

LEADERSHIP

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QUESTION: “Our group is down to about half a dozen members who rotate meeting at each other’s homes for lunch once a month. I’ve heard of other groups that are losing members as well. What can we do to keep our post-polio data bases from eroding to the point where we lose all contacts and are then unable to help anyone?”

ANSWER: It’s true that some post-polio groups have lost members recently. It would be easy to attribute this to a lower energy level as we age and meet new health challenges. However, that wouldn’t paint the entire picture. There are many other reasons why a group’s membership falls off over time. A lack of rotation in leadership can lead to burnout. A group can quickly get stale when everyone doesn’t get involved, leading members to tire of it. Groups where all members aren’t included in decision-making can find it hard to stay alive.

Members who fit in the slowing-down category bring great strength to a meeting. They have the advantage of experience and knowledge that newcomers seek. Many groups create jobs for these valued members that others might find difficult to fill—jobs that can be done from home. For instance, taking newcomer calls most effectively requires the voice of one who has been there and knows what to pass on. Various computer tasks, such as writing certain types of articles for the newsletter or making personal cards of thanks, “missing you” or “loved your brownies” for the group to send are easily done in a leisurely way as we pace ourselves throughout the day. There are many such low-energy pursuits.

GETTING THE JUICES FLOWING

More physically ambitious assignments are tackled by those on the second tier. That’s why it’s essential to have a second tier. Every day polio survivors discover they have post-polio syndrome—these are the potential newcomers who prove that the work of our groups is necessary. Developing effective outreach is essential. We need these people every bit as much as they need us. Perfect symbiosis. This represents the new blood that keeps our meetings active. Effective leaders are good at making room for new members and welcoming their fresh ideas and healthy enthusiasm.

Brainstorming is the key to revitalization. Start by bringing everyone to the table, including as many as possible of those who have left the group. Agree in the beginning to keep personalities out of the discussion. This has to be an open, friendly group, objective and supremely honest. Check egos at the door. Then get down to business. Listen to every voice. Examine every detail. Be specific:

- What made this group worthwhile in the beginning?
- What have we done that we’d like the group to repeat?
- What is stopping us from doing these things?
- What elements make up the vision of our ideal post-polio support group?
- How can we put these into play?
- What can we do to take the excitement of today’s discussion into the future of our group?

continued

We must be aware that though this difficult soul searching will likely generate change—many things will not be done the way we did them before—looking at our groups through a new pair of glasses can provide the buzz of excitement we hope for.

MAXIMIZING TIME

Socializing can be a part of every meeting, but more ambitious goals often attract busy members who want to be certain the way they spend their time will pack a punch. They want to play an important role in meeting the needs of those still searching for the support most of our groups are designed to offer. Talented leaders learn to point the way and then step back and watch their committees go to it. Wonderful things happen when members know that their time and effort carry impact, that what they do truly matters.

In the end, there may be groups that decide their work is done. They may ask for guidance from other groups, attend workshops for inspiration, do everything they know of to breathe life back into their once-thriving organization, and still conclude this group cannot continue. Such a thoughtful outcome is always best. But for those who are anxious to keep going, the possibilities abound.

* Nancy Baldwin Carter and Joan L. Headley are co-authors of the Chapter "Support Groups: Keeping Them Active and Useful" in Lauro Halstead, MD's new book *Managing Post-Polio: A Guide to Living and Aging Well With Post-Polio Syndrome*. The book sells for \$13.95 per copy with \$4.25 postage for one book; \$7.50 postage for two or more books. For more details, contact NRH Press, National Rehabilitation Hospital, Publication Office, 102 Irving St. NW, Washington, DC 20010-2949; 202-877-1776; 202-829-5161 fax. Watch <http://www.nrhrehab.org/>.
