

HELP FOR HELPERS

Hearing a traumatized person's story can revive any personal traumatic experiences a service provider may have suffered in the past. Because of this, it is important for providers to acknowledge and heal from their own trauma.

Advocates at Standing Together Against Rape (S.T.A.R.) in Anchorage, AK, have created a support group for service providers who are trauma survivors themselves. The Professionals Group – which has weekly sessions lasting about two hours and runs for about 16 weeks at a time – includes nurses, law enforcement officers, teachers and therapists in addition to advocates. “We’re asking them to come in and push their education aside and talk about their own history,” says Erin Patterson-Sexson, Lead Advocate/Direct Services Coordinator at S.T.A.R.

She says the Professionals Group originated as a way to address a recurring problem encountered by S.T.A.R. advocates: “We’ve been doing women’s groups for years and years, of course, and we keep having clients coming back to us, saying, ‘I went to this counselor and she didn’t even want to talk about this issue,’ or ‘she made me feel like it wasn’t really that important.’”

Ms. Patterson-Sexson and a therapist colleague speculated that part of the problem was professionals who had their own background of trauma that had not been dealt with or healed. “So let’s get these professionals in here who are dealing with these victims, who aren’t going down this road for one reason or another,” she says. “If it is because they are hung up on their own trauma, let’s start talking about it.”

She says the group may be the first place some participants have been able to talk about their trauma experiences. “So a lot of them are coming in and they are talking about maybe one episode that happened to them in college or in their first marriage or something that they have clearly identified as, ‘This is the event in my life that victimized me.’ But as we talk about it and dig into it, they too have had childhood physical, emotional, sexual abuse issues they haven’t even named yet. Because they were maybe one of the few to break through and try to stay in school or go to college and get a degree, they had totally detached that trauma from their life. They didn’t even own it anymore.”

The group is co-facilitated by both an advocate and a therapist. Each weekly session begins with the advocate facilitator introducing a worksheet or topic for discussion. The therapist then takes charge of processing any feelings that come up. “Advocates, historically I think, do a good job of bringing a whole lot of stuff to the surface and acknowledging it and then helping educate,” says Ms. Patterson-Sexson. “The therapist is there to help sort all that out and dive into it more.”

The professionals group started in February 2010, ran for 16 weeks, broke for a pause over the summer and started again in September. The groups have an average of about

nine participants. “We do try to keep the group small, and we have a stricter screening process for that group,” says Ms. Patterson-Sexson. “We want to make sure they are in a place where they will really want to share. If they are coming into the group as an educational experience, it is not a fit for them. If the group is another avenue for them to be a provider, then it is not a fit for them.”

She hopes the group will have a “positive trickle-down effect” in the helping community. “We want professionals who are listeners all day long. Maybe at the end of the day they are struggling with their own stuff and need some support around it. Who better to support them than a group of colleagues who understand the struggles and the pressure of being a helper?”

Ms. Patterson-Sexson would be glad to talk to people who want to start a similar organization in their communities. For information on this group, including suggestions for replicating such a group in your own community, contact Erin Patterson-Sexson at S.T.A.R. Phone: (907) 276-7279. Email: epatterson-sexson@staralaska.org.

References

Patterson-Sexson, E., S.T.A.R. (Standing Together Against Rape), Anchorage, AK. Personal interview with Debi Edmund, December 2010.