

# Circle of *Hope*

A Guide for Conducting Psychoeducational Support Groups  
Second Edition 2014



WASHINGTON COALITION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT PROGRAMS



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# WASHINGTON COALITION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT PROGRAMS (WCSAP)

## **Mission**

The mission of the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs is to unite agencies engaged in the elimination of sexual violence, through education, advocacy, victim services, and social change.

## **Our Philosophy**

The Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP) views sexual assault as a means of power, control, and manipulation of others and as a social phenomenon which adversely affects adults and children. WCSAP supports efforts to create an atmosphere of nonviolence through social change. We are committed to empowering survivors and eliminating sexual assault.

WCSAP supports the rights of people to have access to quality information, advocacy, crisis intervention, treatment, education and prevention services. We support the right of a victim to make choices about reporting, prosecution, healthcare, future safety, and other issues raised by the experience.

WCSAP provides information, training and expertise to program and individual members who support victims, family and friends, the general public, and all those whose lives have been affected by sexual assault.

WCSAP values the importance of addressing issues of racism, homophobia, able-bodyism, and other issues of oppression in order to make services accessible to all individuals regardless of race; gender; sexual orientation; religion; age; ethnic background; social, economic, immigration, marital, physical and/or mental status.

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## INTRODUCTION



A particularly successful method for working with survivors of sexual assault and trauma is to bring survivors together in groups. Groups are an effective tool in giving hope and providing support, validation, connection, healing, and empathy. At the core of all sexual assault trauma is disempowerment and disconnection. To assist in recovery, empowerment and connection are key factors. It is amazing to witness the transformation that many survivors make because of these groups—because they realize they aren’t alone, because they realize that people care, because they learn that it wasn’t their fault, and because of the hope that comes through connection and validation. The relationships that members develop may be some of the most positive and supportive in their lives. Because these groups can have such a profound impact on survivors of sexual assault, it is vital that as advocates we possess the skills and knowledge to effectively facilitate groups. Hence, the purpose of this manual: to provide a roadmap of sorts, to navigate through the world of psychoeducational support groups.

This manual is considered a basic guide, written with beginner facilitators in mind. It offers practical guidance and recommendations for facilitation and design of psychoeducational support groups. The sources include existing research and literature about groups, the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy (OCVA) support group standards, and the experiences of those who participated in writing this manual. We encourage experienced group facilitators to add their own wisdom and experience to the information presented here as they conduct support groups.

This new edition presents a model for psychoeducational support groups that is consistent with key principles of advocacy: empowerment-based advocacy, trauma-informed services, working within an anti-oppression framework, and promoting survivor-centered services. The group model is strengths-based and focused on resilience.

This manual is divided into three sections. The first section describes the theoretical framework and guidelines specific to psychoeducational support groups, including definitions and characteristics of these groups, as well as some effective facilitator fundamentals. The second section describes how to set up groups, curriculum development suggestions, common pitfalls and solutions, and other recommendations. The Appendix includes resources, references, and samples of helpful tools to use.

As you work to provide the most effective services to survivors, we hope that you find this information useful and relevant.



**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK  
AND GROUP GUIDELINES**



**SECTION 1**



## WHY FACILITATE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS?

**Psychoeducational support groups have the following benefits:**

- ▶ They provide safety, empathy, validation, and much-needed support.
- ▶ They provide factual information and enable participants to learn new coping strategies.
- ▶ They decrease isolation and a sense of alienation.
- ▶ They allow members to meet others who are dealing with similar experiences.
- ▶ They help members develop a sense of community.
- ▶ They help participants to identify the nature and impact of negative societal attitudes and misconceptions surrounding sexual assault.
- ▶ They clarify the message that sexual assault is never the fault of the survivor.
- ▶ They can restore a member's spirit of hope and self-confidence.
- ▶ They increase self-awareness and focus on strengths.
- ▶ They help survivors increase autonomy and a sense of agency in their own lives.
- ▶ They help enlarge the social support network of members.
- ▶ They help members perceive themselves as survivors who can have fulfilling lives.

### **Who Do We Serve with Sexual Assault Support Groups?**

There are many different types of psychoeducational support groups offered by sexual assault advocacy programs. They may serve teens, adults, parents, or elders. They may focus on childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault that occurred during adolescence or adulthood, or ongoing sexual assault within a relationship. Some groups are offered to the primary survivors themselves, while others may be for nonoffending parents and caregivers or for partners of sexual assault survivors (sometimes referred to as secondary survivors).

## KEY PRINCIPLES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT GROUPS

### Empowerment-Based Advocacy

Empowerment-based advocacy means

- ▶ promoting a sense of power from within by supporting a survivor's self-determination and autonomy, and
- ▶ believing in survivors' ability to take care of themselves and to know what they need.

#### KEY PRINCIPLES

Empowerment-Based Advocacy  
Trauma-Informed Services  
Anti-Oppression Framework  
Survivor-Centered Services

These are key concepts in any advocacy work with sexual assault survivors, and they guide our work with survivors in support groups. Empowerment-based advocacy is centered on the concept of resilience and is consistent with a strengths-based approach, which ... focuses on what is 'right' with people rather than on what is wrong. It identifies, builds upon, and amplifies people's strengths, resilience, and resources. While it recognizes and acknowledges people's problems (such as mental illness, physical disability, poverty, legal troubles), the strengths perspective views these as challenges and as needs to be addressed, not as deficits, pathologies, or character flaws (Reamer, 2011).

### What does empowerment-based advocacy look like in a support group?

- ▶ Listen.
- ▶ Provide lots of accurate, useful information.
- ▶ Give clear, understandable information about confidentiality.
- ▶ Learn about other resources and help group members gain access.
- ▶ Examine your own beliefs and biases. Maintain a positive, hopeful tone.
- ▶ Stay in an advocacy role, no matter what your profession.
- ▶ Know that learning travels in all directions—group members will learn from each other, and you will learn from them.

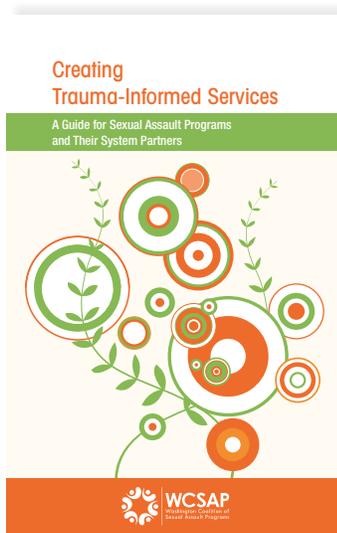
## Trauma-Informed Services

Trauma-informed services are an approach to people with histories of trauma that includes:

- ▶ recognizing the presence of trauma symptoms, and
- ▶ acknowledging the role that trauma has played in their lives.

Because we know that survivors are coping with the aftermath of trauma, support groups should be carefully designed to promote a sense of safety and empowerment. These are the essential elements of trauma-informed services, which “incorporate knowledge about trauma - prevalence, impact, and recovery - in all aspects of service delivery, minimize re-victimization, and facilitate recovery and empowerment” (Fallot, 2007, as cited in Hudson). In practical terms, this means paying careful attention to building trusting relationships, making sure that participants feel physically and emotionally safe in the group setting, and being alert to potential triggers of traumatic stress. From curriculum design to logistics to confidentiality considerations, all aspects of the support group should combine to create a trauma-informed group experience.

In practical terms, these are the steps you can take to create a trauma-informed group:



- ▶ Educate yourself about the neurobiology of trauma.
- ▶ Learn about developmental issues throughout the lifespan.
- ▶ Consider trauma issues as you set up your group.
- ▶ Prioritize group safety.
- ▶ Focus on building trust.
- ▶ Include critical topics such as boundaries, healthy relationships and sexuality, and building support.

For more on Trauma-Informed Services, read our WCSAP booklet on this topic.

<http://www.wcsap.org/creating-trauma-informed-services>

## Anti-Oppression Framework

Using an anti-oppression framework means considering:

- ▶ the causes and connections in power disparities, and
- ▶ how abuse of power disparities works on individual and institutional levels.

As you work through these issues, it is helpful to consider the factors in Pam Hays' (1996) ADDRESSING model:

- ▶ **A**ge/generation
- ▶ **D**isability
- ▶ **R**eligion
- ▶ **E**thnicity/race
- ▶ **S**ocial status
- ▶ **S**exual orientation
- ▶ **I**ndigenous heritage
- ▶ **N**ational origin
- ▶ **G**ender

Letitia Nieto and Margot F. Boyer (2006) have explained how these factors relate to oppression (a system of unjust treatment and control). They describe how an individual can have “target” or “agent” status with regard to each of these factors. For example, you may be on the privileged side as an agent with regard to age if you are neither a teen nor an elder, but you may be in the target category if you are also a person of color or transgender. If you have not had much exposure to these concepts in your professional training, it is worth spending some time learning and reflecting on their impact in your own life and the lives of the survivors you serve.

The anti-oppression framework is a cornerstone of advocacy with sexual abuse and assault survivors. It helps people to understand that sexual violence is not an individual problem; sexual violence permeates our society and shows up in many forms. Experiences of inequality affect how survivors perceive their victimization and what happens in the aftermath of sexual violence. Because so many survivors feel isolated and alone, and because many also blame themselves as a result of the messages they have heard, an anti-oppression framework can be a transformative part of the healing process. When advocates and their programs use an anti-oppression lens, they reach out to more survivors and provide services in a more effective manner.

The practical ways in which you can incorporate an anti-oppression framework in your group include:

- ▶ Make the group inclusive and accessible.
- ▶ Establish (with group members) and enforce group ground rules to build a safe group community.
- ▶ Include information about and respectful discussion of societal causes of sexual assault.
- ▶ Provide space and safety for survivors to explore their identities and culture.
- ▶ ASK how the group can best support participants.
- ▶ Toward the end of the group, ask survivors how they might transform their sense of injustice or frustration into activism for social justice, and provide examples.

## Survivor-Centered Services

Providing survivor-centered services means

- ▶ offering services founded in the belief that survivors are experts on their own lives, and
- ▶ providing support and resources based on survivors' expressed needs.

A support group can be a vital way to show survivors that they have power in their lives as well as telling them this. To do this, ask for input and feedback at every stage, from the initial screening interview to the final group evaluation. Be transparent about how you use this feedback to modify and transform the group. For example, *"During our last group meeting, participants said it would be helpful to move this topic into the second or third session instead of waiting until later to address it. That's why we are talking about it tonight."*

The group is the survivors' group, not the facilitators' group, and participants often have great ideas. It is important to balance group structure (for consistency, safety, and providing valuable information and resources) with flexibility (for meeting the group's expressed needs, responding to issues in a timely manner, and learning from participants). Have an outline for each week, but be ready to extend a certain activity or discussion if the group is really engaged. Consider having a session (perhaps the next-to-last one) that is open for participant questions and concerns. Also, consider having certain session topics "nailed down," but giving the group the chance to choose from a menu of options for at least one or two sessions. If you do this, give the group time to form a group identity and develop a basic understanding of sexual assault topics before asking them to make this choice (for example, at Session Four you might ask them to choose the Session Six or Seven topic from a menu of options).

Some practical reminders about this aspect of group functioning are:

- ▶ You are the *facilitator*, not the leader.
- ▶ Ask for input and feedback.
- ▶ Balance group structure with flexibility.
- ▶ Evaluate, and use the results.
- ▶ Create opportunities for choice and autonomy.
- ▶ Respond to group needs and requests.

## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS?

### Differentiating Psychoeducational Support Groups from Self-Help Groups and Therapy Groups

A good place to begin our exploration of psychoeducational support groups is to have a solid understanding of what they are. It is important to distinguish these groups from the two other types of groups that may benefit survivors, self-help and therapy groups.

As a facilitator, you may have some uncertainty in understanding the differences between self-help, psychoeducational support, and psychotherapy groups. These groups have different goals, structures, and facilitator roles and qualifications. All three can be valuable, but each type of group needs to be clearly defined; the activities and structure of the group should match the group type.

### Characteristics of Self-Help Groups

The primary focus of self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, is to help members gain support in changing some aspect of themselves (Recovery International, 2014). These groups are comprised of members who share a similar problem or life experience, are often “drop-in” in nature, are facilitated by the members themselves, and are usually ongoing and open-ended. The major difference between this type of group and psychoeducational support groups is the focus on producing personal change (inherent to self-help groups) versus providing support, information and education, an inherent focus of psychoeducational support groups. Although self-help groups educate and support, these are not considered to be their primary goals. Self-help groups are generally led by peer facilitators, and may be affiliated with national organizations.

### Characteristics of Psychoeducational Support Groups

Psychoeducational support groups focus on providing emotional support and information to persons with a common problem (Brown, 2011), such as survivors of sexual assault. These groups are most often led by a trained facilitator who is connected to a particular organization, like a sexual assault program. Unlike self-help groups, the primary focus of these groups is to provide education and support, and to increase knowledge and coping skills, rather than to attempt to change some aspect of the person. While it is hoped that those who attend psychoeducational support groups learn information to increase their functioning in the world, attempting to change the person is not their primary goal.

It is important to note that “psychoeducational support groups are not therapy groups, and as such, leaders should not offer therapeutic interventions. . . Facilitators should remember that [psychoeducational support groups] are more social than therapeutic in nature; they are a place to belong, not a treatment to undergo” (Kurtz, 1997).

Psychoeducational support groups also differ from self-help groups in that they are facilitated through the use of a structured curriculum or agenda. Topics are usually selected by the facilitator, sometimes with the assistance of group members, rather than being solely determined by the members themselves.

### ***Participants are Prescreened***

Psychoeducational groups are generally run as closed groups and are directed to a specific population such as survivors of sexual assault. In closed groups, potential members are prescreened prior to the start of the group, and other individuals are not admitted during the span of the group cycle. Closed groups differ from “drop-in” groups as they are not open to anyone at any time. *(We will discuss prescreening in more detail in our “how to” section.)* Prescreening helps to assess a participant’s goals and objectives for being in the group, helps identify potential issues that the participant may be bringing with them to the group, and helps select members who are compatible with each other. Prescreening is intended to ensure that each participant fits the group and the group fits the needs of each participant.

Since prescreening is vital to the success of psychoeducational support groups, running drop-in groups, particularly for sexual assault survivors, is not considered to be the optimal choice. Although drop-in groups have their place, to regain a sense of empowerment and reconnection, sexual assault survivors need a sense of safety, trust, and boundaries. If the group is open to anyone at any time, safety, trust and boundaries may be compromised.

### **OCVA Service Standards for Support Groups**

In the State of Washington, the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy (OCVA) provides funds for sexual assault programs to conduct support groups. The overall guidelines in this manual are consistent with the OCVA Service Standards for Support Groups (see Appendix). Facilitators should contact OCVA to ensure that they have the most current set of Service Standards when they are conducting groups under this funding source.

Research indicates that groups function best when members have similar issues or life experiences, like sexual assault.

### ***Participants Have Common Experiences***

Another issue inherent to prescreening and conducting psychoeducational support groups is identifying the population you are serving and determining membership criteria. Research indicates that groups function best when members have similar issues or life experiences, like sexual assault. Therefore, mixing individuals with a different primary focus within the same group is not conducive to running effective groups. For example, it would not be considered good practice to have adult victims of sexual assault and nonoffending parents of child victims in the same group. Each group of survivors has a unique set of needs and issues; when determining your curriculum, those particular needs and issues need to be taken into consideration. Having mixed issues in one group may also hamper a sense of safety, trust and boundaries. According to Linda Kurtz (1997, p. 95):

*Psychoeducational support groups depend on having members with similar problems or the same concern. Lacking this kind of homogeneity, the group cannot be cohesive, establish its program or extend its knowledge among members. Having the same focal concern is the essence of psychoeducational support groups; and as such, this must be the first criteria for membership.*

### ***Beginning and End Dates are Planned***

To stay true to their nature, psychoeducational groups must be time-limited rather than ongoing. Having a planned ending date gives the members hope that things can change. We want our group members to “graduate”—otherwise they run the risk of becoming stuck. Groups that extend past their planned end date may run the risk of losing the focus on sexual assault.

### ***There is a Curriculum and an Evaluation Process***

Psychoeducational support groups include a structured curriculum based on the group’s goal and objectives. While there is variation in how closely structured a group may be, there is a clear plan for what will happen in each group session, coupled with the flexibility to meet the needs of the group. Most support groups include segments designed to appeal to a mix of learning styles, from lectures to journal-writing to videos to interactive activities. The groups are outcome-based, which means that the facilitators use the objectives they have set as benchmarks to determine whether the group is helping people or not.

## Characteristics of Psychotherapy Groups

The goal of therapy groups is to fundamentally change behavior and seek some kind of shift in action. Psychotherapy groups seek to produce individual growth and change through the relationships that the members establish among themselves and with the therapist. Therapy groups are facilitated by mental health professionals. The group content and process vary depending on the theoretical orientation of the facilitator.

Another way of looking at the difference between psychoeducational support and therapy groups is reflected by the following:

### Psychoeducational Support Groups

Bad Things Happen

- ▶ What information can I learn and what do I need in order to get on with my life?

### Therapy Groups

Bad Things Happen

- ▶ Why am I unable to cope?
- ▶ How has my past influenced the way that I am coping with the sexual assault?
- ▶ How do I move through the pain and through the world?
- ▶ Why am I stuck?
- ▶ How can I change the way I approach my life, my relationships, my family, my work?



## Important Distinction

In gathering information for this manual, we have found that several programs utilize trained psychotherapists, along with a volunteer or advocate facilitator, to conduct the psychoeducational support groups. Although the therapist may have the training and expertise to run a therapy group, when conducting a psychoeducational support group, the therapist must “remove their therapeutic hat” and not engage in therapeutic activities within the confines of the psychoeducational support group. This action ensures that the facilitators, regardless of their expertise, are staying true to the nature of psychoeducational support groups and not blurring the lines between therapy and psychoeducational support groups.

Therapists serving as psychoeducational group facilitators are functioning as advocates and should have a clear understanding of the foundations and techniques of advocacy work. It is especially critical that they review and adhere to the Key Principles of Psychoeducational Support Groups described earlier in this manual. For more clarification of the differences between advocacy and therapy, see *What Advocates Need to Know About Therapy* (Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, 2010).

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## GROUP DYNAMICS AND STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Typically every group goes through three progressive stages in its development. It is essential for a group to progress through these stages to become a functional and cohesive group.

Typically every group goes through three progressive stages in its development. It is important to understand each of these stages and develop strategies for navigation of the challenges and opportunities that each stage presents. It is essential for a group to progress through these stages to become a functional and cohesive group.



**1 First Stage - Forming:** This first stage is where the group initially comes together and the group members are getting to know one another. There is generally some apprehension on the part of the group members during this stage, as they have not developed trust and they are unsure of what to expect during the group. During this stage participants learn about the group, the guidelines, and the other members. The group works towards some agreement on goals. An important task during this stage is for members to discover their similarities so that they may develop a connection with each other based upon their common ground. Facilitators should focus on working to develop trust between the group members and help the group establish group goals and guidelines. Typically this first stage does not last more than one or two group sessions.



**2 Second Stage – Norming and Performing:** During this stage, the group defines how it will work together towards its common goal. Group members will start to begin to open up to each other and support each other’s experiences. In this stage, group members work to adjust their behaviors to each other as they develop a process that makes the group flow well. There may be occasional conflicts during this stage as group members compete for attention or struggle to define their role in the group. It is important during this stage that the facilitator encourages the participation of all group members and is careful not to allow individual members to control the direction of the group. While this process is necessary, it may be difficult for some group members who are uncomfortable with conflict or with expressing a differing opinion.

An important task during this stage is bonding between group members and the development of mutual support systems. Group members may begin to explore new ways of coping and can find ideas and validation in their fellow participants. It is through this process that group members begin to trust each other. The facilitator’s role during this stage is to help group members share their personal experiences, nurture the group cohesion, offer information and resources, and maintain the group’s momentum. The majority of the group sessions during a short-term group will be spent in this stage.

**3 Third Stage - Adjourning:** This stage is the phase leading up to termination, transition, and group closure. By this time, group members have typically built some trust and have developed the way that they relate to each other. The third stage will generally begin a couple of weeks before the group officially ends. This may be a difficult time for group participants and it is normal for them to experience some grief or feelings of loss, particularly in a well-formed group. It is important that the facilitator acknowledge these feelings and include activities that focus on transition and the end of the group. The focus of the group during this time should be on the progress made and new skills learned. Activities can be centered on the development of a supportive network outside of group, ways to continue the healing process, and participation in activities related to social change. It also may be appropriate to provide referrals to additional services.

## GOALS AND FOUNDATIONS OF EFFECTIVE GROUP FACILITATION

Your goal as the facilitator should be to create an environment in which participants understand the boundaries and guidelines of the group (and participate in their creation), are offered choices, and feel supported, free to share, safe, empowered, and affirmed.

The role of a facilitator is multi-faceted. You will be called upon to function in different capacities depending on the group's composition, purpose, climate, duration, and the skill level of the members. Ultimately, you should strive to serve as a guide for the group members as they navigate through both the healing journey and the group process. The role of a guide in this context requires the facilitator to lead by having a structured agenda, linking and engaging the members to the agenda or topic, and then encouraging members to initiate discussion and respond to their peers.

In her book, *Self-Help and Support Groups*, Linda Kurtz (1997, p.100-101) identifies several goals for effective group facilitators and facilitation (paraphrased here):

**Information Exchange** is one of the most important tasks of psychoeducational support groups. The facilitator disseminates information about [sexual assault] and helps survivors recognize their own strengths.

**Mutual Support** – An effective facilitator introduces the concept of mutual aid and demonstrates to the group how to use empathic responses and supportive comments.

**Group Cohesion** – An effective facilitator emphasizes the members' similarities and strengths.

**Coping and Self-Efficacy** – When group members relate how they have coped in the past, an effective facilitator can point out to group members their use of successful mastery over difficult situations and help group members enhance one another's coping skills.

**Reduction of Social Isolation** – This occurs naturally when groups meet. As stated earlier, many join a group in order to increase their social support network and seek to develop a support system around them that includes people who can understand the issues and problems that they are going through.

**Stress Reduction** – Structured meeting formats and the use of fun exercises and activities are excellent tools for reducing stress.

**Safety** – Safety is one of the most important goals for groups and for sexual assault survivors. An effective facilitator can first establish a sense of safety by initiating the group norms and sticking to clear guidelines. Furthermore, facilitators can foster safety by not demanding self-disclosure if the survivor is not ready to do so.

Skills that facilitate group process include paying close attention to members, responding, focusing the group's communication, guiding the group interaction, and involving members in communication.

Although the optimal psychoeducational support group is directed and driven by its members, you as the facilitator must function as a skilled guide and active listener who is in tune with the flow of the process and responsive to the needs of the members. The members of the group will value your subject matter expertise and will rely on you to set the basic direction of the group. Due to the intricacies and complexities of a support group, running psychoeducational support groups with two facilitators is recommended if possible, particularly for a new facilitator. (See the section on Training and Supervision for more details.)



## PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE GROUP FACILITATORS

To facilitate a psychoeducational support group effectively, facilitators must possess a variety of interpersonal and advocacy skills.

... facilitators must possess a variety of interpersonal and advocacy skills.

### Upholding an Ethical Approach

The first responsibility and motto that all advocates and facilitators must possess is to “do no harm.” A particularly successful strategy to avoid doing unintentional harm is to be crystal clear about your role within a given context, such as facilitating a psychoeducational support group. Having strong ethics requires that you continually question yourself, review your intentions and purpose, and know whether or not you are meeting your intended goals. Therefore, when facilitating groups, it is critical that facilitators identify the specific goals and objectives they are attempting to meet before starting the group. Having clear goals and an understanding of the essential nature of empowerment-based psychoeducational groups can help you remain within the parameters of your role and ultimately be true to your ethics. Willingness to use peer consultation and supervision freely as needed, to be intentional in your actions, and to ask questions if you are unsure of a course of action are qualities that will help you to be an ethical group facilitator.

### Maintaining Strong Boundaries and Commitment to Safety

Boundaries are defined as effective and appropriate interactions between advocates and the individuals they serve, and exist to protect both you and the survivor. Boundaries can be considered as a “container” of sorts – a container that provides guidelines to assist both the facilitator and group member in understanding the relationship and knowing how to operate within a given structure. As a group facilitator you need to be clear about your role, your organization’s role and policies, and the boundaries of the sexual assault advocacy field.

For sexual assault survivors to begin the healing and recovery process, it is vital that they are in an environment that is safe and trustworthy. This means that participants in a group need to be able to rely on clear guidelines and consistency in what to expect. Simply put, they need to know what to expect from the group facilitator, the group process, and the group itself. Considerations for establishing a sense of group safety are interwoven throughout this guide, and will help you to translate your commitment to this principle into specific actions and strategies.

When conducting psychoeducational support groups for sexual assault survivors, the more common boundary issues that arise have to do with:

1. **Adhering to guidelines**
2. **Personal disclosure** by the facilitator
3. **Beginning and ending times**
4. The use of **touch**
5. Giving and receiving **gifts**
6. **Transportation** issues
7. Giving out **personal information**

To create a safe and consistent environment, we recommend the following:

1. When facilitating the group, **stick to the given ground rules** you and the group have created. Having those guidelines helps both you and the participants know what is expected and creates safety and structure. General concepts, such as group confidentiality, should be discussed during prescreening, and should conform to your program's policies. Specific ground rules should be developed in the first session and reviewed on a regular basis thereafter.
2. **Carefully consider the pros and cons of disclosing your own personal history to the group.** It is not uncommon for group members to ask if a facilitator is also a survivor. It is important to prepare in advance as to how you will respond. Many facilitators choose not to disclose, believing that this ensures that the group is working on the issues of the group participants and not on those of the facilitator. It is not necessary that a facilitator have a history similar to the group members in order to be effective, but it is important to address trust issues if a participant is asking about your survivor status, regardless of how you choose to handle the request. Some facilitators may be uncomfortable because information disclosed in group may become public knowledge. Other facilitators believe that when a facilitator self-identifies as a survivor, this provides a positive example of the release of shame and secrecy regarding sexual assault. If you are considering disclosure, ask yourself the following questions prior to starting the group:
  - ▶ What is the purpose of the disclosure?
  - ▶ How will it help the group?
  - ▶ What could be some possible negative consequences of disclosure?
  - ▶ Is the timing right?
  - ▶ If I disclose, how can I ensure that I neither act like nor am perceived as a group participant rather than a facilitator?
  - ▶ Is my co-facilitator comfortable with my disclosing, and have we discussed this?
  - ▶ What will be the effect if one co-facilitator discloses and the other doesn't, or if one is a survivor and the other is not?
  - ▶ Have I discussed this issue with my supervisor?
  - ▶ Would I be comfortable with my colleagues knowing how I have handled this?
  - ▶ Am I prepared for any follow-up questions group participants may have about my experience?

“Often a client will ask me to share my personal story. Clients have been known to leave a group when I would not disclose . . . Being fully present, keeping an appropriate sense of humor, and not being afraid to be transparent with some emotion are all ways to build trust and help members see you as a person, without any need to disclose personal information . . . I have found that it is extremely important for me as a facilitator to constantly work on my own issues so that there is never a remote chance that I would use group as a place to process my life.”

--Experienced Group Facilitator

3. **Begin and end on time** – Beginning and ending a group on time ensures consistency, displays good boundaries, and helps the group members know what to expect. If a participant has a crisis at the end of the group, it is not appropriate to ask the rest of the group to stay over the allotted time to work on that participant’s issues. Doing so disrespects the other participants’ time and fosters unclear and inconsistent boundaries. Instead, you may choose to end the group and meet with the participant alone to deal with their crisis the first time this happens. Should this behavior continue, this may be an indication that the participant is not ready for the group and may need different forms of referrals such as for individual advocacy or therapy.

It is best to be proactive about this issue by discussing the possibility when you create and review group ground rules, encouraging participants to bring up any potentially difficult issues early in the session. However, a participant may be triggered by something that happens toward the end of group and need some additional support. During the prescreening process, you can also say to each potential member, “Sometimes things that are said or happen in group can be upsetting. What is your plan for handling things if this happens to you? Do you have the crisis line number if you need to talk to someone after a group session?”

4. **Create a clear expectation that people should always ask for permission or wait for a request before touching someone else.** Giving hugs, touching someone on the shoulder, or patting a hand can be very soothing when done with a survivor’s permission and invitation. Facilitators can create a safer dynamic and ensure their own increased comfort by making it clear that ALL people can choose whether or not to be touched, facilitators and participants alike.

“For experienced facilitators, I would hope that they have spent time considering the question of disclosure and explored reasons to disclose or withhold personal information. It should always be in service to the clients, not for one’s own personal satisfaction. So the question must always be asked, ‘Why am I thinking of disclosing this?’ . . . Also, whether or not one chooses to disclose when asked a direct question can generate useful discussion of boundaries, secrecy, and/or shame.”

--Experienced Group Facilitator

5. **Giving and Receiving Gifts** - Giving and receiving gifts will depend on your agency’s gift acceptance policies. Often group facilitators will give each member a symbolic gift at the close of the group to remind them of the journey of recovery. This small token can help the group member feel encouraged and give them something to carry with them as they continue on their healing path. Additionally, sometimes participants may wish to give small tokens of appreciation and gratitude to the facilitator. Consider the context in which the gift is offered. In some cultures, it is considered offensive or disrespectful to refuse a gift, even if this is done tactfully. However, if the gift is something of value or accepting it feels inappropriate, the facilitator should steer the gift toward the sexual assault center in general, rather than an individual staff member.
6. **Transporting Participants** - This is an issue that can get very dicey. Transporting participants to and from appointments, meetings, or other events can pose liability for the agency, and may present a safety issue for both the advocate and the participant. Therefore, we recommend that programs examine their transportation policies as they pertain to support groups. We do not recommend that programs provide direct transportation for group members. It is important to help participants figure out solutions and/or provide assistance such as bus fare, taxi service, or some other alternate strategy.
7. **Giving Out Personal Contact Information** – Giving out personal information can increase boundary confusion. We recommend that facilitators never give out their own personal contact information. If the participant needs to reach the facilitator, they should do so through the crisis line or directly through the sexual assault program as necessary.

## Keeping Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of providing sexual assault services. It means treating certain communications (or products of those communications, like advocacy records) as private matters that will not be shared or disclosed to any third party without the explicit written informed consent of the participant. Confidentiality is important because it maintains the survivor's trust and lays a foundation for healing from the physical and psychological trauma of sexual violence. As an advocate, you know how important confidentiality is. There are some additional challenges to maintaining confidentiality in a group setting.

- ▶ You can protect a group member's confidentiality by keeping minimal notes of all group sessions.
- ▶ Group facilitators should be extremely well versed in their program's policies regarding exceptions to confidentiality. An advocate should explain these exceptions clearly to potential group members during the first contact with the sexual assault program; participants should be provided with written information about confidentiality; and agency guidelines and exceptions to confidentiality should be reviewed during the initial group session.
- ▶ Explaining confidentiality considerations clearly and appropriately is a skill, and inexperienced facilitators will need to take the time to learn and practice this skill. Even if a survivor has already obtained other advocacy services from your program, you should review all confidentiality considerations with prospective group members prior to the beginning of group.
- ▶ You probably know more about the participants as individuals than they share with one another. Be conscious of this and take care not to volunteer information of another participant, either because you think they have already shared it, you think they wouldn't mind, or you are trying to help participants relate to each other's experiences. Allow participants to disclose each piece of their story themselves.

**"The feeling of being a powerless victim is hellish and is only made worse by people who agree with one's powerlessness by rescuing."  
(Unknown)**

## Practicing Empowerment-Based Advocacy

One of the key principles for psychoeducational support groups, as explained earlier, is empowerment-based advocacy. Empowerment is considered by some to be the foundation for healing. The core of sexual assault trauma is disempowerment and disconnection. Therefore the guiding principles behind all recovery efforts, including group facilitation, must be re-empowerment and the establishment of new and meaningful relationships or reconnection with positive friends, family members, or service providers. People who help others using this model provide aid and resources that survivors deserve but do not have. To empower therefore means to not view the survivor as powerless. It means to focus on their strengths; to provide choices, resources, and options; and to realize that group members have the right to make their own decisions regardless of your views and opinions.

## Listening Actively

Active listening is one of the most critical skills that an effective group leader possesses. To be an effective group facilitator, it is important that you pay attention to each group member and that you demonstrate this by using verbal and nonverbal cues that let the group members know they are being understood, heard, and validated. Active listening skills include focusing, reframing, asking clarifying questions, and associating the members' thoughts and words with their particular feelings. Being an active listener requires genuineness of heart, openness, and not planning your responses before the speaker has finished what they are saying. Although we have indicated that psychoeducational support groups are based on a structured agenda or curriculum, an active listener is someone who is flexible enough to allow the group to move away from the agenda in order to best meet the needs of the group. Sometimes the most critical discussions and learning and growing opportunities occur spontaneously. However, as an active listener you will also need to intervene when the group is struggling or stalls.

## Striving for Personal Insight

Effective facilitators understand who they are and how they relate to their world, the people around them, and to the group members. Personal insight is also having knowledge of your own potential "triggers" and learning not to act them out in the group setting. A lack of personal insight is often demonstrated when the facilitator does not pay attention to all the members, shows favoritism, or displays inconsistent behavior. These inequalities and inconsistencies may occur as a result of facilitators' unexamined personal biases. As you learn to be a facilitator, it is easy to want the group members to like you. While being liked feels good, if the group views you as untrustworthy, inconsistent, or inattentive to certain group members, the group process and the members will be negatively affected.

Personal insight also has to do with being clear about your role. For example, if you find yourself becoming invested in wanting someone to make a personal change, that should be a red flag that you might be entering into the realm of therapy. Being open to feedback from participants, your co-facilitator, or your supervisor is helpful in understanding your own strengths and challenges.

One of the most challenging aspects of personal insight is the willingness to do the hard work of acknowledging your areas of personal privilege as you explore the anti-oppression framework. Expect to respectfully challenge and be challenged when your privilege comes up.

### Engaging in Self-Care

Working with trauma of any kind is hard work. When you conduct a group, know that it might become even harder since you are listening to eight or ten stories at once, rather than one story at a time. It is important that you and your co-facilitator engage in self-care activities that restore, rejuvenate, and prevent burnout. Talk to your supervisor if you are feeling overwhelmed, or were particularly bothered by something that was said in group. It does not mean that you are not doing your job or not doing it well. It means you are human.

**Self-care is not just a personal choice for facilitators; it is an agency obligation when the work of the agency is focused on addressing trauma.**

Self-care is not just a personal choice for facilitators; it is an agency obligation when the work of the agency is focused on addressing trauma. Just as we strive to provide trauma-informed services for survivors, our workplaces should have trauma-informed policies and procedures to support staff. For example, building in adequate time to debrief after a group session with a co-facilitator and/or a supervisor will help create more effective groups while also reducing the stress level of the facilitator.



*Take care  
of myself!*

Sometimes self-care means being clear about how our own situation and needs may affect our ability to facilitate a group. For example, if you are struggling in your relationship with your own adolescent, you may not feel this is the appropriate time to facilitate a teen support group. Support groups require a major investment of time and energy, and if for any reason you do not feel up to the task or have conflicting obligations at a particular time during the year, it is worth talking this over with your program supervisor to see what flexibility may be available.

## WHAT AN EFFECTIVE GROUP FACILITATOR DOES

Developing your professional knowledge and skills will help you to increase your effectiveness as a group facilitator.

### Keeps Learning about Sexual Assault and the Experiences of Survivors

Those who conduct psychoeducational support groups must possess a working knowledge of issues specific to sexual assault along with knowledge of the particular populations that you are serving. Different populations require different skill sets and different approaches. Conducting psychoeducational support groups within a sexual assault context therefore requires an understanding of the dynamics of sexual assault, myths and facts, underlying conditions specific to sexual violence, listening and advocacy skills, how oppression affects survivors, boundaries and safety issues, dynamics of child sexual abuse, issues specific to adult survivors of sexual abuse and so on. It is also important that facilitators have a working knowledge of the particular population they are serving. For example, if you are facilitating a sexual assault group for males, it would be critical that you not only understand the dynamics of sexual assault, but also how sexual assault specifically impacts male survivors.

As you research and learn about particular survivor needs, you can take a leadership role within your program (regardless of your specific job) to discuss the issues, expand resources for survivors, and identify other resources related to the group topic. The WCSAP document *Leadership for a Successful IPSV Support Group* (2010) gives some examples of this process.

... requires an understanding of the dynamics of sexual assault, myths and facts, underlying conditions specific to sexual violence, listening and counseling skills, how oppression affects survivors, boundaries and safety issues, dynamics of child sexual abuse, issues specific to adult survivors of sexual abuse . . .

## Influences Group Climate in a Positive Way

... promote a climate that includes healthy interaction and ownership of feelings and behaviors.

Group members will be influenced by the way you conduct yourself, interact with a co-facilitator, and interact with other group members. Your behavior will serve as the frame of reference throughout the group process. Through your expectations and behavior, you can promote a climate that includes healthy interaction and ownership of feelings and behaviors. You can encourage members to use “I” statements; this technique will help members identify their own feelings. You can also encourage members to participate, but not make them feel compelled to do so. As in all advocacy interactions, your respect for the pace and choices of each individual sends an important message.

Perfectionism is a problem that plagues many survivors, stemming from a time when every decision was a matter of survival. Finding out that it is okay to make mistakes and that, in fact, mistakes are a necessary part of learning is often vital new information. This can be enhanced by the facilitators owning their own mistakes, not being defensive or needing to be perfect. It helps the group members relax. The facilitator can include choice, perfectionism, and all-or-nothing thinking as a topic. This approach relieves pressure on participants and facilitators alike.

“My general suggestion is to meet anger, hostility, accusations, and challenges nondefensively and with good humor. Admit your mistakes and apologize (and try not to repeat them). Come to the group with respect for its members. You are learning from experts, often heroes. Respect their expertise. Survivors are very forgiving of inexperience and mistakes. What they will neither tolerate nor forgive (rightly so) is bullshit: lying, false authority, and rigidity. You don’t have to be perfect, all-knowing, or definitive. You need to be relaxed, open, willing to learn, and reflect the reality of recovery. Survivors do not need models of perfection in their group leaders; they need and thirst for models of healthy humanity.”

--Experienced Group Facilitator

## **Tunes In to the Needs and Nonverbal Cues of Group Members**

Scan the group to notice the group dynamics and any individual signs of distress, lack of engagement, or worrisome behavior. You can link disengaged participants back to the topic at hand, or reflect a general issue, such as “This can be a very distressing topic. Does anyone have a coping suggestion that has worked for you when you’ve felt disturbed by a particular subject?” It is also helpful to talk about the ground rules regularly so that you can guide people away from inappropriate behavior without them feeling like they are being scolded. “I know it is tempting to give advice when you want to help, Patricia. How can you offer support to Maryanne in a different way, as we discussed when we talked about the ground rules?”

## **Creates a Sense of Safety**

Using the practical steps described above in the section on creating a trauma-informed group, you can help create a physically and emotionally safe environment in which group members can learn and share. In addition, you may need to use your facilitation skills to guide group members away from interactions that feel threatening or pressuring to other participants. Janice DeLucia-Waack (2006, p. 72) states, “Research has indicated that members who are dissatisfied with their group experience often implicate the group leader for negligence in providing adequate protection.” She says the facilitator can help create a safe climate by performing “blocking,” “a specific type of protection that is used to stop a member from storytelling; rambling; or inappropriately probing, gossiping, or invading the privacy of others” (p. 72). In a gentle and respectful manner, you can deflect the conversation, ask a question of someone else, move into the next activity, or suggest that the group revisit the ground rules that were agreed upon initially.

## **Prepares to Manage Practical Tasks of the Group Process**

These tasks include keeping group members aware of the schedule or time frame, helping members stay true to the ground rules, and refocusing the group’s attention when the discussion strays from the topic. At the same time, you will want to be flexible enough to allow the group to take a detour when appropriate.

Effective group leaders allow sufficient planning time, gather materials such as handouts and items needed for activities in advance, and work thoughtfully to vary the pace and learning style requirements within each group session. They design and implement evaluation methods and use the results to improve their groups. They keep the group goals and objectives in mind and incorporate input from participants on a regular basis.

## Understands How Groups Work

Effective group facilitators not only have subject matter expertise, but they also understand that each group has its own unique personality—no two groups are ever the same. Each group has a different feel and flow, as the traits and characteristics of its members combine to form a unique dynamic. It is important to be aware of this because the personality of a group may necessitate changes in the way it is facilitated.

## Shows Commitment to Cultural Competency

Culture will have an impact on your group and your group participants.  
Make sure you know about it.  
And respect it.

Cultural competency provides us with the ability to look through different lenses and respectfully see the various viewpoints of other groups. It is helpful for facilitators to consider how culture and oppression affect their own experiences, the experiences of group members, and the way in which the group functions. This is a way of putting into practice the key principle of using an anti-oppression framework, as described in the beginning of this manual.

Culture and inequalities faced by particular groups may affect

- ▶ how sexual violence and its effects are defined,
- ▶ how survivors access systems (for example, are there qualified interpreters for those who need them?), and
- ▶ the recovery process - how one heals and even whom one tells.

Cultural competency is a process of learning and working toward understanding, not a checklist for identifying factors about people in a certain community. An ongoing commitment to learning about oneself and others is critical if a facilitator is going to be committed to running a group that is culturally relevant. It is important to understand that cultural groups interpret their experiences differently, have different experiences with dominant mainstream systems, and have different healing strategies. An understanding of these issues can therefore be reflected in the curriculum and activities that you choose to incorporate. It becomes even more important that group participants provide input into the group topics and strategies in order to make the group pertinent to the challenges they face, both as survivors and as community members.

See the section on Anti-Oppression Framework in the Key Principles section for additional information related to this topic.

***Examines Their Own Experiences and Beliefs***

Unless we make an intentional choice to be more flexible, we tend to use standards from our own cultural background to judge, assume, and draw conclusions about people from other cultures. As a psychoeducational facilitator, you should explore and become aware of your own cultural biases and work to respect

- ▶ boundaries, customs, and values of other cultures, and
- ▶ traditions that may be foreign to your own.

**“The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you: they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.”**  
 – Wade Davis, anthropologist and ethnobiologist

***Considers a Range of Experiences***

When we only look at the form of victimization a survivor has gone through, we fail to take into account the wide disparities of experience that go along with people’s perceived ethnicity or race, their financial status or social class, or any other factors that may lead to discrimination, inequality, or violence. The reality of survivors’ lives is affected by access to housing, financial security, education, safe neighborhoods, services in a language they understand, legal services, health care, and many other factors that shape opportunities. Age, perceived gender, legal status, and disability status can also deeply affect how survivors are treated and what services they can use.

**“When treated with respect, people respond positively and openly, especially when they haven’t been respected much in their lives.”**  
 --Experienced Group Facilitator

It is important to be educated, aware, and unbiased about issues of mental illness and homelessness. Evaluate how the needs of these populations can best be met within or outside the format of a group setting, and consider the effects on other group members. (See the Prescreening section for some practical guidance.)

Consider age as a cultural factor that may have an impact on a group. When you choose to have a group that is diverse with regard to age, this can be a positive experience for adult group members, but may also bring the same challenges in understanding each other’s viewpoints as any other cultural difference.

Spirituality can be an important component of survivors' healing, and can be acknowledged respectfully in group without members pressing others to adopt their beliefs. Similarly, group facilitators must be careful not to project their own spiritual beliefs on the group. Encouraging participants to share a range of healing supports, from family encouragement to cultural beliefs to spiritual practices, can help the group to foster cultural and spiritual respect while valuing diversity.

### ***Knows Cultural Competency is a Process, Not a Goal***

... what matters most often is that survivors feel that they belong, that they are safe, that they are respected and heard, and that their alternate ways of healing are encouraged.

It really all boils down to this: Working toward cultural competency means that you take the time to learn about different cultures. You take the time to bridge the gap between yourself and others' experiences, so that you can build relationships and communicate in a meaningful way. Working toward cultural competency and an understanding of oppression in the lives of survivors requires action on your part; this can be done both individually and organizationally. You will have different cultures in your group. What matters most is that survivors feel that they belong, that they are safe, that they are respected and heard, and that their alternate ways of healing are encouraged.

To address potential conflicts between group members due to cultural issues, you might want to stress the need to respect different perspectives, points of view, and cultures as part of the group's ground rules.

Regardless of people's cultural backgrounds, they can benefit from different healing strategies and different views of how families and communities operate. When you support and encourage participants' sharing of diverse experiences, you can actually facilitate a more inclusive healing process for everyone in the group.

### **Obtains Adequate Training and Supervision**

In order to be an effective group facilitator, the facilitator must not only have a thorough understanding of sexual assault but should also have training in group process, interpersonal dynamics, and experience as a facilitator or co-facilitator. See the section on Facilitator Training and Supervision.

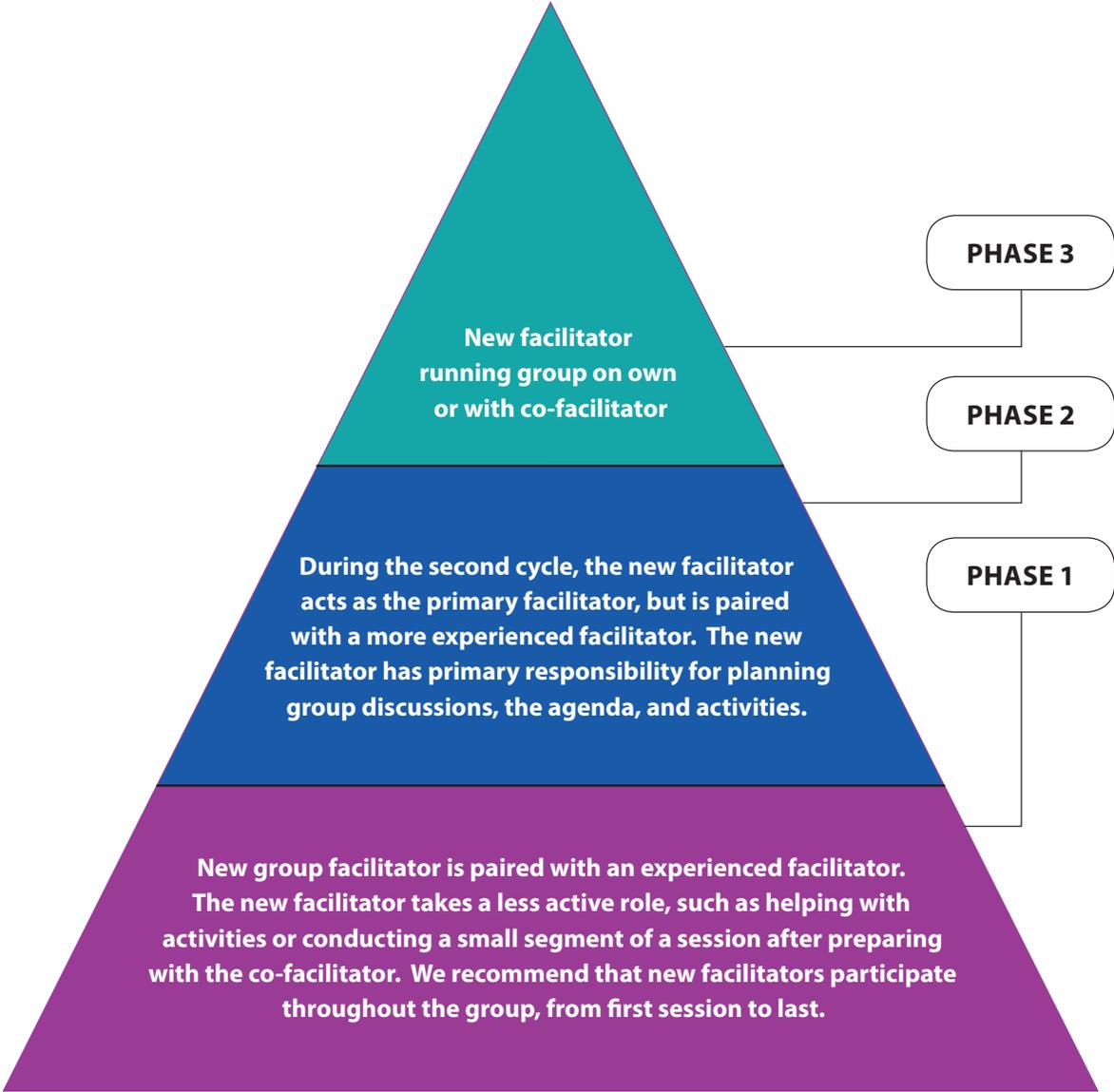
## FACILITATOR TRAINING AND SUPERVISION

### Training for New Facilitators

There is an old saying that people learn by doing. Therefore, we recommend the following training schedule as one option to assist newer facilitators “learn the ropes” of the trade and to become as successful as they can be. Remember, selection of the group facilitator should be based on one’s **ability and not their availability**.

One training process that functions like a pyramid has proved useful:

**NEW FACILITATOR TRAINING PYRAMID**



Although we indicated that after Phase 3 new facilitators can take the lead and could run on the group on their own, we still recommend that they have a co-facilitator if at all possible.

Unfortunately, there is no specific timeline as to when a new facilitator would be ready to take the lead in handling a support group. If a volunteer is going to assist with a support group, we recommend that they have at least 6 months to one year of experience in sexual assault advocacy and be given more and more responsibilities for running the group once they show competency. Whether volunteers or staff, facilitators should have an in-depth background in sexual assault advocacy as well as training in facilitating psychoeducational groups for survivors.

## Appropriate Supervision

Regardless of time on the job, all facilitators need to be supervised on an ongoing basis. We recommend that supervisors have extensive experience in group dynamics and knowledge of sexual assault. The supervisor should meet regularly with the facilitators to debrief the group.

Listed below is a checklist of some of the competencies that supervisors could look for in a new facilitator to determine whether the new facilitator is ready to run a group on their own.

### Supervisor's Checklist for Group Facilitators

TASKS	COMMENTS
Does the facilitator demonstrate knowledge of group dynamics, group process, and sexual assault?	
Is the facilitator able to articulate and implement the key principles of sexual assault psychoeducational groups as described in this manual?	
Does the facilitator display and model appropriate boundaries and ethics (see list on boundaries)?	
Does the facilitator create smooth transitions between the different tasks and activities of the group?	
Does the facilitator show support and empathy to all members of the group?	
Does the facilitator demonstrate a sense of confidence in running the group?	
Does the facilitator prepare for activities thoroughly, and understand how to use activities to help participants learn?	
Is the facilitator sensitive to the group's needs, demonstrating flexibility between following an agenda and knowing when to allow a discussion to continue?	
Is the facilitator able to draw out shy members of the group without putting them on the spot?	
Does the facilitator demonstrate good time management and know how long aspects of the group should take? Does the facilitator begin and end the group on time?	

TASKS	COMMENTS
Can the facilitator develop or adapt a successful agenda or curriculum for the group based on the group’s intended membership?	
Does the facilitator understand that different cultures have different ways of interpreting and healing from their trauma? Does the facilitator help the group to incorporate some of those healing strategies into the group agenda?	
Does the facilitator demonstrate sensitivity to and respect for each group member?	
Does the facilitator demonstrate active listening skills such as restating, clarifying, questioning, summarizing, and dealing with silence?	
Does the facilitator demonstrate the ability to open, close and terminate a group? Does the facilitator demonstrate an ability to work with a co-facilitator effectively (if applicable)?	

It is important to note that supervision is not a one-time event. There must be consistency and a continual flow of feedback between the facilitator and the supervisor.

One way of handling supervision is to host joint supervision for a group of facilitators, so that the facilitators can present their issues with a trained supervisor and have the rest of the facilitators provide needed feedback. This is especially important since we realize that no matter how long one has been facilitating groups, a facilitator may be faced with a situation they might not know how to handle. Getting more than one perspective in these situations is invaluable.





THE HOW TO'S OF  
RUNNING A GROUP



SECTION 2



## PLANNING A PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SUPPORT GROUP

When starting a group, the facilitator must take several things into consideration. The things that must be decided include:

- ▶ What is the need for the group?
- ▶ What target population will you serve?
- ▶ What will be the membership criteria?
- ▶ Where will you hold the group?
- ▶ How many members would you consider to be an ideal size for a group?
- ▶ What will your group meeting format and structure look like?
- ▶ What will be the length and frequency of your sessions?
- ▶ Will you have one or two facilitators?
- ▶ How will you market the group and recruit members?
- ▶ How will you measure outcomes and group success?
- ▶ How will you prescreen potential members to ensure the group is appropriate for them and they are appropriate for the group?
- ▶ What kind of curriculum will you develop or adapt?

### Planning for Adequate Resources

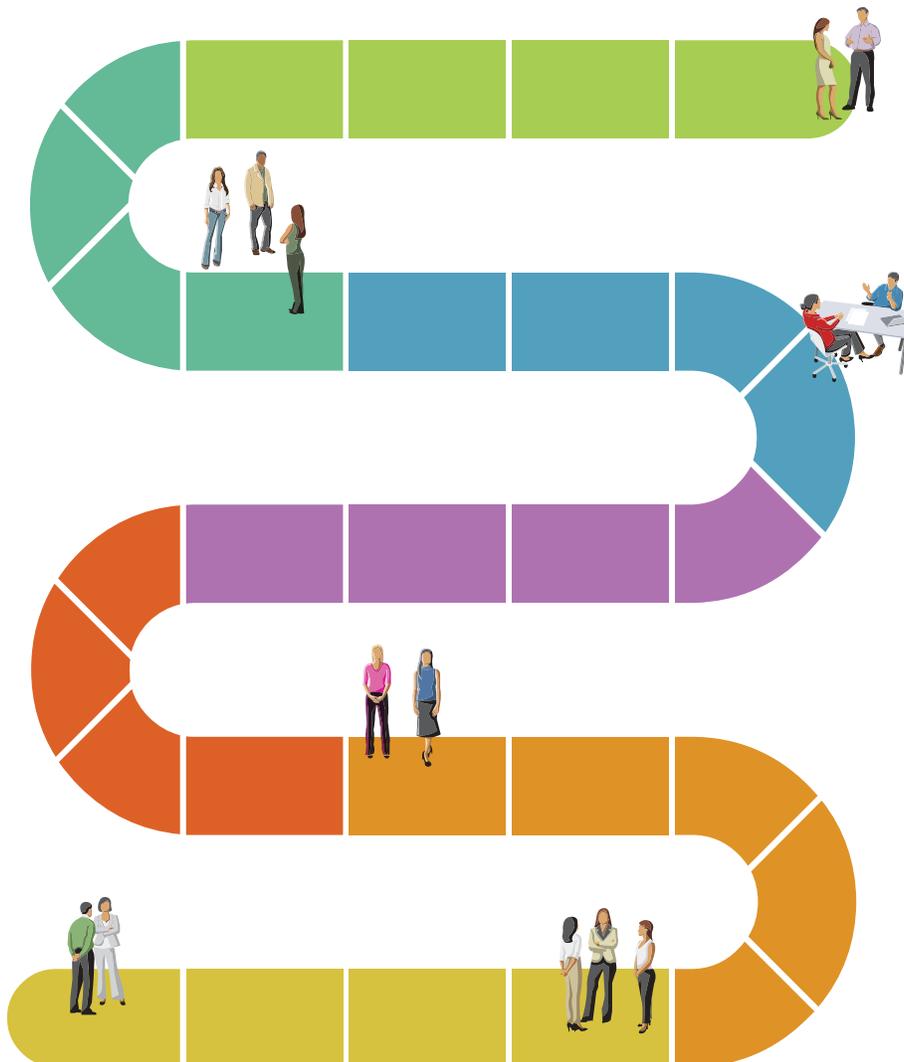
It is easy to underestimate the time and resources needed for a successful, sustainable group. In addition to the group sessions themselves, be sure to plan for adequate time and a realistic budget for these important components of running a group:

- Developing, adapting, and reviewing a curriculum
- Outreach for marketing and recruitment
- Individual prescreening appointments with each potential member
- Planning and debriefing each group session
- Supervision
- Preparing handouts and activities
- Developing and implementing an evaluation plan

## WHAT IS THE NEED FOR THE GROUP?

Although most communities have a need for sexual assault psychoeducational support groups, it can be challenging to get individuals to participate. One option is to develop a running list throughout the year of calls you receive for the most requested services. If you already have a group cycle going, tell the caller that you will put them on a waiting list and will call them during a specified time period to determine if they are still interested.

If your program is just starting to offer psychoeducational support groups, one way to determine the need is to look at the various populations of people that you serve currently and identify the kinds of requests you are receiving. For example, is the need greatest for a group for intimate partner sexual violence survivors, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, or nonoffending parents and caregivers of children who have been abused? It is helpful if a community needs assessment is part of your agency's strategic planning process. In Washington State, the community planning process to determine allocation of specialized funds can offer guidance on priorities for types of support groups.



## WHAT TARGET POPULATION WILL YOU SERVE? WHAT WILL BE THE MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA?

Once you have identified a need, the next step will be determining who you will run the group for. For example, will you run the group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, adult victims of sexual assault, nonoffending parents, male survivors, or teens?

It is important to note that research indicates that groups function best and more cohesively when members of the group have similar issues or life experiences, like sexual assault. However, because so many different people are impacted by sexual assault, having an experience of sexual assault alone is not enough to form a tightly cohesive group. Other factors to take into consideration when selecting your target population and membership criteria include:

- ▶ Gender (see the section on single-gender vs. mixed-gender groups)
- ▶ Age
- ▶ Where people are in their recovery process
- ▶ Culture
- ▶ Victimization history

Whenever making decisions about group membership and composition, increasing all survivors' access to this service and ensuring safety should always be prioritized.

### Single-Gender vs. Mixed-Gender Support Groups

Traditionally, psychoeducational support groups for sexual assault survivors have been gender-specific, and this was the recommendation in the first edition of Circle of Hope. However, the research in this area is very sparse, and thus it is a challenge to identify "best practice" with regard to the composition of support groups.

In addition, the concept of gender itself is changing. Rather than a binary view, cataloging each person as male or female based on assigned gender at birth, we now understand that there is a gender spectrum. At a minimum, most facilitators agree that a group participant's self-identification should be respected, regardless of assigned gender at birth or biological sex.

### Consider VAWA Funding Requirements

If your program receives Violence Against Women Act funding, you should consider VAWA funding requirements and guidance on “sex-segregated” programming in deciding on a single-gender versus mixed-gender support group. The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA) contains a Nondiscrimination Grant Condition that establishes requirements regarding “sex-segregated” programming. For more information, consult the Department of Justice’s guidance: <http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/docs/faqs-ngc-vawa.pdf> and talk to your funder.

### *What is the Value of a Single-Gender Group?*

The reasons usually stated for having a single-gender support group are:

- ▶ Historically, women in the sexual assault and domestic violence movements gathered together in groups to support each other and to counteract restrictive social norms.
- ▶ Gender may be one factor that facilitates group cohesion.
- ▶ Depending on a survivor’s identity and experience, a single-gender group may feel safer or more comfortable than a mixed-gender group.
- ▶ Because of gender socialization, it may be easier for people who subscribe to traditional gender roles to fully participate and to focus on meeting their own needs in a single-gender group.
- ▶ Because of issues of safety, development, and emotional maturity, some facilitators believe that teens may be more comfortable in gender-specific groups.



### ***When and Why Should You Consider a Mixed-Gender Group?***

The reasons for having a mixed-gender support group are:

- ▶ When groups are restricted to women only, other survivors may never have the opportunity to participate in a support group.
- ▶ People in mixed groups may find commonalities as survivors and in terms of other identities beyond gender (such as cultural identity or identity as an elder).
- ▶ It may be a healing experience to have a positive relationship with non-perpetrating individuals of another gender.
- ▶ A mixed-gender group may offer a wider range of perspectives that can enhance survivors' understanding of their experience.
- ▶ For LGBTQ-identified individuals, a mixed-gender group may be particularly valuable, as the sense of cohesion created by shared experiences of oppression and marginalization may transcend gender.
- ▶ A diverse group may provide an opportunity to collectively explore gender-based oppression and violence and the limitations of a gender-binary system.
- ▶ Mixed-gender groups may offer a more comfortable and safe environment for trans survivors and those whose identity is not within the gender binary.

Some types of survivor groups seem to make sense as mixed-gender groups. Most of the support group facilitators we interviewed regularly conduct mixed-gender nonoffending parent/caregiver groups. For other survivors, the facilitators believed that an initial single-gender support group was usually a good foundation; mixed-gender groups seemed more appropriate at a later stage of recovery.

### *Considerations for Facilitating Mixed-Gender Groups*

For those who do decide to run a mixed-gender group, facilitators shared the following considerations:

- ▶ Try to ensure that there is a choice, and that the survivor feels free to choose whichever option is most comfortable. This may involve running single-gender and mixed-gender groups on a rotating basis.
- ▶ In general, mixed-gender groups seem more appropriate for survivors who have had a previous gender-specific support group experience and who have been engaged in the process of recovery for a while. In other words, a mixed-gender group may be most successful as a “Phase 2” experience, which is a good option to have for people who want something more after their initial group experience.
- ▶ Try to maintain a fairly balanced group – it is generally not a good idea to have one man in a group otherwise composed of women, for example.
- ▶ Address issues of gender-based oppression and violence openly in the group, and be sure that traditional gender roles are not played out in a way that limits the benefits of the group for any survivor. This requires skilled facilitation, including supportive co-facilitation and supervision.
- ▶ Consider having a mixed-gender team of co-facilitators, if possible.
- ▶ Transgender individuals should select the group of their choice, even if your program only runs gender-specific groups.
- ▶ Build questions about this aspect of group into your evaluation process, and share the results with the field (WCSAP would be glad to have this conversation with you). The advocacy field needs more data about survivors’ response to mixed-gender groups.

Good facilitation might be more important  
than the gender of the participants.  
– Corey Hodge

I think I am struggling with the difference in what should be done in theory (in a liberated world) and what is realistic or can be applied in practice. In my liberated world, a group of survivors – men, women, people of color, trans folks, lesbians, people with a disability – could all be in a sexual assault group and learn about all the ways patriarchy/oppression affected their experience of surviving, learn from each other regardless of difference, have their experience of sexual assault really seen and validated, and feel safe in the process. . . but sadly, I just don't think we are there yet. . . So, in the interim, gender-specific groups may still play a very important role. The real question may be, "What needs to shift, what conditions need to change, what skills are needed, what support is needed for facilitators, in order to make that liberated view of sexual assault groups a reality?"

– Amarinthia Torres, The Northwest Network

Facilitators have to have a strong understanding of sexism and patriarchy in order to do a mixed-gender group – you have to be able to check male privilege, make sure everyone is sharing space, and hold the context of patriarchy on everyone's experience of sexual assault.

– Amarinthia Torres, The Northwest Network

Some members have actually requested a mixed gendered group with the goal of addressing deeper healing of trust issues, healing negative perceptions of the opposite sex, to experience healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex, and healing their issues around sexuality.

– Claudia Ackerman, DV/SAS of Whatcom County

## WHERE WILL YOU HOLD THE GROUP?

Once you have identified a need and determined whom you will serve, the next step is to look for a location. You want your meeting space to be accessible for those with mobility issues and convenient to public transportation if possible. Ideally, the location will offer safety, confidentiality, and convenience. It should also be comfortable and not be subject to disturbance by noise or interruption, and be consistently available. Of course, your program's financial resources will have an impact on the options you can consider.

When examining your location, try to determine if it is a "gracious space." Does the location make the participants feel welcomed? Do you meet in a comfortable, inviting space? Is your space a place to talk about things that are scary?

Another factor to consider when determining your location is to examine your target population. For example, one member of our team told us about an experience she had with a male survivor support group. She originally held the group in a room that had comfortable couches and to her that would have felt safe. However, the men in the group felt very uncomfortable being in that room because they were uncomfortable sitting so close to each other on the couches. They wanted tables and more space between them. She eventually moved the group to a room that was set up more like a conference room, and the group was able to feel much more at ease.

Consider the implications for survivors of where the group is held. For example, a church may offer a convenient (and possibly free) meeting space out in the community, but some survivors might not feel comfortable in a particular religious setting or there may be some confusion about whether the group is religious in nature. Many programs hold teen groups in schools, because that makes it easier for students to attend. However, there are issues of confidentiality and possible policy conflicts when groups are held in the school setting. The *WCSAP Teen Support Group Guide*, available at <http://www.wcsap.org/teen-support-group-guide>, discusses the factors to consider when planning in-school groups.

Transportation and safety issues are vitally important. Be sure you know what public transportation options are available, and whether they are running at the time the group is held. For groups that meet after dark, there may be additional safety considerations for participants going to and from public transportation or a parking area. Building security and privacy of the meeting space are additional safety concerns, including soundproofing if others are nearby.

Asking group participants for feedback about the convenience, comfort, esthetics, and perceived safety of the group location during your evaluation process will provide valuable information for future group planning. In addition, you can ask about possible attendance barriers during the prescreening process to find out if the location poses a problem for any potential participants.

## LENGTH, FREQUENCY, AND SIZE OF GROUP

Once you have determined your target population and have decided upon the meeting location, the next step is to determine how your group will be set up, how it will operate, the length and frequency of your group, and how many people you want to have in your group.

Your format, length, frequency of sessions, and size of groups will vary depending upon the population you are working with. For example, if you are working with adult survivors, the format and length of sessions may be different than if you are working with teens in a school setting.

### Length and Frequency of Sessions

Most sexual assault programs run adult groups for 8 to 12 weeks (with sessions generally held on a weekly basis). Each group session is normally between one and two hours in length. Many facilitators find that a 90-minute group is optimal for adults. For adolescent groups that are being held in the school, the sessions conform to one rotating class period of 50 minutes; the group normally lasts the entire semester. Although it is important to be creative in how you structure your groups, remember that psychoeducational support groups must have an end date or they run the risk of becoming some other type of group.

To increase the likelihood of consistent group attendance, check calendars for holidays, school vacations, or other events that may conflict with group times. You may be able to accommodate these conflicts with prior planning. For example, you would not want an interruption between the first and second group sessions, but having a “week off” before the last session or two might not be disruptive. It’s important for you (and your co-facilitator if you have one) to carefully consider your other personal and professional commitments as well before you establish a group starting and ending date, since you will need to attend every single group session, barring emergencies. It changes the group dynamics when a co-facilitator is absent, so just assuming that the other facilitator will carry on while you are on vacation, for example, is not consistent with this group model.

### Group Size

A group of six to eight participants is ideal, as it allows for diverse perspectives and experiences while still being a manageable size. Participants will all have an opportunity to share and learn in a personal way. Depending on your community, however, this may not always be feasible. If a smaller group is necessary, consider the group dynamics if one or two participants are unable to attend. In some circumstances, it may be better to provide one-on-one services instead of a group or until you have adequate numbers. It may be tempting to have a larger group if there is enough interest, but once the group gets much beyond eight members, it is harder to establish relationships, ensure participation, and create a sense of trust.

## GROUND RULES

During your initial session, work with group participants to establish ground rules. The ground rules are a group contract that represents the guidelines for interactions among members and between members and the facilitators. The ground rules must be established during the initial group meeting and must include feedback and input from the group. Having the members participate in the creation process helps them “buy into” the ground rules and increase accountability.

Once the ground rules have been established, some programs like to have each member sign a form agreeing to these ground rules. Again, this is a way of establishing safety, consistency, clear expectations, and boundaries. The ground rules should be revisited throughout the course of the group. They may be posted in the group meeting space or read aloud periodically.

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They may be posted in the group meeting space or read aloud periodically.

When establishing ground rules, ensure they are age-appropriate and help participants phrase expectations in a positive tone rather than as a series of “don’ts.” Some areas that you might want to cover include:

- ▶ Confidentiality - Stress that this is the foundation for a successful group process. Use examples to explain what confidentiality looks like in the community, at school (for teen groups), and in the context of their social lives. Asking for input from the group, discuss what the consequences of breaking confidentiality could be. Be clear with the group about how a breach can impact other group members’ healing process. Discuss your mandated exceptions to confidentiality.
- ▶ Attendance guidelines and expectations
- ▶ Not bringing outside people to group sessions (such as friends, parents, or children—unless child care is provided)
- ▶ Drug and alcohol use and consequences, such as being asked to leave for the session if a person comes to group under the influence
- ▶ Safety considerations
- ▶ Respectful and nonjudgmental communication
- ▶ Use of technology (such as cellphones) during group

## HAVING ONE OR TWO FACILITATORS

Although it is possible to run groups with a sole facilitator, due to the intricacies and complexities of a support group, running psychoeducational support groups with two facilitators is recommended if possible, particularly for a new facilitator or for those working with teens. Two facilitators can support each other and share the work of responding to the various group members. Having co-facilitators is also helpful for strategic purposes – two minds are involved in planning group sessions, coordinating individual and collective objectives for the group, and reviewing the sessions. It is essential for co-facilitators to meet with each other prior to each group session to plan activities and discussions, as a lack of preparedness can jeopardize your credibility and make the group less effective.

As with everything however, there are some benefits and challenges of having two facilitators.

### **Some of the benefits include:**

- ▶ Having two perspectives
- ▶ Combining strengths
- ▶ Providing opportunities to demonstrate role-plays
- ▶ Holding each other accountable
- ▶ Having back-up in case of crisis  
(such as illness or injury of a group member during a session)
- ▶ Consulting each other regarding group process
- ▶ Better reflecting the diversity of the group
- ▶ Adhering to best practice when serving youth by having two adults present
- ▶ Enhancing skills by learning from each other
- ▶ Modeling healthy cooperation and conflict resolution

**Challenges may include:**

- ▶ Conflict, such as power struggles between leaders
- ▶ Lack of time for proper coordination, planning, preparation, and debriefing
- ▶ Vastly different approaches to facilitation
- ▶ Lack of clarity about each facilitator's role and responsibilities

When co-facilitators do not address problems directly with each other, it can interfere with the group process and block the members' productivity. It is important for co-facilitators to meet regularly to smooth out potential conflicts and provide feedback to each other regarding the group participants and the direction of the group. Because most psychoeducational support groups include activities, co-facilitators must work out the logistics for these activities carefully and cooperatively. It is useful to have a supervisor who can assist co-facilitators in resolving any difficult issues.

Regardless of whether there are one or two facilitators, the following questions should be answered prior to the start of your group (adapted from Coder, 2000).

- ▶ Who will do what?
- ▶ Who will do the prescreening?
- ▶ How will we handle any negative comments or aggressive behavior?
- ▶ How will we handle any member coming to group under the influence or not following the agreed-upon ground rules?
- ▶ How will we deal with a member who seems withdrawn and doesn't want to participate in the structured activities?
- ▶ How will we deal with a member who suddenly becomes very upset, cries, or dashes out of the room?
- ▶ How will we handle a group member who has a crisis five minutes before the group ends?
- ▶ How will we handle a group member who monopolizes all the time in the group at the expense of the other members?
- ▶ How will we keep records about the group process?
- ▶ How will we plan for and debrief each session?

## MARKETING AND RECRUITING STRATEGIES

Creating a marketing strategy is key to the successful implementation of support groups. One of the first elements to successful marketing and recruitment is relationship-building. It is important to get to know the various programs, organizations, school personnel, leaders of faith communities, media, and civic groups in your community, so that when it comes time to market your group, your relationships with these community leaders are already established.

Maintain a flyer and website information year round that lists all of your groups and includes contact information. Every time you go into the community for meetings or presentations, provide information on your groups.

Locations in the community where you may want to post group information include:

- Doctors' offices and medical clinics
- Community colleges and universities
- Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious meeting spaces
- Mental health agencies
- Prosecutor's office
- Hospitals
- College counseling centers
- Programs serving marginalized communities
- Restrooms
- Day care centers
- LGBTQ community centers
- Homeless shelters
- HIV/AIDS centers
- Drug and Alcohol Rehab centers and Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotic Anonymous meeting spaces
- Health and community fairs
- Civic clubs
- Coffee shops
- Clothing stores
- Nail/hair salons and barber shops

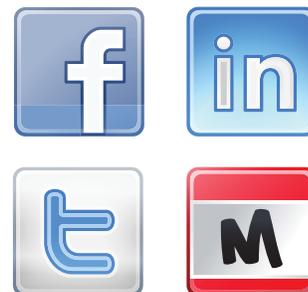
You may also want to provide information to therapists, health care professionals, religious leaders (with a request to include the information in bulletins or newsletters), school counselors, law enforcement, other victim advocacy programs, parent programs, college teaching and administrative staff, and any other service providers who refer survivors to your program.

Use social media and technology to get the message out about your groups. If you are currently recruiting for a group, that information should be prominently displayed on your agency's home page, not buried somewhere else on the website. Use Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Tumblr if your agency uses social media. Ask community partners to post information on their sites. Let sexual assault programs in neighboring communities know about your groups, so they can refer survivors to you if they do not have a comparable group. Target service providers or businesses that work with your intended group population – for example, assisted living facilities for older survivors or school counselors for a teen group.

Don't forget your own agency. Ask colleagues to think about current or past service recipients who would meet the criteria for inclusion in the group and might be interested. If you work in a large multi-service agency, go to staff meetings of other departments and explain your group program. Remind your co-workers regularly when you are recruiting for a group.

One tip that you may find helpful is to print out business cards that have the name of the group, a brief description, perhaps an attractive graphic or logo, and contact information for the group screener. Distribute these widely and ask other to give them to anyone who may be interested in a group. These cards can be made or purchased inexpensively, and make it more likely that potential participants will have the information at their fingertips.

Regardless of where you place your cards or flyers or recruit your members, remember that developing solid relationships is essential. Sit down with folks and let them know about your program and how you can help. Word of mouth will then become your best referral source. This is of particular importance in many marginalized communities, where a conversation with a trusted insider is more likely to bring people to the group than any other method.



## MEASURING OUTCOMES IN PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS



### MEASURING OUTCOMES

1. Set Goal
2. Set Measurement Objectives
3. Measurement
4. Implement Tool
5. Add Informal Measures
6. Evaluate Results
7. Implement Changes

More and more, the evaluation of programs is becoming a necessary part of social services. Not only is evaluation required by many funding sources, but most managers now understand that evaluation is an important tool for improving programs. A closed, time-limited group provides a good opportunity to measure the success of these sexual assault services. Because members begin and end group at the same time, evaluating changes that may be attributed to the group is easier than for some other types of services. This segment of the manual will walk you through one strategy for measuring outcomes in closed psychoeducational support groups.

## Set Goal

- 1 In order to measure the success of any service, the evaluator must be clear about the goal of the service. The goal should be positive and long-term in nature. When a support group has an overall goal, curriculum design and updates are easier to make. This is because any additions or changes can be examined in the context of the goal.

Sexual assault service providers can create goals by considering the reason that people seek services. In sexual assault psychoeducational support groups, a goal might be to improve the participant's ability to cope with the effects of sexual assault. We'll use this goal as our example throughout this section.

**Goal:** Participants are better able to cope with the effects of sexual assault.

## Set Measurable Objectives

- 2 Once a goal has been established, it is important to identify measurable short-term objectives that demonstrate movement toward the goal. Objectives can be determined by considering the steps that need to be taken to get to the goal, the reason that key components of the program exist, and the hopes that providers have for participants.

For instance, psychoeducational support groups may be offered because providers hope that it will help participants realize that they are not alone in their experiences, feelings or reactions. Feeling less alone can help a participant move toward the goal of being better able to cope with the effects of sexual assault. Therefore, decreasing isolation could be a measurable objective of the group. This objective could be measured by asking participants to rate their feelings of support and isolation before and after the group.

Most likely, sexual assault psychoeducational support groups will have more than one measurable objective. For the purpose of this manual, we have identified three example objectives:

### Example Objectives

1. Participants indicate an increased understanding of the effects of sexual assault.
2. Participants indicate an increased use of healthy coping skills.
3. Participants indicate a decreased sense of isolation.

Please note that each of these objectives can demonstrate movement toward the overall goal of the group. When participants show change in the desired direction, the likelihood that they are better able to cope with the effects of sexual assault is strong.

Also note that because each objective statement contains the word “increased” or “decreased” we will be able to measure changes from before the group to after the group. We do not expect all participants to master each realm during the group, but we do expect the group to make a difference to participants in the above areas. Otherwise, what is the point of providing the service?

Measuring the objectives in a psychoeducational support group setting is not about measuring the progress of participants. Rather it measures the helpfulness of the services that are being provided.

### Measurement

- 3 Because members of a closed group start and end the group at the same time, pre-and post-testing is an ideal way to measure changes. Programs can adopt, adapt, or create a tool that measures the objectives for their particular support group. The WCSAP group curricula (for teens, nonoffending parents, and survivors of intimate partner sexual violence) contain materials to help you develop evaluation tools. See Appendix for sample evaluation tools.

Measuring the objectives in a psychoeducational support group setting is not about measuring the progress of participants. Rather it measures the helpfulness of the services that are being provided.

It is important that surveys be fairly short, clear, and easy to complete. Questions should be worded so that participants with limited literacy can participate. Efforts should be made to ensure that participants can complete the survey in their primary language. Surveys that ask participants to rate their response on a numerical scale lend themselves to efficient measurement of change. However, a more qualitative measurement might be more appealing to some programs. Many programs choose a combination of these approaches. Be sure to consider how each aspect of the tool will be evaluated.

Each question on the survey should be examined for relevance to the objectives. If the survey contains questions that are unrelated to the objectives, evaluation will be difficult. If there are unrelated questions that you still wish to include, that may be an indication that objectives need to be modified.

## Implement Tool

- 4 Once the tool has been created, it can be given to participants. For a closed group, using pre- and post-testing, you may wish to give the survey to participants before they come to the first group meeting or during the first group meeting.

Explain the purpose of the measurement tool to the group members. They should be told that the results are used to improve services and not to measure their own personal success. Participants should be told that completing the survey is not a requirement for participation in the group, and paperwork will be kept confidential.

The post-test should be given during the last group session for maximum participation. In programs with access to participants, a three- or six-month follow-up survey would provide additional information about the lasting effects of the group. Ask group members if they are willing to participate in follow-up surveys and whether and how it is safe to contact them.

## Add Informal Measures

- 5 Evaluation can also happen throughout the group in more informal ways. You will want to make this a meaningful process: Let participants know that you really value their input and that it has an effect on future groups; document the ideas that you implement during the course of the group and share those with participants; and find creative ways to harvest the group's wisdom.

At conclusion of the group, ask for some written and oral feedback about what the group has meant to participants, what they found to be most valuable, and what they might do differently. This can be done through creative means such as a collage or a group poster. You may ask for written permission to share appropriate responses (without any identifying information, of course) in order to tell the story of the group to potential participants, referral sources, and funders.

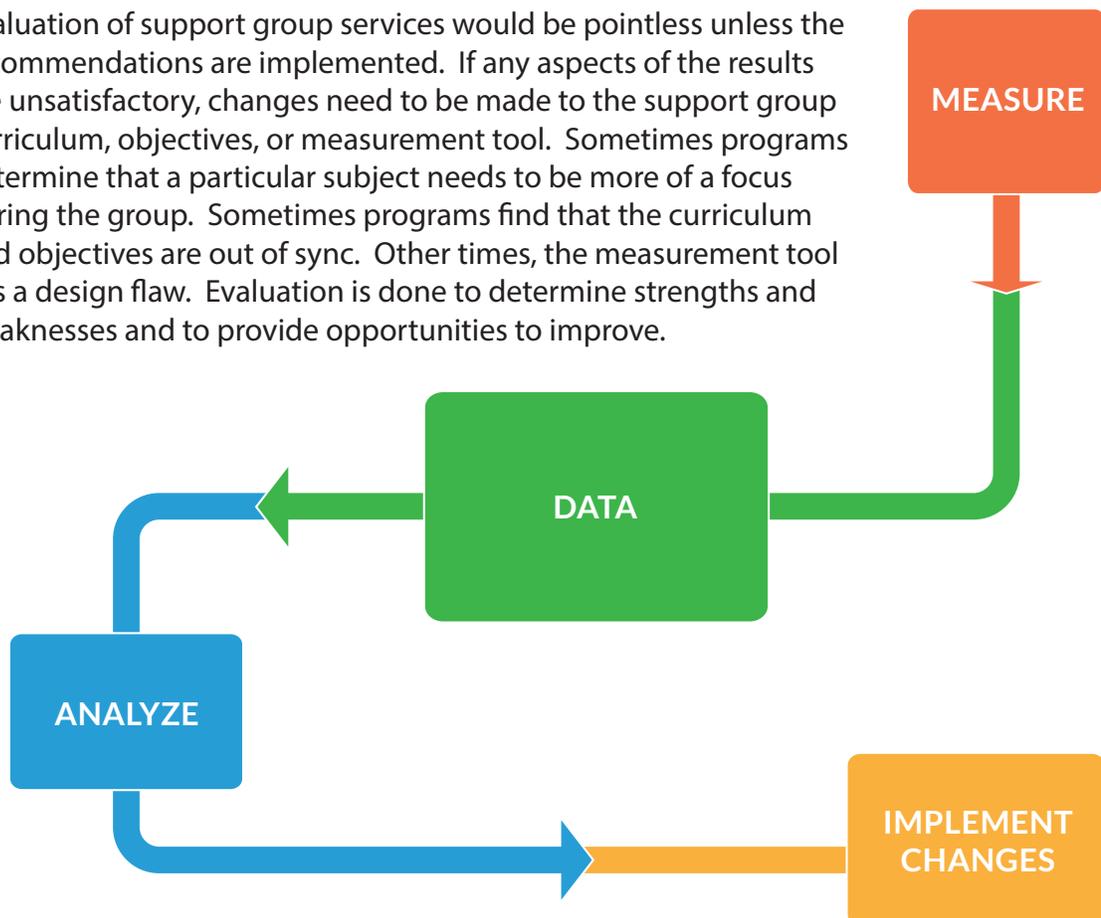
## Evaluate Results

**6** The data gathered from the pre- and post-tests as well as the informal feedback shared throughout the group process will equip your agency with the information needed to provide successful, sustainable groups. (See Appendix for sample pre- and post-tests and end-of-group evaluation form.) Responses to the measurement tool can be compiled and evaluated. On quantitative measures, the average change for all participants can be reported. On qualitative measures, themes and trends that emerge can be reported. After the results are compiled an evaluation report can be created that provides the details, an interpretation of the data, and recommendations for improvements.

Regardless of the type of measurement that is evaluated, it is a good idea to examine all aspects of the group during the evaluation phase. Scrutinize the demographics of the group members, the absence rate, and other factors. Pay particular attention to any factors that group members mention as barriers to attendance, such as transportation or child care, as these may affect support services for subsequent groups.

## Implement Changes

**7** Evaluation of support group services would be pointless unless the recommendations are implemented. If any aspects of the results are unsatisfactory, changes need to be made to the support group curriculum, objectives, or measurement tool. Sometimes programs determine that a particular subject needs to be more of a focus during the group. Sometimes programs find that the curriculum and objectives are out of sync. Other times, the measurement tool has a design flaw. Evaluation is done to determine strengths and weaknesses and to provide opportunities to improve.



## PRESCREENING

Prescreening enhances  
Safety • Confidentiality • Group Fit

Prescreening for a sexual assault group is the most fundamentally sound practice that a facilitator will engage in. Prescreening helps:

- ▶ Ensure that being in a support group is indeed the best program fit for the participant.
- ▶ Ensure group compatibility and that those who are selected are considered a good group fit.
- ▶ Enhance the safety of all the group members, both emotionally and physically.
- ▶ Determine where each member is in their healing process.
- ▶ Assess a participant's goals and objectives for being in the group.
- ▶ Assess potential issues that the participant may be bringing with them to the group. Begin the discussion of confidentiality.
- ▶ Consider prior relationships before placing people in the same group (see discussion below), to help establish a sense of safety.
- ▶ Allow potential participants to describe any preferences or needs that would make the group more accessible to them.
- ▶ Inform potential participants about the level of commitment needed, thus making the group more sustainable.

Good prescreening can make groups more effective and sustainable. Not screening has the potential of creating an ineffective or even harmful group process. For example, let's say you are planning on running a psychoeducational support group for nonoffending parents. If you have one member of the group whose focus is on consistent support and protection for the offender, the rest of the group may gang up on that member, thereby creating an unsafe atmosphere for everyone.

Some programs conduct an orientation session prior to the start of the group. This session allows group members to get to know you, get to know other group members, to review some of the ground rules and confidentiality policies and to see the space they will be working in. Of course, the actual development of ground rules should occur during the first true group session so that members can participate in their creation.

## Who Should Do It?

The screening should be done by the person who will be facilitating the group. If you plan to have a co-facilitator, we recommend that you handle the prescreening together. This helps to establish a relationship and connection between you and potential members, and allows them to ask questions they may have of you and about the group. This is a trauma-informed practice that acknowledges the primary role of trust in a survivor's decision to seek services.

## How Do You Do It?

The prescreening interview is time to have a conversation to determine if the potential participant is a good fit. The prescreening interview is about creating an environment where the potential group member feels safe and secure, and can see that you are willing to listen to what they have to tell you.

Although many programs will use a form to review the questions that they want to ask of participants, we have found it particularly helpful to approach the prescreening interview more as a conversation; as the conversation is flowing, simply fill in the answers that the participant is giving you. We say this because sometimes the prescreening interview can take on the air of an interrogation rather than an interview or conversation.

If you have a list of prescreening questions, just mark the answers as the potential participant is talking and then ask any follow-up questions that you have. We recommend that a facilitator never give participants the prescreening tool to fill out on their own. This will hinder your ability to really get to know the individual and may interfere with your ability to establish rapport. It may also exclude individuals with limited literacy or those who have learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or who face language barriers

As a result of a thorough interview process, you should be able to select a group of individuals who are compatible with one another. In addition, the prescreening interview is an advocacy session. As an advocate, you have access to a wide range of resources that may meet the survivor's needs in addition to or instead of a psychoeducational support group. With this approach, you can make it clear to the survivor that you are searching for the services that best fit their needs rather than "auditioning" them for the group.

This is also your opportunity to clearly outline the expectations for group participation. For example, you are asking for a significant commitment of time and effort on the part of the members. You will want to explain that absences not only detract from the group's value to the member, but also have an impact on the other group members' ability to form bonds of trust and for each participant to receive information in a logical sequence. You will also want to let potential members know that, while group participation can be extremely helpful and even fun at times, it can also be difficult and painful. It is a good idea to take some time during the prescreening interview to ask the person to identify how they will handle the aftermath of an upsetting group session – for example, by contacting the crisis line or their therapist.

The prescreening session can also be a chance to brainstorm what barriers may interfere with group attendance and participation, and what possible solutions can be generated. These barriers may be practical, such as child care or transportation, or emotional, such as not wanting to attend group when a person is having a bad day. Talking through these issues ahead of time may increase the likelihood that survivors can make an informed decision about whether the group is right for them at this time. You are not simply prescreening potential group members – they are also “prescreening” you and the group experience to learn whether they want to participate and feel able to do so.

### What Should You Screen For?

Although each member brings issues to the table, here is a list of some items that you may want to cover during your prescreening conversation. Remember, you are attempting to screen the person “in” to the group as opposed to screening “out.” However, there may be times when it becomes apparent that the participant is not ready to be in a group for a variety of reasons or that your agency cannot meet the needs of that individual. Having appropriate referrals and other ways of meeting their needs will be critical to ensure the participant still receives services as well as to the success of the group. In addition, it may be that the person can participate in the group if you make individualized accommodations, and you can identify these issues during the prescreening process.

These are some of the issues to cover in the prescreening interview:

- ▶ **Learn more about the person** and find out their reasons for wanting to be in the group and their expectations.
- ▶ **Provide information** about the organization, your approach, and how the group is run.
- ▶ **Screen to assess a potential member’s readiness.** The individual should possess a willingness to talk about issues related to the abuse and what they hope to gain from the group. If the member is too fragile to discuss these matters, a group may not be the best choice of service.
- ▶ **Screen for active substance abuse.** If the person indicates that they may not be able to attend the actual group session free of alcohol or drugs, you may need to dissuade them from entering the group. If they are not enrolled in some type of treatment program, providing them with a good referral is best. If the person does acknowledge drug and alcohol issues, but feels that they can come to group sober, it is important to normalize that sexual assault survivors use a variety of coping mechanisms. Express your hope that by attending the group, participants will learn additional coping skills.
- ▶ **Realize that you cannot realistically screen out offenders, so focus on behavior.** While you certainly don’t want any group members who may jeopardize the safety of the rest of the group, there are no “magic questions” that will allow you to screen out those with a history of perpetrating sexual or physical violence. Instead, pay attention

to the individual's behavior and trust your own instincts if you feel unsafe or anxious in your interactions. A potential participant who is verbally abusive to you during the prescreening or who makes threats of violence to others is not an appropriate group member. You can certainly ask, "Do you have any concerns that you would express your emotions in physical or aggressive ways toward someone in the group?"

"My groups and workshops are clearly advertised as being for nonoffending adult survivors only. I mention this in the intake interview, and ask if the person has any questions or concerns about this rule."

--Experienced Group Facilitator

- ▶ **Screen to identify the range of coping mechanisms.** Identification of healthy and unhealthy coping strategies can give you ideas as to what activities you can bring to the group to address these.
- ▶ **Screen for signs of behavioral and mental health issues that might interfere with group functioning.** You want to make the group as inclusive as possible, and behavioral or mental health issues should not automatically exclude people from the group. These issues become a problem only when they will interfere with the individual's ability to benefit from the group or the group's sense of safety. For example, an individual with a high anxiety level may be able to participate in group with the help of accommodations (such as being able to leave the room for a few minutes if necessary) or additional coping strategies, such as relaxation techniques. Another person may say that because of severe mood swings, they cannot commit to weekly group attendance, which would probably indicate that they are not ready for group participation. Evaluate the situation with the goal of working things out if possible. Ideally, the potential member should be able to participate in the decision about the appropriateness of the group and you should be honest about your concerns. If group participation is not possible, providing other advocacy services or additional resources and referrals may be the best option for this person.
- ▶ **Screen to identify appropriate accommodations.** In order to provide appropriate accommodations, ask all potential group members, "What can we do to make the group experience work best for you? Do you have any individual needs or concerns that we should know about in order to work with you to provide the best possible group experience?" If the person indicates a concern, work together to figure out how to modify any aspect of the group that might create a problem. This is also a good time to ask prospective participants how they would like to handle discussing their needs or accommodations with other group members.

- ▶ **Screen for safety concerns of each individual group member.** To enhance a sense of safety for the group members, ask about their concerns and what helps them to feel safe. Inform them of the emotional risks of group (hearing others' upsetting stories, for example) and brainstorm ways to cope. Ask if they are currently experiencing stalking or abuse and create a plan to keep them and the group safe, if necessary.
- ▶ **Screen to prevent member-to-member relationships from interfering.** It is important that group members feel they can talk openly and honestly with their peers. Generally, if there are family members or friends in the same group, this may seriously impact a member's ability to be open and develop trust within the group. There are exceptions to this guideline, however. For example, in nonoffending parent and caregiver groups, it may be appropriate to have both nonoffending parents or a parent and a relative who helps care for the child in the same group. This should be a nuanced decision – some parents may gain strength and mutual understanding by being in the same group, while others may be inhibited from talking about their concerns and feelings.

In school-based teen groups or in rural areas, it may be impossible or impractical to exclude friends and acquaintances from participating in the same group. If you are aware of a relationship between potential participants (or become aware of this during the first group session), each person should be seen privately to identify the nature of the relationship and to work out whether or not co-placement is the best option.

Additional attention should be paid to discussing the practical aspects of confidentiality in these circumstances—for example, participants may decide they don't want to talk about group topics with each other outside of group, even if they see each other socially.

- ▶ **Screen in a manner that indicates respect for different cultures.** It is important that you understand the makeup of your group and be able to incorporate culturally relevant material into the group activities and strategies. One way of getting at this is to ask potential members, "How does your background or culture influence your healing?" This will help establish a sense of rapport and help the survivor know that you take their culture seriously and that you are demonstrating an atmosphere of respect for all cultures.
- ▶ **Screen for age compatibility and developmentally appropriate age levels.** The issue of age ranges for groups is complex. In teen groups, there may be value to having participants of a similar developmental (but not necessarily chronological) level within a single group. In adult groups, age may or may not be relevant. For example, a nonoffending caregiver group may "gel" despite a large age range among participants. However, you would ordinarily not want to have one outlier who may not be able to relate to other group members, such as a 17-year-old survivor of child abuse in a group that is composed of people in their thirties and forties.

“In adult groups I have repeatedly heard members express their gratitude for being able to sit in a group of varied ages and experience equality and understanding in a way that makes age irrelevant. The members on both ends of the spectrum appreciate the wisdom that is shared from one generation to another, the manner in which members process their experience, a newfound level of trust, respect, and self-esteem, and new perspectives on relationship possibilities. Members have reported that being able to branch out of their own peer group and find commonality with all kinds of people has more greatly diffused their feelings of isolation.”

--Experienced Group Facilitator

After you have conducted your prescreening interviews, you may realize that certain people are just not ready for the group or that you will not be able to serve them adequately. The best approach in this situation is to provide appropriate referrals to other programs or develop other creative solutions such as having one-on-one sessions, so that you can best meet their needs. Sometimes it is difficult for us to say no to someone, but learning to say no will ultimately result in ensuring that all participants receive the best services possible. Not saying no can result in more harm than good.

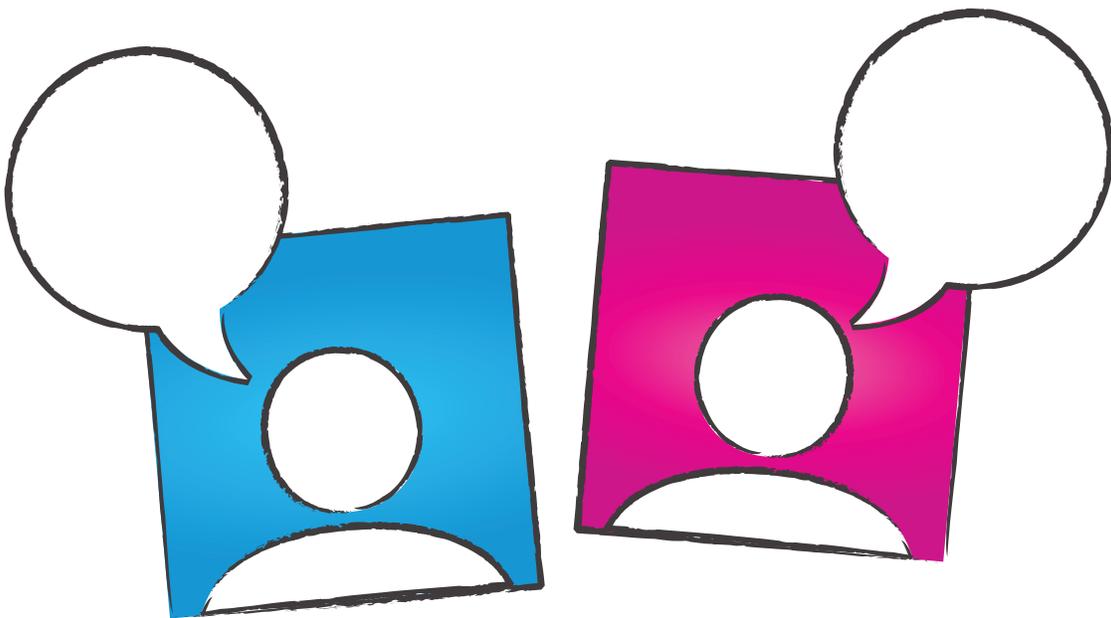
The prescreening process is really a “matching” process in which individuals are matched to appropriate services. Therefore, it is important to develop an array of program services and community resources related to the topic of the group before you begin the group recruitment process. For example, if you are offering a male survivor support group, your program should have a well-developed set of advocacy services for men and you should be knowledgeable about community resources for male survivors. Then if the person is not appropriate for group, you will be able to discuss other service options. This is also important because once you begin marketing your group, your agency may notice that more survivors in that population approach you for other services.

Psychoeducational support groups are not always the best fit for all people. Therefore, when prescreening, it is critical to remember what the goals of a psychoeducational support group are. For example, if a person indicates the desire to change some aspect of their life (beyond coping with sexual abuse or assault issues), or address deep-seated issues, it is best to refer that person to a therapist. Psychoeducational support groups have a limited focus.

### Some Questions to Ask at Prescreening:

1. Could you share a little about your experience of (sexual abuse, sexual assault, your child's sexual abuse)?
2. What are some of the ways you have coped when you have experienced distress?
3. What kinds of support have you had in the past to deal with what happened to you?
4. I just want to be sure you know that this is a group for support and skill-building, not a therapy group. Was that your understanding?

Lastly, the screening process is also about helping the potential participant make informed choices. This is done by giving potential participants detailed information about what the group will be like, what topics will be addressed, what challenges the group may pose for members, and what level of commitment is required. Then the person can consider whether this is the best choice for them. Often people will make the decision not to attend or to defer attendance to a later time if it is clear that they are not ready or able to participate. While of course you need to be honest if you don't think group is an appropriate fit, using your advocacy skills will often help people to come to this conclusion on their own.



## DEVELOPMENT OF A CURRICULUM

There is no one-size-fits all psychoeducational support group curriculum that will work in every community and with every population. At the same time, many resources have been made available that can offer assistance in the process of development. Facilitators should strive to ensure that the curriculum used is a good match for the members of the group.

Curriculum development takes considerable time and effort. You may be able to start with a curriculum that has already been created and modify it to suit your group and your community. If you are going to create your own curriculum, plan for adequate time to think about the curriculum, consult others, write the curriculum, and modify it after you have given it a “test drive.” A good curriculum is rich in interactive activities, and developing activities takes thoughtful preparation.

### Using Resources

When beginning the process of curriculum development, it is helpful to review books and other resources written on the topic (see Reading Guide for Support Group Facilitators in the Appendix). These books can provide a framework for topics and structure that can be a helpful starting point. While it is unlikely to find a curriculum that exactly matches the number of weeks and topics that the facilitator and the group members want to cover, such resources can be valuable. The WCSAP Library has a selection of books available for members to check out.

At the present time, WCSAP has developed our own curriculum manuals for these groups, available at [www.wcsap.org](http://www.wcsap.org):

- ▶ Survivors of intimate partner sexual violence
- ▶ Nonoffending parents and caregivers of children who have been sexually abused
- ▶ Teen survivors of sexual abuse or assault

These WCSAP group facilitator guides have a standard format, with introductory information about the specific type of group, and detailed “lesson plans” for eight sessions. They contain resources and considerations for facilitators related to each topic. There is enough information in these manuals to serve as the basis for a curriculum that lasts ten or twelve weeks.

Once a framework for your group is established, session topics can be identified. Usually, a different topic is explored at each session. The topics should directly relate to the issues faced by the population served. These may be specific feelings, behaviors, or skills. Group topics will vary depending on the type of group, but may include:

- ▶ Sexual Assault/Abuse 101
- ▶ Talking with children about abuse
- ▶ Fear
- ▶ Sadness and grief
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Healthy coping strategies
- ▶ Guilt and shame
- ▶ Self-esteem and body image
- ▶ Handling triggers and flashbacks
- ▶ Self-care
- ▶ Intimacy
- ▶ Dealing with other systems such as the criminal justice system
- ▶ Sexuality
- ▶ Gender roles and victimization
- ▶ Relationships
- ▶ Messages from media and society
- ▶ Assertiveness and boundaries
- ▶ Opportunities for activism
- ▶ Trust
- ▶ Reducing the risk of revictimization
- ▶ Building support systems
- ▶ Preparing for the future
- ▶ Impact of abuse on children

Facilitators are most effective when they do less talking than the members of the group. One way to ensure that this happens is to carefully prepare open-ended questions and activities or exercises related to the session's topic that guide group members into relevant conversation. When developing psychoeducational support group outlines, other resources that can be helpful are self-help books and workbooks for survivors. These resources often contain reflective "homework" questions that can be utilized in a group setting.

You can get some good ideas about what a curriculum might look like from the WCSAP group facilitator guides. Even if your group is not focused on these populations, you can see curriculum models, and you may be able to use and adapt some of the information and activities from these manuals for your own group.

## Develop Interactive Activities

Facilitators are most effective when they do less talking than the members of the group. One way to ensure that this happens is to carefully prepare open-ended questions and activities or exercises related to the session's topic that guide group members into relevant conversation. When developing psychoeducational support group outlines, other resources that can be helpful are self-help books and workbooks for survivors. These resources often contain reflective "homework" questions that can be utilized in a group setting.

Preparing a well-designed activity takes time and thought.

1. Identify the goal of the activity.
2. Consider the time available and the budget for materials needed, if any.
3. Consider accessibility and how you can modify the activity to meet any accommodation needs.
4. Make a list of all necessary items, whether they need to be purchased or made, and who is responsible.
5. Write down each step of the activity, including "scripts" for giving directions. Clear directions for activities are critical to their success.
6. Develop discussion questions to debrief the activity with the group.
7. Practice the activity with co-workers or volunteers, if appropriate.

Some activities will result in "products" such as collages or journal writings. Survivors may not want to bring these products home with them, because of safety or privacy concerns. For example, teens may not wish to have their parents see their group items, and survivors who are in abusive or controlling relationships may not want their partner to know they are attending a group. Some facilitators handle this by having each group participant decorate a bag during the first group session. They can then keep their materials in the bag throughout the course of the group. The bags stay with the facilitators, who bring them to group each week. At the end of the group, the participants can decide whether to bring the bag home, destroy it and its contents, or ask the group facilitator to keep it for them.

Certain activities may require the use of technology – for example, showing videos or having the whole group respond to an interactive activity online. Facilitators should check that they have the right equipment and know how to operate it, especially if the group is being held off site. It is always good to have an alternate plan for an activity that relies on technology, just in case there is a glitch. It can destroy the momentum of a group session if participants are left to mill around for 20 minutes because the facilitator is unfamiliar with the audiovisual equipment.

### **Ask for Input from Group Members**

Many group facilitators find it helpful to enter into a group with a framework in mind and resources at hand, while at the same time remaining open to the needs and desires of the individual group members. During the first session, group members can be asked to identify issues they are struggling with and what they hope to gain from participating in the group. The facilitator can then modify the existing curriculum to more closely match the group. There are additional suggestions for how to incorporate participant input throughout this guide.

### **Check Curriculum Against Goals and Objectives**

It is important to refer to the stated goals and objectives of the support group during the curriculum development process. Ensure that each topic and session outline relates to the goal of the group. Doing this helps to create a cohesive curriculum that maximizes the limited resources available to programs and the participants' experience in group.

### **Consider Population**

Psychoeducational support groups for nonoffending parents and caregivers are inherently different than groups for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Whenever you are developing a curriculum, it is important to ensure that the content is a good match for the population being served. In addition to the type of victimization, consider ethnicity, culture, primary language, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, and other factors of potential participants before and during the group. Depending on the size of your community, it may or may not be possible to offer psychoeducational support groups geared specifically to certain populations.

### **Review Curriculum on Regular Basis**

Once a curriculum has been developed, it is important to review it on a regular basis. Utilize evaluation techniques, member feedback, facilitator debriefing, new learning, and experiences to update the overall curriculum or individual session agendas. Facilitators, as well as group members, learn something each time a group is conducted. Use that knowledge to improve support group services for the next participants.

Based on the participant characteristics of a particular group cohort, you may wish to modify or adapt the curriculum. If you have an individual with mobility limitations in the group, for example, you will want to review all planned activities to make it possible for everyone to participate in some manner. If several of your group's members may have difficulty with written materials, you could substitute activities that don't rely as heavily on reading and writing. It is a good idea to make note of these adaptations. If they work as well as the original curriculum elements, it may be helpful to use them for future groups on an ongoing basis. In any case, you will have a range of options available.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Let's say you are going to conduct an 11-week group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and that each group will be 90 minutes in length. You may wish to look at one of the WCSAP facilitator guides to see how we have structured group sessions.

### Elements of a Group Session

We recommend that each group session contain the following elements:



**GOAL OF SESSION:** Align your session goal with the stages of group development. If you choose to add topics to a particular session, they should support the session goal.



**CHECK-IN:** During the Check-In, the group facilitators ask each participant in turn to respond briefly to a prompt. This is an opportunity to acknowledge each person and to set the framework and tone for the session. It is important that the facilitators emphasize that this activity is quick and establish the ground rule that other participants should not comment or interact during this phase of the group. This check-in sets up the expectation that each participant has something to contribute to the group.



**HANDOUTS:** Listing the handouts you plan to use, if any, will help you to prepare for the group session. Handouts can be used during the Learning and Discussion portion of the session or given to participants to supplement session content.



**LEARNING AND DISCUSSION:** Knowledge is power, and shared knowledge is an important aspect of psychoeducational support groups. By encouraging discussion, the facilitators can help participants to connect information to their own lives and situations. Group members are the true experts on their own concerns; Learning and Discussion provides the opportunity for survivors to integrate their experiences with a wider knowledge of the topic.



**ACTIVITY:** Activities may precede the Learning and Discussion portion of the group or may follow it. There may be more than one activity per session. Activities serve to build group cohesiveness, to engage group members in active learning, and to make the sessions more interesting and enjoyable.



**SELF-CARE ACTIVITY:** In our curriculum guides, we include special activities in some session agendas to emphasize the importance of self-care and to provide examples for participants. We recommend including some brief self-care activities designed to help survivors cope and care for themselves so they can better handle the challenges they face.



**CHECK-OUT:** Because participating in a group focused on sexual violence is difficult and challenging, participants need time to decompress prior to leaving the group each week. The Check-Out helps group members make the transition back to their everyday lives by providing positive, forward-looking suggestions for the coming week. The structure is similar to the Check-In, with a chance for each participant to make a brief comment in turn. This closing activity teaches realistic goal-setting and assists in managing the emotions that may be stirred up by the group.



**RESOURCES:** You may wish to list the resources you have used in developing each session for handy references as you modify the curriculum or share the curriculum with other facilitators.



**CONSIDERATIONS FOR FACILITATORS:** In the WCSAP facilitator guides, each session outline contains information to assist facilitators in presenting the information appropriately, handling the group dynamics, and understanding the process of group development. If you are developing your own curriculum, you may want to include notes regarding these issues. You can generate ideas in conversations with your co-facilitator or supervisor, or you may have some considerations you wish to add after you run a group session.

## Develop goal and objectives for the group and each group session

**1** **Goal:** To increase participants' coping abilities and understanding of their response to victimization and the related impact on their lives.

**Objective:** To provide group members with a safe, open atmosphere for discussion and activity to facilitate understanding of sexual victimization and the healing process.

## Brainstorm topics relevant to the target population

**2** Some sample topics for an Adult Survivor group may include:

- Sexual Abuse 101
- Fear
- Anger
- Guilt and Shame
- Handling triggers and flashbacks
- Intimacy
- Sexuality
- Relationships
- Assertiveness and Boundaries
- Trust
- Building support systems
- Impact of abuse on children
- Talking with children about abuse
- Sadness and grief
- Healthy coping strategies
- Self-esteem, self-confidence and body image

Arrange topics into weekly segments that are logical for the safety and natural flow of the group.

**3** For example, you would not start the group out with the topic of sexuality, as that topic may be difficult to discuss until the group members feel more comfortable with the other members, you, and the group process.

**Week 1: Opening** – Introductions of members, introduction to group format, development and discussion of ground rules, topic review, hopes and fears, pre-group evaluation.

**Week 2: Sexual Abuse 101**

**Week 3: Coping Strategies**

**Week 4: Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, and Body Image**

**Week 5: Trust**

**Week 6: Fear and Anger**

**Week 7: Sadness, Grief, and Shame**

**Week 8: Handling Triggers and Flashbacks**

**Week 9: Intimacy and Self-Care**

**Week 10: Sexuality and Relationships**

**Week 11: Closing** – Saying goodbye, identifying additional supports, hopes and fears realized, taking stock of your progress, post-group evaluation.

Notice that Week 1 and Week 11 are already covered with the opening and closing of group. That leaves you with 9 additional sessions to plan for.

## Develop goal and method for reaching the goal for each session.

**4** The methods for reaching the goals for each session are limitless. This is your time to get creative. You can use videos, film, handouts, journaling activities, discussion, trigger plans, feeling charts, art projects, or collages. You can do an activity using hoola hoops to demonstrate boundaries, have participants complete a sexual effects inventory, discuss self-nurturing activities, do self-affirmations, create a web of support using yarn, do trust exercises and relaxation techniques, and whatever else you come up with. There are literally thousands of activities that you can choose from. Just make sure that they match the topic, are age-appropriate to your target population, and allow everyone to participate. So go ahead and have some fun here!

It is a good idea to have a general blueprint for each session (using the session elements described above, such as Check-Ins and Learning and Discussion segments. Be sure to alternate activities with quieter elements, such as journaling, to keep each session lively and engaging and to appeal to different learning styles.

The brief session descriptions below are NOT a curriculum. They are simply ideas to show you the basic brainstorming process for curriculum development. See Appendix for a sample session curriculum.

### **Week 2: Sexual Abuse 101**

**Goal:** To create an atmosphere where members begin to explore issues of sexual violence in a societal context.

**Activity:** Discussion of myths and facts and issues specific to gender socialization. Each participant writes down one impact of sexual assault and places anonymously into container. Facilitator picks a few to discuss. Perhaps this becomes the basis for future topics.

### Week 3: Coping Skills

**Goal:** To create an environment where members can begin to identify positive and negative coping skills.

**Activity:** Collage art project using magazines of positive and negative coping skills used by each participant. Discuss.

### Week 4: Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, and Body Image

**Goal:** To create a safe environment where participants can identify issues of positive and negative self-talk and take steps toward moving toward self-esteem, self-confidence, and a positive body image.

**Activity:** Discussion of what the concepts of self-esteem, self-confidence, and positive body image mean. Participants to draw how they view their body image and develop one affirmation of acceptance.

**Repeat process until all weeks are filled in.**

- 5** You may want to assign a time frame for each element of the session, bearing in mind that you will need to be flexible and that it is difficult to guess how long an activity will take the first time you facilitate. If you are working with a co-facilitator, checking in with each other about time modifications will help keep you both on track.

#### Keep a binder

- 6** Keep a binder of good ideas, activities, handouts you find, exercises, etc. for your group. These ideas will be invaluable to you and you will notice that the possibilities are endless. Again, have fun and be creative. This is the exciting part. Good luck!



## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GROUP FUNCTIONING

### Guest Speakers

Programs differ in their approach to using guest speakers. Some facilitators find that inviting a “graduate” of a former group back to speak to group members can serve as a powerful beacon of hope. Inviting other agency staff members or community service providers may expose group members to helpful resources and keep the group lively. Others believe that guest speakers may compromise the sense of security that the group offers to participants. In any case, if guest speakers are invited, the group should know about this well in advance (preferably during the screening process, when the group topics are discussed, and then again during the prior session). Speakers should be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, and the group should be made aware of this. If a group member objects to being present when a speaker comes in, perhaps because they know the speaker socially, accommodations should be made.

### Including Low-Literacy Participants

Some participants in your group may have limited literacy (which may or may not be because their native language is not English). Be straightforward during prescreening and ask potential group members to let you know if they are having trouble understanding any information. If you are aware that some individuals may have difficulty reading group materials, use the following strategies to encourage their participation:

- ▶ Orally review all written materials given to group members.
- ▶ Choose activities carefully, or modify activities that require reading and writing.
- ▶ Have participants “pair up” for certain activities, matching low-literacy members with others who are more proficient at reading and writing. Be sure to do this in a way that does not embarrass participants. Simply say, for example, “Let’s work in pairs for this part of the group. Bonnie and Jessica, will you work together? And Eliza and Maria?” (and so on until all pairs are formed).

### **Including Support Persons for Participants with Disabilities**

If a participant needs to have a support person with them at the group due to disability, the support person should be included in prescreening meetings and should document their pledge of confidentiality along with the other group members during the first session of group. If practical, a support person should be encouraged to find a comfortable spot outside of the group room.

There are some considerations based on the relationship between the person with the disability and the person who is supporting them. If the support person is a friend, partner, or family member, talk to the potential group member privately about their feelings regarding the person being in the group with them. This will help ensure that the person with a disability is not experiencing any abuse or exploitation from the support person, as well as checking whether the potential group member will feel inhibited because of the accompanying individual.

## PROBLEMS, PITFALLS, AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

During any group you may be faced with some issues that may challenge you and the rest of the group. We have listed some of the more common problems and possible solutions.

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
<p>Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.</p>	<p>Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the group, you can encourage that person by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.</p> <p>Conduct a "round-robin" style of group facilitation. This is a technique where the facilitator has participants go around the circle and share as much as they choose. This also helps with controlling a participant who takes too much time away from the rest of the group.</p> <p>Use additional activities to engage all group members. Remember that people have different learning styles, so include a variety of types of activities. Having participants discuss something in pairs may be a way of helping more reserved members to share.</p> <p>Scan the room to pick up on nonverbal clues that a quieter member wishes to talk but is hesitant. Say, "It seems like you were wanting to say something," or "I noticed you had a thought."</p>
<p>You have a member of the group with whom you clash.</p>	<p>Discuss this with your supervisor. Do not ignore your own feelings or reactions.</p>

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
<p>An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.</p>	<p>As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you must intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Robert has to say."</p> <p>Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice – you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker. You could say something like, "Sherrie, thank you so much for those great insights. Your openness takes a lot of courage." Then ask a question of another group member.</p>
<p>Group lacks focus and is not moving forward; participants wander off the topic.</p>	<p>Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion and activities along. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or shall we move on to the next topic?" However, remember that sometimes the most rewarding discussions occur when participants stray off topic. This requires a balancing act. Sometimes you can find a way to tie the current subject back to the planned topic.</p>
<p>Members constantly show up late.</p>	<p>Talk to the participant outside of group to discuss barriers to promptness and possible solutions. If this continues, you may have to ask the member to leave the group as this is not fair to the rest of the members. Include in ground rules.</p>
<p>Participants are texting or answering phone calls during the group session.</p>	<p>Ask the group to address this in the first session when they are developing ground rules.</p>

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
<p>Interest level is low, there is no excitement, no one wants to talk, and only a few people are participating.</p>	<p>This may happen in the early stages of a group but as the group gets to know each other, it may subside. Having a solid agenda can also help with this issue. It may also happen if the facilitator talks too much, does not give participants enough time to respond to questions, or does not provide enough activities. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond.</p> <p>Another potential response is to go back to your curriculum and see if you can make adjustments to exercises, topics, or activities. This may rekindle some excitement and participation.</p> <p>Introducing journal writing can sometimes help the group move through a lull. Be positive and enthusiastic about asking participants to reflect in their journals.</p>
<p>Tension or open conflict is apparent in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue, or one participant gets angry and confronts another.</p>	<p>If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is OK as long as it is done respectfully. Explain that everyone has a right to their opinion but personal attacks and use of oppressive language are not acceptable.</p> <p>You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.</p> <p>Check your own level of anxiety; describe the tension in the room; validate the feelings.</p>

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
<p>A participant becomes upset at the end of the meeting.</p>	<p>Allow a person who needs more time due to crisis to stay after and talk with facilitator (one time). After that, the person should communicate within the allotted time structure. If they do not adhere to this, this may indicate that they are not ready to be in a support group; you may refer them to therapy or individual advocacy. It is not appropriate to ever ask the group to stay over the time limit. This fosters bad boundaries and doesn't create a safe, consistent space.</p> <p>You can also brainstorm (individually during group screening or as a group) about what resources and options are available if an individual needs additional support after a group session.</p> <p>Validate feelings without giving too much individualized attention.</p>
<p>A participant comes to the group under the influence of alcohol or drugs.</p>	<p>You will have to ask the person to leave the group and invite them to come back at the next session. Stress that they must return free from the influence of alcohol or drugs.</p>
<p>A participant brings an uninvited guest to the group.</p>	<p>Establish a ground rule up front about not bringing in outside members, as doing so may jeopardize the safety or effectiveness of the group. Refer to that ground rule.</p>
<p>Participants gang up on another member in the group to accuse them of something or pressure them into taking some kind of action or making a change.</p>	<p>It is the role of the facilitator to protect all members of the group. It is also important to redirect the group to its goals. The purpose of the group is to provide support and therefore you can remind the group that people make changes when they are ready. Clarify the difference between offering support and giving advice.</p>
<p><i>Gossip</i> – when a member talks about another person in the room.</p>	<p>Ask the member to direct their comments to the person in the room and provide reminders about confidentiality.</p>

PROBLEM	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
Members of the group invade the privacy of fellow participants, asking overly personal questions.	Members are allowed to share when they are ready and they have a right to not answer if they are uncomfortable with anything. This might be a good time to direct the conversation to the topic of boundaries. During the ground rules conversation, the group may come up with a way to say, "I don't want to discuss this."
Group members want to become friends outside of group.	Provide reminders about confidentiality. Address any group agreements about contact outside of group (these vary). Some groups agree that any out-of-group contact will be mentioned at the next group meeting, so that secrets aren't being kept.
<i>Rescuing</i> – when a group member gives too much advice or takes on others' issues.	Remind the rescuer that the problem belongs to that person. "They gain nothing if the problem and solution is taken from them."
A participant seems to plan crises at the end of group sessions.	<p>Before the group ends and with time still left, it might be a good idea to check with the group to see if members have any issues they would like to address or if particular feelings arose during topics discussed. Provide check-ins.</p> <p>It is never appropriate to ask the group to stay over the time limit to accommodate one member of the group. If this behavior continues, this might be a sign that the individual is not ready for this type of group and may need a referral for individual advocacy or individual or group therapy.</p>

## Food for Thought

In closing, we want to say that assembling this manual in collaboration was an exciting project. *Circle of Hope* was developed to support advocates and facilitators as they serve all survivors of sexual violence. We hope this manual provides a place for you to start, a place for reflection, and a practical tool for you to use to create a safe and nurturing group for survivors. Good luck on your journey!



APPENDIX



SECTION 3



## READING GUIDE FOR SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATORS

### Curriculum and Activity Resources

*The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms, Second Edition* (Paperback & Kindle)  
Mary Beth Williams & Soili Poijula

*The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook* (Paperback & Kindle)  
Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, & Patrick Fanning

*Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* (New Harbinger Workbooks) (Paperback)  
Edmund J. Bourne

*Healing the Trauma of Domestic Violence: A Workbook for Women* (New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook) (Paperback)  
Edward S. Kubany, Mari A. McCaig, & Janet R. Laconsay

*The Rape Recovery Handbook: Step-By-Step Help for Survivors of Sexual Assault* (Paperback)  
Aphrodite Matsakis

*Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse Workbook: Practical Exercises for Working on Problems Resulting from Childhood Abuse* (Paperback)  
Carolyn Ainscough & Kay Toon

*When Your Child Has Been Molested: A Parents' Guide to Healing and Recovery* (Paperback)  
by Kathryn Brohl & Joyce Case Potter

*Healing the Harm Done: A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Child Overcome the Effects of Sexual Abuse* (Paperback, includes English and Spanish text)  
Jennifer Y. Levy-Peck

*Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child*  
(Paperback & Kindle)  
Laura Davis

*A Psychoeducational Support Group for Significant Others of Sexual Assault Survivors*  
(Online Document)  
Laura A. Levant  
<http://scholarworks.csun.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.2/1131/LAURA-LEVANT-THESIS-PROJECT.pdf?sequence=1>

*The Courage to Heal - Fourth Edition – 20th Anniversary Edition : A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Paperback & Audio)

Ellen Bass & Laura Davis

*If He is Raped: A Guidebook for Partners, Spouses, Parents and Friends* (Paperback)

Alan W. McEvoy, Jeff D. Brookings, & Debbie Rollo

*The Body Image Workbook: An Eight-Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks* (New Harbinger Workbooks) (Paperback & Kindle)

Thomas F. Cash

*It Happened to Me: A Teen's Guide to Overcoming Sexual Abuse* (Paperback)

William Lee Carter

### **About Psychoeducational Support Groups**

*Self-Help and Support: A Handbook for Practitioners* (Paperback)

Linda Kurtz

*Effective Support Groups: How to Plan, Design, Facilitate and Enjoy Them* (Paperback & Kindle)

James Miller

### **Foundational Knowledge**

*The Psychobiological Effects of Trauma and Implications for Healing* (Online Document)

Janine D'Anniballe

<http://resourcesharingproject.org/article-index/36-article-index/342-the-psychobiological-effects-of-trauma-and-implications-for-healing>

*Creating Trauma-Informed Services: A Guide for Sexual Assault Programs and Their Service Partners* (Downloadable PDF)

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

<http://www.wcsap.org/creating-trauma-informed-services>

### **WCSAP Support Group Curricula**

*(Note: These curricula contain extensive activity suggestions and resources that may be valuable for a variety of support groups.)*

*IPSV Support Group Guide: A Guide to Psychoeducational Support Groups for Survivors of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence*

<http://www.wcsap.org/ipsv-support-group-guide-psychoeducational-support-groups-survivors-intimate-partner-sexual>

*Parent Support Group Guide: A Guide to Psychoeducational Support Groups for Nonoffending Parents and Caregivers of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused*

<http://www.wcsap.org/parent-support-group-guide>

*Teen Support Group Guide: A Guide to Psychoeducational Support Groups for Teen Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault*

<http://www.wcsap.org/teen-support-group-guide>

### **Additional Resources**

*A Sexual Abuse and Assault Therapy Resource Guide* (Downloadable PDF)

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

<http://www.wcsap.org/sexual-abuse-and-assault-therapy-resource-guide>

This online booklet contains extensive annotated suggestions for self-help resources for children, teens, parents, and other adults. Many of these resources could be used in developing a support group curriculum.

WCSAP also has a number of archived webinars and other resources about support groups.

See <http://www.wcsap.org/support-groups>

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Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. (2012). *Parent support group guide: A guide to psychoeducational support groups for nonoffending parents and caregivers of children who have been sexually abused*. Olympia, WA: Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.wcsap.org/parent-support-group-guide>

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. (2013). *Teen support group guide: A guide to psychoeducational support groups for teen survivors of sexual abuse and assault*. Olympia, WA: Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.wcsap.org/teen-support-group-guide>

## OCVA SERVICE STANDARDS FOR SUPPORT GROUPS

	<b>SUPPORT GROUP</b>
<b>Definition</b>	Regular facilitated meetings of victims and/or secondary victims of sexual abuse/assault with a supportive and educational focus
<b>Goal</b>	To provide emotional stability and promote the understanding of the impact of sexual abuse/assault
<b>Duration</b>	1 to 2 hour average length of time per session; 1 to 4 sessions per month; 3 months to a year
<b>Activities</b>	Group meetings with a planned beginning and ending date and an outcome-based, structured agenda with a primary focus on sexual abuse/assault issues.
<b>Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult or adolescent sexual abuse/assault victims</li> <li>• Nonoffending parents of child sexual abuse/assault victims</li> <li>• Significant others who require help/assistance in order to address their own reactions to victimization and to effectively support the victim</li> </ul>
<b>Recipients</b>	The facilitator must complete 30 hours of initial sexual abuse/assault training, plus 12 hours of ongoing sexual abuse/assault training annually. All trainings must be approved by the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (both the curriculum and the trainer). The provider must be familiar with the dynamics of sexual abuse/assault and relevant community resources, as well as have an understanding of how medical, legal and social services respond to victims of sexual abuse/assault. The facilitator must also have training in group process and interpersonal dynamics, and experience as a facilitator or co-facilitator.
<b>Qualifications</b>	The facilitator must be supervised by a paid staff person with a minimum of a BA degree in Human Services or a related field plus two years of relevant experience or a combination of six years of relevant experience, education and training. The facilitator must be, or receive consultation on group process from, a Masters level therapist.

Note: This Service Standard is subject to change. Consult the Washington State Office of Crime Victims Advocacy (OCVA) for the most up-to-date service standard.

## SAMPLE TOOLS

The sample tools on the following pages are intended to be adapted as necessary to fit your group curriculum.

- ▶ Support Group Member Agreement
- ▶ Where Am I in My Healing?
- ▶ Identifying Your Coping Strategies
- ▶ Signs You Have Clear Boundaries
- ▶ Boundary Activity
- ▶ Group Evaluation Examples
- ▶ Goals and Objectives
  - ◆ Pre-Test
  - ◆ Post-Test
  - ◆ End of Group Evaluation
- ▶ Sample Curriculum for a Group Session (from the WCSAP Parent Support Group Guide)

## SUPPORT GROUP MEMBER AGREEMENT

*[This is a sample form. The bullet points should be developed by the group collaboratively during the first group session, with some guidance from the facilitator(s) about the topics to be covered. Ideally, you will be able to print the agreement and have the members sign at that time.]*

- ▶ I will make my best effort to attend every group on time.
- ▶ I will care for myself and not come to group under influence of drugs or alcohol.
- ▶ I will not disclose information of group location, day and time, or have a current partner drop me off at group.
- ▶ I will not use “oppressive” language (racial slurs, judgmental or prejudicial terms).
- ▶ I will express myself however I feel, but in an appropriate manner for others.
- ▶ I will consider safety, provide mutual respect, and be supportive of all members.
- ▶ I will not participate in side talk; rather I will give other members my full attention and allow others time to share.
- ▶ I will honor the Confidentiality Statement as explained below:

Confidentiality is essential to the success of any group. Confidentiality means that what is said in group, stays in group (this also includes the identity of group members). It is also inappropriate to talk about other group members outside of group. I may, however, share my own experiences and insights with others outside of group as long as I do not break the confidentiality of group members.

The group facilitators will abide by the same standards of confidentiality, except in the circumstances described in the Consent to Receive Services for this agency. Facilitators may choose to review group discussions with the consulting therapist. In this case, they will remain mindful of this commitment to confidentiality.

I understand and agree to follow the agreement and statement above.

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Group Member Signature

---

Date

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Facilitator Signature

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Date

## WHERE AM I IN MY HEALING?

Everyone is in a different stage of their healing. Although there is no set beginning, middle, or end to the healing process, there are points when you are closer to the beginning and other points when you are much further along.

As you begin group it is a good idea to get an idea of where you are in the healing process. Check off the statements that apply to you:

- I have just started having memories of being sexually abused.
- I don't remember anything specific, but I think I might have been abused.
- I don't have any specific memories or pictures, but I know something happened to me.
- I know I was abused, but I don't know who did it.
- I'm not sure my experience counts as sexual abuse. I wonder if I am in the right place.
- I've always remembered the abuse. I am just beginning to think it affected me.
- I want to deal with these issues, but I don't know where to begin.
- I'm feeling really desperate and hopeless. I am beginning this group as a last resort.
- The abuse happened a long time ago and I don't think it has much to do with my life today.
- I've been working on these issues for a long time. I'm looking for an affirmation of how far I have come.
- I feel that I've dealt with most of the core issues surrounding the abuse. I just need some help around specific issues.
- My therapist/partner/friend suggested that a group might be helpful for me.
- Starting this group terrifies me. I don't want anyone to know I am doing this.

(Adapted from *The Courage to Heal Workbook*, by Laura Davis)

## IDENTIFYING YOUR COPING STRATEGIES

STRATEGIES	APPLIES TO YOU				
	Often	Sometimes	Hardly Ever	Never	Used to but don't now
Working					
Suicide attempts					
Becoming aggressive					
Taking a bath					
Resting					
Painting					
Writing					
Phoning someone					
Talking to someone					
Walking					
Having a massage					
Exercising					
Dancing					
Listening to music					
Reading					
Other:					
Other:					
Other:					

## SIGNS YOU HAVE CLEAR BOUNDARIES

- ▶ Your feelings about who you are stem from your own experiences and perceptions.
- ▶ You are able to feel good about your accomplishments whether or not you receive approval from others.
- ▶ You are able to feel compassion without getting so upset about someone else's struggles that you have a hard time feeling okay.
- ▶ You understand you cannot solve someone else's problems or relieve their pain.
- ▶ Your mental attention is focused on your own responsibilities and pleasures to an appropriate extent.
- ▶ You have spent time identifying your own needs and wants, and you are able to express them clearly most of the time.
- ▶ You feel comfortable saying no when you have decided it is best for you not to do something.
- ▶ You have hobbies or interests of your own and you set aside time to enjoy them, even if your friends or partner don't participate.
- ▶ You are aware of your own feelings and you make intentional decisions about when and how to share them.
- ▶ You pursue your own dreams for your future.
- ▶ You do not let your fear of rejection or anger determine what you do and say.
- ▶ You have learned to communicate assertively and use these skills whenever possible.
- ▶ You respect your own values and will not abandon them in order to connect with someone else.
- ▶ You value your own opinion and way of doing things as well as the opinions and actions of others.
- ▶ You strive for fairness and balance in your relationships.

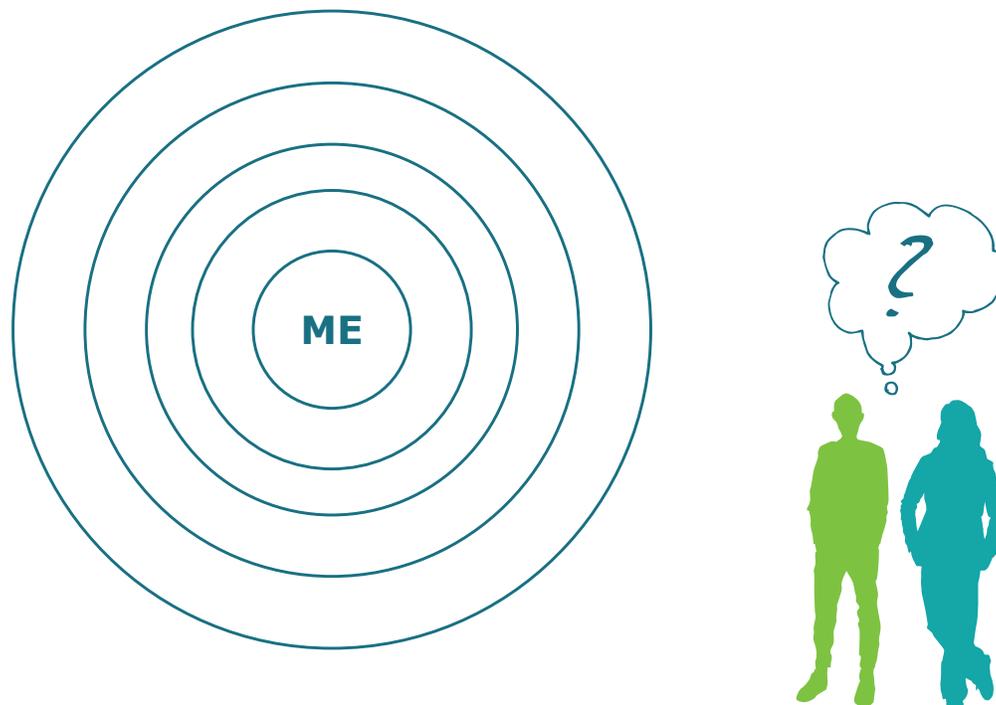
## BOUNDARY ACTIVITY

In this activity, participants will draw a boundary map. Have each participant draw a series of circles descending in size like a target sign (or use the graphic below).

The smallest, most inner circle is for the individual participant and no one else should be listed there. Ask participants to write in where they would put people in their lives, based on how close the people are to them. They should have at least 4 or 5 layers to their target diagram. They can name people as individuals like “Michelle” or “my dad” or can choose to list groups of people “soccer team mates” or “teachers.”

Participants don’t have to share but facilitators can ask questions to consider as they build their boundary maps:

- ▶ Do you move people from one circle to another? Is that an easy or a hard thing to do?
- ▶ Can you see the path some people took to get to the circle you keep them in now?
- ▶ If you don’t like where someone is now, do you feel like you could move them to a different level?



## GROUP EVALUATION EXAMPLES

### Goal and Objectives

The following goal and objectives are based on a particular curriculum. The goal and objectives of your group's curriculum should inform the development of your pre- and post-tests. Remember that the goal, objectives, and pre- and post-tests should be in alignment. If you change one, you will probably need to change the others.

#### Goal:

Participants are better able to cope effectively with the aftermath of sexual abuse and/or assault.

#### Objectives:

1. Participants demonstrate increased knowledge about sexual abuse/assault and how to reduce the risk of revictimization.
2. Participants express increased confidence in their ability to take steps toward recovery.
3. Participants indicate an increased ability to identify and utilize healthy coping skills.
4. Participants indicate decreased feelings of isolation, shame, guilt, and stress.

## PRE-TEST

7. Do you agree with the following statements?  
Please check the box which indicates your level of agreement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am able to take care of myself in healthy ways when I am stressed out or overwhelmed.					
When I think about my abuse or assault, I do not feel alone with my experience.					
I understand what I need to do to keep healing.					
I understand my reactions to the abuse/assault.					
I have enough knowledge about sexual abuse for me to understand what happened to me.					
I know what to do to help myself recover from the abuse.					
I feel able to respond to the reactions of other people such as family and friends.					
I know how to get the help I need for myself.					
I have a sense of hope about my future.					
I feel able to identify the positive people and healthy relationships in my life.					
I am able to communicate effectively about my personal and sexual boundaries.					
Overall, I feel like I am coping well with the abuse/assault.					

2. Please identify three goals you would like to accomplish during your time in group.

**Goal 1:**

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**Goal 2:**

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**Goal 3:**

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## POST-TEST

7. Do you agree with the following statements?  
Please check the box which indicates your level of agreement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am able to take care of myself in healthy ways when I am stressed out or overwhelmed.					
When I think about my abuse or assault, I do not feel alone with my experience.					
I understand what I need to do to keep healing.					
I understand my reactions to the abuse/assault.					
I have enough knowledge about sexual abuse for me to understand what happened to me.					
I know what to do to help myself recover from the abuse.					
I feel able to respond to the reactions of other people such as family and friends.					
I know how to get the help I need for myself.					
I have a sense of hope about my future.					
I feel able to identify the positive people and healthy relationships in my life.					
I am able to communicate effectively about my personal and sexual boundaries.					
Overall, I feel like I am coping well with the abuse/assault.					

2. Please identify three things you have accomplished during your time in group.

**Accomplishment 1:**

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**Accomplishment 2:**

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**Accomplishment 3:**

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3. How many support group sessions did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

Thanks to Connie Au of the Children's Response Center for allowing us to use her materials as the basis for this sample survey.

## END-OF-GROUP EVALUATION

Do you agree with the following statements?  
Please check the box which indicates your level of agreement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The group was a safe place to share my concerns.					
I learned what I needed to learn about sexual abuse and sexual assault.					
The facilitator(s) was (were) knowledgeable and helped the group run smoothly.					
The handouts were useful.					
The activities helped me learn and understand the information.					
I would recommend this group to others.					

### 7. What did you like most about the group?

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2. What could be improved about the group?

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3. What would make it easier for people to attend the group?

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4. What will you do with the knowledge you gained in the group?

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5. Any additional comments or thoughts you would like to share:

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## SAMPLE SUPPORT GROUP SESSION CURRICULUM

This curriculum for a single support group session has been extracted from the WCSAP Parent Support Group Guide as an example of the elements of a support group curriculum. (Pages 106–111)

### SESSION SIX – DIFFICULT CHILD BEHAVIORS AND PARENTING CHALLENGES



**GOAL OF SESSION:** To identify common behavioral responses to sexual abuse, and to increase parents' skills in handling these behaviors appropriately.

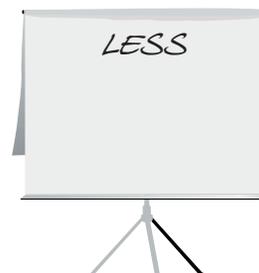


**CHECK-IN:** How did your "Grown-Ups' Night Out" last week go?



**ACTIVITY:** More or Less

1. Preparation: Have two pieces of poster board or flip chart paper. Label one "More" and the other one "Less." Gather several markers.
2. Ask parents to think of a specific behavior of their child that they would like to see more of, and a specific child behavior that they would like to see less of.
3. Give some examples to help them be specific: "Be more well-behaved" is too general. "Sit quietly at the table and eat until the whole meal is finished" is a more specific behavior description.
4. Ask each parent to write down one behavior in the "More" category and one in the "Less" category. These examples can be used later in the session when you are discussing how to encourage good behavior.





## HANDOUTS

*The Impact of Abuse on Children*, pp. 3-4 in *Questions and Answers About Child Sexual Abuse: An Interview with Esther Deblinger, PhD.*

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuse\\_QA.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuse_QA.pdf)

*Signs That a Child or Teen May Be At-Risk to Harm Another Child*

Stop it Now!

[http://www.stopitnow.org/signs\\_child\\_adolescent\\_risk\\_harm\\_child](http://www.stopitnow.org/signs_child_adolescent_risk_harm_child)

*Sexual Behavior and Children: When Is It a Problem and What to Do About It*

Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress

[http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/infobrochures/sexual\\_behavior.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/infobrochures/sexual_behavior.pdf)

*I Broke The Rules and All I Got Was Hollered At*

The Parent Coach

<http://www.parentcoachplan.com/assertive.php>



## LEARNING AND DISCUSSION

Using the handout, *The Impact of Abuse on Children*, define and explain these concepts:

- ◆ Trauma
- ◆ Hyperarousal, or “jumpiness”
- ◆ Re-experiencing, or re-living the trauma
- ◆ Avoidance (including trauma triggers)
- ◆ If you choose to include the “question and answer” about long-term impacts of sexual abuse, be sure to explain that with appropriate help, the outlook is much brighter for children. The tone of this section is a bit bleak and may upset parents.

Describe common behavioral reactions, tailoring your information to the age levels of the children you are discussing. For example, if all the parents in your group have children under the age of eight, you won’t want to focus on teenage behaviors. Be sure to let parents know that some children show no behavioral changes. They may be dealing with their feelings internally, or their coping skills may be effective in alleviating behavioral changes. Every child will handle the aftermath of abuse differently.

### Fear-related Behaviors

These behaviors may include clinginess, a reluctance to do things independently (such as go outside and play or sleep alone in a bedroom), expressing worry about the abuser coming back to hurt the child or other people, or nightmares. Parents need to acknowledge realistic fears (such as worry about the abuser who is still at large) and tell the child what they are doing to protect him or her. For other fears, parents should gently but firmly help the child move away from the avoidance behavior one step at a time. Help parents to understand that avoidance can become a habit; parents shouldn’t force kids to do something that terrifies them, but should support them in approaching the feared situation.

### Sleep Disturbances

In addition to nightmares, kids and teens may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. If the abuse happened at home, a certain room may trigger traumatic memories for the child. Sometimes simply rearranging and redecorating a bedroom may help the child to sleep better.

## Moodiness, Depression, or Irritability

Some mood problems are to be expected. While parents should be understanding, they should gently guide children to express their thoughts and feelings appropriately and set limits on aggressive or rude behaviors. If a child's moodiness or withdrawal persists, the parent should consider therapy. Also remind parents that sleep disturbances may be responsible for irritability.

## Sexual Behavior Problems

Building on the discussion of healthy sexual development in Session Four, explain why sexual behavior problems may be a response to sexual abuse. Refer to the handouts to explain when sexual behavior rises to the level of serious concern. Also describe how children and teens may use behavior that seems "seductive" to relate to adults, because of the lessons learned from the abuser. This behavior should be curtailed firmly with kindness and without shaming the child. For example, a young child who tries to touch an adult's genitals should simply be told, "That is a private part of my body, and it is not okay to touch it."

Explain the basics of encouraging good behavior:

- ◆ "Catch your child being good" – pay more attention to positive behavior than negative behavior.
- ◆ Set clear limits and explain them in terms the child can understand.
- ◆ Empathize with the child's feelings, but continue to expect reasonable behavior (for example, don't let a child get away with avoiding chores because you feel bad about the abuse).
- ◆ Keep a good balance between acknowledging the abuse has happened and it hurts, and helping the child to work toward resuming as "normal" a life as possible.

**Ask the group:** *What are the parenting challenges you have experienced since your child disclosed the abuse? What are some ways you have coped with those challenges?*

Describe how therapy can help children, families, and parents. Address the stigma associated with seeking therapy.





### **SELF-CARE ACTIVITY:** Quality Time with the Family

Have participants plan a fun family activity. It can involve just the parent and the child who has been abused, other family members, or the entire family. Give participants paper and pencil, and have them answer these questions:

- ◆ What activity will we do?
- ◆ Who will be involved in it?
- ◆ When will it be?
- ◆ How should we prepare, and who will do it?
- ◆ Will this be an activity that will be enjoyable for everyone involved?



### **CHECK-OUT:** Briefly share your plan for your fun family activity.



### **RESOURCES**

WCSAP recorded webinar: *Children with Sexual Behavior Problems*  
<http://www.wcsap.org/children-sexual-behavior-problems-recording>

*Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems* by Richard Ferber

*Healing the Harm Done: A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Child Overcome the Effects of Sexual Abuse* by Jennifer Y. Levy-Peck

Online Tutorial:

*Recognizing and Addressing Trauma in Infants, Young Children, and Their Families*  
 Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, Georgetown University

- ◆ This online training module is free, accessible for advocates, and takes less than an hour to complete.

*Assertive Discipline for Parents* by Lee and Marlene Canter



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR FACILITATORS

- ▶ This can be a challenging session, and facilitators will need to be well prepared for participants' questions. Don't hesitate to say "I don't know" if a parent brings up a problem for which you don't have an answer. Be sure that you are familiar with local resources, such as an advocate with a great deal of expertise on parenting issues, or therapists who are skilled in dealing with abuse-related child behavior issues or assessing and treating sexual behavior problems.
- ▶ Parents will have some good ideas to share, but also remember that what works for one child or family may not be appropriate for another. You may have to gently remind the group to refrain from giving specific advice.
- ▶ It can be a huge relief for parents to hear that they are not bad or crazy because they are stressed out and may be irritable at times.
- ▶ The big message you want to give is that parents need to be firm but compassionate about difficult behaviors. Reasonable, age-appropriate expectations and discipline are helpful to all children and do not add to children's emotional burden.
- ▶ Help parents make the connection between their own levels of isolation and stress and their ability to cope with difficult behaviors from their kids. This is a great time to reiterate the importance of self-care and support.

