

Optimal Digestive Health-

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Chapter 49 (excerpt)

Health & Wellness Group Coaching

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Support Groups*

Humans are social creatures. It's our nature to want to interact and support one another. Groups that form around a common goal or challenge can bring us together for strength and unity. Group members can draw on each other's strengths and celebrate our growth and victories. And the group can help us to hold a positive vision in times of challenge.

A review of the research on social support in the journal *Science* cited sixty-two studies showing that supportive relationships had a positive effect on recovery from chronic illness, infectious diseases, and surgery. Social connection was also shown to improve immune response and heart function. These studies indicate that we tend to function more optimistically when we're supported in a positive environment, connecting in a meaningful way with others.

If you have chronic illness, particularly if it's severe, you may find that you're having difficulty getting the long-term support you need from family and friends. In that case a support group could be helpful. If you find a group where you feel respected and heard, group support can be deeply meaningful.

The Power of Group Process

Many of the participants of groups I've facilitated in the Circle of Life program say they found the support group process was life changing for them, and that by meeting weekly with the group they felt their lives changed at an accelerated rate. In addition group participants say they discovered that their primary source of healing lies within themselves. Many of these groups have continued for years after people were in remission, changing the group's identity to "life support" groups!

*This chapter is adapted from *The Circle of Life Workbook*, by Rebecca McLean. Reprinted courtesy of the author, Circle of Life (www.circleoflife.net), and Health Action, Santa Barbara, CA.

The Healing Power of Support

Brent joined one of our support groups because he had ulcers and he was finding that his medications were no longer working for him. Brent tended to become highly stressed at work, which was making his ulcers even worse. In the group we went through an assessment process and looked at everyone's strengths and needs. He discovered his strengths were in exercise and relationships. When we explored the places where people wanted to make changes, he felt he was in a rut in his job and needed help with his ulcer diet. First we evaluated his diet, which revealed that he drank a lot of coffee and ate junk food. He was pouring coffee acids into his very sensitive stomach!

His initial action step was to gradually remove coffee from his diet and replace refined foods with more whole grains, like oats and brown rice, and also steamed vegetables. He also realized he was bored with his job and that he drank coffee to feel stimulated. He wanted a better position that would use more of his talents and hold his interest.

His action steps involved going back to college three nights a week to meet the education requirements he needed to get a better job. Once he reduced the stress his ulcer symptoms began to diminish almost immediately, as he decreased the physical stressor (coffee) and the mental stressor (feeling stuck in an unsatisfying job).

Gradually the ulcers began resolving and Brent got a new job. He no longer needs sick days, doctor's visits, or medication. Through the self-inquiry process Brent found his medical problem was being made worse by diet and work stress. Clarifying the problem and taking personal action not only helped to heal his ulcer, it changed his whole life.

A nine-year study published in *The American Journal of Epidemiology* on social networks reported that people with the lowest number of social ties were two to three times as likely to get sick as those with more social connectedness. A series of studies of weekly support groups by psychiatrist David Spiegel, M.D., at Stanford University demonstrated that women with breast cancer who participated in these groups lived twice as long as those who did not. His extensively documented research shows that health support groups create effective, measurable positive health outcomes.

Working within a group can support the process of improvement. A group can provide expanded resources for information, feedback, coping skills, experiences, testimonials, accountability, and support. It can help us grow and improve both by encouraging us and challenging us to stretch.

The Power of Self-Inquiry

Self-inquiry is a master key that opens the door to the discovery of the inner self. Self-inquiry initiates a profound process of awareness. There is a saying: "If you are aware, you are halfway there!"

In the support group work we have found that people often experience great relief simply by identifying their challenges. Without clarity a person can feel powerless and directionless. Self-inquiry consists of posing questions for ourselves and carrying on an inner dialogue. This creates an opportunity to review all that we have learned, read, experienced, or intuited regarding the issue. By consciously inquiring within we often find we have more information than we have realized. Asking questions of ourselves enhances insight, consciousness, and clarity.

This process can create a kind of self-awareness and is also useful in assessing medical issues. We can use self-inquiry to evaluate what we're doing that improves our health, and identify those things that may be moving us in the wrong direction, whether they involve food choices, stress, or whatever. It can help us sort out our level of improvement and whether we need to seek additional medical resources, collect more health information, seek alternative approaches, or implement new health strategies. It's also important to identify periods when no progress is being made and new solutions are needed.

The Power of Testimonial: Telling and Hearing Stories

We're so incredibly influenced by each other and our stories that the power of testimony is big medicine. When people share how they've implemented self-care practices in their lives or were able to discontinue a damaging behavior, it proves that it can be done. It proves that someone who is no greater than ourselves has been able to achieve a breakthrough.

When someone expresses real insight on how they're getting their life to work, our ears get bigger and our listening deepens! When we see someone with challenges similar to our own making good lifestyle choices and feeling better, there's an automatic sense of inspiration. It gives us the courage and permission to take action ourselves. When we see someone having a breakthrough with their health, their relationships, or in some other area, it reminds us that this possibility is available to us as well. We are each other's mirrors.

We see evidence of the effectiveness of shared experience in the many thousands of success stories from Alcoholics Anonymous. The strength of this movement is built on the power of sharing. Another example of highly effective informal support is the Chinese Cancer Recovery Society, which has millions of members who meet in small groups in parks throughout China. The format of their gatherings includes self-healing practices such as Qigong, having tea together, sharing stories of recovery, and laughter! The impact of the gatherings on members is remarkable.

The Power of Intention: Goals and Readiness for Change

Intention is defined as “having the mind focused on a specific purpose; the course of action one intends to follow; anything intended—an ultimate end.” Clarifying one's intention can provide the energy, insight, and information to design a map to one's desired destination.

The Chinese character for intention means “voice of the heart mind,” implying both feeling and thought. In China the heart and mind are not viewed as separate, but considered together as one thing. Developing intentions with both heart and mind energy can create goals that reflect our deeper core values.

The terms intention and goal have similar meanings with subtle differences. Some people associate goals with stress and great effort—something difficult to attain. Focusing on intention can free up the negative connotations often associated with goal setting, yet have the same powerful impact on your process.

Intention and goal setting involve skills worthy of constant refinement. Most people are adrift in an ocean of details. Targeting areas of improvement and purposefully setting goals toward their fulfillment can bring a greater sense of order to the chaos of life. The Circle of Life (see page 457) can be used to enrich the process of goal setting.

An important step in this process involves preparing for change. The Circle of Life includes a useful tool, the Readiness for Change assessment. This tool helps prepare people for change and helps them focus their actions in order to reduce the chances of failure, disappointment, and low self-esteem. The major disappointments in life are often tied to overly ambitious goals that are set in stone or too unrealistic to attain. The weight of such goals can be exhausting. Choosing the most appropriate goals prepares participants for greater success and builds their confidence for taking future action steps as each success reinforces the sense of their own abilities. Over time this useful approach can become internalized, occurring without conscious effort.

Careful assessment and planning is the best way to clarify your intentions and set goals that you can achieve. But even to meet the goal is an effective way to refine or clarify your action steps. When one sets a goal too high, it does not imply failure. It only shows that the particular goal needs to be broken down into smaller, more achievable steps. In some cases old goals must be released and new ones created. Each time we address the process of setting, clarifying, and refining goals, we have an opportunity to hone our skills in a process of continuous improvement.

The Power of Focused Action

An action taken at the right time can mean the difference between easy and impossible. Deciding to quit smoking on the day before your income tax audit may be bad timing. But quitting smoking might be better when the audit is over and you can go cycling to occupy your hands and exercise your lungs. Deciding to start walking every day may be bad timing if it's January in Chicago. But walking outside every day in late April in Chicago is perfect.

It's also helpful for most people to remember that an action step can be broken into smaller, more attainable steps. Taking one small step in the direction of achieving a goal is a setup for success! While we realize this most of the time, when we are mired in chronic illness the burdens can be overwhelming—physical, medical, financial, social, family, relationships, logistics, and quality of life. This may be the time to use this stepwise action approach.

Weight loss is a good example. The goal of losing 25 pounds can be daunting, but if it's broken down into 52 weekly steps, it's much easier to approach. That's less than half a pound a week. Then rather than trying to do it all by dieting, divide up the process. Part of the half pound can come off from eating the right foods, part from exercise, and part by using positive affirmations. Some can be taken off through breathing exercises that accelerate your metabolism, and some from drinking herb teas that improve digestion. That's five different strategies to address the half a pound a week. Stepwise goals reduce

The Power Of Affirmation

problems down to human scale.

When we acknowledge the barriers we face, it may become easier to create strategies for overcoming them. We may find our own attitudes, behaviors, and negative internal dialogue are slowing our progress. It's important to be sure we're not self-saboteurs or that someone else in our life isn't unconsciously sabotaging us. One of the most powerful tools for eliminating this internal negativity is the use of positive self-messages, also known as affirmations. Replacing negative self-talk with positive affirmations creates new possibilities and breakthroughs.

Research has demonstrated that carefully constructed affirmations cause shifts in the internal chemistry of the body, particularly brain chemistry and immune function. Dr. Candace Pert, a respected research scientist at the National Institutes of Health, has said, "The body is the outward manifestation of the mind." Simply stated, an affirmative thought or attitude neutralizes a negative thought. Acknowledging the barriers to the fulfillment of your goal can help you to create the affirmations and actions that may ultimately clear the negative energy.

The Power of Accountability

Accountability helps to sharpen the awareness of how we live our lives and how to better manage our time. Accountability, in a safe environment, can have a profound effect on our ability to set more realistic goals and action steps. Accountability gives us support and motivation to keep our commitments to our goals, priorities, and purpose. The objective is to practice external accountability in order to develop a more internalized accountability to oneself.

How Support Groups Work

The goal of the group process is to provide support for participants and give them the opportunity to realize what they need to heal faster. So when we first meet we talk about what it is that

everyone wants from the group and what it is that they need in their lives in terms of support. The groups start with a self-inquiry process. I use a diagram I call the Circle of Life, which has twelve major components of life, including self-care, stress mastery, relationship, finances, spirituality, work, and life purpose. First we just look at our lives and evaluate the areas that are strong and those that need support. What do you need? Do you need tools or skills or information or emotional support?

When we don't feel well, it's as if there's a drain on our life energy. It's like being in a boat with holes in it. You know that your goal is to get well so you have a clear destination, but you sense that there's a leak. Sometimes it's a slow leak, but when it becomes a big hole you feel yourself sinking. So you want to find out what is leaking your energy. And sometimes just having an illness itself is a big energy drain, because it takes tremendous energy for the body to heal itself and to cope. Stress may even be one of the causes of the illness. Being closely involved with someone who is extremely negative tends to deepen an illness. So we look at relationships and also identify sources of support.

This assessment process is important. A lot of times when we're not well we tend to feel overwhelmed by everything. So we ask, Where is the drain? What's draining your life force, your energy, your power, your motivation? And what will shift the balance? What strengthens your joy, your health, your peace of mind, your self-acceptance? What supports you? We look at all the different aspects of one's life to see where we need to put the energy.

A Safe Place

It can be nurturing to take part in a support group, where you know other people are having some very similar experiences and where there's no judgment. That's one of the most essential requirements—that you feel you're in a safe environment. The group must be a place where people understand because they're going through a similar experience. When you have safety there's the potential for healing. There's always healing where we feel comfortable, because then we're not using energy to override our emotions, we're not overextending ourselves, and we're not trying to prove anything. We can just be really real.

Steps Toward Healing

The main focus of the group is to acknowledge what's happening in each person's life and where she needs support.

1. First, there's a time of self-inquiry and self-evaluation, looking at your whole life, to ask what gives you energy, what drains your energy. We want to start sealing up the leaks in the boat.

2. After the inquiry process we move forward by focusing on our strengths. When you're sick sometimes that becomes your identity, who you feel you are as a person. And of course that's not the essential you. Even if people are experiencing a major health challenge, they still have their gifts and their strengths. So everyone begins their involvement in the group by sharing their greatest strengths; they may have a spiritual focus or know a lot about nutrition, or have a strong sense of life purpose. By connecting with each other's strengths, we also realize the resources that each member brings to the group, which we can learn and grow from.

3. At that point each person decides where he or she needs support.

4. Then we will draw on the strengths we've seen in each of us to provide support in areas where people need it.

The Circle of Life

The Circle of Life is the name we have chosen for our approach to the support group process. We use a diagram of a circle that reflects all of the basic aspects of life as a tool for the self-assessment of strengths and needs. The circle serves as a kind of reminder we can come back to, that shows us where we're making progress and where we still need more resources and support.

The Circle of Life can be used in a number of ways:

- In a group setting the circle is the gathering of participants, the group or team, that cooperates to improve and support each other. In this context the circle is the contemporary offspring of the ancient council circle or the meeting of the clan. It is also an expression of the breakthrough models for collaboration, such as quality circles, that are being implemented in corporate settings.
- As a self-improvement coaching method, the circle is a method of coaching or mentorship that can be used by individuals, partners, or teams to encourage continuous personal improvement, cycle after cycle.
- As a visual image, which can be used in a process of self-inquiry to assess where we are in each of the major aspects of our lives.

The Circle of Life represents twelve of the primary areas of our existence, focusing on:

Nutrition

Exercise and fitness

Stress mastery

Self-care

Relationships

Work and career

Financial health

Play and creativity

Environment and nature

Emotional life

Life purpose and service

Spirituality and intuition

At the end of the chapter is a copy of the Circle of Life Assessment. We encourage you to explore the value of the circle as a self-assessment tool. You may also want to seek out a certified Circle of Life facilitator in your area.

How to Use this Tool

The Circle of Life can be used in a stepwise journey by assessing where we are, setting goals, and taking action. When we revisit the circle, we have a chance to celebrate successes and set new goals. One of the most powerful concepts in the Circle of Life process is the idea of flexible goal setting, involving a range of goals—working goals, temporary goals, trial goals, and goals that give new directions a try. Working goals are constantly changed, clarified, refined, and even retired. These working goals are part of what makes the circle a fail-safe system. When people are encouraged and supported in a continual process of modifying their goals, this provides alternatives to goals that don't seem to be working. The process offers an opportunity to:

- Decide on your intentions and goals.
- Clarify and refine the goals.
- Acknowledge the physical, mental, emotional, situational, and relationship challenges that could keep you from attaining your goals.
- Design powerful positive affirmations (self-messages) that support your intentions.

- Select measurable, attainable action steps.
- Design your action steps, breaking them down to the right size and pace, to guarantee successful outcomes and gradual but assured improvement.
- Set up accountability by stating your action step to the group or to another person.

Setting a goal effectively requires careful and insightful assessment of the situation. Goals that are not carefully set may be too big or even inappropriate—and harder to fulfill. On the other hand, clarifying and refining goals increases the chances for success by providing essential information: obstacles that need to be cleared, possible alternative options, and a realistic expectation of the time it will take to implement improvements and action steps.

The breakthrough secret of the Circle of Life process is remembering that when a goal is broken down into small, realistic action steps and time frames, it may be transformed from a challenging possibility to a manageable probability. And the strength gained from the group, from the circle of support, is literally a joining of energy—an opportunity to share group energy.

Rebecca McLean is the National Director of the Circle of Life Facilitator Certification training. She trains individuals to be facilitators and coaches for support groups in hospitals, clinics, senior programs, schools, parishes, government agencies, and businesses. She also leads weekend group programs at retreat centers and spas.

Ms. McLean has worked in health care for more than 25 years. She has facilitated thousands of group sessions for people with chronic illness, including cancer, HIV, chronic fatigue, MS, and diabetes. Life coaching is another focus of her work, and she has facilitated both group and individuals seeking health, healing, transformation, and joy. Contact her at www.circleoflife.net, rmclean@west.net, (805) 685-4670, or Rebecca McLean, 243 Pebble Beach Drive, Santa Barbara, CA, 93117.