



# The Power of Social Connection

*Developing and Coordinating  
Sustainable Support Group Programs  
for Survivors of Sexual Violence*



A joint project by:

ORANGE COUNTY  
*Rape Crisis Center*

North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault  
**NCCASA**  
EDUCATION ♦ ADVOCACY ♦ LEGISLATION

# The Power of Social Connection

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## *Developing and Coordinating Sustainable Support Group Programs for Survivors of Sexual Violence*

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Dear Advocates,

We are thrilled to introduce this comprehensive guide, *The Power of Social Connection: Developing and Coordinating Sustainable Support Group Programs for Survivors of Sexual Violence*. Inside this manual, you will find practical tips and tools for building and expanding a sustainable support group program to serve survivors of sexual violence.

*The Power of Social Connection* was born out of an identified need in North Carolina. Both the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCCASA) and the Orange County Rape Crisis Center (OCRCC), known statewide for their long-running and innovative support group program, received numerous requests for information regarding how to offer support groups for survivors of sexual violence. These requests asked how to facilitate a safe and effective support group but, more so, how to build a structure within an agency where support groups can thrive. After identifying this statewide need, NCCASA and OCRCC decided to combine NCCASA's statewide reach and resources with OCRCC's years of support group experience to create an accessible, useful tool to aid North Carolina agencies that provide rape crisis services. This manual is intended to support programs in the creation and ongoing development of successful support group programs.

With support from the Governor's Crime Commission's Sexual Assault Services Program, OCRCC and NCCASA are able to offer *The Power of Social Connection* and accompanying training throughout the state of North Carolina. We feel confident that this document will serve North Carolina well and, most importantly, contribute to the continued healing of sexual assault survivors throughout our state. *The Power of Social Connection* is just the start of this conversation. NCCASA is here to offer continued support as you create and sustain your support group program.

We hope you, your agency, and the survivors you serve benefit from *The Power of Social Connection*. As always, thank you for all you do to support survivors and end sexual violence.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Monika Johnson Hostler".

Monika Johnson Hostler  
Executive Director  
NCCASA

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "S. Bryant".

Shamecca Q. Bryant  
Executive Director  
Orange County Rape Crisis Center

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# Setting the Stage

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Throughout this manual we will be using certain terms and concepts that we would like to take some time to define. It will help readers understand the framework from which we approach this topic.

## Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is an umbrella term that encompasses any forced sexual contact or attention without consent. This can be verbal, physical, or by any other means (such as gestures, online contact, unwanted exposure to sexual images, etc.). We use the term sexual violence consistently throughout this manual as it broadly encompasses a diverse array of experiences. We believe survivors should be given the opportunity to define their own experiences in their own time. The impact of any act of sexual violence is unique to an individual survivor, though we note possible common problems and concerns that arise for sexual violence survivors. We believe individual experiences of trauma should be honored, and that there is no particular type of sexual violence that gains one entry into a support group.

## Gender

We respect a survivor's right to identify their own gender, regardless of the gender assigned to them at birth. They will be welcomed by our agencies into the gender-specific spaces in which they feel comfortable. We understand that some agencies will not be equipped to practice this belief; however, we strongly encourage them to move quickly in that direction. We also acknowledge that there is a wide spectrum of gender identifications and expressions, and we are constantly learning. We encourage agencies to understand that a person's gender identity and expression is entirely their own and not open for commentary. For simplicity of reading, we have chosen to use the terms male/man and female/woman, and these terms are meant to include anyone who identifies as such.

## Other Notes

Throughout this manual, quotes are shared from survivors who have participated in Orange County Rape Crisis Center's (OCRCC's) support group program and given their consent to have their quotations shared. In order to protect their confidentiality, all names have been changed. Also, this manual is intended for support groups with adult survivors of sexual violence. While some information may be useful for creating support groups for adolescents or children, it is necessary to first consult best practices for obtaining parental/guardian consent and receive training specific to facilitating groups for adolescents or children.



# Introduction

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Welcome to *The Power of Social Connection*. This manual is designed to assist with developing and coordinating safe and effective support group programs for survivors of sexual violence. This section of the manual gives an overview of how support groups can be influential in survivors' healing processes as well as information on the authors of this manual. You will find information on the following topics:

1. Understanding the impacts of sexual violence
2. The importance of social support and support groups
3. The Orange County Rape Crisis Center
4. The North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCCASA)
5. OCRCC support group evaluation

# Understanding the Impacts of Sexual Violence

Trauma can be defined as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience” and further as an “emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may be associated with physical shock and sometimes leads to long-term [mental health concerns]” (Oxford Dictionaries).

Sexual violence is a form of trauma, and its impacts are wide-ranging, and unique to each individual survivor. A survivor’s reaction to experiencing sexual violence may depend on a variety of factors, including but not limited to personal life experiences, the type of violence experienced, history of prior traumas, and the level of social support available after the violence has ended (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Levine, 2005).

It is important to acknowledge and understand that the impacts of sexual violence may vary greatly among survivors, and that any combination of these reactions is normal. For example, survivors of sexual violence may experience concerns or disruptions in any of the following areas (Allison & Wrightman, 1993; Robinson, 2003):

- Physical health
- Emotional/psychological health
- Social lifestyle
- Sexual health
- Spiritual or religious practice

*“When it comes to trauma, no two people are exactly alike. There are many factors involved in the wide range of response to threat. These responses depend upon genetic make-up, an individual’s history of trauma, even his or her family dynamics. It is vital that we appreciate these differences” (Levine, 2005, p. 7).*

Survivor experiences in these areas vary widely, and survivors may be at different places in their healing processes when they seek support from service providers. We provided more information on particular concerns that survivors may face in the following table.

## Potential impacts of sexual violence

Area of Impact	Examples
Physical Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Undereating or overeating</li> <li>- Insomnia/disruptions in sleep routine</li> <li>- Physical injuries caused by the violence</li> <li>- Sexually transmitted infection</li> <li>- Gynecological and menstrual problems for female survivors</li> <li>- Chronic pain, headaches, or stomach aches</li> </ul>
Emotional/Psychological Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased use of drugs and/or alcohol</li> <li>- Nightmares or flashbacks</li> <li>- Hypervigilance</li> <li>- Self-harming, reckless, or combative behaviors</li> <li>- Feelings of numbness</li> <li>- Depression and/or anxiety</li> <li>- Fluctuating emotions</li> <li>- Feelings of isolation</li> <li>- Self-blame or guilt</li> <li>- Phobias</li> <li>- Low self-esteem</li> <li>- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts</li> <li>- Eating disorders</li> <li>- Feelings of shame or being dirty</li> </ul>
Social Lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changes in daily routine</li> <li>- Staying at home or only going outside when accompanied by someone else</li> <li>- Concerns with intimacy in relationships</li> <li>- Difficulty in developing long-term relationships</li> </ul>
Sexual Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discontinuing all sexual activity or becoming hypersexual</li> <li>- Disconnecting from one's own sexuality</li> <li>- Disinterest in sexual activity</li> <li>- Distrust of sexual contact</li> <li>- Concerns with intimacy in sexual relationships</li> </ul>
Spiritual/Religious Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discontinuing spiritual or religious practices</li> <li>- Questioning spiritual or religious beliefs</li> <li>- Seeking spiritual or religious answers</li> <li>- Difficulties seeking support through a spiritual or religious community</li> </ul>

Support group participation is one way in which survivors have been shown to experience increased support and a decrease in feelings of isolation, stigma, and shame. Furthermore, support groups have been found to be a very promising service for survivors, helping to connect survivors with social support and a safe and confidential space to move forward in their healing processes (e.g., Leech & Littlefield, 2011). As seen at OCRCC and by others (e.g., Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), there are many potential benefits of participating in healing groups. The following list highlights some of these benefits:

1. Sharing information
2. Expressing emotions in a safe space
3. Learning new coping strategies
4. Finding hope
5. Experiencing validation and normalization of feelings, experiences, and trauma responses
6. Giving and receiving support
7. Building or expanding one's support network
8. Identifying with others
9. Experiencing compassion and empowerment
10. Increasing self-esteem

## The Importance of Social Support and Support Groups

Social support plays a critical role in healing from sexual violence. Research shows that social support can help to buffer some of the stress that sexual trauma can cause (Leech & Littlefield, 2011). Social support can be measured in a number of ways, and is broadly defined as the emotional and physical comfort given by friends, family, and others. Support groups represent one of the main ways for survivors to gain structured social support after experiencing violence, and they can be an effective resource to help survivors on their journey to recovery.

Research shows social support leads to many different positive outcomes for survivors of sexual violence. Generally, it can influence survivors by helping them to develop positive coping skills, thereby mitigating negative effects of the trauma (Leech & Littlefield, 2011).

Thus, social support serves as a protective factor, lessening the likelihood that sexual violence survivors will experience outcomes such as depression, low self-esteem, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Leech & Littlefield, 2011).

Furthermore, social support helps to empower survivors to take care of themselves and re-establish feelings of self-worth.

*“What I do know is that we become traumatized when our ability to respond to a perceived threat is in some way overwhelmed. This inability to adequately respond can impact us in obvious ways, as well as ways that are subtle”  
(Levine, 2005, p. 8).*

Many rape crisis centers offer support groups as one of their services, and they have proven to be helpful for survivors' healing processes (Leech & Littlefield, 2011). Support groups help members cope with stressful life events, such as sexually violent experiences, so they can effectively adapt and learn how to manage future stressful life events and

trauma responses. Support groups ideally provide a space for individuals who have had similar traumatic experiences to come together, share their stories, and support one another through the healing process (*OCRCC Manual*).

As mentioned previously, survivors of sexual violence commonly experience an array of trauma effects such as guilt, shame, and self-abusive behaviors. Many times survivors feel very isolated after such an experience, which creates feelings of “differentness” from others and perpetuates the perception that something is “wrong” with them (Chew, 1998). This is one of the many misconceptions that survivors may tell themselves and potentially start to believe. Support groups, as well as other group work, provide a space to break down these barriers. They also provide an environment for survivors to realize they are not alone and to gain support from others who have also been victimized. By exploring intense personal experiences in a group format, survivors’ experiences are normalized as members are able to observe how others struggle with many of the same challenges (Chew, 1998).

Engaging in group healing such as in support groups, especially in addition to individual therapy, is one of the most effective ways to recover from the effects of sexual violence (Carver et al., 1989). If nothing else, support groups allow survivors to realize they are not alone. Just by being in a group setting, feelings

*Engaging in group healing such as in support groups, especially in addition to individual therapy, is one of the most effective ways to recover from sexual violence (Carver et al., 1989).*

of isolation, shame, secrecy, and stigmatization from the violence are diluted. Exploration and resolution of the trauma and its many effects is also encouraged (Chew, 1998). Research overall suggests that group work in response to sexual violence provides a forum for expressing feelings, to increase social support as a way of healing (whether received or given), and to instill hope in survivors (Bringham, 1994).

Though research studies that have examined the efficacy of support groups and healing from sexual violence are somewhat limited, they show promising results. Research suggests that support groups can be an effective tool in helping members heal and recover from hardship and trauma. For example, Carey (1998) researched a community sexual violence support group with ten women, who attended the group for thirty-two weekly sessions. The purpose of the group was to work toward goals of healing, recovery, and growth. Results indicate that the support group increased self-esteem and assertiveness and improved personal relationships. Carey also found that members of the group gained social reconnection. This was evident throughout the process of the support group. Furthermore, members reported feeling less isolated. The environment of the support group allowed a safe place for members to not only explore the trauma experienced in their lives, but also to examine its impact. Members also became active agents in helping each other. Through this, psychological improvements were gained by dealing with the painful memories of sexual violence with others who had also been affected (Carey, 1998). Through the support group, members were able to start to understand recovery.

Furthermore, Frawley and McInerney's (1987) research assessed a support group for female survivors of sexual violence. The members indicated that the group helped them on their path to recovery by helping them find relief in the process of healing, even though the trauma was still very real for some of them. The results of the study also indicated that some members began to open up to family and friends about the violence they experienced. Some members decided to make progressive choices about disclosure and legal action. Many members of the group felt that participation helped to normalize their traumatic experiences, decrease their sense of isolation, and increase their sense of having connections with others. Members indicated that they had never felt so supported and had never given so much support to others before joining the support group (Frawley & McInerney, 1987).

Similarly, Lanza (2005) researched a psychoeducational group for hospital staff who had been physically or verbally assaulted by their patients. Although psychoeducational groups differ somewhat from support groups, they are similar in many ways. Both use a model of mutual support as a primary tool for recovery. In Lanza's group, members met twice a week for an hour, over the course of six weeks. Lanza conducted pre- and post- assessments of members to evaluate mood status. The mood assessment found that many members of the group reported the greatest drop in ratings of depression. Most members also had decreased ratings of tension, fatigue, and confusion at the end of the support group when compared to the beginning of the group. The overall findings of the group indicated that the support group was a positive experience for members. Also, each session was ranked either "very good" or "excellent" by group members. Lanza's findings reinforce the idea that support groups are helpful to survivors when recovering from assault.

However, it should be noted that support groups have been found to have some potential drawbacks for participants. Though the findings were overall positive, Frawley and McInerney (1987) found that the support group was a strain for the members as the overall experience of being in the group disrupted their lives. Other research conducted by Palmer, Stalker, Harper, and Gadbois (2007) indicated that 20% of the adult, female survivors of childhood abuse that participated in group treatment in the study experienced increased distress due to listening to others' talk about their abuse histories. Though these potential drawbacks have been found, as described previously, support groups and other group treatment have been shown to overwhelmingly have positive effects on group members that may persist well into the future.

Research overwhelmingly indicates that groups overall help many survivors heal from traumatic experiences. Through support groups, survivors are likely to move forward in their healing and continue on their path to recovery.

# The Orange County Rape Crisis Center

The Orange County Rape Crisis Center is a private, nonprofit agency. The Center has served Chapel Hill, Carrboro, Hillsborough, and surrounding communities since 1974 through the provision of 24-hour crisis intervention services to survivors of sexual violence. The Center's crisis response services include a 24-Hour Help Line, support groups, support workshops, and therapy referrals, offered in both English and Spanish. Additionally, the Center offers educational programs for both raising awareness about sexual violence and teaching prevention skills.

The Center receives funding from a variety of sources. Some of their major funding sources include the Governor's Crime Commission; North Carolina Council for Women; Department of Health and Human Services; United Way of the Greater Triangle; the towns of Chapel Hill, Hillsborough, and Carrboro; Orange County; private and corporate foundations; and individual donors.

The Center has offered support groups for survivors of sexual violence since 1988 in English and since 2008 in Spanish. From the program's initial offering of about 3 groups per year, OCRCC has developed the capacity to offer between 10 and 12 support groups (8-10 sessions) and support workshops (1-4 sessions) each year, serving approximately 65 people through this program during FY 2012-2013.

As the support group program has grown, the Center has worked to offer various types of group opportunities, focusing on different types of survivorship and incorporating various healing modalities. Group offerings now include both traditional support groups as well as alternative healing groups. Traditional groups are focused on the mutual giving and receiving of support from others with similar experiences, and they primarily use discussion and brief activities that incite discussion to help group members connect and learn from each other. Alternative healing groups extend this model to focus on other healing modalities, such as movement (for example, dance or yoga), arts and crafts, writing, or other techniques that teach coping skills and promote connecting with others in ways other than talking.

*I never ever would've imagined meeting a group of women who could change my life so much.*  
- Stacy

# The North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault

The North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCCASA) is an inclusive, statewide alliance working to end sexual violence through education, advocacy, and legislation. NCCASA has a diverse membership including rape crisis centers, colleges and universities, law enforcement personnel/officers, medical professionals, and faith institutions. NCCASA provides its members with technical assistance, training, and access to sexual violence resources. The Coalition also encourages lawmakers to create and protect laws that support survivors of sexual violence. In an effort to connect with its diverse membership, NCCASA conducts site visits to learn about members' initiatives to support survivors and end sexual violence. Other projects of NCCASA are:

- **The Training Institute.** NCCASA hosts multiple trainings every year that cover a diverse range of topics concerning sexual assault. These trainings are provided at no cost for NCCASA members. Throughout 2012-2013, NCCASA trained over 1,000 people across North Carolina.
- **Prevention.** NCCASA provides support to agencies working throughout the state to affect cultural change and prevent sexual violence.
- **Legal Advocacy.** NCCASA provides legal support to survivors of sexual violence and keeps the membership informed of legislative concerns and opportunities for advocacy.
- **Human Trafficking.** NCCASA works with partners across the state and nation to support victims of human trafficking and end human trafficking.
- **The Young Advocates Institute.** The Young Advocate's Institute is a summer program designed by NCCASA to engage teens in social justice work. The event averages 140 students each year. At the Institute, teenagers learn about oppression and violence and what they can do to promote equality and peace in their own communities.
- **Engaging Men and Boys.** NCCASA works to engage men and boys through a variety of programs and a special relationship with faith institutions in North Carolina. In 2013, NCCASA was proud to have 13 boys participate in the "Rites of Passage" program, a program designed to encourage young men to be allies in the struggle against violence.

NCCASA works in diverse ways to support survivors and end sexual violence. Much of this work is done through identifying successful initiatives throughout North Carolina and sharing those initiatives with the NCCASA membership. For this reason, NCCASA is thrilled to partner with OCRCC to share this support group manual with North Carolina.

# OCRCC Support Group Evaluation

Over the past 25 years, the Center has developed ways to evaluate group and workshop participants' experiences. These evaluations are voluntary and offer the opportunity for group members to anonymously provide both qualitative and quantitative feedback to the Center and choose how the Center will use the information they provide. (See the "Group Process" section for an example group evaluation tool.)

Group participants have consistently provided positive feedback about the ways in which they found support and healing in group as well as suggestions for ways to improve the Center's groups. Based on these evaluations from the past several years, the vast majority of participants have reported across groups that group participation has helped them:

1. Feel less alone in their experiences of sexual violence;
2. Increase their feelings of being supported in their personal healing processes; and
3. Feel that their personal goals for group participation were reached at least somewhat, including goals such as meeting other survivors, feeling less isolated in their experiences, and sharing their stories.

The feedback that the Center gathers at the end of each group has allowed the Center to adjust and fine-tune the structure of the support group program as well as the format of individual group offerings. As a result, the Center has developed a robust program and has had the opportunity to offer many successful support groups and workshops. This feedback also sheds light on both the importance of offering groups as well as the potential positive effects that groups may offer to survivors of sexual violence.

## OCRCC Group Evaluation Questions

**Question 1:**

*Do you feel participation in this group helped you to feel less alone in your experience of sexual violence?*

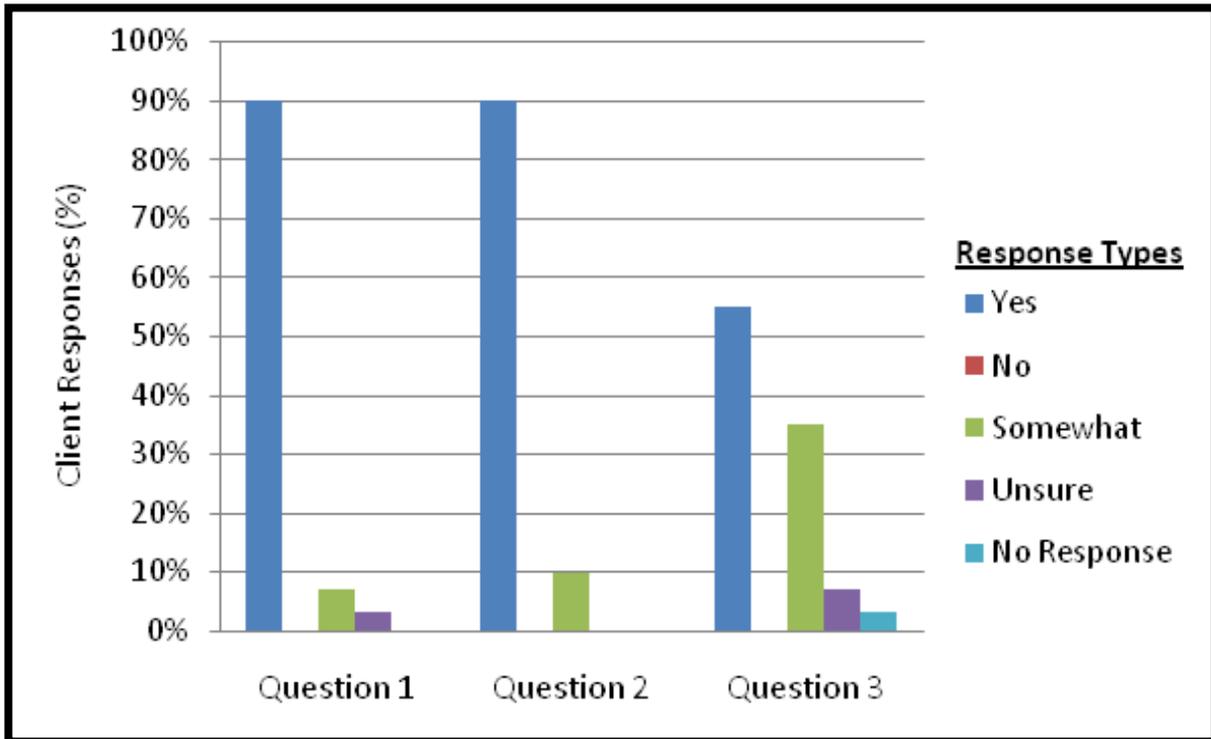
**Question 2:**

*Do you feel that participation in this group helped to increase feelings of being supported in your healing process?*

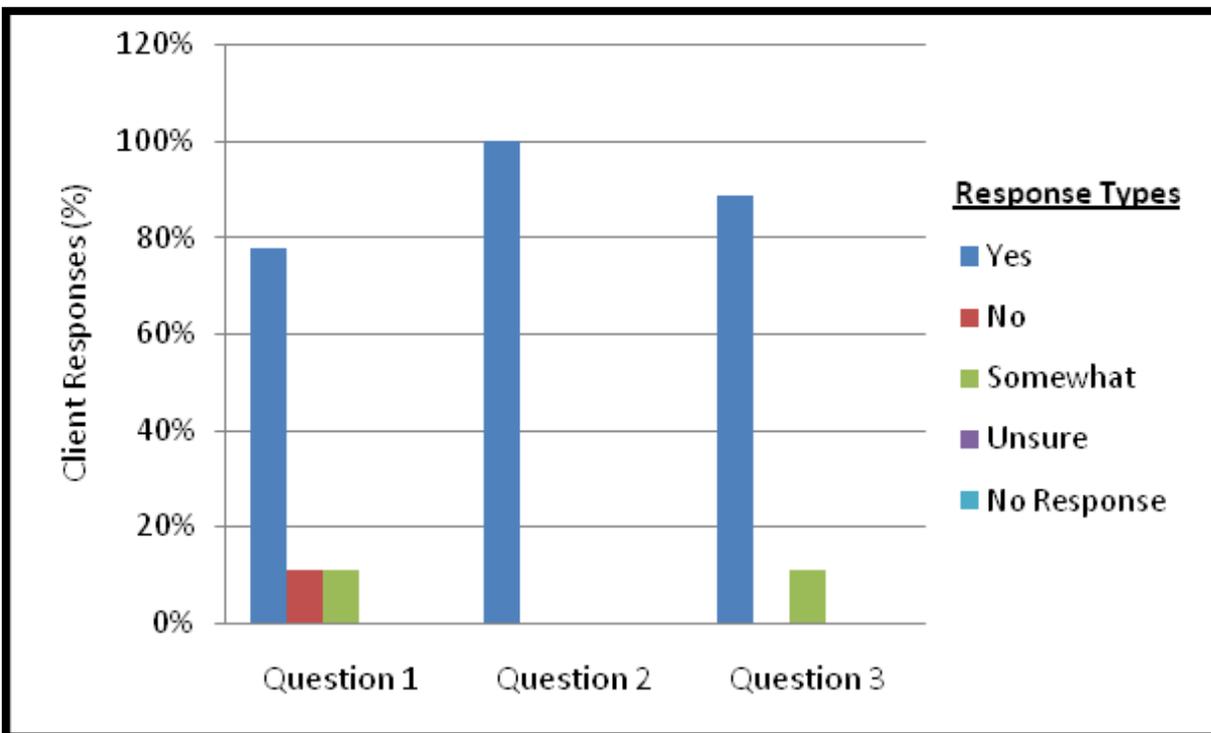
**Question 3:**

*Do you feel that your personal goals were reached?*

OCRCC Support Group Evaluation Data  
 Data Provided by English Speakers: Aug. 2011-Sept. 2012



OCRCC Support Group Evaluation Data  
 Data Provided by Spanish Speakers: Aug. 2011-Sept. 2012



# Group Planning

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When first planning a support group program, there are many important topics to consider to help ensure a successful group experience. This means deciding on details such as choosing a support group focus; securing a group facilitator (or two); identifying meeting dates, times, and location; and more. This section of the manual will walk through group planning steps, offering guides for group coordinators. This section will provide information related to:

1. Important group terms
2. Support Group Coordination
3. Group focus
4. Group structure
5. Facilitators
6. Group logistics
7. Tips & Tools

# Important Group Terms

Many different types of groups exist with the primary focus of bringing together people with some similarity of experience for group learning and growth. However, various group types differ in their goals and purposes. The following section will briefly outline differences between therapy, educational, and support groups, also noting variations between open and closed group structures and durations (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, Larsen, 2010).

## **Therapy Groups**

Group therapy assists group members in creating specific behavioral change, coping with problems that are surfacing in their lives, and/or engaging in rehabilitation after a particular personal trauma. These groups are led by licensed mental health care providers.

## **Educational Groups**

These groups focus specifically on providing members with opportunities to learn about themselves and the society in which they live.

## **Support Groups**

The primary focus of support groups is to assist members with their coping skills by helping them tap into their own skills and learn new ones. This emphasis on skills is intended to aid members in better adapting to personal life events. These groups typically bring together people who have some type of similarity of experience and focus on decreasing social isolation.

## **Open vs. Closed Groups**

Groups can be open or closed in both enrollment and duration. When a group has an open structure, new members are allowed to join throughout the duration of the group. However, groups with closed enrollment only admit new members once, at the start of the group. Open groups are also often open-ended in duration in that there is not a defined start and end date for the group, while closed enrollment groups are typically closed in duration with a set start and end date.

*This manual is intended to assist with the creation and implementation of sexual violence support groups. Some of this information could be used to assist in the development of other types of groups along with consultation of other resources.*

# Support Group Coordination

At the start of developing any support group or program, it is necessary to first identify who will take the lead in the development process and in the implementation of groups. Though other agency staff or volunteers may also be very helpful in the planning and facilitation of groups, it is ideal to identify one coordinator for this process who will be the point person for all support group details and logistics. In this way, details are less likely to fall through the cracks, and one person can be the program expert to whom group-related questions can be referred.

This coordinator may also serve as one of the group facilitators or the only group facilitator, depending on your agency's and your clients' needs. However, if your agency will employ the assistance of many staff or volunteers in the development and implementation of support groups, it will be even more critical to have a coordinator to field questions and make sure facilitators have what they need to lead groups. The following questions highlight key points that should be addressed in choosing this coordinator:

1. Does my agency have the capacity to have a support group program, and if so, how extensive do we envision this program being (for example, how many groups would it be possible to offer per year when we first start)?
2. Can my agency apply for grant funding to support a part-time or full-time "Support Group Coordinator" position?
3. Who has the expertise needed to coordinate the support group program?
4. If the responsibilities will be new to a current staff member, who should that be and why?
5. If no one currently has the expertise, what is my agency's plan for training or hiring someone?
6. What are the qualities that our Support Group Coordinator should ideally have (for example, being detail-oriented, having strong communication skills, etc.)?
7. If multiple people will assist in facilitating groups, who has the ability to coordinate among multiple people?

## **Helpful Hint!**

*If your agency is unable to assign one support group coordinator, not to worry! Think creatively and find ways to meet your agency and client needs in a way that works for your setting. Every agency and community is unique, and the structure that works for one agency may not be possible in others. The important thing is creating a clear system for the tasks done.*

# Group Focus

There are many different ways to focus a support group, whether the focus is on a particular area of survivorship or even a certain healing modality. The first step to organizing any group is to decide what the group focus will be, thus making it easier to advertise, recruit members, and plan the group. In the “Diversifying Groups” section of this manual, there is information about groups focused on several different survivor populations that may be helpful in planning for particular groups. The following table outlines possible ways to focus a support group for survivors of sexual violence:

Traditional Support Groups	Alternative Support Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult, female survivors of childhood sexual abuse and/or incest</li> <li>• Adult, female survivors of rape or sexual assault</li> <li>• Adult, male survivors of sexual violence</li> <li>• The loved ones of survivors, including all genders and all types of relationships (parents, partners, siblings, friends, and other family members)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horticulture support group</li> <li>• Dance support group</li> <li>• Yoga support group</li> <li>• Arts and crafts support group</li> </ul>

Once the focus is chosen, you will need to determine the group name and devise a plan for promoting the group in your community. When developing a group name and description, it is helpful to carefully craft messages that will be easily understood by those who may participate in the particular group offering. Consider the language and terms that your audience would most likely use and understand.

# Group Structure

After choosing a group focus, the next step in planning is to develop the group’s structure. When determining group structure, the following questions would be helpful to consider carefully based on your community, as well as your agency’s resources and capacity:

1. How many people will be able to participate in this group (maximum and minimum)?
2. Will this group have firm start and end dates?
3. Can people join our group at any time, or will the same group members start and end the group together?
4. How many group sessions will we offer and over how many weeks?
5. Will we have one or two facilitators for the group?
6. How long will each session last?

Solidifying these details initially will allow decisions to be made about group logistics, discussed later in this section.

# Facilitators

Facilitators play a critical role in the success of a support group. In many ways, they are the face of the group to its members. It is important that facilitators are professional, friendly, trustworthy, and reliable. These qualities will help to establish rapport between the group members and the leaders and will increase group cohesion. When choosing (a) facilitator(s) to lead the group, consider these questions:

1. Who in our agency has the training and expertise to lead the support group?
2. Should one or two facilitators lead the support group?
3. Who is available and willing to lead the support group?
4. If we don't have someone prepared to lead a group, how will we train someone to lead a group?
5. Who would be the most appropriate facilitator(s) based on the group topic?
6. If we have multiple facilitators, are there two people who might work exceptionally well together on this topic or in this setting?

Answering these questions will help guide your agency in choosing effective and appropriate group facilitators. The “Facilitators” section in the manual provides further information on group facilitation assets, skills, training needs, and supervision needs.

# Group Logistics

After identifying the group facilitators, it will be time to determine the group logistics. Though this is a detail-intensive process, building a strong structure from the start will add to the ongoing success of the group. Each of the following areas needs to be addressed in the planning process:

- Session length
- Number of group sessions
- Day of the week
- Time of day
- Child care needs
- Location of the group and its privacy
- Transportation needs
- Accessibility for people with disabilities
- Parking availability
- Essential group materials

## Session Length and Number of Sessions

Defining a group's session length and number of sessions will depend on the capacity of the agency and the resources available. Groups offered at rape crisis centers typically meet once per week for at least 90 minutes per session. Eight to twelve sessions are typically planned for a single group or a single cycle of an ongoing group.

OCRCC has found that having weekly sessions that are two hours in length works best for traditional, discussion-based support groups. These groups are closed in both duration and enrollment and are typically eight to ten sessions long. In two hours, the group can accomplish a depth of discussion and learning, also leaving time for a check-in at the beginning and end of the session. As group sessions can become emotionally intense for both facilitators and group members, it is very important to allow sufficient time for wrapping up group discussion and checking in with members before they leave.

It is also important to keep in mind that group members will commit to coming to a group based on the information given prior to the first session. It is important to respect group members' time by making it a priority to start and end the meeting on time as well as to communicate these and other expectations to group members prior to the initial session.

### ***Helpful Hint!***

Check out the great, free resource [www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com) for help with group scheduling needs!

## Scheduling Day and Time

Deciding the best day and time is crucial to the success of the support group. The following steps can be used to guide this process:

1. Determine which days and times work for the facilitators.
2. Distinguish what day and time may have the most availability for potential participants. Look into holidays and other events that may occur during the time frame you are hoping to offer the group.
3. Assess when possible group locations are available.
4. After reviewing the information gathered, decide which day of the week and time of day to hold the support group.

## Child Care

Although providing child care may or may not be feasible for your agency, assessing the potential need for child care is necessary when planning a group. The following questions are useful in determining the need for child care and how to meet this need:

1. Do those interested in our support group need child care in order to attend this group?
2. Can they find/afford child care for the duration of the group?
3. Is our agency capable of offering safe and appropriate child care providers?
4. Will there be space to offer child care in the same location as the group?
5. If we are going to offer child care:
  - a. How many children will need care?
  - b. Will we have a sufficient number of child care providers based on recommended ratios of care providers to children?
6. How will we talk about our ability or inability to provide child care to our clients?

If the location is known before screening participants, give them an informational sheet about group details at the screening. This information could include:

- Time
- Location
- Directions/map
- Facilitator's first names
- Contact information for the Support Group Coordinator
- Materials for members to read or bring for each session

## Location

Finding an appropriate location to hold the support group is the next step. This location should be safe, confidential (if deemed necessary by your agency for the safety of group members and facilitators), private, and accessible to group members. The following questions will guide the process of choosing a location:

1. What locations in our agency/community would be available to host a group of the duration we've chosen? Are they available during the period in which we want to offer the group?

2. Will it cost the agency money to use this space? If so, can the agency afford this cost?
3. What locations will feel safe to group members?
4. What locations will meet the group's needs, considering child care, group size, and planned group activities?
5. What is the process for reserving the space?
6. Once the choices are narrowed down:
  - a. Is the space we want accessible for people with disabilities?
  - b. Is the space located on a bus line or in an area that is accessible to most of our client population?
  - c. Is the atmosphere comfortable or will some members feel intimidated? Is the lighting appropriate?
  - d. If it's in a large building, like a hospital, will there be signs to make sure people don't get lost (be sure to consider confidentiality when posting signs)? Will a receptionist know when and where your group meets?
  - e. Does this location have sufficient and accessible parking for group members and facilitators? If there is a fee for parking, group members need to be notified of this before starting the group.

Once a location is decided, group planners should ideally:

1. Book the room(s) for all group sessions in advance.
2. Make sure facilitators have a key or know how to access the room for each session.
3. Make sure all participants explicitly know and understand the location of the support group.
4. Create directions to give to participants at the screening, or email directions to participants before the first session.

## **Transportation**

Transportation needs should be addressed for all participants during the planning process to increase accessibility. Facilitators should inquire whether or not members have a means of transportation to and from the support group each week and brainstorm transportation options as needed. If there is a member who does not have a consistent means of transportation, look into alternatives, such as the possibility of getting rides from family or friends or the accessibility of taxis, bus routes, and agency resources to assist with travel expenses.

## **Essential Group Materials**

When starting any support group, it may be helpful to put together a box of essential materials to take to every group session. It could include things like name tags, pens, paper, handouts, new member folders, a sign-in sheet, snacks and paper products, tissues, and anything else facilitator(s) think will be needed. This will ensure that facilitators have everything they need each week.

## Expenses

Expenses tend to come up over the course of a support group, and it is helpful to determine potential costs in advance during the group planning phase. While planning, create a list of resources and materials needed for the group, which may include things like room rental, snacks, drinks, photocopies, nametags, markers, flip chart paper, and more. Once this ideal list is created, the most important question to consider is: does the agency have built-in funding for support group materials, or will you have to look to outside sources for money? Some potential options for funding:

1. Seek funding support from other agencies, businesses, or grants.
2. Seek donations of specific materials to use in the group, such as food.
3. Suggest a membership fee, such as a \$5 donation, if determined acceptable by your agency and grantor and accessible for potential group members.
4. Brainstorm other ways to raise funds through existing agency connections.
5. Host an agency fundraiser specifically to support the group program.

## *Tip & Tools*

- OCRCC has found that an ideal group size is between 6 and 8 participants, which allows time for every member to share in the group support process. It is not advisable to have fewer than 4 participants for any support group, assuming all members come to the group consistently.
- Determining whether to offer an open or closed group depends on many factors. Think about what will work best for your clients and what is most feasible for the agency. What structure will allow for your agency to provide the highest quality support possible?
- OCRCC typically offers groups that are closed in both enrollment and duration, allowing for greater group safety and cohesion. The groups are usually 8 sessions long, and we also offer shorter support workshops that are between 1 and 4 sessions.
- Groups typically meet once per week for two hours each session.
- Having two trained facilitators is ideal but not always possible or necessary. For a group with 4 or 5 members, it may be preferable to have just one facilitator to keep a balance between member and facilitator input.

# Pre-Group Planning Checklist: Logistics

	Identify the Support Group Coordinator
	Identify the support group focus
	Name the group
	Draft a brief paragraph describing the group focus
	Determine whether the group will be open or closed in length and duration
	Identify the minimum and maximum number of potential group members
	Choose group facilitator(s)
	Determine the length of each group session
	Choose the number of group sessions
	Identify the day of the week for sessions
	Select the meeting time
	Identify any dates the group will not meet (holidays, etc.)
	Set start and end dates
	Determine a plan for child care provision
	Identify potential transportation needs
	Choose a location
	Reserve the location for all chosen dates
	Identify parking options/needs
	Compile essential group materials
	Identify potential expenses and seek funding

# Recruitment

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When planning a new support group opportunity, it is essential to consider how to get the word out to people in your community. This section of the manual describes several strategies to consider when promoting a new group. Although all of these tactics may not suit your particular agency, some may be very useful. Of utmost importance is that each organization identifies the recruitment strategies that might work best for it, based on the community and the resources available to both the agency and the agency's clients. What works for one locale might not be as effective in others, but choosing a variety of different tactics to reach out to your community will be helpful in devising a comprehensive and effective plan for group member recruitment. You will likely need to try multiple strategies to figure out what works best in your community and be open to changing these strategies over time as client needs and resources change. In this section we will discuss:

1. Promotional materials
2. Website
3. Social Media
4. Email and telephone notification list
5. Community contacts
6. Support group referrals
7. Recruitment evaluation
8. Tips & Tools

# Promotional Materials

Posting flyers around the community can be an effective way to advertise your agency and support group program. You could request to post flyers at any of the following locations:

- Therapist/mental health provider offices
- Community crisis centers
- Community health clinics
- Doctors' offices
- Bulletin boards at local colleges and universities
- Department of Social Services
- Health Department
- Law enforcement agencies
- Hospital emergency rooms
- Restaurants and bars
- Laundromats
- Coffee shops
- Fitness Clubs
- Faith-based organizations

Taking the time (or asking agency volunteers, if you have some) to post flyers in highly visible places gets the word out about your support group program and new offerings as they arise.

## Website

If your agency has a website, creating a webpage devoted to support group information can be very useful. Having a webpage that is easy to update is important, since group information will likely change relatively frequently as new things are planned.

It is important when creating a webpage to first think about its audience. Putting some thought into the following questions will serve you well in developing this resource:

1. Do our clients have access to the internet?
2. Are our clients able to understand the language we're using to promote our group?
3. How will people be able to easily locate the support group page on our website?
4. Do other professionals in our community access information online to learn about services in the community?
5. How easily can we update our website?

### **Helpful Hint!**

*The website could also include tentative group opportunities! Post support groups your agency would like to put together depending on community interest. Include contact information, so potential members can show their interest.*

6. Who will be responsible for putting this information on the website and keeping it updated?
7. What information is important to include on this webpage based on our time constraints and the ease with which the website can be updated?
8. Is there a way we can make the text on our website more accessible to people with visual impairment (for example, by using larger font size)?

Using your website can be a great resource to get the word out about your support groups. Often individuals will search resources online before reaching out and asking for help, so updated website information can be essential to reaching potential clients. Be sure to keep all contact information and support group offerings updated, so people can easily reach out to your agency to join a group.

Promotional materials should be written in plain English. Avoid jargon. Remember, many of the terms used in this field are not commonly used by people in the community even though they may seem easily understood. Also, avoid long lists and complicated sentences. It is helpful to keep in mind the education level of your audience. Writing at a lower reading level increases accessibility of your information. We suggest that your materials should never be too complicated for someone reading at an eighth-grade reading level.

*I made amazing friends and am inspired to use my  
experience to help others.  
- Lee*

# Social Media

Using social media, like Facebook and Twitter, could provide another helpful way to spread the word about your support groups, depending on your client base. Posting to these forms of social media could reach a group of people that otherwise would not be informed about your group, especially if you serve a large number of adolescent and young adult clients. To save time, just use the same information included on your website and post it. No need to write something new!

When determining whether to use social media, it is useful to consider if it is worth your time and effort, as with all recruitment strategies. A question to consider: though Facebook and Twitter appear to be very popular, is promoting groups through these media actually going to reach a sizeable audience? It depends on who you're serving.

## Email and Telephone Notification List

Having a support group email notification list allows your agency to keep in touch with clients who have expressed support group interest. This is especially helpful when clients seek a support group when none are being offered or when an upcoming group is not relevant to their needs. By keeping an ongoing email list, clients are kept informed of the different support group opportunities as they are planned.

This email list can be maintained as a listserv, so it is simple to send out mass emails to a large group. However, please note that it is of utmost importance to send emails in a way that protects clients' privacy. For example, sending clients an email using "blind carbon copies" ("BCC") or by using an email marketing system will ensure that those receiving the message cannot see the email addresses of others receiving the email.

Based on experience, sending notices out through the support group notification list about every four to six weeks with updated support group opportunities and possible opportunities should be sufficient. However, the frequency with which you send out emails will depend on how many groups you're planning to offer each year. When it is close to time for a new group to start, it will likely be useful to send emails more frequently to make sure people are informed about how to get involved in the new group(s).

If your community is not email-driven or many of your clients do not use email, it may be helpful to keep a phone list instead of or in addition to an email notification list. Keeping a running list of names and phone numbers for people interested in particular support groups can be a great alternative or supplement to email notification lists. This will help ensure people can more easily access the information they desire.

### **Helpful Hint!**

*For easier mass e-mailing, consider using an email marketing program such as [icontact.com](http://icontact.com) or [constant contact.com](http://constantcontact.com). These programs offer a wide range of useful tools and frequently give discounts to non-profits. Also, they make more attractive and uniform emails!*

# Community Contacts

Reaching out to relevant community partners can be very helpful in getting the word out about your support groups. Therapists in particular can be a great source of support group referrals. It is useful to email (or mail if more accessible) the information posted on your website plus an attachment of your flyer to these partners. The following groups may be great referral sources:

- Therapist/mental health provider offices
- Community crisis centers
- Community health clinics
- Doctors' offices
- Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) members
- Local colleges and universities
- Department of Social Services
- Health Department

It is also a good idea to forward your flyer and blurb out to your agency's volunteers, staff members, and other supporters. That way everyone will be equipped to inform agency clients of group opportunities. You can request that they also send along the flyer and information to their community contacts.

## Support Group Referrals

Once someone has expressed interest in your group, it is often difficult to keep them engaged with your agency until the group is about to start. This raises the following questions: how will the group coordinator know someone is interested in a particular group; and, how will they keep track of interested people? This is where a support group referral system becomes necessary, especially when many different people, including staff and volunteers, work with clients inside and outside of the office space.

The OCRCC uses an in-house referral process as a way to track clients who express interest in joining a support group. When a client indicates interest in a support group over the phone or in person, the client or the person serving the client fills out a Support Group Referral Form. In this form, the following information is obtained from the client:

- Client name
- Date of contact
- Client contact information (email, phone, mailing address), including how they prefer to be contacted
- The type(s) of support groups the client is interested in attending
- Permission to contact the client, including whether it is acceptable to leave a voicemail on the client's phone and whether it is acceptable to say where the call is from in that message

Once the Support Group Referral Form is complete, the form is passed along to the Support Group Coordinator. The Coordinator then contacts the client as soon as possible

(within a few days) to tell them about support group opportunities, describe the support group program and how to join a group, explain the screening process, and potentially schedule a screening appointment. If there is not a current group opportunity of interest to the client, the Coordinator offers to add that person to the support group email notification list.

Having one staff member in charge of all support group referrals is highly recommended. That way, clients have one main point of contact for group information, and all referrals are housed in one place. Volunteers and staff can then be easily trained on how to refer someone to a support group. This reduces the risk of miscommunication or of clients “falling through the cracks.”

### ***Helpful Hint!***

*Keep a running list of interest for support groups! This way, you will have an idea of what support group focus your agency should provide next, based on what would most benefit clients.*

## **Recruitment Evaluation**

So, how will you know which strategies are working? Just ask! We recommend adding a question into your support group screening tool that asks clients how they found out about the group they want to join. That way the Support Group Coordinator can track which outreach tactics are worth maintaining. You can also develop a way to keep track of how referrals are getting to the Coordinator. For instance, are people calling the hotline to find out about groups? Is the Coordinator receiving emails about joining a group (likely coming from information on the website)?

By evaluating your outreach strategies, you can refine and streamline your process for providing information to the community. Finding the most efficient ways to effectively get the information to community members can be challenging and take some time. But in the end, it’s worth it for the agency and, most importantly, for the survivors you serve.

*Every week someone would offer a piece of insight about their process that was really helpful to hear.*

*- Brittany*

## ***Tips & Tools***

- Make a tab/section on the website entirely devoted to support groups.
- Make sure the tab/section is easy to find on the website. Direct clients there whenever possible, so they become familiar with the site.
- Post upcoming groups in the “Support Group” section of your website, including group information such as the title of the support group, dates, time, and a short paragraph that explains the purpose of the support group. This paragraph can be the same blurb that you use in all information given out about the group.
- Note who the contact person is for support groups and how to reach that person by phone and/or email in a very visible way.
- Use simple language that is accessible to a broad audience who may not have a high level of formal education. We recommend a sixth- to eighth- grade reading level.
- Think about whether it is safe to include the location of the group on your website and in promotional materials. Especially if you are working in an agency that provides both domestic violence and rape crisis services, it may be best to leave this information off of all promotional materials.
- Tool: Take a look at the “Support Group Referral Form.” Feel free to make copies of this form to use in your agency or customize it to best meet your needs.

## Support Group Referral Form

Client Name:	Phone:
Staff/Volunteer Name:	Date:

Please mark the type(s) of support group(s) in which the client is interested. If the client expresses interest in multiple groups, please indicate the client's order of preference. Place a '1' next to the client's first stated preference, '2' for the next preference, etc.

- Incest/Child Sexual Abuse Survivors Group (for female survivors)
- Support Group for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault
- Rape/Sexual Assault Survivors Support Group (for female survivors)
- Support Group for the Loved Ones of Survivors of Sexual Violence  
(Specify:  Parent  Partner  Friend  Other family)
- Horticultural Support Group
- Arts and Crafts Support Group or Workshop
- Yoga or Dance Support Group or Workshop
- Other Support Group:

### Client Permissions

**\*\*Please advise clients that, if given, all contact information will remain confidential, and the agency telephone number shows up as "Restricted" on caller ID. Advise the client that a staff member will follow up with the client as soon as possible about her/his interest in groups.**

Is it okay to contact the client by:

1. Email?  yes  no      Email address: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Mail?  yes  no      Valid Address: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Phone?  yes  no      Cell: \_\_\_\_\_ Home: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is it okay to leave a message?  yes  no
5. May we say we are calling from our agency in the message?  yes  no  
If no, specific calling instructions: \_\_\_\_\_

Please briefly summarize the nature of the client contact, including the assault if discussed. What were the main concerns expressed by the client? Include important information relayed to the client.

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Notes about further contact (FOR STAFF USE ONLY):

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# Screening Participants

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Providing ample time to screen potential support group participants is critical to offering safe and supportive groups. Taking the time to appropriately screen group participants is a mutually beneficial process that allows facilitators to learn more about the clients entering the group and clients to actively partake in the group planning process. The following section will offer a guide to interviewing potential group participants as well as tools that can be easily modified to meet the specific needs of your agency. The following topics will be discussed:

1. The screening process
2. Interviewing techniques and skills
3. Recommended screening questions
4. Documentation
5. Decisions about client participation in a group
6. Repeat client participation in support groups
7. Tips & Tools

# The Screening Process

When preparing for a support group, it is important to allow for plenty of time to hold screenings prior to the start of the group. Ideally, the support group facilitator(s) will have the opportunity to offer these screenings and use the information gathered to guide their group preparations.

Prior to a screening, it is necessary to explain the screening process to the client to reduce discomfort and fears about being interviewed. It is very common and understandable for clients to be unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with the idea of being screened for group participation, and the more information provided to them about the process for joining a group, the better.

It is useful for all group advertisements to note that screenings are required for group participation, so this does not come as a complete surprise to potential participants when they contact your agency. The following description could be modified to explain what a screening entails once contact has been made with a client:

*All of our support groups require an initial screening with our Support Group Coordinator. A screening provides time for us to meet and talk about the group. Our hope for the meeting is to have a conversation about what experiences bring you to our group and what impact those experiences have had on your life. It's also a time for us to explain more about our groups, including what to expect from us, and for us to work together to see if a particular group is a good fit for you at this time. These meetings help us do our best to put together safe and supportive group experiences for everyone involved.*

Screenings should include questions on the following topics:

1. Prior group participation
2. Background and nature of the violent incident(s)
3. Mental health history
4. Substance use/abuse
5. Coping skills and other supports for the client
6. Client thoughts about group participation
7. Goals and concerns

## **Helpful Hint!**

*Allow a minimum of 2-3 weeks during which screenings will take place. This helps avoid rushing to get screenings done just before group starts!*

OCRCC and others have found that asking questions in these areas will help ensure interviewers can make an educated decision about the interviewee's participation in a group (Hepworth et al., 2010), which is critical to overall group safety. As noted earlier in this manual, survivors of sexual violence are at higher risk to experience a variety of mental and physical health concerns, including suicidal thoughts and attempts, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, among other concerns. It is important to keep this in mind in designing

group experiences. Creating a safe and supportive group environment requires intention and planning; otherwise, groups could have harmful impacts on both facilitators and group members.

Screenings typically last about an hour. This time frame should allow plenty of time to explore each of the topics listed above, as well as the opportunity for the group facilitator(s) to begin building rapport with a client. Screenings longer than an hour and fifteen minutes can become overwhelming, and it may indicate that the information being gathered has gone off topic.

The group screening can also allow time for other useful processes in preparing for the group. Consider incorporating the following tasks into all group screenings to create greater efficiency in group preparations and to make sure the client is fully educated on the group process:

1. Obtain necessary client contact information.
2. Determine how the client found out about your group.
3. If possible, show potential group members the agency's office/space where the group will be held.
4. Introduce the client to the Support Group Coordinator and/or facilitators.
5. Discuss client needs that may be met with referrals or other agency resources.
6. Distribute an informational sheet that the client can take home with all important group details.
7. Go over the agency's requirements for group participation.
8. Review what the client can expect from the agency regarding group participation, such as confidentiality, starting and ending the group on time, etc.
9. Give the client an overview of what individual group sessions may look like.
10. Introduce the agency's process for evaluating groups.
11. Give the client information about the 24-hour help line at your agency/in the local area.
12. Share contact information for the person in charge of groups.
13. Answer questions.

A holistic screening process will prove very useful in assisting with group planning and making sure agencies are responsibly offering healthy and helpful support group opportunities.

*I feel so much closer to everyone, and their experiences helped change me in such a great way.*  
- Maria

# Interviewing Techniques and Skills

It is very important to keep in mind that each time a survivor shares their story, it can be retraumatizing (Lang-Grant, 2013), and we want to always be mindful of offering the most supportive possible environment for survivors to share their stories. The interviewer will serve two primary functions, first as a supporter and second as an information gatherer. To provide a truly supportive and positive space for sharing, the interviewer will need to keep in mind the following, as noted by Lang-Grant (2013):

## Going into the Interview

- Provide a safe, private space for the screening.
- Keep in mind your knowledge of the potential impacts that trauma may have on a survivor, noting that it may affect the way in which a survivor is (un)able to recount the story.
- Be aware of the background and experiences you bring into the room - religiously, culturally, etc. - and how that may affect your view on someone's experience of sexual violence. Survivors of sexual violence are often concerned about being judged by others, and interviewers should take on the role of being neutral support figures.

## During the Interview

- Allow plenty of physical space in the interview room to help provide a comfortable environment. Also be mindful of touch. Refrain from touching a client unless that client gives you permission.
- Provide the survivor with choices in the interview room, such as where to sit or whether they want to have a glass of water.
- Be conscious of your words, striving to use language that is validating and not blaming. It is also important to mirror the language of the client, using the terms they use to describe personal experiences.
- Be ready for any type of emotional reaction that the survivor may have during the interview. There are many reactions one may have to telling their story.
- Use empowering language that validates the survivor's strength, and be respectful.
- Do not change the survivor's language or attempt to make it "cleaner." It is important to feel comfortable talking about sexual violence, including a wide range of sexual acts that may surface in the conversation.
- Use open-ended questions during the screening. This may assist a survivor with recall related to the experience.

In addition to these recommendations, we encourage each screening to be a "two-way process" (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 279). The screening is an opportunity for the interviewer and the interviewee to get to know one another and have a conversation about the group. Survivors are likely to have questions and concerns about the group process, especially if participating in a group is a new experience.

# Recommended Screening Questions

Prior to offering screenings, it will be useful to draft a tool to use in all screenings. This tool will help interviewers remember to gather all necessary information and help screenings become systematic and uniform in nature. Though each screening will be different, and the order of the questions will likely vary, it is important to have a single guide that can be used and changed over time as Support Group Coordinators/facilitators change.

The following information and example questions are intended to help you design a screening tool that will be useful in your setting. These questions have been used repeatedly at OCRCC and have been found to be useful in guiding screenings. Consider these questions to be a starting place in developing a tool that will be most appropriate given your agency and your community's needs (for example, you may be inclined to change the wording or language used or write the questions less like a script, depending on who will be conducting screenings).

## Introductory Questions

When a client comes to your office for a screening, it is very likely that the client will appear nervous and uncomfortable. It can be challenging to reach out for support of any kind, especially support that focuses on the often-stigmatized experience of sexual violence. For this reason, it is useful to start each screening with a focus on relationship-building and validation of the client's strength and courage in coming to the agency for assistance.

Example tips and questions:

1. Introduce yourself and explain your role with the support group.
2. How did you hear about our groups?
3. Check in on how the client feels about being in your office.
4. What most interests you about participating in a support group?
5. Have you ever participated in a support group before, here or somewhere else?
6. If so, what was that experience like for you?

## Background and Nature of the Sexually Violent Incident(s)

Some clients may organically move into a conversation about the violence they experienced, while others may need more guidance during the screening to help them share. In starting this conversation, it is important to note that you are asking clients to share only what they feel comfortable sharing. Remember, it is important to always be mindful of offering the most supportive possible environment for people to share their stories. The following tips and examples can help start this discussion.

Example tips and questions:

1. Part of the purpose of this meeting today is for me to learn more about your experiences and how those experiences have impacted your life. Talking about these things will help me find out more about whether our group may be a good fit for your goals and learn more about how to support you. Would you mind sharing with me more about the experiences that have brought you here today?
2. How do you feel like these experiences have impacted your life?

During this conversation, it will be helpful to follow the client's lead, using their terminology to describe the violent experience(s). You should follow up on individual pieces of the story as you feel necessary. Throughout the screening, it is important to stay focused on gathering information that will be helpful in planning the group and ensuring that the

Prior to offering support groups, your agency should have a plan in place for how to address clients who express suicidal and/or homicidal thoughts and plans. The information in this manual does not cover suicide and homicide lethality assessment in depth and should not serve as the only means to gain suicide and homicide intervention skills.

**Other helpful resources include:**

- *Where to Start and What to Ask: An Assessment Handbook*, by Susan Lukas (1993)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

support group will be a safe place for the survivor. In other words, we are not gathering information just for the sake of gathering it or to be invasive. Screening questions should always have a purpose that will benefit the client.

### **Mental Health History and Substance Use**

Discussing the survivor's violent experiences often leads to a discussion of mental health concerns. As noted, it is common for survivors of sexual violence to experience a wide range of emotions and personal reactions to their survivorship, and it is absolutely critical to gain a better understanding of what mental health concerns someone may bring into the group setting. Gathering this infor-

mation will be a determining factor in deciding whether a group experience is likely to be safe for a person at the time of the interview. It will also inform you of how that person can be best supported in the group sessions.

Below you will find a list of tips and questions to help guide a discussion of mental health. It is important to be mindful that this section of the interview is often lengthy and involves asking uncomfortable, though necessary, questions. It is strongly encouraged that all topics that appear in the examples below be incorporated into all screenings in some form.

Very specific information should be gathered about the potential for self-harm, the potential for harm to others, and the potential for committing suicide. If someone expresses homicidal or suicidal thoughts or anything resembling a plan to hurt themselves or others, a full homicide or suicide lethality assessment must be completed. This line of question-

ing requires gathering very specific information. Be sure to follow your agency's policy and legal statutes regarding suicide/homicide intervention. This section will also require you to ask more direct, closed-ended questions in comparison to other sections of the screening to ensure you get specific, detailed information.

Example tips and questions:

1. Many people who have experienced things like what you've just described to me have many different types of reactions, which is normal. Some people describe struggles with depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and other mental health-related concerns. Have you experienced any mental health or emotional problems yourself throughout your life? Could you describe them for me?
2. Follow up with each mental health concern mentioned. Also look further into self-injury and other self-harming behaviors.
3. Have you ever had suicidal thoughts? If so, when? Gather specific details, such as what the thoughts are, when they occurred, and if there is a plan in place to commit suicide. When assessing for a plan, ask about how they would do it, when, where, and if they have access to the materials needed to complete the outlined plan.
4. Have you attempted to commit suicide in the past? If so, when? Gather specific details on each suicide attempt, when each occurred, and if there is a current plan in place to commit suicide. As mentioned above, when assessing for a plan, ask about how they would do it, when, where, and if they have access to the materials needed to complete the outlined plan.
5. Have you ever been hospitalized for mental health concerns? Gather specific details: when, where, for what reason.
6. Are you currently in therapy or have you been in therapy in the past? Gather specific details: when, where, for what reason.
7. Are you currently taking any medication for mental health concerns?
8. Often, people who have experienced this type of trauma use substances like alcohol or other drugs to cope, numb their pain, or escape their situation. Did your use of alcohol and/or other drugs change following these experiences?
9. Have you used alcohol and/or other drugs to try to deal with these experiences?
10. If so, how often have you had \_\_\_\_\_ in the past month. (Gather specifics.)

If a client is in therapy, it is useful to ask the client to sign a standard consent to release/obtain information for that individual, so the Support Group Coordinator and therapist can be in touch with one another. A survivor may request this contact or not, but in the event of a client crisis, it is much safer to have the information for a client's therapist rather than not have it. At OCRCC, it is voluntary for the client to sign this form.

We provide more information later in this section about determining whether a group is an appropriate support opportunity for a particular person at a given time.

## Coping and Healing

Support groups are a place for healing, and along with healing comes emotional highs and lows. There will likely be both laughter and tears in this circle of support. With this in mind, it is important to plant a seed early in the group process about the need for taking care of oneself in the group and outside of the group. Having a conversation about self-care and personal supports will give you a better idea of how supported a survivor may be outside of the group and which activities are helpful for relaxation. This conversation also allows you to explore in greater depth whether the survivor is connected to an individual therapist and have time to discuss the stress that participating in a group can cause. Encouraging self-care from the beginning is ideal.

Example tips & questions:

1. As I mentioned, groups can at times become overwhelming and intense. If something is overwhelming you or becoming too stressful, how do you know? (For example, some people feel stress in their body, have intrusive thoughts or anxiety, or other signs of stress.)
2. Let's continue and talk more about the supports you have in your life and what you would like to get out of the group. At times, a support group can feel overwhelming or stressful for those participating. What activities help you alleviate stress when it surfaces?
3. Are there people in your life who you feel like you can reach out to when you're stressed? Who are those people?
4. What other supports do you have in your life?
5. Do you have a therapist? If so, how long have you been working with this therapist?
6. Do you plan to continue seeing this therapist while in the support group?

## Client Thoughts About Group Participation: Goals and Concerns

When someone begins a group, they often have some idea of goals they would like to work on during the group process as well as other thoughts on group participation. It is important to take a bit of time at the end of a screening to ask a survivor to verbalize these goals, concerns, and other thoughts about a group to assist with your planning. This section of the interview would also include questions concerning potential barriers for the client's participation. Here are some example questions:

1. If you could identify a goal or two for yourself for what you would like to gain from this group, what would they be?
2. What concerns do you have about participating in this group, if any?
3. What excites you most about participating in this group?
4. In what ways do you find that you learn best?
5. What personal strengths will you bring with you into this group?
6. How can I/we best support you during group sessions as the facilitator(s)?
7. Will you have reliable transportation to get to and from the group?
8. Can you agree to participate in all group sessions?
9. Do you foresee any additional barriers to your participation in this group?
10. How do you like to express yourself (for example, through discussion, art, etc.)?

# Documentation

You may be wondering how to document this wealth of information in a manageable way. Ultimately it takes time to create a system for documentation, but there are ways to streamline this process. Here are some points to consider in designing a documentation plan:

- Taking notes during a screening is ultimately the interviewer's personal decision. If you are going to take notes, it may be helpful to explain this to the client at the start of the screening and give an explanation as to why you will do that. It is likely that your agency has a policy on documentation of conversations with clients. If not, contact your state coalition for further guidance.
- It is ideal to write summary notes for each screening right after the screening ends, so you won't miss any details. It may be helpful to block off an extra 10-15 minutes in your schedule after each screening to allow time to jot down brief notes to expound upon later if it's not possible to complete the notes at that time.
- Creating a system for keeping client support group records is key, and establishing this system from the start of your group program will save time. You will find an example client file cover sheet at the end of this section that could be modified to help you with filing. Keep individual client records and arrange them alphabetically. It is also useful to keep digital files as back-up data, if possible.
- At times, clients do return to the same agency to participate in additional support groups and/or other agency services. For this reason, it is best to keep ongoing client records that will track a client through the group program. This attention to documentation will help reduce the client's need to continue recounting their personal information and will also make sure that new staff have the information needed to continue serving that client in the future.

*It has been really nice to hear other people's experiences and spend this time together. It really helps to know that other people are going through the same experience.*

*- Lokia*

# Decisions about Client Participation

Each screening will raise the question as to whether a group opportunity is safe for that individual at that particular moment in time. At times, this decision can be taxing and difficult, while other screenings will give you a clear answer. Though not scientific, it is often helpful to follow your “gut reaction” or at the very least to pay attention to it. A lot can be said for practice-based experience; making screening decisions typically gets much easier over time.

There are several scenarios in which particular care should be taken when making this decision. See the table on the following page for three scenarios that can create potential danger as well as ideas for managing those situations. This table draws upon information outlined by Hepworth et al. (2010) as well as OCRCC practice-based experience.

Ultimately, making an educated screening decision requires gathering a lot of information and asking many direct questions. The best way to develop comfort with asking these questions and possibly saying “no” to a client is to practice.

When or if you have determined the group is likely not going to be a safe and supportive option for any reason, it is important to be open, honest, and supportive. Remember: clients should know that participating in a screening means some decision has to be made about their participation in the group. The survivor’s well-being is of utmost importance. When a group is not a good fit, you can frame this “no” as more of a redirection to better resources, since ultimately that’s what it is. Also, redirecting a client at one point in time does not necessarily mean that a future group will not be a good fit for the client. If you feel a future group may work out, tell the client and figure out the best way to keep in touch about upcoming group opportunities. We discuss more about setting up email/mail notification lists in the section on group member recruitment.

## Repeat Client Participation in Support Groups

At times, survivors may want to participate in more than one group at your agency or in an open group in a long-term way. With this in mind, it is necessary to have a process at your agency for determining whether survivors can participate in multiple groups and what the screening process should look like for repeat group participants.

It is likely not necessary to have as extensive a screening as you would for new participants. For this reason, we recommend that you develop a shortened screening tool to use with repeat participants. As each support group is unique based on its members, facilitators, and more, it is important to still allow time for the client to meet the particular group facilitator(s) and have the opportunity for facilitators to determine whether this new group is a good fit for the client. You will find two example screening tools at the end of this section to help guide you in designing one or more tools for your office.

## Client scenarios that present challenges for group participation

Client Scenario	Questions Raised	Action Steps
<p>A client was recently hospitalized for suicidal thoughts/a suicide attempt or is actively suicidal</p> <p><b>**Recently is difficult to define. It is useful to err on the side of caution and always gathering detailed information when a client expresses a history of suicidal thoughts and/or attempts.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the client currently express having suicidal thoughts?</li> <li>2. What were this client's triggers prior to being hospitalized?</li> <li>3. Is the group likely to be a healthy and safe space for the client at this time?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gather detailed information during the screening. If a client is currently suicidal, it is not appropriate for them to participate in a support group.</li> <li>2. Think about your "gut reaction" to the client's story in comparison to your reaction in other screenings.</li> <li>3. If the client is connected to a mental health provider, it is likely best to stipulate that you need to have the mental health provider's approval for the individual to participate. We strongly encourage doing this to help make a well-informed decision.</li> </ol>
<p>A client is actively using drugs and/or alcohol on a regular basis</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is this client currently under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the screening?</li> <li>2. Will this client be able to come to a group sober?</li> <li>3. Is this group a good fit for the client at this time, while in active addiction?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If the client is currently under the influence of drugs or alcohol, discontinue the screening in a supportive way. It is likely not helpful for the client or you to continue talking. Contact the client later to discuss more appropriate resources for the client. A group is unlikely to be most productive for the client at this time.</li> <li>2. If the client is not currently under the influence, gather details on the drug/alcohol use, such as frequency of use, triggers for use, and types of drugs used.</li> <li>3. Tell the client they are expected to come to group sober, and discuss whether this is feasible for the client.</li> <li>4. If the client is connected to a therapist, you can stipulate that you need to have a mental health provider's approval for the individual to participate. We recommend doing this to help make an educated decision.</li> </ol>
<p>A client's experiences do not fit in with all the other potential group members' experiences</p>	<p>Will this client's participation in the group make her/him feel even more isolated?</p>	<p>If the group will likely be more isolating, it is not a good fit for the client. Find other supports for the client and explore if there is a group your agency will offer that better meets the client's needs.</p>

## ***Tips & Tools***

### **Overview of the OCRCC Screening Process: Use of Volunteer Facilitators**

1. It is noted in all advertisements that screenings are required for group participation.
2. When first speaking with a client new to the agency's groups, the Support Group Coordinator explains the screening process in greater detail.
3. The Coordinator holds the initial screening with a new support group client and gathers information on:
  - Prior group participation
  - Background and nature of the violent incident(s)
  - Mental health history
  - Substance use
  - Coping skills and healing
  - Goals and concerns
4. The Coordinator determines with the client's input whether the upcoming group is likely a good fit for the client at that time.
5. If participating in the group is deemed appropriate, the Coordinator sets up a time for the client to meet with the group facilitators for a second screening (most group facilitators are trained volunteers). This screening lasts about 30 to 45 minutes. During the second screening, facilitators focus on:
  - Developing rapport with the client
  - Finding out why the group interests the client
  - Learning about the background and nature of the violent incident(s)
  - Determining if the client has any updates on the state of their mental health since meeting with the Coordinator
  - Identifying specific client goals for group participation
  - Assessing how the client learns best (for example, writing, art, discussion, etc.)
  - Identifying client strengths
  - Exploring how to support the client in a group setting
  - Answering any lingering questions
6. After the second screening, the facilitators give the Coordinator feedback about the client's screening and participation in the group.
7. If the Coordinator and/or facilitator(s) do not find the group to be a good fit for the client for any reason, the Coordinator works with that client to find more appropriate sources of support.
8. For repeat support group clients, the client only screens with the facilitators for a screening. The "Short Version" of the screening tool provided in this section reflects what volunteer facilitators use in their shortened screening. The "Long Version" covers all suggested screening questions and topics.

## Client File Cover Sheet

### Contact Information

Client name:	Cell Phone:
Date of Birth:	Alt Phone:
Address:	Email:

**Preferred method of contact:**

Email    Cell phone    Home phone    Work phone

Is it okay to leave a message and say it is from our agency?  Yes    No

Other contacting instructions:

**Group Interest:**

- Incest/Child Sexual Abuse Survivors Group (for female survivors)
- Support Group for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault
- Rape/Sexual Assault Survivors Support Group (for female survivors)
- Support Group for the Loved Ones of Survivors of Sexual Violence  
(Specify:  Parent  Partner  Friend  Other family)
- Horticultural Support Group
- Arts and Crafts Support Group or Workshop
- Yoga or Dance Support Group or Workshop
- Other Support Group:

**Has this person been added to the support group email notification list?**

Yes    No

If so, on what date?



## Support Group Screening Tool

Client Name:	Date of Screening:
Location of Screening:	Interviewer Name:

### Introductory Questions

1. Introduce myself as the Support Group Coordinator. Explain my role.
2. How are you doing today?
3. How did you hear about our groups?
4. What most interests you about participating in a support group?
5. Have you ever participated in a support group before, here or somewhere else? If so, what was your experience?
6. How does it feel to be here in our office?
7. If it's okay with you, I would like to start by getting your contact information. [Fill out demographic and contact information for the client file cover sheet.]

### Background and Nature of the Sexually Violent Incident(s)

1. Part of the purpose of this meeting today is for me to learn more about your experiences and how those experiences have impacted your life. Talking about these things will help me find out more about whether our group may be a good fit for your goals and learn more about how to support you. Would you mind sharing with me more about the experiences that brought you here today?
2. How do you feel like these experiences have impacted your life?

## Mental Health History

1. Many people who have experienced things like what you've just described to me have many different types of reactions, which is normal. Some people describe struggles with depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and other mental health-related concerns. Have you experienced any mental health or emotional problems yourself throughout your life?
2. Could you describe them for me?
3. Follow up with each mental health concern mentioned. Also look further into self-injury and other self-harming behaviors.
4. Have you ever had suicidal thoughts? If so, when? Gather specific details, such as what the thoughts are, when they occurred, and if there is a plan in place to commit suicide. When assessing for a plan, ask about how they would do it, when, where, and if they has access to the materials needed to complete the outlined plan.
5. Have you attempted to commit suicide in the past? If so, when? Gather specific details on each suicide attempt, when each occurred, and if there is a current plan in place to commit suicide. When assessing for a plan, ask about how s/he would do it, when, where, and if s/he has access to the materials needed to complete the outlined plan.
6. Have you ever been hospitalized for mental health concerns? Gather specific details: when, where, how.

7. Are you currently taking any medications for mental health concerns? If so, which medications?

### **Substance Use**

1. Many people who have experienced this type of trauma use substances like alcohol or other drugs to cope, numb their pain, or escape their situation. Did your use of alcohol and/or other drugs change following these experiences?
2. Have you used alcohol and/or other drugs to try to deal with these experiences?
3. If so, how often have you had \_\_\_\_\_ in the past month. (Get the specifics.)

### **Coping and Healing**

1. As I mentioned, groups can at times become overwhelming and intense. If something is overwhelming you or becoming too stressful, how do you know? (If needed, for example: Some people feel stress in their body, have intrusive thoughts or anxiety, or other signs of stress.)
2. Let's continue and talk more about the supports you have in your life and what you would like to get out of the group. At times, a support group can feel overwhelming or stressful for those participating. What activities help you alleviate stress when it surfaces?
3. Are there people in your life who you feel like you can reach out to when you're stressed? Who are those people?

4. What other supports do you have in your life?

5. Do you have a therapist? If so, how long have you been working with this therapist?

6. Do you plan to continue seeing this therapist while attending our support group?

### **Client Thoughts about Group Participation: Goals and Concerns**

1. If you could identify a goal or two for yourself for what you would like to gain from this group, what would they be?

2. What concerns do you have about participating in this group, if any?

3. What excites you most about participating in this group?

4. In what ways do you find that you learn best, for example, writing, art, discussions, etc.?

5. What personal strengths will you bring with you into this group?

6. How can I/we best support you during group sessions as the facilitator(s)?

7. Will you have reliable transportation to get to and from the group?

8. Can you agree to participate in all the group sessions?

9. Do you foresee any additional barriers to your participation in this group?

10. How do you like to express yourself (for example, through discussion, art, etc.)?

**Follow Up Plans (do not ask clients - for Coordinator records only)**

1. Do you have any concerns about this client's participation in the group? Explain.

2. How will you follow up with this client regarding group participation?

## Support Group Screening Tool (Short Version)

Client Name:	Date of Screening:
Location of Screening:	Interviewer Name:

### Introductory Questions

1. Introduce myself as the facilitator. Explain my role.
2. How are you doing today?
3. What most interests you about participating in this group?

### Background and Nature of the Sexually Violent Incident(s)

1. Part of the purpose of this meeting today is for me to learn more about your experiences and how those experiences have impacted your life. Talking about these things will help me find out more about whether our group may be a good fit for your goals and learn more about how to support you. Would you mind sharing with me more about the experiences that brought you here today?
2. How do you feel like these experiences have impacted your life?

### Mental Health History

1. Many people who have experienced things like what you've just described to me have many different types of reactions, which is normal. You already talked about these reactions with \_\_\_\_\_. Have you had any changes in your mental or physical health since meeting with \_\_\_\_\_?

2. Follow up with each symptom pattern. Look further into the changes brought up by the client, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, sleep/eating disturbances, substance abuse to assess readiness for group participation.

3. Are you currently connected to a therapist? If so, how has this support been for you?

4. Have you had any changes in your medications since you spoke with \_\_\_\_\_? If so, what changes?

5. Do you plan to continue seeing this therapist while attending our support group?

### **Coping, Healing, and Support**

1. Let's continue and talk more about the supports you have in your life and what you would like to get out of the group. At times, a support group can feel overwhelming or stressful for those participating. What helps you alleviate stress when it surfaces?

2. Are there people in your life who you feel like you can reach out to when you're stressed? Who are they?

3. What other supports do you have in your life?

## Client Thoughts about Group Participation: Goals and Concerns

1. If you could identify a goal or two for yourself for what you would like to gain from this group, what would they be?
2. What concerns do you have about participating in this group, if any?
3. What excites you most about participating in this group?
4. In what ways do you find that you learn best, for example, writing, art, discussions?
5. What personal strengths will you bring with you into this group?
6. How can I/we best support you during group sessions as the facilitator(s)?
7. Will you have reliable transportation to get to and from the group?
8. Can you agree to participate in all the group sessions?

9. Do you foresee any additional barriers to your participation in this group?

10. How do you like to express yourself (for example, through art, discussion, etc.)?

**Follow Up Plans (do not ask clients - for Coordinator records only)**

1. Do you have any concerns about this client's participation in the group? Explain.

2. How will you follow up with this client regarding group participation?

# Facilitators

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Finding and training the right facilitator(s) for your support groups is well worth the time and effort. There is a level of expertise related to both group facilitation and working with survivors of sexual violence that is critical to successful and safe group facilitation. This section will focus on outlining attributes of an effective facilitator as well as other topics regarding the preparation of facilitators and developing the capacity to provide training on group facilitation. The following topics will be discussed:

1. Attributes of an effective facilitator
2. Facilitation skills
3. Goals of an effective facilitator
4. The use of volunteer facilitators
5. Training suggestions and resources
6. Things to consider
7. Role play scenarios

# Attributes of an Effective Facilitator

As described by Corey (2012) in the *8th Edition of Theory & Practice of Group Counseling*, there are an array of different personal characteristics that are likely to help a facilitator be an effective group leader. He highlights the following attributes, summarized here:

- **Emotional presence.** This includes being able to engage and remain emotionally present during group sessions, leaving the outside world at the door, so to speak, when entering each session.
- **Courage.** Facilitators are in a position that requires taking some risks, possibly needing to admit mistakes, being vulnerable on occasion, having to confront group members, following their own intuition, and/or discussing their own thoughts or reactions in the group space.
- **Self-awareness.** As a facilitator, one is leading other people in a journey of self-investigation. Having one's own self-awareness, as well as being willing to continuously explore and confront one's own weaknesses, problems, and vulnerabilities, is critical to being able to authentically guide others in this process and know how your own views and experiences affect the group.
- **Authentic and sincere expression.** Having the ability to give group members truthful and sincere feedback is very important in group leadership. This involves providing comments from a place of authenticity and a sincere interest in promoting group members' well-being.
- **Enthusiasm and a firm belief in the efficacy of groups.** If you don't believe in the worth of support groups, how will your clients?
- **Creative energy.** Effective facilitators continue to grow and learn, which also means a focus on bringing new, inventive ideas to groups. Using new activities and tools in various groups can be helpful in keeping facilitators engaged and continuing to improve groups over time.

## **Helpful Hint!**

*Self-care is very important for group members AND facilitators. Having a supervisor or another facilitator to talk to and help in debriefing can be very useful in staying healthy.*

Although this list holds facilitators to a high standard, it's also important to remember that these attributes exist on a continuum and will continue to develop over time with life and group experience. In other words, it's not a question of "either I have it, or I don't." Individuals possess these qualities at different levels across a broad spectrum. Of utmost importance is that facilitators strive to be aware of their own areas of strength and areas for more growth, so they can continue challenging themselves to live up to their full

potential as group leaders. In addition, the list above can serve as a guide for determining who is likely to be an effective facilitator.

Based on OCRCC group experiences, the following characteristics of effective facilitators are added to the list:

- **Organization.** Staying on top of the logistical details of the group is key in helping the group run smoothly. This also means being reliable and fulfilling your responsibilities to the agency and the group members, meeting everyone's overall expectations.
- **A personal focus on self-care.** Facilitating groups is very often if not always an emotionally intense experience. Group leaders need to remember to take care of themselves and even extend that into promoting self-care to group members. Providers can't continue providing services that help others if they don't take care of themselves mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
- **Strong communication skills.** This includes both strong communication skills that promote survivor-focused group facilitation as well as skills to communicate with others at your agency and/or the other group facilitator.
- **Experience with and/or training on working with survivors of sexual violence** (WCSAP, 2006).

Deciding if and when to share personal experiences is often a very difficult skill to master, and the level of self-disclosure with which each individual facilitator is comfortable varies. Here are a few useful questions to consider anytime you are wondering whether you should disclose something personal:

- Would disclosing this information be helpful for the members of this group?
- Would the self-disclosure meet a personal need in some way (i.e., is it more for your benefit than the group's benefit)?

If the self-disclosure would be helpful for the members of the group, and you're also comfortable with that information being out in the open, it is more likely to be an appropriate time for self-disclosure. However, if self-disclosure would be more for your own benefit, you should probably refrain from disclosing.

When facilitating a group for a specific population, it is important to have a strong grounding in what challenges, barriers, and expressions of trauma that population may have experienced. All group facilitators should be specifically trained on how to work with survivors of sexual violence and have a base knowledge of the type(s) of violence people in their groups have experienced. Facilitators also need training in crisis intervention skills as a group member may be in crisis at some point during the group experience.

- **Clear personal boundaries.** Research and provider’s experience show that survivors of sexual violence may be more likely to have difficulty in setting personal boundaries. Being able to model healthy boundaries around service provision is positive for both the facilitator and the survivors in each group.
- **Confidence.** The most effective facilitators have confidence in their facilitation and leadership skills and are able to maintain their confidence in the group setting. Having a confident presence also shows survivors that they are in a group that is being led by a trained professional who knows how to help them learn and grow. This allows for confidence in the overall group process.
- **A focus on ethical practice (WCSAP, 2006, p. 18).** “The first responsibility and motto that all advocates... and facilitators must possess is to ‘do no harm.’” There are several things a facilitator can do to avoid causing harm unintentionally, including knowing your role in a group context, setting clear group goals and boundaries, and having a commitment to continually evaluating your own role in the group and your intentions/purpose as a facilitator.
- **Knowledge of the stages of group development (WCSAP, 2006).** Having a strong base knowledge of the typical stages of group development as well as the skills of an effective facilitator will serve you well as you begin offering groups and continue to develop as a group leader.

Again, these attributes exist along a continuum, though they are all very important to keep in mind when choosing new facilitators, training facilitators, and in the ongoing education of experienced facilitators.

*Participating in the group has...  
“made me realize the importance of allowing myself to  
receive from others rather than just giving.”  
- Virginia*

# Facilitation Skills

Beyond the personal characteristics listed previously, effective facilitators also work to hone the following group leadership skills, as described by Harvill, Masson, and Jacobs (1983) and Ghezzi (2013). Key group facilitation skills are highlighted below, along with a description of the skill and some example statements that a facilitator might use when employing a specific skill.

## Cutting-Off

Sometimes it is necessary to interrupt conversation; this is called “cutting-off.” Facilitators use this in many situations, such as when group members are saying things that are attacking toward other members or excessively disclosing personal or off-topic information (Harvill et al., 1983).

Example facilitator statements:

- “If you don’t mind, let me jump in here for a moment.”
- “If you could hold onto that thought for a second, we may be able to come back to it before the end of session.”
- “I really appreciate you being so willing to share your experiences. Let’s stop here for a moment. I’d like to open up time for other people to respond to what you’ve said.”

## Drawing Out

At times facilitators need to further engage group members who are quiet, not participating, or appear to be shy. Drawing out is a facilitation skill that helps group members feel comfortable in the group setting. This process is intended to help group members feel able to participate in the way that is most useful for them. The goal is not to put someone on the spot in an uncomfortable way but to acknowledge their presence in the group and open up space to join the discussion (Harvill et al., 1983).

Example facilitator statements:

- “I noticed that you looked like you wanted to contribute something earlier but were interrupted. Is there something you’d like to say?”
- “I’ve noticed you’ve been quiet today. I just want to welcome you to join the discussion if you feel like you’d like to at any point.”
- If someone who is normally quiet speaks up - “Thank you for your input [and say something specific about their statement to show they were heard].”
- “Thank you all for being here each week. It can take a lot of courage to reach out for help and to support others through their experiences.”

## Holding Focus

This skill refers to assisting group members in staying on a certain theme, topic, or activity to help meet group goals. This may include redirecting the focus back when it steers away from conversations that are useful/healthy for the overall group (Harvill et al., 1983).

Example facilitator statements:

- “It seems like we’ve steered away a bit from our activity for tonight. Would everyone be okay with going back a bit to our earlier conversation?”
- “She brought up a really challenging experience that she had. Has anyone else experienced something similar?”

## Shifting Focus

When a facilitator redirects the focus of group conversation to something different or new, this is called shifting focus. This may be necessary when a group is not talking much (energy isn’t high), is stuck on one topic that isn’t going anywhere, and/or group members have completed work on a heavy topic (Harvill et al., 1983).

Example facilitator statements:

- “We’ve been focused on this topic for awhile. How about we move on to a new topic?”
- “We seem to be talking about this subject a lot tonight and getting bogged down a bit. I have an activity that I’d like to bring in that may be helpful.”

## Tying Things Together

Connect members by highlighting their similarities (both in their experiences and feelings). As a facilitator you have a vantage point which allows you to make important connections and tie conversations and experiences together in a way that group members may not be able to in the moment (Harvill et al., 1983).

Example facilitator statements:

- “\_\_\_\_\_, it seems like you and \_\_\_\_\_ had a similarly disappointing response from your family members when you disclosed that you were assaulted.”
- “I’m seeing a consensus from all of you about how living in our culture has made things difficult for you in healing from sexual violence.”

## Spinning Off

This term refers to seeking the input or comments of group members in reaction to what another group member has said or done in the group. Facilitators often use this skill when a group member brings up a topic that will benefit the whole group (Ghezzi, 2013).

Example facilitator statements:

- “Thank you for sharing that. Does anyone have a reaction to what she just shared?”
- “\_\_\_\_\_, do you have any thoughts on this topic? It looked like you were agreeing with what he said while he was talking.”

## Noticing Nonverbal Communication

Paying attention to nonverbal communication in the group is very important, such as keeping track of body language, facial expressions, posture, etc. Also, be aware of your own nonverbal communication, and evaluate how you are taking up space in the group (Ghezzi, 2013; Harvill et al., 1983).

## Other Facilitation Skills (Ghezzi, 2013)

- **Summarizing.** Providing comments that sum up things that individual group members say, group themes, and other aspects of group process.
- **Empathizing and Validating.** Demonstrating your understanding in the group, as well as validating and normalizing group member feelings and experiences.
- **Reflecting.** Attempting to restate and also clarify what someone has said while also attending to the underlying feelings expressed by the group member. This requires the use of empathy.
- **Clarifying.** Asking questions that would help the group or yourself understand what a group member is saying.
- **Questioning.** It can be helpful to use open-ended questions that help promote discussion on a certain topic. Facilitators may also employ questions to draw out similarities among group members, draw out participation in group members, or for a wide variety of other things.

Also, remember to model appropriate behavior while in the group space. It is important to show that you are engaged in the group process and able to adhere to group agreements. For more insight into each skill, please refer to Harvill et al. (1983); the full citation is provided in the manual’s reference list.

# Goals of an Effective Facilitator

Effective support group facilitators seek to meet several important overarching group goals. In her book *Self Help and Support Groups: A Handbook for Practitioners* published in 1997, Linda Farris Kurtz described several goals of effective facilitators that we have summarized below as they appeared in *The Circle of Hope: A Guide to Conducting Psycho-educational Support Groups* (WCSAP, 2006):

- **To exchange information.** Facilitators in sexual violence survivor groups aim to disseminate information about sexual violence and aid survivors in identifying and acknowledging their own strengths.
- **To provide a space for survivors to receive and give support.** Facilitators hope to give a window into what mutual support is and to model empathy and supportive feedback for group members.
- **To promote group cohesion.** Facilitators aim to point out survivors' strengths as well as the ways in which group members are similar to one another.
- **To assist survivors with coping skills and awareness of personal strengths.** Effective facilitators are able to identify group members' successes and ability to overcome challenges as well as help members improve upon their own coping skills.
- **To create a safe space for the reduction of social isolation.** This happens organically as a part of coming to a support group, and facilitators help create a safe space in which group members can make connections with others who have had similar experiences.
- **To promote stress reduction inside and outside of the group.** Effective facilitators bring in their knowledge and tools (activities) to assist with stress reduction in the group space and to help group members learn how to reduce stress in their personal lives.
- **To help create and promote group safety.** Creating safety is a primary goal for group work. Facilitators assist with creating safety by helping group members establish (and adhere to) group agreements. Facilitators also are present to help guide safe self-disclosure from group members as they are ready to disclose personal information.

Maintaining a focus on these goals can help provide guidance and direction for facilitators. Keeping all of these broad goals in mind will assist in making sure a particular support group stays on track and remains safe and supportive for the group members.

# The Use of Volunteer Facilitators

You may be wondering, “How could my agency possibly develop the capacity to offer support groups?” or “How can we expand our capacity, so we can offer more groups than we already do?” It is essential to acknowledge that crisis center staff members are often (if not always) trying to use what little resources they have in the best way possible, while grappling with the need to complete many tasks and meet many community needs. At times, volunteers and interns can fulfill critical roles in the agency by offering to take on some of the workload. Volunteers are often an underutilized resource in our communities. Employing the help of volunteers can be tremendously useful in building increased capacity to serve survivors.

The OCRCC has used volunteer support group facilitators and offered formalized facilitator training since the 1990s. Although this is by no means an easy or quick process, slowly devoting time and energy to developing a support group facilitator volunteer program, including a training curriculum, is the only way OCRCC is now able to offer between ten and twelve support workshops and groups each year. The vast majority of these groups are co-facilitated by trained volunteers.

## ***Helpful Hint!***

*If you already have existing volunteer pools with accompanying training, draw on those materials! Any way you can overlap training sessions and re-use training materials will help make the planning and training process more efficient.*

If your agency is considering using volunteer facilitators, this manual can be a starting place for a volunteer training curriculum, though it will not completely suffice. Here are some additional questions to ponder when thinking about the inception of a new volunteer facilitator program:

1. Do we have the capacity to provide training and supervision for a new group of volunteers?
2. Are there people in our community who will want to volunteer for our agency in this way?
3. Who are the people in our community who are already well-suited to becoming a support group volunteer (for example, current or former therapists, experienced crisis line volunteers, people attending local social work or counseling programs)?
4. How many support group volunteers do we actually need to help us expand our program?
5. How will we recruit these volunteers?
6. Who will be responsible for recruiting, interviewing, training, and supervising these new volunteers?
7. Could this training overlap in any way with some of our existing volunteer training (for example, training topics, training curriculum, and training dates/times)?
8. Could we house the training sessions at our agency? Other places in the community?
9. If we need to hold training in a community space, how much will that cost, and how will we pay for that additional expense?
10. Who will be responsible for putting together training materials?

11. Will we provide a training manual or other materials that trainees can keep?
12. How will we pay for training materials? Will it fit in our existing budget?
13. What qualities will we look for in our potential volunteer facilitators?
14. How will we interview/screen potential new volunteer facilitators to make sure they are a good fit for this volunteer role?

Start with devising answers to these questions. If you do identify a desire and need to develop a new volunteer pool (and even if you don't), the following suggestions may help.

## Training Suggestions and Resources

Whether you are employing your own staff or volunteers as facilitators, new facilitators need appropriate training and knowledge before facilitating their first group. As these groups will be offered to individuals who have each experienced trauma, it is necessary to be intentional into training facilitators in order to offer safe groups - safe for facilitators and survivors.

This training could take many forms, and the form will greatly depend on the resources and time your agency has to devote to training facilitators as well as the level of expertise with which facilitators are coming to the group program. It may be best for your agency to send a new facilitator out of the agency to receive training, or your agency may already be well-prepared to offer this training in-house. Either way, there are more and more resources available to help ensure that your agency can offer successful groups.

If you would like to develop a new support group facilitator volunteer program or reach out for training opportunities, here are some suggestions for getting the resources your agency needs:

- Use this manual and the resources listed in it as a starting place for gaining knowledge about group facilitation.
- Contact NCCASA ([www.nccasa.net](http://www.nccasa.net)) for more information on providing support groups for survivors, utilizing volunteer support, and attending trainings.
- Visit the OCRCC website ([www.ocrcc.org](http://www.ocrcc.org)) and contact their Programs Director to learn more about the support group program.
- Check out the following books and materials for additional information (also listed in the reference list):
  - o *Theory & Practice of Group Counseling*, 8th Edition, by Gerald Corey
  - o *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*, 8th Edition, by Dean H. Hepworth, Ronald H. Rooney, Glenda Dewberry Rooney, Kimberly Strom-Gottfried, and JoAnn Larsen
  - o *Circle of Hope: A Guide to Conducting Psychoeducational Support Groups*, created by The Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (free for downloading online)
  - o *IPSV Support Group: A Guide to Psychoeducational Support Groups for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence*, created by The Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (free for downloading online)

# Things to Consider

Included in this section are some things that may help guide you in making sure new facilitators are well-equipped to start leading a group.

## Recommended Training Topics and Areas for Growth

This list can be useful in developing an in-house training or thinking about what areas in which a new facilitator might need some extra support:

1. Information on your agency and support group program
2. Notes on how to receive support from their supervisor at the agency
3. Introduction to sexual violence and different types of sexually violent experiences
4. Crisis intervention skills
5. Attributes of an effective facilitator
6. Facilitation skills
7. Potential roadblocks to communication
8. Stages of group development
9. How to establish group agreements
10. Group session structure and organization
11. Common group member roles
12. Example group activities
13. Information on agency needs for documentation
14. Special challenges that may arise in a group, including suicidal thoughts, absenteeism, balancing self-disclosure with non-disclosure, and a group member leaving a group unexpectedly
15. Special concerns that certain identity groups may have, such as adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, LGBTQ individuals, male survivors, and people of color
16. Vicarious trauma (VT) and common signs of experiencing VT
17. Practice role playing of how to screen potential group members
18. Practice role playing of group facilitation
19. How to take care of yourself while facilitating groups

### **Helpful Hint!**

*When a person is new to group facilitation, it is normal for them to be anxious about leading groups. Exploring this anxiety and the reasons behind it is a step toward figuring out how to reduce it. Self-awareness along with the provision of appropriate training, opportunities to practice, and supervision is often a winning combination to help decrease anxiety and increase self-confidence.*

## Supporting Facilitators

Although a facilitator may be well-prepared to run a group, facilitators also need supervision and space to debrief. Here are some tips for providing a healthy level of supervision:

1. Have an appointed supervisor for support group facilitators.
2. Offer regular check-ins (for example, weekly or bi-weekly) during the duration of a group with time for the facilitators to talk about the group experience.

### ***Vicarious Trauma (VT):***

It is common for people who work with survivors to internalize the trauma experienced by the survivors they support. This can lead to reactions such as fatigue, extreme emotional responses, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, anxiety, and more. It is important to understand that experiencing VT is the norm rather than the exception for people who work with survivors. Taking care of your mental, physical and emotional needs as well as working closely with a supervisor are necessary for mitigating the potential impacts of VT.

3. If there is more than one facilitator, encourage the co-facilitators to debrief with each other after each group session.
4. Normalize and validate that vicarious trauma is not the exception but the norm in this work.
5. Encourage facilitators to take care of themselves throughout the group process.
6. Demonstrate that open communication is valued. It is often helpful for facilitators to feel like they can approach a supervisor who is supportive of a facilitator reaching out for individual support.
7. Be sensitive to signs of vicarious trauma. Supervisors can work to be mindful of the signs of vicarious trauma,

such as unhealthy boundary-setting, fatigue, extreme emotions, and dips in job performance, though the signs look different for each individual. If there is a concerning pattern, check in with the facilitator to see what may be occurring and how to be supportive.

## **Role playing**

Practice makes perfect! Or close to it. In OCRCC training experience, offering trainees the opportunity to work through example client interactions is critical to the learning process. In particular, allowing the space to role play participant screenings and challenging scenarios that may arise in a group is especially useful. Whether you're training one facilitator or many, role playing can be a useful tool, whether between facilitator and supervisor, staff members, or whoever is available.

Here are some ideas for incorporating role plays into new facilitator training:

1. **Practice screenings.** Use the screening tool provided as a guide. One person can play the role of a client, while a new facilitator takes on the task of working through the screening tool. You should give the person who is playing the client role a brief paragraph outlining the basics of the role they are playing without telling any of this information to the facilitator.
2. **Work through example group scenarios.** Getting people together to play out the roles of multiple group members can be a little more difficult, unless you're training a class of new volunteers. However, staff could help a new facilitator do this. Refer to the "Group Process" section of this manual to help identify different challenging behaviors in which group members may engage, and design an example role play around those challenges. Play out the roles as a group, and allow the facilitator to take the lead in guiding the group, practicing their skills.

3. **Have someone observe and give feedback.** When conducting role plays, it can be helpful to have an experienced facilitator sitting and watching the interaction, so they can provide constructive feedback about the interaction - both strengths and areas for growth.

Below you will find some example role play scenarios that you could use or change to meet your agency's needs.

## Role Play Scenarios: Screenings

**Instructions:** A future support group facilitator should pair up with another person. The partner should be given a brief description of a client role to play. The trainee will play the facilitator role, practicing screening the client. Each role play scenario should last about eight to ten minutes, and a trained facilitator should observe the role play in order to provide feedback on strengths and areas for improvement at the end of the role play. After acting out the scenario, the trainee and their partner should discuss how the role play went and receive feedback from the observer.

***Client Role: You identify as a female survivor of rape.***

- You are 25 years old.
- You identify as a lesbian.
- You experienced the assault at a party when you were sixteen.
- You note that you were drinking at the party, and the perpetrator was a male friend.
- At the time, you did not tell anyone about the assault except one friend who told you that “you shouldn’t have been at the party any way.” After that experience, you kept the assault to yourself.
- You have never been in therapy, though you are open to the idea of getting therapy referrals.
- Immediately following the assault, you felt on edge and lost motivation to be around others. You have struggled off and on with feeling anxious, especially in social situations.
- You do not have a history of suicidal thoughts or attempts.
- You have found that the experience keeps resurfacing, especially when you are finding yourself attracted to a romantic partner.
- You’re tired of feeling alone in your experience of assault and would like to connect with others who have had similar experiences.
- To de-stress, you like to exercise, be with small groups of friends, and read.

***Client Role: You identify as a male survivor of childhood sexual abuse.***

- You are 40 years old and have told only your wife and parents about your experiences of sexual abuse. You told your wife after dating for several years, but you have not talked in depth about the experiences in an ongoing way.
- When you told your parents about the abuse as a child, they told you not to say anything else about it. The perpetrator, a family friend, was still allowed to interact with you and your sisters.
- You have recently begun seeing an individual therapist to talk about the abuse.
- You are concerned about your marriage and how your experiences with abuse may affect your ability to be a good father to your three children.
- Since you first became sexually active, you've had trouble with sexual intimacy.
- You feel alone and unable to talk to friends or family about the abuse.
- You have been struggling recently with feeling very distracted, and you have noticed over the years that certain situations trigger you to have flashbacks of the abuse. You have been feeling very down and often isolate yourself at home.
- You have trouble finding ways to de-stress, though you do like to watch television.
- You would like to be able to talk to other people who were sexually abused as children.
- Sometimes you like to write in a journal about your experiences, though you imagine talking would be very helpful.
- You have a lot of questions about confidentiality and what to expect from group sessions because you're concerned that you will see someone you know. You also have no experience with support groups, so you need an overview of what a support group is.

***Client Role: You are the spouse of a childhood sexual abuse survivor.***

- Your wife is successful in her career. She was molested by her mother between the ages of eight and twelve.
- She has been in therapy and support groups in the past and has worked through the trauma a great deal.
- Now that your daughter is eight, your partner is beginning to feel very protective of her, and you feel she is being overly protective at times. She has realized that some of her abuse issues are coming up again. You are unsure of how to react or support her, and you are worried about her being too protective of your daughter.
- You want to help your partner but also need support on your own.
- You love your spouse and your daughter and feel that a support group might help you in a similar way to how they have helped her in the past.
- You would like to find some strategies for supporting your wife, your daughter, and yourself as your family goes through this.
- You have been diagnosed as suffering from depression, and though you read and enjoy fishing trips as ways to de-stress, you often feel you do not have the time to do these things.
- You are excited about the potential of a support group and most of your questions are logistical in nature.

# Role Play Scenarios: Challenging Group Member Behaviors

**Instructions:** Gather a group of people to act out between four and six of the client roles listed below as if they were members of a support group at your agency. Have one or two trainees act as the group facilitator(s). The group should be told which session (for example session 1, 2, 3, etc.) to role play, and the facilitator(s) should be given a specific activity to facilitate, such as the creation of group agreements. This group role play should last at least fifteen to twenty minutes, and someone with facilitation experience should observe the role play to provide feedback on strengths and potential areas for improvement. After acting out the scenario, the trainee(s) should discuss how the role play went with everyone involved and receive feedback from the observer.

*Note: The client roles provided are meant to be a starting place for building a group role play scenario that works for your agency. Feel free to add more detailed client information to each role that reflects the diversity of clients your agency might see in a support group.*

## ***Client Role: Negativity***

- This is your first sexual violence survivor group.
- You were raped four years ago by your boyfriend at the time.
- When feedback or options are shared with you in a group, you often say “Yes, but...”
- Try to make a lot of comments and seek clarification of things that other group members say.
- Make eye contact and talk only to the facilitator(s).

## ***Client Role: Monopolization***

- Your body language and communication are eager and direct.
- This is the first time you’ve participated in a group for sexual violence survivors.
- You were sexually assaulted in high school (fifteen years ago) by a group of boys.
- You are really excited to be in the group, and you cannot wait to share and support the other group members.
- You dominate conversation and try to offer helpful suggestions.
- You are more focused on others’ needs, feelings, etc. than your own.
- Make eye contact and talk only to the facilitator(s).

### ***Client Role: Silence***

- Your body language and communication are reserved, silent, and observant.
- This is your first support group.
- You have been sexually assaulted multiple times in your life; most recently was five years ago by a co-worker while at work.
- You often blame others for your feelings, and you have a lot of anger toward the people who hurt you.
- You are generally silent, and give short, close-ended answers.
- You do not make eye contact with anyone.

### ***Client Role: Conflict***

- You are very direct when you communicate, and you are easily angered when people try to give you suggestions or feedback.
- You are a survivor of date rape that you experienced about 2 years ago.
- You have participated in one other support group, but it was not focused on surviving sexual violence.
- When you become emotionally overwhelmed, you react towards other by saying things like “I’m sure that works for you, but...,” “You definitely don’t understand where I’m coming from,” and “There’s no way that will work for me.”
- You often correct others when they speak without using appropriate grammar.
- You want to be able to better relate to others but don’t know how to make progress in this area.

### ***Client Role: Judgment***

- Your body language and communication are open and thoughtful.
- This is the second sexual assault survivors group that you have participated in, and you make this known over and over in the group.
- You were assaulted two years ago by someone you were dating.
- You tend to make positive judgments, such as “that’s good; that’s exactly what you should have done, etc.”
- Make eye contact with everyone.

### ***Client Role: Eager Advocate***

- Your body language and communication is energetic, excited, and eager.
- This is your first sexual violence survivor group.
- You were assaulted by your best friend’s boyfriend last year while staying at their house for the night.
- You are really excited to do the group, and you cannot wait to share and support the other members.
- You seek clarity in group discussions and advocate for everyone to participate.

***Client Role: Excited, Reserved***

- Your body language and communication is stiff, withdrawn, and hesitant.
- You have participated in many therapy groups; this is your first sexual violence survivor group.
- You were assaulted by a stranger at a street festival eight years ago.
- You are somewhat excited about the group but nervous about talking about sexual violence.
- You are constantly incorporating your experiences in other groups into the conversations in group sessions.

***Client Role: Relaxed, Information Seeker***

- Your body language and communication is laid back, relaxed, and thoughtful.
- This is your first sexual violence survivors group.
- You were raped by a friend at a party two years ago; you were intoxicated and don't remember the actual assault.
- You seek clarity because you want to make sure everything is crystal clear for everyone, and you want to help keep the group running smoothly.
- Make eye contact with everyone.
- You arrive late to the session and apologize profusely throughout your time in the session.

# Group Process

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Though each support group will vary somewhat in how it forms, develops, and grows, this section will provide some general information on the typical arc of group development. With a focus on traditional, discussion-based groups, this section will cover the following topics:

1. The stages of group development
2. Group session organization and structure
3. Sample session timelines
4. Group agreements
5. Structure vs. flexibility and the planning process
6. Possible topics and activities
7. Serving as a co-facilitator
8. Group evaluations
9. Challenging group member dynamics
10. Tips and Tools

# The Stages of Group Development

Many researchers have described the stages of group development, and various models divide group development into anywhere from three to six stages (Hepworth et al., 2010). No matter the number of stages, it is important to note that group development is a dynamic process. Although each group is different, all groups must go through a process that allows the group to become unified and supportive for participants. *The Circle of Hope: A Guide for Conducting Psychoeducational Support Groups* (WCSAP, 2006) describes three basic group stages:

Stage	Characteristics	Facilitator Tasks	Group Sessions
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group members are getting to know one another and learning about the group purpose.</li> <li>- Group members often express anxieties about group participation and are testing out other group members and the facilitator(s) as trust has not yet been established.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Help group members learn about the group and other members.</li> <li>- Facilitate the establishment of group agreements and goals.</li> <li>- Assist group members in seeing the similarities they have with others in the group.</li> <li>- Develop trust and establish healthy group interactions.</li> </ul>	This stage typically spans sessions 1-2 in an 8-10 week group.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is movement toward establishing common goals among group members.</li> <li>- Group members begin to share personal information in the group.</li> <li>- People are learning how to behave in the group in a way that is conducive to group progress.</li> <li>- At times, conflict may arise between group members as they navigate their learning process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitate balanced group participation, encouraging members to participate or allow more space for others to participate.</li> <li>- Assist group members in developing trust, with group members and with you as the facilitator, by sharing their stories and finding common ground.</li> <li>- Help the group continue moving forward toward identified group goals.</li> </ul>	In an 8-10 week group, most of the sessions will fall into this stage of development.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The third stage leads up to the end of the group and provides closure. It is common for group members to feel like they are losing a support system and experience some grief related to the group ending.</li> <li>- Typically, a strong trust has been established between group members, and the group dynamics are stable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bring in activities that focus on providing the group with closure.</li> <li>- Acknowledge group members' feelings about the end of group, and allow space to process how they may be feeling.</li> <li>- Focus on ways group members can access support after group, possibly providing referrals or discussing other groups.</li> </ul>	This stage typically includes the last 2-3 sessions in an 8-10 week group.

# Group Session Organization and Structure

Each support group session ideally builds upon the session before it, promoting group momentum and working toward goal achievement. Different support groups are structured in different ways to best meet the needs of group members and the skill sets of facilitators. Here we have provided an example of the typical structure of OCRCC support groups offered in an 8-session format as well as sample timelines for the first, middle, and final group sessions.

## Sample Group Structure

### I. First Session

- a. Allow time for introductions of each group member and facilitator.
- b. Establish group agreements with input from all group members (example provided at the end of this section).
- c. Fill out a participation agreement (example provided at the end of this section).
- d. Lead an activity that helps the group learn about each other and helps people get comfortable.
- e. Gather input from group members on the topics and goals they would like to address while in the group.
- f. If there is time, provide a brief activity to build group cohesion.
- g. Provide time to debrief before leaving the session.

### II. Middle Sessions

- a. Have time for checking in at the beginning of each session.
- b. Reiterate group agreements as needed, especially confidentiality.
- c. Keep a running list of topics and activities that relate to the topics and goals identified by the group. Refer to the list when appropriate to facilitate discussion.
- d. Maintain the focus on group goals.
- e. Be flexible enough to design each session based on the needs of the group.
- f. Allow time for closure and debriefing at the end of each session to help ensure group members are in a healthy place when they leave the session.
- g. By the sixth session, begin conversations about the end of the group and preparations for group closure.

### III. Final Session

- a. Allow time to talk about the group disbanding and to process group members' feelings about this topic.
- b. Allow space for reflecting on the group experience.
- c. Provide the post-evaluation survey for participants to complete.
- d. Ritualize the closing in some way based on what the group wants (for example, having a potluck for the last session or sharing notes with each other).
- e. Offer information on support resources for after the group ends, including other group opportunities or other appropriate referrals.
- f. Address the issue of members wanting future contact with facilitators and other group members. How will this be handled based on agency policy?

# Sample Session Timelines

## First Session (6-8pm)

6:00-6:30 - Introduction and Getting Started

- Facilitators and group members introduce themselves to each other
- Facilitators give an overview of what to expect from the support group and hosting agency
- Group establishes group agreements and signs participation agreement together

6:30-7:00 - Relationship-Building

- Complete an activity that promotes getting to know each other.

7:00-7:10 - Break, if needed

7:10-8:45 - Facilitated Discussion or Activity

8:45-9:00 - Reflection

- Reflect on the first session and/or begin group closure ritual
- Give reminders or information on the upcoming session as needed.

## Middle Sessions (6-8pm)

6:00-6:20 - Check in

6:20-7:00 - New topic for facilitated discussion or activity

7:00-7:10 - Break, if needed

7:10-8:40 - Continue facilitated discussion of topic or continue a prepared activity

8:40-9:00 - Debrief and close group session

## Final Session (6-8pm)

6:00-6:20 - Check in

6:20-7:00 - Discussion of closing group

7:00-7:10 - Break, if needed

7:10-8:35 - Closure activity

8:35-9:00 - Complete post-group evaluations, offer referral information as appropriate, and debrief

It is important to begin talking about the end of a group prior to the last session to:

1. Find out what group members would like to do for the last session;
2. Help prepare people to transition out of the group as smoothly as possible; and
3. Identify additional supports group members may need once the group has ended.

# Group Agreements

During the first session, it is essential for group members and facilitators to establish a set of group agreements that will guide group communication and interactions. Also known as “group guidelines” or “ground rules,” these agreements are made up of a list of statements that group members decide upon, helping to make the group a safe and supportive space for all participants. It is essential for all group members and facilitators to participate in drafting of the list and to agree on the list as a whole. The following is a list of some possible group agreements:

1. What is said in the group stays in the group.
2. We agree to come to group sober.
3. We will respect others’ differences, beliefs, lifestyles, cultures, sexual preferences, and other forms of identity.
4. We will “move forward/move back” (allow time for all group members to share in the group process).
5. We will refrain from interrupting each other.
6. We agree to ask someone before assuming it is okay to touch that person.
7. We agree to check in with the group facilitators about any difficulties, problems, or concerns that we have during or after a group session.
8. We agree that any language is acceptable.
9. We agree to speak from our personal experience by using “I statements.”
10. We agree to turn off our cell phones or put them on silent during group sessions.
11. We agree that group members may leave the room to take a break at any time, and the group can continue discussing.

Although there are numerous ways to establish this list, it is often helpful for group facilitators to come into the group with an idea of a few essential statements to add to the list. Facilitators can start by giving an example or two to get conversation started and then use the following questions to elicit more input from group members:

1. What would make this group a safe and supportive environment for each of you?
2. What would you like to add to this list?
3. How do you all feel about the list we have created?
4. Do you have anything else to add or anything you would like to modify?
5. Can everyone agree fully to this list?

Group agreements provide facilitators with a tool to use throughout a group, creating a standard for group interactions. When conflicts arise in the group setting that are caused by deviating from the agreements, facilitators should bring the focus back to respecting the concrete list of guidelines for group conduct. This is a powerful mechanism for creating an effective group with healthy group dynamics. OCRCC has also found it helpful to use a separate Participation Agreement in addition to establishing group guidelines. This is given out after group members create their own list of agreements and is signed by all group members during their first session. It covers the agency’s expectations for all group members in a bit more detail than the group agreements and lets people know about the

agency's confidentiality policy. An example Participation Agreement is provided at the end of this section. At OCRCC, once the participation agreements are signed, the Support Group Coordinator keeps them on file.

## Structure vs. Flexibility and the Planning Process

Every group facilitator has their own style and planning process - some wanting more or less structure for each session. Different facilitators also engage in more or less planning prior to each session. With experience, the planning process for groups may change for facilitators as they become more comfortable and skilled in facilitation. As a facilitator, especially if you are a new facilitator, it is necessary to think about the following questions when planning a new group experience:

1. Who are the group members coming into this particular group?
2. What are their collective goals for group participation?
3. Will it be most useful for these group members to have more or less structured group sessions? For example, do you have the sense that group members will open up easily, or will it be very difficult to get conversations started?
4. What activities may be useful for these group members to promote both discussion and collective learning?
5. What planning process (creating group session outlines, having a list of possible discussion questions, etc.) will allow me to feel prepared for group sessions while still allowing me to be flexible in meeting the group's needs?
6. If the group is being co-facilitated, how will I work with the co-facilitator to plan each session and make sure we both feel prepared and are working collaboratively?

Thinking through your answers to these questions will likely be helpful in getting started in your planning process. As you gain more experience in facilitation, the planning process will become more "second nature," allowing you increased efficiency and more comfort in planning and offering groups.

# Possible Topics and Activities

Each support group is unique, with a different set of members and needs. As discussed earlier in this manual, the group member screening process will help facilitators gather a list of possible topics and goals for a group as voiced by the members. Groups typically address at least some of the following themes/topics:

- Fear
- Anger
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Trust
- Grief and loss
- Relationships
- Self-blame
- Shame
- Sexuality
- Intimacy
- Power and control
- Healing and self-care
- Self-esteem
- Body image
- PTSD symptoms and other impacts of sexual trauma

During each screening, it is important to identify which themes each group member would like to address, as well as their learning style. Facilitators can then compile a list of potential group topics to be tweaked on the first session and throughout the group. During the first group session, it is helpful to present the list of group themes and get group members' feedback. Remember: get group input on the list of topics and themes, and be flexible. It is not likely that you will be able to address every topic on the list, and the needs and goals of group members may change throughout the course of the group. You can continue to check in with group members and revise your list and plans throughout the group process. It also may be helpful to acknowledge that the group may not be able to cover every topic, though you will do your best to help facilitate a useful group experience for everyone involved.

During the screening process, it is also especially helpful to assess how group members learn best. This information will help you choose appropriate group activities. For example, do they express that they learn best through discussion, writing, listening to music, doing art, or in other ways? Based on what you learn about the group members, you can plan your activities according to what will be most likely to benefit the group overall. The following table can help you identify possible activities based on group member learning styles.

## Different Forms of Expression and Processing

<b>Discussion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare a list of possible discussion questions to elicit and guide targeted conversation.</li><li>• Provide a poem, short story, news article, list of quotes, or other written document to read together and discuss.</li></ul>
<b>Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use journals as a part of the group experience.</li><li>• Provide writing prompts to engage group members in writing during or outside of the group.</li><li>• Encourage writing in the group prior to open discussion. Members can use the opportunity to gather their thoughts.</li><li>• Recommend journaling as a form of self-care.</li></ul>
<b>Music</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bring music to the space.</li><li>• Provide printed lyrics to discuss together after listening to a song.</li><li>• Encourage group members to recommend songs or music they would like to share in the group.</li><li>• Recommend music as a form of self-care.</li></ul>
<b>Art</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bring materials to the group to make a themed collage. Collages can be done individually or as a group.</li><li>• For members who like to draw rather than write, encourage drawing in their journals.</li><li>• Recommend art as a form of self-care.</li><li>• Explore therapeutic art techniques that may work in the group.</li></ul>

There are many internet resources that provide example group activities and materials to draw upon in your plans. Be creative and think broadly about what types of activities may promote healing in a support group. You can also use web-based search engines for additional materials. Of utmost importance is for activities and themes to be:

1. Specific to the desired themes, goals, and learning styles of the specific group members;
2. Exercises that the facilitators know how to employ and feel comfortable using in a sensitive group setting;
3. Culturally appropriate;
4. Short enough to allow for debriefing and closure at the end of each group session; and
5. Safe and supportive for the group.

# Serving as a Co-facilitator

When planning a group by yourself, you will have more autonomy over the planning process. However, if you are co-facilitating a group, it will be important to find ways to each fully participate in the planning and facilitation processes. In order for co-facilitation to be effective, it is important to pair up with someone with whom you feel comfortable and with whom you can create a positive group environment. You will spend a great deal of time with this person, and you want to know that you can trust each other to offer a wonderful group experience.

If your program has the capacity to use a co-facilitation model for groups, it is ideal for many reasons. The following list highlights some of these benefits (adapted from the research outlined in Hepworth et al., 2010):

- You have two people to follow what is going on in the group during each session.
- Each facilitator brings their own qualities and skills to groups as well as their own background and personal perspectives. This can help the group feel like a good fit for a wider audience of members.
- Co-facilitators also interact within the group setting, which can serve as a model for other group members of positive communication and problem-solving skills.
- Facilitators can give feedback to each other on their facilitation skills and style.
- Having two facilitators also means that a group session may not have to be canceled if a group leader falls ill or has a personal emergency.
- If a group member needs to take a break from the group, one group leader can check on that person while the group continues.

However, having co-facilitators is not always possible for many reasons as it requires more time, effort, and people to offer groups. Choosing to have one or two group leaders should be based on your agency's capacity. Offering groups with one leader can also be very effective following the same principles included in this manual and other group-focused resources.

## **Helpful Hint!**

*It can be useful to set a specific meeting day and time for co-facilitator meetings prior to the start of group.*

*These may be weekly during the group. This will avoid becoming too busy to find a time to meet regularly during the group process.*

Assuming you will have co-facilitators in the group, the question becomes, "How do I develop a sound relationship with another facilitator (who I may or may not get to choose), and learn to work together seamlessly in a group setting?" It is a process that takes intention, time, and effort, and it starts well before the group actually begins.

Here are some tips based on suggestions in Toseland's and Rivas' *An Introduction to Group Work Practice* (2011):

- Co-facilitators should meet regularly to plan for the group and discuss group issues as they arise throughout the group process.
- When co-facilitators meet during the group process, it is helpful to discuss each session. It is useful to discuss what went well in the session, what they did well in working together, what difficulties arose during the session, how they will work together during the next session, and how the group is progressing. Assuming facilitators meet each week following the weekly group session, these meetings should also be used to plan for the following session.
- It is helpful to meet as soon after each session as possible, so facilitators will be fresh and able to remember what occurred in the session. This also allows for more time to plan for the next session.

OCRCC has found the “Co-Facilitator Inventory” at the end of this section to be helpful in pairing compatible facilitators for new groups. This tool is included at the end of this section and is meant to be used by all group facilitators. Each facilitator fills out this tool for the Support Group Coordinator to keep on file. The Coordinator then uses the forms to match facilitators based on particular skills, strengths, and facilitation styles. It is also useful for co-facilitators to discuss their answers to the inventory with each other when they start planning their first group together. This discussion will assist in getting to know each other and learning about each other's facilitation styles.

This inventory can be especially challenging for new facilitators to complete as their style is not yet developed. However, it can help new facilitators think through how they might handle different group challenges and begin to think about an array of group situations. Though the inventory is intended for use with people who have facilitated groups before, you may decide to use it with new facilitators for this reason.

*Participating in the group has...  
“helped me grow and own this experience, instead of the  
experience owning me.”  
- Thomas*

# Group Evaluations

Evaluating the group process is essential for numerous reasons:

1. It helps you improve your support groups over time to make them increasingly beneficial to survivors. Reviewing the data from evaluations will indicate which components of your groups are beneficial and which are not. Learning this information will help you continue to craft a group model that best fits your community needs.
2. Having this data can assist you in showing the use of support groups to your community. This is key for two reasons. First, positive feedback from group participants illustrates the potential benefits of support groups. This may encourage more survivors to explore joining a support group at your agency. Second, positive support group results will encourage community engagement and possibly secure further funding for your support group program.
3. It is often necessary to share data with funders to continue receiving funding or access new funding sources. Many funders will require this information, so it is essential that your evaluation process is highly organized and established from the beginning of the group program.

An example of an evaluation tool used by OCRCC is included at the end of this section. This tool may serve as a starting place for devising an evaluation that will best benefit the survivors in your community and your agency as a whole. For evaluation support, please contact the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

*I got a lot of ideas of how to support myself but also  
how to let myself be supported.  
- Allie*

# Challenging Group Member Dynamics

Many challenges will likely arise during any group process. This section will highlight a few of these challenges and possible interventions that facilitators may use to help the group continue to progress. This section is based on OCRCC sexual violence support group experiences.

Group members will take on their own roles in the group and express themselves in different ways. Several common group member communication patterns can quickly become problematic:

<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Possible Interventions</i>
Monopolization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking up too much space in the group</li> <li>• Taking over the conversation to a degree that is unhealthy for the group</li> <li>• Often interrupting others in the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank the individual for their contribution and ask questions directly of other group members.</li> <li>• Provide additional structure in the sessions, as in writing prompts or asking for comments from specific individuals in a certain order.</li> <li>• Stop making eye contact with the monopolizer in order to subtly discourage further talking.</li> </ul>
Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not entering the discussions on an ongoing basis</li> <li>• Sharing very little in the group sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage and reinforce all group member participation through activities such as check ins.</li> <li>• Ask silent members direct, open-ended questions to engage them in the discussion.</li> </ul>
Negativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressing pessimistic or critical views toward others on an ongoing basis in group sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge the negative comments in a polite manner, asking for additional information or offering a different perspective.</li> </ul>

<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Possible Interventions</i>
Creating Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing with group members over details of the conversation</li> <li>• Correcting imperfections in group members' speech</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intervene in displays of inappropriate behavior by asking for others' opinions or providing a new question.</li> <li>• Model conflict-free interactions with other group members/facilitator.</li> </ul>
Judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing advice to other group participants when they do not ask for it</li> <li>• Evaluating others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intervene in moments of disrespectful communication by directly addressing the comment and redirecting the conversation.</li> <li>• Remind group members that although they have a lot in common, everyone is unique and copes with things in different ways.</li> </ul>
Poor Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking group facilitators for their personal cell phone numbers</li> <li>• Relying on facilitators for a ride when it is against agency protocol</li> <li>• Pushing boundaries/rules in a way that makes members and facilitators feel uncomfortable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adhere strictly to agency policies and protocols.</li> <li>• Explain agency policies and protocols from the very beginning of the group to all members.</li> <li>• Remind group members of the group agreements.</li> <li>• Find additional supports for the individual if they are in need of more support than the group can provide.</li> </ul>

*Participation in this group has made me feel less alone, less fearful, and more confident in myself.*

*- Derek*

In addition to the interventions listed above, the following more general tips for intervening in problematic behaviors and group dynamics are important:

1. Explicitly go over the group agreements with the group for at least the first two or three sessions.
2. Refer back to the group agreements when problematic behaviors are first identified.
3. Try to intervene in the group space whenever possible, so that problems are dealt with as a group. Directly address disrespectful behavior during the group session as needed to show your support for a safe and supportive group environment.
4. If behaviors are not successfully addressed in the group sessions, talk with the individual before or after a session to address the problematic behavior individually.
5. If the group member cannot appropriately participate in the group and their behavior is a detriment to the other members, dismiss them from group participation.

## Group Member Absences

Outside of specific group member behaviors, group member absences in the following forms can cause a disturbance:

- A group member leaving the group unexpectedly
- Dismissing a group member from participation
- Absenteeism from the group

It is helpful to think through your responses to these events prior to facilitating your first group. Here are some tips that may help you navigate these situations:

1. Establish an agency procedure for what to do when a group member leaves the group unexpectedly, both due to dismissal by the agency and other reasons.
2. Ensure that facilitators know how to appropriately communicate with the overall group about a person leaving the group, while maintaining the survivor's confidentiality.
3. OCRCC has found that notifying the overall group that a person will not be returning to a group and processing that together is helpful and important for group members, especially in a very cohesive group.

## Facilitator-Member Boundaries During and After a Group

Maintaining appropriate facilitator-member boundaries is key to a successful and healthy group experience. Agencies should avoid situations in which survivors feel dependent on a particular group or specific facilitators for support. When thinking about your support group protocols around facilitator-member boundaries and communication, consider the following questions:

1. If a group member is in crisis outside of a group session, who will that person call for support?

*Suggestion: Your agency's 24-hour hotline number or the group member's therapist, if they have one.*

2. If a group member requests follow up contact after a group session to further debrief, who will be responsible for following up with that individual and how will they know to provide the follow up contact?

*Suggestion: It is ideal for these responsibilities to be shared by more than one agency staff member/volunteer if possible. This process should be clearly outlined to the facilitators and the group members.*

3. What will a facilitator/the agency do if a client continues to push agency boundaries and make others uncomfortable?

*Suggestion: Develop an agency protocol for addressing clients who are not following agency policies, and ensure that facilitators and agency staff know how to appropriately approach these issues in a uniform manner.*

4. When using volunteer facilitators, what protocols will we have in place to ensure their right to privacy?

*Suggestion: Volunteer facilitators should be responsible for group communication only during screenings and group sessions (in-person group contacts). All other communication should go through the Support Group Program Coordinator or another agency staff member as the volunteers are not typically in the agency's office. Volunteer facilitators should not give out their personal contact information, and they can go by only their first name to further ensure their privacy.*

5. What will we do if a support group facilitator (volunteer or staff member) does not follow agency protocols and/or does not respect facilitator-member boundaries?

*Suggestion: At times, this occurs when facilitators become over-invested in the well-being of clients to the point of taking on each client as a personal responsibility. Establish clear boundaries for facilitators and promote self-care activities for all facilitators in your agency. Also, it is important to provide adequate supervision for facilitators.*

Based on OCRCC group experiences, here are additional tips for decreasing boundary concerns:

- Protocols and policies about group participation should be clearly outlined to facilitators, agency staff, and support group participants. Preparing and providing written documents that outline this information is especially useful.
- Explain what group members can expect from the agency and how to access support when they need it outside of a group session.
- Include information on group expectations and boundaries in a written group participation agreement.
- Be prepared to dismiss a group member if necessary and find other more appropriate supports for the survivor.

# Group Participation Agreement

This group is open to women who:

- Believe they can benefit from the group.
- Feel they are now able to discuss their feelings about the abuse with a group of peers who have endured similar experiences.
- Would like to both give and receive group support.
- Will respect the feelings, choices, decisions, and statements of other group members, even if they are different from their own.
- Will respect group confidentiality.
- Will notify one of the group facilitators during the group, call the agency during office hours (\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_), or call the 24-hour help line (\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_) if they feel themselves or another group member is at risk for hurting themselves or others.
- Will attend group sessions regularly and arrive on time, or if there is an emergency, call the business line and leave a message for the \_\_\_\_\_ if they cannot attend a group session.

Group participants should be aware that:

- The agency welcomes diversity among its participants.
- The group is intended to supplement, not substitute, private therapy.
- The facilitators do not assume personal or professional responsibility for participants' therapy needs.
- Participants are encouraged to discuss and implement other guidelines as needed.

I accept the above conditions for participation in the group.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Co-facilitator Inventory

*Originally adapted from Pfeiffer and Jones (1975)*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the group you are interested in co-facilitating (Circle all that apply):

Rape/Sexual Assault Survivors

Male Survivors

Incest/Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors

Spanish-Speaking Survivors

Survivors' Loved Ones

Other:

Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay/Transgender Survivors

I am able to co-facilitate a group during the (Circle all that apply):

Summer

Fall

Spring

Winter

Anytime

Depends (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Each time I co-facilitate a group, I expect to learn the following things:

The best thing that could happen would be...

The worst thing that could happen would be...

## Group Facilitator Style

1. When I facilitate a support group, I prefer to be:

Talking or otherwise actively involved

Quiet and observant

2. I prefer facilitating:

By myself

With a co-facilitator

3. My style is characteristically more:

Subtle

Direct

4. The following best describes my group planning style:

Pre-planning is essential.

I am easy going; it will all come together and work out.

Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

5. My personal goals for being a facilitator include:

6. I think group members typically have the following personal goals for participating in a support group:

7. When starting the first group session, I would like to...

8. When one group member is silent for a particularly long time, I would...

9. When the group is silent, I would...

10. When someone cries in a support group, I would...

11. Some group norms/agreements that I think are essential in a group are...

12. When someone comes in late, I would...

13. When there is a conflict in the group, I would...

14. When there is an attack on one individual in a group, I would...
15. One thing that I don't like that may happen in small groups is...
16. One thing I really like or think I would like about facilitating a support group is...
17. If my co-facilitator is unable to attend a group session, I would...
18. An ideal co-facilitator is...
19. Effective ways to communicate with my co-facilitator are...
20. A good match for my co-facilitator style would be someone who...
21. My strengths as a co-facilitator are...
22. Challenges that I may face as a co-facilitator are...

# Post-Group Evaluation

## *Primary Survivors of Sexual Violence*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for completing our Post-Group Evaluation. These evaluations are confidential. At the end of the evaluation, you can choose how you would like for the agency to use the comments and information you provide. When complete, please place it in the folder provided by the facilitators. These evaluations help us ensure that we are providing safe and supportive group experiences for group members.

The \_\_\_\_\_ who coordinates the Support Group Program will review all evaluations. Results will then be summarized and shared with the group facilitators at a later date with your permission. We take these steps to help ensure that you may share information without personal identification.

1. Do you feel that participation in this group helped you to feel less alone in your experience of sexual violence?

*Yes No Somewhat Not sure*

2. Do you feel that participation in this group helped to increase feelings of being supported in your healing process?

*Yes No Somewhat Not sure*

3. When you first joined the group, what did you hope to gain from participation?

4. Do you feel that those personal goals were reached?

*Yes No Somewhat Not sure*

Comments:

5. Did you experience any other positive gains which you did not expect? Please explain.

6. What aspects of the group did you feel were most helpful to you (for example, the other group members, activities, facilitators, meeting place, other)? Please explain.

7. What aspects of the group do you feel were least helpful to you? Please explain.

8. How would you describe the effectiveness of the group facilitators (for example, preparedness, facilitation skills, listening skills, guiding not leading, etc.)?

9. Do you have any suggestions for improving the group? Please explain.

10. Please complete this sentence about how the group has affected your healing process. You can write more than one sentence to complete your thought(s).

*Participating in this support group has...*

11. Did you see a therapist throughout the time you participated in this group?

Yes    No

Further explanation (if needed):

12. We welcome other comments or suggestions:

13. Can we use comments and information provided on this form in public documents? For example, your feedback may be used in communication with the community (including people or agencies who contribute money to the support group program) or in presentations on the agency's support groups. We will not use information that identifies you, such as your name, without your permission.

Yes No

14. Can we use comments and information provided on this form in reports to grantors that fund the agency? We will not use information that identifies you, such as your name, without your permission.

Yes No

15. Can we share comments and information provided on this form with this group's facilitators without identifying information?

Yes No

16. Would you like for your real first name to be used if your comments are shared outside of the agency?

Yes No

If so, please write your name here: \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU!!

# Diversifying Groups

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People come to support groups with a wide variety of life experiences. Additionally, the way people process violent experience(s) is often informed by their membership in various groups based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, class, and other forms of identity.

For example, many people have access to fewer resources, information, or support due to an array of external barriers and systems of oppression. As a facilitator, it is important to be sensitive to the specific challenges that may arise for survivors based on the identities they possess and the potential impacts certain groups may experience that are caused by identity-related barriers and discrimination.

It is important to note that the challenges presented in this section are not experienced by everyone who identifies with a certain group mentioned here. Also, there are many groups not listed. It is important to be constantly engaged in work to increase your agency's ability to serve underserved populations in your community. The goal of this section is to increase sensitivity to some of the challenges specific populations may experience in order to increase a facilitator's ability to provide open, accessible, and understanding support group environments. In this section, we will discuss potential challenges faced by sexual violence survivors as well as some alternative group modalities that can be incorporated into a support group.

1. Male survivors
2. LGBTQ survivors
3. Secondary survivors
4. Survivors of intimate partner sexual violence
5. Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse
6. Survivors with disabilities
7. Examples of alternative healing modalities

# Male Survivors

Sexual violence is often seen as an issue that affects women. Yet many men are also survivors of sexual violence. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's *2003 National Crime Victimization Survey*, one in thirty-three American men have experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime. Research also shows that approximately 1 in 6 males have experienced sexual abuse in some form before age 18 (1in6.org). It is a myth that men do not experience sexual violence, and furthermore, ideas about masculinity present unique challenges to male survivors of sexual assault and abuse. Some of these challenges include:

- **Shame.** Many men report feeling a heightened sense of shame following their victimization. Men are socialized to be strong and powerful, so any loss of power can challenge a man's sense of self. While many notions of masculinity need to be challenged, those notions can still impact the way a man processes his victimization and increase shame. Ultimately, this shame can prevent men from seeking the support needed following a sexually violent experience.
- **Sexuality.** Most men who are sexually assaulted or abused are sexually violated by men who identify as heterosexual. The assault or abuse can often cause men to feel that disclosing sexually violent experiences will cause people to see them as homosexual. Due to social stigmas about homosexuality, this can feel very intimidating and prevent the survivor from accessing resources or finding the resources they desire.
- **Lack of information.** Because of the myth that men are not survivors of sexual violence, men may not be aware of the resources available to them. For example, a man may not feel that rape crisis centers are designed to support them after an assault or may not know that there are support groups designed for male survivors of sexual violence.
- **Lack of validation.** Many men encounter the idea "What man wouldn't want sex?" If the perpetrator of the crime is a woman, a man can be made to feel like he is "less of a man" for not wanting the sexual activity. Men are often viewed as always wanting sex and often face disbelief when disclosing a sexually violent experience. Men can be victimized by women and men.

# LGBTQ Survivors

While great strides have been made in the legal and social acceptance of people who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer), many LGBTQ people frequently face institutional, social, and internal oppression. This oppression can impact their ability to process and access resources following a sexually violent experience. There are certain challenges that face LGBTQ people when looking for a support group. These include:

- **Degree of outness.** Coming out and publicly identifying as LGBTQ is a process, not an event. At the time an LGBTQ survivor seeks support, they may be out to no one, only a few people, or could be out to everyone in their life. The degree of outness could impact their comfort with seeking support. It is important to ensure that support group participation is confidential, while letting people know that they could potentially know a participant in the support group or someone in the agency unexpectedly. By letting people know of the risks of participation, LGBTQ survivors are better able to make a choice that is safest for them.
- **Homophobia within the group.** Support groups bring together a variety of people. Some people might have homophobic beliefs that could create an unsafe environment for LGBTQ survivors. It's important to address this during the screening process to create a safe environment for all participants. Also, incorporating the desire to create a safe space into the group agreements and participation agreement allows for a reminder at the start of each group.
- **Internalized homophobia.** LGBTQ people are not immune to the homophobic ideas prevalent in our culture. Some LGBTQ people may begin to believe these ideas about themselves. As with other marginalized groups, stereotypes about LGBTQ people are often used to blame or cast doubt on their experiences with sexual violence. Internalized homophobia can cause an LGBTQ survivor to do this to themselves. As with all survivors, self-blame can create a major barrier to accessing resources and support.

## Secondary Survivors

Secondary survivors are friends, family members, partners, and others who have a relationship with someone who directly experienced sexual violence. As they care for the survivor, they too have been victimized by the violence. Secondary survivors often go through a personal healing process that can be somewhat similar to the healing process of a person who directly experienced violence. Support groups designed for secondary survivors can very successfully provide a safe and supportive space for the loved ones of survivors to heal together and find validation for their experiences.

Secondary survivors commonly experience a wide range of reactions and concerns. Those listed below are adapted from an article by Tracy Sheeley in association with the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault:

- **Anger.** This could be anger directed toward the perpetrator or situation, but it is commonly inappropriately directed at the sexual violence survivor.
- **A desire for revenge against the perpetrator.**
- **Shame.** Secondary survivors are not immune to unhelpful cultural responses to sexual violence or common myths about rape and sexual abuse. This internalized response to sexual violence can cause secondary survivors to feel ashamed of talking about the violence with others or worried about the reactions others.

- **Guilt and helplessness.** The loved ones of survivors may feel that they could have done something to prevent the assault or abuse.
- **A loss of intimacy.** It is not uncommon for secondary survivors to feel distanced from their loved one who is healing from violence, and they may not understand why there is distance or why the survivor won't just "get over" what happened.
- **An interruption in daily life/routine.**

Given these common secondary survivor reactions, facilitators can be helpful by providing space to:

1. Describe the true nature of sexual violence and debunk common myths about the experience;
2. Give information on common reactions survivors and secondary survivors may have to the experience of sexual assault and abuse;
3. Provide normalization and validation of secondary survivors' feelings;
4. Allow a safe and supportive space for expressing feelings and reactions that they may not be able to express to any other person in their lives;
5. Redirect anger to the perpetrator and away from the survivor; and
6. Allow space to discuss feelings about intimacy and patience with regaining intimacy over time.

## Survivors of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence

While everyone experiences the trauma of sexual violence differently, there are often commonalities in the healing process for survivors of intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV). When planning and facilitating a support group with survivors of IPSV, it is important to realize the healing needs that are unique to this population. Those who experience IPSV often experience multiple sexual assaults as well as other forms of violence from their partner, such as physical, psychological, and emotional abuse during the course of a single intimate relationship. Many times IPSV survivors suffer maltreatment for long periods of times, sometimes for many years. Here are some things to consider:

- **Chronic assault.** Due to the likely chronic nature of IPSV, the damaging psychological effects can sometimes be more extreme. When planning and facilitating a support group, many survivors of IPSV experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression as well as helplessness and low self-esteem.
- **Assault by an intimate partner.** Another way to understand why IPSV can be so traumatic is by acknowledging that the violence occurred in the context of an ongoing relationship. Survivors have to cope not only with the sexual violence that occurred but also with the fact that the abuser is someone with whom they've been in an intimate relationship. Researchers have found that sexual assault by a current partner was the strongest predictor of PTSD, stress, and dissociation when compared to sexual violence by a previous partner or by a non-

intimate partner. IPSV survivors heal in a variety of ways and experience outcomes of the violence differently. Many times survivors feel shocked and betrayed that someone they love and share a relationship with could hurt them so badly. Some develop an inability to trust romantic partners or other loved ones. Some might experience humiliation, anger or guilt, sometimes feeling the violence perpetrated by their partner might partially be their fault, or that they somehow deserved it. Not surprisingly, fear of being assaulted again is a common outcome for IPSV survivors, as well (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Kelly & Stermac, 2012; Temple, Weston, Rodriguez, & Marshal, 2007).

## Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Many rape crisis centers are seeing a large need for support groups geared specifically toward adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest. It is common for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and childhood incest to never have sought support or even disclosed their abuse prior to adulthood. Being in a group with other survivors of this type of abuse can be a very powerful and healing experience. Certain topics that might arise in groups with adult survivors of CSA (adapted from information on the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network [RAINN] website) include:

- **Sexuality.** Sex is a difficult thing to talk about and even more so if your first experiences with sex were abusive. Adult survivors of CSA may need to discuss the way the abuse shaped their feelings about sex, sexuality, and intimacy. Some adult survivors of CSA report that memories of the abuse prevent them from engaging in enjoyable sexual relationships.
- **Trust.** Most children who are sexually abused know their abuser. Often the abuser might be a member of their family, a friend of the family, or another trusted adult. Being victimized by an adult who a child trusts can greatly impact the child's ability to trust others in the future.
- **Dissociation.** Many survivors separate themselves from the memories and feelings of abuse. This is a common psychological defense from trauma. While this might prevent survivors from fully experiencing their negative emotions, it can also present barriers to healing. In support groups, survivors might be surprised by the depth of emotion they experience when exploring an event that happened years ago.
- **Flashbacks.** It is not uncommon for survivors generally and specifically survivors of CSA to have flashbacks and/or nightmares related to the abuse they experienced.
- **Guilt and shame.** A common tactic used by abusers is to shift blame to the child being abused. Combined with society's tendency to blame survivors of sexual violence for the crimes committed against them, it is no surprise that many children who are victimized blame themselves. Adult survivors might have carried this guilt with them throughout most of their lives. Often, feelings of guilt and

shame can prevent children and adults from seeking support.

- **Problems with boundaries.** It is not uncommon for adult survivors of CSA to experience problems with discerning appropriate personal boundaries, having had their boundaries breached by a trusted adult at a young age. Survivors may have difficulty setting their own boundaries and/or understanding the personal boundaries of others.
- **Grieving.** Abuse experienced as a child can cause the loss of many things, including perceived innocence, relationships, trust, and more. Allowing space to grieve these losses can be important to healing from the abuse.
- **Anger.** It is often difficult for adult survivors of CSA to get in touch with their own feelings of anger, while some adult survivors may understandably experience a great deal of anger centered on the abuse.

## Survivors with Disabilities

The term “disability” is a broad term that includes physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities. Prior to starting a support group, it is important that you assess your agency’s level of accessibility. A good resource to use in your assessment is the *Fundamental Elements of Accessibility* which is available for free downloading online. Here are some things to consider when trying to create a safe space for survivors with disabilities:

- Be sure to pick locations that are accessible for all group members. Even if you don’t think there is a survivor with a disability, it’s important to hold support groups in accessible locations. If a survivor with a disability hears of your support group but realizes it is not in an accessible location, it could discourage the survivors from contacting you.
- Be sure the materials you distribute can be made available in a variety of formats, such as online, in large print, verbally, etc., to meet the needs of people with cognitive disabilities or sight difficulties.
- Ensure that facilitators have training on how to work with survivors with various forms of disability..

# Alternative Healing Modalities

People learn and grow in a variety of different ways. For some survivors, the standard support group model might not be best suited for them. For this reason, OCRCC and others have begun to use non-traditional support group models to meet the diverse needs of survivors. Below, you'll find descriptions of groups OCRCC has offered in the past that may give you ideas for alternative healing groups:

## **Healing with Nature: A Horticultural Support Group for Survivors**

Our agency is offering a support group for female survivors of sexual assault and abuse. We will meet for eight sessions. Through introducing elements of nature and horticultural therapy techniques, we will explore topics like anger, trust, and self-care. This group will provide the opportunity to learn, share, and gain support from others with similar experiences of sexual violence.

*Note: This group is only offered with the co-leadership of a certified horticultural therapist. However, spending time in nature and working with plants may be a useful part of your support groups based on the skill sets of your facilitators.*

## **Mindful Movement: A Dance Group for Survivors of Sexual Violence**

Our agency is offering a dance support group for adult, female survivors of sexual assault and abuse. We will meet weekly for six sessions. This group will allow us to focus on self-care, relaxation, and reconnecting the body and mind. It is an opportunity to learn, share, and gain support from others with similar experiences of sexual violence.

*Note: This group is offered with at least one co-leader who has dance therapy background or expertise in using movement to promote self-care. You can draw upon the skill sets of people in your community and agency to create unique healing groups.*

## **Healing through Art: A Support Workshop for Survivors of Sexual Violence and Abuse**

Our agency is offering an arts and crafts support workshop for adult, female survivors of sexual violence and abuse. We will meet weekly for four sessions. Participants will have the opportunity to complete arts and crafts projects that promote healing and self-care. We will offer several activities as well as time to process feelings that come up while completing these projects. This workshop is an opportunity to learn, share, and gain support from others with similar experiences of sexual violence and abuse. People of all levels of artistic ability are welcome.

# In Conclusion

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Dear Advocates,

Support groups have been shown to be a powerful healing resource for survivors of sexual violence. We sincerely hope that this manual has provided useful tips for creating and sustaining a support group program. Throughout this manual, we have detailed the basic steps and materials necessary to cultivate a successful support group program at your agency. Whether you currently have a support group program, want to get one running, or have a support group program that is not functioning at the level you desire, we feel confident that the information provided in this manual paired with your expertise, passion, and commitment to survivors will elevate your agency's support group program to the next level of success.

As you build your support group program, it is important to remember that you know your community best. The suggestions contained in this manual are general. It will be your wisdom and experience that fine-tunes this process to succeed in your community.

But that's not all! It is our hope that this document serves as the beginning of a conversation rather than the end. NCCASA exists to provide quality support to all rape crisis centers throughout the state of North Carolina. NCCASA hopes to work with you as you build up your support group program by providing additional resources, technical assistance, and encouragement as you create a program that works for your agency. In addition, the Orange County Rape Crisis Center is available to provide continued support to any program that desires more information. Building a new initiative or revitalizing an old one can be trying; please turn to both of these resources for any support you might need.

It is an honor to be a part of the amazing work you're doing to support survivors and promote healing after sexual violence. Above all, thank you for what you do to support survivors of sexual violence. You are an invaluable part of your community and an invaluable part of the movement against sexual violence.

Thank you.



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