ORGANIZING SUPPORT GROUPS

Support groups can serve as a valuable adjunct to individual advocacy or counseling. These groups provide opportunities for participants to discuss their daily struggle with the multiple issues affecting their safety, sobriety, wellness and empowerment.

Much of the power in support groups comes from the personal stories. People share their experience, strength and hope with each other. When one person breaks the silence about personal experiences that are uncomfortable or “taboo” to talk about, others feel safer breaking their silence.

Members of the group also hear success stories. They hear what others are doing to cope with problems similar to their own. They can help other members who are not as far along on their path, which can help improve self-esteem and give them the feeling of making a positive contribution.

However, individuals who are survivors of multi-abuse trauma do have some special safety and access concerns. Support groups should have a non-judgmental atmosphere, clear ground rules addressing confidentiality, and respect among group members.

In this section, you will find some tips, general guidelines and a sample overall support group format. We have included some suggested group topics complete with handouts. Please feel free to adapt either the overall format or the topics in whatever way works for your particular setting or time constraints.

Confidentiality

Most people in support groups respect anonymity and confidentiality, but be sure to explain what these concepts mean in your particular program, especially when there are safety issues involved. To ensure confidentiality:

• Use first names only.

• Limit notes. (Document topic covered and attendance only and require a signed release of information to disclose these.)

• Advise group participants about what you are mandated to report (child welfare or adult protective services issues, suicide threats, etc.).

• Advise individuals leaving an abusive situation not to share information in a group setting if doing so could put their safety at risk.

• Some group members don’t want to be greeted or acknowledged outside of the group.
due to safety or privacy concerns. Be sure to address this with the group. Some groups come up with a code to use if they see each other in a public place.

**Promoting easy access to the group**

Some initial discomfort is normal for anyone who is new to support groups. It is natural to feel nervous in a roomful of strangers. First-time participants may have spent years avoiding the issues the group is discussing. People whose experience includes violence or abuse also may have safety concerns. Here are some tips to help group members feel comfortable, stay safe – and hopefully, keep coming back:

- Have easy access to the group – don’t create barriers. For example, try to hold the group in a location that is close to a bus stop during hours the buses are running.
- There is no right way to conduct these groups. Be open to suggestions from participants.
- Prioritize child care.
- Have healthy food, de-caffeinated coffee and tea available.
- Assist with transportation.
- Ensure accessibility for people with disabilities.
- Don’t screen out. Prepare for arrival!
- Have enough staff or volunteers available to deal with unexpected issues.
- Have group members create their own resource book of referrals.

**General tips**

It is extremely important for facilitators to provide a safe, non-judgmental environment for people coping with multiple issues. It is also very important for facilitators to emphasize that no one deserves violence, bullying or other abuse, no matter what else is going on. Offenders should always be held solely accountable for the abuse they have directed toward their victims.

Here are some general tips for effective “drop in” support groups:

- Support group facilitators need to be trained about the unique problems faced by people who are survivors of multi-abuse trauma.
- Be flexible. Think kitchen-table – have a topic in mind but be willing to change. Let members of the group own the group.
• Include time for group members to address practical issues such as housing, employment, legal or children’s issues, and community resources.

• Allow group participants to use the copy machine, telephone, fax, etc., if feasible.

• Adjust group guidelines and topics depending on setting (domestic violence shelter, sexual assault program, substance abuse treatment center, mental health facility, transitional housing program, jail or prison, or elsewhere).

• Be willing to talk about issues the group wants to talk about, but don’t pressure anyone to share if they’re not ready.

• Remember you may only see a group member once or you may have the member for three or more years. Be solution-based and friendly, but make the most of your interaction because it may be the only one you get.

• For drop-in groups, the average member comes about 12 times; make sure all group participants understand they are welcome to return at any time.

**Stage 2 groups**

Typical domestic violence/sexual assault programs offer short-term group options from 4 to 12 weeks and discourage long-term presence in groups, which may be viewed as fostering dependency. Generally speaking, however, it can take twice as long for survivors of multiple abuses to do half as much as they would like to achieve because of all the barriers and challenges they face daily.

During the process of addressing multiple issues survivors continue to need emotional and other forms of safety, validation and connection, particularly when they are exhausted and overwhelmed by the many ongoing challenges they face. Providing long-term group support is an affordable option that reduces isolation, provides encouragement and fosters connection.

Stage 2 groups for survivors who have moved beyond immediate crisis but still benefit from peer group support can be led by members themselves. This is very empowering and a good option for long-term group members who are developing confidence and leadership skills. The Stage 2 group model acknowledges both the strengths of survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and their often long-term need for peer support and encouragement.

**General goals**

Regardless of topic or setting, keep these overall goals for the group in mind:
• Address safety concerns and provide safe space. Participants in the group need to feel safe in order to tell their story and benefit from being believed. Be sure to listen and validate each person’s experience, strength and hope.

• Build on existing strengths. Don’t focus on what is wrong with people. Focus on what has happened to them. Provide practical support. Help group participants identify safer coping mechanisms than alcohol or drugs, cutting, binging and purging, etc., if their coping tools are not working well for them or pose risk to themselves or others.

• Provide an opportunity for connection. Encourage group members to support each other, and develop phone lists when it is safe to do so.

**Overall format for groups**

Participants in support groups may be more comfortable when group sessions have a predictable structure. Here is an example of an overall format that has been used successfully with people who have multiple issues including current interpersonal violence or past trauma.

• **Check in.** Open the session by asking group members to briefly state one thing they did right, or were proud of achieving during the previous week.

• **Identification of problems, challenges or goals, and resources.** Ask participants if anyone is facing a special challenge, or has a particular goal they would like to achieve. Identify resources currently utilized by group members and develop additional options to resolve problems, meet challenges and achieve goals.

• **Educational component.** Use a portion of the session to educate participants about some aspect of interpersonal violence and its relation to past trauma, mental health concerns, substance use or any of the other issues they may be facing. Topics may include power and control dynamics, safety issues, sobriety issues, wellness issues, children’s issues, healthy boundaries, coping skills, etc. Below are some examples of possible topics, along with suggestions about how to use the handouts we’ve included in this kit.

• **Closure.** Close the session by asking individuals to name one thing they can do to achieve safety, sobriety, wellness or empowerment as defined by each person.