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Who are we?

M-Coalition is a regional HIV/AIDS advocacy network specifically devoted to the needs of LGBT in the MENA region. It was established in January 2014 in response to a shared concern that current HIV strategies and responses in the region are not adequately responsive to MSM and later expanded to include all aspects of health for MSM. In 2018, M-Coalition officially started working on health needs for lesbian women and transgender populations.
What will you find?

In the following pages, you will find guidelines on how to facilitate support groups for people living with HIV. The resources lay out key things you as a facilitator should know, provide ideas and suggestions for running an effective group, present tools to help carry out the job and give links to resources which may help you improve your groups and your facilitation of it. The information is categorized in sections to help you pick and choose what works best for you. We encourage you to incorporate your own resources and knowledge to add to the content we have provided. If this format does not work for you, change it as you see fit to meet your needs.
Living with HIV can be very difficult. One thing that can be helpful is finding the support of others living with HIV through support groups.

People living with HIV (PLHIV) form support groups to share emotional and spiritual support. They also form support groups to develop and sustain positive strategies for living with the virus and to strengthen their knowledge about HIV and AIDS. The group is a space where PLHIV can share experiences confidentially, gain self-confidence, make new friends and develop a public voice. When PLHIV form support groups, the following topics are addressed:

**Group members talk about how to accept their HIV status and live positively and healthfully. They discuss the health and psychosocial challenges they have experienced and conclude how best to deal with these challenges. Members might share ideas about attaining good nutrition and maintaining adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART), or exchange practical advice about overcoming anxiety and coping with stress. Sharing experiences is especially helpful for members who have recently learnt of their HIV-positive status.**

**Finding out that you are HIV positive doesn’t have to mean an end to relationships with HIV negative partners. Remember that if you’re on treatment and have an undetectable viral load, you cannot pass on HIV. You may find it difficult to tell a partner you are living with HIV, but not telling a partner can lead to problems later.**

**Support group members can help each other think through how to disclose their HIV-positive status to partners. Disclosing an HIV-positive status can be extremely stressful, and members can share ideas on what to say, when to disclose and who to disclose to.**
Support groups provide an important refuge from the stigma that PLHIV and their families experience. Groups can also develop ways of addressing stigma in their communities. There is still fear and lack of understanding about HIV and many PLHIV are hurt when rejected by partners or friends, especially if they are turned down in insensitive ways. The key is to always express these emotions and to try not to give up hope.

One-on-one support over a long-term period is especially effective for people who have recently learnt their HIV-positive status or have commenced treatment. PLHIV support groups are often a hub where members serve as friends and identify individuals who can support them. A ‘mentor’ or ‘sponsor’ will offer personal and frequent support to their peer PLHIV, for example, by accompanying them to the clinic for check-ups or reminding them to take their medication on time.
It is well known that the use of HIV treatment not only improves the health of people living with HIV, but is also a highly effective strategy to prevent HIV transmission. This is because HIV treatment can reduce the amount of virus (viral load) in the blood and other bodily fluids (such as semen and vaginal and rectal fluids) to undetectable levels. To become and remain undetectable, people living with HIV need to take their HIV treatment as prescribed.

In addition to taking HIV medications, regular medical visits are important to monitor viral load to make sure it stays undetectable, and to receive other medical support. A person living with HIV who has undetectable viral load does not transmit HIV to their partners.
Support groups take a variety of approaches. These approaches depend on the needs and interests of the participants. The needs and interests of groups are likely to differ based on the characteristics of group members.

The guidelines of setting up a support group are grouped in (8) headings:

- Setting up a Support Group
- Facilitator
- Structure of Meeting
- Location and Organization
- Creating the right atmosphere
- Outreach
- Developing ground rules
- Activities

If you partner with an organization that provides services to people living with HIV, that organization may be willing to tell its members about your group so that those who are interested can join. If you are not familiar with organizations in your area, you can find more information about HIV-related services in your country by visiting https://sanadi.org/. You can ask if organizations in your area already have a support group; if they do not, you can ask them for suggestions and for ways they might help you start a group in your community.
PLHIV are advised to participate in all aspects of support group formation and operation. Although NGOs and health facilities often play a role in forming, nurturing and facilitating support groups, the primary drivers and decision-makers should be the PLHIV who belong to the group. Participation by PLHIV ensures that decisions are made by people closest to the situation; that PLHIV have ownership over the group; and that PLHIV know the group’s vitality is dependent upon their own needs, interests and participation.

Every support group should have a constitution developed by its members that clearly outlines how the support group will function. Constitutions provide clear guidance about what is and is not allowed within the group, and they establish the framework for the group’s norms and values. The constitution should address, at minimum:

- Overall vision and mission of the group
- Membership: How members will be recruited, maximum number of members, confidentiality, conflict resolution, what happens if a member violates confidentiality, leadership, meeting frequency, and life span of the group. Having a constitution that all members are aware of provides a foundation for teamwork and reduces potential for conflict.
- Support groups should only contain PLHIV.

**FACILITATOR**

Next, decide who will facilitate the group. If you want to participate in the group that is easier to do if someone is leading. Often, feelings that people have hidden will come out in a safe, supportive environment. Therefore, it is important to find qualified people in the community (ex: a mental health professional, PLHIV individuals, or someone experienced in leading support groups) who can assist with facilitating the group. Group leadership must be selected through a process that is transparent and fair, as articulated in the group constitution.

The role of the facilitator should be clearly defined; support group facilitators do not undertake unilateral decisions, rather, they build consensus and act as coordinators.
STRUCTURE OF MEETINGS

Next, you can think about the structure of the meetings – will they be free flowing or have a set agenda? Ask the participants in the group to help make this decision. Having them choose the way the meetings are carried out can help them feel some ownership of the group and safety. The more ownership they have, the more likely they are to participate consistently in the group.

Facilitators’ roles should involve the following:

- Ensuring all members actively participate
- Upholding the group constitution
- Organizing effective group meetings
- Overseeing the group’s schedule of activities
- Referring participants to the services needed

A support group cannot meet all of the emotional, social and health needs of PLHIV. What a group can do and cannot do should be clear to all members. Individual counselling, medical assistance and family support are all important types of support that can help PLHIV live positively and healthfully.
At the beginning session of each semester, the participants come with their ideas for various topics they would like to learn about. The group then decides together which topics will be covered and which social events will be planned. Once these decisions are made, a calendar is created, and various participants volunteer to help arrange the events on the calendar.

When new participants attend the group, they are provided with a calendar. This process helps core participants take ownership of the group and allows new participants to become familiar with the purpose, agenda, and structure of the group.

LOCATION AND ORGANIZATION

Other questions to consider include:
• How often will the group meet?
• Where will the group meet?
• What time will the group meet, and for how long?
• Will the group be closed or open to new members? If closed, how often will it open to new members?
• Will the group run for a certain number of weeks or will it be ongoing?
• Will the group adopt rules and delegate responsibilities?
• Will there be snacks? If so, who will be covering the cost?
• Will incentives such as transportation assistance be offered?

The meeting venue needs to be accessible, affordable, safe and agreeable to group members. When selecting a venue (if your organization cannot provide you with a space) facilitators must consider the cost of transport fares to and from location of participants. At the same time, facilitators must recognize that some members purposely decide to attend a support group outside of their neighborhood because of concerns about stigma and discrimination.

All of these obstacles must be taken into consideration when recruiting members. NGOs or health facilities may provide refreshments and snacks. Such organizations could use this opportunity to share information with the group on self-care and nutrition.
It is important to ensure that your support group provides a space that is safe, confidential and welcoming. Try to create a non-judgmental atmosphere where participants, both old and new, feel comfortable sharing their feelings. It can help to explain what confidentiality means to all members so that all participants have the same understanding and expectations for privacy. This is especially important for people living with HIV, since disclosing one’s status can have negative consequences and is often an emotionally challenging thing for people to do. In fact, one of the roles of a support group is to provide a safe space in which people can talk about living with HIV without having to be concerned about possible negative consequences.

Sharing experiences allows members to give each other support, and to exchange practical information and ways of coping. It also allows participants to understand themselves better through the insights of others.

When a group is new, participation may be small. It is important not to be discouraged and to continue to meet as scheduled.

The participants in the community need to see that the group continues to meet. Besides, the success of a group is not based on how many people attend, but on the relationships that develop and support that is provided.

If the group is open to new members, increase awareness by posting flyers at local organizations. Group name, meeting place, and meeting time are important facts to include. If a group is closed to keep it more confidential, then the name and number of the facilitator can be made available at local organizations for referrals. You may also want to coordinate with case managers and keep in contact with other organizations in your area that serve people living with HIV.
DEVELOPING GROUND RULES

Ground rules are standards of behavior that are agreed upon by the facilitator and the group members at the beginning of the session. These standards are a list of the group’s expectations for acceptable behavior during the session. As the number of participants grow, it will be important to create some ground rules and it is often helpful if participants create these rules themselves. Ground rules are a way of establishing boundaries and keeping order in the group. If the rules are broken, it is important to remind the group of the rules that the group established, so as to provide a level of continuity and safety.

Here are five basic ground rules to help get you started:
1) Only one person speaks at a time.
2) Stay on topic
3) No side conversations
4) Confidential issues will remain in the room
5) Respect others’ points of view

Notice that these ground rules are simple and direct, but are very meaningful. These are only five of many potential ground rules. If the participants are known to be disruptive, develop ground rules to prevent disruptive behaviors seen in previous sessions.

A set of reasonable ground rules will assist the facilitator in running an effective session. Even professionals might need some guidance with their conduct in a facilitated session. Ground rules are most effective when the participants are involved in their development and agree to the set of guidelines. It is better to have some simple guidelines in place to avoid issues, than to have them when issues arise.
Here are a few examples of common ground rules:

• Expectations around confidentiality: anything said or noticed in the room will not be repeated or discussed at another time or place. Group members must uphold confidentiality at all times. Each member must be certain that any information he/she/they shares with the group will not be discussed outside group boundaries without their consent. Support groups only work when members trust each other and can have free and open discussions.

• Openness and respect: group members are expected to listen to each other without interrupting, take turns speaking, and speak without judgment or giving advice; choosing not to speak is also respected.

• Language: group members are expected to avoid language that would offend other members and participants.

• Promptness: meetings will begin and end on time.

As the group grows: deal with issues immediately

As the group grows, the different personalities and sometimes opposing views of participants and facilitator(s) may cause some tension or division. As the group organizer, it will be important to deal with issues as they arise. Try to stick to the rules and consequences the group creates.

There may be times when the group process becomes more difficult and you want to quit. If that happens, try to reconnect with the reason you started the group and work out the difficulties so the group can continue. This may mean passing the organization or ‘ownership’ of the group to someone else. Since being a part of a support group is intended to help you live more healthfully with HIV, it is fine to leave a group if it no longer serves its purpose for you. If you are the group’s lead organizer, it is also okay to rotate out of your role and become a regular member of the group. This not only gives others an opportunity to step forward and assume leadership role, but also gives you the chance to benefit from membership in a group you helped create.
On a regular basis, group members should work together to develop a list of events and activities. At a set period, group participants should work together to prioritize events and activities for the next period, this list should be circulated to all participants. Some successful groups establish a theme for each month such as nutrition or adherence, and then organize speakers, and organize events that support theme.

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There is power in a group. Through support groups, participants have the opportunity to learn more about HIV, provide support for each other, develop leadership skills, set boundaries, gain respect, and develop their self-esteem and confidence. Through your group, PLHIV can learn that they are not alone – they have a family they chose, to support them as they live with HIV.

Leading a support group is a deeply rewarding experience, which can be both touching and fun, but also requires effort and time. Although many support group facilitators gladly pursue the role for many years, every interested potential facilitator should carefully consider what is involved in facilitating a support group.
Step 1: Meet & Greet Icebreakers
Exercise 1

Ice breakers, energizers, and engaging activities heighten the effectiveness of facilitation topics and the needs of the participants. The icebreaker exercises make it easy for the presenter to transition into the chosen topic, which reinforce the content and goal accomplishment of the session. The meet and greet icebreaker works well when you have a group of new participants and is also effective in helping participants get to know each other. For example, in a one-word ice breaker exercise, select one word that is an introduction to the session. In this case, an excellent choice is: “Answer in one word, what you think of when you think of stigma?” Participants reveal a lot about themselves and their thinking as soon as you begin the session.

Step 2: Setting the tone of the session
Exercise 2

Train participants on terminology, health disparities, and how to avoid assumptions and stereotypes. A positive or negative encounter with one participant can set the tone for the whole session. Make sure to ask participants to be respectful and non-judgmental in order to create a safe and comfortable space and to increase the likelihood that they remain engaged. For example, ask everyone to write down their preferred names/pronouns. Knowing and using someone’s gender pronouns is a positive way to acknowledge the other person’s identity.

Step 3: Maintaining focus
Exercise 3

Make sure you choose one topic at a time. Focusing on one subject is narrowing or sometimes broadening a topic so that you can demonstrate a good understanding of it, as well as including enough examples and important details.

Talking object (applies to all sessions)

Any distinctive object is placed in the center of the group. Speakers take it from the center, say their piece and pass it around. Only the person holding the object is permitted to speak (time limit is 2 minutes). This tool allows people to be considered in an organized order. They are then invited to speak in that order and take their time in voicing their views as they don't have to be afraid that someone else might jump in. It also makes people conscious of when they interrupt others and helps them to break the habit.
Session Evaluation Form for Participants

TO EVALUATE THE SESSION, PLEASE FILL THE FORM BELOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1 (NO)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3 (OK)</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (YES)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you satisfied with the session?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you feel the session met its objectives?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was the content clear?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did the handouts fit with this session – did they help?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did the facilitator allow sufficient discussion?</td>
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<td>Did the facilitator encourage participation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did the facilitator bring out new group ideas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was the session organized?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you feel comfortable in the group environment?</td>
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<td>Were you able to express yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you plan on attending the next session?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Comments:

Signature
ANNEX C FACILITATOR SESSION EVALUATION TEMPLATE

Session Evaluation Form for Facilitators

Date:
Name:

To evaluate the sessions, please fill the form below

Please take 20 minutes, once a month to complete the following questionnaire. Your responses will help us improve the toolkit.

1. To what extent do you feel the sessions met their objectives?

Not at all                         Somewhat                    Completely
1              2            3              4              5             6

Please explain your response.

2. Describe five things would you do differently next month (think in terms of methodology used, time management, level of participation in the sessions).

3. Describe what aspects of the sessions were particularly successful (think in terms of methodology used, time management, level of participation in the session).
4. List any training techniques or activities that you felt helped to achieve the sessions’ objectives (e.g. role play, case studies, presentations etc.). Please name the sessions that they were used in.

5. Were there any training materials that you felt helped achieve the sessions’ objectives? (e.g. hand-outs, examples etc.). Please name the session that they were used in.

5. What additional materials would have been useful in helping you prepare for the session?

6. What additional materials would have been useful in the delivery of the session?

If you wish to evaluate your work, send this form to (info@afemena.org)

Thank you,
M-Coalition, AFE-MENA, Lebanon