
Survivors Helping Survivors



A Practical Guide to Understanding Peer-Support For Survivors of Sexual Violence

Prepared for the Cornwall Public Inquiry

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Introduction

We are all social beings by nature – connectedness and community are necessary, if not vital to our well-being. Through their very existence, social relationships can be a source of healing for many psychological wounds. Because sexual abuse and sexual assault occur in relative secrecy – in a state of disconnection between people – reconnecting and rebuilding trust are often at the core of healing from sexual violence. Some survivors turn to peer-support initiatives to build connection and to heal.

For some, peer-support initiatives (groups, mentoring programs, etc.) may supplement the formal counselling process. For other survivors, especially those in smaller or rural communities, peer-support initiatives may be the only opportunity for growth and recovery. For others still, peer-support is the preferred mode of connection.

From the wounds of sexual violence, many survivors face problems in relationships with friends, at home and at work. These challenges in relationships are not only a consequence of abuse, but can also place survivors at greater risk of isolation, re-victimization and abuse. This vulnerability is worrisome. For recovery to take place, physical and emotional safety is essential. Developing an understanding of how safety can be created and sustained within peer-support initiatives is the goal of *Survivors Helping Survivors*. We trust this document will be helpful to survivors and service providers alike.

Survivors Helping Survivors, a guide funded by the Cornwall Public Inquiry, explores the benefits, risks and challenges of peer-support for survivors of sexual violence. We also provide practical ideas for creating and maintaining peer-support initiatives for survivors of sexual violence. With this guide, we hope to provide a better understanding of peer-support among survivors of sexual abuse.

Organized peer-support networks have only been around for a relatively short period of time. In fact, some of the oldest peer-support initiatives such as Alcoholics Anonymous only came into being in the 1930s.

Peer-support is most often in response to issues related to medical conditions, addictions, and mental health. Peer-support is also a popular format for school programs with youth. Peer-support groups are also helpful in coping with issues such as grief and weight loss. In all of these areas, support and first-hand experience is tremendously important.

A companion document *Survivors Helping Survivors: a Study of Peer-Support among Survivors of Sexual Violence in the Province of Ontario* offers a more detailed and academic look at peer-support. In our study, we looked at the literature on this topic. We also talked with people who are connected with peer-support initiatives for survivors of sexual violence across the province of Ontario. In the guide (which you are currently reading) we have removed most of the discussions and references about the research in order to make it more readable and practical.

Both documents can be accessed through the Cornwall Public Inquiry (www.cornwallinquiry.ca)

Survivors Helping Survivors in Ontario

Through our research we uncovered 13 peer-support initiatives in Ontario for survivors. When we compare this with the thousands of groups that exist for alcohol addiction and cancer, it seems that joining a peer-support initiative that addresses sexual violence is a very uncommon way for survivors of sexual violence to seek or give support. There are many possible explanations for this. It may in part be because of the stigma and isolation that accompanies sexual trauma. It may also be because of fears about the potential risks and challenges. Many initiatives were hard to find. Peer-support groups vary in terms of size, structure, funding, leadership, and mandate. Some initiatives seem to be thriving while others are struggling.

What is Peer-Support?

In our understanding:

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

- Davidson, Chinman, Sells, & Rowe, 2006, p.443

Some key characteristics of peer-support initiatives usually include the following:

- Not professionally-led, though may have professional involvement in some capacity.
- People gather for support based on a shared issue or experience.
- May include self-help, mutual support, mutual-aid, support groups, and mentoring.
- May be change-oriented, social-oriented, support-oriented, or focussed on social action.

The benefits of peer-support among survivors

People involved in peer-support groups often state that their involvement allowed them to “find their voice” or helped them to heal. Some key benefits are:

- **Emotional Support:** This is the benefit most often identified when individuals are asked what they received from a group. Peer-support has the potential to benefit helpers and not just helpees. Peers who help others, talk about how rewarding it is to “give back”, how it is helpful in their own recovery, and how it increases their sense of confidence and competence in connecting with others.
- **Sharing information and advice:** One survivor said: “Group provides a safe place to express what we are experiencing and feeling. We share our abuse experience.” Being encouraged by somebody who can say “I tried it and it worked” has a different impact than advice from a counselling professional.

- **Increased social network and friendship:** While sexual violence can drive a wedge between survivors and their support networks, peer-support initiatives can give people a sense of being part of a community. This often happens through opportunities for being heard and understood, identification with others, having the experience of being valued and cared for, and also making friends. Peer-support initiatives have the potential to create a sense of increased social connection and reduced isolation. One survivor put it this way: *“Because of the group, people are not alone. They are part of a group; part of a family.”*
- **Becoming empowered:** The capacity to stand up for oneself and/or others is at the core of most self-help and peer-support groups. For survivors of sexual violence, peer-support has the potential to transform the powerlessness resulting from trauma, through helping others, taking on meaningful group roles, and being encouraged to see one’s strengths and resources.
- **Finding hope or positive role models:** With peer-support, hope is something that develops within the group, rather than created for the group. Peer-support initiatives provide chances for members to serve as role models or mentors for other group members. It can be very powerful when group members share their journey of healing or recovery with others who are feeling hopeless or discouraged.
- **Achieving insight:** Insight occurs when group members discover something important about themselves – about their actions, what motivates them, and things kept hidden inside.
- **Learning coping skills:** Developing coping skills in peer-support groups is based on shared experience and expertise – “this is how I coped.” Coping generally involves practical strategies for managing situations.
- **Reduced symptoms:** The successes of other types of peer-support initiatives can be measured in terms of symptom relief, recovery time, life expectancy, functioning, and psychological well-being. Survivors of sexual violence may benefit from reduced symptoms as well.

The risks and challenges of peer-support among survivors

Most groups experience problems at times and peer-support groups are no different. The following are risks and challenges of greatest concern for peer-support initiatives for survivors.

- **Leadership burnout:** Leadership burnout can be caused by trying to do too much and by being overloaded by painful stories. It can occur from the high demands of coordinating, recruiting, and maintaining the vision and, in some cases, from being a public figure.

- ***Irregular attendance or low membership:*** Irregular attendance and low membership are some of the most common complaints with support groups. Irregular attendance and low membership can threaten the existence of a group and also has the potential to leave remaining group members feeling further isolated.
- ***Dominating or controlling members:*** Dominating or controlling members may talk more than their share, talk over people, yell or talk loudly, put others down, or try to tell others what to do, think, or say. Behaviours of such members can be particularly challenging for groups that lack an identified group leader. Among survivors, dominating or controlling members raise the risk of re-victimization of group members.
- ***Keeping the group safe or comfortable for members:*** Sexual abuse survivors are more at risk for having personal boundaries violated or not respected. Establishing safe boundaries is more problematic with survivors and issues such as sexual relationships and financial dealings can become challenging if not discussed and addressed with clear ground rules.
- ***Sharing of misguided or inaccurate information among members:*** While sharing information appears to be positive, information passed between group members may be inaccurate or possibly harmful. Medications, for instance, may or may not be helpful for individuals, and what has worked for one person may or may not work for others.
- ***Expression of intense emotions or negativity that becomes unmanageable for group members:*** The expression of intense emotions or negativity can be both helpful and problematic for survivors. Being a part of a peer-support group can help people talk about and sooth painful or scary feelings. On the other hand, the expression of intense emotions can result in people leaving the group or causing a lot of strain on the group's ability to provide support. It is important to have a plan for how strong emotions and negativity will be handled in group.
- ***Group members attempting therapy in a group that is unequipped for it:*** Many peer-support groups warn against "going too deep" and some discourage talking about sexual abuse altogether.
- ***Not welcoming to others:*** Given that connectedness is a key benefit of peer-support, some individuals who are new or are from a minority group may feel left out or may not have their needs met adequately.
- ***Group members at too many different stages of recovery:*** While there are benefits to having groups with members at different stages of recovery, peer-support group members who have worked a lot on their healing may experience frustration with others who may seem "unaware" or "raw." Furthermore, group members who are relatively new in their recovery may be triggered by group members who can talk with ease about the details of

their victimization. This can be a challenge for groups as well as a risk for individuals themselves - e.g., “I don’t belong” or “my needs are insignificant.”

- **Approaching peer-support initiatives as “the answer” to healing from sexual violence:** Concerns have been raised that group members may opt for peer-support groups and never seek professional treatment. One survivor commented: *“Some survivors assume that just by going to peer-support it will heal them. The attitude is ‘I don’t need to see a professional or work on anything on my own. Everything’s going to happen in group.’”*
- **Isolation:** One respondent talked about the initiative actually increasing or reinforcing a negative view of themselves or negative feelings for some survivors: *“Some people feel let down. They don’t feel like they fit in. It can create more isolation.”*

Lessons Learned

Creating a new group can be both exciting and difficult. Putting care and thought into creating new groups is important in ensuring that the group works well, stays afloat, and doesn’t put survivors at risk. The following is advice from people who are connected with peer-support initiatives about how to create effective peer-support groups for survivors of sexual violence.

Plan It Well: One survivor suggested that people who wish to start a new group think about and write down what they hope and expect, including what they want the group to do, what they want to achieve, and what roles people will play in the group. Similarly, another respondent talked about how it is important to evaluate and plan for how the initiative will be able to keep going. Yet another survivor said: *“figure out what you really want the group to be about. Figure out your mandate and stick to it.”*

Boundaries, Safety, and Structure: These three terms came up numerous times as being vital to successful peer-support with survivors of sexual violence. Some respondents went further and talked about the importance of group rules and having a clear mandate. People talked about the importance of having a screening process for new members in order to ensure that the person is ready for a group and a “good fit.”

Create an atmosphere of sharing and non-judging: It is important to create peer-support spaces where there is equal sharing (*“everyone gets a turn”*). Some respondents talked about the importance of creating a non-judging space, one asserting the need to *“honour the individual’s right to express herself without advice.”*

Get direction, support and advice: Most existing peer-support groups encourage those wishing to establish a new group initiative to seek advice. Some encouraged new initiatives to seek advice from professionals or *“people you respect.”* Other survivors stressed the importance of seeking advice that is rooted in peer-support. It seems most important to be

linked to something from which to draw on experience and wisdom; the type or tradition seems less important.

Training: It is important to have some kind of training before starting a peer-support initiative. While the training should be specifically about peer-support, applicable topics should include group facilitation and abuse issues as well. One survivor commented: *“Take some form of training beforehand. Take mentorship training or training to be a facilitator.”*

Share leadership: Enlisting others to work with you and share leadership can help reduce burnout. Knowing that leadership burnout is a significant challenge, and that those who seem most at risk are the people who start initiatives, it is important to have members who are committed to sharing the tasks of organizing, telephoning, recruiting and group leadership.

Don’t let lack of money stop you: One person from a longstanding peer-support initiative that has had struggles at different times in its history asserted that lack of money should not be allowed stop the benefits of peer-support.

Attracting Members

Many peer-support groups in Ontario find it difficult to attract new members. Almost half of the peer-support initiatives for survivors in Ontario do not publicize themselves and most rely heavily upon word of mouth. Also, very few such initiatives are listed on self-help or peer-support databases. Without new members, most groups can’t survive. Small groups can sometimes provide greater closeness, but can also feed a sense of isolation – “almost nobody else has been through what I’ve been through.”

There are some other ways besides word of mouth to attract new members:

Public education: One participant noted that *“attracting new members often involves the re-education of referral sources.”* All participants in our research claimed that their initiative engages in some form of public education. Some initiatives have developed a roster of individuals who engage in public speaking about their experiences and healing process.

Partnering: Many stressed the importance of partnerships with organizations for attracting new members as many attract new members through referrals from helping professionals.

About half of the initiatives we contacted in Ontario identified media such as **newspapers, on-line social network, posters, websites, and fax** as an important means for attracting new members.

Screening Potential Group Members

Many peer-support initiatives require that new members go through some type of screening process to determine if they will be a good fit in the group. Some peer-support groups have professionals such as social workers to do this screening. Screening is important for keeping groups safe. Here are some reasons why potential group members might not be accepted into a group:

- **Victims who have been abusive as adults:** Many abusive people have a history of being abused and it is important that these victims get help too. While it appears that these people rarely seek support through peer-support groups, this situation can be extremely distressing and challenging for groups to handle. It also makes it very difficult for groups to build trust and safety. Many recommend that victims who have been sexually abusive as adults not be allowed to join peer-support initiatives for survivors.
- **Survivors who cannot attend sober:** Some survivors turn to various coping strategies like alcohol and drug use in order to cope with emotional pain and loss. Peer-support groups may not be able to or want to provide the level or type of support required to actively “using” survivors. It may be best to refer survivors with alcohol or substance use problems to professional services or Alcoholics Anonymous.
- **Survivors who cannot follow group rules or abide by structure:** Usually with group therapy, professionals make sure that rules are followed in order to keep the group emotionally and physically safe. Having members in a peer-support group who frequently challenge rules can be particularly hard. It is important that some groups be prepared to exclude some potential group members who seem domineering, disrespectful or unable to commit.
- **Those who are not survivors:** Most groups do not let service providers attend in a professional capacity, although many peer-support groups do invite professionals as guest speakers. Most groups are also not open to family members or friends. Many groups are open to survivors of sexual assault (sexually victimized as adults); however, some groups limit themselves to survivors of childhood sexual abuse only.

Keeping It Safe: Ground Rules

Having ground rules is important for keeping groups safe. Most initiatives have rules about taking turns, respect, and sobriety. Some have rules about gossip, the conditions under which a non-member might be allowed to attend, and the content of discussions. One group made political discussions off limits while another limited graphic discussions of abuse, and yet another deemed “no topic is off topic.”

There is a great deal of variability in the ground rules for peer-support groups.

Key in understanding sexual violence is that, at the core, sexual violence is a boundary violation. It is essential that care and effort go into discussing, setting, and maintaining the boundaries of the group. Rules or group agreements pertaining to confidentiality are particularly important for keeping a group safe and functioning. See the box called "Sample Group Agreement" for common ground rules for peer-support groups.

SAMPLE GROUP AGREEMENT

- 1. Confidentiality: What is said in this group stays in this group.***
- 2. We start and end on time.***
- 3. Don't come to group intoxicated or you will be asked to leave.***
- 4. Group members respect one another's pace of learning and use talk time responsibly.***
- 5. Always ask for permission before touching someone.***
- 6. Sexual and financial relationships between group members are not allowed.***
- 7. Group members have the right to pass.***
- 8. No gossip or talk about politics.***
- 9. Don't give advice unless somebody asks for it.***

Seek Direction

Being connected to people who provide guidance is very important for making peer-support initiatives with survivors work. Operating in isolation greatly increases the chances that the initiatives will fold, re-victimize members, become non-functional or dysfunctional, or experience high leadership burnout. Self-Help Resource Centres can often help make these connections. It may be helpful to talk with people at a local community centre, sexual assault service, or other counselling organizations.

The specific qualifications of the person who serves as this “outside person” will depend upon the needs and characteristics of the initiative. It is recommended that the consultant have knowledge of peer-support as well as sexual violence. Without knowledge of peer-support, there is some danger that the consultant (if he or she is a counsellor) may attempt to shift it into a therapy group. If the consultant lacks knowledge or understanding of sexual violence, he or she would likely not understand the ways in which peer-support for survivors can be unique in relation to other forms of self-help.

Evaluating Your Group

Part of keeping a group going is staying on track and part is about creating changes that make it more responsive to the needs of its members. Getting feedback from the group members is really important in this regard. If a group isn't meeting a person's needs, he or she is more likely to leave than to let people know that there is a problem.

Taking time periodically to check-in with group members can reduce member drop-out and increase the beneficial aspects of the group. An evaluation tool can be helpful in this regard.

Leading the Way

Leadership can take on different forms. Among peer-support initiatives that we researched for survivors of sexual violence in Ontario, leadership takes on the following various forms:

- Groups facilitated by trained volunteers, with high value placed on the first hand knowledge of participants.
 - Initiatives that have a small core leadership group amongst the membership.
 - Initiatives that are almost single-handedly being run by one or two individuals (usually the founder[s]).
 - Initiatives that claim no leadership.
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Training

The groups in our research that seemed to function best had group members or facilitators who have undergone extensive training. The following organizations are seen as leaders in Ontario for training in models of peer-support:

Community Justice Initiatives (Kitchener)
www.cjiwr.com

The Gatehouse (Toronto)
www.thegatehouse.org

Ontario Self-Help Network (Toronto)
www.selfhelp.on.ca

Sample Group Evaluation Questions

What aspects of the group work well?

What makes you want to attend meetings?

Are we sticking to our purpose or mandate?

What should we change about our group?

What makes you not want to attend the group?

Self-Care

When survivors take time to care for and nurture themselves, risks and challenges appear to be lessened. Some groups find it helpful to do relaxation, meditation, or grounding exercises in the group meetings. Self-care may also involve making some or all political discussions off limits, sharing leadership and discussing as a group what people do to take care of themselves or what people plan to do to take care of themselves after they leave a meeting.

Mentoring

Mentoring is another form of peer-support. Mentoring involves matching a peer who is relatively far along in his/her recovery with someone who is less far along. Perhaps the most familiar form of mentoring is sponsorship in Alcoholics Anonymous. Mentoring can provide the new member with a role model and support and also gives the mentor opportunities to give back. In some instances, programs accept volunteers as mentors who may or may not personally share the focal issue. Mentoring can also occur within peer-support groups and informal peer-support where advanced survivors serve as role models and/or support to younger and less advanced survivors.

Survivors Helping Survivors On-Line

In the past decade, the use of internet sites and chat groups for peer-support has quickly grown in popularity. The internet allows quick and easy access to information and emotional support. Although this area of peer-support is growing at a fast pace, it has received little study and little is known about the benefits, challenges and risks.

On-line peer-support allows for anonymity and easy access. This is a particular benefit for survivors in rural or geographically isolated locations. It may also be beneficial for survivors living with disabilities or conditions that affect mobility.

In terms of challenges, some people believe that internet peer-support offers only shallow paths for emotional support. The anonymous nature of most internet participation means that screening is impossible and people may misrepresent themselves. Misinformation can also be more of a problem with on-line peer-support.

Final Thoughts

Peer-support initiatives can serve as important avenues through which survivors of sexual violence can reduce isolation, rebuild trust, and gain emotional support. Organizers need to consider strategies to ensure that these services can be both successful and safe for all concerned. We hope that this guide gives voice to the successes of existing initiatives and also help to further develop safer peer-support practices.