

## Support Groups: The Naked Truth

You may picture the scene in your mind, as seen on various TV sit coms and movies:

.....Sitting on a folding chair in the local church basement, the smell of burnt coffee and stale donuts wafting through the air. You are surrounded by a room full of strangers. Everyone is expected to talk when it's their turn. Some go on...and on..and on...There is lots of sharing of private "feelings". As you listen to the sad story of the person next to you, you silently wonder why you came in the first place. Oh, and the chairs are arranged in a circle, so eye contact is uncomfortable and unavoidable...

Now. Personally, I find support groups to be wonderful places! Of course... I am a social worker. And social workers are known for their love of people... and circles... and "feelings". Granted, my comfort level is not shared by the general public. Just the WORDS "support group" trigger all sorts of preconceived notions.

So, let's dispel 5 common myths and talk about what really happens at a support group.

MYTH: "All group members must share their story."

TRUTH: Sharing will help you reap the most benefit from the support group experience. However, you are NEVER forced to talk during the group. Many members observe for several meetings before sharing a thing!

MYTH: "Group members must RSVP and commit to attending the group regularly."

**TRUTH:** RSVPs help the organizers plan for logistics like room set up and refreshments. However, you are free to walk in with no prior notice. There may be different people in group each week. Life happens! The meeting time may work well one month, and not so well the next! It's important to see the group as a benefit you look forward to, rather than another obligation you have to squeeze into your day. When you find the RIGHT group for you, this perspective develops naturally.

**MYTH:** "All support groups are the same. If you've seen one, you've seen them all."

**TRUTH:** Each support group is in fact very different. Some have more spouses and life partners. Others have a higher number of adult children, or long distance caregivers. Some meet at nursing homes or senior centers, others at churches (though the coffee and donuts are usually quite good! ☺). Some groups invite regular guest speakers to educate members about various dementia related topics. In others, group leaders prepare a general topic to stimulate sharing and discussion. The best way to determine whether a support group is right for you, is to contact a group leader. This person typically works in the senior health care field, and can fill you in on details about the group.

**MYTH :** "I'm handling mom's condition just fine, I have it all under control. I don't need a group."

**TRUTH:** As a recovering Type A control type, allow me to shed some light on this one. There is no CONTROLLING dementia. There is just COPING. The progressive, ever changing nature of dementia means that tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year, may be very

different from today. Once you've figured out how to solve one issue, another has arrived in its place. Support groups are rich with knowledge and resources. Group leaders and members have certainly never walked in your shoes. Still, chances are, some have traveled a very similar path...and have picked up some great tips along the way.

**MYTH:** It's hard to find a support group that fits my schedule. There is no way to know if a group will meet my needs.

**TRUTH:** There are over 70 support groups in Connecticut alone, with additional groups forming all the time. The Alzheimer's Association trains support group leaders. This ensures that leaders are well prepared to lead effective, quality groups. You can find Alzheimer's Association endorsed support groups on their website. Visit: <http://www.alz.org/findus>.

So... if you are a person or a caregiver living with dementia, consider a support group. What's the worst can happen? Burnt coffee? Stale donuts? Grab Dunkin' on the way!