

Support Group for Adult Survivors of Child Abuse Offers Healing

Volunteers and friends of Safe Passage are starting a support group for adult survivors of child abuse.

Similar groups, such as [SNAP](#) for survivors of sexual abuse by priests, have found that sharing one's story with people who have had similar experiences can generate healing that therapy doesn't always accomplish.

Their [ground rules](#) open with this statement:

“We who have survived childhood abuse understand as few others can. We carried that experience with us through adolescence and into adulthood as we were developing our lives. We urge you to share our meetings, our experiences, strength, and hope.”

The group meets the second Sunday of each month at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom. Upcoming topics include self-care, letting go of behaviors that no longer work, and speaking up for oneself.

Anyone interested in participating can contact Karen Nestingen at knestingen@earthlink.net.

Podcast Narrative.

For this week's podcast I want to share some of the research that Safe Passage did in conjunction with the individuals who are organizing this support group for adult survivors of child abuse.

Let me start however with some of my own experience in this area. Over the years I have done a fair amount of work not only in child welfare but also in workforce development. I have noticed in both fields that informal groups of people who share a common problem have been incredibly effective at helping people break mental logjams and make real progress. Years ago there was a program in Chicago that I studied in depth for a client. Unfortunately it is no longer in operation, and the evaluations are no longer on the Internet. But I will share with you what I learned from my research on it. It was the most successful job training I ever encountered in helping women who were multigenerational recipients of welfare move into the workforce. What they found was that group members could identify what was really keeping people stuck in ways that the paid staff did not see or weren't really able to talk about. I recall a group calling out a woman in an abusive relationship who came to a meeting uncharacteristically wearing sunglasses. They immediately figured out what was going on. Group members also didn't hesitate to call out a member who had relapsed on drugs or alcohol. Or, they often had practical knowledge of job opportunities. I remember one group telling a participant not to apply to a particular Walgreens but to go to a different one nearby because one manager was sympathetic and the other was not. What was unique about this program is that it stuck with individuals for a long period of time, women who started out with virtually no job experience, no experience with family members working, very little education, and in many cases had never been out of the neighborhood. They worked with these welfare recipients until they gained enough skills to get into the workforce and off of public assistance. This often started with simple skills such as learning to read a bus schedule or volunteering a few hours a week at the local library. The program distinguished itself by starting where the clients were at, not some

arbitrary skill level, and developing stretch goals, agreed to mutually, for each next stage of development. A key experience was that getting off of welfare was not a straight line. Similar to self-help groups for people addicted to drugs and alcohol, people frequently simply disappeared for months at a time and then reengaged down the road. So getting from the beginning point to the end resembled a series of peaks and valleys more than a straight line. However within five years this program had more than 50% of its clients successfully off of welfare in the workforce, which was the best outcome of any group I ever studied.

Groups for individuals addicted to alcohol or drugs like Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous are generally better known by the public. They often also feature the ability of group members to frankly confront individuals when they are not being entirely honest with themselves or others

In the child welfare field, the national organization Prevent Child Abuse has a program called Circle of Parents. In Minnesota the Prevent Child Abuse chapter has become a program within a nonprofit called [FamilyWise](#).

The Circle of Parents groups are individuals who want to become better parents themselves and, beyond that, often to break the cycle of abuse in their family history. These groups are not professionally run by trained therapists but do have facilitators, who may be volunteers or staff members, that are trained and subjected to background checks by the program, although problems with the background check might not necessarily exclude them from that leadership role. So to a degree these Circle of Parents facilitators are certified. The role of the agency is to do the training, and help with recruitment and referral sources but these groups are not programs within the agency nor does the agency serve as a fiscal agent.

There is also a national organization called [Adult Survivors of Child Abuse](#) which has a chapter in Minnesota. There is a link to the website in the written narrative for this blog or you can simply look up adult survivors of child abuse on the web. The group of Safe Passage volunteers and friends decided not to pursue this option because the program involves a multi-year commitment and has a series of 21 steps which one must pass through to complete the program. The manual itself is 115 pages long.

Of course the most well-known self-help groups are the Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous and similar ones. In many respects the SNAP groups and this group for adult survivors of child abuse emulate these models in that they are self-managed, meaning they don't have a paid facilitator and aren't run by a professional therapist, and they have similar ground rules. We put a link to the ground rules for the adult survivors of child abuse group in the blog, but they include that the groups expect members to seek professional therapy elsewhere, they ask that members avoid giving advice or trying to problem solve for individuals, promote active listening, and require that everything shared in the group be confidential. We learned that the SNAP group does encourage people to get together outside the meetings to share resources or strengthen their relationships

This approach works in part because a majority of people have been in therapy anyway. People occasionally join the group who have never come out about their abuse before, or may not have been in therapy. If that becomes a concern the group facilitator may talk to the person

individually and encourage them to get professional help before they rejoin the group. Apparently however this is quite rare. People sometimes get emotional, but none of the groups we talked to indicated that situations develop where a professional therapist would have been necessary on the spot. One thing I would like to see though is some good research on whether therapies related to PTSD might be or are successful with survivors of child abuse or priestly sexual abuse.

What I have heard from talking with people who are members of or sponsor these types of self-help groups is that people feel safe, they know everyone has been in similar situation, and that this very act of simply sharing their story with people who have similar experiences is healing in itself, in a way that they have not been able to experience in therapy. It can provide closure to some degree, perhaps to a great degree, on experiences that are extremely troubling.

Some individuals' stories emerge around particular topic for the monthly meeting. A common one for example is to share experiences around the holidays. A person may reveal that every year an uncle or grandparents came to stay for the holidays and sexually assaulted them. Or that simply the amount of hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance involved in showering presents on children that they were assaulting was deeply disturbing.

Another common theme has been that individuals who have experienced one of these types of abuse are often judged by others and told to "just let go" and to "just move on", which minimizes or trivializes the incredible trauma that people have experienced and discourages them from talking about their pain openly to others. In support groups, these experiences are taken with the seriousness that they deserve, people tend to feel like they have been heard, and that in itself is healing.

So in sum I am very optimistic that this self-managed group of adult survivors of child abuse will bring healing and hope to its members. I encourage you, if you have been a victim of child abuse, or if you know of someone who has, to connect with Karen Nestingen yourself, or help someone else do so. Karen is the organizer of the group. Her email is listed in the blog or if you are just listening to this podcast and don't have the blog available it is knestingen@earthlink.net. Nestingen is spelled Nestingen.

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