

A Guide to setting up a self-help group for women who experience Domestic Violence

Here are some suggestions for how to plan and prepare for a self-help group. You know your clients best, so you may have some additional or different ideas!

Please note that this is a general and basic guide to give you some considerations for planning and facilitating a group. This guide does not explain *how* to run a group - this requires some training and experience.

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NB. *Some of this information has been taken from www.womensaid.org.uk*

Group Practicalities

- Group size: 6-10 women?
- How many sessions? Or on-going?
- Where will the group meet? (safe, private and comfortable location)
- What time will the group meet? (Consider when might be a good time for women, and try to keep the sessions as regular times – e.g. same day and same time each week)
- How long will sessions last?
- Who will facilitate the group (2 facilitators)
- A name for the group?
- Will you have a leaflet for the group?
- Who will be invited to attend the group? (Think about the age of the women, who you think will work well together in a group, the level of their crisis, level of risk – e.g. feeling suicidal?)
- How will you explain to the women what the group is about and what it will involve? (Be clear with the women so they know what to expect)
- Will you provide drinks for the women?
- How will you evaluate the group? (e.g. questionnaire? Anonymized feedback forms? Verbal feedback from women? Facilitator's evaluation of the group?)
- Will you allow 'newcomers' into the group?

Session Planning and Preparation

- Decide how much you want the facilitators to be involved in the group discussion
- Do you want the women to talk together freely in the sessions? Do you want to introduce discussion topics to start discussions?
- What materials do you need (e.g. a flip chart? Pens? A 'do not disturb' sign for the door)
- Do you need to read some literature about Domestic Violence? (see websites / useful documents below)
- Are you aware of the help available (e.g. NGOs) and any statutory laws supporting women who experience DV?

Ideas for the Group Aims

These aims should be developed together with the women

- Being able to talk openly and freely without being judged. Being with other women who understand
- To improve self-esteem
- To realise that the violence is not their fault or responsibility
- To help the women realise that they are not alone
- To give them hope that their situation can improve
- To develop confidence in coping with their situation
- Knowing how to access help

Important Considerations

Impact of Domestic Violence on women

Short-term impact

- Physical injuries - such as cuts, scrapes and bruises, fractures, dislocated bones
- Hearing loss
- Vision loss
- Miscarriage or early delivery
- Sense of powerlessness
- Fear, shame, self-blame
- Sexually transmitted diseases

Long-term impact

- Gastro-intestinal (Stomach) disorders associated with stress
- Headaches
- Back pain
- Fainting
- Seizures
- Gynaecological problems
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Low self-esteem
- Sense of powerlessness and self-blame

- Sleep disturbances
- Alcohol and substance misuse
- Homelessness
- Suicide

Impact of Domestic Violence on children

- Chronic fear and anxiety
- Chronic worry (for themselves and their family)
- Taking on a parental role of victim
- Self-blame
- Sense of powerlessness
- They may at risk of developing symptoms of PTSD
- They may lack appropriate attention & affection since the mother may be preoccupied with her own safety and survival
- Anger (towards both victim and abuser for not preventing the violence)
- Poor performance at school (unable to concentrate at school)
- Problems with sleep, bed wetting
- They may learn that violence is the way of resolve conflict
- They may internalise the abuser, and may be at greater risk of being abused or abusing others in later life
- They are at higher risk of drug and alcohol abuse in later life

Risk Management

- How to assess and evaluate the likely harm to women (e.g. assess individually and during the group)
 - What will you do in the case that you find out one of the women's life is in danger?
 - Risk to other women in the group (e.g. if a domestically violent man follows one of the women to the group)
- Reduce risk by providing telephone numbers (i.e. who to contact if in danger), discussing group agreements about group and individual safety

Expressing feelings of suicide

How are you going to manage someone in the group who expresses feelings of suicide?

Some guidelines:

- Don't panic
- Remember your counselling skills: Active listening, Empathy.
- Agree to meet with the person after the group
- Conduct risk assessment (outside of the group): E.g.
 - o How often do they think about suicide?
 - o Have they thought about how they would kill themselves?
 - o Have they made a plan to commit suicide?
 - o Break confidentiality if necessary.
 - o Discuss their protective factors
 - o Make a safety agreement & plan to next make contact
 - o Inform management / supervisor

Post traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Complex PTSD

It is possible that some of your clients may suffer from PTSD and / or Complex PTSD. Here are some symptoms to look out for:

Some symptoms of PTSD

- Hypervigilant: being very sensitive to trauma-related stimuli (e.g. noise, certain people)
- Dissociation: detaching oneself from reality
- Flash backs: intrusive images of the trauma
- Sleep problems & Nightmares
- Unable to remember the trauma
- Negative thoughts about the self and the world (eg. "I am bad" "the world is dangerous")
- Blaming self for the trauma
- Irritability and aggression

Symptoms of Complex PTSD

- Difficulty managing strong emotions. This may lead to self-harm, aggression, feeling suicidal, taking risks)
- Dissociation: They may dissociate (detach themselves from emotions and/or reality)- this can result in forgetting periods of time
- They may suffer from a lot of guilt, shame. They may also feel that nobody can understand them
- Difficult relationships with others: They may become a victim of abuse, or abuse others
- Somatisation: (e.g. Chronic headaches, stomach aches, other physical health problems)
- Hopelessness: 'nothing will get better' 'there is no hope for me'

Women may express anger in the group

- Decide what is an acceptable and unacceptable level of anger during the group (discuss with women –e.g. during a discussion about group agreements)

Facilitator support

- Facilitators may be exposed to some traumatising information. This places them at risk of secondary trauma and burnout. Avoid having the group sessions at the end of the day or on a Friday afternoon. Try to plan to do something you enjoy (to de-stress) after the group or in the evening
- How will the facilitators support each other? (e.g. debrief discussion and reflection after session)
- Who will the facilitators approach for support and supervision?

Ideas for group discussions / activities

- Relaxation exercises (e.g. Singing, listening to relaxing music, breathing exercises, meditation)
- How different people cope with DV
- What help is available in the community? (Organisations that can help, friends and family, useful contact telephone numbers)

- What feelings people can have in response to DV (e.g. Fear, confusion, helplessness, anger)
- Exploring women's inner strength: thinking together about situations when they used their inner strength

The role of facilitators

- To provide a safe (both physically and emotionally safe) environment
- To be empathetic towards the women and help them to realise they are not alone (as many as 1 out of 4 women (worldwide) experience domestic violence at some point in their life – it's very common)
- To make sure all the women's voices are heard, but recognising that women will differ in how much they want to talk
- To take time to summarise what has been said in the group
- To comment on the group processes – ie. to say what is happening in the group (e.g. “I have noticed that the group feels very sad today” / “the group is being very brave in talking about some difficult issues” / “there seems to be a lot of tension amongst the group – perhaps people are feeling angry / confused / hopeless”)
- To notice similarities and differences in women's experiences and to highlight these sensitively
- To remind the women of the group agreements when necessary
- To know when to lead discussions or when to let the women interact on their own.
- Be flexible: you may start a session with some ideas about what you want to discuss, but some women may have different ideas / an important issue they want to talk about
- To not be afraid of silence in the group: this can be an important time for reflection
- Before the group sessions, spend some time to remind yourselves what happened in the previous session. Think about what discussions you may want to have. Think about any difficult situations that arose in the previous session and how you want to respond to it in the current session
- After group sessions, spend some time thinking about how the group went (use the 'Session record' document to give you ideas for discussions)

Beginning the group

Helping the women to get to know each other and to feel safe

This could take almost a whole session

- **Introductions:**

- Facilitators introduce themselves
- Ask the women to say a bit about themselves, their family and their interests / things they enjoy doing (avoid talking about domestic violence - at this stage you want the women to 'settle in' to the group and feel comfortable)

- Decide on the **group agreements** together with the women to help keep the group safe.

"What would help you participate most fully in this group?"

"What would make it possible to talk about your own experiences?"

"What would prevent you from expressing yourself?"

- Write this down on a flip chart so that the group can all see, and bring these to each group session so the women can remind themselves of these).

Suggestions for group agreements

(the women may have some ideas as well):

1. Group confidentiality: Keep things private (things that are spoken about in the group). You can talk about what YOU said but not about what other people said
2. Keep the venue of the group private so that it can be safe
3. Listen with kindness and respect other women in the group – everyone in the group is important and their voice needs to be listened to
4. Give everyone the opportunity to speak

5. Only talk about things you feel comfortable sharing with the group
6. If you become distressed and need to leave that is fine, but please let one of the facilitators know. If you need to take some time out and come back into the room later that is ok.
7. Try to come to the group every week, on time. Let the group facilitator know if you are not able to come to the group.
8. Do not drink alcohol or take drugs before coming to the group

Group ending / reviewing the group

It is good to remind the members half way through the programme that the group will be coming to an end in the near future. Once the group approaches the end, it is important to prepare the members by having discussions on group ending within the last few sessions.

For the last session, the following are points to remember:

- Ask the members what they feel they have gained from the course.
- Allow time for socialising, e.g. a farewell party with music, food and drink.
- Highlight the positives of the group ending, e.g. it is a new beginning and a chance for the women to practice what they have learnt.
- You may want to create a certificate for the women saying that they have successfully completed the course, as it will highlight their sense of achievement.
- All members should complete a final evaluation / feedback form. This helps to evaluate the group, but is also a useful way to assess how the group has helped the women
- You may want to do a risk assessment into the final session, or arrange one-to-one sessions with all women afterwards.

Useful websites

<http://tpocambodia.org/index.php?id=medicalandpsychologicaltreatm>

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/help-for-abused-and-battered-women.htm>

<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-articles.asp?section=00010001002200370001&itemid=1841>

<http://www.hiddenhurt.co.uk>

Useful documents

http://www.womensaid.org.uk/core/core_picker/download.asp?id=1963

Potential Problems in Facilitating the group

a) The facilitator dominates

The facilitator may try to solve all problems alone instead of engaging the whole group. This can inhibit the group's potential. From the participants' point of view, such a facilitator is in a position of power, and any dominating behaviour could potentially reinforce feelings of helplessness and inadequacy.

b) The facilitator has fixed expectations

The facilitator has specific expectations about how a group member (a victim) should behave. This can lead to overlooking and/or not accepting many emotions such as anger or depression.

The facilitator must create enough space within the group for each member to flourish and express her individuality.

By labelling the women as victims and expecting certain behaviour from them, the group's mission is lost.

c) The facilitator thinks that she is a greater expert on women's lives than the women themselves

Often the facilitator has good theoretical and practical skills in working with survivors. This might lead her to believe that she has a greater understanding of domestic violence than the women in the group.

However, the facilitator should still consider the women the experts in relation to their own lives.

d) The facilitator tries to avoid silence

Perhaps due to her own anxiety, or feeling pressured for time, the facilitator starts talking whenever there is a silent moment. Yet silence is a necessary tool of group work: it allows time for thinking and reflecting, and can create a certain tension that forces group members to seek solutions. The facilitator must be open to silence and be flexible regarding time.