

Group Work with Victims of Crime: Mutual Aid in Practice

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The most significant achievements of human endeavour are the product of human cooperation. The Victims of Crime Service (VOCS) in South Australia uses this fundamental principle in designing programs to assist people who have been victims of crime. Group work is an important element in the package of services that is offered by VOCS. One of the major group work programs is a group for women whose children have been sexually abused. This paper describes this group and attempts to make some of the connections between the practice and the theories that underpin it.

Women whose Children have been sexually abused

Early in 1991, VOCS started to experience a rapid increase in the number of referrals of families in which a child had been sexually abused. In the first six months of 1990, 18 new cases of child sexual abuse were referred to VOCS. By 1991, such cases were being referred to VOCS at the rate of about 15 every month. This massive increase was caused by a combination of a number of factors including the high underlying rate of child sexual abuse in the community, the growing awareness that this is a crime and that it is acceptable for people to come forward and ask for help, and the raising of the profile of the agency in South Australia.

From our work in this area, it became clear that there were some excellent services available to assist children who had been sexually abused, but the services for the non-offending parents of such children seemed to be less adequate. Yet our experience of working with these families taught us that in many of these situations the mother was the key figure in the family, and her recovery was critical to the long-term well-being of the whole family. The child's progress was made extraordinarily difficult if the mother was not making a similar recovery from the trauma.

We also observed that, in many families, if the children who had been sexually abused received good support at home and appropriate professional counselling when needed, the children often made significant and relatively rapid progress towards recovery. However, the non-offending parents often appeared to be less resilient. For them, the issues (such as their feelings of guilt and anger) seemed to linger and continue to affect their lives for long periods of time.

From previous group work experience at VOCS, a group based on the mutual aid model seemed the most appropriate for these clients. We decided that we would have six or eight sessions, on a weekly basis, for two hours at a time. The meetings needed to be in the morning, in order to allow time for people to travel home to collect children from school. At this stage, the group was an experiment and so we made no plans beyond six or eight weeks, at which point we would review the situation.

We reviewed our caseloads and selected six people whom we were seeing for individual counselling. The basis of our selection was simple: we chose people who we thought would respond positively to a group situation and who reacted favourably to the idea of meeting others who had experienced a similar trauma in their family.

At this stage, we were planning a group for non-offending parents of children who had been sexually abused. It so happened that the six people we invited to the group were all women. This was not surprising as we were seeing very few fathers for individual or family counselling at the time. Those whom we were seeing had no interest in attending a parent's group. However, once the group had started, we realised that this chance gender selection had been critical. For many of the families, the offender had been the father or father-figure. It would have been extremely difficult for the mothers from those families to cope with the presence of fathers in a group such as this, in which such intense emotions would be laid bare. There would have been the risk that any fathers present in the group could have become the target for the rage that the women felt towards the offenders.

Another complication of which we were unaware before the group started, was that those mothers who were themselves victims of child sexual abuse might have found it difficult and restrictive to participate in a mixed gender group. With the benefit of hindsight, it would be inappropriate to run a mixed gender group for parents of children who have been sexually abused.

As the weeks passed, the importance of this group for the women seemed to grow. At the sixth session, we were due to review whether or not the group should continue. By this stage, it was clear—both from our observations and from individual feedback—that the group was playing a vital role in these people's lives. It was making a significant contribution to their ability to cope and to recover from the crimes that had been perpetrated on their families. There was no question but that the group should continue.

In any group work venture, two of the most important factors are selection and clarity of purpose. We have a few fundamental criteria that we use in selecting people for the group. The potential participants must be mothers of children who have been sexually abused. We allow the women to define whether the crime has occurred. There does not have to be police involvement (although,

in practice, the police have been involved in most of the cases). There is no limit on time or age. Thus some of the mothers have children who are now adults themselves, but who were sexually abused in the past. In these situations, the mothers may only be dealing with the issues now (they may have only recently discovered that the abuse occurred). For these women, the issues they face are similar to those confronting much younger families. The fact that these older women are at a very different stage in their lives does not detract from the group, indeed, their presence helps to universalise and normalise the feelings and reactions that all the women experience.

All potential participants have to be interviewed and assessed by a VOCS social worker before joining the group. This is both to ensure that the above criteria are met and to assess whether this is the right time for this particular person to join a group. We have learnt that some clients benefit from having some one-to-one counselling before joining a group of this kind. We are happy to receive referrals to the group from other agencies and it is entirely acceptable for people to attend the group, but receive their one-to-one counselling elsewhere, providing that, in all cases a VOCS social worker conducts an assessment interview.

Shulman (1979) identified a number of different mutual aid processes that occur within a group. These included the sharing of data, the dialectical process, discussing a taboo area, the 'all-in-the-same-boat' phenomenon, mutual support, mutual demand, individual problem solving, rehearsal and the 'strength-in-numbers' phenomenon. All these processes have been evident in this group.

The discussion of taboo areas is a good example of a mutual aid process. To an extent, the whole subject of child sexual abuse is still regarded as taboo in the community. It is generally not a topic that can easily be discussed with friends and relatives. Not only have the women been able to talk about the subject quite openly in the group, but they also have been able to disclose actual details about the abuse to an extent that would probably not be socially acceptable in any other context.

The level of mutual support amongst the participants in this group has been extraordinarily high. The women have been able to share feelings and display emotions in a way that would not be possible in their usual family and social networks. The strong empathy that the women show for each other and the knowledge that the others in the group really do understand what they are talking about constitute a powerful healing force.

Many of the women who attended the group also received one-to-one counselling from one of the social workers at VOCS, either prior to or during the time that they attended the group, or both, although it should be noted that the frequency of the individual sessions usually decreased markedly once the women joined the group. The experience of the social workers has been that, in most cases, the one-to-one work has been enhanced by the woman's attendance at the group. Far from being competing processes, the two seem to operate ideally in tandem. Our experience appears to fit with the observations of Shulman who wrote that,

Group discussion, rather than robbing the individual work of its vitality, will often enrich the content of the individual counselling session . . . In like manner, the

work in the individual sessions can strengthen a client to raise a personal concern in the group . . . Thus, the group and individual work can be parallel and interdependent, with the client free to choose where and when to use these resources for work (Shulman 1979, p. 127).

Finding mothers in the group who are themselves adult survivors of child sexual abuse was unexpected. About half of the women in the group were themselves sexually abused when they were children. This has enormous implications for their therapeutic needs: it means that as well as coping with all the issues connected to their children's sexual abuse, they also have to confront their own childhood issues, in many cases for the first time. It also usually means that the two sets of issues become entangled. Our experience has shown that these women are more likely to need individual counselling and are more likely to attend the group for much longer periods of time.

Conclusion

The dynamics of mutual aid have the energy to transcend the boundaries of formal structures. These processes result in not only the healing of the individuals, but their empowerment. Thus, the whole purpose of assisting victims of crime is fulfilled.

Reference

Shulman, Lawrence 1979, *The Skill of Helping Individuals and Groups*, F.E. Peacock Publishers, Illinois.