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## **Feeling Safe, Feeling Strong : Support Groups for Older Abused Women**

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# *Feeling Safe, Feeling Strong*

*Support Groups for Older Abused Women*

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*Too often, older women experience the heartache of being hurt by someone they love. These women may be isolated and unaware of community resources. Support groups can provide older abused women with support, information, friendship, and hope—a place to feel safe and strong. Based on interviews with 34 support group facilitators, this article describes (a) the logistics of identifying projects, (b) the benefits of support groups for older abused women, (c) the characteristics of existing groups, (d) the challenges of starting a support group, and (e) principles for working with older abused women.*

**Keywords:** *domestic violence in later life; elder abuse; older abused women; support groups*

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I think that maybe we [older women] might have had it worse. It was covered up in those days and you didn't tell anyone, you didn't tell your neighbors, you didn't tell your mother. You told no one and just hoped that nobody knew. You were too ashamed . . . and years ago you didn't get divorced because it was a sin to get divorced.

—An older woman (personal communication, November 2000)

Too often, older women are harmed by someone they love or trust. Often, the abuser is a spouse/partner, adult child, grandchild, or caregiver (National Center on Elder Abuse, 1998). Abuse

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AUTHORS' NOTE: This article would not be possible without the wonderful facilitators and older women throughout the country who shared their expertise and wisdom with us.

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can be physical, sexual, and emotional. Financial exploitation and neglect also occur. Other tactics employed by an abuser can include intimidating and threatening the victim and withholding needed medications, water, food, or sleep. Batterers may also use isolation as a primary tactic to keep their victims from seeking help and escaping controlling or violent relationships. An abuser may keep the victim from friends and family members. As a result, the victim comes to depend exclusively on the abuser for companionship and information.

Support groups for victims and survivors of abuse can (a) break through the isolation, (b) offer an opportunity to share experiences, (c) provide information about the dynamics of abuse, and (d) furnish a forum to problem solve with others in similar situations. Support groups for domestic abuse victims of any age exist across the country. However, too often, an older victim finds herself the only woman of her generation in a battered women's support group. Younger group members often discuss child custody and parenting or job training and employment opportunities. For older women, these may not be the most important or relevant issues at this point in their lives. Therefore, some communities in the United States have organized support groups specifically for older abused women that address issues such as parenting an adult child, health concerns, grief, and long-term relationships.

The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) is a project of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV). During 2003, NCALL staff interviewed facilitators of 34 support groups for older battered women throughout the United States. This article describes (a) the logistics of identifying projects, (b) the benefits of support groups for older abused women, (c) the characteristics of existing groups, (d) the challenges of starting a group, and (e) principles for working with older abused women.

### LOCATING PROJECTS FOR OLDER ABUSED WOMEN

In 1992, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) contracted with the WCADV to conduct a national survey to identify programming tailored specifically for older abused women. Of 240 surveys sent out, 120 agencies in 48 states and 2

territories returned completed surveys. Only 16 specialized programs for older battered women in 4 states or territories were reported (AARP, 1994). Vinton's (1998) national survey of domestic violence programming for older women found that, of 428 respondents, 9% had support groups for older women.

In 2002, NCALL staff conducted a national survey to locate projects and task forces focusing on abuse in later life. The survey, advertised on a number of national list serves, was available on the Internet and mailed to known projects. Every statewide domestic violence coalition in the United States was called and asked about projects in their state. The results of this survey have been compiled in a national resource directory (NCALL, 2003).

Although all states have domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse agencies, many states have few or no specialized programming on abuse in later life. The NCALL project (contacting all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands) found that 14 states had no specialized services on abuse in later life; 37 had fewer than five projects. California had 8 projects, New York had 10 projects, and Wisconsin had 22 projects. Success in Wisconsin is due, in large part, to a collaboration between the Wisconsin Bureau on Aging and Long Term Care Resources, the WCADV, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and other agencies that have worked together for more than a decade to create training, policy, funding, and services to improve safety for older victims of abuse.

At the time the survey was completed, 34 support groups for older abused women were identified. They were in the following states: Arizona (2), California (2), Colorado (2), Illinois (1), Indiana (1), Maine (1), Massachusetts (1), Michigan (1), Minnesota (2), Missouri (2), New Jersey (1), New York (3), North Carolina (2), Ohio (1), Virginia (1), and Wisconsin (11). After the support groups were identified, NCALL staff surveyed the facilitator(s) of each group and created a manual describing how to start support groups for older victims (Spangler & Brandl, 2003). In many instances, the facilitators interviewed were those who started the project. Often, older women were running the support groups; several facilitators were more than 80 years old.

Some support groups were relatively new and only a few older women had been served. Others had been in existence for more than a decade and had served hundreds of older women. Of the

34 support groups, 4 (12%) started between 1985 and 1990, and 5 (15%) started between 1991 and 1995. The majority of the support groups for older women have started since 1996. Twelve new groups (35%) started between 1996 and 2000. During the years from 2001 to 2003, 13 new groups (38%) were formed.

### **BENEFITS OF SUPPORT GROUPS FOR OLDER ABUSED WOMEN**

One recurring question is why offer support groups specifically for older women? Two studies that examined older abused women support groups shed some light on this issue. First, Wolf (1998) interviewed 30 facilitators of support groups for older abused women in the United States and Canada. These facilitators said their programs (a) improved self-esteem, (b) improved abuse awareness, (c) fostered feelings of personal growth, (d) enhanced coping ability, and (e) decreased isolation. Women were able to learn problem-solving strategies and develop safety plans. Second, in a qualitative exploration of the Interagency Older Battered Women's Program in Lynn, Massachusetts, most of the older abused women described their group as a life-altering experience. Support group members described feeling empowered to change their lives. The older women attending the support group "attributed the group experience to increased feelings of well-being and happiness, lessened fears and worries, higher self-esteem, feeling stronger, finding a voice and a general sense of rebirth or rejuvenation" (Coleman-Hardy, Forget, Johnson, & Luetjen, 2001, p. 11).

Older women attending support groups identified a number of reasons why the group helped them. Several ways older women benefited from the group were (a) learning they were not alone, (b) providing support and breaking isolation, (c) learning new survival strategies, (d) improving their physical and mental health, and (e) promoting peace and hope.

Older women often believe they are the only people their age being harmed. Media and literature images of battered women most often portray young mothers with children. Through the support group, these women learned they were not alone. One older woman said, "Often women our age won't admit to being

abused unless they see other women our age experiencing the same thing."

Batterers use isolation as a primary tactic to keep control of their victims. Support groups were a great way to make new friends and break isolation. The women liked having someone listen to them. A woman said, "I feel the group has made me stronger and I feel less alone." Another woman stated, "I was so isolated before. Now I have true friends."

Older women also learned about new strategies to be physically safe and emotionally strong. Some women credited the group with saving their lives. For example, one older woman said,

I'm an old lady. I'll be 84 in June. I've had a lot of experiences . . . but there's nothing like this group. This group saved my life, really. Now I'm glad I'm alive and I feel good about myself. My self-esteem is way up high.

The women also talked about the positive impact of the group on their physical and mental health. One woman remarked, "It's amazing how much my health has improved since I left him." The support group also improved the women's self-image:

Knowing there's a safe place you can meet with older abused women and share what's been going on in your life and receiving and getting positive support from those women has helped me realize I'm not going crazy (like my abuser would like me to think). It has also helped me retain my self-esteem at a time when mental and verbal abuse was trying to rob me of my self-esteem.

Finally, the support group promoted peace and hope. An older woman stated, "Now I've got peace and nobody's going to take it away from me." Others talked about the importance of having fun and laughter. "We're all honest here. We all say what we think. We kid and we joke, it isn't all just serious you know." For women who have been isolated for many years, joy and laughter were especially important.

Facilitators described similar benefits of support groups for older women. One primary benefit of the group identified by facilitators was giving the women an opportunity and the information to make changes in their lives. One advocate said,

The women who make it to the program have been able to get past the barriers of fear, shame, and isolation that keep many women captive. Despite facing a Bermuda triangle of bad choices—staying, leaving, or fighting back—many abused older women make major change when respectful support is available.

Like the qualitative study by Coleman-Hardy et al. (2001), facilitators also described the benefit of breaking the isolation and providing support. One facilitator commented,

The women say that group is the best thing that ever happened to them. They exchange phone numbers, go to lunch together after morning meetings, and call each other “honey” and “sweetie.” There is so much laughter in the room that I sometimes have to close the door so we don’t disturb anyone.

Another stated,

So many of the women have been isolated either physically or psychologically—through embarrassment. Sometimes they have not talked about the abuse outside the family, or even there. Especially when the abuser is a son or daughter, it seems to them it would be less believable. Of course, they cherish the stories from the other women as that tells them the situation is not odd, unusual, or unique to them. It gives them a sense of community—of belonging somewhere.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EXISTING SUPPORT GROUPS FOR OLDER WOMEN

### WHO: THE TARGET POPULATION

Victims of abuse in later life come from all racial, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds. Some victims are healthy and active; others have illnesses, are frail, or have disabilities. Many victims are competent and live independently. Some victims may have dementia or difficulty processing information. Frail victims and victims with disabilities may require assistance with daily living skills or require ongoing nursing care. Victims may live in private dwellings or in facilities such as nursing homes.

Determining the target population significantly affects who joins the group. Considerations for the target population include

age and gender of the victims and their relationship to the abuser. Most, but not all, support groups served women aged 50 and older in a trusting, ongoing relationship with their abuser.

Most groups are open to women of any racial, ethnic, religious, or economic background. A few culturally specific groups were located. Since 1990, Self Help for the Elderly in San Francisco, California, has run a group for abused older Chinese American men and women. The group sees victims who are abused by spouses/partners and/or adult children or other family members. Most of the clients are women; however, male victims have participated and enjoyed the group. The Hmong American Association in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, holds a sewing circle for older abused women. Table Talk is a group for older African American women in St. Louis, Missouri.

#### Age

The age used for the target population influenced who attended the group. One domestic violence program that defined later life as 40 and older has not served any women older than age 60. In contrast, an agency that chose 65+ has not gotten any women under age 70 to attend their group. Some groups let women self-define *older* and allow women without small children to attend. The majority of groups (65%) chose age 50 and older as their age guideline.

#### Gender

The majority of victims of elder abuse are female (National Center on Elder Abuse, 1998). Although several support groups for older men and at least one group for men and women exist, most support groups are exclusively for women. Facilitators organized women-only groups to create a soothing, safe environment. Because their abusers are often male, women may be uncomfortable sharing intimate details, especially details about sexual abuse, with a mixed-gender group.

#### Relationship to the Abuser

The majority of support groups served older women abused by someone with whom they shared an ongoing, trusted



relationship, such as an intimate partner, family member, or caregiver. The types of relationships varied. Some women were in long-term marriages or relationships where abuse had been ongoing and long term. These relationships ranged from 20+ years to several women in 60-year marriages. Other women were in new relationships, often following a death or divorce, and were now being abused by their new partner. Some women had left abusive husbands and were dating. Fewer women described late onset abuse where the abuse starts later in life. Often, late onset abuse or combative behavior is due to a medical or mental health condition or sometimes an inappropriate combination of medications. Some older women experienced physical abuse only later in life but described controlling behavior throughout the relationship (e.g., watching the odometer, limiting her phone calls, putting her on an allowance). Few older lesbian, transgendered, or bisexual women had used tailored services or attended a support group.

Abusers may also be adult children, grandchildren, family members, or caregivers. An older woman raised to believe that her most important role in life is to be a wife and mother may feel like a failure if she ends the relationship. Imagine the increased emotions felt by a woman who has been abused by her adult child. Mothers may resist interventions that may result in their child being arrested, living on the streets, or being put in a mental health facility. Women may be equally reluctant to report abuse by another family member or caregiver.

Most often, women abused by a spouse/partner or adult child met in the same group. However, the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Women's Center held three groups for older women: an evening group, a mothers group, and a wives/partners group. They found that an evening group for working women tended to have younger participants, and their attitudes were noticeably different from the wives and mothers.

Some support groups accepted women who were no longer living with abuse but were still experiencing effects of trauma. These women may suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome or depression because of incest, sexual assault, or domestic violence. Some women's abusive spouses/partners may have died, and the women attended the group to deal with nightmares, panic attacks, or other conditions that were a result of the abuse.

### WHERE TO HOLD THE GROUP

Women need to feel comfortable in the group setting or they will not continue to attend. Communities found different locations to be successful. Some groups were held at domestic abuse agencies. Other facilitators chose different locations such as senior centers, aging services, health care settings, faith-based agencies, or libraries.

### WHEN TO HOLD THE GROUP

Determining a good time of day for the group to meet can be a challenge. Some victims may have difficulty early in the day and prefer an afternoon group. Persons who experience sundowning may have more clarity in the morning and fade as the day progresses. A morning group may be best for them. Victims who work; who provide care for children, grandchildren, or other dependents; or who volunteer may prefer an evening group. Often, older people are working. Several projects have more than one group and hold one session in the day and one session in the evening.

### CONTENT OF THE GROUPS

Some groups are time-limited and others are ongoing. Some groups are informal check-ins with peer counseling, whereas others have structured activities. Topics covered include but are not limited to dynamics of abuse, anger, depression, physical health, women's sexuality, dating, parenting adult children, self-advocacy skills, setting personal boundaries, spirituality, legal issues, safety planning, and financial options.

Activities include interactive exercises such as looking at the dynamics of abuse and family relationships, self-image exercises, and art projects. One group planted seeds and watched them grow while talking about plans for a new life. Another group made magic wands and described how they would make their lives different if they had a magic wand. Several groups had sewing or quilting projects where the women could work and talk. Creating *soul mates* was another sewing project. The soul mates are cloth dolls sewn by volunteers. The women in the group decorated them and put affirmations into pockets or purses. Another

group used everyday materials to build miniature houses and then described how their choices symbolized their lives.

### CHALLENGES OF STARTING AN OLDER ABUSED WOMEN'S GROUP

Several facilitators noted that starting and maintaining an older abused women's support group was amazingly challenge-free. Other communities struggled with participation, transportation, women's freedom to attend the group, and funding.

#### PARTICIPATION

Most facilitators of support groups across the country noted that participation was a challenge. Some talked about how isolated older victims can become. Other facilitators described generational, religious, or cultural values that affected women's participation in a group. Many older women believe that problems should remain within their family or community and should not be shared with strangers.

To recruit participants, choice of language is crucial. Many older women do not identify with terms such as *battered* or *abused women* or *victims of domestic violence*, *elder abuse*, or *sexual assault*. These are terms that are commonly used by professionals. Many facilitators found it more effective to list common behaviors or ask questions about experiences such as, "Does someone put you down and say you are stupid?" or "Does someone control your money?" or "Does someone withhold medications from you?"

Most older women had never attended a support group and did not consider themselves in need of *support*. Language such as *advocacy*, *empowerment*, *self-esteem*, *validate*, or *entitlement* may be confusing to some older women. They also may not see themselves as *in crisis* and may never call a *crisis line*. One program's creative solution was a senior-to-senior line. During designated times each week, the domestic abuse hotline was staffed by older women. This provides older women a time when they can call and be guaranteed they can speak to someone of their generation.

Participants for groups can be found through strong collaborative relationships with agencies that provide referrals. Cospon-

sorship of a support group between domestic violence and aging resource agencies was helpful in many communities. Many projects had an extensive outreach program by doing presentations for older people on abuse throughout their community. Materials were created that specifically address abuse in later life. Often, the media were interested in this new angle on domestic abuse and provided coverage that attracted new participants.

### **TRANSPORTATION**

Almost all the facilitators across the United States mentioned transportation as a past or current problem. Many facilitators said they had women interested in the group who had no way to get there and so could not attend. An urban program described paying for taxi services only to have women who used wheelchairs sitting outside on the curb for more than an hour waiting for a cab. Some of these women showed up as the group was ending, extremely upset. In rural communities, taxis may not exist or are cost prohibitive.

Programs used many creative ways to get women to the support group. Some examples include the Red Cross, aging-network staff, or police senior escorts picking up participants (if this was safe); taxi vouchers where service was reliable; or use of a medical van when the group was held at the hospital. Another solution to the transportation problem was to hold groups in different settings throughout the community. For example, in Phoenix, Arizona, five groups are held each week in different locations so more women can attend.

### **FREEDOM TO LEAVE**

Some women who are interested in attending a support group live with an abuser who is home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Some abusers are retired and stay at home every day. Other abusers may be family members who are unemployed or keep erratic schedules, so the victim does not know when she can leave safely. One group had a health care provider write a prescription saying the victim needed to be at the hospital for rehabilitation or stress management class every week at a specific time. Because the group was held at the hospital, the women could go to the

hospital (even have the abusers drive them to their appointment) without raising suspicion.

Some victims provide care for an elderly parent, sibling, or spouse/partner. They may not feel they are able to leave home to attend a group because of their caregiving responsibilities. The aging network may be able to provide respite care services to give the victim time away to attend the group. However, some abusers sabotage the victim's time away by being abusive to the respite care provider.

Some older women have children or are responsible for grandchildren. Others may have an adult child with a disability for whom they provide care or who lives with them. These women may require assistance finding child care or adult day care to be able to attend the support group.

## FUNDING

Funding can be a significant challenge to starting or maintaining an older abused women's support group. Existing groups received funding from government agencies, private foundations, individual donations, or corporate sponsorship. A few groups are a volunteer effort. One group was funded by an older woman who left money in her will to start such a group.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH OLDER ABUSED WOMEN

Advocates and workers who facilitate support groups for older abused women offered the following tips on working with this population:

- Believe the victim. Even if the victim says other things that seem unlikely, begin by assuming the older woman has been harmed or has experienced trauma at some point. If you have concerns about dementia, depression, or delirium, contact a health care provider.
- Do not assume that stress, poor family communication, or poor caregiving techniques are causing the problem. *Assume it is power and control unless and until proven otherwise.* Focus on victim safety and avoid colluding with the abuser.
- Identify the victim's strengths and skills and build upon them.

- Offer hope. Focus on offering strategies that promote victim safety and break isolation, support the victim's decisions, and provide additional information.
- Recognize and respect cultural and religious differences. Language barriers and value differences may create challenges. Understand and acknowledge the importance of holidays and rituals from a variety of traditions.
- Support any decision the victim makes: staying, leaving, or leaving and returning to an abusive relationship.
- Treat older victims as adults with respect and kindness. Do not treat them as children by doing too much for them, talking to others about them while they are present, or making decisions for them.
- Collaborate with other professionals and other systems. For example, multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary teams meet regularly to consult on cases of elder abuse including abuse in later life. Family violence councils and coordinated community response teams generally review policies and procedures to ensure seamless service delivery and abuser accountability throughout the system.

In conclusion, support groups for older abused women have the potential to help victims feel safe and strong. The groups can save lives. As one woman noted, "Without the staff and this group, I would still be a prisoner, maybe even dead." Sadly, too few support groups for older women exist in the United States. As the population ages, there will be an increased need for funding, policies, and services promoting safety and support for older victims of abuse.

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