

# **Leader Behaviors in Virtual Support Groups: A Case Study of Israeli Support Groups on Facebook**

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## **Summary**

Online support groups allow people who struggle with certain problems, challenges or illnesses to convene in an online space to share experiences, as well as seek, receive and provide information, advice and emotional support. Recently published surveys, research and publications indicate a systematic and ongoing increase in the use of Facebook groups, and a similar increase in the number of informational searches conducted in groups, as opposed to other information channels. Support groups for people struggling with various illnesses and challenges are a broad and significant means for transmitting information. Group members, and various professionals, use support groups to distribute, evaluate, create and use information, in a wide variety of ways. The role of support group leaders is central and important: the leaders can prevent the information from being distributed as they see fit, and their level of control over the information is near-absolute. Despite current findings in the field indicating that Facebook support groups hold deep meaning and great potential for their members, there is a clear lack of proven research-based knowledge on the ways in which support groups are managed and led. There is limited research examining the behaviors of leaders in Facebook groups, and even less research focusing on the leaders of support groups on this platform.

To provide an in-depth exploration of leader behaviors on Facebook support groups, this research will use the leader behavior model developed by Lieberman and others, following observations of physical support group leaders, holding face-to-face meetings (Lieberman et al., 1973). The model defines five categories of leader behaviors as observed by the researchers: (1) Meaning Attribution – actions in which the leader explains, clarifies, interprets, compares and assists in constructing a perspective and cognitive learning, (2) Support-Caring – when the leader helps, rewards, shields, compliments, supports and offers compassion, friendship, love and affection, (3) Evoke-Stimulate



and many other findings. Each of the behaviors contained different and various actions the leaders take: some of these behaviors had documented in previous research, others were recorded here for the first time.

**Conclusions.** It is clear that Lieberman et al's leader behavior model exists in online support groups operating on Facebook, and it turned out to be an appropriate tool to describe, investigate and interpret leader behaviors in groups. Furthermore, group leaders perform many actions relating to and influencing information in the group, though often the leaders lack professional education or established knowledge in the field. The overall conclusion of this research is that Facebook support group leaders can use the leader behavior model established by Lieberman et al in order to shape and characterize the groups they lead. Understanding leader behaviors and the various actions attributed to each of them will aid leaders in expanding the repertoire of possibilities available to them, and expose them to tools as well as the rationale behind them, as described by the group leaders interviewed for this research.

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