

Collaborations

The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc.

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Beginning a Crime Victim Support Group by Noelle Hometchko, LSCW-C

(Noelle Hometchko is a Licensed Certified Clinical Social Worker, in the state of Maryland. She is currently employed by the Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center as the therapist working with victims of crime in both Baltimore and Prince George's County. Ms. Hometchko specializes in working with children and families experiencing traumatic grief.)

Supportive counseling for victims of crime is an important yet delicate process to be undertaken with careful planning and compassion. Support groups are one avenue for victims to express a wide range of emotions including sadness, guilt, anger, disappointment, and relief, among others. One of the most important aspects to keep in mind is that each individual is emerging from a unique and painful situation, and their reactions may be unlike that of any other victim. Before starting a support group for crime victims you may want to consider incorporating some of the following ideas.

The first step to begin the group is to conduct a needs assessment in your area. If you are already part of an organization that works with victims, you can sample your existing client population to determine the need and desire for such a group. Another option is to send a survey, with a postage paid return envelope, asking questions to gauge interest in a group. Faith communities can be a valuable resource when beginning a group. Often they have families in their congregations who have been victims of crime and have turned to their faith leaders for support.

Once you have determined the need for the group, you must plan the format. This includes practical and convenience issues such as time, frequency and basic guidelines. Ask yourself questions such as: Where will the group meet? How many people will be allowed in the group? (Continued on page 2)



“One person can make a difference—and every person should try.” Stephanie Roper

The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center, Inc.

14750 Main Street, 1B
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772

Phone: (301) 952-0063
Fax: (301) 952-2319
Email: ScottBeard@mdcrimevictims.org



Is there adequate space and accommodations? Will you meet every week, once a month, or bi-weekly? What day and time will the group meet? Will the group be run as a therapy group, with a professional counselor as a facilitator, or will it be more of a peer support group? Will members be required to attend each meeting or will it be more of a drop in format? Advertising and holding an “open house” for those interested in a support group can address many of these questions. Potential support group members will be more invested in maintaining the group over time if they are included in this decision making process.

After the format has been established, it is important to establish basic “rules” for the group sessions. It is important that the group members feel that the group is a safe forum to discuss sensitive issues and that all opinions and thoughts are welcome. One of the most imperative rules is the confidentiality of statements expressed in the support group. Confidentiality is a key factor for group members to feel comfortable in sharing with each other. In the same vein, the group leader must be prepared to prevent attacks on individual members. At times when emotions run high, people may say things that seem inappropriate. It is important that the group leader does not criticize members publicly when such issues arise, but to divert the conversation and speak to individual members after the group has concluded. In some instances, group members challenging one another can be helpful in forwarding the healing process. However, blatant attacks must be monitored and eliminated whenever possible as they can negatively effect the group environment and possibly group safety.

Planning group activities can be done in several ways depending on how the group has decided to function. For example, as a peer support group, the responsibility to contribute topics for discussion and group activities may fall on various members. On the other hand, if a counselor facilitates the group he or she should plan all group activities. In either case, the group activities should be based on the needs of group members and their corresponding stages of healing.

When running a victim support group, it is important to keep in mind that revictimization issues can emerge from one victim hearing the story of another. It is important to continue to “take the pulse” of your group and assess what topics can be tolerated. It may become necessary to split your group if some have advanced beyond the point of others in the group. This may be especially true if some are hindering the progress of others.

One excellent publication for use in homicide/suicide support groups is “Hope for Bereaved” by Therese S. Schoeneck. (1) This book offers useful information for discussion of grief; ways to help; coping skills; and stories for discussion written by survivors of a variety of sudden death situations. These stories can be used as prompts for your group members to discuss their own experiences with certain issues.

Another publication that has been useful is “Growing Beyond Survival” by Elizabeth G. Vermilyea. (2) This book contains worksheets and tools for group members to complete and discuss in the group setting. These include tools focused on journaling, the cycle of trauma, and reality checks. There is also “homework” that can be assigned to group members. The “homework” can then be reviewed in the next group session thereby giving victims time to think about the questions in private. These are excellent tools even if your members choose not to share. Simply completing the “homework” can be very therapeutic.

Finally, continue to monitor and adjust your group format to meet the needs of the members. If you have more new members than old at any given time, it may be necessary to repeat activities for the newer members. Always keep in mind, that no matter how you choose to run your group, victims have experienced a trauma and should be treated with compassion and respect for the current feelings they are experiencing. Remember that grief is not a linear process; it comes with many ups and downs and in-betweens. Acceptance is often the most therapeutic role a group can play, so above all else, attempt to maintain an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding where healing can begin.

(1)Schoeneck, Therese S., *Hope For Bereaved: Understanding, Coping and Growing Through Grief*, HOPE FOR BEREAVED (2001).

Vermilyea, Elizabeth, *Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-Help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress*, The Sidran Foundation and-Press (2000).

Internet Resources for Support Groups:

Crime Victim Support Group Information

http://www.mentalhelp.net/selfhelp/selfhelp.php?idx=41&isindex2=&a_index=100

Online Directory of Support Groups (by Category or keyword)

<http://www.mentalhelp.net/selfhelp/>

Self Help 101

http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/Understanding_Self-Help.pdf

(Resources continued on page 3)

Faith Based Support Groups

Often individuals need support to understand and deal with traumatic events in their lives. Faith based communities can keep costs very minimal for providing support groups because they can use the same space used for worship as a meeting place. Also, they can advertise through their bulletins and congregation. The faith leader can be utilized as the leader for the support group.

In order to start a support group in your community, here are a few good tips (1):

Don't reinvent the wheel: Although faith-based support groups will tailor their support groups to align with religious beliefs, it is likely that there is a non-faith based group in your community offering support. Check local groups for basic models and outlines. It would be helpful to talk with the leaders of the support group. The information gathered can then be adapted accordingly to include the element of faith.

Establish the purpose of the group. Define the groups shared concern. Initially, try to focus on one or two activities. Groups can focus upon providing emotional support, practical information, education, and sometimes advocacy.

Create Guidelines: Determine any basic guidelines your group will have for meetings. It is essential to establish levels of anonymity and confidentiality so group members feel comfortable sharing.

Membership: Discuss potential members. Can anyone join? Will there be specific times new members can start attending meetings? Decide whether membership dues should be charged to offset costs such as facility rental or refreshments. (Faith communities can likely use their own facility thereby eliminating that cost).

Meeting Format: Determine how much time will be devoted to business affairs, discussion time, planning future meetings, and socializing. What topics will be selected? Will there be guest speakers?

Roles and Responsibilities: Continue to share and delegate the work and responsibilities in the group. Decide who will serve as a phone contact. Consider additional roles members can play in making the group work.

Use of Professionals: Consider using professionals as advisors, consultants, or speakers to your groups, and as sources of continued referrals and information.

Outreach to Community: After picking a location that will serve the needs of potential members, begin advertising. The advertisements can include public service announcements and flyers distributed to local community centers, grocery stores, or libraries. Faith communities can also advertise through their congregations and/or bulletins.

(1) Adapted from the following websites: *Six Steps to Start a Successful Self-Help/Mutual-Aid Group*, available at <http://www.selfhelpresource.bc.ca/Resources/SixStepsToStartASuccessfulSelf-original.pdf>; and Self-Help Resource Centre: *Starting A Group*, available at <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/start.html#what%20is%20a%20group>.

(Internet Support Group Resources continued from page 2)

Gift From Within (PTSD)

<http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/groups.html>

Self Help Groups (PTSD)

<http://www.activist-trauma.net/selfhelp.htm>

International Institute of Faith Based Counseling

<http://www.iifbc.com/grouptraining.php>

Witness Justice: How Faith Based Communities Can Help Survivors

<http://www.witnessjustice.org/health/faithbasedcomm.cfm>

Amazon Online Bookstore www.amazon.com

In the search option box, type in words such as “spirituality and trauma recovery”; “spirituality and domestic violence”; “spirituality and crime victims”. Several books appear including workbooks on conducting support groups.

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“Putting Victims First”

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