

Introduction

This guide is for men interested in peer support groups. It is for those interested in starting a new group, or for an ongoing group looking for different ideas, or for those who want additional information on peer groups in general.

The digital age has allowed us access to information and support through a wide variety of online resources, however there is a growing amount of evidence that points to the healing power of direct participation with other survivors. Peer groups, though very active in addiction recovery, are still rare for male survivors. There are many reasons that have contributed to the difficulty in creating a robust peer to peer support network; survivors can feel vulnerable, anxious in groups, and generally unsafe sharing our experiences with others. For men especially, stereotypes and social norms of masculinity can create the perception that talking about being a victim or sharing our emotions with other men is somehow 'unmanly'."

Many survivors wish to have a place in their lives where they can speak openly and be heard without fear; a place where they are not seen as broken, where their defense mechanisms are seen for what they are. Survivors desire a space where the issues they suffer seem more normal. They want the ability to speak out and be understood. Survivors want to claim what they've long been denied: feelings of safety, acceptance and empowerment. Delivering this is the essence to the peer support group.

The difficult issues we face like isolation and low self-esteem can be directly addressed in the safe and supportive atmosphere. Peer group participants often report deep satisfaction in being able to break their isolation, share their stories, their successes in healing, and what they have learned from their mistakes. Men recognize that they are not alone because they are literally in the physical presence of another survivor. Someone who can say, "You are welcome, you are heard, and I am a safe person for you to relate with."

Like many other members of the MaleSurvivor community, I took the initiative to start a peer support group with two fellow survivors in Portland, Oregon three and a half years ago. We still meet regularly. We have gone through several iterations, met in different places. Sometimes I was the only one sitting in a chair and sometimes we had over ten men each week and as many as fifteen. I invite you to consider looking one up in your neighborhood, and for most of you this may mean starting your own. This guide is to help you do that very thing.

What is a Peer Support Group

Simply put a peer support group is 2 or more people gathering regularly over time with the shared desire to heal and offer support to other survivors. Some structures for a group work better than

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others, but what is most important is the understanding that simply being together with others who share the same challenges can in and of itself be healing.

Below are some ideas and methodologies. Creating a safe, open, and respectful space where individuals will feel honored and empowered isn't done by checking off items on a to-do list. It takes commitment, understanding, and a very healthy dose of humility and compassion for each other, our differences, our similarities, and our mutual agreement to heal together. We are survivors with all the surrounding issues and those issues do not make organizing, leading, or simply even being a member of a group easy. But for all the challenges there is empowerment and support we can share that makes the work so very wonderful.

Another important aspect of peer support groups is that they do not all look alike and this guide is not designed to create homogenous meetings. It offers some best practices, experience from successful groups, and new ideas. This guide has been reviewed, edited by MaleSurvivor personnel, clinical experts in psychology and trauma, peer group leaders, peer group members, and others in the recovery field. That said, this guide should be read as a series of suggestions and general principles rather than a rigid set of rules that must be adhered to. Please respect your individual intuitions.. Work in collaboration with others to come up with your own ideas as you work to create a group that meets the unique needs of your members. We also welcome feedback. We are all learning as we move forward to help each other heal.

The following are basic necessities for peer support groups. In the next chapter we will offer some specific ideas on how to accomplish each of these issues.

1. Someone to start with

- a. A partner or partners to establish your group. You only need one other committed person to get started. Later as others show up you can discuss what being the leader or facilitator entails. See more on this below.

2. A sense of what you want to accomplish

- a. Just getting together is a vast accomplishment as being with other survivors is hugely rewarding. Some groups have little or no agenda. They share with each other, listen respectfully, and offer little or no advice. Being heard by someone who isn't evaluating you is powerful. Other groups have a well-defined agenda, have agreements about sharing and how to offer feedback, rules of attendance and participation. You will have to think about what works for you and others as they join.

3. Some basic ground rules/questions

- a. **Safety is the number one, the number two, and the number three rule.**

Everything that follows is really about making the group a safe place. What will make the group safe? Some things are obvious like confidentiality and deciding who participates. Many groups define participation as male survivors of sexual assault and abuse who have never perpetrated. Other groups are more open, possibly including friends and partners, and some might include men who perpetrated as

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children after being abused themselves. There should be some forethought into who can participate and how to make that happen. Is there a screening process, an accepted minimum level of commitment for participation, a facilitator whose function it is to have an “eye” on safety during the meetings? What topics are appropriate? Details of abuse can be triggering to others, where’s the line? How do you respond if someone crosses the line even if they’re well intentioned? You don’t need to answer all these questions before hand, but it is essential helpful to have thought about it.

- b. **What's the goal?** Are you creating a place for men to share and enjoy the safety of a group with just a few agreements? Or do you want to actively engage in a recovery conversation? These decisions will affect how you organize your group. With the former a more relaxed attendance policy and little or no agenda will work, but for the later you may need firm attendance commitments with a specific agenda that might include visiting speakers or a handbook to work from.
- c. **Alcohol/Sobriety Commitment** To protect and promote an environment of safety MaleSurvivor strongly recommends that peer group members make a commitment to be sober prior to and during group sessions.
- d. **Physical and Sexual Contact** To protect and promote an environment of safety, MaleSurvivor strongly recommends that members of a peer group clarify any boundaries/limitations on physical contact (hugs, handshakes, etc) wanted by individual members. In addition it is essential that group members agree not to have sexual contact with other members.

4. Outreach Strategy.

- a. How many men do you envision in your group? Maybe the numbers don't matter, quality over quantity, or maybe it is important to you to reach as many men as possible. Reaching out can be time consuming, but rewarding. Many groups fail because of a lack of new members and others fail because of too little cohesiveness created by excessive turnover. Your location may have a big effect on this; for example rural areas may need agreements that allow for long distances and fewer participants or urban areas having to divide a larger attendance into several groups. Listing your group or intension of forming a group here at Malesurvivor.org in the discussion forums is a good start. Many groups start small and can take a considerable time to get going.

5. Individual commitment?

- a. Think about your personal level of commitment. Some men realize that this is one thing they are committed to, others are fully willing to help and participate but don't see themselves as able to commit to being a facilitator. We all need some successes to not burn out, but what does that mean to you? This will help you set some meaningful expectations for yourself and the group you wish to start or participate in.

6. A place to meet.

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- a. Public meeting places are good for several reasons. One, they're usually set up with the services you need. A space where you won't be overheard, a bathroom, chairs, and the feeling of being anonymous. Downsides may include the type of facility and its associations like churches that are a space of healing for some and not for others and the risk for some of being recognized and feeling shamed. Look for something that feels safe, no possibility of interruption by others, and a sense of it being "your" space. Costs vary widely, and sometimes space can be found for free.
- b. Private meeting spaces like someone's home can have great benefits, but whose private space? Does the private space include everyone and does everyone have access. Some groups meet at a home, but it is important that the home feels open and inviting and "belongs" at some level to the group, at least during the meeting and that meeting dates are not controlled by the homeowner, but by the group.

How to create successful meetings

We went over intent above, but here are some specific areas you should consider.

1. Safety

- a. There is no healing, authenticity, or positive vulnerability without safety. Creating safety is not easy or simple. It requires an individual or several individuals to be fully focused on what is happening within the group at any given moment.
- b. Empowering a person to be responsible for safety. This position can be rotated, sharing the responsibility and letting each member of the group have the experience of monitoring the meeting. They may intervene in a difficult conversation, keep an eye on sharing time, and be the final say about safety in any given moment.
- c. Ground rules. Written or vocal it is important that everyone establish a clear agreement as to why they are there and what is expected of them. See below for specific examples of how to establish ground rules.
- d. The safer the environment the deeper the sharing and the more opportunity for healing. However, this takes time. Some men may not be able to share for a long time, perhaps even after a year of participation. Also, anyone can become triggered at any time. There needs to be a way for men to safely communicate that. This can also occur after the meeting is over. It is important that there is some way that men can deal with issues that come up from the group. This might be a therapist, or other support resources. It is possible that a group facilitator could help with issues about the group's agreements, however private side conversations about the group participants should not be had by any individuals participating in the group.

2. Confidentiality

- a. Authentic sharing needs trust. It's important to establish a ground rule that ensures the confidentiality of each group member and what he says during the group. It may also be advisable to establish rules for when someone can discuss anything that comes up during a group meeting outside of the group. A guideline we suggest is,

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"the stories we hear in this room stay in this room, the lessons we learn can be shared"

3. Meeting Format and Agendas

- a. Simple or specific. Some groups start with a three to five minute share with a human or mechanical timer, some with a light opening activity, others work off of a formal agenda agenda. That agenda can include guest speakers, specific topics, or work from a book or follow a recovery model like Dr. Howard Fradkin's, **Joining Forces: Empowering Male Survivors to Thrive**. Whatever you decide, be consistent for an agreed period of time and see how it works for the group. Constant change can be detrimental by interfering with expectations and any established momentum the group may have achieved.
- b. Carefully consider the length of your meetings. With the amount of emotional energy that is likely to be shared, it's important to not leave members feeling burnt out. We recommend an hour and half with a focus on sharing specifically around abuse issues with no break or two hours with a break. Some groups enjoy the opportunity for a more social interaction that a break can provide.
- c. Some examples of format
 - i. Less agenda: This works best with a strong core of men or leader who has some experience with recovery.
 1. Begin with three to five minute shares about how each person is doing. Some share in a circle, others take turns in any order they wish. Consider some norms like active listening, appreciation without judgement, and acknowledgment. These norms should be known to all the participants.
 2. Open discussion of whatever comes up during the individual sharing. This can be monitored by the leader or just a free flow of ideas and experiences. The group must be careful that everyone has an opportunity for participating. One useful practice is "step up, step back". Those who have a tendency to always have something to offer can "step back, others who rarely share can then "step up".
 3. Final comments/sharing
 4. Housekeeping comments: E.g. Next meeting location, other survivor news, local events, etc.
 5. Closing affirmation or acknowledgment
 - ii. More agenda
 1. Opening activity that lets men feel welcome and engaged.
 2. Introduction of agenda. This might include a guest speaker, work from a hand book, or specific activity.
 3. Break
 4. Further discussion or Q and A session
 5. Activity close
 6. Housekeeping: Next session agenda, meeting news, local events, etc.

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7. Closing affirmation or acknowledgment

4. Accountability and Agreements

- a. Written or vocal, it is important that everyone understands the agreements. How do I communicate? How do we respond? What can I share? What to do if someone is inappropriate? How do I express a negative feeling about something someone just said, or said half an hour ago? Can I bring up politics, express my religious convictions, share a very intimate story, etc...and still create a positive, open, respectful, and honoring space?
- b. Establishing a regular way to help someone know they have made an error without shaming them can help communicating accountability within the group. Some groups will even establish a code-word, phrase, or nonverbal response for this purpose.
- c. Coming to agreement on procedural items such the need for written agreements, group consent for facilitator, a method for time keeping (if desired), having a person establish beginning and ending times (and make people aware that the end of meeting is coming up) are all potential elements that can impact group integrity if not carefully thought through.
- d. At the MaleSurvivor Weekends of Recovery, we have for many years empowered the people who attend to establish the ground rules at each weekend and tell us what it is they need in order to feel safe. It's important to realize that the point is not to create agreement on a fixed set of rules that everyone is expected to memorize and abide by. The point is to empower each person to say to everyone else what they need at that moment. Common ground rules can be helpful. Note we suggest framing these in positive terms. (e.g. DO X as opposed to DON'T DO X):
 - i. We agree to use supportive language rooted in "I" statements instead of offering "advice".
 - ii. We agree to ask consent before touching anyone physically, E.g "Can I give you a hug?"
 - iii. We agree to attend meetings regularly
 - iv. We agree to bring any outside discussions between groups members into the full group
 - v. We agree to speak up or have a simple signal when we feel unsafe or triggered for any reason.

5. Participation

- a. The level of commitment will affect the group's dynamics. It's no different than little league or play rehearsal in terms of more in more out, though as survivors we are at risk of feeling betrayed. If you don't have a core group of participants it limits what's available. Some groups have an open attendance policy, but then rely on a strong facilitator or core group for cohesiveness, others have some open meetings and then limit participation to those who have fully committed for a period of time, say two or three months or even longer.

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- b. Whichever format you choose, it is helpful to communicate the expectations openly with all members and periodically remind members of the participation policy as a matter of course so that it does not become an issue that is only raised when a member misses meetings.

6. Leadership

- a. Whether there is a single leader, or whether the leadership is shared amongst group members, it is very important that there is full agreement and support from the group.
- b. Shared and/or rotated leadership works well because it maintains transparency and understanding of the job.
- c. Some groups have a facilitator to manage money for rent (if needed), or a safety monitor, and some have a leadership team that sets agendas and schedules speakers.
- d. Leadership burnout or domination can end a group. A committed facilitator can create a wonderful and safe group experience, but it is important for leaders to allow themselves the same right to be fully open in the group. If a leader feels too much pressure, there should be a way for him to take a step back without it making it harder for a group to continue meeting.

7. Group dynamics and skills

- a. This gets back to the goals of the group. Does the group thrive on an open agenda with enough individual core recovery work that it is naturally expressed in the group or does there need to be a more specific agenda and format that facilitates keeping the conversation focused and appropriate. If you do have that strong core then new members will be less likely to alter the group dynamic, however if a majority is new to recovery it might benefit the group by following a more specific agenda.
- b. Guest speakers. Many groups like to invite participation from skilled professionals within the recovery field. They might be a survivor therapist, alternative healer, body movement specialist, neurologist, or a trauma informed speaker on many subjects. The discussion of a wide range of trauma related subjects can help add to our “tool box” of survivor skills, add new information about healing, and open our eyes to how we can better support our fellow survivors.
- c. Socialization. Groups have significantly different reasons for meeting. Bottom line is healing, but how you go about that is wide open. Some groups like to include more social gatherings. They will include social activities outside of the group’s official meetings. They may go to conferences, enjoy outside activities, or have a second lunch meeting during the week with a casual feel to just catch up and enjoy each other’s company. It is important that these activities are inclusive and that the men who don’t feel like participating to not feel excluded. Other groups are careful to avoid casual socialization, keeping the group focused on the agenda of healing. This can help some members who do not socialize feel welcome and not alienated. If some members enjoy friendships outside the group they are not on open display

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during the meetings. Many trauma survivors have suffered from isolation and betrayal. Be very careful on how you socialize, for many this can feel enormously exclusive. We recommend that discussions or meetings outside of the formal group setting not be about the group. Those discussions should only be had within the group during formal meetings.

- d. Power and control. Men can fall into power and control hierarchies, whether deliberate or not. Survivors are not immune to this dynamic and of course can be very sensitive to the injustice of power positions. It is important that each group address this reality. Rotating leaders, shifting responsibilities, timed sharing, good ground rules, “step up, step back”, are all important ways of managing our natural, if not very helpful in the recovery realm, behaviors.

In conclusion

I believe that building a community of local survivors through peer support groups is instrumental to helping us all heal from trauma. It demonstrates that we are not alone and empowers each of us with the knowledge we are helping each other as we help ourselves. Our growing community of survivors can affect the perception of what that means to be a survivor. Support groups can facilitate the positive change we need to move forward, and ultimately provide a safe place for ongoing expression and healing, bridging the gap between individual experience and shared experience.

At the heart of peer support groups is the idea of listening and sharing without judgment. We become each other’s “trustworthy story catchers”, a phrase from one of my favorite advocates in the survivor recovery realm. As we bear witness and offer the possibility of resonance among fellow survivors our potential for healthy and self-expressed lives can become fully realized.

Please share your peer support group experiences and ideas with our volunteer coordinator Das. His email is das@malesurvivor.org.

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