

## **Fostering Resilience in our Immigrant Families & Communities: Strategies for Building Support Groups in the Face of Adversity**

### ***Defining Social Support***

Social support is essential to your overall health and well-being. It means knowing that you can rely on others to help you make important decisions, to gain access to the resources you need, and to offer advice. Social support can come from a relationship with one person or from a group of people with similar lived experiences. Having social support often means feeling that you belong, are connected to a community, and are accepted. A support network can be made up of community activists, family members, close friends, romantic partners, mentors, and/or supportive co-workers.

### ***Social Support and Stress***

Social support is especially important during times of stress. Stress can happen when you feel overwhelmed by your circumstances, or feel you are unsafe. Stress can come from a positive change such as moving to a new city for school or work, or from a negative change such as losing a loved one unexpectedly. Many in our community are experiencing stress from the uncertainty and anticipation of changes to immigration policies. Every person will respond differently to stress; trusting that there is someone to turn to is beneficial to your wellbeing.

### ***The Challenge of Developing Social Support***

Creating strong support networks in an unfamiliar place is a common challenge for many people, including immigrants. Social support networks often develop naturally, and might include extended family, classmates, friends from work, members of your faith community, and even the people in your neighborhood. Among undocumented and mixed-status families, creating support networks might be compromised by valid feelings of mistrust, limited access to available resources, language differences, and little free time to engage with the broader community.

In some immigrant families, parents and caregivers may find that their children have an easier time developing support networks because of their daily interactions in school and bilingualism. The increased exposure offers opportunity, but it does not always mean that parents and caregivers may be ready or trusting of outside supports. As a result, families are sometimes left vulnerable to experiencing tension, misunderstanding, and a sense of isolation from their community and each other. However, this is something that leaders of the undocumented immigrant community can address to foster positive change.

### ***Ten Considerations for Developing Social Support Groups***

Immigrant communities are often in transition – people are constantly growing, learning, and transforming as they interact with each other and the places they call home and community. Social support groups that bring people with shared experiences together in a safe space can be one way of creating community. As you take the next step in launching social support networks for immigrant families and communities, below you will find ten recommendations and guiding questions to keep in mind as you plan, conduct, and reflect on your groups.

---

*Prepared for NLPA and UWD by Michelle A. Silva, Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, German Cadenas, Luz Garcini, Alfonso Mercado, & Manuel Paris. For further information, please contact [michelle.silva@yale.edu](mailto:michelle.silva@yale.edu)*

<b>Phase 1: Planning</b>	
1. Carefully define the purpose of the group and take care of yourself.	Who do I envision will be the participants of this group? What do I want participants to walk away with after being part of this group? What can I expect from group members, and what can group members expect from me? How will I know that the group worked well? How similar/different is my experience from that of the participants? How am I balancing the commitment to organize, but also to heal? How can I model self-compassion?
2. Learn what is important and comfortable.	What is important to the group? Who can tell me more about the needs and preferences of the group? What might be some of the barriers to joining and participating in the group?
3. Create partnerships.	Who are my allies to build this group? How prepared are organizations to receive requests for assistance? How ready am I to provide group members with contact information for useful and easily accessible resources?
4. Recruit knowledgeable group facilitators.	What characteristics would I want in a group facilitator? What kind of training can my organization or other related organizations offer to help me conduct this group? What motivates the group facilitators, and how ready are they to share in a way that is most helpful to the group members?
5. Develop a referral to higher levels of care.	How prepared am I to manage a crisis situation if it arises? What additional information or training do I need to be safe and keep people in the group safe? How will I recognize if someone is triggered by something said in the group and how can I plan to follow-up?
<b>Phase 2: In Action</b>	
6. Promote a safe space throughout the group: beginning, middle, and end.	Have I been clear about the purpose of the group and my role as a facilitator? How prepared do I feel to manage emotional conversations in the group? What is my understanding of a safe space, and how do I intend to create it and keep it going? What is the group's understanding about privacy and confidentiality? How will I be sure to end on a positive note?
7. Get the conversation started, and be patient with the process.	What can I do to promote open conversation among all group members? How comfortable do I feel with silence in a group process? What is being communicated with words? What is being communicated through gestures or other non-verbal behaviors? What questions am I ready to ask to keep the conversation flowing?
8. Name the hard stuff, but also affirm vulnerability and courage.	How comfortable do I feel calling out behaviors or comments that might be perceived as disrespectful to the group? What do I consider to be examples of strength and resilience? How can I affirm and validate the group experience? Do I believe that "it's ok to not be ok," and how can I share that with the group?
9. Support and honor healing.	What is my definition of healing? How am I communicating respect, trust, and acceptance of group members? How comfortable do I feel integrating spiritual and/or religious practices into the group?
<b>Phase 3: Reflection and Growth</b>	
10. Express gratitude and stay connected.	How did the group end? Was there any unfinished business to address before closing the group? What is the plan for continued communication with the group and among group members? What is the plan for debriefing the group process?

## PHASE 1: PLANNING

### **1. Carefully define the purpose of the group and take care of yourself.**

A well-defined vision for your group will increase the likelihood that it is successful and that participants will feel satisfied. It is important to consider the intended audience, message, expectations, and desired outcome. Additionally, taking time before and after the group to self-reflect on your experience is necessary. Hearing and holding strong emotions can be demanding and showing yourself some self-compassion can prepare you to continue. Depending on their situation, some participants may have the belief that self-care is selfish, however, by practicing self-compassion, you are modeling these steps as an example of strength rather than weakness.

### **2. Learn what is important and comfortable.**

You will want to ensure that participants feel safe in the group. A supportive environment will convey acceptance, compassion, non-judgment, and trust. It is important to keep in mind that participants will arrive with varied experiences and views of asking for help - some will be positive and some negative - be prepared for both! If you are not sure of the group needs and preferences, take time to ask members of the community. Their voices in your planning process will be critical to the group success.

### **3. Create partnerships.**

As part of preparing for your group, familiarize yourself with the various resources that participants and their families may need, such as: medical, mental health, employment, academic, social, and legal. Taking time to get acquainted with relevant and accessible organizations will increase the likelihood that you can offer immediate assistance. In addition, creating partnerships with allies who are knowledgeable about the immigrant community and are willing to work with you will expand and strengthen the utility of the support group.

### **4. Recruit knowledgeable group facilitators.**

Take time to identify and recruit knowledgeable group facilitators. An ability to demonstrate respect, sensitivity, and awareness regarding the various concerns some immigrant communities may encounter is essential. Facilitators will appreciate that there is not a universal immigrant experience, and will exhibit genuine curiosity in each group member's perspective. Facilitators with similar experiences as the participants are encouraged to be thoughtful about the timing of self-disclosure and to carefully consider how to use the content to move the conversation forward. In addition, humility and an ability to say "I don't know, but can try to find out" is honest and can go a long way in a group process.

### **5. Develop a referral list to higher levels of care.**

Sometimes, community members might need more specialized support than might be available in a social support group or healing space. This is particularly the case when a community member is in a mental health crisis, is a danger to themselves or others (ex: thinking of harming themselves or someone else), or may benefit from more in-depth and ongoing mental health supports. It is important that you are prepared if these situations arise. You may create a list of local mental health agencies, hospitals, and low-cost providers where to connect those community members who need it. At the very least, please be ready with emergency numbers, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

English: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Español: 1-888-628-9454

## PHASE 2: IN ACTION

### **6. Promote a safe space throughout the group: beginning, middle and end.**

You are likely to hear some powerful and emotional messages in the group. It is not unusual for participants to look to the group facilitator(s) for support and advice. Remember to remind participants that the process is not intended to replace therapy, professional mental health services, or other forms of healing (ex: Indigenous, spiritual). However, support groups can be incredibly healing. Effective group facilitators will offer the safe space for participants to share without feeling the need to “fix problems”; in other words, listening to understand instead of listening to prepare a response. Clear communication will help participants feel at ease and likely increase satisfaction in the process. Establishing and collaborating in the development of community agreements can be one way of promoting a safe space at the beginning of the group. Holding the collective emotion of the group by listening and validating the feelings throughout the conversation, and closing with a summary that highlights the positive messages and ends on a good note are some practical steps to consider.

### **7. Get the conversation started, and be patient with the process.**

Creating safety and trust in a newly formed support group takes time, so it is essential to stay present and patient with the process. At times there will be silence and tolerating it communicates support. Sometimes participants will need time to think about an answer or be sure about a comment they want to share. Not jumping in to fill the silence leaves room for dialogue to develop and for group members to be supportive of each other. A few questions to help keep the conversation flowing include: *What are some of the things that are working for people right now? What are some of the things that are not working so well for people right now? What is helping you cope with stress when things are not going right?* It can also be empowering to invite dialogue: *Would anyone who has not had a chance to share so far, like to say something today?*

### **8. Name the hard stuff, but also affirm vulnerability and courage.**

Naming the hard things whether they be feelings or tough experiences decreases fear and can be empowering. Disagreement may happen, but the emotional safety of all group members should be maintained. Part of keeping a safe group environment is to speak up if community agreements or group rules are violated. When someone makes a comment that could be considered disrespectful to the group, address it directly. It is also recommended to listen for the efforts and risks participants make as they share their experiences and ask questions. Affirm the decision to share and validate the feelings – self-disclosure can be risky but it is also courageous. There might also be stigma about seeking help and naming this possible discomfort, even if participants are not saying it, can help group members feel understood.

### **9. Support and honor healing.**

The process of healing will be unique to each person. Participants may bring messages and beliefs passed down from family and their ancestors. Take time to honor these lessons and integrate the wisdom shared. Religion and spirituality offer support in times of stress, and inviting these topics will convey respect. Narratives of strength and overcoming despite circumstances can be inspiring to the group. *Healing Circles* can serve as an example of one model which utilizes specific rituals and practices to promote connection, healing, and safety.

### PHASE 3: REFLECTION AND GROWTH

#### **10. Express gratitude and stay connected.**

Congratulations on completing your group! Now it is important to thank participants and encourage ongoing communication and opportunity for connection. It is advisable to share information on future groups and resources with participants.