



GUIDEBOOK FOR GROUP LEADERS

A publication for Secular Organizations
for Sobriety / Save Our Selves

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SOS International Clearinghouse

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INTRODUCTION

These suggestions have been collected as a result of many questions from individuals interested in starting self-help support groups for addicted persons as well as their friends and family members.

Most of the inquiries have come from chemically addicted persons who have tried the 12-step method and are now looking for a secular option for recovery.

Interest has also been voiced in forming secular groups for compulsive overeaters, gamblers, etc. SOS, has, therefore, come to stand for Secular Support, and every effort is being made to expand the original concept to meet the needs expressed not only by chemically addicted persons, but by others as well.

In assembling this handbook, we have drawn from our own experiences and those of others who have taken the time to talk with us or write to us. As one would expect, we have also drawn heavily from our own contact with AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), A1-Anon, and other similar associations.

It is important to state clearly at the beginning that we think of ourselves simply as members of SOS helping others to explore their own group possibilities. We hope that SOS will remain forever free from any dogma, any party line, any attempt to impose our ideas on anybody else. All statements made in this handbook are meant only as guidelines, as suggestions for your consideration. If your group is started on an autonomous basis, free from any inhibiting entanglements, it can continue to experiment, to modify, to innovate as it grows. You, its members, are free to shape your meeting to fit your needs. Take only what you find useful from this handbook.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Purpose

Support groups provide a regular coming together of people with similar problems and concerns in a non-judgmental and safe atmosphere. The members of such a group are free to work out its structure and the format of its meetings. Meetings usually include a forum for the exchange of information, experiences, and ideas. This exchange is always done in ways that are not threatening to the members and which help validate to the person in pain the realness of his or her experience. The meeting sometimes becomes the one anchor in the new member's current stormy existence.

Self-Help

Support groups of the type we are starting are also “self-help” groups. That is, they operate non-professionally, offering no medical advice or psychotherapy. Instead, the members share their own experiences and understandings, their personal failures and victories. In time, the new member begins to discover what is needed to fit his or her particular situation.

In general, the goal of each group is to support its members while they learn to cope with frustration, despair, and the isolation that brought most of them to the group initially. In addition, each group may want to define its own specific goals and emphasis, if any—always with sobriety as the priority. Unless sobriety is the priority for chemically addicted persons, no amount of personal growth in other areas of life is likely to bring the needed recovery.

Group Variations

The original SOS groups began as groups for alcoholics. These groups have been extremely flexible in accommodating family

members and friends of alcoholics and addicts, compulsive overeaters, and those addicted to drugs other than alcohol. Groups of family members are beginning to meet separately now (as an SOS support group) and other groups are in the making. In the meantime, we have been able to explore for ourselves the pros and cons of both open and special-interest group meetings.

There are many possibilities. Groups could expand to include all those harmed by dysfunctional families or relationships, regardless of the initial cause of the problem. SOS groups can also be formed wherever a secular alternative is needed for compulsive overeaters, smokers, addicts of a specific drug or of drugs in general, compulsive gamblers, people with sexual obsessions, adult children of alcoholics (or from dysfunctional homes in general), or any other group needing to meet for mutual support. Adults may want to start SOS meetings for teenagers or younger children using drugs or living in dysfunctional homes. If you need support in these or other areas, you can get together with those who share your problems and concerns and help create a secular group to meet those concerns.

Secular Distinction

The word that distinguishes our groups from other, widely available groups is the word *secular*. There are many groups that fit into the category of self-help support groups and that offer roads to recovery from a multitude of problems. But most of these groups imply strongly (and sometimes directly state) that true recovery without dependence on supernatural help is simply not possible. There is usually an insistence that their programs are “spiritual” rather than “religious,” but in the final analysis, many people end up feeling alienated by these meetings and find recovery in these groups only with great difficulty, if at all.

It should never be necessary to compromise integrity in the

search for recovery. Nor should anybody be asked to pay lip service to beliefs or rituals that are alien, just to find acceptance and help. In our less-than-perfect culture, there is a pressing need for more secular alternatives to the existing self-help groups.

We can, perhaps, make a distinction between what we should and should not be asked to do. We certainly should be able to accept a nonsecular person's sharing of experience, even if that experience is of a religious nature. If, however, the person begins to suggest that secular paths to recovery won't work (that is, tries to tell others that they, too, need to depend on the supernatural), then we may need to meet this pressure with some loving but firm resistance. We might, for example, explain that the person is welcome to share, but not to recruit.

SOS was founded to provide neutral ground where the alcoholic/addict can safely explore an individual path to recovery. While many of us are atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists, many others are theists of one form or another who simply want a secular recovery environment—separation of church and recovery. There is no reason why religion should ever become a main topic of conversation at our meetings. We can agree with many others that such discussions in self-help support groups of any kind are potentially offensive and generally not productive. Other nonsecular groups already exist for this purpose. Our focus is recovery, as a separate issue.

Nonprofit Nature

One thing needs to be said about what our purpose should not be. It should not be to make money for anybody under any circumstances. Early on in its development, after much thought and with good reason, AA formed principles and practices relating to money matters. Our groups, too, will be wise to maintain our autonomy, pay our own way, and keep only as much money in our treasury as is need for the continuing function of the group. Surplus money is almost sure to create unwanted and

unnecessary conflict.

STARTING YOUR OWN GROUP

Even with no help and limited resources, starting a group is not difficult. You can set up a time and place to meet, publicize that information, and then be there. If only one other person shows up, you can have a meeting. It is easier, however, if you have a few people interested before you begin. And it will be a fortunate thing for your group if several of these persons have some self-help experience. Any background in other groups is very helpful, especially if that encounter included some time in recovery.

Group Name

Before you publicize your SOS meeting, you might want a tentative name. Later on, when the group is established, the members may want to choose a different title. At the beginning, a generic name might be the simplest. Some examples:

SOS Group of Twin Peaks

North Shore Secular Organization for Sobriety / Save Our Selves Group

Eastside Save Our Selves Group

You can make your group's purpose clear in the name you choose. There is no reason why you can't be innovative, i.e. Twelve O'Clock Tension Tappers (A Noontime Addiction Recovery Support Group for Anyone Who Needs It). It would be helpful to those looking for an SOS meeting if your group was to be listed under the general heading of SOS in the phone book. This is especially true if the name your group chooses begins with a word other than *secular*.

Meeting Place

You will also need to settle on a place to meet. If you try to have

meetings in a member's home or in any other place owned or controlled by a member, you may encounter proprietary problems. If that is all you have at the beginning, you may have to make do with it. But consider rental of a neutral place as soon as possible. Even if a meeting place is offered to you at no charge, a small payment toward electricity and other expenses is *always* appreciated. By doing this, group autonomy is maintained, possible conflicts are avoided, and group esteem is enhanced.

Look for a room in hospitals, schools, municipal buildings, parks and recreation buildings, family centers, child-care centers, senior-citizen centers, clubs, lodges, and so forth. Some businesses, such as banks, have small conference rooms that they may rent. County-library branches and local community centers are also good places to check out. Choose according to your size and financial ability. Whatever you do, tell the owner ahead of time the purpose of your group and the fact that it is secular in nature. Do all you can to avoid any possible future misunderstanding that might surprise anyone and cause disruption to your meeting.

Time and Length of Meeting

Once you have a name and a place to meet, the next step is to determine when you meet and for how long. Again, the choice is entirely up to those in your group. Having a meeting once a week is the usual frequency. You may have to experiment to find which day is the best.

Experience seems to show that lunchtime and early evening might attract more people, but meetings are being held at breakfast time, the middle of the day, and in the afternoons/evenings as well. Pick what *you* need. Meetings traditionally last from an hour to an hour and a half. Again, try to think what will work and change it later if you need to. Whatever you finally decide upon, try to be consistent.

Promotion

People are not accustomed to looking for secular support groups! Many people in need seem to have either settled with resignation for groups with religious overtones or have given up trying to find any help at all from existing groups and institutions. You have to let these people know where you are and what you are doing.

Be ready to invest some time, energy, and perhaps a little money. What you do will likely have to be repeated over and over again until word of mouth begins to take effect. When SOS is as well known as AA, we can relax a little on promotion! Meanwhile, you can try these strategies:

- Mail a press release to local radio stations, both AM and FM. Address them to the Program Director or Public Service Director.
- Mail a press release to the newspapers, daily and weekly. Address them to the Editorial Department. If you know that a paper has a community calendar, mail a press release to that department for a listing.
- Mail a press release and a bulletin-board announcement to any local cable television companies in your community. Many cable companies will run this kind of announcement on the local-access channel on a continuing basis.
- Make extensive use of bulletin boards—in laundromats, food markets, gyms, hospitals, schools and colleges, senior-citizen centers, neighborhood centers, and in cyberspace.
- Contact local “throw-away” free papers. Some of these may run regular SOS meeting-announcement listings in their “ongoing groups” section at no charge. Find out what their requirements are and make use of this free listing.
- Let the local alcohol/drug-dependency treatment community know about your new group. A large proportion of our inquiry phone calls are from professionals in the area who want to be able to refer people in treatment to secular support meetings. A simple postcard with the name, location, and time of your meeting, along with a local contact telephone number, can be sent to

hospital alcohol units; private treatment facilities; city, county, and state facilities; and individual therapists who specialize in drug-dependency treatment. This can be very effective.

The suggestions here are very basic in nature, and you will probably think of other good ways to reach those who need SOS. As your group develops, you will have help in getting the word out. It will, not doubt, take a while before you see meaningful results. Stick with it and try to be patient—it is important not to let yourself become discouraged.

SAMPLE PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

This section offers suggestions on disseminating information regarding a new SOS addiction-recovery meeting. Supplement these suggestions with your own creative approaches. We should attempt to remain respectful, however, of existing recovery and treatment programs already in operation within our communities.

It is not our purpose to “bash” other programs, nor to make any negative aspersions regarding them. Our primary concern is to assist all persons in need to attain recovery from addictive disorders.

(Sample Bulletin-Board Announcement)

Had Enough?

There is a new support group for addicted individuals
in the Mar Vista, CA, area!

The letters 'SOS' are rendered in a large, bold, black serif font. Each letter has a subtle drop shadow effect, giving it a three-dimensional appearance. The 'S' is on the left, the 'O' is in the middle, and the second 'S' is on the right.

Secular Organization for Sobriety or Save Our Selves

For those persons who are uncomfortable with the spiritual content of widely available 12-step programs, the alternative is Secular Organizations for Sobriety/Save Our Selves. SOS offers a self-empowerment, secular approach to recovery based on individual responsibility for one's "sobriety priority."

Every Thursday 8:00 P.M.

For more information, contact

Jim at (323) 666-4295

(Sample Press Release)

*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

SOS To Add New Local Chapter

SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety/Save Our Selves), a support organization for people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse, has added a new local group. Meetings will be held **every Wednesday night, beginning September 2002, at 8:00 P.M. at 4773 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027.**

SOS was founded by Jim Christopher in 1985 in North Hollywood, California. It is a friendly alternative to 12-Step groups. SOS offers a secular, self-empowerment approach, emphasizing that each individual may draw upon his or her own resources to deal with the problems of addiction—hence the name “Save Our Selves.” SOS chapters are meeting throughout the United States and abroad.

For further information, please contact

Jim at (323) 666-4295

Special Note: An alternative approach would be to announce a “planning meeting” *before* announcing the formation of a new SOS meeting. This gives those who attend an opportunity to *directly participate* in the decision-making process of selecting

the title, time, date, and other aspects of the meeting.

SERVICE

Many people have spoken about the value of service as part of recovery. As many people as possible should be given responsibilities—for their own growth as well as for the sake of the group and SOS as a whole. There are certain qualities that might be said to be required of anyone who volunteers to take on responsibility in a self-help group. A certain sensitivity to the group's needs, a greater awareness of how we relate to others, a willingness to listen and be flexible—these are all attributes that help us to be more effective when we become actively concerned with the affairs of the group.

Group Facilitator

Keeping the basic things in order will make your meetings run more smoothly. Experience shows that each group needs someone to provide orderly continuity to a group over a period of time. This person could be called a coordinator or secretary and would be asked by the group to assume responsibility for such matters as:

- opening and preparing the room for the meeting;
- starting the coffee and water for tea if your group provides these refreshments;
- bringing meeting materials—brochures, meeting lists, newsletters, logs, format sheets, etc.—to each meeting, gathering them up afterwards, and keeping them safe between meetings;
- greeting newcomers and arranging for someone to chair or leading the meeting;
- taking care of passing the basket, paying room rent, and keeping track of the group's finances.

Other Service Positions

Keeping a group running is a lot of work. You may find it easier if the tasks are split or shared among two or three people who agree to take care of these fundamental tasks for the group. Divided responsibility is a valid, workable concept. We realize, of course, that new groups won't immediately find enough people for all the areas listed below, but they will give you an idea of how a group's needs can be addressed.

Treasurer

A person who usually collects, guards, and pays out the group's money.

These duties might include collecting donations at each meeting, keeping track in a notebook where the money comes from (meetings, literature sales, etc.) and where it goes (room rental, refreshments, literature, etc.).

Librarian

A person who obtains and/or coordinates appropriate literature, presents it to the group for discussion, and, once accepted, uses group funds to order or copy enough to keep a reasonable inventory for the group's use.

Publicity/Community Outreach

A person who can help establish a group or local SOS phone number and post office box, handle correspondence with local media, maintain bulletin-board and newspaper meeting listings, and respond to inquiries about the group.

Steering Committee

Some groups have found that a small committee chosen by the membership is preferable to specific positions. The members of this committee can help in advising the coordinator and the group, setting up business meetings, arbitrating disputes, handling publicity, and other duties.

General Notes

All positions should be filled through elections by the general group membership during regular meetings, not at business meetings. Elections should be announced ahead of time to ensure that as many members as possible can be polled concerning these vital decisions.

One of the most effective ideas we can adopt from other successful self-help groups is the concept of leadership rotation. Nearly every group advises that all responsibilities should change at regular intervals agreed to by the group. If you have an elected steering committee, consider replacing only part of the committee at any given time. Staggered elections can be set up at reasonable intervals which will provide for continuity and avoid any suggestion of entrenched bureaucracy. Members should be encouraged on a regular basis to join the committee in order to keep it fresh and current with the group's wishes.

We have found it vital to be flexible, innovative, and creative in the area of service commitments to SOS. Again, the guidelines throughout this booklet are just that—guidelines and suggestions from others who have started meetings. We are not an authority, nor do we care to force any structure on any SOS group. The group belongs to its members, who alone are responsible for its format, structure, and level of community outreach.

Another good idea, borrowed and modified: whatever you do, whether electing officers or settling other group matters, do it lovingly, do it patiently. Take the time to hear all voices waiting to be heard. Aim for a consensus, even if you have to settle for a majority. Never try to railroad over a minority position for the sake of expediency, convenience, or to support some imagined position of virtue. Trust the members of your group and always keep the focus on what you know to be the purpose of the group—sobriety.

Surplus Treasury Money

As a new group, you will not likely have this problem for a while. But as you grow, your treasury will too. An active, concerned membership will be able to find uses for its funds. It is wise to keep enough money set aside to see your group through a lean month when attendance is low. But beyond that, after your bills are paid, consider what you might do with any extra funds you might have.

Since SOS members have donated this money, your group has an obligation to use it for SOS purposes. Here are a few things you might consider:

- Contributing a portion to the SOS International Clearinghouse for operation funds, literature and publications, etc.
- Going beyond free promotion by placing a larger advertisement in the local newspaper.
- Give gift subscriptions of the *SOS International Newsletter* to your local libraries and other institutions.

Imagination and group discussion will usually help you decide what to do.

SUGGESTED SOS MEETING FORMAT

Opening

Welcome to SOS. My name is _____. I have been asked to lead tonight's meeting.

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (or Save Our Selves) is dedicated to providing a path to sobriety, an alternative to those paths depending upon supernatural or religious beliefs. We respect diversity, welcome healthy skepticism, and encourage rational thinking as well as the expression of feelings. We each take responsibility for our individual sobriety on a daily basis.

This is a sobriety meeting. Our focus is on the priority of abstaining from alcohol and other mind-altering drugs.

We respect the anonymity of each person in this room. This is a self-help, non-professional group. At this meeting, we share our experiences, understandings, thoughts, and feelings.

Announcements

- Ask for announcements from the group.
- Announce new literature, meeting schedules, etc.
- Indicate if refreshments are available, etc.

Anniversaries

We celebrate various lengths of sobriety in these meetings. Is there anyone here with less than thirty days of sobriety? Is there anyone here with thirty days of continuous sobriety? Sixty days? Three months? Six months? Nine months? Is there anyone celebrating a yearly anniversary this week? If you have an anniversary date coming up, please let me know after the meeting, and we will prepare a celebration for that date.

Reading

Tonight I have asked _____ to read the suggested “Guidelines for Sobriety”:

- To break the cycle of denial and achieve sobriety, we first acknowledge that we are alcoholics or addicts.
- We re-affirm this truth daily and accept without reservation—one day at a time—that as clean and sober individuals we cannot and do not drink or use, no matter what.
- Since drinking or using is not an option for us, we take whatever steps are necessary to continue our Sobriety Priority lifelong.
- A quality of life, “the good life,” can be achieved. However, life is also filled with uncertainties. Therefore, we do not drink or use regardless of feelings, circumstances, or conflicts.
- We share in confidence with each other our thoughts and feelings as sober, clean individuals.
- Sobriety is our Priority, and we each are responsible for our lives and our sobriety.

Introductions

Again, I’m _____. Now, starting with the person on my left, let’s introduce ourselves.

Opening

This meeting is now open. We ask that you try to keep your sharing to a reasonable length of time so that everyone can participate.

Closing

This group is self-supporting. If you can make some contribution, we will use it to help defray the cost of rent, refreshments, and other expenses. (Pass the basket.)

Sobriety is our priority and we each assume the responsibility for our lives and our sobriety. Thank you for coming and please come back. Let’s close by giving ourselves a hand for being here to support and celebrate each other’s sobriety.

SETTING A TONE FOR SOS

In the Introduction to this booklet, we mentioned “suggestions” rather than “rules,” and throughout these pages, we have favored words like “might” and “could” rather than “must” or “should.” All these conscious choices of words and phrases are an attempt to create a character, a quality, an ambience we hope will always be associated with SOS. We hope from the beginning to discourage arrogance, elitism, and any use of SOS for personal wealth or fame. We hope to encourage attitudes and methods of hospitality, compassion, sensitivity, openness, and honesty—thereby setting for SOS unimpeachable standards of excellence.

In this section, we will only briefly touch on some matters that may affect your new group and suggest how they might be handled. The idea of this section is not to establish rules, but rather to stimulate dialogue about the tone we want to guide our action as SOS members.

SOS and Other Organizations

We hope SOS will not be seen as opposed to, or in competition with, other established groups. We respect recovery in any form, no matter by which path it is achieved. Our movement is intended simply to fill a need not met by others.

Even when your group is started, you may find other meetings still valuable. Some SOS members continue to attend AA, Al-Anon, and other groups. Ultimately, we are all allies working toward a common goal.

Discussion of Other Groups in the SOS Meeting

During the years since the first SOS meeting, we have noticed that new members seem to need to talk about the alienation experienced in nonsecular groups. Clearly, meeting should not

be allowed to fall into negativity or pointless group comparison, but neither can the pain and anger engendered by past experiences with group insensitivity be ignored.

It has proven helpful to accommodate a reasonable amount of lamentation. Once the newcomer gets it out of his or her system, others in the group can bring the focus gently back to the purpose of the group.

Nonsecular Members

It is easy for many of us to remember what it was like to be a secular person in a meeting that made us feel like an outsider or an errant child. Care should be taken in how religious or spiritual members are treated. We want to be able to show consideration and acceptance while still maintaining the secular nature of our meeting.

Morale

There will be times when it will seem that nothing is going right for you and your group. Low attendance, disruptive members, and a lack of volunteers to help run things are just a few of the concerns that might worry you. Don't let yourself become overwhelmed. When you are having a problem with your group, try talking to another group leader. Try to keep your focus on the purpose of your group and SOS in general. Remember, *what you are doing is important!*

GENERAL STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Dear Friends:

Clearly, alcoholism and addiction are global problems. We need alternatives, we need options. Support should be readily available to all who seek help. Together we can Save Our Selves.

Since its beginning in November 1986, in North Hollywood, California, SOS has grown to hundreds of meetings across this nation and abroad.

Due to the movement's rapid growth, the SOS International Clearinghouse has relocated to the Center for Inquiry—West in Los Angeles. The SOS International Clearinghouse acts as a facilitator for the movement, addressing individual queries, preparing and mailing materials, and getting the word out to the media, treatment professionals, and organizations and individuals concerned with recovery.

In the spirit of free thought and free inquiry, every SOS meeting is autonomous. Meetings are held on an anonymous basis and are free of charge. SOS groups provide a safe, supportive, secular environment for all addicted persons who want to achieve and maintain sobriety and to support each other in this process of recovery.

This guidebook will undoubtedly undergo numerous revisions. That's good. That's healthy. We welcome and encourage your comments and concerns. We're all in this together!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Christopher". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jim Christopher, Founder

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF SOS

All those who sincerely seek sobriety are welcome as members in any SOS Group.

Although sobriety is an individual responsibility, life does not have to be faced alone. The support of other alcoholics and addicts is a vital adjunct to recovery. In SOS, members share experiences, insights, information, strength, and encouragement in friendly, honest, anonymous, and supportive group meetings.

Sobriety is the number-one priority in an alcoholic's or addict's life. As such, the alcoholic or addict must abstain from all drugs or alcohol.

SOS is not a spin-off of any religious or secular group. There is no hidden agenda, as the focus of SOS is Sobriety, not other issues.

SOS seeks only to promote amongst those who suffer from alcoholism or other drug addictions. As a group, SOS has no opinion on outside matters and does not wish to become entangled in outside controversy.

To avoid unnecessary entanglements, each SOS group is self-supporting through contributions from its members and refuses outside support.

Honest, clear, and direct communication of feelings, thoughts, and knowledge aids in recovery and in choosing non-destructive, non-delusional, and rational approaches to living sober and rewarding lives.

As knowledge of drinking or addiction might cause a person harm or embarrassment in the outside world, SOS guards the anonymity of its membership and the contents of its discussions from those not within the group.

SOS encourages the scientific study of alcoholism and addiction in all their aspects. SOS does not limit its outlook to one area of knowledge or theory of alcoholism and addiction.



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