

World Stuttering Network

Support Group Handbook

Better Together!

For more information, check out the WSN website:

www.worldstutteringnetwork.net

or email us at:

worldstutteringnetwork@gmail.com

QUICK START GUIDE: STARTING A SUPPORT GROUP

1. Ask yourself “Why do I want to start a support group?”

- Do I want to meet/help other adults who stutter?
- Do I want to help kids? Teens? Families? Parents?

2. Research other stuttering support groups in your area.

- Do any support networks or groups exist nearby? If so, how far will people in my area have to travel to get there? GOOGLE it!
- Will hosting a group locally be more convenient for PWS in my community? Will a new group conflict/compete with any other groups in the area?

3. Choose your location.

- Is my location highly populated or more rural?
- Do I need to allow for traffic or lengthy travel times?
- Would it be better for me to choose a location in a more populated area? Or closer to me?
- Does the building/space I want to use have reliable internet access for use of online resources, virtual meetings, etc? Is reliable internet necessary for our meetings?
- Does the building/space have a cost? Is it open to the public? Who do I need to get permission from to use the space? (Consider churches, universities, community centers, libraries, etc.)

4. Choose a day & time.

- How often do I want the group to meet? 1x/week? 1x/month? What frequency will allow me to fully commit?
- What is the typical work schedule in my community? Will this meeting time likely interfere with work/family/traditions/religious commitments?

5. Advertise!

- Who are my local news stations, newspapers, university media outlets, etc.?
- Where can I hang flyers so many people will see them?
- How can I best use social media? Can I take 15 minutes to create a Facebook page that the public can access? What about Instagram, Twitter, or other sites?
- Who are the speech therapists in the area? How can I get in touch with them? Email? Phone calls?

6. Get meeting content.

- What will I talk about at these meetings? (Check out “WSN Huddles!” They are easy-to-use guides designed for high-impact meetings with low-effort planning.)

For consideration:

- Do I want a co-host to help out? Or fill-in when I am not available?
- Do I want to have virtual guests to add more voices to our group?

QUICK START GUIDE: BUILDING A SUPPORT GROUP NETWORK

- 1.) Use social media to find others in your country/region who host support groups or might be interested in starting one. (Try World Stuttering Network or International Stuttering Association to start.)
- 2.) Attend international events (in person or virtually) to learn more about stuttering support groups. You may find someone from your country who has similar ideas.
- 3.) Host a special event! Do you have an engaging guest speaker? Can you do a book reading? Show a film related to stuttering? Invite others from all around. People are more likely to travel a bit further for a “special event.” During that time, you can invite others to join in your mission.
- 4.) Host a national online event open to everyone! It might be a discussion, game night, guest lecturer, etc. Meet others who share your interest in developing a support network.
- 5.) Send a press release to your news stations about your support group’s inaugural meeting or a special event. Call for others to join you or start a group in their area.

STUTTERING SUPPORT GROUP MANAGEMENT

I. BUILDING YOUR ORGANIZATION

A. Finding Support Group Leaders (SGLs)

1. *Call For Action* on your website (i.e. "If you'd like to start a support group, please contact us")
2. **BEST PRACTICE:** Actively recruit within the professional/educational community

Where do stutterers go seeking help? Professionals! Many speech clinics/centers already have "group sessions" as part of their program. Google "[your area] stuttering/stammering" to find them. Ask: "Would you consider forming a support group affiliated with our organization?"

Wait a minute! What about these concerns...

Will our group be a funnel for them to recruit clientele?

Not necessarily. With the proper expectation at the beginning, everyone understands the purpose of the support group.

How will our support group benefit their program?

Larger groups of stutterers are more powerful. Size matters. And their client can practice whatever technique they're working on within the safety of the support group meeting.

What if the professional is hesitant about affiliating with your organization?

Understandable. Ask to be a guest at their next meeting. Tell them what you're all about. *You are planting seeds.*

GOAL: AN ATTENDEE BECOMES A SUPPORT GROUP LEADER.

B. Establish Leadership Layers.

Example:

Support Group Leader (SGL): **Most important** role in entire organization. Without SGLs, organization may become a hollow website of information.

Regional Director (RD): Greatly assists with regular communication and support to SGLs. Keeps SGLs engaged and updated.

Board of Directors (BoD): Position of guidance and source of energy for organization.

WHAT LAYERS BEST SUIT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

WHAT TERMS ARE EASILY RECOGNIZABLE IN YOUR AREA?

VOLUNTEER TIME IS SACRIFICED PERSONAL TIME.

Time is a good thing to keep in mind when formulating tasks for each role, such as reports, duties, etc. Keep everything simple and quick.

Remember that you'll get about 2-5 hours per month from each volunteer. Make it count.

What information/reports do you really need?

Is the data you're collecting "fun facts" or stuff you can use?

Value their time and YOURS.

C. Getting Media Attention

Being mentioned in media does much to bring awareness to your organization with minimum effort. Locally, this is a POWERFUL advertising tool.

Reporters & marketing professionals LOVE receiving awards.

What works:

1. Google "disability" & the area you're representing. Look for reporters/authors who've covered this topic during the past few years.
 - i. Find their contact info through "Contact Us" on their website.
 - ii. Send a 2-3 paragraph promotion about your group/organization

2. Create an Award.
 - i. Follow step #1 above to find someone who's covered "disability" over the past few years
 - ii. Present an award to them from your organization at your conference/local meeting recognizing their contribution to bringing awareness to disabilities. Ask them to attend for the award presentation.
 - iii. Why does the **award** work? *Because they write about it*

PRO TIP: Recognize and give an award to a reporter who covered *stuttering*.

II. PILLARS

A. Create Opportunity for Involvement with:

- Leadership roles
- Public speaking opportunities
- Interaction among people who stutter

Leadership Roles

- Matching skills & talents with an organization's needs is **key**.
- *The right people will emerge*. Gauge by their excitement and productivity.
- Let the volunteer set their own pace.

Public Speaking Opportunities

- CREATE EVENTS with as many speaking opportunities as possible. Get people in front of a group.
 - Welcome host(s)
 - Master of Ceremonies (MC), co-MC's
 - Instead of one keynote, break the time down into 3-4 mini keynotes
 - OPEN MIC tends to be the most popular and powerful experience at large stuttering conventions. Example: Talent Show.

BEST PRACTICE FOR SCHEDULED SPEAKERS ON THE EVENT PROGRAM WHO STUTTER: *MAKE SURE THEY STUTTER!*

Interactions Among People Who Stutter

Speed Friending

- As a group, make this part of your event or meeting as an Ice Breaker.
- As an organization:
 - Rather than a pic and a couple paragraphs, post a video. This way the person becomes REAL.
 - Offer the option of an interview. This way it becomes a conversation between friends. No pressure. Provide questions pre-interview with NO impromptu questions.
 - **PRO TIP: 10 minute duration**
 - Create opportunities at events in between programming

Other examples of promoting interaction:

- Plan meals together
- When at a large gathering, create a staffed booth for those without meal plans to meet and join a group. Many people avoid attending groups solo for fear they will be left dining alone.

III. PRODUCTIVITY

A. How to Get the MOST Done

IDEAS

Three Elements:

1. People are highly motivated when it's *their* idea.
2. Focus on ideas backed up by a willingness to make it happen. Is this work for *others* to do?
3. Connect the idea person with those in your network whose particular skills & talents will help

Important:

- Set the tone for a "climate of creativity"
- Promote & support as much as possible
- Assigning people to someone else's idea is creating *unpaid staff*. Result is limited productivity and you'll waste time on follow-up. You want **believers** 😊
- Instead of "No" say "How can we help?"

GOAL: HELP EACH OTHER BE SUCCESSFUL. NO COMPETITIONS. DOESN'T
MATTER WHO HAS "THE BRIGHTEST LIGHT." YOU WIN = WE WIN

IV. MEETING PERSONALITY TYPES

A. The *OVERTALKER*.

They say "a picture speaks 1,000 words..." Have you ever had a meeting like this???

We get stutterers talking. It's what we do. But what if someone consistently dominates the group discussion?

Actually, this seems to be a common occurrence in stuttering support group meetings. One of the greatest paradoxes of stuttering is that many of us (myself included) tend to TALK A LOT. With that in mind, how do we manage the discussion so everyone has input?

Remember:

- This may be the overtalker's first time speaking to a group of active listeners.
- Their basis is to HELP others.

Suggestions:

- At some point, let them get it out. Tell their complete story. Yes, you may sacrifice the majority of one meeting; but let them convey their message in its entirety. Piecemeal storytelling will not satisfy their urge to 'save the group'.
- If they continually have new information they want to share, give them the *last* 10 minutes of each meeting.

Usually, once they understand that the greatest help they can provide to another stutterer is LISTENING to them, they get it.

B. The *FIXER*

Have you been in a situation where you shared a challenging situation and were bombarded with unsolicited advice? "This is what you should do...."?

Did that make you feel better? Or worse? Did it make you *more* or *less* likely to share a challenge in the future?

Unsolicited advice:

- Often makes the person feel worse because they can't see the solution so readily.
- Does it come from a place of ego? Or caring?
- May be based on partial information
- Often has no room in a support group meeting

Solicited advice:

- Wait for the person to ASK

If your group has a fixer:

- Step One: Add a "no fixing" line in your introductory/welcoming statements at the beginning of your meeting.
- Step Two: Make "Listening vs. Fixing" a meeting theme.
- Step Three: Talk to the fixer privately

PRO TIPS:

- "I'm sorry you're going through this" usually is the best response.
- Share a similar personal experience
- When tempted to offer unsolicited advice, **DON'T**.
- **NO FIXING** at a stuttering support group meeting. **LISTENING** is always more important

C. The *Creeper*

Our instant connection as stutterers and those who support us is ripe with love and support. On rare occasions, this connection is mistaken for romantic interest, or used as opportunity by a person commonly referred to as a “creeper.”

As an SGL, we give members (especially new ones) personalized attention. What should we do if someone takes this as romantic interest?

- Usually this is short-lived when they see that romantic feelings aren't involved.
- Talk about your partner often.
- Gender neutral compliments/encouragement.
- A wise choice might be not to return private messages or emails.

How does a person know if someone is “creeping” on them? What is the “line” of inappropriateness?

1. Compliments

Friend: Comments are gender neutral. General praises about anything and everything. From a new job to grooming style. From new outfit to vehicle.

Creeper: Compliments are interspersed with BODY references. “You look HOT!” “You are so beautiful!” “You’re very attractive!” HIGH number of compliments.

2. Conversation

Friend: Public and private. Close friend talks; mutual trusted exchange of inner details relating to all facets of life.

Creeper: Always seems to steer towards one-on-one PRIVATE conversations. Want to establish a “special” friendship. "Let's message/text"

3. Frequency of Contact

Friend: Typical response frequency; contact when they have time, or need to talk.

Creeper: Often INSTANT response. FLURRY of communication. Almost like they’re sitting by the phone, waiting to hear from you.

4. Physical Touch

Friend: Could be a “haven’t seen you in a long time” hug of affection. High five. Fist bump. Everyone gets the same treatment.

Creeper: Try to touch you every time they see you. Hug. Pat on the arm. Hand on shoulder. Maneuver to close proximity of where you’re standing/sitting. Almost attempting to look like you two are “together.”

5. Content

Friend: Would say it in front of their wife/husband/partner.

Creeper: NO WAY. “I don’t usually talk like this...” or “I’ve never met anyone like you...” often precedes attempts to stimulate your interest.

6. Reaction when confronted

Friend: "Oh I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to come off like that." Changes behavior immediately.

Creeper: Defensive. "I was only being nice. I didn't do anything wrong." Behavior continues with others. Gaslighting.


(Of course, almost everything we’ve described above as “creepy” is often a natural occurrence when love begins to blossom. When both people are “in,” that’s cool. What we are talking about is when someone DOESN'T want this type of attention.)

What to do if this happens to you? Contact your Board or Executive Director; message the group admins; talk about it here; whatever. Don't "go it" alone.

One question to consider: Is this a misguided *looking for love* person, or someone who is establishing a fact pattern of *questionable behavior*? Their reactions are very telling, and are dealt with accordingly. The victim's name is kept private. (Funny thing; usually the creepers are making so many moves on so many women that they have no idea who is reporting them). It’s difficult to assign motive and intent; that’s why patterns of “do” and “say” are monitored, ESPECIALLY after the matter is brought to light.

Bottom line, protection of our members and maintaining a **safe place** for stutterers and their families/friends/partners are of the HIGHEST priority. Establishing a ZERO tolerance for *questionable behavior* patterns is a good thing.

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Sometimes, a person comes from a culture/upbringing of high physical contact, and/or constant lifting other's spirits, and this may be perceived as "creepy." When a person comes across as "over-the-top" affectionate, we reel them in. Meeting other stutterers (especially large groups) can be overwhelming, and sometimes people get caught up in this whirlwind of experiences and opportunities not available to them before. A gentle "nudge" to get someone back on track is needed, at times.

If you're sure someone is "creeping" on you, speak up. If you're not sure, but have a "gut" that it might be happening to you, talk about it.

D. The Quiet One

Stepping through the door of a support group meeting can be a terrifying experience. Talk about stuttering??? No way!

However, this is our **MOST** important attendee: the quiet one.

- Usually agrees with group and doesn't jump into the discussion
- Very smiley & polite

JOB #1 IS TO GET THEM TALKING.

How?

- Sit next to them.
- Customize a question to them during the group discussion without asking them directly. **Praise** them when they answer.
- Mention the importance of "group pausing" at meetings. Does the air **always** have to be filled with words?
- Ask them to help facilitate ONE question during the meeting.
- Discuss privately among your core group members.

PRO TIP: Be cautious about pushing them. Open doors of opportunity & let them walk in at their pace.

V. PERSONAL GROWTH

A. Toastmasters

Public speaking. For stutterers? Yes!

Very few life activities are as empowering & confidence building as public speaking. Stutterer or not.

Through involvement in a Toastmaster club, you'll gain experience and skill in public speaking. You'll also learn how to lead meetings effectively. The clubs are 'safe places' to learn & grow, and easily translate into everyday life.

As part of the club's routine:

- Applause for every speaker.
- Evaluation slips (written encouragement) after each speech.

Both are **very powerful** for stutterers.

The best thing? *Toastmaster clubs LOVE stutterers!* In fact, you'll find many stutterers in the ranks of competitors for the yearly contests.

Learn to *stutter confidently* in Toastmasters.

B. Performing

Anything that puts us in front of an audience helps our stuttering. Speaking or not, goal is to *become comfortable while others are watching you*. Get beyond those feelings from 'judgmental eyes'--what do others think of me???

Improv Acting, especially *Improv Comedy* seem to be the most powerful among stutterers. Improv enables you to 'get out of your head.'

- Arrange an improv workshop at your conference or support group meeting (see WSN Huddle)
 - **PRO TIP:** Works best with LARGE group

Other highly successful events at conferences/large gatherings of stutterers:

- Talent Show
- Comedy Show
- Spoken Word
- Open Mic

NOTE: '*What worked*' is available upon request.

VI. COMMUNICATION

A. Verbal

Be positive.

- Members will be more likely to return to meetings that leave them feeling hopeful and uplifted.
- SGLs will be more willing to dedicate their free time when they are part of an organization that spreads joy.

Recognize contributions.

- Thank your members for attending & sharing in the conversation. Be sincere.
- Offer individualized compliments for contributions to the meeting. This might include help with set up, posing an interesting question, sharing a resource, giving a response or simply offering a smile. Find a way to compliment each group member.

Use a friendly tone.

- Save formal communication for the workplace. Use a casual conversation style during meetings.
- Build friendships. Get to know your members. Learn about their families, work, and what is important to them. *Be human! And be accessible to your group members.*

CREATE A FEELING THAT ***FRIENDS*** ARE TALKING, SHARING & WORKING TOGETHER TO DO GOOD.

B. Written

Send ***individualized*** emails to each member when possible.

- Send 2-3 days before a meeting. Remind them of the added value they bring to the group. Let them know you look forward to seeing them.
- Send an email after the meeting. Thank them for their attendance and note their contribution. (For example, *"The story you shared about your work experience really opened up conversation for a lot of people."*)

PRO TIP: While this takes extra time for SGLs, it is highly effective in member retention.

Keep everything short. Limit messages to a few short paragraphs. Everyone reads the first paragraph, some people read the second paragraph and no one reads the third or beyond.

- First paragraph... Give a compliment.
- Second paragraph... deliver your message & encouragement towards the future.

Delete excessive words. What are you trying to say?

- Need help with this? Try the app <http://www.hemingwayapp.com>

Avoid using words such as "awesome" and "great" unless it really is awesome or great! Save those words until you really mean it.

Avoid overly emotional messages. Passion is good; just don't overdo it.

VII. SOCIAL MEDIA

Getting the word out about your support group is easier than ever with the far-reach of social media platforms. Engaging your target audience can be more challenging. Here are a few tips to get you started:

A. Create a Facebook (FB) Page, Instagram Account or Twitter Account

- Explore different platforms for reaching your desired audience. Which will you likely use most often? Make it enjoyable and easy on yourself.
- If you're trying to decide between a Facebook group or page, Facebook pages will show up best in searches. FB Pages also allow you to "Boost a post" (for a small fee) to better reach your targeted audience. FB Groups provide more privacy for discussion amongst members.
- Ask for help if navigating social media is intimidating or confusing.

B. Use an eye-catching picture when you post.

- Use a person's face, when applicable – especially a smile.
- Google the exact description of image you want to find.
- Take a photo with your group. ALWAYS ask for permission from each member before posting online.

C. Use videos when possible.

- Record a brief SGL message and share it.
- Make a short video with the help of your support group. Videos can be an inspirational message, a holiday greeting, a story, an educational factoid, or an advertisement. Be creative! Again, ALWAYS get permission from each member before posting anything online.

D. Share interesting resources.

- Did you read a great book? See a video that peaked your interest? Learn something new? Share it on social media!
- Pose an open-ended question about posted material to get a conversation started. (e.g., "What do you think about this comedian who stutters?")

VII. RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Relationships with your SGLs should TOP the priority list in order to sustain your organization. Volunteers can choose to spend their time anywhere. It's very important to keep them motivated, fulfilled and engaged. Here are a few guidelines to help with retention:

A. Be realistic about expectations.

- Assume about 2-5 hours of time commitment per month, give or take a few.
- Set realistic, attainable goals. How much is the SGL able to accomplish? What is an appropriate timeline? *What are their interests?* If conducting a group for one hour a month is all they can commit to doing, be thankful! Offer to give them some help or find a co-leader. Encourage them to explore projects that interest them.
- Volunteers are NOT employees. Their contribution needs to feel good.

B. Offer training & tools that save time.

- Find common areas of need & address them in a timely manner. Offer strategies and tools that solve problems. Recruit members to help (if they want).
- Reduce planning time. Access “WSN Huddles” for meeting topics and discussion guides developed by experienced support group leaders.

[WSN HUDDLES WILL GIVE YOUR MEETINGS GREAT IMPACT & SAVE TIME.](#)

C. Be human & get to know your volunteers personally.

- SGLs clearly want to be part of your organization or they would not have volunteered. Most want to build friendships and get to know others who believe in the mission. *Being dry & formal will not keep people engaged.*
- Ask volunteers about their hobbies, families, work life, etc.
- Ask for feedback from each volunteer (e.g., conversation, survey, etc.)
- Connect on social media.
- Write handwritten thank you notes for added personal touch.
- Host events together.
- **Be accessible.** Respond in a timely manner to let your SGLs know they're important.

D. Give recognition for achievements.

- Everyone likes to be recognized for their achievements and volunteers are no different. Recognition can promote a sense of gratitude & keep them coming back.
- Provide food for your volunteers when possible. Say some words of gratitude before sharing a meal together.
- Set up a recognition event. Offer awards for achievement.
- Feature your SGLs on social media posts or blogs. Highlight their achievements, spread good ideas and help everyone connect.