

DBSA Support Groups

How can DBSA support groups help people maintain better mental health?

- People who had been attending a DBSA support group for more than a year were less likely to have been hospitalized in the past 12 months.
- The longer people had attended a DBSA support group, the less likely they were to have stopped medication against medical advice, and the fewer barriers to following their treatment plan they experienced.
- More than half of the people who were not following their treatment plans when they began attending their DBSA support groups became more motivated to do so over time with continued group attendance.

“Personally, the local DBSA support group has shown me another side of mental health care that is not often seen in regular clinical practice.”

-Brian Clark, LCSW, SAC
Professional Advisor, DBSA Milwaukee Southside (WI)



What happens at a DBSA support group meeting?

Self-help: DBSA support group meetings focus on mutual aid and strategies for living the fullest life possible. By sharing experiences, insights and ideas, people get peer-to-peer support from others who have “been there.” DBSA support groups meet regularly and are completely free of charge.

Acceptance and safety: Participants make the group a safe place by fostering a supportive, trustworthy, respectful, nonjudgmental atmosphere to share strategies, tips, and experiences to help others cope successfully with depression or bipolar disorder.

Confidentiality: What happens at a DBSA support groups stays within the group. Exceptions to this policy are made only when the safety of an individual is in danger.



Peer leadership: Each support group meeting is led by someone with depression or bipolar disorder or a family member. The facilitator guides discussion, provides focus to the group, and helps ensure that group principles/rules are followed.

Other services: Most groups offer free educational materials about mood disorders, and many publish newsletters or are involved in outreach or advocacy in their local community.

“I can’t overstate the benefit that this organization’s presence in the community offers me as a practitioner, my patients, and the community. The small effort required as a Professional Advisor to facilitate the presence of DBSA support groups is something that I gladly offer.”

-Thomas Sheriff, PhD
Professional Advisor, DBSA Navarro County (TX)



What does not happen at a DBSA support group meeting?

Therapy or treatment: Group participation is a valuable supplement to professional care but is not a substitute for it. DBSA and its support groups do not endorse or recommend the use of any specific treatments or medications.

A lecture by an expert: Although some meetings feature guest speakers or special lectures, most DBSA support groups are of the “share/care” variety, in which all are encouraged to share, if they wish to.

A religious meeting or a 12-step group: Group participants are not compelled to accept any particular set of beliefs or to follow any particular list of “steps.” It is understood that each person’s path toward wellness is unique.

What are Chapter Professional Advisors?

A DBSA Chapter Professional Advisor is a licensed health care professional who provides mental health services and who offers technical, professional, and/or administrative assistance to a chapter.

The professional advisor supports the chapter in its efforts to promote self-help to individuals living with mood disorders.

Professional advisors should understand and respect the mission of DBSA as well as how peer-led, self-help support groups differ from therapy groups.

Advisors are what their name implies and should not take part in leading support group meetings, which is the function of chapter participants and facilitators.

Professional Advisors are not to provide therapy or recommend any particular course of action in the support group setting.

DBSA chapters are required to incorporate as a not-for-profit organization after their first year of affiliation. The corporation provides indemnification (personal protection from liability) to anyone acting in the best interest of the group or organization.

The Professional Advisor is an integral part of successful DBSA chapters and support groups. Each year, outstanding advisors and their chapters are honored by DBSA for their partnership in supporting self-help for those living with depression or bipolar disorder.



“DBSA chapters and support group participants are experts in the lived experience. Professional Advisors are experts in the scientific experience. Together, we can learn and grow as mental health advocates in expert-to-expert collaboration.”

-Gregory Simon, MD, MPH
DBSA Scientific Advisory Board Chair

Responsibilities of a DBSA Chapter Professional Advisor

At minimum, all advisors commit to

- Remain in regular contact with chapter leaders.
- Refer individuals to the chapter and support groups.
- Promote the chapter to other professionals and the community.
- Provide the chapter with information regarding mood disorders.
- Assist chapter leaders in dealing with difficult situations within the group.

An advisor may educate and offer their expertise to a DBSA chapter in other ways as well; for example:

- Speak at educational meetings or public lectures.
- Write articles for the chapter's newsletter.
- Seek or provide funding to the chapter.

Qualifications of a Professional Advisor

Advisors should be

- A licensed health care professional who provides mental health services.
- Supportive of the concept of self-help and peer-led support.
- Well-versed in mood disorders, their causes and treatments.
- Committed to the DBSA mission.

A variety of health care professionals (psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, social workers, psychologists, or professional counselors, for example) may be qualified to serve as chapter professional advisors. A chapter may have more than one professional advisor if desired.

Term of Service for Professional Advisors

Each DBSA chapter is asked to identify any professional advisors annually at the time of their affiliation renewal. There is no limit on the amount of time a person may serve as a professional advisor; however, DBSA chapter leadership should consider the advantages of changing their professional advisor periodically.

Finding a Professional Advisor

Start by talking with supportive health care professionals with whom you or the support group participants have had contact. You might start with your therapist, doctor, or nurse. You might also ask these people for recommendations and introductions to other professionals that might have an interest in DBSA chapters. Contact local branches of professional societies (e.g., the local medical society, psychiatric society, National Association of Social Workers chapter, or nursing association) or nearby medical or other professional schools.

In addition to their commitment to the local chapter, individual professional advisors are encouraged to make a financial contribution in support of DBSA.

Donations can be made through the DBSA website at www.DBSAlliance.org/Donate or by calling toll-free, 800/826-3632.

The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA) is the leading patient-directed national organization focusing on the most prevalent mental illnesses. The organization fosters an environment of understanding about the impact and management of these life-threatening illnesses by providing up-to-date, scientifically based tools and information written in language the general public can understand. DBSA supports research to promote more timely diagnosis, develop more effective and tolerable treatments and discover a cure. The organization works to ensure that people living with mood disorders are treated equitably.

Assisted by a Scientific Advisory Board comprised of leading researchers and clinicians in the field of mood disorders, DBSA has more than 1,000 peer-run support groups across the country. Nearly five million people request and receive information and assistance each year. DBSA's mission is to improve the lives of people living with mood disorders.

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

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DBSA Chapter Professional Advisors: An Important Role in the Success of Chapters



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We've been there. We can help.