

## a) Starting a support group

### The advantages of joining a support group

A support group brings together those people living with IBS, helping them self-manage their IBS, reduce their symptoms, learn from each other and share their experiences.

It allows members to share their feelings and experiences with a group of like-minded people in an open and supportive environment without fear of stigmatisation.

Each member has something they can offer to the group. Their experience of managing their symptoms and their support and empathy can help a new member manage their condition better.

A local group can make the links between those that live with IBS and the local healthcare professionals stronger. **NB Your group should not aim to replace the support of healthcare professionals but complement their services.**

IBS is a complicated condition. Only by working together and with healthcare professionals, can we look to improve our understanding and treatment of IBS.

That said, there is no set format to running a support group. It should aim to meet the needs of members and support those living with IBS in your area.

### Membership of The IBS Network

People will be able to attend their first support group meeting without joining The IBS Network as a full member. On attendance at their second meeting, they will be required to join the network. We can only continue to support people and Support Group Leaders if we continue to raise funds. This will provide access to the full membership benefits, which include:

- a dedicated telephone helpline so that they can talk to one of our IBS trained nurses who can answer questions and provide advice and support
- a personal response to their questions by email/letter from an IBS medical professional
- a range of factsheets providing key information about symptoms to aid understanding of the condition
- Gut Reaction, our quarterly magazine, packed with articles from medical professionals and advice and tips on how to self-manage IBS
- a 'Can't Wait' card with our unique International TRAVEL card written in 12 languages
- access to our online Symptom Tracker
- access to our Self-Care Programme, with in-depth information about IBS and symptoms
- gut friendly recipes suitable for all the family

By becoming a member they will be able to take a full and active role in the meetings as they will have access to all the information on The IBS Network's website.

### The practicalities

#### First steps

Setting up your group and getting it established will take up quite a bit of your time and energy.

It's important to be considerate to your member's feelings and show compassion. Your ability to show empathy and your active listening skills will get better and better as you gain experience. Don't worry though, you are not expected to know all the answers. As your group grows, it will be everyone's role to help and support each other, not just yours!

Starting and running a group is an incredibly rewarding experience and will benefit members, not just in your local area, but as part of our network of groups across the UK.

## Location

Location is a key aspect of the success to your group. Key things to consider:

- does the venue appear welcoming and offer members a relaxing environment in which to meet?
- can members find and access the building easily?
- is it close to bus, tram, train routes? Does it offer free car parking?
- does the room have enough space to accommodate everyone and does it offer room for expansion as the group grows over time?
- does it have enough clean, easy to access toilet facilities?
- how much will it cost? (Tip: try negotiating a reduced rate for your meeting place, as a support group is considered to be a community group and not a business)
- is the venue going to be available at the same time each month, all year round?
- don't be afraid to change the venue, if it isn't ideal once you've had a few meetings
- consider having your meetings at the same time and location on a regular basis. It is important to find the balance between demand on your time and maintaining interest in the group. Once a month seems to offer a good balance between the two, but find what works best for you and your group
- you may want to consider places such as churches, village halls, schools and community centres or doctor's surgeries.

## Publicising the group

You should think about where those with IBS may look for information about support in your area. You will know your local area best so use your own knowledge to promote the group in the ways you feel are most appropriate. The IBS Network will help you publicise your group (see section 3 on what support The IBS Network will provide).

Think about:

- do you have an active and busy community centre, faith community, public library or community health centre? Also consider talking to your local supermarkets who might allow you to have a table-top one Saturday, or at the very least put a poster on their noticeboard. (The IBS Network have provided posters at the back of this pack)
- doctor's surgeries in your local area. Contact the Practice Managers, explain what you are doing and point out the benefits. A successful group in their area will help take pressure of their appointments and support their GPs by allowing them to sign-post their patients to the group
- local free magazines usually have a support and interests section at the back and would be worth contacting. Adverts for support / community groups are usually free
- the Health Unlocked forum ([www.healthunlocked.com](http://www.healthunlocked.com)) is another place where you can get the word out there that you've started an IBS group. Contact the office and we will put the details on. [info@theibsnetwork.org](mailto:info@theibsnetwork.org)
- the charity is currently developing an area on the website for Support Groups. The area will include lists of all UK groups, resources and meeting topics, keep checking the website for more information.

**Tip:** It would be worthwhile starting to publicise the group a couple of months before your first meeting to help build up interest.