Safety at Community Support Group Meetings

Community support groups can serve as a valuable supplement to counseling or advocacy. Much of the power in these groups comes from the personal stories. People share their experience, strength and hope with each other. When one person breaks the silence about “unspeakable” experiences, especially those that carry a lot of stigma, others feel safer breaking their silence. You also hear success stories. You hear what others are doing to cope with problems similar to yours.

Some initial discomfort is normal if you’re new to support groups. It is natural to feel nervous in a roomful of strangers. You may have spent years avoiding the issues the group is discussing. If your experience includes violence or abuse, you also may have safety concerns. Here are some tips to help you feel comfortable — and stay safe:

• **Protect your safety.** Most people in support groups respect confidentiality (anonymity). However, if you are leaving an abuser, don’t share information that could put your safety at risk. Do carry your cell phone with you to 12 Step meetings or other support group meetings if you have one. Tell your sponsor or someone else at the meeting what is going on.

• **Find a home group.** For people who attend 12-Step groups, this is a group you attend regularly. You get to know other “regulars” and feel more comfortable talking at meetings. Some 12 Step veterans have two or three home groups. If you need to avoid being predictable to an abuser, have a back-up home group. Alternate between one meeting and the other one.

• **Shop around.** You will probably notice that each support group has a distinct personality, depending on who attends. For example, larger communities may have a number of different Alcoholics Anonymous groups holding meetings in a given week. Sample several. Some people feel most comfortable in small, intimate groups. Others may feel more comfortable at meetings with large numbers of people in attendance, because they can sit back and listen and feel less pressure to speak or contribute right away.

• **Recognize the group’s limitations.** Support group meetings are not meant to be a substitute for professional help. Use sessions with a counselor or advocate for issues that are beyond the group’s scope.

• **Respect your own boundaries.** Some people may try to sexually exploit others in the group. 12-Steppers call this practice “13th Stepping,” and most consider such behavior unethical. You don’t have to tolerate it! Also, don’t feel compelled to talk about painful abuse issues in groups if this makes you uncomfortable.

• **Try “specialty” groups.** In many communities, Alcoholics Anonymous has “Beginner’s Groups” designed for people who are new to recovery. Some women who are survivors of domestic violence or sexual abuse may have difficulty setting healthy boundaries, especially with men, and report that women-only meetings feel safer than meetings where both men and women are present. One can also find 12-Step groups especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.