

AMHC SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES

GROUP FACILITATION MANUAL

(MATERIAL TAKEN FROM: The Power of Social Connection Developing and Coordinating Sustainable Support Group Programs for Survivors of Sexual Violence)

**Setting the Stage**:

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. This material will be helpful to you moving forward to make a group happen in your office.

* 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.

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 y 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.

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. Length will depend on the group offered.

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.

**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

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

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.

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

**(See appendix for Group Referral Form)**

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.

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. 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 fi t for you at this time. These meetings help us do our best to put together safe and supportive group experiences for everyone involved.)*

**(See appendix form titled Group Screening Form)**

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 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?

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. After a screening is completed consult with co-facilitator about clients screened or reach out to another staff member to consult. A lot can be said for practice-based experience; making screening decisions typically gets much easier over time.

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 fi t, 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 a 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.

Attributes of an Effective Facilitator

There are arrays of different personal characteristics that are likely to help a facilitator be an effective group leader. Below 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.

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 likely is an effective facilitator

Facilitation Skills

Beyond the personal characteristics listed previously, effective facilitators also work to hone the following group leadership skills. 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

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.

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.

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.

Example facilitator statements:

• “We’ve been focused on this topic for a while. 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**.**

Effective support group facilitators seek to meet several important overarching group

Goals

• **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.

Group Norms and Safety

During the first session, it is essential for group members and facilitators to establish a set of group norms and safety that will guide group communication and interactions. Also known as “group guidelines” or “ground rules,” these norms 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 norms 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 norms, 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. It is helpful to use a separate Participation Agreement in addition to establishing group norms. 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 norms and lets people know about the agency’s confidentiality policy. Once the participation norms are signed, the facilitator keeps them on file.

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

• 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 fi t 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 resource.

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

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

a participant 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.

**(See appendix for group evaluation form)**