

## *About Support Groups*

*Imagine if you will*, something very scary: you begin to feel down and very depressed, or very irritable and very angry – or notice other changes in yourself – and you cannot understand what is happening to you. Let's say you are able to see a competent doctor who makes an accurate diagnosis and prescribes treatment. The doctor explains your condition to you and your significant others – but you still feel confused, alone, scared, and very unsure of yourself. What does a person do after learning he/she has been diagnosed with a serious psychiatric disorder? Even if an appropriate diagnosis is made, and treatment started, patients and families often feel adrift, and bereft of support. The mental health professionals do what they can do, but perplexities, anxious uncertainties, terrible confusion, and profound feelings of isolation and helplessness remain for the patient.

However, what if you have been able to connect with a group of people who have experienced what you have been through, and this group can provide information, counsel, advice – what a boost to your morale and self confidence. These are the powerful benefits of support groups. Support groups are also sustaining over the long haul, as experienced members can help you stay the course. Support groups are extremely important for many types of medical problems including psychiatric disorders. Patients and families benefit from information, advocacy, and a connection with a community which offers strength.

Usually support groups develop around specific psychiatric disorders: for example, the DBSA (Depression Bipolar Support Alliance); the OCD Foundation (Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation), etc. Certain support groups focus on patients in various age groups, e.g., the Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation. Certain support groups are primarily advocacy groups – such as MACED (Michigan Association for children with Emotional disorders) which assist patients and their families in obtaining proper care in the community, treatment centers, and in schools. Some support groups, such as AA, NA and ALANON, do not have medical advisors. These groups also have been lifesaving for its members.

I am most fortunate to be the Medical Advisor to the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA). I have learned so much from the members, and I am most grateful for many enriching experiences being around so many marvelous individuals.

Support groups are essential and can save lives. So – support your support groups.

--Alvin B. Michaels, M.D.