



# Support Group Facilitator Manual

MECASA, 2023

**mecasa**  
MAINE COALITION AGAINST  
SEXUAL ASSAULT

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## History

In 2017 the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA) convened a work group to develop a foundational Support Group Facilitator Training. The group included experienced facilitators from six sexual assault support centers, MECASA staff, and Nancy Ansheles, a consultant who specializes in training on facilitation. Together, we developed an annual training and this manual based on the philosophy and practices of advocate-facilitated support groups and the MECASA Quality Assurance Standards (QAS).

After participating in the annual training, advocates will have the skills, tools, and confidence to convene and facilitate a support group with an experienced co-facilitator. This manual will be used during the annual training offered by MECASA and is also intended for centers to use to train new staff one-to-one as needed.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the original and ongoing development of the training and this manual. A special thank you to center staff for their time, wisdom, and sharing of their materials.

## Sexual Assault Support Group Overview

For a long time, well before the anti-rape movement began, communities have come together in groups to heal wounds, celebrate victories, and find humor and love in even the darkest of situations. Stories are shared and, in the sharing, paths out of pain, despair and isolation are found.<sup>1</sup>

Support Groups are spaces where people gather to be in community and to share experiences, thoughts, feelings, and skills. Support groups for survivors of sexual violence share roots with the establishment of rape crisis centers, Consciousness Raising groups, and Speak Outs organized by feminists in the early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> As more and more women began to share their stories of rape and sexual violence, volunteers and activists began to address unmet needs with hotlines, legislative advocacy, and support groups. Support groups provided an opportunity for sharing and connection, but also to understand how personal experiences relate to the larger systems and culture that support and perpetuate sexual violence.

## Defining Advocate-Facilitated Peer Support

Key characteristics of peer support groups include:<sup>3</sup>



- Groups are not clinically led, though may have clinical support.
- People gather for support based on a shared issue or experience.
- Focus is on social connection, peer-to-peer emotional support, or skill building.

Clinical and therapeutic approaches play a role in healing from sexual violence but differ from peer support. Advocate-facilitated peer support is a free service which does not require a diagnosis. Support for survivors and families at sexual assault support centers is interwoven with addressing the culture that supports sexual violence and oppression. Peer-to-peer support, with facilitation by an advocate, honors individuals as experts in their own experiences and healing that is community-driven.

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<sup>1</sup> [Facilitating Support Groups for Survivors of Sexual Assault](#), Paupel, Susan Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, ReSHAPE, 2010

<sup>2</sup> [History of the Rape Crisis Movement](#), Gillian Greensite, retrieved from Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs website.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from: *Peer Support Guidebook*, 1 in 6

## Purpose

Research shows that support groups lead to many different positive outcomes for survivors of sexual violence. Generally, it can help survivors develop positive coping skills, thereby mitigating negative effects of the trauma<sup>4</sup>. In more traditional support groups, individuals who have had similar traumatic experiences can come together, share their stories, and support one another through the healing process<sup>5</sup>.

Engaging in the group healing that support groups offer, especially in addition to individual therapy, is one of the most effective ways to recover from the effects of sexual violence<sup>6</sup>. If nothing else, all types of support groups allow survivors to realize they are not alone. Just by being in a group setting feelings of isolation, shame, secrecy, and stigmatization from the violence are diluted<sup>7</sup> and safety, support, and belonging can be found.

Peer support is based on the belief that people who have faced, endured, and overcome adversity can offer useful support, encouragement, hope, and mentorship to others facing similar situations.<sup>1</sup>

## Types of Support Groups<sup>8</sup>

The types of support groups offered by sexual assault support centers in Maine have changed over the years to provide more holistic and accessible forms of connection, education, and healing. Like all services at a sexual assault support center, all groups must incorporate the necessary elements of trauma-informed services: safety, trust, choice, control, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural relevance.<sup>9</sup> Additional information about the following three types of groups can be found in the Quality Assurance Standards section and in the appendix.

### Traditional Support Groups

Traditional support groups are rooted in group process and trust building, so they typically are closed to new members after the first or second meeting and held for a finite amount of time. Survivors are active participants in creating the goals and topics of the group. Examples of traditional groups include Support Through the Holidays, Boundaries in Relationships, or a modified Trauma Recovery and Empowerment (TREM) group.

### Experiential Support Groups

Experiential support groups offer opportunities to engage in practices that build upon healing work already done. They often offer multiple means of healing and engage community members who a traditional support group model may not reach. Experiential groups can be held as weekend retreats, as closed groups held for a specific amount of time, or as drop-in groups. While many of the core approaches to addressing sexual assault, such as talk therapy and crisis intervention, remain critical services for many survivors, research and experience clearly demonstrate that healing sexual trauma must holistically include the mind, body, and

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<sup>4</sup> Leech & Littlefield, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Orange County Rape Crisis Center Manual

<sup>6</sup> Carver et al., 1989

<sup>7</sup> [The Power of Social Connection](#), Graham, Laurie; Powell, Rob; and Karam Anna. North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault and the Orange County Rape Crisis Center

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix for Support Group definitions

<sup>9</sup> [Holistic Healing Service for Survivors](#), Poore, Terri; Shulruff, Toby; and Bein, Kris. Resource Sharing Project 2013

spirit.<sup>10</sup> Experiential support groups incorporate those holistic healing practices;<sup>11</sup> for example, Trauma Informed Yoga, Book Making, Writing and Art, Kinetic Dance and Drumming, or a Surfing Retreat.

### Outreach and Educational Support Groups

Outreach and education groups are held in a community setting or where individuals are located (e.g.: homeless shelter, jail, residential program, elder housing). The purpose is to remove barriers to services and support by having advocates come to participants. While participants needn't identify as survivors of sexual violence, similar themes of trauma, resources, culture, and tools for healing are discussed. It is also an opportunity for survivors to connect and build trust with their local sexual assault support centers. Outreach groups may be co-facilitated with a community partner and may be ongoing drop-in style groups.

## Quality Assurance Standards

### Support and Outreach Group Management (effective February 2015)

1. Each center is encouraged to offer support and outreach groups. Groups typically exist across three types (below). Each group type has a different purpose and anticipated outcome, and participant characteristics and group organization may differ.
  - a. Traditional closed groups;
  - b. Experiential groups; and
  - c. Outreach and education groups.
2. Group Facilitation
  - a. While it is recommended that groups be co-facilitated, there may be circumstances when only one facilitator is appropriate.
  - b. Facilitators must have completed the advocate training and support group facilitation training approved by the agency, unless they are a licensed mental health professional with prior experience working with survivors of sexual assault/sexual abuse.
  - c. Persons facilitating a group for the first time will co-facilitate with an experienced facilitator.
  - d. Each center will have written criteria for the selection of group facilitators.
3. Evaluation: Group participants will complete an evaluation following the conclusion of limited-session groups, and periodically during drop-in groups. The evaluation will measure the participant's increase in knowledge of community resources and support systems and decrease in trauma-related anxiety because of their participation in the group.
4. Traditional Closed Groups
  1. Nature: Traditional support groups most typically aim to support participants in: connecting with other survivors; fostering healing; increase personal knowledge of the dynamics and impact of sexual violence; develop and maintain coping skills; and to provide peer-to-peer support for others.
  2. Screening: Each center must have a written screening protocol for group members which includes consideration of the following:
    - i. Expectations of the group;
    - ii. Support system and coping strategies/self-care;
    - iii. Safety for self and others;
    - iv. Comfort with diversity;

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<sup>10</sup> *Holistic Healing Service for Survivors*

<sup>11</sup> Recommended: [How Does Cultural Appropriation Affect Rural Sexual Assault Services?](#), Resource Sharing Project

- v. Prior participation in other healing efforts;
- vi. Readiness for participation;
- vii. Safety needs within group;
- viii. Drug and alcohol use;
- ix. Medical, mental health, or medication concerns that pertain to the group;
- x. History as abuser or offender; and
- xi. Physical accommodations if appropriate.

3. Record-Keeping: Centers must maintain records for each group offered, which includes:

- i. Group attendance record;
- ii. Acknowledgement of confidentiality statement, which explains the limits of confidentiality and potential emergency measures;
- iii. Acknowledgement of group nature and expectations; and
- iv. Relevant releases of information.

5. Experiential Groups

- a. Nature: Experiential support groups most typically aim to support participants in: Increasing and/or exploring a mind and body connection related to healing; increasing exposure to multiple means of healing and multiple aspects of integration; and to enhance self-care and coping skills.
- b. Screening: Each center must have a written screening protocol for group members which includes consideration of the following:
  - i. All items i through x under Traditional Closed Support Groups; and
  - ii. The presence of a designated support professional.
- c. Record-Keeping: Centers must maintain records for each group offered, which includes: All items i through iv under Traditional Closed Support Groups; and signed confidentiality statements by any other related party in the group, such as support staff (such as music or yoga instructors, etc.).

6. Outreach and Education Groups

- a. Nature: Outreach and education groups most typically aim to support participants in: Increasing awareness of resources from the center and the community; building peer and community support systems; increasing skills designed to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors; building trust with the center and other systems; and to refer to other center programming.
- b. Screening: As these groups are typically open, drop-in groups, screening may not take place. Instead, centers must:
  - i. Have a statement on the norms of each group;
  - ii. Review the norms at the beginning of each session; and
  - iii. Ensure that each participant meets the parameters for service at the host agency, if applicable (i.e., drop-in groups at high schools are to be utilized by students at that school).
- c. Record-Keeping: Centers must maintain records for each group offered, which must include:
  - i. Signed confidentiality statements by any other related party in the group, such as support staff or host agency staff;
  - ii. The group norms; and
  - iii. Total number of group participants each session.
- d. Other Best Practices
  - i. When offering Education/Outreach Groups, center staff may choose to engage in the following: *(TBD)*

## Starting a Support Group

Below you will find a list of things to consider prior to starting a support group. This list is not all-inclusive, or perfectly linear, but its intent is to help group facilitators think through some important options in the initial stages of support group planning.

### Organizational Assessment

- How do we know who needs a support group?
- What have we committed to (in grants, partnerships, philosophy)?
- How can we best support this commitment?
- What funding opportunities exist?
- Who will be your co-facilitator?
  - Do you have a good working relationship with them? Have you ever done a group together?
  - What pieces will they be able to take on; for example, help with advertising, screenings, fielding phone calls, etc.? Will they be able to meet with you before and after the group to prepare and debrief? Who is in charge of paperwork and reporting, supplies, etc.?
- Are there community partners interested in collaborating?
- Capacity Assessment – who will:
  - Plan group content
  - Prep group
  - Do outreach
  - Do data entry, paperwork, etc.
  - Debrief each group

### Audience Assessment

- What type of group are individuals asking for?
- Who is this group for?
  - Specific experiences?
  - Specific age range?
  - Specific gender?
  - Other specific identity?
- How will group structure support your group goals?
  - Traditional, Experiential, Outreach?
  - In person? virtual?
  - Will this be a closed or open, drop-in style group?
    - If it's a closed group, will the group be kept open for a week or two to allow other group members to join?
- Do you have a waitlist of people waiting to join a group?
  - If so, how will you stay connected to potential group members?
    - At some centers, facilitators may offer one-to-one appointments to group members if the group is not scheduled to begin right away. Other centers may stay in touch by phone or e-mail.



- Your waitlist may help determine what type of group you will offer and where. It may also impact the resources you spend on advertising and outreach.
- How will the group be advertised?
- Who will contact group members prior to the first group to check in and provide a gentle reminder about the start date, meeting time, and to answer any questions?

### Accessibility Assessment

- Where will the group be held?
- Have you considered:
  - Getting there: transportation, childcare, familiar and/or comfortable location
  - Physical space: wheelchair ramps, elevators, accessible and non-gendered bathrooms, locked doors, chairs all bodies can fit in
  - Emotional space: confidentiality and other people in the building, clear expectations of the participants & facilitators
  - Sensory: Lighting, scent, and sound considerations

### Logistics Assessment

- What is the projected start date?
  - It's important to consider what time of year the group will happen and if it will be held in person or virtually.
- How will you handle cancelations due to weather or illness?
- How many sessions will be held and for what length of time?
- Does the space meet the needs of the type of group you are holding? For example, if you are starting a Therapeutic Arts Group, you may need a space with a sink and running water. If you're starting a Trauma Sensitive Yoga Group, you'll need plenty of space for people to move and stretch.
- If the group will be held off site, who is your contact for the space and when will the space be available for set up? What are your responsibilities for locking up, cleaning, etc.?
- If you are planning on holding a virtual group, could you open it up to participants from around the State?
- What materials will be needed for the first group and who is responsible for coordinating them?
- How will screening interviews happen?
  - Screening for a group can happen many different ways or not at all. What's important is that you and your co-facilitator are taking steps to ensure this is the safest space possible for participants.
  - How will information be gathered and stored in a confidential manner?
  - Who will be present during the screening interview and what will happen at that meeting?
- What resources are you going to need to create content for the group?
  - Were themes heard during the screening meetings that stood out?
  - Will discussion points and/or activities be pulled from existing models? (See Support Group Resources in the appendix).
- What day of the week? What time of the day? Wait till screenings? Have a window of time that works and ask participants between that window, have multiple days as well?
- What holidays fall in that timeline, school vacations?



## Support Group Screening Interviewer Guide<sup>12</sup>

Screening interviews are done for traditional and experiential groups prior to someone being accepted into and participating in a support group and may be done for other types of groups. Screenings are a part of our Quality Assurance Standards. They help determine if an individual is ready for the group process, what is needed to create the safest space possible for participants, and help facilitators gain some insight and information into how the individual will engage in the group and what needs they have.

The person doing the screening should always be one of the co-facilitators and both of the facilitators when possible. If only one facilitator can do the interview, ideally each group member would meet the other facilitator prior to the start of the group.

The questions on the support group screening form need to be asked in a conversational and sensitive way. The client should know that it's okay to not go into a lot of detail about their experiences of sexual violence and be reassured they may take a break at any time. The interviewer can explain that these questions are being asked as part of the support group screening process and are asked of all individuals interested in joining a group. Information should be provided about the purpose and structure of group so the individual can decide if the group is the right fit for them.

The screening is not a formal interview. Questions and information are provided in a conversational way, and not necessarily in the order they are written on the screening form. The advocate can talk a little about the group and maybe about the agency if the person isn't familiar.



Statements and questions to encourage individuals to share information include:

- I'm here to listen to whatever you'd like to share with me.
- Where would you like to start?
- What would you like me to know about you?
- Tell me a little bit about what interests you in a group right now.

It's important for the advocate to become familiar with the questions so they can have a more natural interaction with the client. If something is written down during the interview, let the client know what is being written, where the information will be kept, and who it will be shared with. During a screening conversation, providing an overview of the following may be helpful:

### Group format

- Is this a skill building focused group, experiential group, traditional peer support group, or a combination?
- Explain the types of groups centers offer and clarify this is not therapy or a clinical group.
- Be prepared to describe a little bit about what the group might be like week to week.
  - Will any materials be used?
  - Will there be guest speakers? If so, who will they be and how will they maintain confidentiality?

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<sup>12</sup> Adapted from content written by Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Services, 2018

## Group process

- Will there be a check-in each week at the beginning and a check-out at the end?
- What will happen during the group time? Although it's not possible to describe exactly how the group will go, it may be helpful to provide a basic outline (a summary of general group information) for day one. This may help the client to have an idea of what to expect and may be particularly comforting if the person has never been in a support group before.
- It's important to keep in mind that some aspects of a group may be uncomfortable or triggering for participants. For example, sitting in a circle or being asked to participate in meditation may feel unsafe. Talk with individuals about these potential aspects of group, as needed.

## Facilitator roles and expectations

- Describe the facilitator's responsibilities in the group:
  - To provide as safe a space as possible for all group participants.
  - To ensure that confidentiality is maintained.
  - To make sure that each group participant has an opportunity to talk and is not being pressured to talk/share if they don't want to.
  - To ensure that all group guidelines are being followed.
  - To provide education and information as requested and/or appropriate.
- Facilitators may participate in some of the group activities; however, it is important that the facilitator's roles are clear and group members are not put into the position of emotionally or physically taking care of the facilitators. If the client asks about your personal experiences with sexual violence, think through how you will best answer that question in accordance with your agency's boundaries and policies and your personal boundaries. Consult with your supervisor for guidance.
- Share your agency's policy on working with group participants one-to-one outside of group. At some centers facilitators do not meet with group members individually while group is happening. Other centers may not choose to set this boundary or may be unable to given agency capacity.

## Confidentiality

- It is important to discuss issues of confidentiality and how it applies to participants, facilitators, and any guest presenters. All guest presenters should sign a confidentiality agreement prior to visiting the group.
- Provide the agency support group confidentiality agreement at the screening interview, and also go over it again when the group is together. It's important that everyone hear the same information at the same time.

## Participant roles and expectations

- Describe the expectations of group participants, which include:
  - Maintaining confidentiality during and after the group.
  - A desire and willingness to participate in the group process.
  - Can participants miss a group session? If so, how many can they miss before it may be no longer appropriate for them to return?
  - Starting and ending on time, perhaps.
- Discuss additional expectations or guidelines.

Before the screening ends, it may be helpful to do an assessment for safety and/or discuss next steps. Individuals can be encouraged to think about all of the information provided during the screening and follow-up with you about any additional thoughts or questions. It may be helpful to follow-up with the person in 5-7 days to check in and see if they continue to be interested in a group and to ask if they have any additional questions. Advocates can provide support and encouragement around considering a support group and thank individuals for their time and for attending the screening meeting.

### Screening in and screening out

At the end of the screening or during follow-up folks may want to know if they can be in the group. The way this is handled varies at centers and facilitators will need to discuss this process further with their supervisor. Facilitators can work together and talk with supervisors to determine who will be accepted into group.

If it's determined that someone will not be able to join a group, the facilitator needs to let the person know as soon as it is appropriate. In some cases, this may need to occur during the screening interview if, for example, they disclose they have abused someone, or the interviewer feels they may be a danger to others in the group. Be honest and up front about the process and about boundaries that may need to be set.

Not everyone is appropriate for a support group. In the following examples based on actual screening interview experiences, the center determined the individual would not be able to join the group they expressed interest in.

- The client said, "I lash out" and when asked several clarifying questions by the advocate the client could not guarantee they would not physically harm another group member.
  - The center determined this person could not attend a group due to the possibility of harm to the participants and the facilitators. Other types of advocacy was offered.
- The client disclosed having harmed someone sexually.
  - The center felt the safety of group members may be significantly disrupted, and other group members may be harmed if they learned a fellow participant had caused sexual harm in the past.
  - The advocate provided in-the-moment support, offered referrals, and a one-to-one meeting.
- The client stated they had a hard time hearing about other people's experiences of abuse and said they didn't want to hear about childhood abuse.
  - The center determined they could not guarantee experiences of child abuse would not be discussed and instead offered individual support and the possibility of a future group that was more experiential, or skills based.

### Final details

One week prior to the start of the group, one of the group facilitators can consider calling each confirmed group member to verify they plan to attend, to discuss logistics, to review what people can expect at the first group meeting, to answer questions, and reiterate any additional information.

### Last minute referrals

Sometimes a group referral will come in the day of or the day before group is scheduled to begin. This can be handled in a few different ways. In some cases, the person may be able to be screened quickly and it might be determined that the group is a good fit for them. Other times the group has agreed to accept new members until the second or third week, allowing time and space for new members to join. If these things cannot happen they may need to go onto a wait list and have the opportunity to attend future groups.

## Minors, Screening, & Mandated Reporting

As will be reviewed in the Limits and Boundaries section of this manual the obligation to make mandated reports to Child Protective Services and Adult Protective Services remains in the support group setting. Therefore, when preparing to facilitate a group with youth, you will want to think through what questions are being asked during a screening that could prompt a report.

How teenagers will be identified for a support group and the purpose of their support group will impact your screening and how you share your role as a Mandated Reporter, but generally it will look like it does when you support a minor on the helpline: before the screening begins, give minors a clear definition of what being a Mandated Reporter means and what information you would need in order to make a report – then let them decide what information to share.

Under the QAS centers are under no obligation to ask details of the sexual abuse they experienced, so if that is included in your screening, perhaps those questions are adjusted. The Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs has a nice framework for this on page 16 of their [Teen Support Group Guide](#).

## Structure, Session Planning, & Content



One of the challenging things about developing an advocacy-based peer support group is that there is no prescribed way or one way to do it. It's a collection of the facilitator's knowledge, experience, and insights and the needs of the group participants. It requires preparation and planning as well as creativity and adaptability.

### Structure

The support group structure is the design and flow of your group session and is meant to create a safe and trauma-informed space to explore individual experiences and feelings as well as finding connection with others. This structure or framework creates consistency and common expectations, while also allowing enough space and flexibility for the participants to pursue what they want to get out of the group. The following structure plan works for virtual, in-person, traditional, experiential, and outreach/educational groups alike.

### Opening

Opening a group is about creating a welcoming and centering space so that facilitators and participants can be as present and grounded as possible. Group openings might change with time and with the needs of the group. Examples of group openings include a simple ice breaker for all, a 2-word quick share, the sound of a chime, or reading of a poem.

### Norms

Norms are a commitment made by all group participants that address how they will behave and communicate. Generally, a facilitator will bring two or three core group norms (i.e., confidentiality) and then build a comprehensive list with group participants. Norms are then reviewed at the beginning of every group.

Examples of norms include listening when someone is talking, not giving advice or judging others, start and end on time, phone on silent or vibrate.

### Topic

The topic is the focus of the group for that session. Topics are identified by the group's needs or by a predetermined curriculum. Topics tend to include themes related to sexual violence, the impact of trauma, coping skills, and the impact of oppression and culture.

In a traditional support group, many of the topics may be identified in the screening process. In experiential support groups, the topic is embedded within the group type, i.e.: yoga, surfing, or drumming. In outreach/education groups topics vary depending on the audience. The longer a group is together, the more capacity they will have for building on topics and delving into harder content.

### Discussion/Activity

Facilitators will offer participants guiding questions or activities to prompt reflection and sharing about the topic at hand. Sometimes a reflective activity or project happens prior to the discussion, and then participants have an opportunity to share and explore the topic further.

### Closing

The purpose of closing a group is to re-ground participants, to check in before leaving, and to mark the ending of the group. Some groups do a verbal or number scale check-out, others may read a poem or offer a closing activity.

#### **SAMPLE Structure for a 90-minute group**

Welcome, norms review and check-in (15 min)

Review of last week's topic/activities (10 min)

Grounding exercise/activity (5 min)

Session topic discussion/activity (40 min)

Grounding exercise/activity (5 min)

Check-out and closing (15 min)

### Session Planning

Advocates who are being trained to be support group facilitators may get anxious or curious about what they are going to do with their time in group sessions and often want a curriculum or step-by-step agenda for each group. We believe (and have seen over the years) that groups built in collaboration with survivors and on your strengths as a facilitator will lead to amazing opportunities for reflection, sharing, and healing. Below are some steps to build group sessions/agendas without a curriculum.

#### Determine topics or themes

If you screen for support groups, survivors may tell you what they want to talk about and what they want to learn. These can be the start of your group topics and themes. Whether screening happens for a group or not, facilitators can consider the title, setting, and purpose of the group and brainstorm some topics. Perhaps your purpose is building trust and providing time to care for the people coming to your group, so you focus on crafts and quiet time. Perhaps your purpose is skill-building and connection with community services, so your

topics may include mini training sessions and guest facilitators. Facilitators can also ask participants at the first session if they have ideas about what they would like to do or talk about. This step can begin the process of group forming by sharing ideas and finding commonality. Sometimes people are unsure or reluctant to speak up, so the facilitators might offer up ideas based on their experience in other groups. You can also get feedback from on-going outreach to group participants through evaluation or conversation about topics that have or haven't worked.

Below are examples of topics from a group facilitated for trans and gender non-conforming survivors.

- Coping strategies
- Addressing guilt and shame
- Navigating seeing your abuser(s)
- Sex and intimacy
- Family relationships
- Boundaries
- Resilience
- Gender euphoria
- Connections between sexual trauma and gender identity



Below are examples of topics from an outreach group in a jail.

- Grounding techniques
- Boundaries
- Community services
- Support a friend
- Defining sexual assault
- Child abuse prevention
- Self-care
- Impacts of trauma

### Ordering your sessions

Every survivor choosing to enter a space to talk about their trauma and the impact of sexual violence is taking a risk. Facilitators cannot guarantee safety in all spaces at all times, but they can intentionally build trauma-informed support groups to be as safe as possible. Groups need time for trust to be established and for norms to be learned before delving into difficult or more intense topics. Start with topics that may feel safer or easier and build to the more complex or more difficult topics after the group has formed a bit and some trust has been established. In any type of group, the first sessions can act as a collaborative process to share out ideas for topics, hear additional ideas from participants, and decide together where to begin. This can continue each session, coming back to the list and deciding what's next. You may also find that one topic ends up spanning more than one session.

### Content

The content is the details of how you will carry out your session plan. After determining the group topics, it can be helpful to find something that will create an opportunity for reflection, discussion, sharing, and/or learning. This is your content. Typically, each topic will use a prompt or activity as a starting place for conversation and reflection. Content can be an article, a couple of guiding questions you generated, a poem, a

worksheet, a craft, etc. You can be creative in using what you find. There probably are lots of tools and resources at your centers. You can also adapt a session from an established group curriculum such as Trauma Recover and Empowerment (TREM), or from a classic book such as *Courage to Heal* keeping in mind that you are facilitating a peer-based group, not a clinical or therapeutic group. The options are truly endless and can be well served by the facilitator's strengths and skills.

Where to find content:

- Media, articles, music, & literature
- Parts of an established group curriculum
- Staff brainstorming & institutional wisdom
- Personal skills & style
- Crafts & art
- The MECASA Toolkit

### Preparing content for the session

As the group facilitator you support reflection and discussion. Very often, especially in an established group, just reading an article or a poem and asking the group what they think about it can begin a great conversation. Facilitators can then support, guide, and ask open-ended questions as the conversation progresses. But in case the conversation doesn't happen that naturally, here are some recommendations:

- Ask group members how this connects to their experience.
- Ask if anyone would like to offer a different perspective or if the content provided a different perspective than one they've been holding.
- Ask if anyone would like to share their thoughts, feelings, or reactions?
- Share your own thoughts and feelings within the boundaries and parameters you/your agency has set.
- Wonder out loud if this connects with other conversations that have been happening in the group and state the connections you notice.
- Acknowledge when it is time to move on by stating that it doesn't seem to be resonating with anyone and asking if folks would like to move on to something else.

## Skills and Characteristics of an Effective Facilitator

The MECASA training teaches 8 principles of facilitation best practice:



1. Using prompts to start the discussion and to support questions and activities.
2. Following the conversation with active listening.
3. Observing how participants are engaging.
4. Allowing silence and quiet space for an appropriate amount of time.
5. Tuning into the energy and mood of the group. Offering options/change of plans to align with needs.
6. Making connections between participants.
7. Making connections of cultural and liberation education.
8. Willingness to interrupt/disrupt in order to hold the space and maintain group guidelines.

### Additional Skills Include:

- Modeling group norms such as confidentiality and community-care.

- Maintaining focus on the agenda and process, while holding and managing a safe space.
- Managing time effectively.
- Willingness and ability to work with a co-facilitator.
- Encouraging participation in multiple ways – allowing silence, asking questions, working in pairs, activities.
- Recognizing group stages and dynamics.
- Engaging in crisis management and de-escalation techniques.
- Knowing how to access self-care and support.
- Utilizing the experience of others in the space.
- Doing their own healing work and not using support group as a personal process.

#### Characteristics Include:

- Flexibility
- Self-awareness
- A sense of humor
- Confidence
- Being open to style differences and roles
- Seeks a space where everyone has a voice
- Non-judgmental
- Open and engaging
- Healthy boundaries
- Consistent and reliable
- Honest
- Comfortable with silence
- Aware of their limitations

#### Limits and Boundaries

One of the responsibilities of sexual assault support group facilitators is to engage in a continual process of examining and identifying your organizational and personal boundaries in doing this specific work. Here are some things to think about:

##### Organizational boundaries

Organizational boundaries are guidelines, policies, and protocols organizations create to structure relationships between staff and clients. They most often exist in written form and are derived from laws, regulations, grant requirements, and codes of ethics that govern staff roles. Policies such as protecting confidentiality and privacy or not providing transportation are examples of organizational boundaries. It is important that you understand your organization's policies and practices that govern actions and relationships with the individuals you are serving.

Program boundaries are specific to support groups and may vary agency to agency. These may include whether or not group participants are encouraged to communicate outside of group, substance use, honoring gender identity, and/or engaging outside services if someone is in crisis.

##### Personal boundaries

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules, or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them and how they will respond when someone passes those limits. They are built out of a mix of past experiences, conclusions, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.

Take the time prior to starting the first group to think through common boundary issues, such as self-disclosure, relationships outside the group, or running into a group member in the community.



Deciding if and when to share personal experiences is often difficult, and the level of self-disclosure each facilitator is comfortable with 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)?
- Does my agency have a policy or practice about self-disclosure?

### Mandated Reporting

The obligation to make mandated reports to Child Protective Services and Adult Protective Services remains in the support group setting.

### Confidentiality and Privilege

The legally protected privilege an advocate has with a survivor does not apply anytime another person is in the room. So, in a support group setting, while all practices of confidentiality remain in place, privilege does not. Take this into consideration always, but especially if you have a support group member whose experience is connected to an active civil or criminal case. You might want to have a conversation with that participant ahead of the first meeting, so they make informed decisions about what they choose to share (or not) in group.

### Duty to Warn

Duty to Warn and Duty to Protect are legal terms that describe someone's legal obligation to report threats of homicide or suicide to law enforcement or crisis. All advocates nationally follow the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) regulations regarding confidentiality which state an advocate can share information about a client, if:

1. There is a written, time-limited release of information from the client, or
2. A statutory mandate, or
3. A court mandate, which includes case law.

Every state is different in its reporting requirement regarding Duty to Warn/Duty to Protect. In Maine there is no case law or statute that creates permission or mandate for advocates regarding Duty to Warn or Duty to Protect – which means reporting threats of homicide or suicide without a release of information from a client violates VAWA regulations.



Agencies need to have training, support, and policies to address what to do if a group member presents a threat to harm themselves or someone else. Overwhelmingly it will be a plan to work in collaboration with the participant to access crisis supports.

### Boundaries and Co-facilitators

Discuss boundaries with your co-facilitator prior to starting a support group and as a regular part of your debriefing after each group. Co-facilitators could be bound by the same organizational boundaries but can have very different personal boundaries. For instance, one facilitator may be more likely to engage in self-disclosure in a support group; another facilitator may think it is never acceptable to offer personal information or experience to the group. It's important to have some awareness of each other's approach, style, and boundaries before the group begins. This will avoid group member confusion about what is acceptable or not.

## Group Stages

As support group participants get to know each other, understand their shared group purpose, and build trust, the group will shift and change. All groups and group dynamics are different, but there are some common stages of group development:

### Forming

Lack of clarity about the purpose and process (who are we?, why are we here?, what's allowed?), testing the waters and building trust.

#### What the group may need

Clear information about the process, norms, etc., modeling of participation and communication, development of group guidelines/norms, and leadership.

### Storming

Testing each other and group agreements, conflict with each other and the facilitator, and discovering roles and communication styles.

#### What the group may need

Opportunities to express differences and see different perspectives, modeling good listening and conflict resolution skills, involving quiet members, as well as paying attention and helping the group move into claiming the space for themselves.

### Norming

Learn from storming stage how to work together, making decisions and resolving conflicts, an increase in trust and potential for the group.

#### What the group may need

Challenge the group think if it develops, review big picture, push to focus on their shared goals.

### Performing

Achieving common goals, motivated, and participation by all members.

#### What the group may need

Good listening skills from facilitators, motivation/resources to build skills, recognition, to develop new goals.

## Intervention Strategies

All sorts of behaviors are normal and part of group dynamics. They all happen for different reasons and needn't be pathologized (treated as unhealthy or abnormal). The behaviors below are listed because they could impact the safety, growth, and trust within a support group. But not always – someone monopolizing the time might need that support and the group may want to provide it, so it's important we ground ourselves in the question, "How is this behavior impacting the group?"

### Pre-Intervention

Pre-intervention is about being pro-active. When planning for a group and during the initial forming of the group some pre-intervention steps can happen. Some of the benefits are to aid in facilitator communication, to address concerns group members may have, to create pro-active plans for specific situations, and to

increase facilitator confidence in dealing with the unexpected nature of groups. Below are some pre-intervention considerations:

- Talk with your co-facilitator about how you will manage a disruption or crisis ahead of time.
  - How has your co-facilitator dealt with situations in the past and what is their comfort level in dealing with them in this group.
- If possible, consider having a brief initial pre-group check-in by phone, over zoom, or in-person to address basic group guidelines and assess for safety.
  - If it's a drop-in group, be available 30-minutes before group begins to connect with folks individually for 5 minutes or follow-up afterwards with individuals who attended, if appropriate.
- Create clear group guidelines and revisit them often.
- Talk openly with the group about how you will address situations before they happen, maybe as a topic at the first group.
  - What will happen if someone leaves the group suddenly?
  - What if someone doesn't show up for group?
  - What if someone starts yelling in the group?
  - What if a group member has a panic attack?

### Steps for Intervention

When any behavior is impacting the group there is a process for facilitators to engage in that includes some assessment questions and action steps. Following the process below are some behaviors and suggested interventions. Depending on the answers to the questions, facilitators may choose to take steps to address the behavior in the moment, may choose a wait and see approach, or may choose to discuss the situation further with a supervisor or with a clinical consultant.

1. Go inward first.
  - Ask yourself, "Is it just me?"
2. Be curious vs. certain.
  - Ask yourself, "What story or scenario am I creating in my mind based on the behavior? Is it accurate? How do I know?"
3. Determine if the behavior is impacting safety and/or the whole group.
  - What are you noticing? Did the energy in the space shift?
4. Consider your options.
  - Wait and see.
  - Address immediately in the group.
  - Take a break and check in with your co-facilitator.
  - If on Zoom, private chat with your co-facilitator.
  - Address with the individual(s) after group.
5. Gently intervene.
  - See below for suggestions.
6. Determine if further discussion is needed in the moment or later.
7. Reflect later on learnings.



### Behaviors and suggestions for intervention:

**Aggression** such as criticizing, blaming, using aggressive language, volume, or tone.

- Touch base with the individual after group. “You seemed angry. Can you tell me about that?”
- Remind everyone that group is a place to express feelings and anger is a feeling we often suppress. Explain that it is ok to express anger but not to become aggressive with other group members.
- Offer a break to the whole group
- Refer back to the group guidelines

**Conflict between participants** such as arguing or minimizing.

- Identify and normalize differences and remind folks to respect one another.
- Role model communication by recognizing discomfort and focusing on the goals of the group.
- Refer to the group agreements.
- Take a break and check in with folks one-to-one.

**Monopolizing** or taking up space in the conversation without consideration of other participants.

- Set time limits by saying, “Let’s take 5 more minutes to talk about this and then move on.”
- Engage other participants by saying, “I’m wondering what this may be bringing up for others?”
- Use a talking stick or ball to allow others to speak without interruption.
- Be more direct by saying, “Thank you for sharing. I’d like to give someone else a chance to share.”
- Offer the person a chance to continue the conversation with you after group.
- Move the group along by stating, “In the interest of time...”

**Self-confessing** or using group as a sounding board for expressing thoughts/feelings unrelated to the group.

- Follow up after group and check in with the person to ask how they are doing.
- Acknowledge, validate, and redirect by saying, “That sounds like a very difficult experience for you, thank you for sharing. Others might be able to relate to you. Would anyone like to share their experience?” or “What you’ve just shared is related to our next topic...”
- If the content is especially detailed, pause to check in to see how the group is doing.

**Withdrawing** such as acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, daydreaming, doodling, whispering to others, non-verbal participation.

- Touch base with the individual after group. Ask if there is something about the group that is uncomfortable for them. Ask if there are ways that would make it easier for them to contribute.
- Remember that some people are better listeners than talkers and will get more out of group by not sharing too much, and that is okay.
- Educate the group by stating that everyone contributes in different ways and one way may be to listen and observe in silence.
- Create opportunities for sharing by saying, “I’d like to hear everyone’s perspective if you are willing to share.” or “Do others have anything they’d like to add?”
- Create norms and guidelines that provide a space for everyone to share.
- Notice when someone is trying to speak and protect that space for them by saying, “I think Sam has something to share.”

## Co-Facilitation

Co-facilitation requires time, planning, relationship building and relationship tending. Each facilitator brings their own unique qualities, skills and experiences to the process and the benefits of co-facilitation are many. Having two people to facilitate the group and support each other is invaluable, particularly when needing to assess and address some of the behaviors discussed above. Co-facilitation can also enhance the safety and

stability of a group. For example, one facilitator may be able to leave the group to support a member who's been triggered, and a group may not need to be canceled if one facilitator is sick.

### Additional benefits of co-facilitation

- Learning from one another, especially a new facilitator learning from an experienced facilitator.
- Someone to reflect and debrief with.
- Sharing in responsibility for preparing and facilitating through alternating or shared tasks.
- Strength from different styles of facilitation and advocacy.
- Offering variety to participants regarding style of facilitation and advocacy.
- Building rapport and trust among coworkers.
- A balance of assumptions when interpreting participant needs and responses.
- Modeling support and respectful conflict to one another.
- Reduction of potential harm or danger if intervention is needed with participants in conflict or in crisis.

For co-facilitation to serve the group well, the facilitators need to develop a relationship that allows them to work together seamlessly within the group. Developing that relationship takes intention, time, and effort and it needs to start well before the group does. In the appendix you'll find two check lists: one for preparing for your co-facilitator relationship-including questions to explore and conversations to have, and the other to use when prepping and debriefing groups.

### Consideration for working with community partners

Partnering with another agency can benefit support group participants by connecting them with more community resources and specialized support. Since organizational policies and practices are different, it's important to review that information and consider differences in boundaries before you begin planning a group. Some things to review include:

- How both agencies view the purpose of support groups.
- Structure and philosophy around peer support.
- Boundaries regarding personal disclosure.
- Agency policies regarding providing transportation.
- Agency safety practices and mandated reporting policies.
- How you will share in group preparation and facilitation.
- How to make referrals to services and support outside of group.
- Communication with participants outside of group.
- If you are in a community space/community agency, review host agency policies regarding mandated reporting, safety practices, communication, and crisis intervention.

### Conclusion

This support group facilitation guide is not all inclusive and is updated regularly to include the best and most promising practices about advocacy and peer-driven support group facilitation. Thank you for the wisdom and heart you bring to advocacy work, including support group facilitation.

*"Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break.  
And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention.  
So, go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.  
The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."*

*L.R. Knost*

## APPENDIX

### Support Group Definitions (Developed by center staff in 2013)

	Participant Characteristics	Goals & Purposes <sup>13</sup>	Group Examples
Traditional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has begun and can talk about their healing process</li> <li>Ready to explore new options for healing</li> <li>Has more stability in their lives</li> <li>Can coordinate their own transportation, childcare, etc.</li> <li>Self identifies as a victim/survivor of sexual violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connect with other survivors (breaking isolation and sense of being 'alone')</li> <li>Foster healing</li> <li>Increase personal knowledge of the dynamics and impact of sexual violence on themselves</li> <li>Develop and maintain coping skills</li> <li>Provide peer-to-peer support for others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional Support Groups tend to include an identified audience: Women, Men, CSA Survivors, LGBTQ+ Survivors, etc.</li> </ul>
Experiential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher self-management/regulating skills</li> <li>Often a supplement to on-going healing process, e.g.: referred by current therapist</li> <li>Next/different level of healing for when verbal processing has plateaued</li> <li>Self identifies as a victim/survivor of sexual violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase/create a mind &amp; body connection</li> <li>Exposure to multiple means of healing and multiple aspects of integration</li> <li>Enhance self-care and coping skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yoga</li> <li>Surfing</li> <li>Drumming</li> <li>Art</li> <li>Physical movement (see Orange County Rape Crisis Center's Walking Support Group!)</li> </ul>
Outreach & Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marginalized and highly victimized populations who have high barriers to accessing services, including: individuals with disabilities, elders, incarcerated women, homeless and street involved adults &amp; youth, victims of domestic violence</li> <li>Traditionally underserved by population</li> <li>Do not have to identify as victims of sexual violence.</li> <li>Self-selects attendance at group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase participant awareness of resources—both from the SA agency and the community</li> <li>Build peer and community support systems</li> <li>Increase skills designed to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors</li> <li>Build trust with SA agency and other systems</li> <li>Refer to SA agency services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My Life My Choice</li> <li>Jail groups</li> <li>Groups at shelters</li> <li>Tea and Tips in housing for older adults</li> </ul>

<sup>13</sup> MECASA Quality Assurance Standards

## CO-FACILITATION: Before the groups starts

### Things to discuss

- ☐ Share your experience with facilitating and co-facilitating support groups.
- ☐ Any reflections you have on your facilitation style and vibe.
- ☐ What are your hopes and expectations for this group?
- ☐ Share what areas of facilitation you feel least confident about and what support or feedback you'd like from each other.
- ☐ Share what areas of group or facilitation you feel excited about and are interested in taking the lead.
- ☐ Each other's personal and organizational boundaries and how you'll support each other.
- ☐ How will screening interviews will be coordinated?
- ☐ If you can't both be there for interviews, how will the information be communicated, and group participants be decided?
- ☐ How group details will be communicated.
  - ☐ Contact info you will give potential participants:
  - ☐ Person to confirm with participants:
  - ☐ Cancellation communication:
  - ☐ Day-of questions and communication:
- ☐ Agreement of strategies to address specific situations in group:
  - ☐ Someone steps out of group:
  - ☐ One facilitator is on call:
  - ☐ Someone is in crisis:
- ☐ Review specifics for the first session: how you will set up the room, where you each will sit, etc.
- ☐ Schedule a regular time after each session to debrief. Consider a brief chat immediately after the session and a longer conversation within a couple of days. Whenever it is, make sure you meet before the next session.
- ☐ Put together a box of essential materials to take to every 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 you think will be needed.

## CO-FACILITATION: Prepping & debriefing groups

### Before group begins

- ☐ Concerns about the upcoming group meeting.
- ☐ Review plans/outline for the group and assign sections.
- ☐ Assign necessary tasks: materials for activities, needs for the space, etc.

### After each group

- ☐ Briefly check-in with each other. Confirm longer debriefing time.
- ☐ At the scheduled longer session, discuss:
  - Any specific situations that happened in the group.
  - What went well, from each of your perspectives?
  - What could be improved next time?
  - Feelings/thoughts and any vicarious trauma symptoms.
- ☐ Prep the next group
- ☐ Decide who will track data and enter data.
- ☐ Follow up with any participant needs.

### After the final group

- ☐ Briefly check-in with each other. Confirm longer debriefing time.
- ☐ At the longer session, debrief last session as above
- ☐ Review evaluations and debrief entire support group
  - What went well, from each of your perspectives?
  - What could be improved next time?
  - Decide how to record/store your conclusions so that it can inform future groups.



## SAMPLE: Support Group Screening Form

*This is a sample that was adapted from a center support group screening form. Some of the questions may not be asked or included and other questions may be added. The only guidance regarding questions that must be included at a screening meeting exist in the MECASA Quality Assurance Standards and are not necessarily all reflected below.*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer(s): \_\_\_\_\_

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

Pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address (if appropriate): \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number (s): \_\_\_\_\_ May a message be left? \_\_\_\_ (Detailed or nonspecific)

Best time to contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency contact (and signed release): \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about our services?

What interests you about being part of a support group at this time?

What do you hope to get out of a support group? (Goals, expectations, etc.)

Do you have any hesitations or concerns about being in a group?

What has helped you in your healing process? (Counseling, groups, self-help, etc.)

Who lives with you at this time and do those individuals know about the group?

Who would you consider to be a part of your support system?

What are the stresses in your life?

How do you take care of yourself?

What would you like me to know about the types of abuse or assault you've experienced?

Have you noticed changes in yourself since the abuse? (Eating, sleeping, socialization, substances, etc.)

Have you ever felt suicidal? When?

How did you cope with those feelings?

Are you having thoughts of suicide now?

How do you cope with those feelings?

Do you struggle with a substance abuse disorder?

Are you currently using?

Have you ever been given a mental health diagnosis?

Do you have any medical or health concerns that you would like the group facilitators to know about?

Have you ever abused or assaulted anyone?

Are you comfortable with diversity (age, gender, beliefs, sexual orientation, etc.) within a group setting?

Do you need any accommodations to be able to fully participate in the group?

**Other information to discuss:**

- Due to many people having scent-based allergies we are requesting all group participants refrain from wearing perfumes, colognes, after shave, etc.
- Do you have reliable transportation to and from the group?
- Best days/times for a group meeting?
- Do you anticipate being able to commit to weekly meetings for the duration of group?

## SAMPLE: Multi-Agency Screening Guide

### Trans Support Group Conversation Guide

*In 2019 advocates from sexual assault support centers and MaineTransNet (MTN) co-facilitated groups for trans and non-binary survivors of sexual violence. Part of that partnership included developing a screening process (and an evaluation process) that fit the style, values, and policies of both agencies. Below is the shared screening tool centers and MTN facilitators used for prospective group participants.*

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Pronouns \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Pronouns \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Pronouns \_\_\_\_\_

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

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Voicemail Message okay? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

What the best way to get a hold of you if group is canceled?

Preferred way to be contacted: Text \_\_\_ Phone Call \_\_\_

Is there someone you would want us to call in case of an emergency? What pronouns or name should we use for you? Does this person support your gender identity? If no, how would you like us to navigate coordinating your care with them?

Navigating emergency contact instructions:

### Introduction

#### *Purpose of this conversation*

Mostly this is a chance to get to know each other and see if we are a good fit. It is a space for you as a potential participant to learn a bit about us as facilitators and our ideas for what this group will be like. Lastly, this is an opportunity for facilitators to listen to you and learn how we can make this group a safe(r) and healing space for you. We hope to do this by discussing our conversation guide questions below.

#### *Purpose of the group*

This program, one of the first of its kind, will offer a confidential and safe environment for trans identified and gender non-conforming folks to talk about their experiences as survivors, to learn coping skills, access resources, and create a community of support.

#### *Logistical information*

Group will begin on \_\_\_\_\_ and run for \_\_\_\_\_ weeks. Last Session will be \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any sessions you won't be able to attend?

Snow day protocol: Facilitators will notify you through your preferred method of contact if we have to cancel due to snow. We plan to make up any missed sessions.

## Accessibility

Here is a rundown of what the space has: (Facilitator expands on navigating the space. Address, entrances, bathrooms, privacy, accessibility offerings, etc.). Here is what the space looks like currently: (show picture.)

Is there anything we can do to make sure the meeting space is accessible for you? Physical accommodations like chairs without armrests, wheelchair ramps, gender neutral and/or handicap toilets etc.? Do you have any sensory needs that we can assist with? Certain lights, smells, sounds etc., anything that would interrupt your participation in the group?

Any questions about space logistics?

## Conversation Questions

You are in control of how you share your experiences. This can be a space for you to share the details of your story if you feel empowered doing so, but it is not expected nor required to participate.

1. What made you consider coming to a support group?
2. Have you thought about your personal goals for the group? What are you interested in addressing?
3. We plan on having the group create ground rules together. Is there any group norm you would like to share? What is important to you about how the group operates? Share handout of MTN ground rules and discuss.
4. Do you have any other experience with groups? If yes, what was the best thing about the group? What was the hardest thing?
5. We recognize that healing is not linear. We don't think you need to be any amount of "healed enough" to be in this group. At the same time, we accept that the nature of this group is intense and has the potential to be triggering. Being triggered or "sent back into your trauma" can look like many different things to different people. What have you noticed about how you react when you are triggered? What has been helpful to support you? What has not been helpful? Can we make a plan about how we can help when that happens?
6. In life when coping with really difficult circumstances, it's not uncommon to have behaviors that are harmful to yourself or others. We believe you know what's best for you and are not here to put a judgment on the ways you cope. This is an opportunity to talk about the ways we cope and provide support if a coping mechanism is being more harmful than helpful to you. Are there any ways in which you cope that feel harmful and that you would like support around from us? Are there any healthy coping skills we can reinforce or suggest?
7. What does your support system look like? Are there folks you can lean on when things are tough?
8. We recognize that healing is really complicated and has many different paths. Our support group is just one of those paths. Are there other healing paths you have tried or are interested in?
9. Safety is a complicated subject but so important to the space we are trying to cultivate in this group. What do you need to feel safe within a group?
10. Many survivors seek out mental health support after a sexual assault. Have you had mental health/medical/medication experiences that were helpful? Any that there were unhelpful? Anything important we should know about how to best support you? Anything you are worried might impact your participation in group?

11. Is there someone or anyone in the trans/queer community that you would feel unsafe and unable to participate in this group with?
12. What do you do to take care of yourself? What do you do for fun?
13. Any questions or concerns about the group?

#### *In the moment needs*

Example 1. You are listening to another group member share their story of sexual violence and you need to leave the room. Would it be helpful for us to check in on you? Do you just need time alone? For how long? Do you have a favorite grounding exercise we could plan to do with you? What else?

Follow up needs.

Example 2. If you feel you are having a tough night, is there anyone it would be helpful to call for you, or call with you, on that night or the following day?

#### *Things you should know about the group*

1. Though this group can be therapeutic in nature, our role is to be your advocate, not your therapist. We are committed to being with you in this space for healing and can help connect you to therapy and other resources for continued support in your healing.
2. A reality of this work\* and community is that sometimes survivors have also caused others sexual harm. If this is true in your experience, that does not stop you from participating in this group, but due to how we are funded, we are not able to discuss those experiences in this group. (\* unpacking and undoing the impacts of sexual violence within society as a whole)
3. Our support group is a sober space. If that's ever an issue for you and need support around that, we want to work with you to maintain accessibility in the space.
4. Review Maine Trans Network Guidelines, they also apply in this group.

#### *Next Steps*

We will be meeting with folks for the next couple of weeks and from our list of potential participants will be trying to craft a group of 6-8 people who will be a good fit for each other and this group. We will be getting back to you between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to follow up.

## SAMPLE Support Group Referral Form

*Adapted from a center resource to potentially be used when someone requests information about participating in a support group. It's important to discuss this process with your supervisor and to store information in a confidential location.*

Caller's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Staff Completing this Form: \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ May a message be left? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Detailed or nonspecific)

Best time to contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Support Group Requested:

- ☐ (Adult) Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse
- ☐ (Adolescent) Survivors of Sexual Abuse
- ☐ (Adult) Survivors of Sexual Assault
- ☐ (Non-Offending) Parents & Caregivers
- ☐ Concerned Others Support Group (18 and over)
- ☐ Experiential Based Support Group: *Examples: Trauma Sensitive Yoga or Art/Craft*
- ☐ Other

\_\_\_\_\_  
Caller requests follow-up contact:

- ☐ Within 72 hours
- ☐ Within one week
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Any Additional Information:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## SAMPLE: Support Group Guidelines/Group Agreements

### Self-Care

Please don't use substances before the group meeting.

Please be honest and ask for what you need.

If you feel you may harm yourself, someone else, or if you are in danger, please tell someone and ask for help.

It is okay to ask questions and okay not to answer questions asked of you.

You may leave the room at any time but please come back into the group or check in with a facilitator.

### Supporting Others

Please maintain confidentiality during and after group ends.

Please let each person finish what they are saying and talk one at a time.

Respect each person in the group.

Give listening and support, not advice or judgment.

### Boundaries

We will begin and end on time. If you need to miss a group, call the office at XXX-XXXX or email XXXXXXXXXXXX.

Some people may have been in a group at XXXXXX before or have previously met with one of the facilitators. Please keep in mind this is a new group. We ask that when talking about past conversations, everyone in the group is clear about what is being shared.

We request that group members do not socialize outside of group until the last group session is complete.

### Additional Information

Smoking is not permitted in the building.

Cancellations: Group may be canceled due to weather or illness. The decision will be made by (time) on the day of the group. The facilitators will call (or email) each group member to let them know of a cancellation.

Is there anything you would like to add?

## SAMPLE: Confidentiality Agreement for Support Group

[Agency name] is committed to creating a safe group environment. What is talked about in the group is private and confidential.

1. The names of group members and their families are not shared with anyone.
2. Only the first names of group members and facilitators will be used.
3. What is said in the group stays in the group.
4. The day and place of the group will not be shared with anyone.
5. The privacy of group members and their families continues when group is over.

Advocates are mandated reporters. That means information shared about a child or adult who is possibly in a dangerous situation may be reported.

I understand and agree to the above.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_

Witness\_\_\_\_\_Date\_\_\_\_\_



## Support Group Resources

The MECASA Toolkit includes resources on facilitation, group content ideas, guides, and webinars. The Toolkit page can be found at <https://www.mecasatoolkit.org/support-groups.html>.

### Manuals, Guides, and Curriculum

LGBTQ+ Support Group Facilitator's Guide, MECASA

The Power of Social Connection: Developing and Coordinating Sustainable Support Group Programs for Survivors of Sexual Violence

North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCCASA), 2013, <https://nccasa.org/resources/>

The Power of Social Connection: A Guide to Providing Virtual Support Groups

NCCASA, 2021, <https://nccasa.org/resources/>

Holistic Healing for Survivors, Resource Sharing Project

<https://resourcesharingproject.org/resources/holistic-healing-services-for-survivors/>

A Guide for Facilitators of Transgender Community Groups: Supporting Sexual Violence Survivors

Forge, <https://forge-forward.org/?s=support+groups>

Trauma Recovery and Empowerment (TREM)

A guide (book) to working with women in groups, by Maxine Harris. Content can be modified to be more peer-support focused.

### Webinars

Part of the Solution: Gender-Integrated Sexual Assault Support Groups

Forge, <https://forge-forward.org/?s=support+groups>