

# The Golden Thread

Building Family Bonds  
& Parenting Skills as a  
Means to Reduce Recidivism  
in European Prisons

## Prisoners' Family Support Group – Manual for Practitioners

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***The Golden Thread: Building Family Bonds and Parenting Skills as a Means to Reduce Recidivism in European Prisons***

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## Introduction

### Document Identity

The Manual for Practitioners is an analytic document that will provide to any professional who undertakes the role of the facilitator for a family support group consisting of family members affected by imprisonment, the principles and the framework for setting up, conducting and operating a Prisoners' Family Support Group.

The aim of the Manual is to give practical guidelines to the facilitators of the family support group on how the group will operate and to help them discuss the issues relating to specific ground rules, according to which the group will implement its meetings. These ground rules include issues such as the timing, the frequency and the duration of the meetings, confidentiality issues, etc. Moreover, the Manual aims to provide guidance and advice on practical issues related to the role of the facilitators, such as preparing for the meeting, starting, leading and closing a discussion, preparing the meeting room, starting the meetings, giving preliminary introductions and information, encouraging members to listen each other and support each other, offering support, dealing with difficult group members, and properly closing the meetings.

The Manual is to be used by facilitators complementarily with the Prisoners' Family Support Group (PFSG) Operational Framework, also developed by the Golden Thread project partners, to support the organization, the development and the implementation of the project's family support groups, which will take place in each participating country (Cyprus, Greece, Poland, and Portugal). The Operational Framework contains the methodology, background information on the importance of peer support, key elements needed in a support group

programme and a step-by-step outline on how to develop a peer support programme.

Therefore, the Manual is by no means an exhaustive guide including the theoretical background, for example, on the history and the philosophy of peer support methodologies, on the specific characteristics of families affected by incarceration and the challenges they face; instead, it is a guide to provide the practical framework for the implementation of the Prisoners' Family Support Groups, based on the specific approach of the Golden Thread project. It targets professionals with some experience in the field, such as psychologists, social workers, counsellors, coaches, etc., i.e. professionals who already have the basic skills and knowledge to lead and facilitate a peer support group.

Finally, the Manual can also be used independently of the Golden Thread project approach as a tool by any interested stakeholder [public/local authorities, penitentiary institutes, NGOs, voluntary organisations etc.] who wishes to organise family support groups especially for families affected by incarceration.

## **Family Support Groups for Prisoners' Families and their effectiveness**

Peer support refers to emotional and practical support provided by individuals who share similar experiences and backgrounds. In the context of prisoners' families, peer support may be provided by other families or other family members or friends who have also had their members incarcerated. This type of support can be particularly helpful because peers can relate to one another's struggles and offer empathy, understanding, and advice based on their own experiences.

Professional support and counselling, on the other hand, refers to services provided by trained and licensed mental health professionals. This type of support may include individual or group therapy, counselling sessions, or other types of interventions aimed at helping prisoners' families cope with the emotional stress and trauma associated with incarceration. Professional support may also involve education about coping skills, communication strategies, and other tools that can help families navigate the challenges of having a family member in prison.

While both peer support and professional support can be beneficial for prisoners' families, there are some key differences between the two. Peer support is often more informal and may be based on shared experiences rather than formal training or education. Professional support, on the other hand, is typically more structured and may involve evidence-based interventions that have been shown to be effective in addressing specific mental health concerns. Another important difference is that peer support is often free or low-cost, whereas professional support typically involves fees or insurance coverage. This can make peer support more accessible for families who may not have the financial resources to access professional services.

Regarding the benefits of peer support for prisoners' families, much evidence indicates that support groups for prisoners' families provide a safe and supportive environment for family members of incarcerated individuals to come together and

share their experiences. This can be particularly valuable given the stigma and isolation that many families of prisoners' experience. These groups for prisoners' families often offer practical advice and guidance on a range of issues related to incarceration. This may include information on navigating the criminal justice system, accessing resources such as legal aid or counselling services, or managing financial or logistical challenges associated with having a family member in prison. This information can help families navigate the complex and often confusing world of the criminal justice system and make informed decisions about how to best support their loved one. Moreover, these groups often serve as a source of emotional support for family members, providing a space to express feelings of grief, shame, uncertainty, anger, or anxiety in a non-judgmental setting. Many support groups also offer counselling or therapy services to help families cope with the stress and trauma of incarceration. Finally, support groups can help families build a sense of community and belonging with others who share similar experiences. This can be very important for families who may feel isolated or stigmatized because of the incarceration of one of their members. By connecting with others in similar situations, families can find strength and support in each other.

Finally, the results from a consultation process carried out by Pact in England, specifically for the group of families with incarcerated members, indicate that the perceived benefits of accessing Peer Support include<sup>1</sup>:

- reduced isolation and an opportunity to feel part of a community
- an opportunity to be amongst people who do not judge or stigmatise
- an opportunity to talk and share experiences and emotions
- an opportunity to receive information, advice and emotional support from those with lived experience.

To conclude, evidence suggest that the empowerment of families of prisoners is closely related to the development of resilience by giving them the freedom to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/media/rbxlovi1/peersupport-consultationwithfamiliesofprisoners.pdf>

explore and express their vulnerability. The findings of studies on families of prisoners, have communally agreed on the ability for self-help and peer- support groups to support families effectively and empower them through a number of different aspects<sup>2</sup>.

## **The role and the skills of the facilitator in a family support group**

### **The role**

Facilitated Support Groups are led by professionals with expertise in the specific issue on which the group focuses. A facilitator plans, guides and manages a group meeting to achieve its goals. Regardless of her or his professional background, experience and training in managing group dynamics are essential.

For a support group addressing challenges faced by families of persons serving prison sentence, including prisoner-family relations, the facilitator should be aware of various barriers specifically experienced by these families, including their material situation, logistical issues, as well as psychosocial problems concerned with imprisonment of family member – stigma attachment, social isolation and discriminatory practices towards them.

Managing a support group that is particularly concerned with building family bonds requires experience in communication, interpersonal relationships, and social skills training. At the same time, the facilitator must have the capability to assess individual members' needs and identify cases that may require additional professional assistance, referral, or intervention beyond the group's scope.

Effective facilitation requires objectivity and a focus on the “group process” – how individuals collaborate to perform tasks, make decisions, and address challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Empowering-Families-of-Prisoners-Mick-Schroeder.pdf>

A skilled facilitator remains impartial and guides the group in a way that enables the smooth flow of ideas and solutions.

To facilitate effectively, the facilitator must be objective and focus on the “group process.” That is, the ways that groups work together to perform tasks, make decisions and solve problems. Good facilitation involves being impartial and steering the group so that its ideas and solutions flow.

In summary, support group facilitators actively work to promote the processes that enable the group to achieve its objectives, ensuring that the meetings run smoothly in a safe and supportive environment. Their primary role is to foster healthy and effective communication among group members, serving as a role model for constructive interaction (Mental Health America, 2016). Their role also entails:

- providing a safe and supportive environment for members to share
- planning, guiding and managing the group to meet its goals
- fostering a healthy and effective communication among group members
- assessing individual members’ needs
- identifying cases that may require additional professional assistance, referral, or intervention beyond the group’s scope
- enabling the smooth flow of ideas and solutions within the group [facilitate discussion]
- providing information about resources available to support families
- offering coping strategies
- encouraging open communication and empathy within the group

## The skills

Regarding the necessary skills to facilitate the implementation of a family support group, the following are of high importance:

- Active listening: An essential communication skill for a support group facilitator is **active listening**. By actively absorbing the information presented by a group



member, demonstrating genuine interest, and offering feedback, facilitators ensure that the speaker is aware their message has been received. Providing verbal and non-verbal cues, summarizing and paraphrasing, asking clarifying questions and acknowledging and validating the speaker's emotions and thoughts by reflecting them back are only some of the active listening techniques which the facilitator needs to apply during the group meetings.

- **Self-care:** **Self-care** entails being aware of how personal circumstances and experiences can influence one's ability to facilitate effectively, especially in the case of peer facilitators. If the physical or emotional demands of facilitating the group start to have a negative impact on the facilitator's well-being, which is a quite usual phenomenon, they should be ready to transfer that responsibility to the co-facilitator or another designee. Another crucial component of self-care is emotion regulation, which is, recognising and managing emotions. It includes the ability to identify one's own emotions as they arise; understand what the emotional response is; acknowledge and accept the presence of emotions without judgment or suppression; and choose adaptive strategies to modify or manage emotions effectively.

- **Conflict resolution:** In situations where emotions run high or problematic group members become disruptive, an effective facilitator should take proactive measures to guide conversations towards healthy paths, thus preventing conflicts from arising (Clifton, 2007). When non-avoidable, the facilitator should resort to conflict resolution techniques and strategies to deal with conflict in a positive and constructive way, such as brainstorming and negotiating possible solutions<sup>3</sup>.

In summary, facilitators need to have the following skills and knowledge in order to facilitate a family support group for families affected by imprisonment:

- Counselling and group facilitation skills (active listening, empathy, and ability to manage group dynamics and conflicts)
- Cultural competences

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the role of the facilitator, please study the Operational Framework

- Time management and organizational skills
- Advocacy and referral skills
- Self-care and boundary setting
- Emotion regulation
- Knowledge of the criminal justice system, including its processes, procedures, and policies
- Knowledge of prisoner rehabilitation programs, including substance abuse treatment, education, and job training
- Knowledge of the challenges and dynamics for prisoners' families.

Based on their educational background, their experience in facilitating groups as well as their personal traits, facilitators need to:

- Be approachable and welcoming to all group members
- Accept and be open to change
- Understand that everyone is different and may have different opinions
- Be open to learning from other people within the group
- Respect all members of the group equally
- Have personal insight into their own life experiences, values and beliefs
- Be able to engage members
- Seek, accept and act upon feedback from members about the group's progress.

### **The second facilitator (co-facilitation)**

One facilitator can make a support group effective. Bringing a co-facilitator can lead to even better engagement, providing participants and facilitators with additional space and focus to reach their desired outcomes. Co-facilitation is when two or more facilitators deliver a session as a team. Co-facilitators share the responsibility of everything from co-designing an agenda to delivering a support group and following up with participants. Co-facilitation can come in different forms. It might mean sharing "the stage" throughout a support group meeting or alternating who is the lead and supporting facilitator.

Some of the benefits of having two facilitators are:

**More attention on the group:** Facilitation is often an exhausting process. During long complex group meetings with large numbers of participants, the attention of a single facilitator is often split around the group. Bringing in a second facilitator means a second pair of eyes in the room ensuring that everyone in the group is attended to. It's easier to ensure all voices are heard and help those who require extra attention. Co-facilitation also makes it easier to manage issues or adversity when it arises. For example, one facilitator may handle a technical issue while the other facilitator preps the group.

**Energy management:** Energy is a vital ingredient for a successful support group. For both participants and facilitators, it's normal that energy levels fluctuate throughout a group meeting. Co-facilitation makes it easier to manage both personal and group energy. Swapping facilitators can create variety, increase engagement and positively affect the energy in a room. It also provides the opportunity to give one facilitator a break while the other steps in.

**Greater flexibility:** Good facilitation and flexibility go together – having two minds working together massively increases the ability to respond to change and serve the group. The varying skill sets of two co-facilitators also means that variety and flexibility can be added to the agenda design or respond when things change. More resources and experience mean more options and a greater ability to solve problems creatively should they arise.

**Modeling different viewpoints:** There is more than one way to facilitate. Having two facilitators in the room can be an effective way to model difference for a group. This might mean having facilitators who occupy opposing views to help model effective conflict management. Having a co-facilitator can create a more balanced dynamic while also being an effective way to ensure representation and equivalence.

Professional development: A major benefit of co-facilitation is professional development. Learning from a peer on the job can be extremely instructive. Two facilitators might explore new methodologies together, start facilitating larger groups or incorporate an entirely new facilitation style. Two facilitators also presents the opportunity to give and receive professional feedback. Seeing another facilitator's process can be transformative, and having a peer give feedback on your facilitation style can be very helpful too.

### **The 3 styles of co-facilitation**

When working with a co-facilitator, it's important that the style of co-facilitation is aligned between the two professionals. It might mean dividing up the agenda equally and taking turns being the lead facilitator or complementing one another throughout the support group meeting. All of these approaches are valid, but understanding how both facilitators prefer to work and factoring this into the design of the group meeting is essential.

The **three main styles of co-facilitation** are as follows:

1. Taking turns: Taking turns and alternating is probably the easiest way to begin working with a co-facilitator. In this facilitation style, co-facilitators take turns to occupy the lead and supporting facilitator roles. The lead facilitator operates like a solo facilitator: leading the group process, managing activities and facilitating the flow of the session. The supporting facilitator is an additional presence to support where necessary, often helping with logistics or being available to participants who need additional help. The supporting facilitator may operate from the back of the room or be an active presence based on the needs of the session. At various points in the session, the two facilitators will alternate roles.
2. Sharing the stage: This style of co-facilitation can be very dynamic for both facilitators and participants. Here, facilitators co-lead the agenda and fluidly complement each other throughout a session. In this style, there is less of an emphasis on designating a leading and supporting facilitator for each section.

Instead, co-facilitators share leading and supporting roles at once, organically transitioning and responding to one another throughout the session.

3. Expert/Apprentice: A common style of co-facilitation is that of an “expert and apprentice”. In these set-ups, an expert facilitator leads a session and has an apprentice shadowing them as part of their personal development journey. In some support group setups, it might be that the apprentice is leading a session with an expert on hand to help out and provide feedback and share best practices.

In conclusion, as with any co-facilitation set-up, making roles and expectations clear beforehand is key to making this style effective.

## Starting a family support group

Starting a support group requires time, energy, organisation, and commitment. While usually a motivated and passionate person can initiate and promote a new support group, the success of the group is up to its members.

When planning a support group, project partners and facilitators should consider the following (Clifton, 2007; Mental Health America, 2016; Parkinson’s Foundation, n.d., 2021; Self Help Alliance, 2013):

- Who will participate: It can be an open group where anyone with a close relationship with a prisoner (e.g., partner, family, or friend) can attend, or it can be limited to partners of prisoners, for example. Alternatively, it may be beneficial to focus on a specific prison population, such as a group for family members of incarcerated women or young people, or of long-term prisoners.
- Where: Creating a safe and comfortable environment is essential for facilitating active participation and effective interaction between the group members. The meeting facility should fulfil certain basic requirements, like providing easy access for all members, including those with physical limitations, ensuring comfort through features like climate control and proper ventilation, and offering accessible restrooms. The venue choice might also be related with the timing, as some locations may only be available at specific times. If the group includes family with children, it is important to consider childcare options, such as facilities

that provide a large play area and gym or offer structured play and other planned activities. It should be a location convenient for the prisoners' families, so it is important that group coordinators and facilitators ask family members for ideas.

- When: Often, support groups meet once-a-month, but the coordinators and the facilitators of the group should find the frequency that works best for group members. The key for the effective implementation of a family support group is to set a regular time and place so that more people become aware of its existence.

- How: Support groups can adopt various formats (e.g., curriculum-based, topic-focused, or open forum), each offering a different level of structure in terms of agenda and discussion topics. However, the best advice is to maintain flexibility according to the needs, focus and purpose of the support group. The length of the meeting should be up to the group to decide, considering factors such as the availability of the room and schedules of families. Frequently, support groups meet for no more than 90 minutes, with a halfway break. Planning for food is also important. Most groups provide refreshments or meals on a side table. In any case, family members can contribute by bringing something to share. Regarding seating arrangements, most support groups prefer a "round-table" format where chairs are arranged in a circle, making it easier to talk and listen to each other.

Finally, another important issue to be tackled prior to the implementation of the support group is finding interested individuals who would like to participate in it. Promoting and advertising the support group by using relevant means is essential at this stage. Creating a simple and informative flyer about the group meetings and delivering them at places frequented by families of prisoners, such as prisons (in particular, during prison visits) and local community organisations is a good start. Social media can be another important channel for reaching members of the target group, as well as cooperating with the Social Services departments in prisons to spread the word to the inmates and their families about the goals, the objectives and the practical aspects of the family group meetings. This process

is coordinated by the organization organising the support groups, but the facilitator can also be actively involved in it.

## How to facilitate a support group meeting<sup>4</sup>

If you are the group's facilitator, here are some helpful guidelines for running these meetings.

### PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE MEETING

Take a few minutes to think about possible topics for discussion. If this isn't your first meeting, review the topics that were talked about last time. Go over any notes you took. This can help you remember to bring up things that members might want to revisit or give updates on. If you plan to make any announcements of community events or activities that may be of interest to the group, make sure you have them ready.

### PREPARE THE ROOM FOR THE MEETING

Arrive 20 to 30 minutes early to arrange the room. Put the chairs in a circle large enough for latecomers to fit in, with enough room for participants who use wheelchairs to easily join. If you're going to have refreshments, set them up on a table to the side or back of the room. If you're going to use name tags, have them ready. Have a pen and paper to take notes.

### START THE MEETING

As people begin arriving, be sure to make eye contact and say hello, greeting them by name if you've met them before. Call the meeting to order on time, or at least within five minutes of the designated time. This encourages other

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>

members to be prompt. It also rewards those who are punctual; if you always start the meeting late because you're waiting for that one person who shows up 15 minutes late every time, you risk alienating those who made the effort to be there on time. A simple "Let's get started," or "Well, it's five minutes after seven o'clock, why don't we begin the meeting," is adequate.

#### GIVE PRELIMINARY INTRODUCTIONS AND INFORMATION

Introduce yourself briefly; if you have some experience with the group topic, be sure to mention it. Make any announcements and ask the group if they have anything to add.

If this is a new group or there are new members present for the first time, explain the ground rules. The most common ground rule for support groups is that everything discussed in the group must be kept confidential. Reminding the group of this from time to time is very important. Explain whether the group is open or closed and what that means. Be sure that everyone understands the rules.

Have everyone introduce themselves, stating their names and a little bit about why they were interested in the group. Then begin the discussion, either by touching on something that was mentioned by one of the members or by bringing up a prepared topic.

#### ENCOURAGE MEMBERS TO LISTEN TO EACH OTHER

Being a good listener - and acting as an example to group members in this regard - means being an active listener, one who is obviously listening and understanding what is being said. Active listening involves:

- Body language (leaning slightly towards the speaker, not fidgeting)
- Eye contact (looking in the speaker's eyes, not looking around the room)
- Brief encouraging statements, also sometimes called nonverbal encouragers ("Uh-huh" or "Mmm-hmm")
- Nodding
- Repeating or rephrasing the speaker's last phrase to let them know you understood. ("I can't believe my husband was so cold about it," could be



responded to with, "So you were really hurt by what your husband did,"  
for example)

#### ENCOURAGE MEMBERS TO OFFER SUPPORT TO ONE ANOTHER

While being supportive yourself, you must also help others in the group learn how to be so as well. Demonstrate the active listening skills listed above while the member is speaking. Wait 10 seconds or so and then, if no other members have done so, offer support. Group members will usually pick up on this and start offering support themselves. If they don't, you may have to ask them questions about how they are affected by the discloser's experience.

#### ENCOURAGE MEMBERS TO TALK ABOUT THEMSELVES

One advantage of support groups is that they can create an atmosphere in which members feel comfortable talking about and working through very personal issues and experiences. Disclosure - the act of revealing personal information - gives other members a chance to offer support, ideas, and assistance. It also encourages other members to share their own experiences and fosters an atmosphere of trust in the group. To maintain that trust, facilitators may find that they also need to disclose information from time to time.

When a member discloses information, the facilitator may have to guide the discussion to make the member comfortable or encourage others to join the discussion. Asking open-ended questions - those which cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" - is very useful at this point.

You can also plan topics ahead of time. Some support groups do things like have their members do reading or keep journals of their experiences to help spark discussion.

#### OFFER SUPPORT

This is the main reason the group exists! Fortunately, offering support is one of the simplest things to do in the course of running a support group. Giving members support can help them realize that reaching their goals is possible, give

them hope, or just let them know that you empathize with what they're going through.

Support consists of making statements that show your understanding, sympathy, and concern. Listen for the feelings expressed by the member, and address those feelings. Support can also be expressed through body language (such as making eye contact or smiling) or touch (hugging, patting the member's arm). Care should be taken in using touch as a form of support - in some circumstances, such as a support group for survivors of child sexual abuse, touch may be threatening and uncomfortable instead of comforting.

Usually, members will offer support to each other on their own, or they will quickly pick up on how to do so by following your example. However, you may have to ask questions to coax them into offering support by asking questions.

#### HELP MEMBERS SOLVE PROBLEMS

While solving problems shouldn't be the only goal of a support group, it is something that many members hope for and expect. All members should take part in the problem -solving process so that no single person is seen as the solution to their difficulties. It's the facilitator's job to help members learn how to help each other with problem solving.

Here are the steps to problem solving:

- *Clarifying the problem:* Make sure everyone fully understands the problem. If you aren't sure what the problem is, ask questions to get more information.
- *Talking about the alternatives:* Bring up possible solutions to the problem, but be very careful to word them in a way that doesn't give advice. For example, instead of "You should do this," a better wording could be "I wonder what it would be like for you to try this" or "Maybe you could do this." Telling people what to do is not the purpose or responsibility of a support group. It takes away a person's feeling that he can handle his own problems and can make people feel attacked and uncomfortable. Try asking members to tell what's worked well for them in similar situations. You can also ask the person with the problem what he thinks might work.

- *Choosing which option(s) to take:* Have the group discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion. You can then let the person with the problem come to a decision, or they may want to take some time on their own to consider the possibilities. Let them know that the group cares and wants to know how things turn out.
- *Offering help:* Sometimes members may offer to assist each other. For example, if the problem being discussed is a member's problems with transportation to the meetings, other members might offer to give that person a ride.

Most support group meetings last between an hour and two hours. If the group is caught up in a particularly intense discussion or in helping a member solve a problem, you might go a few extra minutes, but generally it's best to stop before everyone is tired and eager to leave. When the discussion is winding down or when a previously agreed-upon ending time has arrived, wrap things up. Here are some ways you can close the meeting:

- *Make a summary statement:* Summarize the topics that were discussed and alternatives that were chosen. Highlight any positive observations or solutions that came up.
- *Ask for additional comments or questions:* Check to see if anyone in the group has anything to add.
- *Remind members about the next meeting:* Let everyone know the time and place for next time.
- *Request volunteers, if necessary:* If you need help with donations, refreshments, transportation, or other group needs, this is the best time to ask for it. Asking for help from members encourages them to take leadership responsibilities and fosters a sense of personal investment in the group's success.
- *Give a final greeting:* Thank everyone for coming, say goodbye, and encourage them to come again.

- Make final notes: Shortly after the meeting, make some brief notes about what was discussed while it's fresh in your mind. This information can be used to initiate the next meeting. Keep any notes on the group in a safe place to insure confidentiality.

## First meeting

Apart from the general guidelines for the implementation of every group session, as described above, facilitators should pay additional attention to the first support group meeting. Some extra considerations are as follows:

### 1. Consider beginning with a Grounding Activity<sup>5</sup>

**2. Starting the Meeting: The Welcome.** Facilitators may want to start the meeting by welcoming the members and introducing themselves. This is also a good time to inform the members of what the facilitator's role is and is not. It's important to establish that this is not a therapy group. Facilitators should explain the purpose of the group, start and end times for the group, and any other "housekeeping" announcements may also be included in the welcome portion. When beginning a group, create an opportunity for everybody to introduce themselves and begin the process of building social connections with the rest of the group.

Example Language to Consider: *Thank you for your willingness to participate in this support group. The purpose of this group is to provide a safe space for us to gather and discuss our thoughts and feelings, as well as offer support during these challenging times. We will meet (frequency – weekly perhaps?) and it is important to keep in mind that we are all equals here, supporting one another.*

Here's what you can expect today:

- We will spend about 45 minutes in our discussion
- We will do a check in; and set confidentiality, group guidelines, and ground rules

<sup>5</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/178031585674457717-0230032020/original/PeerGroupFacilitatorGuide.pdf>

- We will focus on finding common ground, sharing our experiences and how we are finding ways to cope with the current situation. We will share important resources and guidance on where to direct people with specific questions (e.g., organizations offering support, existing childcare services, mental health, domestic abuse; etc.).

**3. Confidentiality and its Limitations:** Facilitators should explain the meaning of confidentiality within a group setting and discuss what will happen if confidentiality is breached. Confidentiality in a support group is paramount and should be firmly established before each meeting commences, especially the first one. Ensuring that participants feel confident that their words will not be shared elsewhere is crucial for fostering open and honest discussions, encouraging continued engagement in the support group. Confidentiality ensures respect for individuals' privacy. It means that information shared within the group remains is not disclosed to others without consent, including the identity of members. This fosters a sense of safety and encourages openness among members. However, it is important to recognize that there are limitations to confidentiality, such as situations involving potential harm to oneself or others, suspected child/elder abuse or neglect, which should be addressed by the group facilitators (Mental Health America, 2016).

*Example Language to Consider: Confidentiality is an important element of this support group. It is a critical and absolute rule that everything that is said in this room remain only amongst us. It is important for everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues arise.*

4. Establish/Review Group Guidelines. Every support group must have guidelines for individual and group expectations. It is the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that everyone in the group understands and adheres to them. Guidelines generally include and address group etiquette and boundaries.

Most support groups jointly develop guidelines for individual and group expectations which can include agreements, goals, boundaries, group practices, and/or norms. Guidelines serve as a vital tool in ensuring clarity within the group regarding its purpose and ground rules, being a major step toward avoiding future problems. They also contribute to easing the facilitator's role by

distributing the responsibility among all participants to promote active listening, minimize judgment, and provide suitable responses, ultimately promoting shared ownership. The group also collectively determines consequences for not following guidelines, which can range from gentle reminders to temporary exclusion.

Once the guidelines are agreed upon and recorded, they can be included in the group's welcoming materials, opening remarks, or displayed on wall posters during each meeting. It is crucial to periodically revisit the guidelines, especially when new members join, and make any necessary updates or modifications (Self Help Alliance, 2013).

*Example Language to Consider: It's good to all be on the same page especially when it comes to comfort in the group. We all need to agree to general housekeeping and self-care; the need for confidentiality; minimizing distractions (turning cell phones to vibrate and turning off "push" alerts, for example); and treating others with unconditional positive regard and respect for diversity. We want everyone to have an opportunity to speak if they wish to do so.*

Finally, at the beginning of the first meeting, it might be a good idea to discuss with participants the vision and mission statements of the support group. **The vision statement** answers the question: "why is the group important?". In other words, it should clarify what is the purpose of the group and what are its aspirations, as well as define the general route, which the group is taking on its way to fulfil its goals. **The mission statement**, on the other hand, answers the questions: "what are the group's concrete goals?" and "how is the group aiming to achieve its goals?". It should therefore outline the group's primary objectives and general aims, by which it wishes to achieve them. For more information on the vision and mission statements, go to Chapter 2 of the Operational Framework.

## Managing disruptive members

Sometimes, participants may dominate a group or raise issues in a manner that is disruptive to the overall group. It is important for facilitators to address behaviour that is disruptive and counterproductive to the support group. Initially, facilitators may want to simply pose the correction to the entire group without

singling out a specific participant. Referring to the group's pre-established ground rules and guidelines can be helpful. However, if a participant's disruptive behaviour continues, the facilitators may need to directly address the issue in the group setting.

Below are a few common scenarios that may occur, and some language which may help you manage those situations.

a) A member monopolizes the discussion or frequently interrupts others. Your response might be to give the floor back to the original speaker. (*e.g. "I'd like to go back to Kate for a minute. I don't think she was finished talking. We want everyone to have equal opportunity to share."*) b) A member broaches inappropriate subjects or ones that may be offensive in nature. An effective response might be to redirect the discussion (*e.g. "It doesn't seem like this an appropriate discussion for this group, so we are going to move on."*)

c) A member continuously digresses to irrelevant topics. The facilitators' response would be to redirect the focus to the purpose of the meeting. (*e.g. "How does that relate to what we've been talking about today?"*)

Facilitators must be able to determine if disruptions can effectively be addressed to the entire group or if speaking to the member in private outside of the meeting is better. Individuals who become argumentative or unresponsive to feedback and correction may need to be excused from the group.

In dealing with difficult group members, support group facilitators must learn a delicate combination of control mixed with kindness. This sort of assertive caring directly addresses problems with the group without insulting or offending members. You, as a facilitator, may use assertive caring during a meeting to get the discussion back on track, or you may wish to speak to the member in private after the meeting.

#### TIMES TO USE ASSERTIVE CARING:

- When a member is often late to meetings
- When a member talks too much, monopolizing the discussion

- When a member rejects every suggestion that others make - the "yes, but" phenomenon
- When a member appears to have problems that are more than the group can handle - such as someone who's had a change in health and should seek medical attention, or someone who may have psychological problems needing professional attention
- When a member interrupts others or brings up inappropriate or irrelevant subjects
- When a member's problem doesn't match up with what the group is meant to address<sup>6</sup>.

#### THE STEPS TO ASSERTIVE CARING:

- *Show that you understand the member's position or dilemma:* State that you understand the reason(s) behind the member's negative behavior. Use "I" or "we" statements, which show how his behavior affects you and the group. For example, *"I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what Camilla can do about child care."*
- *Set limits:* Gently but firmly correct the behavior. Explain your reasons; letting the member know why you need to change the situation will make him more likely to cooperate. For example, *"I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what Camilla can do about child care, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting."*
- *Suggest an alternative:* Explain what you'd like to see the member do instead of the negative behavior. For example, *"I know things are difficult for you, but right now we're trying to figure out what Camilla can do about child care, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem until after we've come to some conclusions about what Camilla can do."*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>



- *Get the member's agreement on the alternative:* Make sure the member understands what is being asked of him and agrees to do it. For example, *"I know things are difficult for you right now, but we're trying to figure out what Camilla can do about child care right now, and it's hard to do when you keep interrupting. I wonder if we could wait to talk about your problem until after we've come to some conclusions about what Camilla can do. Is that okay with you?"*

Similarly, facilitators may need to handle difficult situations from participants. Being able to recognize a difficult or crisis situation is critical and may require immediate support, regardless of what was planned for the group. (e.g. a member in distress, disclosure of abuse, medical concerns, etc). Timely assistance by facilitators to connect members to resources can prevent issues from progressing further and will build stronger trust within the group.

## **Keeping a support group going: things you should remember**

Even the most successful idea can be of a short time. When the problem, for which the idea was born as a solution, is solved, it is normal, but the problem of families being abandoned by one member who is incarcerated is continuous. That is why the support group should be sustainable. It is easy for groups of people to burn out as a team, but fortunately there are many factors that can make the Family Support Group sustainable.

### TIPS ON KEEPING A SUPPORT GROUP GOING<sup>7</sup>

- *Keep track of your group's progress.* From time to time, ask members for their feedback on how the group is going. Find out how useful they find

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/enhancing-support/peer-support-groups/main>

it, how comfortable they feel, and their likes and dislikes about the group. This information can be used in order to make adjustments.

- *Share responsibility for the group.* Letting others take leadership roles helps them feel more committed to and invested in the group. Make sure members know their help is appreciated. Since you may find it's often easier to do things yourself, asking others in the group to take over some responsibilities can be trying. However, no one person should have to do everything, and sharing responsibilities will help you avoid burnout.
- *Be sure everyone has a chance to talk.* Some people are naturally more talkative than others. Asking questions to get quiet members to speak up is important. It's also crucial to keep the more vocal members on-topic and gently remind them to let others have a turn at times.
- *Emphasize the importance of confidentiality.* In order for your members to feel safe enough in your support group to self-disclose and work through problems, they need to feel sure that nobody is going to be telling people outside of the group about the group's discussions. Make sure this is well understood by everyone.
- *Encourage outside contact among members.* Members can offer support to each other outside of meetings. The "buddy" system, used by groups like AA, encourages members to take interest in one another's well-being and form relationships outside the group.
- *Keep recruiting.* If you have an open group, make sure you continue to get the word out. Groups can stagnate when the membership remains the same all the time, and if members who leave are never replaced your group will not survive.
- *Share rewards and failures.* Let members know that you appreciate their contributions. When people make mistakes, don't place blame. Don't heap all of the praise when something goes well on any one person - or all of the guilt when things go badly.
- *Keep a realistic perspective.* Don't idealize the support group. There may sometimes be people that your group won't be able to help; this doesn't mean your efforts are futile. Also, when members leave, it doesn't mean

you've failed them. Usually it means that they have used the group as much as they think is useful and moved on with their lives.

- *Remember that this is a support group.* The dynamics of a group may change over time - for example, it could become more social in function, or it could change focus in terms of topic. No matter how the group changes, your group's primary purpose is to provide support and understanding to its individual members.

## Conclusions and tips

This Manual has been developed by the Golden Thread project partners to facilitate the design and the delivery of the Project Result 3, titled Family Support Groups. This Result involves the development of a framework and a “place” for the support of children, parents, spouses, partners, and other family members of prisoners, in the form of Family Support Groups. Family support groups constitute a powerful tool to provide opportunities to share experiences; meet, learn and gain encouragement from others in similar situations and offer family members of prisoners a place to focus on their own needs. Family support groups may provide the context for a safe, non-judgmental place where people in similar situations can connect with each other and provide compassion, support and information during their very difficult times. Members of a support group know that whatever comes into their way, they don't have to face it alone. There is a strong, consistent, scientifically rigorous pattern of evidence that confirms the effectiveness of facilitated, programme-based, family-led support groups (Worrall et al 2018).

Thus, this Result is comprised of the tools that are required in order to develop and implement a comprehensive methodology that will harness, prisoners' family ties more effectively as part of a wider methodology to build a rehabilitation route in each individual prison setting. This includes the development of:

- the Prisoners' Family Support Group - Operational Framework

- the Prisoners' Family Support Group - Manual for Practitioners

Facilitators undertaking the task of leading and facilitating the support groups need to consult both documents in order to effectively prepare and conduct the sessions with the groups. The timing, the venue and the frequency of the sessions need to be decided with the relevant organizations implementing the Golden Thread project activities, at their national context. Apart from these practical issues, including specific administrative tasks, the processes and procedures to be followed for the design, development and the delivery of the support groups are described in the aforementioned documents. Facilitators need to apply their existing skills and knowledge for the conduct of the support groups, also taking into account the special issues related to the specific group, the families affected by incarceration.

Finally, in case other organizations wish to replicate the project's Prisoners' Family Support Group, some tips and recommendations are included below, based on the experience of partners from the implementation of the family support groups in their national settings:

In terms of **designing and preparing** the support groups:

- Time needed to reach and inform potential group members: This process needs to start well before the foreseen initiation of the support group. Family members of incarcerated individuals are not as visible as other vulnerable social groups and it takes extra effort to trace them and persuade them to participate in the group. This can be attributed to different factors: the concept of peer support is still not widely known or used, therefore, family members are not aware of this type of support and are not necessarily willing to take part in such groups; the stigma they experience often discourages them to be open about their situation and seek for help. In many cases, family members of incarcerated individuals do not wish to be identified or labelled as such, because they feel that this would contribute to their stigmatization, further; support groups are

associated with other conditions, such as AA support groups. This is a prejudice, mainly based on the lack of knowledge on these initiatives, which can lead family members to be less willing to participate; finally, the profile and the background of the organizations implementing the family support groups for family members of incarcerated individuals play a crucial role. Family members need to have a clear idea of the organization behind the support groups. They need to be aware that the organization offers similar support services to other vulnerable groups (for example, on employment issues) and they need to trust the organization. It is a challenge for a “newcomer” to achieve broad acceptance by them, very soon.

- Different organizations/ authorities/ stakeholders needed to be informed about the FSG, and, in some cases, they need to provide their permission to access family members (such as in the case of Social Services operating in prisons). Their support is necessary in order to find and engage family members, even though, in some cases, even after they have provided their support, finding family members can still be challenging. In this sense, engaging local actors to support the initiative (such as local NGOs, or Community Based Organizations and Institutions) can prove to be a good idea for the approach of family members of incarcerated individuals.
- Careful planning of any activity related to the organization and implementation of family support groups (in terms of dissemination, information, recruitment, cooperation, implementation, sustainability, etc.) is necessary so as to ensure that the relevant efforts reach their goal to support inmates’ family members.

In terms of **implementing** the support groups:

- The role of the facilitators is very important for group dynamics. Facilitators need to have the experience, empathy and flexibility in order to address any challenging issue that might arise during one of the group’s

meetings. They need to be well prepared in order to respond to different situations and address different needs effectively.

- In many cases, family members' needs are very specific. For example they wish to discuss only some financial issues and the ways they could access specific state benefits. The facilitators should recognize these needs and address them in the group accordingly, also highlighting the rest of the issues that can be discussed during the meetings. Of course, the selection of topics to be discussed rests with the group members.
- Family members need to trust and feel safe in order to respond positively to such initiative. This is a process which starts even before the actual meetings and continues during their implementation. It is the facilitators' role to make sure that a safe space for all is created, where everyone is equally respected and accepted. The ground rules are also an important tool to facilitate the creation of a non-judgmental environment.
- The venue where the meetings take place is important. The chosen venue needs to be easy to reach, close to where the families reside. Long travelling hours will discourage family members from participating in the group meetings.
- The first meeting is very important to clarify the scope and the objectives of the support group, also defining the hopes and expectations of group members. During the first meeting, all different aspects of the implementation of the support group should be clarified, so that members know what to expect and how they can contribute to the effective support of each other.
- Sustainability needs to be considered beyond the funding period. Organizations responsible for the design and the implementation of support groups need to make sure that the group meetings continue, by tracing different financial resources. Facilitators can also contribute to this effort.

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