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Every Other Thursday: Stories and Strategies from Successful Women Scientists. Author: Ellen Daniell

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REVIEW

The members of Group are seven professional women scientists who meet every other Thursday evening at one of their homes for a supportive, problem-solving meeting in which they can voice their frustrations, work through problems, seek advice on specific issues and share success stories. Their methods of working are based on those of the Radical Psychiatry Movement of the 1960s and 70s, whose message was 'that individuals could make changes in their lives by learning to trust and validate their feelings and by making close connections with other individuals' (p. 202), and that they could do this through problem-solving groups, without turning to doctors or therapists for cures. In line with this philosophy, the aim of Group is for its members to help one another to find empowerment in their professional lives.

In this engaging and accessible book, author Ellen Daniell, who has been a member of Group for over twenty-five years, describes how the process works. The book is neither a memoir nor a how-to guide, although it contains elements of both. Rather, Daniell reconstructs a number of Group sessions to give the reader a dynamic flavour of how Group functions in a flexible way to support its members through a variety of different kinds of challenges in their lives. Her goal is both to inspire others to set up similar groups and to give her readers advice on how to do so successfully.



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Group provides a safe environment where members can work out practical solutions to specific problems and discuss broader issues of work-life balance, feelings of isolation or how to cope with stress. Daniell writes: 'A critical message of this book is that intimacy and reliance on others for encouragement and advice is a source of empowerment, not a sign of weakness' (p. xii). She stresses that anyone, female or male, who feels isolated in a professional or competitive setting can benefit from this kind of group, where you know that everyone is on your side.

In the beginning, the membership of Group included men, but for many years it has been a women-only group, which the author says can be helpful in that they all face similar issues in the workplace. When they were hired for their first jobs, as academic chemists and biologists, most found themselves to be the first woman in the department or on the faculty. Some of their male colleagues found it hard to relate to women as professional equals, and Group was a useful space in which to explore how best to respond to the put-downs and sometimes outright hostility. Daniell gives an overview of statistics showing that, although there are more women working in the sciences now, senior women scientists are still in a small minority in academic institutions and that they still earn less, have less laboratory space and less access to research funding than their male colleagues. Several of these problems have been encountered by Group members over the years. For example, many years after first joining Group, Judith, by then a full professor, discovered that men ten years less senior than herself were earning significantly more than she was. Group helped her both to work through her anger and frustration and to decide how best to go about claiming a pay rise and challenging the gender inequities at her institution. Group is about finding the balance between perceiving and dealing with genuine discrimination or external barriers, and acknowledging and dealing with the inner voices that we all carry around with us, criticizing us and belittling our achievements. It's not about blaming other people for life's setbacks. As one member puts it: 'Group reminds me that there is no "them" out there trying to get me' (p. 25).

In the first part of the book, Daniell explains why Group exists in the first place, what it's for and how and why each of its members came to join. The first chapter is a chatty description of a typical meeting taking place at Daniell's house, and gives a very immediate sense of what it might be like to be a participant at one of these vibrant gatherings. The formal part of the evening takes place first, with each woman stating how much time she feels she needs to work on whatever problems she has brought along. Taking turns, they describe the issues that have come up for them since the last meeting and what kind of help they want. Sometimes it's just for other people to listen, sometimes it's a need for practical advice or help with setting goals. Sometimes it isn't a problem at all, but a proud announcement of gaining an award or promotion, and Group members encourage one another to take pleasure in their successes. After everyone has taken her

turn, they share food, and give one another 'strokes', which are positive observations about another Group member that are announced and then delivered directly to the recipient in front of everyone else. She must accept the compliment without protest, something that most people find very difficult to do at first, but Daniell adds that 'getting a stroke is a delight once one is accustomed to it' (p. 206).

As an illustration of the many facets of the support that Group can offer, Daniell goes on to describe how it helped her through a major career setback. After working for six years on the chemistry faculty of her institution, she was unexpectedly denied tenure. This was a crisis in her professional life, and she writes that with the support of Group 'I was able to work through many possibilities and consider alternatives with their protection and critical feedback. I ended up with a sense of choice and self-direction that contrasted sharply with the lost and helpless feeling of professional defeat' (p. 35). With the support of Group, she chose to leave academia and enter the corporate world.

The central part of the book consists of a series of chapters illustrating the diversity of issues that members bring to Group. These vary from specific advice on how to approach a big presentation to support in finding a healthy work-life balance to coping with demanding workloads and advice on managing other people without emotionally exhausting oneself. One of the strengths of Group is that very often people have similar concerns, and it can be enormously helpful to someone just to know that she is not the only person feeling chronically overworked or undervalued, etc. Many readers will probably find this central section, which makes up more than half of the book, relevant and helpful in thinking through professional problems of their own since many issues are common across fields, not only in academia but in any high-pressure work environment where there never seems to be quite enough funding or time to get everything done.

Towards the end of the book, Daniell discusses the nuts and bolts of setting up a group of one's own. She offers a list of pointers to think about when establishing a group, such as the need for honesty and commitment to creating a safe space for all, the ability to listen and to give good feedback. She discusses the procedures that have helped Group to be successful over so many years. While acknowledging that other groups may find a slightly different framework is more appropriate for their needs, she stresses that 'an agreement to abide by common rules that mandate support of one another is the foundation of success' (p. 226).

'Every Other Thursday' is an inspiring read. For young women considering going into science it demonstrates that there are successful women scientists out there, doing superb work at the highest levels, winning awards and gaining international recognition alongside their male colleagues. It also presents them as ordinary human beings with hopes and fears and anxieties

that sometimes make them feel they can never succeed, *and* it offers practical advice for how to set up support groups that can help their members get through the tough times. I would recommend this book to any woman, or man, who has ever felt isolated or unappreciated at work. You are not alone, and there is something you can do about it. All it takes, as Daniell and her colleagues in Group have demonstrated, is commitment and a few hours every other Thursday.