

What's Up With This Support Group Mumbo-Jumbo?

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These days it seems like there is a “support group” for everything and a variety of ways to participate, from virtually (also known as online) or the ‘old-fashioned’ way, face-to-face. Only a small portion of people take advantage of the opportunity to connect with people facing a similar diagnosis—in this case, chronic kidney disease. Why? Some people are understandably uncomfortable discussing their personal lives with strangers. With good support groups, everything discussed within the group should remain confidential. Participating in a support group is just *one more way of giving yourself an edge for living well with a chronic illness.*

People give a number of reasons for not participating

in a support group. Sometimes a person may have tried a support group in the past and had a bad experience. Support groups are dynamic; they change with the mix of people attending and the type of day the participants may have been having —so it might be worth attending a support group more than once before deciding that it is definitely not for you. You may have thought to yourself, “I don’t want to talk about my problems—and I don’t want to hear other people’s problems.” While support groups are not for everyone, you may be surprised by the positive experience you have by meeting with people who are also dealing with a chronic disease and the *hope* it can unlock.

Why do people attend support groups? It gives people





the opportunity to share concerns and experiences with people going through something similar. So, you're thinking, "support groups are good—but for someone else, not me." Well, why not you? Attending a support group has been found to influence better health outcomes or prognoses with some chronic illnesses. A well-run support group provides a safe space for individuals to share their stories, and a place where people identify with a shared experience. There is strength in shared knowledge and understanding. Participating can help give you a sense of power and self-determination. It is a place where you can compare observations about resources, get advice, feel less cut off from others, and maybe even relieve some stress by honestly sharing your feelings.

What exactly is a support group? Often, the term support group is confused with 'group therapy.' Group therapy is a formalized type of therapy led by a mental health professional. Support groups are about *support*, creating a sense of community and connection with a specific focus; it is not formal therapy. A support group can be led by professionals or by non-professional peers.

Every support group is different, so you need to evaluate what type of group you're looking for—structured or informal? Online or in-person? Online support groups allow you to connect with people all over the world 24/7 (any time day or night) and provide a certain amount of an-

onymity. With that, you must also be cautious of the credibility of the people using the group. Beware of people who misrepresent themselves and don't believe everything you read online as truth. Some warning signs that a face-to-face support group or online support group may be the wrong group for you are: fees for attending groups or meetings that are mainly sessions centered around complaining. If you are feeling overwhelmed by attending a support group or discouraged or judged by the group, then the group you are attending is not right for you.

If you are feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or isolated, a support group can help in combination with medical care. If you think sharing your thoughts in a group is something you'd never do, then consider connecting with a counselor to help you find healthy ways to cope with your kidney disease. Support groups or counselors are there to provide emotional support if you're feeling like no one understands your struggles related to kidney disease. Within a group, sometimes humor can be found and it also provides a chance for you to help others who may be struggling with something with which you have struggled. It is your journey but you do not have to go on it alone. If you are interested in starting a support group, you can contact the DPC Education Center for more information on how to get one started or speak with your social worker in your facility. ■