

## What is a Support Group?

An Alzheimer's Association affiliated support group can be made up of care partners, family members, and loved ones of those with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia. Although these people begin as strangers, they quickly become friends and, in a sense, a family.

The support group leaders may be a community member and/or a health care professional. The meeting may focus on emotional support and sharing experiences, or it may focus on education, with experts speaking on topics such as legal issues, nutrition, caregiving techniques and community resources.

The number of participants will vary, in some cases depending on the format. For instance, educational groups are usually larger. However, the ideal size for a support group is 6 to 12 members.

Meetings are usually held monthly or bi-monthly at hospitals, churches, libraries, care facilities or senior centers.

The purpose of an Alzheimer's Association support group is to offer individuals support and information that is specific to dementia. Some Alzheimer's Association chapters have specialized support groups, such as: early stage groups, groups for adolescents, male care partners, adult children caring for a parent, and care partners dealing with late stage issues.

Support groups that are sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association are open to the public and free of charge. These support groups depend on the chapters they are affiliated with to provide resources such as literature, updates on legislation and research, and newsletters. Alzheimer's Association chapters serve larger areas than the support groups and they provide resources to the community as well.

Alzheimer's Association support groups encourage members to share information, give and receive mutual support and exchange coping skills with one another. Support group members share practical suggestions for caring based on their caregiving experiences. Caring for an individual with dementia requires different techniques than those needed to care for someone who is not cognitively impaired. Experienced care partners have found that some methods of providing care, ideas that may not be found in books or articles, can make caregiving easier. Sharing those ideas in a support group can prevent care partners from having to "re-invent the wheel."

The support group setting also assists individuals in learning about and locating community resources, such as adult day care and transportation services. Through sharing common experiences, individuals can obtain consumer information, such as listings of physicians who are familiar with dementia or nursing homes in the area that accept dementia patients.

Perhaps what is most important about a support group is the atmosphere of caring, frankness and confidentiality it provides. Care partners need the freedom to express their emotions without feeling guilt, and they need the positive reinforcement that can be given by others who know the hard work involved in providing care. A support group gives its members the chance to vent their frustrations, anger and disappointments, as well as share their successes in a safe, non-judgmental environment. In the process, members take a first step in restructuring their lives by forming new relationships with each other.

### **Why Do You Need a Support Group?**

Attending a support group is often difficult at first. It takes time to feel comfortable sharing your problems with people you do not know. However, the experience of many individuals is that once they open up, they find that their problems are not so different from those of other support group members. Suddenly, the people they were sharing with were not strangers at all, and by sharing with others in the same situation they felt less alone.

If you are having difficulty talking to family or friends about your feelings, you may find that it is easier to express yourself in a support group, where you can be honest with others who are facing similar problems.

Through participation in a support group, you will be better prepared and perhaps feel less devastated as your loved one's condition becomes worse. You also may be able to find some hope, from seeing that others who have been caring longer have survived the caregiving experience.

### **How to Find the Right Support Group for You**

Not every support group is necessarily right for everyone, however with a little searching, you probably can find a group that fits for you.

Each person who attends the group is an individual with unique needs, preferences and communication styles. Each group has its own way of functioning with some groups' focus or content more on education, some on supportive listening and some on problem-solving and coping techniques. Each group and facilitator also seem to have their own 'personality' or communication style.

We encourage you to call the facilitator before you attend the group to see if it seems like a good fit for you.

Possible things to discuss are:

- What is the make-up of the group (mostly spouses, children, long-distance caregivers, etc.)?
- Is there a specific focus for the group (topic each time, specific stage, problem-solving, education)?
- How many people usually attend?
- How long has the facilitator been with the group?
- Tell the facilitator about what you would like to get out of the group or in what atmosphere you feel most comfortable

Remember that if you attend a group(s) and they don't feel right for you, you can always try another group.

**Support Groups are FREE and available to care partners and families who are dealing with Alzheimer's disease or other memory loss disorders. The meetings have proven to be an excellent place to find information, education, friendship and support. For additional information and an up to date support group listing, please call the 24/7 Information Helpline at 1-800-272-3900 or visit our website at [www.alzmdak.org/gethelpandinfo/supportgroups](http://www.alzmdak.org/gethelpandinfo/supportgroups).**

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

**Updated** December 2007