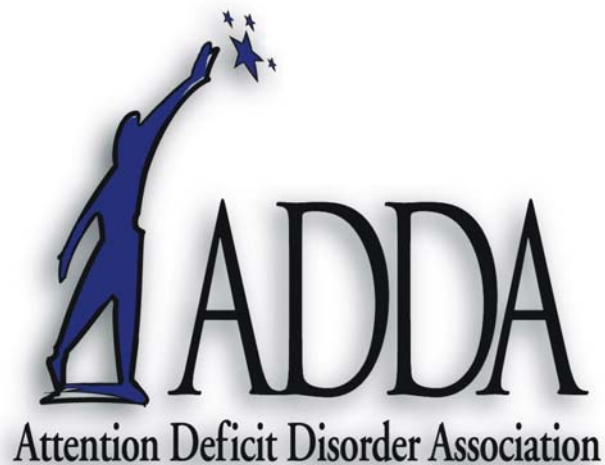


# ADDA Support Group Manual

*Prepared by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA*



**Helping Adults with AD/HD Lead Better Lives**

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[www.add.org](http://www.add.org)

## Introduction

Don't under-estimate the power of a support group. I ran an adult ADHD support group for five years and found it to be an extremely rewarding experience. The attendees' appreciation made it all worthwhile. As much as there were times before a meeting when I would have preferred to go home and eat dinner, by the time the meeting got rolling, I always found myself enjoying it. Attendees found it a unique opportunity to come and meet other people who also had ADHD—of course, they know other people with ADHD, but just may not *know* that they have ADHD! Attendees found it helpful to tell their stories, get advice, and share resources to help them at home, at work, and with friends. A good support group does something that nothing else does—it won't replace an understanding romantic partner or knowledgeable therapist, but it will complement them nicely.

If possible, it is recommended that the group facilitator have some sort of mental health background and/or other training related to ADHD. At a minimum, you should have one of these professionals available in an advisory capacity. Although support groups are not generally difficult to run, it's possible that situations may arise that require some extra finesse. In addition, if the group is to be successful, it's important that the support group facilitator be organized enough to make it to meetings early and respond to queries about the group in a timely manner. Although you don't need to be Superman about these things, attendees can be quickly turned off if the meetings are too chaotic or inconsistent.

Having said this, there is no one right way to run a support group. Every group will have its own feel and way of doing things, depending on the personality of the facilitator and attendees. As the facilitator, you should be open to suggestions from your attendees, but use your discretion to evaluate these ideas to be sure that they are in the whole group's best long term interests.

If you are thinking about starting a support group, I encourage you to make an honest assessment of your readiness, but to go for it if you feel up for the challenge. This manual should help you make that decision in a more informed kind of way and get you started on the right foot. If you are already running a support group, hopefully you will get a good idea or two from this manual.

## Starting a Support Group

### *Why Start a Support Group?*

People start and run support groups for many different reasons. If you are thinking of starting a group or getting involved in one, consider what you are hoping to get out of it. For example:

1. I need support and other ADHD adults need support, too.
2. I want to learn more about ADHD and share what I already know with others, including other adults with ADHD and their romantic partners, family members, and friends.
3. I would like to give back to the community and be a part of something meaningful.
4. I'm a professional who provides services to adults with ADHD and would like to increase my visibility and standing in the local community. (More on this in a minute.)

Be realistic in both what you hope to accomplish and the real reasons you want to start a group. Clarity and an informed decision will make it much more likely that you will find the group a rewarding experience. It's easy to get caught up in the passion of the moment and ultimately lose interest if your reasons are not well thought out or your circumstances change and you are no longer able to provide the necessary time commitment. If you are going to start a group, you should be sure that you can commit to running it for at least a year, at which point you can look for someone else to hand it off to. A new group can take some time to get rolling, so it isn't a short-term commitment.

As the final point in the list above mentions, professionals, such as therapists or coaches, who provide services to ADHD adults may be interested in running a support group as a way to build their practice. I don't necessarily see this as a problem, provided that the professional strives to make the group truly something of value to the community. As someone volunteering their time, it isn't unreasonable to expect some pay back for this effort. In fact, I found that running my monthly support group was the single most effective and efficient marketing activity that I did to promote my psychology practice. It established me as an expert in the area and gave me something that potential referral sources would be interested in, especially since the groups were free. I would mail out the group's flyer two or three times a year, reminding referral sources about the group and incidentally about my practice too. Of course, the only way that this works is if you are very disciplined about making the group inherently valuable to attendees and completely avoid giving the impression that you are fishing for clients from the group, since this will be a total turn off. Rather, most of the clients who contacted me as a result of the group had come across information on the group in their search for a psychologist who specializes in adult ADHD and then contacted me before even attending the group. With the right attitude, running a support group can be a real win-win for all concerned.

### *Sharing the Workload*

Although running a support group can be a one person job, it's often better to recruit some helpers. For example:

1. Other ADHD adults
2. Professionals who provide services to ADHD adults
3. Romantic partners or family members of ADHD adults

Starting a support group can be informal, beginning with a few interested people sitting around a kitchen table discussing the challenges of living with ADHD and exchanging ideas. Great things can happen in small groups. It can also be the seed for organizing a support group that is open to the larger community.

Support groups can be a one man show or can involve a small committee of officers. Although extra helpers should always be welcome, you don't need to make the structure overly complicated. Titles may be less important than that all the work gets done and that everyone does what they have committed to. You may want to develop a mission statement to help you stay focused on your goal. For example, your mission statement may be, "We meet once a month to give ADHD adults and their romantic partners, families, and friends a chance to discuss life with ADHD and share support, resources, and advice."

Once the group is rolling, you can draw volunteers from the regular attendees. For example, they can help with sending out mailings, checking voice mail and email, contacting potential speakers, etc. Be honest and up-front with them about what the time commitment and requirements are for these tasks (e.g., "the email account has to be checked at least twice a week, but will probably only take a few minutes each time"). You don't want people to over-promise or get into more than they are ready for, since this will ultimately cause you more headaches than just doing it yourself. However, at the other extreme, don't fall into the Superman trap of doing it all yourself because this is a set-up for burn out.

### *Finding a Meeting Location*

Since there may be some other expenses for things like mailings, it's best to find a location that you can use for free. I've done two monthly ADHD support groups—one at a library and one at a church. These locations, as well as schools, colleges, YMCAs/YWCAs, healthcare facilities, and community centers, will often allow you to use a meeting room at no charge as long as the meetings are open to the public and free. For a discussion group, I've found it most comfortable to arrange the chairs in a loose circle, so flexibility in moving seating around may be a consideration. I would also strongly recommend that you ensure that the room will be available on a consistent basis (e.g., every third Thursday at 7:30). This will help with attendance and reduce confusion.

## *Discussion Group or Speaker Meeting?*

Some support groups involve open discussion among members, whereas others have a speaker present on a pre-set topic. Each is valuable in its own way, but they fulfill different needs. You may choose to only use one format or to alternate between the two. From a logistical point of view, it is easier to run a discussion group because you don't need to recruit speakers. Some speakers may also potentially have audio/visual needs that may rule out some locations, whereas a discussion group just needs a private room and some chairs.

Discussion groups tend to be less formal and give attendees a chance to share their stories and receive input from the group. In addition, because there is no pre-decided topic, there is less of a chance that someone with a burning question or issue won't have an opportunity to bring it up, whereas it may not be relevant to the topic in a speaker meeting. However, attendees may find it helpful to have experts come in to speak about various topics that are likely to be of interest to the group, such as organizational tips, how to improve your relationship, and finding an optimal medication regimen.

If you are going to do speaker meetings, ask your speakers for recommendations of others who could come in to speak. Also ask meeting attendees for suggestions. Especially when trying to connect with busy professionals, it can take multiple calls/emails to nail down the details. It can also take multiple attempts to find a date that works well, so don't be surprised that you need to schedule speakers six months or more in advance. Over time, as your group gains credibility and a steady membership, speakers will begin to approach you, but initially you will need to contact them. Remember that as you approach and evaluate potential speakers that their presentation will reflect on the group—for good or bad. If you bring in a controversial speaker or someone with radical ideas, there may be some fall out—this doesn't mean that you shouldn't do it, but be aware of this.

I also strongly recommend that you discuss your needs with all speakers beforehand. Tell them the general size of the audience to expect, whether handouts are helpful/encouraged, the room set-up, the audience's level of sophistication, etc. Most of the bad presentations that I have seen have actually had a decent presenter but have involved some sort of mismatch in one of these areas.

Although obviously any professional doing a presentation (presumably for free) has some reasonable expectation that she may potentially gain some clients from it, it's very important that the presentation be useful for the audience and not come across as an infomercial for the speaker's services. It's appropriate for the speaker to bring business cards or brochures and include contact information on the handouts so that clients who liked what they heard can choose to contact the speaker. Having been both the presenter and the one recruiting other presenters, I have found that a soft sell works best for all concerned. You can highlight the potential for practice building when recruiting speakers, but also make it clear what is and isn't acceptable in this regard.

Although you should be respectful of your speakers' time, ask them if they can stay fifteen minutes beyond the formal ending of the meeting, since some attendees will feel more comfortable asking questions face to face.

## **Promote Your Group**

Word of mouth is the easiest and most effective kind of promotion you can have for your group, but it takes time to build this up. In the meantime, focus on making the meetings useful to attendees (more on this below).

Since it can be discouraging to be the only person who shows up for the first meeting, give yourself at least a couple months to adequately promote the group. Given your limited time and resources, the suggestions that I offer here tend to be either free or very low cost. Try any or all of these techniques:

- List the group on ADDA's support group listing at [www.add.org](http://www.add.org), as well as other online locations.
- Affiliate the group with a school, university, healthcare institution, etc. who will include information about the group in their other promotional activities. Depending on their size, some of these entities have a far greater ability to promote the group than an individual does.

- Most communities have various agencies that serve as clearinghouses for information about support groups, amongst other things. These include mental health associations, mental health centers, healthcare institutions, etc. Notify each of them about your group and find out how often you need to re-new your listing or whether they will keep it as is unless notified by you.
- Develop a computerized mailing list of professionals in the area who work with ADHD clients who can post flyers or pass on your group's information. This can include therapists, psychiatrists, neurologists, primary care physicians, coaches, etc. One of these professionals can pass along your information to dozens of potential attendees, vastly multiplying the effect of your mailing. If you are doing speaker meetings, some of these may also be happy to come present. You can look them up in the yellow pages or do an internet search. You will probably already know some relevant professionals, so ask them for the contact information for colleagues.
- Newspapers often contain free listings of support groups, so find out when and how you need to get that information in to them.
- As you go about your daily business, keep an eye out for community bulletin boards where you can post information about your group, for example at the grocery store, pharmacy, government buildings, etc. Keep a few flyers in your car at all times, so you will always be ready. Also check out all the libraries within a reasonable radius of where your group meets. You may be able to mail them rather than driving over, if you call first, although then it isn't guaranteed that the notice will be posted or posted in an optimal location.

I have included a sample flyer at the end of this manual. Feel free to adapt it to your own needs. If you would like a soft copy of this, and you have a printed copy of this manual, you can find the manual for download at [www.add.org](http://www.add.org).

Although you can pay for advertising, my guess is that it will be beyond your budget and unlikely to yield enough attendees to be worth it, so it's better to go with what's free. Some places may allow you to advertise at no charge if you are a nonprofit group—for example, try the local psychological association newsletter.

One of the best sources of attendees is the people who have already come, so I strongly recommend collecting email addresses that are used for a reminder email a few days before the meeting—this is especially helpful for an ADHD crowd. A quick copy and paste means that it takes only a couple minutes to send out the reminder. These can also be handy in case you need to cancel a meeting for weather reasons or otherwise. Make it clear that you will only use the list for meeting announcements and absolutely nothing else.

One advantage of having speaker meetings is that presumably the speakers will help to promote your group, at least for the meeting that they are presenting at. This can greatly increase the number of people who find out about your group and attend subsequent meetings.

### **General Tips for Running a Meeting**

Every group will have its own style and way of doing things. However, you will probably want to strike a balance between casual and professional so that attendees are comfortable but there is still some structure to the meetings. Here's some general advice:

1. Arrive early to prepare the meeting place and greet attendees.
2. If you have handouts, lay them out on a table near the entrance. If you accept contributions, the container should have a small sign on it.
3. Place a clipboard on the table to collect email addresses for the mailing list. You can collect names and addresses if you would like or if you are required to by the sponsoring institution, but I never found this necessary for my groups.
4. Nametags can be helpful. If you use them, then bring a thick marker so that the writing is more easily visible.
5. Keep an eye out for people who appear to be new or uncertain of themselves. Make a point of introducing yourself, tell them briefly about what will be happening at that meeting, where the restrooms are, etc. If

possible, introduce them to someone who has been at previous meetings and ask that person to tell them a little bit about the group as you attend to other matters.

6. Try to start meetings generally on time, with the expectation that some people will continue to trickle in. Also try to end the formal part of meetings on time, since some attendees may have responsibilities afterwards.
7. Seat yourself either near the door or with the door within your line of vision so you can greet new arrivals or flag them into empty seats, etc.
8. When reserving time for the meetings, build in at least an additional 15 minutes for attendees to linger and socialize, talk to the presenter if there is one, ask you a question, etc. This informal time can be extremely important and people will feel cheated if they are forced to rush out the door. If you aren't able to stay in the same room, then tell everyone that they should feel free to linger outside. My group always hung around in the parking lot, although obviously more when the weather was nicer!
9. Once the meeting starts, make an opening comment:
  - a. Give the group's name
  - b. Introduce yourself and perhaps your professional credentials, background, or experience if relevant and/or why you find the group rewarding.
  - c. Introduce any other relevant people.
  - d. Make a brief comment about upcoming meetings or events.
  - e. Briefly review the group's rules (see below).

### *Establishing Ground Rules*

Meetings tend to go better when everyone knows what to expect. Some simple ground rules can help attendees feel more comfortable. Larger groups may require a more formal tone and therefore a stricter adherence to designated ground rules, whereas a small group can be more casual. A group that has been meeting for a while and has a core group of attendees will have a momentum that tends to keep the group on track, meaning less work for the leader. So, you will have to work harder to lay a foundation in a new group, but it will pay off in the long run. I would suggest the following ground rules:

1. What's said in the group, stays in the group. Attendees will feel more comfortable sharing personal and sensitive information if they don't need to worry about it leaving the room. Obviously, you can't control what people do outside of the meetings, but in the interest of making a better meeting for everyone, you should ask attendees to respect each other's privacy.
2. Side conversations can be distracting, so attendees should try to refrain from them.
3. Attendees should wait their turn to speak.
4. It's OK to disagree, but it should be done respectfully.

You may want to add some other rules or may be required to based on your meeting location. You may also need to review a rule again in the middle of a meeting, for example if someone blurts out a question.

### **Tips for Conducting a Speaker Meeting**

1. Introduce the speaker, including a brief bio which the speaker has provided. Find out beforehand how the speaker would like to be referred to—by a formal title or a first name.
2. Provide the time frame for the presentation, including whether attendees should ask questions as they arise or hold them to the end, whether there will be a general discussion at the end, etc. You may need to remind people of this as the presentation goes on, especially for late arrivals.
3. Keep an eye on the clock and give the presenter a five minute warning.
4. In case the audience is shy about asking the first question, jump in with a question that others will also find helpful.
5. Wrap up the question and answer part of the presentation by announcing, "Let's take one final question."
6. Thank you notes sent out after the presentation are a nice touch, if you have the time to do them.

## Tips for Conducting a Discussion Meeting

1. If the group is small enough, you may have attendees go around and give their name and possibly a couple sentences about themselves and/or what they are hoping to get from the meeting. Since some people may get carried away and talk for too long, you may need to intervene to remind everyone to keep the introductions short.
2. If the group has been meeting for a while, you can probably start with an open question like, “So what do we want to talk about today?” and the discussion will evolve easily from that. However, you may also want to share something specific that you came across or thought of or ask a specific question, especially if the group is new and the attendees don’t yet feel comfortable taking the initiative.
3. The longer a group has been meeting, the more you will have a core group of attendees who will move discussion along nicely, whereas in the early days you will need to play a more active role in keeping conversation moving and on track. You may do this by providing bridging comments that connect one person’s comment to someone else’s or something that was said before. You may also draw similarities or differences between what different people have said.
4. As the facilitator, attendees will sometimes look to you to provide an expert perspective. This is to be expected and is fine, provided that the meeting doesn’t become a Q and A session. If you find yourself getting more questions than you would like, turn it back to the group by asking if anyone else has any thoughts on that topic.
5. Related to this, you may sometimes need to correct something that someone in the group says. I have found it helpful to preface my comment by saying that everyone is an individual and that different people can potentially respond differently or have different experiences.

## Potential Tricky Situations

It’s worth thinking about potentially problematic situations, since a little forethought can go a long way towards helping you feel less anxious and also better prepared in case something does come up. The first two situations below, attendees either talking too much or not enough, can be fairly common but are much easier to deal with. The remaining ones are much more rare but potentially more serious if they do arise.

1. **The Monopolizer**—Some attendees may talk too much, either out of an inability to tolerate silence or because they get carried away and talk too long. While there will always be some people who talk more than others, be sure to provide the opportunity for others to have their say too. You can do this by jumping in and asking whether anyone else in the group can relate to what the over-talker just said, has any helpful ideas, etc. There is an art to doing this kind of re-directing in a way that doesn’t hurt feelings yet keeps the meeting balanced, but you will get better with practice. Remember, your responsibility is to the group as a whole, not just a single attendee—others will stop attending if they don’t find the meetings helpful.
2. **Silent Attendees**—Remember that just because someone remains quiet, doesn’t mean that they aren’t receiving any benefit from the meetings. If they appear bored or disengaged, you may want to ask them in a friendly way if they can relate to something that was just said, but you need to be careful about this so you don’t come across as the mean teacher calling out the distracted student. Some shy attendees just need a specific invitation to get them going. As the facilitator, it’s your responsibility to try to create a helpful discussion, but it’s each attendee’s responsibility to get involved and/or take something meaningful from it. You can’t please all the people all the time, so don’t let one or two seemingly unhappy attendees make you nervous.
3. **Anger**—If things get too heated in your group, do your best to keep your own cool. An attendee may express anger over his situation or people not in the meeting. Although some people may feel uncomfortable with this expression of feeling, it’s unlikely to escalate into a problematic situation. Allow group members to express angry feelings as long as it isn’t disruptive. Express empathy and understanding for the person’s feelings. Unless the person seems to want specific advice, try to avoid this. Rather, ask others in the group if they have been in similar situations and how they handled it. This indirect advice can be more palatable.
4. **Disagreement**—Generally, problematic disagreement among attendees are easier to address before they escalate too far. Allow attendees to disagree, but ask that they do it respectfully. If someone says something that comes across the wrong way, either ask them if they can re-state it or re-state it yourself in a friendlier

way. If someone becomes too angry, ask that he step outside for a few minutes to compose himself. If necessary, you may need to accompany him and talk it out while the group continues—although you may not want to leave the group alone, it may be the better alternative. Although I certainly don't expect this to occur, if someone can't or won't calm down, tell them you will call 911 and let the police sort it out. In five years of running my monthly support group, I never came anywhere close to this and I don't expect you to.

5. **The Group Challenges You**—If an attendee or the group challenges your authority or how you run the group, take a moment to hear what they are saying. Ask for more information or clarification if you don't understand what they are saying. Avoid getting defensive or closing down discussion too quickly. Own up to any legitimate points that they make and apologize if appropriate, but avoid apologizing excessively. By being comfortable admitting any mistakes, you will be a good role model for your group on how to accept feedback. If the problem is one of miscommunication, clarify what you meant to say or ask for clarification from other members of the group.
6. **An Attendee Is In Crisis**—It's possible that you may have an attendee who needs more help than you can provide in a support group. Although it's appropriate to give that person some additional time during the meeting, you need to keep a balance so that other attendees also benefit from the meeting. You can offer to speak with the attendee privately after the meeting, strongly suggesting that he or she seek professional help and give her a few names of qualified professionals. Remember that although support groups can be very beneficial, they are better suited for ongoing support than crisis intervention, particularly if they only meet once a month, so don't attempt to accomplish more than is reasonable with this format. If someone is in a bad spot, give them the names and numbers of a few local professionals or resources who can be helpful.

## **Financial Matters**

Generally speaking, support groups tend to be rather inexpensive to run, particularly if you don't need to pay for a meeting location. Having said that, there may be some expenses that you do need to cover, probably mostly related to copying and mailing, although you may also have a dedicated website, email address, and/or voicemail. If your group is affiliated with a university, healthcare institution, or other agency, they may provide some of these resources. If the expenses are small enough, you may feel comfortable just covering them yourself. For example, I would make my own copies and cover postage when I sent out the flyer for my group, although I had the added personal benefit that it helped to promote my psychology practice. Meanwhile, the local CHADD chapter was also promoting the group.

If you feel that the expenses exceed your personal budget, probably the simplest fundraising method is to put out a hat or bowl and collect donations from attendees. You can specify a suggested amount or you can leave it open, with the expectation that some people simply have very little to give. A few dollars per attendee is a reasonable amount to expect and may provide what you need.

Of course, the flipside to fundraising is to lower your costs so you don't need to bring in as much. For example, you can use a free email address and free web hosting service. Also, although providing some snacks and drinks can be welcoming, they may not be necessary. Finally, keep in mind that once the group is established, you don't need to do as much promotion to keep it running.

## **Ethical Matters**

There are two important ethical concerns that need to be kept in mind and a third issue involving good common sense practice.

1. Maintain strict confidentiality when talking to others about what has been confided to you. Let the person who owns the condition or problem make it public if they wish. Also make it clear at the start of the meeting that you are asking the other attendees to abide by this as well and that it is based in mutual respect.
2. Although attendees will often ask for your recommendations for professionals or services, make it clear that there is no direct relationship between this professional and the group and that the attendee needs to use his



judgment as to whether this professional will be a good fit. When suggestions are offered in the group for specific professionals or treatments, point out that different people can have different responses.

3. If your support group is affiliated or associated with a treatment center or professional, be mindful of the assumptions that attendees may make about your endorsement of that center or professional. This isn't necessarily a problem, but it's important to be clear with people about what the relationship actually is. For example, if a local healthcare institution allows you to use their space for the meetings and mentions your group in their literature, but there otherwise is no relationship, then state that at the beginning of the meeting.

# TEEN AD/HD SUPPORT GROUP

Teens with AD/HD (also known as ADD) face challenges that friends and family might not understand. This discussion group provides a rare opportunity to meet other teens with AD/HD and to learn strategies to manage the challenges of AD/HD.

Parents must stay on the premises during the group.  
A CHADD board member is present to answer questions and facilitate networking and resource sharing.

**When:** Every third Thursday, 7:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Sept. 20	Dec. 20
Oct. 18	Jan. 17
Nov. 15	<i>&amp; ongoing</i>

**Where:**

Exton Community Baptist Church  
114 E. Swedesford Road  
Exton, PA



For more information, contact Ari Tuckman, PsyD, at (610) 344-3442 or Ari@TuckmanPsych.com. Dr. Tuckman is a psychologist in private practice and specializes in ADHD teens and adults.

**Directions:**

**From the North:** Take Rt. 100 south to the Intersection with Swedesford Road. Make a Left onto Swedesford Road. The church is 1/10 mile on the right, near the K-Mart entrance.

**From the South:** Take Rt. 100 North to the intersection with Swedesford Road. Turn Right onto Swedesford Road. The church is 1/10 mile on the right, near the K-Mart entrance.



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