SAMPLE TOPICS FOR EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT OF SUPPORT GROUPS AND SUGGESTED HANDOUTS

Here are some sample topics for use in the educational component of support groups, along with suggestions for handouts to use with each topic. Each of these topics could stand alone, so that individuals who only attend some group sessions won’t need to rely on information from a previous session to understand the topic being discussed in the current one. The topics may be used in any order. These are examples only! Nothing here is carved in stone – feel free to be creative with these topics and come up with some of your own.

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Topic: Multiple Layers of Trauma

Explain the concept of multi-abuse trauma. Give examples of active abuse and coping abuse, and discuss how these different forms of abuse interact with each other to make safety, sobriety and wellness more difficult to achieve. Explain how co-occurring issues such as mental illness or disabilities can make the situation more complex, and discuss ways the social services system and other systems may further traumatize individuals.

Use the “10 Tons of Trouble” exercises to help group participants identify overlapping elements of active abuse and coping abuse, and discuss other issues that impact safety, sobriety and wellness.

The Power and Control Wheels can be helpful for illustrating the abuses of power often involved in multi-abuse trauma.

Handouts
Multiple Layers of Trauma
Trauma: The Common Denominator
Multiple Layers of Trauma Graphic
Topic: Examples of Abuse

Discuss the different types of abuse that can happen to people with multi-abuse trauma issues. Examples include domestic violence, sexual assault or sexual abuse, child abuse, societal abuse and oppression based on gender, race or ethnic group, disability status, sexual orientation, etc. Explore some of the common elements of these different types of abuse. Example of common elements may include physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, economic or financial abuse, use of privilege by a dominant group, etc.

Handouts
Examples of Abuse
Manifestations of Violence
Power and Control Wheel for Women’s Substance Abuse
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans: Power and Control (Wheel)
People with Disabilities and Their Caregivers: Power and Control (Wheel)
Violence Against Native Women (Wheel)
Immigrant Power and Control (Wheel)

Topic: The Relationship Between Substance Abuse and Violence

Use the handouts “Woman Abuse/Substance Abuse” and “Survivors of Chemical Dependence, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault” to discuss commonly-asked questions about the relationship between substance abuse and interpersonal violence. Does substance abuse cause a perpetrator to commit domestic violence or sexual assault? Will treatment stop the violence? If the victim abuses alcohol or drugs, does this mean the individual was asking for trouble?

Use the handout “Sorting Out Messages” to help those who are using services from both victim’s advocates and substance abuse counselors reconcile messages that seem to conflict or contradict each other. Key to this, for both group facilitators and participants, may be understanding that substance abuse and violence are different problems requiring different approaches.

Discuss overlapping elements of abuse and addiction using the “Merry-Go-Round of Violence” and “Merry-Go-Round of Addiction” handouts. Finally, discuss why it is usually necessary to address both substance abuse and victimization if both are part of an individual’s experience.

Handouts
Women Abuse/Substance Abuse: What is the Relationship?
Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Substance Use
**Topic: Healing on Multiple Levels**

Tia M. Holley, ANDVSA statewide training team member, created “Stages of Addiction, Stages of Untreated Trauma,” a “dip chart” or “Likert scale” to show the parallel paths that untreated trauma and untreated addictions follow. In early recovery feelings begin to emerge and emotional numbing dissipates. If the multidimensional issues are not addressed concurrently there is a high risk of relapse because the emerging overwhelming emotions push the person back to the bottom of the vicious cycle.

On the upside is how healing on multiple dimensions; body, mind, spirit, and emotional levels can help survivors get beyond the vicious cycle of pain.

The three-dimensional treatment originally addressed with this scale was the combined strengths of providing integrated Traditional healing, mental health services and addiction treatment. The three-dimensional coping skills are mental, physical and spiritual.

Use this chart to discuss the multiple levels in which the “active abuses” and “coping abuses” of multi-abuse trauma occur, and the multiple levels in which healing can happen.

**Handout**

*Stages of Addiction, Stages of Untreated Trauma*

**Topic: Using Support Groups**

People attending support groups together can serve as a safety net of caring individuals. Those facing similar struggles can reduce isolation, anxiety and fear through their connection with each other. However, individuals facing interpersonal violence may need to do the same kind of safety planning when they use support groups as they do when going to work, visiting relatives or using public transportation. Because of the difficulties many survivors of abuse have with boundary issues, they may also need some extra assurance that they have the right to protect their boundaries when in groups.

Discuss ways to interpret popular 12 Step concepts so they can be used in a way that is appropriate for people who have survived violence or abuse, or who have mental health issues. The handout “Using 12 Step Groups” makes numerous references to the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous and *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, with page numbers, to provide support for people who use 12 Step groups and wish to use the
suggested interpretations in that handout. Encourage participants who use 12 Step groups to discuss their own ways of interpreting the Steps as well.

In addition to 12-Step groups, other types of peer-led support groups are available in many communities to address a variety of issues. Make sure group members are aware of any of these groups that exist in your community.

**Handouts**
- Ending Isolation: Reducing Anxiety Through Connection
- Safety at Community Support Group Meetings
- Etiquette in Groups
- Using 12 Step Groups
- Community Peer Support Groups

**Topic: Who Can We Trust?**

To have healthy relationships and function in the world, we all need to be able to trust somebody. However, past experiences with interpersonal violence and other trauma may have made this difficult. Discuss some of these experiences, and how they might impact a person’s ability to trust others— including advocates, counselors and other service providers, as well as spiritual leaders, institutions and authority figures.

Also explore how legitimate ideas such as spiritual traditions, constructive criticism and legitimate authority can be twisted and distorted by abusers to justify violence and other abuse. Discuss how we determine who is trustworthy and who is not, and point out that it’s perfectly appropriate to have people earn our trust.

**Handouts**
- Trust Isn’t Always Easy
- Constructive vs. Abusive Criticism
- Legitimate vs. Abusive Uses of Authority

**Topic: Sorting Out Messages**

People with multi-abuse trauma issues may be receiving services from several different providers. For example, they may be seeing an advocate for domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking, a treatment counselor for substance abuse or dependence, a therapist or psychiatrist for mental health concerns, and a social worker for assistance finding housing if they are homeless. In the process, people experiencing multiple issues may begin to acquire multiple labels. People receiving help from a variety of sources may also hear messages that seem to conflict or contradict each other. In the skit, “Mary Has All Kinds of Troubles,” ask for several volunteers to play the part of the “helping professionals,” the part of “Mary” (the person seeking services) and the part of a volunteer who will tape labels on Mary while the helping professionals are speaking. Following this role-play exercise, use the skit and the other handouts to discuss how
group members can better navigate conflicting systems and advice, as well as the pros and cons of using labels.

Note: You will need to do some advance planning for this group. For each role, you may want to use a highlighting pen to highlight each actor’s part in their copy of the script to make it easier to follow. (For example, you will highlight the substance abuse counselor’s part in the copy of the script that you give to the person playing the role of the substance abuse counselor, Mary’s part in the copy you give to Mary, etc.) Review the script and write assorted labels such as victim, drug addict, borderline, etc., on several sheets of 8 ½ X 11 paper. These can be taped on Mary by the volunteer while the “helping professionals” are verbally labeling this individual. Once you make up your labels, you may want to laminate them for future use.

_Handouts_

_Skit: Mary Has All Kinds of Troubles_
_Sorting Out Messages_
_To Label or Not to Label?_

**Topic: Normal vs. Healthy**

“Normal” simply means “the norm.” People who grew up in an abusive or violent environment may have gotten a number of distorted messages about what constitutes “normal” behavior and attitudes in relationships. Skewed messages from our larger society compound the problem – behaviors and attitudes promoted by popular culture as “normal” or desirable may be anything but healthy. Discuss the difference between “normal” and healthy, and encourage group members to question what they may have learned from both their upbringing and society about relationships. Some of the Power and Control Wheels included in this manual may be useful to illustrate the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. For example, contrast the Power and Control Wheel with the Equality Wheel, or the Natural Life-Supporting Power Wheel.

_Handouts_

_Power and Control Wheel_
_Equality Wheel_
_Natural Life-Supporting Power Wheel_

**Topic: Healthy Relationships**

Naomi Michalsen, executive director of Women In Safe Homes in Ketchikan, AK, shares an exercise she uses to facilitate group discussion of healthy relationships:

Have group participants describe the qualities their ideal partner would have, with the proviso that “it can’t be lots of money or material things like a nice car. It has to be qualities.” Ideal qualities might include such things as “a good listener” or “trustworthy” or “willing to compromise.” As participants name positive qualities, write them down on a list. Often, Ms. Michalsen says, “They’ll have honesty, respect, all the things on the
Equality Wheel. They came up with it themselves. Those are the tribal values. We already have all these things in our head, but we just don’t know how to do that.”

Once group participants have come up with all the good qualities they can think of, pick a different-colored marker, and have them come up with the opposite. What’s the opposite of respect? What’s the opposite of a good listener? “And those are all the warning signs,” Ms. Michalsen says. “Or the power and control.”

**Supplies**

*News print paper and markers*
*Power and Control Wheel*
*Equality Wheel*

**Topic: Getting Help**

Discuss the services offered by domestic violence/sexual assault programs, mental health professionals, substance abuse treatment providers, health care providers, organizations that assist people with disabilities, indigenous providers, etc., with an emphasis on resources within your own community. Invite some of these providers to make a presentation, explain their services and answer questions from group participants.

Advocates and other providers will want to have addresses and phone numbers handy so they can make appropriate referrals, but also ask group participants to share information about resources they are aware of. Some groups have developed their own resource books to serve as an ongoing guide for both themselves and those who will follow. The books can be decorated with artwork to add a personal touch. Group participants may also want to add personal written comments about their experiences with various community resources they’ve used.

**Handouts/Supplies**

*Worksheet: Where Can I Get Help?*
*We Are Our Own Best Advocates*
*Continuum of Caring: Community Based Resources for Battered Women (Wheel)*
*Brochures/meeting schedules from agencies/support groups in your community*
*Loose leaf notebooks/other supplies if group is creating resource book for the first time*

**Topic: Safety Planning**

Advocates for victims of domestic violence encourage the people they serve to develop a safety plan. However, “safety” can mean different things for different people. For people with multiple issues, safety, sobriety, wellness and accessibility may all need to be priorities. Ask group participants to identify which issues they are dealing with and discuss what would help them feel safe.

Discuss how safety plans can be modified to include addiction recovery, mental health
concerns, accessibility for people with disabilities, or other concerns. Also point out that group participants can ask their advocates or counselors to assist them individually in modifying their personalized safety plans to include those additional problems they may be facing, such as mental health issues, or substance abuse/addiction.

Mental health providers, substance abuse counselors, disabilities advocates and other providers may also help the people they serve develop treatment plans, recovery plans, or other types of service plans. Brainstorm ways to incorporate safety issues into the plans created by these other providers, and encourage group participants to discuss safety with the various providers from whom they receive services.

Note: In a residential setting, this exercise can help group participants gain understanding or empathy about additional barriers their peers may be dealing with.

**Handouts**

*Personalized Safety Plan*

*Mini-Safety/Sobriety/Wellness Plan (With Instructions for Use)*

*What Does Safety Mean?*

**Topic: Power and Control Dynamics**

Judith Herman, M.D., author of the book *Trauma and Recovery*, emphasizes that most interpersonal trauma is embedded in a social structure that permits the abuse and exploitation of people in subordinate groups. Use Power and Control Wheels to illustrate all the various ways that power is used and abused – both in our society and in our personal relationships – to dominate and control others.

In addition to educating about interpersonal violence, the wheels can be useful for exploring issues such as mental health concerns, substance use disorders, disability issues and various kinds of social oppression, with an eye toward ways that power dynamics can impact an individual’s ability to address these issues. The Wheels can also be used to explore the use and abuse of power in various settings ranging from intimate relationships to schools, social service agencies, other institutional settings and communities.

Use the “equality” wheels and community collaboration and accountability wheels as a basis for discussion of ideal behaviors and responses in personal relationships, institutions and the community.

**Handouts**

*Power and Control Wheel*

*Abuse of Children*

*Children Coping With Family Violence Wheel*

*Power and Control Model For Women’s Substance Abuse*

*Mental Health System Power and Control: Escalating Danger*

*Medical Power and Control*
People with Disabilities and Their Caregivers: Power and Control
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans: Power and Control
Immigrant Power and Control Wheel
Power and Control Wheel for Women Involved in Street Prostitution
Violence Against Native Women: Battering
Bullying Power and Control Wheel
Power and Control in Dating Relationships
Abuses Endured By A Woman During Her Life Cycle
Equality Wheel
Nurturing Children
Mental Health System Power and Control: Empowerment
People with Disabilities and Their Caregivers: Equality
Natural Life-Supporting Power Wheel
Ideal Institutional Response

**Topic: Parenting and Children’s Issues**

Children may not talk about problems they witness in the home, so it can be tempting to think they don’t notice what’s going on, or that it doesn’t affect them that much. But research tells a different story. Help group participants to recognize the impact of both substance abuse and violence on their children, and discuss how to create a more positive environment for children.

**Handouts**

*Children Exposed to Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse*
*Abuse of Children (Wheel)*
*Children Coping With Family Violence (Wheel)*
*Nurturing Children (Wheel)*
*Safety Planning Interventions for Children*

**Topic: Working for Change**

Many people who have survived trauma, especially that caused by interpersonal violence or social injustice and oppression, find that working for social change aids their own healing process. People may call their efforts working for change, service to others, or carrying the message. Discuss contributions from a variety of social movements – the women’s movement, the recovery movement, the mental health movement, the disability rights movement and civil rights movement – that have made it easier for people to get help with problems often denied or stigmatized.

Also discuss simple things group participants might do to make a difference in society while maintaining their own safety. In a group setting, choosing an activity to do together as a group (such as writing letters to elected officials regarding an issue that concerns
them) may be an effective hands-on way to engage participants in the art of “making a difference.”

**Handouts**

*Can One Person Make a Difference?*

*Writing a Letter That Gets Attention*

**Topic: Messages from Society**

Naomi Michalsen, executive director of Women In Safe Homes in Ketchikan, AK, shares a group exercise she uses to help people understand social attitudes and their impact on the personal level. Make a list of a couple dozen or so behaviors and attitudes often seen in our society, or in movies or on television. Some examples may include:

- A coach telling boys, “You’re playing like a bunch of girls.”
- Assuming that girls are not as smart as boys at math.
- Insisting that a woman’s place is in the home.
- Mud flaps on a truck with the woman’s silhouette.
- A billboard that says, “Come see hot young chicks” and has pictures of baby chickens.
- Ads or movies or television shows with violent themes or imagery.
- Your partner calls frequently or drives by your house to check if you’re home.
- Being forced to have sex by someone you know on a date.
- Rape/sexual assault by a stranger.

For each attitude or behavior on the list, ask, “Is this harmful?” When the group has discussed whether a particular item is harmful or relatively harmless, point out how things that may seem harmless or even funny can chip away at the value that society gives women, or can build tolerance for violence and abuse.

For this session, bring poster boards and a variety of old magazines that can be cut up – women’s magazines, sports magazines, news magazines, publications geared toward adolescents, etc. Have group participants look through the magazines for ads that promote unhealthy attitudes or behavior. Examples might include ads promoting the idea that women exist only to please men, or the idea that drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes makes one look glamorous. Group participants may want to cut out the ads and make a collage.

**Supplies**

- News print paper and markers
- Poster board
- A variety of magazines to cut up
Topic: Sharing Personal Experience, Strength and Hope

The handout “Women Talk About Substance Abuse and Violence” is based on a series of interviews with 10 women. All 10 had experienced some form of abuse: battering, rape or sexual assault, incest or child sexual abuse. In addition to the violence, all of them had experience with alcohol or drug abuse, either on their own part, on the part of their partner, or both. At the time of the interviews, all of the women had left their abusive relationships, and those with chemical dependency problems were in recovery. They talked frankly about the impact of the substance abuse on their efforts to escape the violence and heal from abuse. They also discussed how their experiences with violence affected their efforts to recover from alcoholism or other drug addiction. Ask participants to take turns reading the parts aloud. Pause between questions on the handout for comments from participants.

If you know people in the community who have successfully transcended multi-abuse trauma, you may also want to invite them to share their experiences with the group and, if they are comfortable doing so, answer questions from group members. Listening to someone who has been successful in resolving issues that group members are struggling with usually elicits a strong response.

Handout

Women Talk About Substance Abuse and Violence