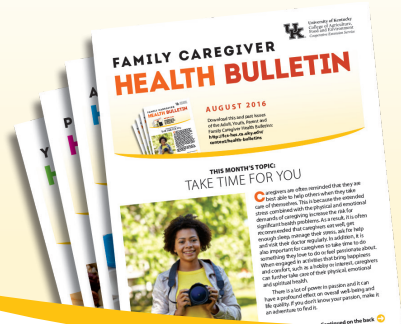


FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



JULY 2019

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<http://fcs-hes.ca.uky.edu/content/health-bulletins>

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

JOIN A CAREGIVING SUPPORT GROUP



A support group is a group of people who gather over common experiences and/or concerns. Because of their shared understanding and experience, people in a support group are able to provide each other with comfort, empathy, encouragement, and even information or advice. Support groups help people connect (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

Various community or national agencies or organizations like hospitals or healthcare clinics can offer support groups. But they can also be independent of any organization and run entirely by its members. Formats can also vary from face-to-face meetings to teleconferences to online communities (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

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➔ Continued from page 1

Groups can be led by a lay leader who is experiencing or has experienced the group's common experience or by a professional facilitator such as a healthcare professional or counselor. Some groups will offer educational opportunities through guest speakers or lectures about particular topics related to the group's needs. Other groups have sessions where members can talk about and share their own personal experiences.

Because members of a support group share common experiences and often similar feelings, worries, stresses, and concerns, participants often find strength in being with other people who "get it."

According to the Alzheimer's Care Resource Center (2019) and the Mayo Clinic (2018), the benefits of support groups can be numerous:

- Learning you are not alone
- Sharing honestly and openly in a safe, nonjudgmental environment
- Discovering new resources and information
- Getting practical feedback
- Keeping up your motivation

Along with the benefits, there are risks like someone dominating the conversation, disruptive group members, competitive comparisons of those who feel their situation is worse, bad group dynamics, poor facilitators, or unsound advice.

With the daily demands of caregiving, finding time to attend a group can be challenging. Online support groups can provide flexibility and offer more privacy or anonymity. But it can also intensify isolation, increase opportunities for misinformation or misinterpretation of information, encourage emboldened behavior or disrespect because you are not face-to-face, and open a vulnerable community to predatory people (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

Questions to ask before joining a support group

Because support groups vary in organization, members, and leadership, the Mayo Clinic

(2018) suggests asking the following questions before joining and taking heed if a facilitator promises cures, asks for high fees, or pressures you to purchase products or services:

- Is the group designed for people with a specific medical condition or certain stage of a disease?
- Does the group meet for a set time or does it continue indefinitely?
- Where does the group meet?
- At what time and how often does the group meet?
- Is there a facilitator or moderator?
- Has the facilitator undergone training?
- Is a mental health expert involved with the group?
- What are the guidelines for confidentiality?
- Are there established ground rules for group participation?
- What is a typical meeting like?
- Is it free? If not, what are the fees?

To find a support group, ask a healthcare professional, your local Extension agent, or an organization like The Alzheimer's Association or The American Heart Association that advocates for your specific need (Mayo Clinic, 2018).

If you choose to attend a support group, participate in a way that makes you the most comfortable. For example, you could choose to listen versus sharing your experience. The Mayo Clinic suggests trying it for a few weeks to help you fully realize whether the support group is a good fit for you, or whether you should consider a different group, setting, or format.

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