

6.3 DEMENTIA SUPPORT GROUP TOOLKIT

This Dementia Support Group Toolkit provides step-by-step guidance for communities to develop, launch, and sustain dementia-related support groups.

PURPOSE OF A DEMENTIA SUPPORT GROUP

Dementia support groups provide a safe, trusted space for individuals impacted by dementia—especially caregivers - to: Share experiences and challenges; reduce isolation and stress; learn coping strategies; access community resources; and build peer connection and mutual support

Support groups are not therapy. Their primary value is creating empathic understanding and emotional support among people with shared experiences.

TYPES OF DEMENTIA SUPPORT GROUPS

Communities may choose one or more models depending on needs and capacity:

- **Caregiver Support Groups** (most common)
- **Early-Stage Dementia Groups** (for individuals living with dementia)
- **Memory Café–Style Groups** (social, activity-based, inclusive)
- **Mixed Groups** (caregivers and care receivers together, with structure)

STEP 1: IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE PARTICIPANTS

Purpose: Identify caregivers and other community members who would benefit from participating in a dementia support group and begin building interest in the group.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.2 Quick Start Guide and Tool 6.3.6 Planning Template to guide initial planning and participant recruitment.

WHO TO ENGAGE

- Family caregivers
- Friends or neighbors providing care
- Long-distance caregivers
- Community members supporting someone with dementia

HOW TO IDENTIFY INTEREST

- Ask staff, volunteers, or care teams
- Include questions in community surveys or intake forms
- Share invitations through newsletters, email, and community boards
- Host informal listening sessions

Recommendation for Success: A group can begin with as few as 3–5 participants. The ideal group size is 8–12 members.

STEP 2: DESIGN THE SUPPORT GROUP STRUCTURE

Purpose: Develop a meeting format that reflects the needs and preferences of participants while encouraging consistent attendance and meaningful discussion. Support group structure should be developed *with participants* and may evolve over time.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.2 Quick Start Guide and Tool 6.3.6 Planning Template to help determine meeting logistics.

KEY DECISIONS

- Meeting frequency (monthly, biweekly, weekly)
- Meeting length (60–90 minutes recommended)
- Format (in-person, virtual, or hybrid)
- Open group (new members can join anytime) or closed group (fixed group for a set period)
- Group size limits and plans for growth

Virtual formats can increase access and reduce barriers and may continue alongside in-person options.

STEP 3: SELECT A FACILITATOR

Purpose: Identify a facilitator who can create a welcoming, supportive environment and guide group discussions effectively.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.1 Facilitator Guide and 6.3.2 Quick Start Guide to prepare facilitators for their role.

FACILITATOR OPTIONS

- Trained community volunteer
- Peer facilitator from the group
- Staff member
- External facilitator (social worker, counselor, trained professional)

CORE FACILITATION SKILLS

Effective facilitators: - Encourage participation from all members - Practice active listening - Manage time and group flow - Handle difficult dynamics respectfully - Maintain confidentiality and trust

STEP 4: ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

Purpose: Create shared expectations that promote confidentiality, respect, trust, and meaningful participation.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.4 Ground Rules

COMMON GROUND RULES

- Confidentiality is required
- Everyone has a chance to speak
- No interrupting
- Respect different experiences and perspectives
- Stay on topic and on time

Ground rules are most effective when developed *together* by the group and revisited as needed.

STEP 5: PLAN MEETING AGENDAS

Purpose: Develop a consistent meeting structure that encourages participation while remaining flexible to meet caregiver needs.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.3 Agenda Template

SAMPLE MEETING STRUCTURE

- Welcome and check-in
- Group sharing (core of the meeting)
- Discussion or topic focus
- Resources or announcements
- Closing and next steps

Time flexibility is important, as caregiving crises may arise.

STEP 6: CREATE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Purpose: Communities should strive to: - Reduce stigma around dementia - Include care receivers when appropriate - Adapt activities to different abilities - Offer respite-friendly options

Examples include inviting care receivers to social events, maintaining participation in ongoing programs, or coordinating short respite activities.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.1 Facilitator Guide and Tool 6.3.4 Ground Rules.

STEP 7: CONNECT TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Purpose: Help participants access additional education, services, respite opportunities, and community resources that support caregiving.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.7 Resource Referral List to connect participants with local and statewide resources.

COMMON RESOURCES

- South Dakota Alzheimer's Association
- Dakota at Home

Building relationships with local organizations strengthens group sustainability and support pathways.

STEP 8: SUSTAIN AND GROW THE GROUP

Purpose: Develop strategies to maintain participation, strengthen the group over time, and support long-term sustainability.

Tool to Use: Tool 6.3.1 Facilitator Guide, Tool 6.3.2 Quick Start Guide, and Tool 6.3.5 Attendance Log.

SUSTAINABILITY TIPS

- Rotate facilitation roles if appropriate
- Revisit structure and ground rules periodically
- Track participation informally
- Gather participant feedback
- Share successes with community partners

Groups may remain small and informal or grow into multiple groups over time.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS

- 6.3.1 Facilitator Guide
- 6.3.2 Quick Start Guide
- 6.3.3 Agenda Template
- 6.3.4 Ground Rules
- 6.3.5 Attendance Log
- 6.3.6 Planning Template
- 6.3.6.1 Planning Example
- 6.3.7 Resource Referral

SUPPORTING HEALTHY BRAIN COMMUNITY GOALS

This Dementia Support Group Toolkit helps communities implement Component 6: Caregiver Education & Support while also supporting:

- Increased caregiver education and confidence
- Stronger connections to community resources
- Reduced caregiver isolation
- Dementia awareness and community inclusion
- Long-term caregiver support networks

Support groups may be implemented as a standalone community program or as part of broader Healthy Brain Community initiatives.