

Creating
Living Room

a faith-based
mood disorders support group:

A comfortable and inviting place to be with friends,
a place to relax and be oneself. *Living Room* is an
outreach ministry sponsored by churches
and taking place in churches.

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Second edition
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Two *Living Room* manuals are available for
your group's use:

1. Creating a *Living Room* Group
2. *Living Room* Facilitator's Manual

A collection of sample devotionals is also available.

Creating
Living Room

Our Mission

Living Room is a network of Christian peer-facilitated support groups for people with mood disorders, creating places of safety, acceptance, understanding, healing and community. Support groups are sponsored by local churches and para-church agencies in partnership with mental health professionals, agencies and associations.

Our Vision

- To decrease stigmatization of mental illness
- To increase accessibility to Living Room support groups
- To provide resources to support group facilitators
- To promote networking to benefit from collaboration with others

INTRODUCTION

The original *Living Room* mood-disorders support group first met in September of 2006 at Brentwood Park Alliance Church in Burnaby, British Columbia, under the leadership of author Marja Bergen. As a person who herself lives with bipolar disorder, Marja realized how important peer support is to those who live with something as stigmatized as mental illness.

Christians living with mental illness have few places where they can be truly open about themselves. At secular support groups they may feel they can't comfortably talk about the importance of God in their lives. At church groups they fear they will be judged if they talk about their mental illness – they fear their condition will be considered a spiritual rather than medical problem. At *Living Room* participants can freely discuss their faith *and* their mental health issues, knowing they will be accepted and loved the way they are. For many this is the only place where they can be fully authentic.

From the beginning *Living Room* has partnered with the Mood Disorders Association of BC. MDA train our leaders to become effective facilitators, and they are always there to answer questions and give advice and guidance. They also make their general membership aware of the spiritual option of support *Living Room* offers.

Thanks to the publication of manuals and a website, as well as a story on the TV program *100 Huntley Street*, news about *Living Room* has spread. Our ministry is quickly gaining recognition as an effective model for giving faith-based assistance to people with mental illness. Church support through *Living Room* groups is now going global.

The basis for *Living Room's* support model, the foundation on which it rests, is the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We believe that the knowledge of His love, the depth of which we can never quite grasp, is our key to wholeness. We learn to trust God, asking Him to fill us with His love

and to help us share that love with others. This is how we can bring healing to our lives and to the lives of others.

PREFACE

Over the years that I have been a pastor, I have become convinced that God works by bringing people and events together at the right time to fulfill His plan and purpose in the world. In various places in the Bible, this is referred to as “the fullness of time” or “the opportune time.” My calling as a pastor is to be the catalyst in this process, and that has been my experience and my part in seeing *Living Room* become a significant ministry not only in our church but also in our community. God brought Marja Bergen to our church for such a time as this, and together we have been able to see her vision of a Christian faith-based support group for people dealing with mental health issues become a reality. At times our faith has been stretched, and continues to be stretched, as we realized that what was taking shape was far greater than our initial expectation, and greater than our perception of our own abilities and resources. But then, that is always how God works, for when the work is beyond us we find ourselves living and serving in dependence on God.

I believe the best place to live is at the intersection of heaven and earth, praying and working to establish the kingdom of heaven here on earth. I am convinced that *Living Room* is just that. It draws people together who are wrestling with the issues of this life but want to find their place in the community of faith. Sadly, those who deal with mental health issues have not always found the love and acceptance, the compassion and grace in the church that they so need to experience a measure of healing and wholeness. *Living Room* is part of the intentional effort our church is making to change that. Our vision for our church is to be “a church without walls,” making every effort to remove the barriers that keep people from being part of a community of faith, as well as moving beyond the walls of our church to make a difference in our community. Our vision and our hope for *Living Room* is to see this ministry become contagious so that other churches start up similar groups.

On a more personal note, as I have sat in on group meetings with *Living Room*, I have learned much. I have at times been overwhelmed by the pain that is in the room represented by the lives of those in attendance. But, at the same time, I have been inspired by the resilience of those same people as they battled to overcome their issues and live as best they can in spite of their treatment by others. I am deeply indebted to them, and particularly to Marja, for opening up my understanding of what it means to be a person with a mental illness. My hope and prayer is that through *Living Room* we will see not only our church but also many other churches become places where people don't need to hide these issues but can be open about them because they know they will be loved and accepted. Is that not what Jesus wants for his church?

Don Dyck
Lead Pastor
Brentwood Park Alliance Church
Burnaby, BC

WHAT IS *LIVING ROOM*?

Living Room is both a support group and an outreach program:

- It is a Christian support group for people with depression, anxiety and bipolar disorders.
- It is an outreach program sponsored by churches and taking place in churches.

Living Room is based on the self-help model. Ideally, it is facilitated by a person who also has a mood disorder. Partnership with a mental health organization such as the Mood Disorders Association of BC is strongly recommended.

Living Room is not led by professionals and does not offer clinical therapy.

Living Room is a place that offers help and comfort to participants:

- Participants can openly and confidentially share their struggles with others who face similar struggles.
- Those who suffer can find understanding and encouragement.
- The medical basis for mood disorders is recognized and treatment is encouraged.
- Participants learn they're not alone.

PRINCIPLES OF SELF-HELP*

- We are equals; we're all in this together; no one has all the answers; we share information and experiences in an informal and non-judgmental way.
- You get help, you give help, and you help yourself.

WHY FAITH-BASED SUPPORT?

- One family in five is affected by mental illness. Christians are not exempt.
- Discussing faith in secular support groups can feel awkward.
- Because of stigma, Christians often fear discussing their mental health issues in other church groups.
- *Living Room* gives spiritual support with a better understanding of the issues than many other church friends can provide.
- Trusting in God is an important factor in people's ability to cope with emotional problems.
- Sharing emotional and spiritual battles with fellow believers is comforting.
- The message of God's immeasurable love is a powerful healer.

* From Mood Disorders Association of BC Facilitation Manual

HOW CAN PARTICIPANTS BENEFIT?

Living Room provides many benefits to participants:

- Prayer for each individual
- Study of scripture to help them deal with their mood disorders
- Healing through sharing their troubles with people who understand
- A place to shed feelings of guilt and shame by no longer having to keep their mental health problems secret

HOW CAN THE CHURCH BENEFIT?

When a church sponsors a group such as *Living Room*, the church benefits in return:

- The church responds to Christ's call to love and help people in need.
- It helps people who are often shunned in the community.
- It helps break down the stigma of mental illness by promoting prayer and support for participants.
- It helps make mental illness an acceptable topic of conversation, encouraging others to be open about their struggles and search out treatment and support.
- It gives members of the congregation opportunities to gain a better understanding of mental health issues.

WHY PARTNER WITH A MOOD DISORDERS ORGANIZATION?

Partnering with a mental health organization, preferably one dealing with mood disorders, is important:

- The mental health organization will have resources and information readily available for your use and your members' use.
- It will help you learn about the current medical understanding of depression, anxiety and bipolar disorders.
- It will be a valuable source of support for your facilitators and all members of your *Living Room* group.
- It will support people with mood disorders.
- It will help make people aware of the spiritual option of support *Living Room* provides.
- It will train your facilitators.
- It will occasionally provide speakers for your meetings.
- It will lend credibility to your *Living Room* group.

* See Appendix for a list of mood disorders organizations and mental health organizations in the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

THE MEETING

The following are only guidelines. They describe the kind of *Living Room* that has proven successful. Do what is most suitable for you and your group.

FORMAT

- Lunch, if this is part of your program
- Business: introductions, discussion of what the meeting will consist of for the benefit of new people, affiliation with MDA or other organization, rules, etc.
- Prayer before devotional time
- Devotional and discussion (sample devotionals available)
- Short break
- Sharing by each participant of how life is going
- Closing prayer for each participant

(Note: The first part of the meeting – the business, devotional and break – could occupy roughly one hour. The last hour should be enough time for sharing if the group is no larger than seven members.)

TIME, LENGTH AND FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

- Daytime meetings if you're trying to draw non-working people:
 - Noon to 2 p.m. for a lunchtime meeting – good if you want a meeting that includes mothers with children at home, or
 - 1 to 3 p.m.
 - Mornings are generally not a good time, as many people with depression might have trouble getting up early enough.
- Evening meetings are good for those who are employed:
 - Early evening between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. works well.
- Two hours is a comfortable length of time for a meeting. It allows for prayer, devotionals and discussion, and sharing. Stretching it any longer would be tiring for you and the participants.
- Frequency of meetings will depend on how much you are able to commit to. It could be once or twice a month. Weekly might not be a wise choice. You will need to guard against burnout.

LOCATION

A room in your church would be the ideal location for your group:

- Individuals from the community will feel more comfortable coming to a church rather than the private home of someone they don't know.
- Participants see *Living Room* as church-sponsored rather than the project of a few individuals.
- Churches are usually more accessible by transit.
- Churches have more space, should the group become large.

REFRESHMENTS

Refreshments help create an inviting atmosphere:

- Tea or coffee with cookies are ideal for afternoon or evening meetings.
- For an early afternoon meeting, a simple lunch is a wonderful way to start off. Since you won't know how many to make lunch for, let members make their own. You could provide buns, meat, cheese, raw veggies, and a dessert of fruit and/or cookies. Suggest a small donation for those who want to contribute.

FURNISHINGS

- Some churches have comfortable spaces with sofas, giving a true living room atmosphere.
- Or simply have a circle of chairs, with empty chairs always ready to welcome latecomers.
- Sitting around a table is a good option, especially if you're having a lunch meeting. Add a tablecloth or centerpiece of flowers and candles to make the atmosphere warm and inviting.
- Provide boxes of facial tissues.
- Have paper and pens or pencils on hand for note-takers.
- If you want to spoil your participants, a dish of chocolates is a good idea.

GROUP SIZE

Each participant needs ample time to share how their life is going, without feeling rushed. To ensure this happens, each group should have no more than six or seven participants. Once your attendance becomes larger than this, split into smaller groups and have your co-facilitator lead one. You could keep the larger group together for the devotional and discussion part of the meeting.

RULES

Before each session, make sure everyone is aware of these rules before they begin sharing. By stating them ahead of time, you can avoid problems.

- Do not interrupt when someone is sharing; allow each person to fully finish talking before responding.
- “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.”*
Each person needs to be respected as an individual who wants to find their own way of coping.
- “Share the air.” Give everyone ample opportunity to talk.
- Keep everything discussed within the group confidential.

* Parker J. Palmer: Ground rules for his Quaker “circle of trust” (from his book, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*). This mirrors the rule of the Mood Disorders Association of BC self-help model, “don’t give advice.”

FACILITATORS

Ideally, to be a facilitator, you yourself should have depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, but be functioning well. You should always be supported by a co-facilitator.

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

- Organize and plan meetings.
- Lead the main part of the meeting.
- Plan and present a devotional time. (Sample devotionals are available.)
- Facilitate sharing time.
- Stay in contact with members by reminding them of meetings and following up with people who are having difficulties.

ROLE OF THE CO-FACILITATOR

- Help prepare refreshments and greet people as they arrive.
- Lead a smaller group when it becomes necessary to divide a large group.
- Take time with a person when they need extra time to talk one-on-one during a meeting.
- Be prepared to lead the meeting if the facilitator is absent.

SHARING THE WORK

Taking turns and sharing each other's roles reduces stress on the facilitator and co-facilitator. For example, one might present the devotional and lead a discussion and the other might facilitate the sharing time. A healthy group has more than one co-facilitator ready to step in when needed.

OUTREACH

Living Room's faith-based support is an important program for the community at large:

- Some people with mood disorders have become alienated from the church, though they believe in God. They need a place to be with others who share their faith.
- People from many churches need a place to come for support with their mental health problems.
- People often begin searching for God when they are in crisis. *Living Room* is a welcoming, non-judgmental introduction to God's love.

ADVERTISING

- List your faith-based group in mental health newsletters.
- Send a press release to your community newspapers, showing your group as an ongoing program. They will continue publishing your notice.
- Let your own church members know by hanging a poster and listing your program in the bulletin.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Staying in touch with members of your group is important. You can remind them of meetings and keep tab on how they're doing. When prospective new members contact you, take their name and phone number. Ask if it's okay to call them with reminders.

Don't share your contact list with anyone. If members want to contact each other, they should make their own arrangements.

APPENDIX

CANADA

Mood Disorders Association of BC
202, 2250 Commercial Drive,
Vancouver, BC V5N 5P9
604-873-0103
info@mdabc.net
www.mdabc.net

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario
36 Eglinton Ave. West, Suite 602
Toronto, ON M4R 1A1
416-486-8046
Toll free 1-888-486-8236
www.mooddisorders.on.ca

Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba
4 Fort Street, Suite 100
Winnipeg, MB R3C 1C4
204-786-0987
Toll free 1-800-263-1460
mdam@depression.mb.ca
www.depression.mb.ca

Mood Disorders Society of Canada
3-304 Stone Road West, Suite 736
Guelph, ON N1G 4W4
519-824-5565
info@mooddisorderscanada.ca
www.mooddisorderscanada.ca

UNITED STATES

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501
Chicago, Illinois 60610-7224 USA
Toll free 1-800-826-3632
www.dbsalliance.org

AUSTRALIA

Depression and Mood Disorders Association of NSW
<http://dmda.mentalhealth.asn.au>
Mood Disorders Association
1 Richmond Rd.
Keswick, SA 5035
PO Box 310 Marleston SA 5033
Phone: 08-8221-5170
www.ozemail.com.au

Even Keep Bipolar Support Association
PO Box 1584
Midland WA 6936
Share an office with MINDS at
3 Viveash Rd.
Midland, WA 6056
Phone: 08-9274-2848

NEW ZEALAND

Otago Mental Health Support Trust (Bipolar Network)
3rd Floor Queens Building
109 Princes Street,
Dunedin
Phone: 03-477-2598
otagomd@es.co.nz
www.bipolarotago.balance.org.nz

Christchurch Manic Depressive Society Inc.
PO Box 25.068
Christchurch
Secretary 3583 442

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

NAMI FaithNet is a mental health outreach website for faith communities. This is an excellent resource for support and information.

NAMI
NAMI FaithNet
2107 Wilson Blvd. Ste 300
Arlington, VA 22201
703-524-7600
faithnet@nami.org
www.nami.org/faithnet

Mental Health Ministries was started by a United Methodist Minister who has struggled with depression with a vision of producing high quality resources to reduce the stigma of mental illness in our faith communities. And she has done that very well.

Mental Health Ministries
c/o Susan Gregg-Schroeder, Co-ordinator
6707 Monte Verde Drive
San Diego, CA 92119
www.mentalhealthministries.net

Pathways to Promise is an interfaith technical assistance and resource center which offers liturgical and educational materials, program models, and networking information to promote a caring ministry with people with mental illness and their families.

Pathways to Promise
5400 Arsenal Street
St. Louis, MO 63139
FAX: (314) 877-6405
pathways@mimh.edu
www.pathways2promise.org

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