

## How to Start SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> Groups and Keep Them Going When You Don't Really Want To Be Obligated To Run a Meeting Every Week

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Many recovering members as well as professionals have hesitated to start a SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> group, because they do not feel they know how to run a group, and because they do not want to be responsible for running a group every week. As a result, it has been very difficult to find new, potential Facilitators for SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> and very difficult to get new meetings started.

In a very few areas of the country, many groups have been started, but this is almost always the result of a few very dedicated individuals. Joe and Barbara Gerstein in Massachusetts are the most remarkable in this regard. However, outside of isolated places, SMART Recovery's growth has been slow. In addition, even when a number of groups start in an area that hardly guarantees that they will be there a few years later. This is especially true of SMART, because we do not explicitly tell our members that they had better attend our meetings for the rest of their lives. At one time in Manhattan, we had five groups running, but then three Facilitators started new careers and decided to stop coordinating. Their groups collapsed, and no one filled their shoes or kept the groups running.

What's the solution to this problem? One solution is to alternate, or rotate, Facilitators. Having different people run meetings week to week has many distinct advantages:

1. No single Facilitator is identified with any one group. So, no one can say (as occurred in the past in NYC), "I really like Francine's group. But I don't like the way Bob runs his group." When such a statement could be made, Francine's group grew in membership and popularity and Bob's dwindled. Often, Bob got discouraged and disappeared, and SMART Recovery lost a person willing to volunteer time and energy.
2. SMART Recovery meetings become less like free group therapy meetings run by skilled Facilitators, and more like self-help discussion groups.
3. Group members usually take more responsibility for how a meeting goes. They cannot rely on a particular leader to run an effective meeting.
4. On-the-job-training occurs on a continuous basis. In addition, I suspect that those members who are going to coordinate in the following weeks pay close attention to what works and what doesn't as they think about and prepare for the meeting they are going to run.
5. If a leader relapses or goes on to some other activity in his or her life, the group can continue without interruption.
6. No one person is obligated to run a meeting every week. In New York, one member, let's say Jennifer, a schedule that is going to coordinate each meeting for the next two months. If someone has to be away or has another obligation that evening or is ill, Jennifer finds someone to fill in.

7. "Understudy" Facilitators have fewer worries about stepping in and volunteering to lead a group. When they feel ready, they can try out their skills for one meeting without making a more extensive commitment. As well, such "understudies" usually will have a more seasoned Facilitator (perhaps more than one) at the meeting ready and willing to pitch in.

Ironically, this is the way the first Rational Recovery<sup>®</sup> meeting in New York started and was run in the early nineties. Peter, one of the members of that group and the backbone of the current organization, started to alternate Facilitators when I was away for a month last summer. AA, as many of you know, uses a similar system with good success.

How can you start this process?

First, don't be too good a Facilitator! SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> meetings should not be free group therapy meetings with a talented group leader. Primarily, your role as a Facilitator is to keep the ball rolling. I always say that you can tell if you are doing a good job if you can feel your upper lip touching your bottom lip! Some (many?) Facilitators work too hard and talk too much. Ideally, a meeting provides a place where people feel welcome and supported and, in addition to support, learn and practice SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> tools. Everyone in New York is encouraged to try to do at least one exercises each meeting, and to have something else ready in case the meeting really does need a jump-start.

Second, once you have a meeting going, indicate that you do not want to coordinate the meeting every week and that you would like some other members to do so. Speak to one or two people after the meeting and ask them if they would consider helping out. In New York, a core group of five or six people started to meet once a month to talk about running groups, to get some additional suggestions from me, and to discuss ways to help SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> grow in the Big Apple. That group now numbers twelve people.

Third, accept that on average, for every 100 people who come through the door, only 10 to 20 will remain. As it may take a long time for 100 people to show up, it may take quite a while to get a core group going. But I believe that alternating Facilitators will help people become more involved faster. No one has to commit to very much (just running a meeting) and you will be there to help new people on their maiden voyages. As more people become used to coordinating, you can fade a little further into the woodwork--and start another group! Eventually, you may find that members will start groups on their own, as happened in New York.

If SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> wants to grow, many of us have recognized that we had to solve the problem of starting more groups and of keeping them going. From our experience in New York, alternating Facilitators looks like a good solution to this particular organizational problem.