



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Rob" • Support Groups: Challenge and Benefits

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When Father Rob completed his five-year commitment to the Continuing Care Program of St. Luke Institute, his support group wanted to celebrate the occasion with time for reflection and a party. The official end of this commitment was an appropriate time for them to reflect on and share what had happened for each of them as support group members. The group invited Fr. Rob's Continuing Care Therapist to reflect with them on how they grew and changed by being members of a support group. They explored together the benefits and costs of a faithful commitment to the group process.

Fr. Rob began the sharing by recalling his original resistance to initiating his support group. As a resident preparing for discharge from SLI, he developed a contract which included a commitment to assemble a support group of six to eight people with whom he could share the precipitating reasons for treatment, the relapse triggers, and the terms of his contract. He was concerned about facing his peers with the required rigorous honesty that he practiced in treatment. He shared that at the time of his discharge he was anxious to get on with life and was willing to do whatever was required of him. He also admitted that in setting up the support group he acted more in compliance than in surrender.

Fr. Rob was not fully aware of how a support group is designed to help him activate his continuing care contract. He recalled being encouraged by his continuing care therapist as he structured his schedule around recovery activities including 12-step meetings, therapy, support group and spiritual direction. Today, he gratefully acknowledges that the support group offered a forum for him to discuss his needs and problems and receive feedback from a variety of viewpoints. The group meetings presented a safe atmosphere for him to share and improve his recovery skills. The feedback of the group was vital for his recovery process.

Creating a Support Group

While preparing for discharge, Father Rob was encouraged to consider the following characteristics in choosing his support group members: ability to keep confidences, trustworthiness, accessibility, and a willingness to observe and give feedback. Fr. Rob selected a representative of the diocese, his pastor, and friends that he has known over a time frame of ten to fifteen years. To acclimate the support group to his recovery issues, Father Rob hosted a

Re-entry Workshop within a few months after discharge where the members were able to learn his recovery issues, begin to bond as a group and learn what to do if Fr. Rob had a problem or a relapse.

It was also at this workshop that the support group members made a commitment to meet initially on a bi-monthly basis, and then quarterly or semi-annually over a five year period as Fr. Rob progressed in recovery. The responsibilities of the support group members included submitting observations and feedback, consulting with each other on behalf of Fr. Rob, seeking a balance between being a watchdog and being an enabler, and finally learning how best to tell Fr. Rob what he needed to hear in a way it could be heard.

Ordinarily, Fr. Rob set the agenda for the group. In the beginning he shared he was uncomfortable when it was time to set the date for the next meeting. He felt that his group members were so busy and he was imposing on their time. Gradually, one or the other of the group would ask Fr. Rob when was the next meeting. Frequently, the members would express how much they enjoyed their time together. As Father Rob reflected on the past five years, he was amazed at the group's interaction with him and with each other. Most of them found time to get to know other group members in a deeper way. Father Rob was grateful and pleased to learn what each group member gained by being on his support group.

Benefits and Costs

Members of Fr. Rob's support group shared with him both the benefits and costs of supporting him. One member shared that being a member of the group helped him to look at some of his own unhealthy behaviors. Another stated, "We had a healthy atmosphere to explore and discuss addiction, issues of intimacy, celibacy, and sexuality." Others recognized the strong bonds of friendship that developed during the five year process, noting that "a closeness and deeper sharing gradually unfolded." Open communication between Father Rob and the team members as well as with each other gradually developed. The members also shared that they grew in humility as they witnessed Fr. Rob's growing awareness and rigorous honesty. Finally, many experienced a renewed sense of fraternity.

During the past five years, Father Rob and the support group members demonstrated growth in significant areas of their lives. They noted, "We saw growth in our prayer life and in our own spiritual journey; we experienced stable relationships within the group throughout some troubling times in the Church." For some, the meetings provided a healthy atmosphere to explore and discuss their feelings and struggles. This intentional relationship during transitional times was stabilizing for several members. They developed better listening skills, were more attentive to other's stories and less inclined to talk. A member noted, "We learned the importance of empathic listening." Most significantly, each of them recognized in a practical way, how grace is active in each of their lives. One commented, "I am able to recognize what salvation history means for me and my brother priests."

What were the costs of belonging to a support group? The basic question to ask before one becomes a support group member is, "Am I willing to change?" The members of Father Rob's support group had to let go of some pre-conceived ideas, intolerance, biased opinions, and pride. The cost of being a member is also being vulnerable to the other members of the group. One member learned that compassion is an attitude of mind and heart that does not come easily.

Fr. Rob's support group learned that when one member of a group changes, the group changes. The support group not only helped Fr. Rob but also all the members of the group. Father Rob concluded this meeting by saying, "I am grateful for your support and for sharing your life with me. Truly, wisdom was in the group." It is noteworthy that as a result of the growth and benefits to the members of the support group, they plan to keep on meeting.

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