



Welcoming First-Time Attendees

Wisconsin Parkinson Association – Facilitator Content Library

Attending a support group for the first time can feel uncertain for many people. Individuals may be newly diagnosed, adjusting to changes in their health, or unsure what to expect from a group setting.

A thoughtful and welcoming first experience can make a significant difference in helping someone feel comfortable returning to the group.

Facilitators play an important role in creating an environment that feels safe, respectful, and supportive for new attendees.

Before the Meeting

If possible, greet first-time attendees when they arrive.

A simple welcome can help reduce anxiety and help them feel included right away.

Example:

“Welcome. We’re really glad you’re here today. Support groups are a place where people connect, share experiences, and support one another. Please feel free to participate in whatever way feels comfortable for you.”

You may also briefly explain how the meeting typically works.

Example:

“We usually begin with introductions or a short check-in, followed by discussion. There is never any pressure to speak if you would rather listen.”

Introducing New Attendees

During the meeting, acknowledge that someone is new while being respectful of their comfort level.

Example:

“I’d like to mention that we have someone joining us for the first time today. We’re glad you’re here. If you feel comfortable, you’re welcome to introduce yourself, but please know that listening is always perfectly okay too.”

This allows the new attendee to decide how much they would like to share.

Helping New Attendees Feel Comfortable

Facilitators can help create a welcoming atmosphere by:

- Using warm and inclusive language
- Encouraging respectful listening
- Making space for everyone to participate
- Avoiding putting anyone on the spot

It can also be helpful to remind the group that everyone’s Parkinson’s journey is different.

Example:

“Each person’s experience with Parkinson’s is unique, and there is no single right way to navigate the journey.”

After the Meeting

If possible, check in briefly with first-time attendees before they leave.

Example:

“It was really nice to meet you today. We’re glad you joined us, and we hope to see you again. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.”

This small moment of connection can help someone feel more comfortable returning.

Encouraging Continued Connection

You may also want to share additional WPA resources that could be helpful to new participants, such as:

- Upcoming WPA programs or events
- Educational resources available through WPA
- Support groups in other communities
- WPA online educational materials and programs

Encouraging continued engagement can help individuals feel connected to the broader Parkinson's community.

Facilitator Tip

The first meeting experience often determines whether someone returns to a support group.

A warm welcome, clear expectations, and a supportive atmosphere can help new participants feel that they have found **a community that understands and supports them.**

Even small gestures of kindness and inclusion can make a lasting difference.

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