

# November 2022 – Musings from Lived Experience

I've been attending peer led support groups for as long as I can remember. As I look back on the early days when I was looking for a group, I'm struck by how much has changed and how much has remained the same.

I was searching for a mood disorders support group. I was alone and uncertain of what lay ahead of me. I contacted a mental health organization and received details for an upcoming meeting. It took place at a community centre. I was warmly welcomed by facilitators and members alike. One of the facilitators stood tall in front of the group and started the meeting. Within seconds, suggestions came forth from the group.

"Why don't the people who are manic sit over there?"

"Good idea! Why don't the people who are depressed sit over there?"

"Why don't the people who have problems with alcohol because of their mood disorder sit over there?"

Once the novel criteria for the seating arrangements had been adhered to the meeting resumed. It was engaging, informative, and helpful.

I met with another group a few times at a Denny's restaurant. We sat in a booth and communicated in hushed tones. We offered silent encouragement by smiling and nodding our heads.

I decided to try a third group and discovered it was the one for me at the time.

The importance and benefits of support groups are beyond measure.

Some of the benefits include:

- confidentiality,
- talking openly and honestly about your feelings without judgement,
- learning and improving skills to cope with challenges,
- feeling less lonely, isolated, and judged,
- gaining a sense of empowerment and hope,

- receiving supportive and practical feedback, and
- learning about health, economic and social resources.

It's important to be aware that these groups do not take the place of counselling or treatment. Additionally, they aren't for everyone. Some people are uncomfortable talking in a group or disclosing intimate details. If that is the case, it may be helpful to attend a meeting a few times before choosing not to go back. Another alternative may be to seek one-to-one peer support.

Support groups were profoundly affected in the early days of the pandemic. Zoom meetings arrived on the scene offering connection and comfort. It was heartening and encouraging to see people thriving and navigating their way in a setting that never could have been anticipated.

Support groups have expanded in remarkable ways and there is every reason to believe that this will continue. People who never had the opportunity to have their specific needs met now have access to groups that will meet those very goals.

What hasn't changed is the ongoing acceptance, compassion, and fellowship that these groups offer so freely. Many have said they are a lifeline, myself included.

I have nothing but affection and admiration for the people that I've met and continue to meet in these highly valued groups.

For those who are contemplating attending a meeting for the first time, know that you will be met with warmth and kindness. Know how brave you are for taking this step and know that observing and listening is more than enough. Should you continue to attend meetings, know that your confidence will flourish in unexpected ways.

Lastly, to all support group members and potential newcomers:

Never underestimate the impact you have on others. It is a gift that will continue to keep us together on the road to recovery, health, and wellness.

I guarantee it.

*Merle Ginsburg has living experience with bipolar disorder. She has been active in the mental health and substance use community as a peer leader, facilitator and coordinator.*

To find out more about support groups in BC, go to [BC211.ca](https://www.bcc11.ca)

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Consumer Involvement & Initiatives or Vancouver Coastal Health.