Starting an Aspie/Autism Social Support Group

1. Find someone (preferably an adult Aspie or autistic) who is willing to start the group. If not possible, find someone who has a vested interest in the adult Aspie/autistic population who is willing to start the group.
2. Find a location (library, community center, autism center/clinic, place of worship, etc.) that would be willing to host this group on a monthly basis, as it would meet once a month.
3. Every group will be different in terms of starting and ending times, as well as the day during the week and the day of the month the group will meet. May take several months before setting in on a day and time. My Chattanooga group meets on the first or second Tuesday each month from 5:30-7:00 PM locally. My Dalton State College group meets 5:45-7:00 PM locally on the second Thursday each month.
4. Think of the group as meeting in a “large living room”. Your job is supportive of everyone there and to make sure things move along until the time for the meeting is done, although you may need to get discussion started. Sometimes I will do a PowerPoint presentation that goes 30 minutes to start discussion, then things will go from there. Unless you are a licensed therapist or psychologist, you do not want to be giving people professional advice. Have everyone go around the room and introduce themselves. Allow people in the group to start the discussion about why they chose to come to this group meeting in the first place. You might want to ask during the flow of communication about challenges they are facing or things going on in their lives. Most often, people love talking about their interests, so that could be something you ask to someone who attends this type of meeting the first time Just go with the flow of the meeting and do not overanalyze anyone’s situation. You are not facilitating the meeting to be judge, jury, and executioner to those attending. Be supportive totally. Remember that and you will be fine. You will want to ask the group if they would like to have speakers at the meeting and if so, which topics. If no speakers, that is fine, too.
5. If you have a Facebook group to promote this group, great. If not, you will want to promote locally on Facebook through a new group called something like “Aspie/Autistic Adults or Adult Autism Social or Social Support Group” and through other means like Twitter and other social media. Also, consider going to social service agencies, doctors’ offices, psychologists’ offices, mental health organizations in your area to promote it. If your local paper has a section for announcements, get your group’s announcement in there. If you can promote through a TV station, do it. The important thing to do you at this point is promote, promote, promote when starting out with a group as this. It will grow over time, but may be slow at first. Consider that you will not have the same number of people at each social group meeting. What you are wanting to do to bring attention and awareness that this is a new group and the benefits that people would receiving by attending a group as this.
6. Consider offering pizza and light refreshments at meetings and make it complimentary for those attending. You might want to have more pizza for the first meeting. When pizza is all gone, so be it. Light refreshments can be cans of pop/soda and bottled water. Keep in consideration that some Aspies will be receiving Social Security Disability or be limited with income who attend your social group. Consider taking donations for pizza, but do not charge them for it. If you can find a sponsor for the pizzas (local pizza place, most likely) who is supportive of the adult Aspie community in your area, take advantage of the partnership and get your pizzas from there. You will want to make your social group meetings free for all to attend.
7. If you have a built-in membership for this group already, great. If not, consider that it may take a few months for word to get around for your group. Don’t give up if it feels like no one is coming to your social group meetings after a few months. Things take time to develop.
8. Anything else I might have missed that is not in 1-7.

Description of GCA Centre for Adult Autism | Southeast USA

GCA Centre for Adult Autism is an "adult arm" of the Chattanooga Autism Center. This group is public and acts as a gateway for adults and young adults on the autism spectrum, their parents/caregivers, and their supporters/friends in the Greater Chattanooga, TN and North Georgia (Dalton, GA) areas - and beyond. GCA has groups for in Chattanooga and North Georgia: Adults (generally ages 30 and over), Young Adults (generally ages 18 to 29), and Parents/Friends. Also, GCA partners with the Autism Society of Georgia to co-host a social event monthly for the Adults and Young Adults groups in the Metro Atlanta area.

Any questions (including from the media) should be directed to Scott Kramer, Program Director and Founder, at Scott.Kramer@chattanoogaautismcenter.org. The above groups are for those who are on the autism spectrum and their parents/caregivers. The groups are not to be used for any other purpose. Thank you for your interest.

Guidelines

By joining and participating in this group, I ...
1. Agree that what is discussed in the group will be kept in the group (confidential!).
2. Acknowledge that I understand that people within this group have different worldviews and beliefs. I commit to being kind, respectful and constructive in my posts and comments.
3. Promise not to advertise, promote, or offer anything for sale. (However, you may recommend a book or product that has made your journey easier.)
4. Understand that this group is for people who are in serious, committed relationships. This is not a place for dating advice or for those looking for a new relationship.

Then, I would add the following.

5. We are not licensed therapists or counselors. Thus, we cannot offer professional advice to your situation (or else you can be sued potentially, if someone acts on what you told them and it turns out bad, especially). If your situation requires you to get psychological help, we will help by guiding you in the right direction with those who might be able to work with your situation.

Remember, adult Aspies who attend these meetings have been looking for something like this, because of the lack of resources that exist for this population once the “safety net” is gone. They will be sharing sensitive information with you that needs to be kept confidential. Also, they may not know of anyone else and have a strong lack of support system.