening skills*

An introduction to counselling skills

Further thoughts on working with groups

- Leadership Styles

- Extraversion / Introversion

- Dependence / Independence

- Leading or Facilitating?

- Stages of Group Development

3. Activities for New Members

Helping others to learn Coping Skills

Career First Aid*

Personal Pressures Checklist*

Coping with Stress*

Coping with Change*

4. Work search activities

Work search activities in the Group

Preparing a CV*

APPENDICES: External courses, sources and references

1. Notes for Guidance for Newly Unemployed*

2. Schemes available to unemployed people in Surrey

3. CSGU and other Support Groups

** These items can be copied as handouts for group use only (see copyright conditions).*

PART 1: LEADING AND HELPING A SUPPORT GROUP

Aims of the Starter Pack

This *Starter Pack* is mainly written for leaders who are taking direct responsibility for setting up or running a support group, and for other people who are willing to offer help in running group events, training sessions, or giving individual advice to members.

It is also written with external helpers in mind e.g. local community leaders (ministers, councillors etc), expert advisers (doctors, lawyers), and other support workers (e.g. CSGU members who may offer training and support services to a number of local groups).

Although some leaders and helpers may already have experience of helping people or working in groups this is not essential. These notes are to help you become more aware of how support groups can work so that you can do your best with whatever experience you have.

The *Starter Pack* is designed to be the first part of a larger *Handbook for Support Groups*. Part II will contain a series of briefing notes describing various activities and handouts which leaders and helpers can use.

1. THE SUPPORT GROUP CONCEPT

1.1 Community needs and options

There is a vast, urgent need to spread knowledge of coping skills to people affected by the recession. But coping alone is not enough without community wide awareness and support through genuine and appropriate caring.

In preparing this *Starter Pack* we have considered the experience of 12 support groups in Surrey and NE Hants, and reports about the work of other groups in London, Hertfordshire and the Thames Valley. The first lesson we have learned is that local needs vary widely from community to community - from rural parish, to suburban areas and inner cities.

So there is no standard formula for running a support group. You need freedom to design a scheme (possibly several schemes) that best meets your local community needs. We offer you suggestions and options, rather than rules.

This is also a changing area - your local needs are likely to change, hopefully for the better as economic conditions improve. Your scheme is likely to grow and change with experience and new faces.

So that we can update this *Starter Pack* we would like to hear from new and existing groups. Your experiences, good and bad, will help others who are also trying to run Support Groups.

1.2 Examples of support groups for the unemployed

Government sponsored Job Clubs provide a formal support group service in most areas. But by mid-1993 there were at least 12 church-based unemployed support groups in Surrey and NE Hants, and a similar number of non-church groups. Each one has its own way of working depending on how they started - responding to local needs and the skills of local organisers - and how long they have been running.

These examples of different types of groups may help you to decide what kind of group would serve your local needs best, or to explore future options if you are already in a group.

a) Skilled Leader Groups or Counselling Services

Some groups have been formed by skilled leaders e.g. with experience of personnel, counselling. Employment Service or Citizens Advice Bureau work. These leaders may have considerable experience in employment, counselling or related areas e.g. career change, family problems, or financial difficulties.

These groups tend to specialise in offering one to one counselling with the skilled helper/leader. This may include a regular weekly clinic or "drop-in" session. Prime relationships are between clients and skilled helpers, with less emphasis on mutual aid activities between members, but occasional visiting speakers.

Skilled Leader groups can be particularly helpful to shy clients, people seeking advice for the first time, or individuals with complex or traumatic situations which they are not comfortable revealing in a group situation.

Examples of this type include *Action with the Unwaged* in Camberley (combined church support) and *The Employment Advice Centre (TEAC)* in Woking (Council sponsored).

b) Personal Helper Groups or Services

Like the skilled helper group this arrangement aims to provide individual support for members on a one to one basis. However in this case the personal helpers are volunteers who are willing to befriend an individual.

The personal helper undertakes an extended period of support (if needed) to the member. Meetings are by mutual arrangement. This can be a great help to individuals going through a traumatic change, or who have limited emotional support from their own family or friends.

This is potentially a very supportive arrangement, though it may place a heavy load on the individual helper from time to time. Training and backup for helpers could be important. Personal helpers may or may not be supplemented by group activities with other members.

The *Busbridge Support Group* in Godalming runs this way.

c) Autonomous Team Groups

This type of group is run entirely by members who are not working. They usually have regular weekly meetings during the day or evening. Group size varies from 3 or 4 to 20+. They tend to have formal leaders e.g. Chair, Secretary etc who may be rotated every week or month to share time commitments.

One group meets regularly on Wednesdays at 2pm but invites new members to arrive 30 minutes early for an informal welcome and introduction to group activities.

These groups tend to involve more communal activities including general business (news of vacancies, trips, planning future events etc), formal presentations by members or guests, and other group activities (e.g. discussions, mock interviews etc).

Some of these groups are going beyond mutual support into active work creation programmes e.g. mailing member details to local employers, and tendering for contracts in the community.

Although formal activities are in group meetings there may be detailed support for individual members. Care is taken to keep in touch with members who appear to be becoming withdrawn, while respecting their privacy.

Examples of the Autonomous Team approach are the Woking based *PEGS* group (Professional and Executive Group Support) and *SEEA (SE Executive Associates Ltd)* which has grown from *PEGS*, non-church groups. *SEEA* is taking a new approach by organising as a business to find work contracts.

d) Assisted Team Groups

These are very similar in activities to the Autonomous Team approach described above. However the Leaders may be more experienced volunteer organisers, employed or unemployed, sometimes with specialist training or experience like organisers of the Skilled Leader Groups.

The main difference is that committed organisers may provide more continuity, particularly during the first year of a new group. All groups hope that their members will find employment within a relatively short time, including the leaders of autonomous groups. The leader(s) may be supported by local organisations e.g. churches, or by other organisations covering a larger area e.g. Surrey University.

Two examples of Assisted Team groups are *Bookham Workout*, and the *Springboard* group (in Weybridge and Cobham). These are both church supported groups. Baptist and Catholic respectively. They involve a team of leaders including former group members who have returned to employment but continue to participate in running the group.

e) Specialist networks

Several specialist network groups have been formed which bring together people with a common interest e.g. unemployed accountants, and construction industry personnel sponsored by *Surrey University* and meeting at the *Guildford Institute* and other centres.

There is another type of network called *CAUSE - Christian Action for the Unemployed & Self Employed*. This circulates a directory of members to local employers and other organisations, and may advise members of employers with opportunities. It does not provide personal contact or group activities but offers another form of work-search support. It is based in Woking and has agents running similar networks in 25 areas around the UK.

These various networks cover a wider area rather than a local community. But they may offer useful additional contacts for members of local support groups.

These are just some examples of support groups. Some groups have changed from one type to another, or represent a combination of those above, but in some areas support groups have become more formally organised with full time staff and premises such as the PECAN group in London. Other groups may last for a few months until local needs have been met.

1.2 The role of Christians and Churches

The support group concept is not unique to churches but CSGU believes that Christians and our local churches have a special role to play in meeting the challenge of unemployment. Here are some of the particular contributions we believe Christians and churches can make:

- a) We have a Christian commitment to help those in our community who are in need or distressed. This may be limited by our circumstances, or their willingness to be helped.
- b) Since we value each person for themselves, as children of God regardless of employment or other status, church-backed support groups should be able to bring some sense of normality, mutual respect, optimism and good humour to all who participate. This is so important for people otherwise at risk of being marginalised, pitied, or patronised by society.
- c) Most churches are based in local communities or parishes covering every area and with facilities in easy reach of local residents. Many of the needs of the unemployed - practical advice and emotional support - need to met as easily as possible i.e. locally, ideally with personal support available locally between formal meetings. Most State facilities are only available at borough or district level.
- d) Local churches may already have a significant pool of friends and experts in our congregations who can contribute to the needs of the group, whether in advice, facilities (copiers etc) and possibly in offering employment opportunities.
- e) Support groups have started in churches from all the main denominations. In some areas support groups are joint, ecumenical activities. This could be particularly helpful in rural areas to save duplication of effort in small communities. The CSGU is an ecumenical group which offers its support to all churches who wish to participate.
- f) The needs of group members, and the additional responsibility shared by leaders and helpers, merit the prayers and support of the wider congregation of each church. This contact may lead to wider understanding of the reality of unemployment, too often invisible in most communities, and attract new opportunities and resources.

At the same time there are aspects of this opportunity which need to be carefully considered to be sure that helping is done in appropriate ways, not exploiting the disadvantaged situation of the unemployed for example:

- a) Most existing groups do not see support groups as a direct opportunity to evangelise (see section 2.2 (6) on Basic Issues), preferring to make their Christian witness through their practical care and support.
- b) Where resources permit most existing groups are open to non-church goers, and non-Christians, as well as to Church members.

2. FORMING A GROUP IN YOUR AREA

2.1 Assessing local needs

Your own needs

Potential leaders and helpers may find it useful to consider your own needs and motivations first. Please tick any of these which best describe your interests:

- a) you, or someone near you, are directly affected by unemployment or other traumas of the recession [...]
- b) you are a concerned citizen aware of the needs of many people in your community. [...]
- c) you have more formal pastoral commitments as a minister, counsellor, healer or other community worker. [...]
- d) you are already involved in a support group and would like to explore ways of offering more coping and caring skills to your members. [...]

Unemployment in your local area

Building on your own awareness, you may find it helpful to explore these questions:

- e) How many people in your church are unemployed?
(It is easy to underestimate this figure as people are often unwilling to reveal their unemployment).
- b) How many people in your community (parish, village, town or district) are unemployed?
- c) What kinds of people are affected? for example by..
 - age - under 25, 25-40,40 +
 - men/women, or domestic status - single / married / single parents etc
 - type of occupation - manual, office, technical, professional etc
 - length of time without paid work - < 6 months, 6-12, > 12 months
- d) Where are you mostly likely to get some idea of the number of local unemployed people, or to make contact with them?
 - church, or church related groups
 - partners, neighbours or friends
 - local health services / surgeries
 - local post offices. Citizens Advice Bureaux, Libraries
 - pubs, clubs and betting shops
 - statistics from the local Employment Service or DSS

From this basic information you are likely to get some idea of the priority groups of unemployed people in your area. They may cover a wider range than one support group can handle. Start where you can.

Personal needs of unemployed people in your area

After thinking about the kinds of people you may want to reach the next question is "what are *their* needs?". It is tempting to answer this question for them - projecting our own interpretation of their needs onto individuals and groups. But there is a fine line between being helpful and being prescriptive.

We can give you an idea of the range of needs you may meet based on experience from other support groups, and from academic research. These include:

- a) **Material needs:**
 - money, food, shelter, clothing, transport, health.
- b) **Psychological needs:**
 - stress and anxiety caused by uncertainty,
 - fear of the future,
 - loss of confidence and self-esteem,
 - coping with loss and change and other traumas.
- c) **Social needs:**
 - loneliness, isolation, family strain
- d) **Employment needs:**
 - work opportunities, keeping in practice, new training

But these problems vary between people and areas. So please ask what are the problems that people are finding most difficult to cope with *in your area*.

Finding ways of meeting these needs, or more appropriately helping the group and its members to find ways of meeting their own needs, is really the key challenge for leaders and helpers in unemployed support groups.

And it is the differing needs of different groups that explains why there is no one, perfect type of support group.

Section 4 gives practical suggestions for helping your group to identify their own needs, as a group and as individuals, and then how to choose activities to match the needs. It includes suggestions on running your first meeting.

But there are some important basic issues to consider for Leaders, Helpers, and your sponsoring Church organisation *before* you really get going. If these are not addressed they are likely to cause problems or misunderstandings later on, as some existing groups have already discovered.

2.2 Basic issues to consider

We have identified a number of basic issues that seem important both to help support group organisers, and to ensure that external support and networking is appropriate to the varying needs of different groups. These points will be debated and improved in coming months but we offer them as a beginning:

1. Locally Based

It seems to help if groups are fairly local - to minimise travel costs for members, and to have help accessible quickly. However where resources permit some special interest groups (e.g. for people in similar occupations) may cover a wider area.

2. Flexible Format

There is no standard formula for running a support group. You need freedom to design a scheme(s) that best meets local community needs.

3. Involvement of Members

It seems to help if groups are at least partly self-managed, i.e. members are actively involved in planning and organising events. The concept of mutual aid is central to the idea of support groups. This may help to increase personal commitment and self-confidence. Some groups have voluntary co-ordinators who provide continuity and expertise.

4. Respecting the autonomy of members

Whatever the purpose of organisers and sponsors most groups seem agreed that the rights of members as individuals must have first priority. Several church sponsored groups have made a policy to operate as a service to the community, with no religious pressure on participants. Equally, whilst support groups for the unemployed will make every effort to increase members' chances of finding a job this does not imply a duty to find work, unlike government schemes.

5. Respecting the autonomy of the group:

It seems important that Support Groups should have a high degree of autonomy, to adapt to changing local conditions. It is helpful if external organisations, e.g. those that provide meeting places or offer financial support, can respect this autonomy and can assist rather than control the groups.

6. Limited Financial Resources

Blunt reality is that community support groups should not rely on financial support from government. The needs are too urgent to wait or hope for this to change. The richest resources in support groups are the members themselves. (The SEEA group in Woking is a good example with almost every major profession represented among its members!) The principle of minimising financial needs and maximising use of human resources may be helpful, increasing the autonomy of groups.

7. External Support & Sponsorship:

Provided that the autonomy of support groups is respected then certain types of external support can be most helpful. In particular:

- a) Provision of regular meeting room facilities at no cost. This may be offered by local organisations e.g. church premises, schools, or other community facilities.
- b) Provision of information and training materials at minimal cost or subsidised by other community organisations (e.g. this guide).
- c) Provision of expert advice and assistance, from the local community, and from charities and public services.
- d) Mutual aid between support groups.

Sponsorship e.g. by churches and other local organisations to provide some of these services needs careful discussion and a clear understanding or agreement about the terms of sponsorship by the group and the sponsor.

We would encourage you to discuss these points with your group and sponsors, and to identify any other basic principles that are important to you or your group.

2.3 Willing hands

One of the most positive impressions of existing support groups is the commitment of leaders and helpers to the work of their groups. Also one of the key factors in deciding what kind of group you form is the kind of people available as Leaders and Helpers (the first key factor being the members' needs).

Volunteers come from a number of situations, each with different talents to offer e.g.

- a) **Unwaged helpers** - often include unemployed people seeking work, unwaged carers (not registered unemployed), and retired or semi-retired people. These offer their time to the group but may share some of the difficulties or distress of unemployment whether in terms of financial insecurity, or loss of work satisfaction and identity, or both. This common experience may give them much empathy with other group members. They may be more flexible about time commitments.
- b) **Employed helpers** - whether regularly employed/self-employed, or recently employed after a period of not working. These volunteers may have a slightly more secure situation, and be able to offer continuity to groups whose members (hopefully) find work fairly quickly. However they may not be available for weekday activities.
- c) **Church ministers and officials** - no assumption is made requiring church ministers, elders or other office holders to take part in groups because they will probably have existing, wider pastoral responsibilities. But giving recognition, consent, and moral support to the group and its activities can be a great encouragement to volunteer leaders. This is important to their credibility within the church community. Church leaders may also be an important referral point for group members in need of deeper counselling or pastoral support than the group can give.
- d) **Local expert resources** - in some cases groups may be able to develop a list of experts from the local church and community who are willing to give free or low cost advice to group members e.g. on financial, legal, employment, health or welfare issues. These may not be directly involved in support group meetings, but may be available for private, one to one consultations by informal referral. These may include people with professional counselling training. NB Competence is essential.
- e) **Guest speakers** - often available locally, or from other CSGU Support Groups. These can lighten the load on local group leaders in running sessions and can add useful hints and tips to members. They would not usually charge for presentations but may appreciate refund of out of pocket expenses (e.g. travel and cost of handouts or other materials).
- f) **External mentors or 'facilitators'** - the wider CSGU organisation hopes to be able to provide some external helpers who can offer extra support to local leaders from time to time e.g. while setting up a new group, or if unusual problems arise from time to time.

2.4 Initial aims and objectives

"If you don't know where you are going you are likely to wind up somewhere else..."

Any new group needs some agreement among its members about WHAT its purpose is, and HOW it will operate. Here are three different ways of doing this:

- a) **Free wheeling** simply providing a meeting place, inviting unemployed people to attend, and seeing what happens next. With a skilled leader (or facilitator) this can be very effective. For an inexperienced leader it can be disappointing because not much will happen until the group agrees some purpose.
- b) **Structured** forming a group after careful research, planning and analysis. Providing a formal constitution, procedures and events. This may suit people who come from a structured background e.g. former bank employees. Or it may be too formal for others and lose support.
- c) **Prototype** this is more planned than the 'free-wheeling' approach, with some provisional aims and structure. BUT leaders and helpers expect the group to redefine its needs, purpose and structure for itself within a few weeks or months. This way a group can be set up fast, but it is expected to change so it does not have to be right first time.

Aims and **objectives** are used in most organisations to give them a sense of direction that can be mutually understood by members. **Aims** are fairly broad statements e.g.

"The XXX Support Group is formed to help unemployed people resident in the Parish of XXX, to enable them to cope better with the experience of unemployment, and to increase their chances of returning to paid employment in the future."

This kind of statement is needed if a group becomes formal enough to have a bank account which will require some kind of written constitution with named officers.

Objectives are usually more specific statements which indicate the ways in which the aims will be achieved. Clear objectives usually indicate what is to be done, with some measurable outcome in terms of time, cost or numbers of people involved e.g.

"The Group will meet every week for three months commencing 16th September."

"The Group will invite at least two guest speakers a month."

"The Group will aim to raise £500 within 6 months to buy a photocopier".

Objectives change from time to time so do not need to be included in the constitution. But they do need to be agreed by members and accepted by sponsors.

2.5 Practical resources

One of the basic principles suggested is to *minimise financial needs and maximise use of human resources* to increase the autonomy of groups. The following are practical resources which can really help a group to get started, or to maintain an existing one:

- a) **Regular meeting room facilities at no cost.** This is usually one of the easiest contributions a church can make to assist unemployed support groups. Such facilities are also usually covered by **public liability insurance** for authorised users to cover accidental injury or damage (no higher risk than any other community use but still important). Usual understandings need to be agreed in advance about domestic facilities like making tea/coffee and smoking rules.
- b) **Low cost photocopying facilities** preferably nil cost to leaders and helpers for copying information sheets, and nominal cost for members to copy CVs.
- c) **Telephone contact point** for receiving enquiries about the group, or urgent requests for help from members. This may not be available but where there is a church office facility this can be very helpful. Please note that leaders and helpers need the option to maintain their home privacy, particularly for women volunteers.
- d) **Office and computer facilities** are of great value to more established groups. These enable CVs to be prepared, plus membership lists, mailing lists etc. Ideally they might also be used for computer training in established groups. However this provision requires extra care regarding security, data protection rules, and potential conflict of timing with other users.
- e) **Information and training materials** can be made available from various sources. Some will be available from CSGU or CSGU guest speakers. Other sources include *Guildford Institute* and *Surrey Training & Enterprise Council*. A small library of career related books are also desirable for loan to members, though these can also be available in local libraries and careers offices.
- f) **Financial Resources** may not be a serious problem in the early stages of a group if free meeting facilities can be provided. However it is important that the group reimburses leaders, helpers and guest speakers (often from other groups) for out of pocket expenses e.g. for copying and travel to meetings from the outset
- g) **Fund Raising:** The PECAN group in London is one of the largest community support schemes for the unemployed. They strongly encourage fund raising because these extend the activities the group can offer. These can be organised by members themselves by approaching local businesses, councils, TEC'S and the public for financial support. But be wary of potential commitments to sponsors.

New and established groups may like to consider PECAN'S advice and plan some fund raising activities e.g. a car boot sale, 100 club or similar activity so that funds are available for more ambitious projects e.g. mail shots to local employers.

[Editor's note: PECAN became a highly effective training organisation in later years].

3. HELPING PROCESSES

A support group operates at various levels. Certain practical activities like exchanging information about vacancies etc can be called *tasks*. But for leaders and helpers much of the work of getting the group running, keeping it going, and responding to the needs of individuals, involves various *processes*. These are not so obvious.

Some awareness of helping processes can explain some of the problems and misunderstandings that happen in almost any new group. In support groups for the unemployed some individuals may be under severe stress and some situations will need handling with special care, understanding and discretion.

This section looks at three areas: helping the group, helping individuals, and helping the helpers. It will offer some suggestions about the roles of leader, adviser, counsellor etc. But first you may like to keep these points in mind:

- All group members will probably have a wide experience of being members of different groups, and this experience will need to be harnessed purposefully.
- Just turning up to a meeting may have been a very real struggle for some members. Try to make it an enjoyable experience, not creating other obstacles or putting other pressures on them.
- It may not be helpful to put too much emphasis on the difference between the leader and members.
- It is all too easy to make assumptions - remember to ask, and then *listen*.

3.1 Helping the group

One of the most confusing and frustrating problems for leaders and helpers in new groups is the way they change, especially in the first few months! It may help to know that that this is perfectly normal, indeed a healthy sign of a developing group.

This process of change needs to continue because the very aims of the group - to help people join *and then to leave for new employment* - make it difficult to create a sense of stability and continuity. So expect continuing change and let this be a source of stimulation and renewal, rather than a source of confusion and frustration.

Working as a Group

When a group is first set up a number of individuals get together with a specific aim in mind i.e. finding employment and/or overcoming the isolation of unemployment. These aims give the group its purpose and common interest, and point to some of the tasks it will want to cover (e.g. job hunting skills). But how the group works matters too.

As it settles down certain roles may emerge. Different personalities can make different contributions. Some will come up with new ideas, others will shape ideas into more workable suggestions, and others will get on with practical tasks from collecting information to making tea. Often formal roles will be agreed e.g. Group leader, Treasurer, Events Co-ordinator etc.

The role of the Group Leader

Most groups will appoint a leader to steer the group towards some agreed purpose or objectives. Ideally the leader acts as facilitator (an enabler) allowing the group to develop in its own way and for each individual to be as fully involved as they wish. The group will gradually form its own identity and questions like who does what, how are decisions agreed, and what behaviour is expected or accepted will need to be sorted out.

Depending on the type of group that is formed (see Section 1.2) the leader needs some authority to co-ordinate group activities and to represent the group to other people. The leader may delegate tasks and stimulate a free flow of ideas.

This enabling role is separate from any one-to-one support (e.g. advice or counselling) that the leader may be able to offer. The leader does not need to have any particular area of expertise because advisors can be invited into the group if wanted, and group members can be helped or referred for specialist advice e.g. counselling if the need arises.

The role of leader involves various skills e.g. motivating, encouraging, and vision building. Befriending and listening skills are also of great value and the leader can encourage members to understand and use these skills in the group. In some groups the role of leader may be passed around regularly to share the commitment involved, the group itself deciding who seems most suited to its changing needs.

Further thoughts about running groups

There are more aspects to running groups which are better dealt with in workshop sessions, ideally when leaders are actually gaining experience of running their own group and can exchange experiences with others. At this stage just one other comment may give encouragement to worried leaders: *conflict within groups is not necessarily bad*. Sometimes brief periods of conflict allow taboo subjects to be aired, allow members to let off steam, and may help everyone come to a more open, honest understanding about the group's purpose.

Further thoughts and suggestions about running groups will be included in Part II of this Handbook.

3.2 Helping individuals

Support groups exist to help their members, and for members to help each other. Some activities (e.g. discussing interview skills) can be done as a group. But support groups can also provide a potential source of one-to-one helping relationships. These can operate at three levels: befriending, advising and counselling. Some basic principles apply to all three:

a) Respect and empowerment

No matter what an individual's situation is, nor how difficult their behaviour, the principle of *respect* is fundamental. Helping which is based on pity or moral superiority, however well meaning, actually patronises and 'puts down' the other person. Instead of enabling or *empowering* the individual to cope with their situation this attitude actually *disempowers* the other person. It treats them as inferior, and invites them to become dependent on the helper. Such dependence may make the helper feel that he or she is actually doing good when the reverse is happening.

There is a delicate balance between caring with respect, rather than smothering someone with well meaning but inappropriate affection. Mutual respect within the group is a useful antidote to this hazard of patronising helpers.

b) Privacy

Care is needed when enquiring about why someone is distressed or withdrawn, to avoid intruding into their privacy or grief. If a member of a group chooses to be silent that should be respected. Their presence at all is a positive sign that they may see some value or hope in the support group. Leaders can help by giving them opportunities to join in, or to talk after the session.

c) Confidentiality

Information shared within the support group must be regarded as confidential to the individuals concerned and not revealed to third parties except with their prior permission. Please note that the Data Protection Act 1984 applies to computer records about people - members, leaders, helpers, and third parties.

If a problem arises over confidentiality e.g. information about potentially illegal activities, then leaders or helpers should seek advice from the local minister, or through other CSGU network contacts, preserving the anonymity of those involved.

d) Knowing when to stop or refer

Whoever is involved in leading and/or helping the group it is very important to be aware of their limitations. Most of the activities described here can be used with care and common sense. Being a good listener, and giving people encouragement are always helpful.

BUT some people may need more specialist help e.g. if they have multiple problems, difficult emotional situations, or medical needs. There is a vital difference between offering first aid and giving professional help. If in doubt leaders are strongly encouraged to ask advice and find someone more qualified to refer your member to, either through the local Minister, or other CSGU network contacts.

3.3 Befriending

This is something many people do naturally, whether for friends, neighbours, or strangers in need. It needs no formal qualifications but it does involve:

- *patience, tolerance, and trust*
- *listening stalls*
- *and being available (how often to be agreed)*

Befriending is specially valuable for members who are becoming isolated, either by lack of contacts, or by their own withdrawal. "*Being there*" for someone has a special meaning - something of a lifeline, some steadying point in a period of total uncertainty. It may be far more highly valued or appreciated by the person in need than the friend realises and so should not be taken lightly.

Befriending does not require formal counselling training, just some awareness of basic listening skills. But the basic principles of respect, privacy, confidentiality, and knowing when to stop or refer are important too.

Leaders and helpers will potentially befriend all members of your groups to some degree. But availability is a special issue which needs to be clearly agreed with the group or with individual members. It may be restricted to weekly meeting times, or extended to personal contact time. If members are in special need then helpers may offer 24 hour emergency contact, with fallback telephone numbers if not available.

The Busbridge support group specifically arranges support for members on a one-to-one befriending basis with local volunteers.

3.4 Advising

Advice can range from informal information to formal financial or legal advice by qualified professionals. The adviser gives a range of options according to the facts of the case as presented by the individual. The adviser will give the pros and cons using their specialist knowledge. The individual then makes the decision, often guided by the adviser.

Mutual advice and information exchange is one of the special strengths of unemployed support groups. Unemployment is an unfamiliar experience to most people. It involves many new problems to overcome and new procedures to learn e.g. DSS benefit claim procedures. But a group of unemployed people can rapidly acquire first hand experience of the benefits system and local employment opportunities.

Groups may invite members to do a short presentation on areas of their own expertise eg budgeting on low incomes, insurance's, CV writing etc. Even talking about their previous employment can be helpful if other members are thinking of applying to jobs in a similar environment

Advice from external helpers/guest lecturers can be a further valuable resource to the group, and provide valuable interest to group activities over a period of months.

The most urgent need for sound advice is for new members who have only recently become unemployed. Appendix 1 - *Notes for Guidance for the Newly Unemployed* - was written for this situation. Leaders and helpers can copy this and give it to new members, and add their own illustrations, local information and experiences.

Advisers (eg in the DSS, financial or legal firms) usually deal with facts at a fairly practical level, rather than emotions. Individuals will often add emotional, and possibly unconscious factors before making a decision. Unemployment problems often affect all these levels. Sales people often exploit emotional vulnerability. Counselling (see next section) may help individuals to take them into account in a balanced way. For this reason individuals are advised to avoid major decisions when under stress, or to seek professional help if major decisions are involved (e.g. quitting a job or selling a house) appear unavoidable.

Advice or 'hints and tips' offered informally in group discussions can be a good use of members' experience. In the group it can be questioned. But members should be advised to double check advice they receive privately from unqualified advisers (e.g. check with the Citizens Advice Bureau).

CAUTION: *The main danger of using volunteers is that they may seek to offer advice in areas in which they are not qualified. Professional advisers are legally liable for their advice, whether they charge for it or give it free. Leaders need to check whether advisers are competent for the subjects they are offering, and to warn members that the group cannot be liable for advice given by other individuals.*

Financial advice is one example to watch: investment of redundancy money offers considerable opportunities for bad advice, by accident or design, at huge cost to members. Pyramid sales schemes often target unemployed people as potential dealers. If leaders are in doubt about any type of advice or presentations offered to the group men contact me local Citizens Advice Bureaux or the CSGU network.

3.5 Counselling

Counselling is a more specialised form of assistance usually offered on a one-to-one basis, and over a series of sessions. The use of a counselling approach is becoming popular in many of the helping professions. In simple terms it may seem to be about giving advice but this is not always the case.

These are some of the potential problems with giving another person 'advice' e.g.

- do you know what their real problem is, or do you jump to conclusions?
- do you have enough information to make the right diagnosis?
- even if your advice is good, will they take it?
- are you doing it to help them, or to make you feel good?

Counselling experts over the years (e.g. Gerard Egan in *The Skilled Helper*) realised that ***the most effective form of help for complex personal problems is to help people help themselves***. Counselling can help them to understand their own situation more clearly, and give them skills to solve their own problems. They are likely to be more committed to the results, and likely to be more self-sufficient for coping with future problems.

The role of the counsellor is to listen, support and challenge but to always leave the ultimate decision to the individual. This is exemplified by the Samaritans organisation whose principles include the statement that 'a caller does not lose the freedom to make his/her own decisions, including the decision to take their own life.'

Professional counselling is more than a chat over a cup of coffee. There needs to be agreement that the counsellor and individual will work together to achieve discussed outcomes. During this process the counsellor will explore the real issues, often hidden under the presenting problem and may move from conscious to unconscious thoughts and reactions. Underpinning this process is the acceptance that everything said during the discussions is confidential within agreed terms. *Formal training is essential for anyone who wishes to develop effective counselling skills and use them responsibly.*

Leaders and Helpers do not need to be trained counsellors. Their prime tasks are about creating a supportive environment for the group, and offering friendship to members.

However the basic principles of counselling outlined in Part II can be helpful background knowledge for leaders and helpers, as they are for parents, teachers and anyone who may be in contact with people in difficult circumstances or distress. A number of the techniques offered are general life-skills (e.g. action planning, problem solving etc.) that can be taught to the group.

It is helpful if a support group has access to one or more trained counsellors who can give extra support to members who may need it, between group sessions and not during them. Leaders and helpers with basic counselling awareness can then refer members who appear to need more professional support to their trained counselling contact(s).

Helping relationships - dependency and freedom

Throughout the counselling process the objective is to help the client to rebuild confidence, gain an accurate understanding of his/her situation, and empower him/her with ways of taking control over difficult situations. Ideally coping skills are transferred which the client can use time and again in the future.

Counselling is partly like helping an injured bird back to health: the purpose is to see the bird fly again on its own, not to become a dependent pet. If done skilfully counselling enables the client to cope with difficult situations on their own, now and in the future.

3.6 Helping the helpers

Your support group is likely to be run by volunteers both as leaders and helpers. However willing they are you need to consider several special needs to take care of yourselves:

a) Sharing the load

Leading or helping in a group regularly can be very demanding. Most group helpers are highly committed and may put many hours into the group's operation between meetings as well as during them. The work can be emotionally demanding, sometimes supporting distressed individuals in situations that are beyond their control and yours. But it can also be fun and very rewarding.

Leaders and helpers should allow themselves and each other regular breaks. This also encourages other people to volunteer. In single leader/helper groups thought should be given to arranging a relief, either locally or via the CSGU network.

Remember that *"a problem you can do nothing about is not a problem any more - just a fact to be taken into account"*. This can be important to keep volunteer work in the right perspective, not unduly owning other people's problems.

b) Training opportunities

Many of the activities involved in running a support group are very worthwhile and rewarding for all concerned. Some activities are easier with some training or advance warning of how to cope. And some, like counselling skills, must involve formal training.

Leaders and helpers will probably want to keep extra commitments to a minimum. But occasional training or briefing sessions, either within the group, or at CSGU network workshops could make running groups easier for helpers, more effective for clients, and more fun for everyone.

c) Helping relationships - safeguards for helpers and clients

Helpers and counsellors also need to be aware that individuals suffering extended periods of distress and isolation may become very grateful and affectionate for the help they receive - possibly the first sincere affection or emotional support they have experienced for months or years.

It is so important not to confuse a trusting helping relationship with an intimate personal relationship because the situation involves a heightened vulnerability on the part of the client. This must be recognised and respected, not misunderstood or exploited even in good faith. The consequences of inappropriate relationships in a helping situation can be very sad, whether one sided or mutual.

If relationships between helpers and clients begin to get difficult, intense, or distressing, the helper should seek advice from the leader or other CSGU network members. In professional counselling situations the concept of *regular supervision* is recommended. This creates opportunities for helpers to discuss difficult situations and seek advice and support at an early stage.

Ideally there should also be a *complaints procedure* for clients who are uneasy about the working of the group, with open access to any leader or helper, or elsewhere in the CSGU network.

The concept of supervision, or mentoring for all leaders and helpers in support groups is important to consider, either within the group, or provided within the wider CSGU network. This applies as much to established groups as to new ones.

d) Involvement in new directions

It is important to let the group decide its own future in a co-operative way. The needs of the helpers and leaders need to be included too. So periodical planning meetings are desirable where everyone has a chance to share their ideas for new activities.

This involvement for leaders and helpers can also include contacts with other support groups individually, or at CSGU events. These will give opportunities to compare experiences and discuss changing needs and new possibilities. And this CSGU involvement includes inviting contributions from leaders and helpers for future editions of this *Handbook* and other information or training materials.

4. GETTING STARTED

4.1 Contacting potential members

Despite the large numbers of unemployed (40,000+ in this area) only a small number are currently involved with support groups (less than 500). There may be a number of reasons for this:

- not knowing that such groups exist
- feeling they are exclusive clubs (e.g. for executives etc).
- not wanting to identify with being unemployed.
- feeling isolated, depressed so too unconfident to join.
- not wanting to be 'supported'.
- existing groups are too far away.
- no existing friends involved to make it safer.
- being put off by first impressions (all men? all suits? all older?) etc.
- not wanting to be 'converted' or sucked in to religion.
- pessimistic that support groups won't solve the real problem.

Making contact with potential members will depend on *overcoming negative factors* like those above. How will they know about your group? Will it be relevant to their personal needs? Will it work? What is the catch?

Your survey of local needs and points of contact with unemployed people will give some clues about how to offer the support group's services. *A leaflet or posters* in shops, churches, libraries, surgeries and schools will be helpful.

Announcements in church, and in church related groups, will spread news of the group. And *informal briefings* with local community focal points e.g. doctors, teachers, library, careers and Post Office staff will all help, not only to spread news of the group, but to make contacts for future referrals and recommendations.

Regular meetings (at least for a trial period e.g. 1-2 months) will give more credibility and continuity. A new activity takes time to become known and accepted.

4.2 Planning the first meeting

The first meeting could be about an hour, plus informal time before and after. With some preparation it should be possible to personally invite some people - even 3 or 4 will do. A few minutes explanation to them before the meeting will help them to understand what is happening, and not to expect too much too soon. They can form a core which can then welcome new arrivals.

Think about the setting. A semicircle of chairs is more friendly than rows of seats because people can look at each other as well as the presenter. And think about smoking. It may not be permitted in most meeting areas but try to provide times and places for people who need to smoke, especially during the nervous phase of meeting new people.

An informal '*getting to know you*' period of 10-15 minutes may help at the start of the session. But early arrivals will soon get restless and want some action. So a *short introduction* will help to set the scene for the first session.

It is worth passing round a list for names, addresses and phone numbers so that attenders can be given details of future events.

The leader/convenor can then invite people to give *brief personal introductions* e.g. first name and what they hope to get from coming to the group. These initial introductions give a chance to begin to *identify needs and priorities* of the people present. It may be better not to ask for detailed personal backgrounds that take time and will make some people nervous. The needs raised may be different from what the leader and helper expected. It is helpful to write up questions and needs raised by the group. This can then be used as the agenda for the rest of the meeting.

If there are more than 5-6 people present then quieter members will probably not join in. (Refer to Section 3.2 - Extraversion/Introversion). Try breaking a large group into several *smaller groups* to let people discuss their needs in more detail for say 30 minutes.

After the small groups try a short break for *refreshments*. This gives time for people to make informal contacts and feel more comfortable with what is going on.

After a break bring the group together for a *combined session* and invite people to bring forward comments, needs and suggestions from the smaller discussions.

If you have some *handouts* available e.g. the *Personal Checklist* and the *Notes for Guidance of Newly Unemployed* will give people something practical to take away and think about.

If possible agree some *topics for the next meeting*.

After closing the meeting you leaders and helpers may need to be available for a few minutes for any individuals to talk to, particularly if they have *urgent questions* or are in some distress. Make a note any urgent needs and try to act on them - probably with *referrals* - within a few days.

Review and further action

After the meeting leaders and helpers may have a follow up discussion to review responses and plan the next session. They may also like to contact other CSGU leaders for comments or advice.

Do not be too ambitious for the first few meetings. "*Eat your elephant a spoonful at a time*" applies to starting a new group as it does to helping an individual to regain confidence and take action!