

# "Better, Together"



5 REASONS WHY  
COMMUNITY-BASED PEER SUPPORT  
GROUPS WORK BETTER

# But first...about me:



*My name is Elizabeth M. Johnson, MA.*

I am an abuse survivor and trauma educator. I have worked with domestic violence and sexual assault survivors for over 10 years. My research and teaching focuses on how intimate abuse affects sexual and reproductive health. In 2017, I trained 400+ professionals and students on topics such as how past sexual abuse can affect intimacy, what to do when “breast isn’t best” and how to trauma sensitive sex education. I also lead a free peer support group for sexual trauma survivors. 30+ women attended my peer support group in 2017.

# Now about those support groups...

The support groups I lead are *community-based* and *peer-led*. *Community-based* means that they happen in the community, the neighborhood where we live, instead of at a non-profit or social services agency. *Peer-led* means that the group organizer identifies as someone who shares a common experience with other attendees. An example of another community-based peer support group is an AA (NA, Al-Anon, etc.) meeting.

For almost two years, I led groups as an "expert", not as a peer survivor, at a non-profit agency. These were psycho-educational groups where attendees were screened for mental health challenges (and more) before they were allowed to attend. As the leader (and a paid staff person at this agency), I was actively discouraged about being honest about my own history as a survivor.

So, I've seen both sides.

And there's a BIG difference.

Here are my 5 reasons why community-based, peer support groups *work better*.

# #1: Neutral ground

"LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION" IS NOT JUST EVERYTHING IN REAL ESTATE...

In community-based, peer support groups, meetings happen outside social services-type agencies. There is no intimidating locked gate or heavy door to linger outside of, waiting to be allowed in. Groups happen in churches, local businesses, sometimes even homes.

Innocuous places where you could be anyone stopping by for anything.

**Agency based support groups are known for their high absentee rate. This isn't the case for community-based peer groups.** There are no emotions, obligation or stigma tied to location so women show up. They come even if they missed an appointment with their CPS worker or counselor. They come after surgery, with a newborn or in a thunderstorm.

Again and again. They gather around a hodge-podge of chairs and sometimes sit on the floor.

Food gets offered. Everyone shares. People arrive early and stay late.

*Neutral ground, common ground.*

# #2: Present Tense

"THE TIME IS NOW." - WANGARI MAATHAI

Community-based, peer support groups are not psycho-educational and not usually evidence-based. Topics, e.g. abuse education, are like those of traditional groups. But in peer support groups, there is an emphasis on what's happening *now* in the group member's life, not a re-hashing of what had happened to her. In that way, these groups have more of a coaching feel, rather than a therapeutic one.

**One thing that helped me get out of my own abusive relationship was my background as a life coach.** I had spent years coaching myself and others to ask: "what's getting in my way?" and "what can I control?". In the peer support groups, I sometimes ask, "what's the boundary you need to set?" and we crowdsource some language. We might role-play so she feels comfortable using the words. I may challenge her to take action and report back. It's a safe space to decline the challenge but that doesn't usually happen. Sometimes, there are even challenges between attendees.

*Never failure. Rather, unfinished success. That's present tense focus.*

# #3: No experts

"THE MASTER'S TOOLS WILL NEVER DISMANTLE THE MASTER'S HOUSE." - AUDRE LORDE

You can't tell who the master or the expert is in a community-based, peer support group because unlike traditional groups, everyone is talking! I ask questions, usually around a crowd-sourced topic, to provide some focus but with no set expert, everyone feels comfortable voicing an opinion.

The leader of an agency based support group is an expert. She isn't a master per se but she represents an institution. She allows people into support groups and keeps some out. She is a person of power and in power. **For an abuse survivor, power is control.** And control is something that the survivor has seen, experienced and has been hurt by. Power has taken her pride, happiness and maybe even her kids. She doesn't need another imbalance of power in her life. She needs to feel more power-full.

*No experts means everyone's an expert.*

# #4: (Unintentionally) Trauma-Informed

**"WHAT ISN'T SAID IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT IS SAID."  
- COLSON WHITEHEAD**

As defined by SAMHSA, "trauma-informed" means that programming operates from a perspective that: a) trauma is a widespread reality and b) program providers must not only be able to recognize and respond to the affects of past trauma but also actively avoid practices that would involve re-traumatization. Community-based, peer support groups are a near perfect paragon of trauma-informed. "Near perfect" because there is no provider intentionally creating a safe space.

**We all do that.**

No one knows gets survivors like other survivors. We know our triggers, like we know how to avoid a seat with its back to the door. We know we have a hard time with boundaries. And, when we are healthy enough, we know how to create safe spaces for ourselves and other survivors. That's what you experience in a community-based peer support group.

*We're trauma-informed, just not fancy about it.*

# #5: Vulnerability Exchanges

"VULNERABILITY SOUNDS LIKE TRUTH AND FEELS LIKE COURAGE." - BRENE BROWN

A "vulnerability exchange" is a simple toss of something true and brave to someone else. The offerer assesses how it lands and makes choices from there. Did the receiver accept in a respectful way and in doing so, encourage another such exchange? Did they respond with a toss of their own? Or did they criticize or shame?

**Vulnerability exchanges make for great dialogue but language without action doesn't say much.** In my peer support groups, I model these exchanges authentically; I share my own. This is a unique opportunity to learn and grow that can't happen in a traditional support group with an expert leader. Modeling these exchanges not only builds trust but also helps everyone see how vulnerability can be done and that it works.

*When you have women who have been to a few of your groups use the same language that you've been using, you know you're onto something.*



**"It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out where the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The *credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by blood and sweat.*"**

-TEDDY ROOSEVELT

# To sum up...

In community-based, peer support groups,  
everyone matters.

But no one more than anyone else.

These groups are safe spaces where we all know  
shame, secrets and pain. We acknowledge that  
and choose to focus on owning our story, *even  
those bits of it*, instead of allowing it to own us.  
And we know that the people who can give us  
the empathy, understanding and courage to  
keep going are the ones in the arena with us.

That's community-based, peer support.

It just works *better*.



"SURVIVOR FLOWERS"  
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THANKS FOR READING.



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