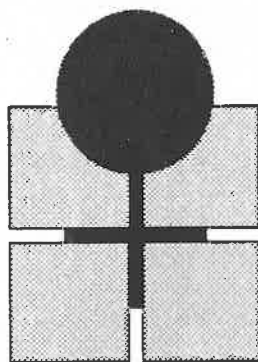


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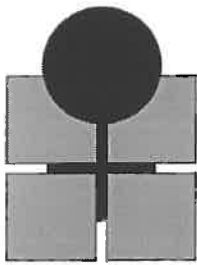
**SECOND STAGE SUPPORT GROUP:
MOVING ON FROM THE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP**

by

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Feminist Research, Education, Development & Action Centre

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The Feminist Research, Education, Development & Action (FREDA) Centre is one of five violence research centres funded by Health Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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To the women
who
have shared with us
their courage and dignity,
laughter and tears.

PREFACE by Angela Henderson

The scope of the problem of woman abuse is both astonishing and alarming. Studies from around the world have consistently found that approximately 30 percent of women have been physically assaulted by an intimate male partner (United Nations 1995). The much-publicized 1993 Canadian national survey on the subject of violence against women found the figure to be 29 percent nationwide (Statistics Canada 1993). Women are most often abused in their own homes by the men closest to them. At the same time, it is increasingly being recognized that the single most dangerous period for an abused woman is after leaving the relationship, when both the frequency and the lethality of men's abuse can escalate significantly (Zorza 1995).

Emotional abuse leaves no visible scars but can cripple women just as surely as physical abuse. Its effects are frequently long-lasting and devastating. Women begin to doubt their own worth and value, suffer from depression, and may ultimately be scared that they are going crazy. Emotionally and physically abused women often suffer from feelings of low self-esteem, depression, fear, anxiety, as well as various somatic problems such as sleeping and eating disturbances (Trimpey 1989). It is not hard to imagine the long-term effects of this constant barrage of abuse on a woman's ability to focus on her own needs and those of her children, or to attempt to take control of her life. The importance of programming to meet the needs of women and children is self-evident. Abused women report that peer-provided support groups are a useful approach to addressing their concerns (Campbell 1986; Trimpey 1989; Tutty, Bidgood and Rothery 1993).

The provision of various types of support groups is proving to be a useful strategy employed by community organizations serving abused women and their children (Campbell 1986). In a group, women are able to explore questions such as "Am I really abused?", "Was the abuse my fault?", or "How will I survive on my own?" Women can find the strength to enable them to cope with the overwhelming demands of their day-to-day lives in the kind of atmosphere of mutual understanding and support provided by a group of peers (NiCarthy, Merriam and Coffman 1984). Women who have been involved in abusive relationships seek out support as they try to re-establish themselves as single parents, or as they grapple with decisions about staying in or leaving the relationship.

Groups aimed at the provision of mutual support allow women to share their experiences and utilize the unique strengths and resources of each member. These groups are also economical, allowing the needs of many women to be met at the same time while not compromising the quality of interaction.

The purpose of this report is to describe the results of a research study aimed at demonstrating the efficacy of a support group. This particular "second stage" group was specifically for women who had passed through the initial crisis that often ensues once a woman first leaves an abusive man. A supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere was set up for women who were interested in focusing on their own personal concerns rather than relationship-related issues.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“By talking, I hear myself and learn...”

The following report describes a support group that was offered through the North Shore Crisis Services Society to women who had been in relationships with abusive and/or violent men. The participants were women who had been out of the abusive relationship for some time and who were able to attend the ten-week closed-group session. This report documents the group process and its effect on the participants and facilitators.

There is an assumption that the readers of this report have some basic knowledge of the issue of violence towards women, the social context in which violence occurs, and the long and short term effects on women.

Expectations of the Group Participants

The participants came to the group to help them identify and deal with issues they wanted to work through. For example, some of the issues women were interested in examining included: looking at the effects of being in a long-term abusive relationship, questioning what healthy relationships are, how to set boundaries with ex-partners, how to support their children who were also affected by the abuse, and dealing with their own depression, anger, and resentment.

Expectations of Facilitators

The facilitators hoped to create a safe environment for women to explore their issues and gain an appreciation of their own self-worth. Additionally, facilitators wanted women to gain information about the social implications of male violence, as well as an understanding of the impact of violence on their lives. Another important component of the group was the sharing of information and discussions which highlighted women's equality rights.

What Worked for the Participants

“I realize the only people who really understand me are people who've been there.”

Women felt that the group was a safe place to come to each week to try out new ideas, and to examine and leave behind old patterns. It gave participants an opportunity to share their experiences with other women who understood them without explanation or judgment. The group increased women's self awareness and knowledge about woman abuse. Further, it

helped them to trust their instincts, view their relationships in a clearer light, and discuss the differences between healthy and abusive relationships.

Women reported that the group interaction provided them with an increased sense of self worth. Participating in the group allowed women to have a positive experience through asking for, and receiving help. They also had the opportunity to acknowledge their own strengths and challenges in a positive, non-shaming way.

"If I figure out the answers on my own they'll stick in my mind; they'll be mine."

What Worked for the Facilitators

The criteria for women coming into the group allowed for participants who had already gone through the initial crisis stage of leaving and were ready to look at issues in more depth. The facilitators learned from the ways in which women explored their feelings about the abuse, how the abuse had affected them, and from the discussions about the role that society plays in sanctioning abuse.

The format and structure of the group was guided by a feminist perspective. This perspective allowed participants to direct the group as much as they wanted and needed to. Facilitators felt that the belief that each woman has her own answers and is an expert on her own situation, led to the women feeling empowered.

Effectiveness of the Second Stage Group

By the end of the group, both facilitators and participants felt that a support network was being developed which the women could rely on. Everyone agreed that the ten-week session and/or the meeting time at each session should be extended to allow for further connections to be fostered.

The facilitators felt that rather than participants returning to the First Stage drop-in group for on-going support, they would benefit from a Second Stage drop-in, in order to continue examining issues in depth and to maintain a "woman oriented" rather than "relationship oriented" focus. Since each woman's process is not linear, the facilitators felt that a second stage drop-in group would give women the opportunity to develop trust in a safe environment and provide them with the opportunity to practice the new skills they had learned. A drop-in group would also allow women to attend as many or as few sessions as they wished.

Recommendations

- That a structure to support Second Stage Groups be developed at the North Shore Crisis Services Society.
- That an ongoing Second Stage drop-in group be established with training for facilitators already experienced in facilitating First Stage Groups.
- That time and funding be made available for the development of these groups. For example, for advertising, information sessions, contact with local agencies, procurement of literature and group materials, etc.
- That training for participants interested in starting their own groups after completing Second Stage Groups be investigated. A model that begins with First Contacts, First Stage Drop-in, and moves on to Second Stage Closed, Second Stage Drop-in, might be appropriate. This cycle might be completed by individual women who would then become facilitators.
- That funding be provided by the provincial government for a conference to bring together facilitators of groups to share information.

“You quite possibly saved my life.”

I INTRODUCTION

This is a report on a study undertaken by the North Shore Crisis Services Society (NSCSS) with the support of the Feminist Research, Education, Development, and Action Centre (FREDA), in order to evaluate the effectiveness of a Second Stage Support Group for women who have experienced violence and/or abuse in an intimate relationship.

Women from our current First Stage Groups, from our drop-in groups, and from the community at large have expressed a need for a different kind of group—one that looks more in-depth at the underlying issues and patterns of violent and abusive relationships. In response to this need, the North Shore Crisis Services Society decided to conduct research into the effectiveness of a support group intervention for increasing participants' feelings of support and their own ability to cope. We approached the Feminist Research, Education, Development, and Action Centre (FREDA) to help us fund and develop a pilot project that would test a closed ten-week Second Stage Group.

The purpose of this group was to provide women with the opportunity to come together to share their common experiences and assist each other in the recovery process. Through discussion, exercises, and educational materials the aim was also to provide women with an understanding of the social context in which male violence occurs and the impact this violence has on the lives of women and children.

II THE NORTH SHORE CRISIS SERVICES SOCIETY AND EMILY MURPHY HOUSE

*The North Shore Crisis Services Society:
"Working Towards Ending Violence against Women and Children"*

1. HISTORY

In 1979, a small group of North Shore women created the non-profit North Shore Crisis Services Society in response to the lack of services for women and children fleeing abuse and violence. An emergency shelter was identified as a key need. On November 30 of that year, Emily Murphy House, the first and only transition house on the North Shore opened its doors.

Emily Murphy House was named in remembrance of a Canadian pioneer, the first woman to be appointed as a magistrate in the British Empire. Her appointment in 1916 was promptly challenged on the ground that the British North America Act of 1867 authorized only "persons" to preside in courts of law. Women did not enjoy that status. Emily Murphy instituted a campaign to reform the law which ultimately took the form of a lawsuit to determine if a woman could be named Senator. When the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against her, stating that women were not persons in the matter of rights and privileges, she pursued her claims to the Privy Council in England, which decisively declared in 1929 that women were indeed "persons" in the eyes of the law.

The transition house which bears the name of this remarkable woman is founded on the belief that women are full individuals who have the right to make their own choices, and to live a life without the fear of male violence. It is believed that these rights deserve support. The courage, tenacity, and strength Emily Murphy displayed are reflected every day in the struggles of the residents of Emily Murphy House in their efforts to free themselves and their children from violent men.

2. SERVICES

Violence towards women knows no boundaries; we serve women from every socio-economic background, culture, ethnic, and religious origin.

Up to eighteen residents can be sheltered at Emily Murphy House on a short-term basis. Counselling, information, referrals, and accompaniment to legal, medical and social services are provided to assist and support women in recognizing and acting on the options available to them. Children staying at the house also receive special attention from child advocate workers and, when funding is available, art and music therapists. Women who are non-residents can also access our services through an outreach program which includes a 24-hour crisis line, structured and drop-in support groups and counselling services. Women from the community who wish to volunteer at Emily Murphy House are offered specialized training through our volunteer program.

Public education and community awareness is vital in lowering the incidence of violence against women and children in our community. NSCSS provides speakers to a wide variety of groups regarding this issue, the existence of Emily Murphy House, and its services. NSCSS also consults, acts as liaison with, and trains other organizations in developing their own community resources addressing the issue of violence against women and children.

The services have greatly expanded since the founding of our Society and so has the need for them. During 1994, 305 women and children stayed at the shelter while 828 had to be turned away due to lack of space. In 1995 we moved into our new expanded and wheelchair accessible eighteen-bed facility to better serve women and children.

For fifteen years the North Shore Crisis Services Society through Emily Murphy House has offered drop-in support groups as part of their outreach program.

3. FIRST STAGE SUPPORT GROUPS

In facilitating groups for women who have been abused, we use a peer feminist method based on the philosophy that any services offered to women must “fit” their needs rather than assuming that the women will adjust their needs to “fit” what they are being offered.

It is our belief that women do not deserve, or in any way cause the abuse, that women are their own best experts, and that the non-judgmental support of other women is invaluable in the process of breaking the cycle of violence.

It is our goal to help women take back control of their lives, however they individually define that control. Each woman has different needs and expectations based on her life experience, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and class.

The obvious commonality is the abuse that women generally have experienced in their lives. In support groups, we also stress the positive bonds that exist between all women while honoring the differences and how these differences affect women's lives and their approach to dealing with the violence. All of our support groups are guided by the following principles:

- We believe in a non-violent society so that women and children can develop to their fullest potential without fear of reprisals.
- We believe that violence is unacceptable. Violence includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse or threats of abuse.
- We recognize that in a patriarchal society inequities exist which affect women and children. The unequal power base between men and women facilitates violence against women and children.
- We acknowledge that we live in a society that institutionalizes violence against women and children. Therefore, we believe we have a responsibility to speak out against violence in order to challenge the social acceptability of the victimization of women and children.
- We believe that women and children have a right to be supported with dignity and respect so as to nurture their self-esteem and establish a sense of control over their lives. At the same time, women are encouraged to take responsibility for their lives.
- We believe that women and children have a right to a safe place.
- We believe that we have a responsibility to provide options to women and to respect and support the choices they make.
- We believe that education is an important means to facilitate change. Therefore, we believe that women and children have the right to receive information and referrals in order to assist them in evaluating their decisions.

III “SAYING NO TO VIOLENCE”: A SECOND STAGE SUPPORT GROUP PILOT PROJECT

1. METHODOLOGY

The first stage of the project was to develop a program manual which would include an outline of the ten Second Stage Group sessions, a list of the materials used to interview participants, forms for child care subsidies, etc. It was felt that this manual would provide useful documentation which could later be used as a training manual for new facilitators.

Women were recruited to join the Second Stage Group from the already existing drop-in group, as well as from the community. Advertising for the group was sent out in flyers to other referral agencies, and ads were placed in the *North Shore News* and on Shaw Cable Telepages.

Before entering the group, women were interviewed to assess whether or not the Second Stage Group would be suitable for them. Women were required to be out of abusive relationships and not in immediate crisis. It was asked that they be willing to commit to the ten-week sessions, and whether or not they felt their needs could be met in a group situation. Prior to the interview, women were given information about the research project and asked permission for their initial contact interview to be taped. Women were also asked to sign a form that indicated they understood that facilitators had a responsibility to report child abuse. Prior to the initial interview they were also given information about the group and the sessions. During the interview they were asked what expectations they had of the group. Women were also asked to discuss their histories and to describe their current support systems and methods of coping.

The group ran from November 17, 1994 to February 2, 1995 with a two week break over the Christmas holidays. The pre- and post-group interviews were done outside of these sessions. Five women were recruited—one did not attend on the first night and contacted facilitators to tell them she was not ready for a group at this time. The other four members came to every session. After two sessions, participants asked that the 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. time limit be extended an extra half hour because they felt they needed more time. The group was held at the offices of the NSCSS.

The group members were asked to fill out a questionnaire at the mid-point of the group to evaluate the process of the group and to make suggestions about how facilitators could better meet their needs. They were also asked what was working for them and what they needed.

When the group was over, post-group interviews were held. Women were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and the interviews were based on their responses. They were asked about the weaknesses and strengths of the group process, the content, and the facilitators. Further, they were asked to discuss what had changed for them and what new coping skills they had acquired.

2. PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant “A”

Current Situation

“A” is a 38-year-old woman. She is a single parent of three children: two girls 7 and 4 years old, and a 2-year-old son. She had been away from her abusive partner for approximately one year at the time of the group. She had been involved in this relationship for seven years. “A” was a member of the drop-in group and also attended a parenting group for women whose children have witnessed violence/abuse.

Abuse History

At the beginning of the interview, “A” said there was no abuse history in her family. She did say that her boyfriends prior to marriage had the potential of being abusive but that she had ended the relationships before they became abusive. She said she carefully and methodically put together her plan to leave. She indicated that she still has contact with her ex-partner during access visits, in which he continues to try to control and manipulate her.

He never, never treat[ed] me like an adult, [he] treat[ed] me like a child, like a stupid woman. [F]rom the beginning of our marriage, he used to call me stupid...calling me swear words. [H]e kicked me hard...obsessed...I wasn't allowed to open the window. He didn't know that I knew he was [listening in] on the [phone] line...I saw him opening mail that I was mailing out. I wasn't allowed to drive the car...I wasn't strong enough to completely, 100 percent cut him off...I failed somehow....

Participant “B”

Current Situation

“B” is a 55-year-old woman. “B” is divorced and has a 33-year-old grown son. She had left her abusive partner for approximately one year at the beginning of the group after a 20 year relationship. “B” was a member of the drop-in group for a year. She is currently employed and works with elderly people.

Abuse History

“B” was the youngest of seven children. Her father died when she was 5 years old and her mother remarried. “B” said that her step-father was very violent. She connects the abuse in her marriage to the inter-generational effects of violence.

[My step-father] kept all of us kids very suppressed, we couldn't have a mind of our own, couldn't have an opinion. [He had] a very Victorian attitude—children should be seen and not heard. [I]f you weren't getting ready quick enough you would get slapped around the ears...I always had sore ears when I was a kid. He used to take a belt to you, we went to school with black and blue marks...he would sort of linger over certain parts of your body...[O]ne brother used to try to sexually abuse me...my husband...would drink...physically abuse me in the street and the police were involved, not for the first time, they'd been called a few times, but I could never press charges....

Participant “C”

Current Situation

“C” is a 41-year-old working single parent of four children: three girls 14, 12 and 10 and a son 7 years old. She is separated from her second husband. She sees him on access visits and he continues to verbally and emotionally abuse her. She is having a lot of difficulty with her children acting out. She had left her abusive partner for approximately one year at the beginning of the group after a fourteen-year relationship.

Abuse History

...I was sexually abused from [the time I was] an infant starting with my father. [A]s a child [I was abused] by my friend's brother, a stranger, a whole series...[I was] rape[d] by my husband...he hit me once, and he put his hands around my throat and said that he was going to choke me...he was drinking...punching me...jealous of any friendship I had with anybody. [He]threatened to kill me...my father said to me that if I had been a better wife, none of this would have happened....

Participant “D”

Current Situation

“D” is a 56-year-old divorced woman with serious health problems. She had cancer two years ago and then fell into deep depression. She is on numerous medications and is having difficulty sorting out medical and financial problems, mainly due to the debilitating bouts of depression. “D” was worried about getting evicted from her apartment because she had not been able to pay rent, and was having a desperate time trying to live off her social assistance cheque which was under \$700 per month. “D” had been in several abusive relationships, at the time of the group her last relationship (with an abusive alcoholic) had ended. She did not initially see a connection between the abuse in her relationships and things that had occurred in her family of origin. “D’s” greatest realizations came in this area during group sessions.

Abuse History

...he [my partner] got me into a corner, [he] loved hitting my head on corners and things. I had been on a pedestal to this man and after a couple of years, he had me convinced I couldn't tie my own shoelaces. I had broken ribs...trouble breathing...weeks of extreme battering and intense terrible verbal abuse, then it would be wonderful, almost fairy tale. My next relationship was an extremely bad alcoholic he quit his job so I suddenly had to support him...

Summary Of Themes

Like all women in abusive and violent relationships there are some common themes among the experiences of the group participants. However, each individual woman had her own particular story. What these women shared in common was low self-esteem, isolation, self-blame and confusion. Each one was at a different place with her emotions when the group began: "A" talked about disassociating; "B" felt resentful of the time wasted; "C" felt helpless and powerless; and "D" was getting in touch for the first time with her anger and reaching out.

Each woman was looking for a place to be heard, to tell her story. All the women were eager to learn, understand and be changed by the knowledge they felt they would gain from each other, the facilitators, and their own inner source of truth.

3. THE GROUP PROCESS

The group met once a week for a period of ten weeks with the same two facilitators. Initially, the sessions were two hours in length but the participants requested another half hour. This change was negotiated and agreed to by all participants and facilitators.

Negotiation played an important role throughout the ten weeks. At the beginning of the group the participants were presented with a list of suggested topics and were asked how they wanted to cover them. An agenda was prepared by the facilitators for each session with handouts relevant to the topic.

From the beginning of the ten-week session the participants expressed themselves openly and took risks with what they revealed about themselves saying that they felt safe to do so. As they became more confident, they took more control over the agenda, spending more and more time on an in-depth analysis of the topic in relation to themselves rather than working through the agenda in a linear fashion.

One of the obstacles each woman had to overcome was to allow herself to focus on her feelings and the effect the abusive relationship had on her, rather than talking about the relationship. Once this was achieved, the women began to explore their needs, their rights, and expectations in relationships. It is common for women who have been in abusive

relationships to focus on others and their needs. As facilitators, it was important to help the women break that thought pattern and give women permission to look at themselves.

The potential of a support group effecting change in a woman's life is excellent. The group meeting is a social context in which a woman will make decisions about how to engage, confront, embrace or otherwise participate with other members and facilitators. It is a safe place where she may first be able to practice change in her life.

Group counselling provides women with the opportunity to come together to share common experiences and assist each other in the recovery process. Group counselling also provides women with information, education and a greater understanding of the effect that violence has had on their and their children's lives. Through discussion, exercises, reading materials and the group experience, our aims were:

Providing women with a safe place to meet

- a) ensuring confidentiality.
- b) informing the women of their legal rights.
- c) offering safety plans, action plans and future planning.

Alleviating social and psychological isolation

- a) providing a space and opportunity to meet women who share a common experience.
- b) helping the participant see that she is "not the only one," not "crazy" or isn't/wasn't "asking for it."
- c) reaching women who may never go to a transition house.
- d) respecting the choices that women make.
- e) increasing feelings of support.

Offering useful information and practical assistance

- a) helping women to sort out problems by breaking them down into components small and specific enough to be tackled with some confidence.
- b) informing the participant of what resources are available in the community and what to expect from these resources.

Assisting women to develop self-respect, autonomy, and increased coping skills

- a) exploring self-image.
- b) learning to trust again.
- c) learning that it is acceptable to make mistakes.
- d) approaching the "impossible" and taking risks.
- e) gaining courage and energy to face new situations.
- f) appreciating their own qualities and positive accomplishments while in a battering relationship.
- g) exploring what each woman wants to do, and providing the support and encouragement to carry that through
- h) recognizing opportunities to give support and encouragement to other women.
- i) developing confidence.

Creating political and social awareness

- a) discussing alternatives to violence and options.
- b) comparing viewpoints about, and expectations of, life and women's experiences.
- c) connecting women's experiences in general with battered women's experiences.
- d) discovering why the participant is there, who or what is responsible for her being a battered woman seeking group support, societal accountability and the abusive man's accountability.

Exploring difficult questions

- a) helping a woman through the transition from self-blame to the realization that she didn't cause the abuse.
- b) learning to identify warning signs/red flags for potential abuse in future relationships.

IV GROUP MATERIAL OUTLINE AND TOPIC SUGGESTIONS**TOPIC I (fixed): INTRODUCTION TO THE SUPPORT GROUP**

In this session women are welcomed to the group. Their courage and strength in participating is recognized and they are assured that they can take part freely without humiliation or judgment. The facilitators are introduced (background and knowledge/experience), and participants introduce themselves (why they are in the group, expectations, etc.). The ground rules of the group are laid and housekeeping, group structure, etc., are discussed.

Each participant receives a book in which she may choose to write during the ten weeks. Participants are invited to decorate their journals during the first session. Sharing in this activity is an important part of the group bonding process.

TOPIC II: ANGER

In this session the goal is discovering the underlying emotions behind anger. Participants voice their anger and investigate ways of dealing with and resolving anger.

TOPIC III: FEAR

Participants identify the source of fear and its purpose. There is a recognition that in an abusive situation, fear is a means of staying safe. Learning to trust one's instincts is discussed as well as the importance of paying attention to feelings of fear.

TOPIC IV: DEPRESSION

Participants are encouraged to recognize and acknowledge feelings of depression. They are encouraged to develop an awareness of how depression can be related to past and present abuse (childhood sexual abuse, adult emotional and physical abuse). Coping with depression is discussed.

TOPIC V: SHAME

Participants explore the origins of shame through recalling childhood experiences and adult experiences in abusive relationships.

TOPIC VI AND VII: SELF-ESTEEM

The focus in these sessions is on moving one's perspective from negative feelings of helplessness towards positive feelings of self-worth and empowerment. Participants look at ways of building self-esteem and reducing self-blame. A discussion of societal responsibility for violence against women takes place with a focus on the accountability of the violent man.

TOPIC VIII: ASSERTIVENESS

Participants learn to differentiate between aggression and assertiveness. Women's rights to express their opinions directly and honestly without fear of negative consequences (humiliation, violence) are discussed.

TOPIC IX: LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

In this session, participants assess relationships, examine personal boundaries and recognize one's right to have control over the degree of intimacy established.

TOPIC X: SEXUALITY

This session is dedicated to discovering how comfort with one's sexuality is related to past positive/negative experiences. Significant "markers" in one's development are highlighted and discussed.

Topics IX and X may be discussed as separate topics, but may merge into one discussion depending on the comfort level of the group.

TOPIC XI: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

In this session the stages of development in a healthy relationship are discussed. Things such as recognizing "power and control" versus "equality" in a relationship are emphasized. Issues surrounding group closure are first raised in this session.

TOPIC XII: WRAP-UP SESSION

In this session facilitators discuss closing the circle and raise the question where do we go from here? Participants are asked to identify their support network and plans for the future. The group is evaluated and closing rituals are conducted (i.e., small gift exchange—card, funny button, etc.).

V EVALUATION OF THE GROUP

1. MID-POINT EVALUATIONS

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the group and to guide the facilitators, participants were asked the following questions midway through the group process:

- a) What have you found valuable in the last four sessions?
- b) What do you want out of the group?
- c) What are you willing to put into the sessions to achieve these goals?
- d) Do you feel there are any personal blocks in your way to achieve the goal(s)?
If so, please describe.
- e) In what way do you think facilitators can help you to achieve your goal(s)?
- f) Other comments, observations?

2. FINAL EVALUATIONS

At the end of the group, participants were asked again to evaluate the effectiveness of the group and to discuss how well the group helped them fulfill their own personal goals. The questions asked were:

- a) How well was the purpose of the group fulfilled?
- b) Can you describe any new understanding or awareness that has occurred to you because of your participation in the group?
- c) How could the way the group functioned be changed to make it more helpful to you?
- d) Have you learned new ways of coping? If yes, please describe.
- e) What was the most valuable part of the group for you (interaction with facilitators, support, promoting information)?
- f) What bothered you? What didn't you like about the group (facilitators, location, time, size of group, format, other)?
- g) What are your feelings about the role and effectiveness of the group facilitators?
- h) Where do you see yourself in the process of healing from the abuse?
- i) What is your current support network?
- j) Were the goals you set for yourself met in the group?
- k) Were your expectations met?
- l) Any other comments you would like to make?

The support group experience was described by the participants as being an extremely positive one. All of the women felt that the purpose of the group had been achieved. Although they felt that they had a great deal of work ahead of them and that they would continue to have difficult obstacles to overcome, they felt that they were better equipped to face the future.

Several themes came through consistently in response to the evaluation questions. One of the most important of these related to the value of having a group composed of people whose experiences were similar. Women stated that they didn't have to explain themselves because they instinctively knew what the others had gone through.

Women also discussed the importance of acquiring skills to obtain clear, accurate information about woman abuse. One of the most highly-rated aspects of the group was the value of that new information.

In relation to themselves, the group members described various things as positive changes. They all experienced an increase in self-knowledge and self-esteem. They felt more confident in their own abilities to influence their lives and they attributed this to increased knowledge and skills. A couple of the women described how they felt more comfortable expressing their emotions and saw this as a positive skill.

There were two identified problems with the group experience. One was the feeling that the experience was too short. All the women felt that there should be more sessions and that the sessions should be three hours long instead of two. The other problem was related to interpersonal relationships among group members. These took the form of small complaints about such issues as lack of punctuality or failure of other members to complete agreed-upon tasks. These concerns were not seen as particularly worrisome and tended to be referred to in passing during discussions about other issues.

In summary, the group was seen as producing increased confidence and knowledge which resulted in new ways of coping. The members were all committed to continuing the support group on their own to support each other.

VI SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has described the content and conduct of a research project related to the provision of a second stage support group to women who had left abusive relationships. The group proved to be extremely successful, although both participants and facilitators felt the 10-week time period was inadequate in that it did not allow for total integration of the program content. Women were just beginning to identify their own most significant issues and to feel comfortable discussing them when the group ended. It is recommended that if the group is offered again the sessions be expanded to two-and-one-half hours and that the number of weeks be increased from twelve to sixteen. At the beginning of the ten weeks, women found it hard to change the focus from the relationship to their own personal issues. A major intent of the program was to help women make this shift, because one of the effects of living with abuse is that women's attention is focused on monitoring the relationship and her partner at the expense of attending to her own needs.

Women were very clear that the major strength of the group lay in the non-judgmental contact with other women who had had similar experiences. There was no need to explain their feelings; the other women instinctively understood. As the program evolved the women all began to experience feelings of increased self-worth and confidence in their own abilities. They became more comfortable giving themselves credit for what they had accomplished in leaving the abusive relationship and setting up independently. However, it is important to acknowledge that women all move through the process of working towards independence at their own pace. Facilitators need to be comfortable with this diversity and to have realistic expectations about what can be achieved in ten weeks.

For this reason it is recommended that facilitators be chosen who are familiar with the range of reactions and responses, and with the differing lengths of time it can take women to make decisions about their lives. Facilitators must also believe the principle that the women are the experts in their own lives and that the facilitator's role is to provide clarity and focus, and to support them in their decisions.

Lastly, it is recognized that support groups are a successful resource for abused women and that more agencies are beginning to take this approach. It is recommended that funding be sought to support a conference of facilitators engaged in conducting different types of support groups in order to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, techniques and strategies.

This report has outlined the design, implementation and evaluation of a second stage support group for abused women. The group proved to be a successful resource for women who had left an abusive relationship to begin an independent life free of violence, threat, and fear. It is hoped that funding support can be secured to continue and refine the group program.

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