

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes – 06-21-05

Present: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Paula Manley (Manley Interventions), Michael Crowe (Choices), Matt Johnston (ChangePoint), Jacquie Pancoast (ChangePoint), Stacey Womack (ARMS, Abuse Recovery Ministry Services), Paul Lee (Men's Resource Center), Chris Wilson (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Songcha Bowman (Multi-Cultural Counseling Services), Hazel Whitman (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Roberto Olivero (Men's Resource Center), Elsie Garland (Juvenile Justice)

Minutes by Jacquie Pancoast, edited by Chris Huffine

Today's Topic: Use of Self-Disclosure in Groups

In terms of the use of self-disclosure in group, there was a range of opinions regarding what amount is appropriate and what is in the client's best interest. Likewise, those present today represented a range of self-disclosure styles from virtually none at all to regular self-disclosure.

Some of the benefits of self-disclosure:

- it can help connect the facilitator with group members, creating a better therapeutic alliance (or, using non-therapy terms, a better "level of influence")
- it can be used to relay experiences which might help clients.
- can let client know you care and have appropriate knowledge.
- it can be helpful to disclose controlling behaviors that even non-abusive people do.
- it can be used to counterbalance abusive, disrespectful responses in situations with more appropriate, respectful responses.

The intention of self-disclosure should always be to further benefit client and not the facilitator. It can be a negative experience with counselor who does too much self-disclosure and focuses on themselves.

Much depends on group dynamics, how the group members process/use it.. Self-disclosure can be used for modeling.

Traditional work with anti-social/criminal clients recommends no disclosure about yourself outside of work. Those present stated that not all DV group members are necessarily criminal/anti-social. The question was raised as to how do counselors weigh use of self-disclosure with groups that have a mix of anti-social, criminal, and non-antisocial client populations? One response is that we might need to be more neutral with particular clients. Several people mentioned that they intentionally do not keep family photos in their office if they see clients there.

There was general agreement that when a group member is eliciting the information, greater caution needs to be used about whether to share it. One common response is to ask why the client is asking--what their purpose is. Sometimes group members ask personal questions as a way of deflecting attention from themselves.

An appropriate level of self-disclosure varies with cultural background and the age of the counselor, especially when working with Hispanic clients. One area this is relevant to this is the level of self-disclosure that is done before the group gets started, on breaks, and as the group is ending. For example, talking about the weather, how one's day is going, etc. For some cultures, to not do a certain amount of this type of sharing is likely to alienate clients.

With male/female co-facilitators, there appears to be more pressure for the female to self-disclose. This could be a natural pull for self-disclosure based on the female being in the minority in the group setting. Men are more interested in hearing the "female perspective" or understanding the experiences of women. Male co-facilitators can help with this by providing a voice for women/victims so that the female facilitator doesn't have to bear the full burden/responsibility for representing women.

Age may also be a factor in how much to share. Female counselors present remarked that, when they are older than the group members they get a sense of being seen as a parental, nurturing, mother figure. Self-disclosure can be seen as the sharing of wisdom gained from experience. It may be easier and less risky to self-disclose as a person older than other group members than as a person who is younger than other group members.

Should we disclose our own past abuse and control? There was some consensus that "normative" abuse and control, the kind that is done by virtually everyone, should be disclosed or a facilitator may seem ingenuine and dishonest. One person said that they talk about past abuse and present successes.

Self-disclosure can be masked by referring to personal experiences as if they happened to a generic other or to someone else the facilitator knows. Another way of doing this is to ask global questions. Ex: "When you were a kid in a playground..." Ask questions instead of making statements.

Self-disclosure covers not only a facilitator's past, but also their experience in the moment in the group. For example, commenting that they felt intimidated by a look of a group member or that the intensity as they spoke made them uneasy. The clinical word for this is "process work" or sharing observations about the group process and interactions. It is important to respond to clients cognitively and not emotionally--to be more of an "observer" (about your own as well as other's feelings and behaviors) than a "reactor". This is a benefit of co-facilitation - if one counselor is reacting emotionally, the other counselor can intervene and redirect focus.

Likewise, one's style of interaction is as disclosive or more disclosive than what one explicitly reveals. Clients can sense a lot in a counselor's physical presentation. If counselors pay attention to client's reactions, we can learn from what we do. One important thing to be vigilant about is avoiding getting into power struggles with group members (i.e., where you become too focused on getting someone to act a specific way). Power struggles ultimately lead to someone "losing" and are not appropriate modeling of mutually respectful relationships.

Self-disclosure of one's own past abuse and control and mishandled situations can help keep the facilitator from being "above" the clients. Yet some members may use those examples to justify their own past abuse (e.g., "see, everyone does it"). On the other hand, if primarily positive and appropriate responses are only shared, a facilitator may come off as "perfect" and "above" the rest of the group. One way of avoiding doing either of those things is to do little or no self-disclosure, although that, too, has its drawbacks.

The use of self-disclosure should be to encourage group members to emulate the behaviors, not the facilitator. However, in truth, if there is a solid therapeutic connection, some group members seeking to "be like the facilitator" is probably unavoidable and not necessarily a bad thing. Keep in mind that who they are trying to "be" is the image the facilitator is presenting, not the actual person the facilitator is outside of group.

The issue of self-disclosure gets particularly complicated when a husband and wife are co-facilitating a group together (which is the case for two programs locally). That alone means that there will be self-disclosure--since group members may read more into interactions and moods than they otherwise would.

Even if not romantically involved, co-facilitators are often seen as a couple by men in the group. Interactions between male/female co-facilitators can be used as a teaching tool. It is important conflict be worked out towards a healthy resolution. Co-facilitators can demonstrate positive non-competitive interactions. They can do intentional conflict role plays to demonstrate healthy resolution.

Question: When there is a conflict between the co-facilitators, should that be handled in front of the group or outside of group? It depends on various factors. In general, it is probably best to deal with such conflicts outside of group. However, there may be times and issues where it is best to let the conflict, when handled appropriately, play out in front of the group as a means of modeling appropriate arguing/conflict resolution.