

b) Running the meeting

When you start the group don't be too concerned about numbers; they will grow over time.

Make sure you have plenty of chairs for everyone. No one likes to stand for an hour! You may wish to consider some refreshments, perhaps a jug of water and cups at the very least.

Starting off meetings

Introduce yourself and welcome everyone to the group. You might suggest that everyone introduce themselves, perhaps just their first names. This is a support group and formalities shouldn't be excessive, although it is important to develop a structure and ensure that all present know that the meeting is underway.

Ice breakers

Ice breakers are a great thing for a new group just starting up or for a group that has new members attending, it can even be a great fresher for people who may not have attended the group in a while.

Below are some suggestions you may want to use in your group.

Each person will introduce themselves by stating their name and answering the following question(s):

- if you had to give up a favourite food, which would be the most difficult to give up?
- if you could have an endless supply of any food, what would it be?
- what's your favourite cartoon character and why?
- you have been given access to a time machine, where and when would you travel to?
- what's the weirdest thing you have ever eaten?

Hopefully some of the ideas above will help your group to open up and bond.

Getting people to talk about themselves can be tricky at first but it is important that everyone feels included in the group. If someone doesn't want to open-up initially then that's fine, you don't want anyone to feel under pressure. Simply move on to someone else and perhaps the more hesitant individuals will open up when they see they have nothing about which to fear or feel embarrassed.

You'll find that some people open up more quickly than others. It's important not to let an individual or minority dominate the group. Try and steer any conversations around the group by asking quieter members if they agree or have had similar experiences.

Closing meetings

Finish each meeting by thanking members for attending and reminding them of the date of the next meeting. If you have email addresses for your members it is worthwhile sending out reminders, perhaps a week before the next meeting.

Managing people's expectations

As a Support Group Leader, facilitating a group is about the process of helping and supporting people to explore, learn and self-manage.

As a leader people will have very high expectations of you, remember you do not have all the answers, so it's ok to say 'I don't know' or 'I'll look into that' and take more advice on it.

From the beginning it is best to set out some clear rules with members of your group so they are fully aware of what to expect from you as a Support Group Leader.

- be honest from beginning
- never give out your personal details or any other members in the group
- explain you will answer emails at a certain time each week/month
- do not feel responsible for answering their questions, by continuing to attend the support group they must become a member of The IBS Network, therefore they will have access to 'Ask the experts' page and the nurses telephone helpline
- you as a Support Group Leader will not replace the advice of their own health care professional
- time management – make people aware that the group starts and finishes at certain times, do not get caught up in staying late or meeting before the group starts
- do not allow someone to hog all your time, you are there as a Support Group Leader for all members who attend the group
- make members aware that what you see and hear within the group will stay within the group unless
 - a) you suspect that a group member may be in need of protection or safeguarding
 - b) if a group member declares a plan to harm themselves or another person.

What to talk about at your meetings

This can be one of the most exciting aspects of starting and developing a group. Certain topics can be raised and then they can go on varying tangents as members bring their own experiences to the group.

Find out about your members' symptoms and their coping strategies by getting them to complete the symptom evaluator. Some of the most rewarding discussions that can be had in groups are when sufferers with similar symptoms have shared the treatments that have made a positive impact on their condition.

See the enclosed range of factsheets to give you ideas as to meeting themes. Don't worry if you have planned a theme for a meeting and the meeting goes off on a tangent, sometimes these are the most productive meetings where people report really getting something from them.

Have a look at the enclosed support group topics in Section 2 for more ideas. The meetings don't have to be particularly formal; they may work best if they are informal. However, they will need a bit of structure and it is up to you to judge how the meetings proceed.

Encourage members to suggest topics for discussion and if they have several topics they'd like to discuss then let that be the basis for the meeting.

Get to know the range of healthcare professionals in your area. Also, use the useful links sheet in the pack to find professionals like registered Dietitians and Complementary Therapists in your area. They may be able to help in signposting people to your group. They may also be interested in coming to your group to give a talk.