



COMMONWEALTH HOLISTIC HERBALISM

We're excited to share our **Mutual Aid Start-up Guide** with you!

You may be reading this guide with past experience in other Mutual Aid groups and wanting to start your own, or you may be brand new to the idea of Mutual Aid. You might be ready to build radical community, or you may just be looking for a little support in your neighborhood.

No matter how small or how big your goals, or what your background is, when we come together to support one another, we strengthen our entire community.

This guide has:

- Information about the different forms Mutual Aid can take
- Steps to take to get a group started in your community - even if you've never done this before and don't have a lot of time or resources
- Steps to take to get a group started in your community if you've got big goals
- Specific inspiration for your group's activities
- And links where you can get more information

And if you have any questions, always feel free to contact us at info@commonwealthherbs.com :-)

Let's go!



What is Mutual Aid?

If you aren't familiar with the term "Mutual Aid", an example that impacts your life right now is your local fire department: they have mutual aid arrangements with the neighboring fire departments so that if a fire is too big for one of them, the others will help.

By planning these arrangements in advance, they can practice together, share equipment and training, and build camaraderie that will help them work together better in an emergency.

You can build this in your own life too - no fire truck required!

But it's not just for disasters!

One of the most common questions we get from students is "i need help to have more energy and focus because i'm raising kids and working and doing these other things that i have to do and i just am so tired all the time" - and this is also a place where mutual aid can help you!

Because the truth is, in that situation, you don't need herbs to give you more energy, you need **community support** so that you don't have to do all this stuff alone!

Mutual aid is just another name for community support. It's people helping each other in an emergency, sure - but it's also moms helping each other out with child care and play dates so everyone gets some time alone. It's sharing errands or batch cooking together or helping each other out with DIY around the house. It's sharing our skills and our resources with one another so that life is easier for everyone.

In other words, you don't need an emergency to be worthy of assistance!

You can build systems to support you in regular everyday kinds of things - and those systems will serve you every day, AND in an emergency!



Why isn't this already in my life?

"Community" is such a buzzword in these times: everyone talks about it because everyone wants it. These days, very few really have a solid support network. Most people I know struggle to find time to get together with friends at all - the reality of life these days is that everyone is really busy!

That doesn't mean that community and support are out of reach. It just means we have to be more intentional, and treat our support networks like investments: when we invest in each other, then we know that we're not alone when trouble comes!

Depending on how old you are and what part of the country you were raised in, you might have grown up in these kinds of communities of support. You might remember your parents getting together with other families to do group projects - simple things like a multi-family yard sale, or bigger things like cleaning up after a tornado or flood.

I remember my parents going to regular neighborhood card games too - we kids were always relegated to the backyard or the living room with a movie while the adults played Uno in the kitchen. (And as we got older and they let us play a hand or two with them - ooh, we felt so grown-up!)

Those social times were just as important as the times they were helping each other with something hard. Spending time together helped form the bonds that people relied on for more difficult times.

It's easy to look at any one of these things individually as inconsequential - but the truth is, each one is weaving a thread in a web of support. Those webs don't just magically exist - they were always intentionally woven: nourished by community members for the benefit of all.

Everyone has less time today, but these are still the things that form our foundations of support: shared experiences, like a neighborhood game night or yard sale. Small acts of support, like sharing something from your garden or cookies at a holiday. And even though we have less time to maintain them, if we intentionally come together with the purpose of supporting one another, we can build them up strong.



What are your goals?

There are no rules about what your goals should be! Mutual aid is not one set thing - it's any form of people helping people and building intentional networks of support.

Your goals might be to start a community resource such as food distribution, a community apothecary, or a network of folks who are helping the elderly in your area. You might want to organize a monthly free clinic in your area, or a community garden project. You might be interested in organizing skill shares or other kinds of workshops so that you can grow your group and your capacity to help others - it's a good way to build interest and find like-minded folks who want to join you, even if you don't know them yet!

Even if you only have one or two interested people to start with, offering a low-key skill share will help you find other people in your community and get the ball rolling.

You don't have to be a fully-fledged expert to do a skill share - just share something that you're good at. Of course you can talk about herbalism skills if you have some to share - but other great topics include sewing & mending, using different kinds of tools, cooking, canning, gardening - anything you are good at, that's relevant to the goals you have for the group you want to build! Just put up a flyer at your local library and public bulletin boards - it's enough to get started with, and you can grow from there.

Or you might want to keep your group small, focusing just on your neighborhood or a particular group of people - maybe organizing through a school your child attends or an affinity group you belong to.

A group like this could focus on helping one another with home care, child care, cooking when someone is sick - the kinds of support everyone needs sometimes!

You can start small and grow later - that's a great way to scale your goals so that nobody burns out.



Finding ideas

One way to start this process is by thinking about what you wish you had available to you, and then setting that as your goal to build.

Another way to think about this is, what is the impact you want to have on the world? You don't have to be a big famous celebrity to change lives and change the world - at least your own part of it - you can create impact and a legacy just through the work you do to build a sustainable community. So pick the thing that's most interesting to you, that you feel most passionate about, that you have a lot of energy for, and let that be your starting point.

As you get established and grow, other people will bring ideas into the group too, and your goals can expand! But start out with the thing that you are most passionate about, and move from there.

Here's a short list of ideas to get you started in your brainstorming:

First, I want to highlight the concept of a **community apothecary**, since we're an herb school and you are probably a person who's interested in herbalism. :-)

A community apothecary can be hosted anywhere - but the idea is that there is a supply of herbs that is ready and available for anyone in need. As a group, you could do things like preparing batches of Fire Cider for fall and winter health. You could prepare postpartum kits for after birth care. If you live in an area with frequent wild fires, you could prepare respiratory support kits. Just think about what your community deals with regularly and how you could provide herbal support.

It's a fun way to use your herbal skills to serve the community, and it provides you with community too. Even if you're the only herbalist you know of in your town, you might be surprised at the level of interest for this kind of project: lots of people are interested in herbalism!



In our Accessible Herbalism course, you'll find lots of details about setting up a community apothecary, as well as many other ways to make herbalism & better nutrition more accessible to everyone in your community.

[Click here for the Accessible Herbalism course, available on a sliding scale](#)

Here are some other options to think about:

- **Focus specifically on being ready for an emergency** - then your get-togethers will be focused on identifying skills that your group has and skills you need, organizing skill-shares to cross-train group members, and delegating someone to learn skills that aren't yet represented in the group.
- **Organize a kid share**, scheduling with other parents for group playdates, so that each parent gets some Saturdays kid-free, for example.
- **Organize a DIY share**, and help each other with household tasks or projects. This could include a community tool library, so that people don't have to buy new tools when they have a project - instead they can borrow tools from the community tool library.
- **Organize a meal share**, which could include community food preparation and distribution to folks in need or who are sick. It could also be as simple as intentionally preparing food together as a group for all to enjoy - this is a great way to build group cohesion while also practicing large-batch food preparation: an essential skill for post-disaster situations.



- **Organize a community closet** - this is like a food pantry, but for non-food items. It can include clothing, household items, pre-paid gas cards, or anything that can be useful for your community.
- **Organize a fix-it club** - this way, people can bring things they have that need repair to the club and either learn to repair them, or swap repairs (ie, i can fix your sweater and you can fix my lawnmower). Things that can be repaired and are still good but no longer needed can be donated to a community closet, or sold to raise funds for the group.
- **Start a First-Aid club** - you can use our free [Herbal First Aid Packing List](#), if you need something to help you get started! Your group could first work on making sure everyone in the group has a first aid kit and knows how to use it, and then can branch out to help others get first aid supplies and skills as well!
- **Use the Herbal Community Care Toolkit!** We built that course intentionally as a way to help folks start working in their own communities, and it's available for free or by donation. You could start a group to work through that course together and use that as your foundation of helping one another - and then see how you grow from there!

Click here for the Herbal Community Care Toolkit
use code **mutualaid** to get it free,
or make a donation if you wish

There are so many more ideas - after school groups, senior lunches, support for chronically ill community members or the elderly, support for single moms, etc.

You can have a big goal, but it doesn't have to be big - it just has to be something that starts to build trust, and helps everyone get to know one another.



And don't forget the fun! Activities that are enjoyable create deeper connections - and the connection is the most important part. So make sure that you schedule regular activities that are just for nourishing camaraderie and connection within your group. They don't have to be fancy, just enjoyable.

The logistics of group organization

You have some goals in mind, but how do you get from goal to real life sustainable group?

Here are a few things to think about to make your group successful.

Keeping people engaged & interested

It's perhaps good to address this topic first off, because what we're really talking about here is a group project. If you ever did one of those in school, you know that a good group makes the project easy and fun, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way.

So it's important to pick a core of folks that you can work well with.

Think about people you know, who you get along with well and have similar outlooks. Specifically be thinking of people who are reliable - if they say they'll help you, they really do. When you're first forming your support community, it's important to have this core of folks who will come through for each other. As your community grows, you'll have all different kinds of people who have different levels of commitment and different skills to contribute. If you have a solid core of people who are working well together, they set the tone for the whole group, and make it easier to integrate new members with varied skills.

Try to intentionally incorporate folks who have different skillsets - maybe someone who's handy with DIY, someone who is a nurse, someone who is good at gardening, someone who is good at sewing, someone who



likes technology, etc. Different skillsets helps ensure that no one person is carrying the whole weight of the group, and that it's easier to delegate responsibilities among the folks who have the skills. Try to think about the kinds of skills you'll need: if you're planning to cook large meals to distribute, but only one person in the group knows how to cook - that's not the end of the world, but before you really get started, other members will need to learn to cook so that they can share the load. Learn-to-cook sessions can even be fun!

Thinking about capacity and delegation ahead of time means that no one person gets burned out.

Spend a little time thinking about your list of folks. There's no minimum or maximum number of people, just think of a group of folks you enjoy and can depend on.

What if you don't know the right people?

Maybe you live in a new town and don't know many people at all. Maybe your work is busy and you don't know many folks outside of work. Maybe lots of things - you just might not know the types of folks you think would be a benefit to your group & goals.

It's time to meet them! Let people know what you want to do and what you're looking for. Hosting a skill share is a great way to find interested people, but it can be even simpler than that - you can literally publicize your goals and invite folks who are interested in forming a committed group.

Depending on where you are and what kind of goals you have, of course, you may choose your wording carefully. You might want to host some informal get-togethers on various related topics (ie, a first aid workshop) and then pick people who you'd like to invite into the group - that way you can get that reliable core started first, before opening up the group. It's a way of getting to know folks before you approach them about a longer-term working relationship.



Some options for that would be to host a book club and choose a few books specifically about mutual aid situations. You could host a neighborhood party in your yard to get to know your neighbors and see who you might like to work with. You could narrow down your invitations to a specific affinity group - for example, if you love rock climbing, you can talk to folks who go to the climbing gym.

Accepting people as they are

People can only give what they have to give! That's true for others and it's true for you! So having some awareness about burnout is important - so that people can get a break before the burnout happens.

Also it's important to recognize that not everyone in the group will contribute the same amount.

Some people may have aspirations that are bigger than their time and energy resources, some people's schedules and obligations will shift over time - lots of things can change, but that doesn't mean that they can't be involved!

If you build a culture in your group of recognizing that schedules shift and change, energy levels change, and that these things are normal, you can help people participate at the level they are able to contribute, without feeling shame that they can't give more. Regularly checking in with members - about who needs a break, who's feeling like they can take something new on, and who is tired of a particular task and would like to trade - opens up space for folks to make these kinds of shifts in a positive way.

Sometimes folks in a group drift off. There are a lot of factors that could be going on here, but they're all "normal". Here are some things to think about if that's happening:

- If people took on more commitment than they can actually manage, they might feel shame or guilt, and that can cause them to drift away. Building a culture where it's very acceptable for members to ask for help or to say "this ended up to be bigger than I thought, I can't do the whole thing" - and meeting those kinds of statements with gratitude and assistance - can help folks stay with the group at the level they have available.



- Groups succeed when they feel deeply committed to one another. If you have a group that is focused on doing a particular kind of work in the community, make sure that you're not just working! Make time to get together for fun with each other too, so that people feel connected to one another.
- If you have big goals, and you don't have team or volunteer management experience, it's worth getting some. You'll find some links to free resources in the Resources section at the end of this guide.
- Sometimes folks drift away and it's ok. If that's happening, it's a good opportunity to check in to see if there are adjustments that need to be made for the health of the group, but sometimes it's just a normal aspect of shifts in people's personal lives.

Mechanisms for Meeting

There are lots of ways for your group to meet up and communicate with one another, and it's worth thinking through a few different options so that your group can be as accessible as possible.

Meeting in person – It is important to get together in person sometimes, but this doesn't have to be a weekly or even monthly thing - meeting times will depend on your group's goals.

Your group could meet in person once a season, for example, and collaborate between meetings in other ways (below). This would be ideal for a group that doesn't have a lot of time but wants to be building meaningful support networks.

Other goals would require more frequent meetings - possibly with specific tasks to get done, in addition to just building camaraderie.

When you're thinking about meeting up in person, think about who you include and exclude with your meetings:

- **Are they at times when the people you are inviting can attend?** You might need to be creative with timing because work & family schedules differ. If your group is large, you could schedule multiple



events a season, so that people can attend the one that fits in their schedule best. A large group can also break into smaller task-oriented groups that are defined by everyone's availability.

- **Are the meetings in locations that everyone can access?** For example, could you schedule events outdoors, to reduce the risk to immune-compromised folks? Can your events take place in locations that are accessible to people with limited mobility? Depending on your goals, some tasks or events might have certain requirements - the ability to lift heavy stuff, for example. But there will be other tasks that don't require that: planning ahead for allowing everyone to contribute what they have to offer builds a stronger network.
- **Could your events schedule include Zoom options?** This makes events accessible to folks with disabilities, folks with babies and small children, folks who are caring for aging parents, and many more scenarios! Someone might not be able to attend an event in person because they might not be able to get care coverage - but they could attend an event on Zoom!
- **Are the events sustainable for the organizers?** The whole point of community is to support one another - not for one person to get burned out making sure that everyone else has support! Getting together at the park with everyone bringing their own snacks is much easier to organize than some big fancy luncheon - but it's just as effective! The focus is on sharing what's going on in our lives, on who needs support and who has the skills & time resources to do it, and on having fun building connection. A simple, no-fuss get-together keeps the focus on the people and allows for more events with less burnout!
Even if your group has specific and long-term goals, a low-key gathering allows you to keep your focus on the goals rather than spending a lot of energy on the meeting preparations.

In-Person events aren't the only way! – There are lots of ways to build community that don't require in-person events! The ultimate goal here is regular & meaningful connection, and technology can help with that!



- **Group Chat Apps:** If your group is small - and “small” here is anything from 2 - 200 people, you can have a group chat. This can keep the group together in between in-person meetings, and can provide a way for folks to interact even if they're busy or if in-person meetings are not accessible for other reasons.
In a chat situation, you can both share personal information, like things going on in people's lives - new skills they learned, a need they have, a thing they're celebrating - as well as information about work that the group is doing together, such as collecting food donations or organizing a community herbal apothecary.
There are a lot of good tools to do this, but a great free one is Signal. It has a desktop and a mobile option, supports both group chat and private chat, and is highly secure.
<https://signal.org/download/>
- **Video meetings:** On one hand, many people use video meetings for work and are kind of tired of videos by the time it's time for social activities - it's true. But Zoom (etc) is a really important tool for accessibility! People who wouldn't be able to participate in a physical meeting due to illness, time constraints, or lots of other factors, are often able to participate in a video meeting. Zoom allows for free meetings up to 40 minutes, and Google has longer free meetings.
- **Other technological assists:** There are so many apps and platforms that can help with group cohesion. There's everything from working through google docs and a group chat all the way through to something like a Circle community, or a Slack channel. Some apps are free and some cost money, but don't rule out a paid option just because it's money. Sometimes the cost is quite manageable, especially when it's spread across a whole group. If it allows for more group cohesion and consistency, it might be worth it!

The major thing to consider when you're looking at technology is who has access to the data, and what kind of security does it have. You might not feel like your group is doing anything that requires secrecy, but you still might not want your data being used to train an AI, for example. It's a good idea to avoid Facebook groups, because everything written there is used for advertising purposes.



Even if you're not a big fan of technology, remember: a way for folks to interact online really will help with group cohesion and camaraderie, so it is worth a little bit of time to find a method you like.

Getting started

The general steps, true for every group:

- Find the people you want to work with
- Share your goals with them & hear what they think
- Agree on a shared goal for the group
- Then do it!

Whether you're planning big goals or small ones, your very first meeting probably will only be a handful of people, and you'll grow from there. Which means that this is really not much different than having a low-key backyard party!

It doesn't have to be a fancy thing - just tell everyone to bring something and come over to hang out. Invite your friends/neighbors/community members who you think would be a good fit. It's ok if it's a tiny group to start with - it's ok if it's literally you and one other person!

You can meet in your backyard, or in a public park, or a cafe, or at the library (many libraries have community meeting rooms!), or at the school playground - anywhere you can get together is perfect!

Some people won't have heard of the idea of Mutual Aid before, so the first thing to do in this party is explain what it is - you can use this guide as a starting point!

Once you've introduced the idea of committing to helping each other out and helping the community, then you can share the goals you have been thinking of. Once you share your ideas, your friends will have ideas too, so be prepared for things to grow and shift.



Everyone is really busy these days, and stressed out, so some folks might feel awkward about making a commitment to a new group - that's ok! You can still do this!

If your group doesn't have a lot of time, plan smaller goals. Maybe you meet once a month to share some ideas, keep each other updated on skills and gear everyone has in case anyone needs to share. These gatherings will build camaraderie so that you know you can depend on one another if you need to, and gives you a foundation to grow in the future if the capacity is there.

Although it certainly can be, it doesn't have to be bigger than that - just getting together regularly provides the connection you'll need to pull together if there's some kind of emergency - whether it's personal, like a death or a serious illness, or community-wide, like a flood or fire.

For now, you don't have to have all those answers - just invite everyone over and see where the idea goes!

Maybe you've fallen out of practice with inviting folks to hang out - it's ok! These days, that's actually really common! But the best way to start is to just start, so right now, look at your calendar and pick a day.

Then email the friends you want to include, or make a flyer to post at the library (or wherever the right place is for you), and get it out there. Don't wait! You don't have to have everything perfectly planned out, you just need to get some folks together and get started.

What if there's... no one?

You might live in a location where there is no one you could be in such a group with. Or disability might make creating a local group extra challenging.

Virtual Mutual Aid is still mutual aid! You could work with friends online to create networks of support! The process is similar - choose some people you'd like to build a network with and just invite them to a video session or



an intentional chat meeting. There are so many ways we can support one another even if we're not in the same location!

You don't have to do it alone!

Here are some links to help you find already-existing Mutual Aid groups that you can plug into and learn from. You can also search on the phrase "mutual aid groups near me".

<https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>

<https://www.idealists.org/>

<https://findhelp.org/>

Here are additional guides about how to create Mutual Aid groups. Each group comes from a slightly different perspective, but each has good information to think about.

From the American Friends Service Committee:

<https://afsc.org/news/how-create-mutual-aid-network>

A toolkit focused on neighborhood mutual aid, with lots of helpful links, assembled by AOC during the initial parts of the Covid pandemic:

<https://cdn.cosmicjs.com/09a653b0-7545-11ea-be6b-gf10a20c6f68-Mutual-Aid-101-Toolkit.pdf>

Mutual aid tools from the Solidarity Economy coop in the UK.

<https://www.mutualaid.coop/tools-resources/>

Shareable's Mutual Aid Toolkit & Learning Series:

<https://www.shareable.net/mutual-aid-101/>

They also have an excellent guide to starting a "library of things", a community tool library, etc:

<https://www.shareable.net/library-of-things/>



Dean Spade's writings at the Anarchist Library:

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dean-spade-mutual-aid>

Resources for managing a team of volunteers:

You'll find some volunteer management advice that's specific to Mutual Aid groups in the links above, especially in the Shareable toolkit, in the third section titled "Decision-making, Governance, & Power". That link is here:

<https://www.shareable.net/mutual-aid-toolkit/#section-3-governance>

These two are mostly geared towards NGOs and Non-profits, and so they are referring to larger groups of volunteers, but they have some useful ideas that can help you in your groups too! (But don't worry, you don't need a software platform to manage your volunteers!)

<https://volunteerhub.com/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-volunteer-management>

<https://neonone.com/resources/blog/volunteer-management>

And if you are thinking about **disaster response**, you might love our Emergent Responder program!

You'll learn everything from setting up first aid stations, organizing teams to find trapped and injured people, securing resources & clean water, creating interim shelter, more advanced first & second aid care for extended situations, working with folks with complex medical needs in the absence of medical care, and much more!

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use code **support** for \$100 off!