Community support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Women for Sobriety can serve as a valuable supplement to advocacy or counseling. Much of the power in these groups comes from being with other people who share similar experiences. Members of the group share their success stories as well as what they’re doing to resolve problems. A survivor shares:

“I had my A.A. family. There were a few old timers, and I would ask questions, and they would answer.”

Support groups can go a long way toward ending the isolation faced by people coping with both interpersonal violence and other issues. A survivor shares:

“Much of my family, even though they wanted to be a support, did not know how. So, for my own emotional safety, I kind of had to distance myself from them. I think I found some of the most valuable pieces of help from people that I knew who were in recovery, that had been around for a long, long time in recovery, and were gentle, forgiving, open spirits. That kind of held me up when I couldn’t hold myself up. I’d have to say the most helpful of all were my close-knit friends in recovery, and my chemical dependency/domestic violence support group. They were the most helpful.”

Because recovery and healing from addiction or trauma can be a lengthy process, support groups can also be a valuable source of long-range ongoing encouragement. A survivor shares:

“The different places, and the different women that I chose to hold my hand, I called them my Angels. ... I couldn’t have done it without all the people that I had in my corner to help me. I wasn’t alone anymore. It was amazing.”
Finally, most community support groups are free of charge, which makes them accessible to people regardless of income.

However, there are some important caveats involved when making a referral to support groups in the community:

- Keep safety issues in mind. Most people in support groups respect confidentiality (or, “anonymity” in 12-Step groups). However, someone leaving an abuser may wish to avoid sharing information in a group setting that could put safety at risk. Encourage people who are fleeing abuse to carry a safe cell phone with them to 12-Step or other meetings and to tell their sponsor or someone else at the meeting what is going on. (Note: Cell phones can contain GPS locator devices and pose risks for a survivor whose abuser is tech savvy.) Someone who needs to avoid being too predictable to an abuser may also want to vary the times and places of meetings attended when alternatives are available. (In larger communities, for example, A.A. may hold meetings at several different times and locations each week).

- Any peer-led support group – whether a 12-Step group or another type of group – can vary in quality, and may be healthy or unhealthy. When making referrals, find out which groups in your community are considered to be of good quality – for example, Alcoholics Anonymous groups where several of the members have healthy, long-term recovery. (Drug and alcohol counselors who are sophisticated about interpersonal violence issues may be able to recommend the safest A.A. and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.) Women who are survivors of domestic violence or sexual abuse may have difficulty setting healthy boundaries, especially with men, and many report that all-women’s meetings feel safer than meetings where both men and women are present.

- Each group – even a healthy one – has a distinct personality, depending on the make-up of the group. For example, some A.A. meetings may be small and intimate, with six or seven people in attendance, while other meetings held at popular times and locations may attract dozens of people. Some survivors may find a small, intimate group less intimidating, while others may prefer a larger group where they don’t feel as “noticed” or pressured to speak. Encourage people who want to try support group meetings to shop around for one that “fits.”

- Kasl (1992) lists the following characteristics of healthy groups: People are supported in thinking for themselves and finding their own belief system. People are regarded as whole individuals — not just “alcoholics,” “addicts,” “survivors,” or a psychiatric diagnosis. There is an established process for dealing with conflict. The group recognizes its limitations (members don’t give out medical advice or claim that the group should substitute for professional counseling or therapy). Confidentiality is respected.

- Encourage people who attend community support group meetings to recognize the limitations of such groups and to respect their own boundaries. For example, support group meetings are not meant to be a substitute for professional help, and healthy groups encourage their members to use sessions with an advocate or counselor for issues beyond
the group’s scope. Some people may try to sexually exploit others in the group. Members of 12-Step groups call this practice “13th Stepping,” and most consider such behavior unethical. Also, one should not feel compelled or pressured to talk about painful abuse issues in a group setting.

Advocates may also want to partner with other providers to offer their own support groups for people with multiple issues. Because people impacted by multi-abuse trauma usually have additional safety concerns beyond those posed by interpersonal violence, support groups addressing both the interpersonal violence and co-occurring issues are essential. Moderated support groups are strongly recommended, especially for walk-in groups and for people who do not have previous experience with support groups.

References