Alzheimer Society
BRITISH COLUMBIA

SUPPORT GROUPS:
MODEL, BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

One of the ways that people experiencing difficult situations can find relief is through meeting with others in similar situations. Alzheimer Society of B.C. support groups are for people who want to inform themselves with current information that may improve their quality of life with the disease. Support groups are a safe environment where people can share and help each other through mutual understanding.

We offer two types of support groups: Caregiver Support Groups (for families and friends of people with dementia), and Early Stage Support Groups (for people with early dementia). Both groups are based on an *Information and Mutual Aid model*. This means that people can benefit from reliable information provided by the Alzheimer Society of B.C., and from the experience of other group members who are also living with dementia.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is about people helping each other. Our support groups rely on the sharing of common experience more than on the knowledge of experts. In a support group that operates according to mutual aid principles:

- All members of the support group are equally respected and valued.
- The group is based on people talking as equals as opposed to being lectured to or advised by an expert.
- Members are encouraged to take an active role to ensure that all the tasks necessary to maintain the group are carried out, for example welcoming group members, making coffee, and making reminder phone calls before the meeting.

Information

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. provides support groups with reliable, current information that can be used to supplement or clarify the information that is discussed among group members, or to introduce relevant topics.

Support Group Facilitators are not expected to be the experts, or to provide answers for every topic or issue that arises in the group. Instead the facilitators can rely on the information provided by the Alzheimer Society. Discussion segments, handouts, newsletters, brochures, fact sheets or DVDs can be used to clarify information that has been discussed in the group, to expand on a discussion topic that many members are experiencing, or to sometimes introduce a new topic that has not previously been addressed in the group.

Benefits of Support Groups:

Some of the specific goals of support groups are to provide a place where people can:

- Share common experiences and decrease feelings of isolation
- Learn about dementia and its progression
- Learn practical coping strategies, communication and problem-solving skills
- Learn about and begin early planning
- Be encouraged to protect and maintain their physical and emotional health
- Express feelings and be reassured that these feelings are normal and expected
- Access the most current information provided by the Alzheimer Society of B.C.
- Regain some control in the face of a disease that cannot be controlled
- Find a sense of hope

Limitations of Support Groups:

It is important to recognize that support groups are not for everyone. Some people do not find group discussion helpful and prefer other forms of help, such as individual support or professional assistance. Similarly, a support group will probably not work well for a person who is not interested in hearing about the ideas and feelings of other people.

There are limits to what a group can do. For example, a support group is **not**:

- A replacement for therapy or counselling. Some people may seek professional support instead of, or in addition to, attending support group meetings.
- A social gathering, although some socializing does occur
- A formal educational group led by an expert. The emphasis is on input from all members based on personal experience rather than expert or professional knowledge.