Empowering Male Survivors To Heal Through Community and Peer Connections

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Introduction

We have long advocated empowerment as a crucial component of the healing process for male survivors of sexual trauma. We further believe that empowerment is facilitated by connection with other survivors. With the expansion of grassroots services for male survivors and the growth of the Internet, networking amongst male survivor peers is becoming more accessible. In this chapter, we will review research that demonstrates that the effects of individual psychotherapy can be amplified when clients risk sharing their recovery with peers.

We have found that when male survivors interact with peers in a group setting, there are opportunities to grow beyond the isolation that often characterizes their lives. One example of such a group program is the Weekends of Recovery (WOR) program, sponsored by the non-profit organization MaleSurvivor.org.

The WOR program creates an effective healing milieu in which male survivors can develop healthy peer relationships and take steps toward self-empowerment. We have co-chaired these three-day experiential group events for the past 15 years. Feedback from participants in the weekends affirms our premise that group experiences provide an invaluable adjunct to psychotherapy. Male survivors report their healing journey is exponentially more transformative when contact with other survivors grows into on-going healthy peer networking (Struve & Fradkin, 2014).

We will begin with a brief overview about the philosophy of our program. We will then review some research about the effectiveness of peer group support that has informed how we designed our program. We will then discuss the evolution and growth of our WOR program, elaborate the design of these events, identify special issues with which we have grappled, and assess the program's impact on the healing process for WOR alumni.

The WOR Program Philosophy

The WORs originated in 2001 to provide an additional service to assist the healing process for adult male survivors who have experienced any kind of sexual trauma as children and/or adults and/or who have witnessed the sexual victimization of others. The weekends are designed to co-create, with the participants, a safe environment in order to reduce isolation, discover the benefits of engaging in recovery while in the company of other male survivors, and acquire recovery tools they can use when they return home. The weekends are highly structured and are conducted with adherence to the highest professional standards. They were conceived as an adjunct to psychotherapy, using a variety of modalities and interventions to meet the needs of a wide variety of participants.

The programmatic goal of the WOR is to co-create an environment safe enough that each man feels sufficiently secure being vulnerable that he can tell his story and create emotional bonds with other male survivors that may endure far beyond the weekend. Safety is enhanced by a small client to staff ratio, 3.5:1. The program includes participation of both male and female facilitators. Including women facilitators provides an opportunity for men who were victimized by a female perpetrator to be able to confront the complexity of safety issues in the presence of women in positions of power and authority. This opportunity to have a different and healing

experience with a woman in authority is a significant benefit to these men. On the other hand, for men who have only felt safe talking to women, having safe women facilitators present at the weekend helps them expand their comfort zone to include some men as well.

Our team shares the philosophy that healing from sexual trauma is amplified when survivors join together, sharing and witnessing each other's strengths, challenges, and successes. Inviting diverse participants has been an underlying strategy, as men from all walks of life benefit from finding commonalities while having their differences honored.

As this volume and its companion volume (Gartner, in press) demonstrate, there are a variety of therapeutic interventions that are effective for working with male survivors. A number of them provide a critical foundation for our work.

Research on the Effect of Peer Group Support

There is significant research suggesting that interactions with peers is effective in addressing many mental health challenges, particularly in changing self-defeating attitudes and improving health and overall achievement. For example, Kyrouz and Humphreys (2002) demonstrate value from participation in community programs and support groups for clients who struggle with intense emotional issues such as shame. This same research reports an increased sense of empowerment and resolution of shame from group membership. In another study (Edmunson, Bedell, Archer, & Gordon, 1982), a 10-month patient-led social network enhancement group with former psychiatric patients successfully empowered 53% of the patients to function with no contact with the mental health system. For those patients who still needed mental health assistance, half did not need repeat hospitalization and those who did had much shorter average hospital stays (7 days vs. 25 days).

A survey (Galanter, 1988) of 356 members of Recovery, Inc., (a mental health self-help group now known as Recovery International) found that, when compared with a community sample, participants in the group had very low re-hospitalization rates (8% of group leaders and 7% of recent members). Another study by Recovery, Inc. reported that individuals who participated in self-help groups for two years experienced no more anxiety than the general population (Raiff, 1984). Similar results of decreased hospitalization and increased coping ability were found in two other studies of self-help groups (Kennedy, 1989; Kurtz, 1988). In yet another study, involving 869 participants, seven randomized controlled trials of peer support versus usual care for depression found that peer support interventions were superior to usual care in reducing depressive symptoms (Pfeiffer, Heisler, Piette, Rogers, & Valenstein, 2011). Finally, a guided peer support group for people with psychosis demonstrated a positive effect on increasing their social support, self-efficacy, and the quality of their life as compared to those who did not participate in the group (Castelein et al, 2008).

Both authors of this chapter have worked with individuals grappling with HIV/AIDS. One author previously worked as a facilitator in a Healing Weekend for individuals from this population. When offered the opportunity to participate in such a weekend retreat, many were able to leave their isolation behind and find ways to build support for themselves. Their group experience allowed them to learn new skills for coping with the profound challenges they faced psychologically and physically. Self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) have also been found to be a key in HIV risk reduction for high-risk injection drug users (Sibthorpe, B., Fleming, D., Tesselaar, H., & Gould, J., 1994).

Twelve Step groups have helped vast numbers of people facing challenges of various forms of addiction, compulsive behaviors, and emotional struggles. For example, attendance at

NA has been shown to help drug-addicted members stay sober, feel less anxiety, and acquire more self-esteem (Christo & Sutton, 1994). A meta-analysis of more than 50 studies found that membership in AA helped members reduce physical symptoms and improve psychological adjustment (Emrick et al, 1993). A 1994 study (Humphreys, Mavis, & Stoffelmayr) reported that African-American patients who participated in NA and AA groups, as compared with patients who did not attend those support groups, showed significantly more improvements over twelve months in six problem areas: employment, alcohol, drug, legal, psychological, and family. A similar study found that male substance abuse patients who participated in self-help groups after treatment significantly reduced their frequency of alcohol and cocaine use in a 7-month follow-up (McKay et al., 1994). In the authors' experience and in the research (Hartman, Ho, Arbour, Hambley, & Lawson, 2012), participation in 12-step meetings has also been found to be a vital component of recovery for men who are struggling with sex addiction. The clinical experiences of the authors similarly corroborates that many sex-addicted clients who are also male survivors report that connecting with others with similar histories of sexual victimization helps them in reducing their shame.

One of the most healing aspects of attending and participating in this type of group is finding others with similar struggles, thereby being inspired by another's successes in facing challenges. Participants often discover that connecting and reaching out for support empowers them to embrace hope, whereas isolation is a less effective strategy.

Male military personnel returning from the battlefield with the scars of PTSD and its accompanying shame have found that joining a group where they can be open about their struggles and find hope is healing (van der Kolk, 2014). The National Center for PTSD advocates participation in peer groups to help people feel more comfortable talking about their

trauma and cope with memories and difficult emotions. In addition, they suggest that connecting with other people can help you feel better (National Center for PTSD, n.d.).

Designing Peer Support For Male Sexual Trauma Survivors

Male survivors of sexual trauma often feel great shame about the abuse done to them, and often suffer in silence. They endure a range of psychological problems and are often unaware that others are suffering with similar problems and challenges. Further, they often feel very reticent to reach out for support (Fradkin, 2012a).

The WOR program seeks to incorporate 11 curative factors of group treatment articulated by Yalom (1995):

(1) *instilling a sense of hope*: often male survivors enter their healing journey with a great sense of hopelessness;

(2) *universality*: a profound sense of inclusion may replace feelings of seclusion when a survivor has an opportunity to share with and listen to other male survivors;

(3) *imparting of information*: debunking myths, which is especially important for male survivors, who frequently have distortions about the common dynamics of their own sexual victimization;

(4) *altruism*: finding they can help other men despite believing no one could benefit from their struggles;

(5) *corrective recapitulation of the primary family group:* participants incorporate learnings more deeply when awareness emerges from safe and ethical re-creations

of past dynamics and struggles that have different endings within the corrective milieu;

(6) *development of socializing techniques:* as the participants risk connection;

(7) *imitative behaviors:* as participants mirror successful strategies used by their peers;

(8) *direct advice:* given as suggestions of new possibilities to take further steps in the healing process;

(9) *catharsis:* permitting themselves to be vulnerable and share feelings on a deep emotional level;

(10) *interpersonal learning:* experimenting with new behaviors and seeing the effect on themselves and their peers; and

(11) *existential factors:* as participants explore the realities of the trauma(s) of what was done to them.

These core philosophies are well articulated by a WOR alumnus, John:[1]

> The WOR changed my life by providing me ways to express my pain, shame, grief, helplessness, and anger within a compassionate, loving group. Knowing I was not alone …helped give me strength as I witnessed others challenge themselves. I found courage and safety to move beyond barriers within comfortable parameters. The weekend gave me hope that I was not defined by my abuse. I had nothing to be ashamed of; it

[1] We thank the alumni who participated in our survey of the Weekends of Recovery in 2014. Quotes in this chapter were responses to the survey, and help us explain more fully the benefits of the weekends.

encouraged me to heal and grow. I can honestly say I would not be who I am today without WOR. You provided me with the tools and platform to do that.

Goals of a WOR

The Weekends of Recovery strive to provide an opportunity for male survivors:

1) to experience a safe environment in which participants can discover they are not alone;
2) to co-create and experience safety with other survivors;
3) to share their inner pain, strength, and hope with others who have been abused;
4) to safely share their narrative with others who will understand and offer support;
5) to safely experiment with letting go, opening up, and being vulnerable, and practice asking for the support they need;
6) to explore safe ways of moving beyond their comfort zones, releasing their blocks, and moving beyond their abuse to experience a greater sense of freedom in their minds, bodies, and spirits;
7) to reconnect with ethical, life-affirming power, exquisite self-compassion and self-expression (defined below), and learn how to use it to protect themselves, and
8) to provide a safe place where participants can experience a sense of community, brotherhood, and joy.

Overall Structure of a Weekend of Recovery

Introductory weekends are limited to a maximum of 28 participants. Potential participants sign up online, often encouraged by a therapist, fellow survivor, significant other, or ally. A preponderance of participants report that support from their therapist or another helping professional contributes to the success of their weekend experience. Each weekend usually includes a couple of alumni who are attending a second introductory weekend for the benefit of their recovery. Many participants spend some time on the MaleSurvivor.org website prior to attending, reading other men's experiences or participating in peer-moderated chat rooms. For a large number of our survey respondents, it was this positive feedback on the website that helped them decide to register. Support from a spouse, partner or family member also often encourages them to risk attending a weekend.

We do not require that a man concurrently participate in therapy to register; however, we strongly encourage each man to have a support system in place when he returns home. Once registered, they participate in a structured screening interview with one of the facilitators. We'll detail below how the interview is structured, but generally it is a chance to screen for readiness to benefit from the weekend and to screen out those who may not be ready or do not fit our criteria.

The weekend programs are located at retreat centers around the United States that we have identified as providing safe accommodations, adequate meeting space, and nutritious meals, and whose staff understands, values, and respects the work we do at the weekend. It is necessary that the retreat center can provide private spaces for us to conduct our program. We utilize settings that offer the options of single, double, or triple rooms to accommodate diverse needs: men can feel safe enough when they head for bed and those with tighter budgets are assisted economically.

Once the men arrive and get settled in their rooms, we begin at 12 noon on Friday with lunch. The first day is devoted primarily to orientation and safety, welcoming the men into the community and teaching them mind-body awareness skills they can utilize throughout the weekend. One of the first activities at each WOR is a structured safety exercise, during which we ask a series of brainstorming questions about safety. This, like other experiential activities, contributes to participants becoming "mirrors" for each other. They transition from believing they don't fit in the group to discovering there are unquestionably other men who have walked in their shoes, and they begin to feel inclusion in a community of men, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

The second morning is devoted to providing a safe enough space for them to tell the story of the abuse they suffered. In the afternoon and evening, we focus on helping them learn how to offer themselves exquisite self-compassion and how to "bust through their shame" (see below). The third day focuses on preparing them to return home with a plan of specific skills, tools ,and resources they can utilize to continue their recovery journey. Numerous breaks are provided throughout the program for casual connecting, recreation and art, and self-reflection.

The strength of a weekend is that survivors participate in a variety of experiential modalities: large group activities, four small group sessions during the weekend, access to individual consultations, and many opportunities for social interaction and networking. We also use a variety of interventions to keep participants engaged, including brainstorming, mind-body awareness, group process, psychodrama, artist activities, and therapeutic recreation blended with authentic movement. We have learned that each man will benefit from being engaged in a wide variety of activities and that some interventions will impact some men more than others. We spend considerable time at the beginning of the weekend helping men understand as fully as

possible how we envision the structure of the weekend. We then invite them to participate in as many different aspects of the weekend as possible, including taking the risk of doing some activities that may seem to be beyond their comfort zone.

Pre-Weekend Interviews Begin the Process of Creating Group Cohesion

Group cohesion develops organically once bonds are established that are rooted in safety. We approach safety as a process, with several avenues for engagement. A pre-weekend phone interview, conducted by a member of the facilitator team, offers a routine structure for our initial contact with each participant. The task of gathering preliminary information provides an opportunity to develop interpersonal rapport between facilitator and participant. As the facilitator gathers information about positive experiences and challenges a man has encountered in his recovery journey prior to deciding to attend the WOR, there emerges a natural context to explore safety needs with the participant.

During this interview, we inquire about physical and mental health issues that may impact attending a weekend. For example, survivors who experience a severe level of social anxiety may anticipate more concerns about safety during a weekend. For survivors who have not yet learned the skills for managing chronic dissociation, there is a risk that attending a weekend may be destabilizing or disabling. We assess for suicidality and substance use, thereby alerting us to address any needs for prevention planning. In these circumstances, the facilitator team's knowledge of individual participants' vulnerabilities alerts them to look for signs of who might be struggling at some point as the weekend progresses.

We also use the interview to screen out those who may not be ready or who do not fit our criteria for inclusion. A weekend is contraindicated for survivors who are still in active states of

substance abuse and may be contraindicated for those in early stages of addiction recovery. We also screen out any participant who has been convicted of a sexual offense as an adult. Participants who acknowledge any other history of sexual offending are required to have a second interview with one of the co-chairpersons to determine if they can appropriately participate in the weekend. We assess specifically the participant's ability to take responsibility for his offending behaviors and for his ability to honor the physical and emotional boundaries of other participants. In cases involving sexual acting out behaviors during childhood or adolescence, we evaluate whether this reflected the dynamics of "sexually reactive behavior" rather than predatory or pedophilic intentions (Johnson, 2009). Such incidents mirror the trauma that was experienced, which is then reactively inflicted on another person. We frequently are able to accept a participant who had an incident of sexually reactive behavior, whereas we would screen out someone who exhibited predatory or pedophilic behavior.

During our initial interview, we inquire whether registrants perceive themselves as different from other survivors. Each question is designed to help us prepare for the diversity of participants at the weekend, and to communicate our respect for diversity (e.g., sexual, gender, ethnic, and religious identity). We evaluate what these minority group members may need both from themselves and others to feel safe. We also assess for biases that may make it difficult for any potential participant to be fully welcoming and respectful of the diversity of peers with whom he will be sharing the weekend milieu. When necessary, we address such conflicts during the interview.

Many male survivors hesitate to register for a three-day intensive retreat. Alumni who have completed weekends have identified several issues that contributed to their reluctance: perceptions that they were emotionally ill equipped to tolerate a WOR; fears of being with other

survivors; and questions about safety (Struve & Fradkin, 2015). The pre-weekend interview allows us a forum to validate and normalize these fears while simultaneously providing reassurance about ways the weekend can provide an opportunity for positive growth and change.

Healing Benefits of a Weekend Retreat Format

While not considered therapy, the weekends often have therapeutic benefits. There are many restorative benefits to having a small group of male survivors gather for a weekend to connect with each other. Isolation is a primary life strategy for many of them. They rarely have talked previously about the abuse and/or assaults they suffered. Indeed, many men go to their graves without disclosing their secrets. Their shame may be so immense and their fears about sharing so intense that they protect their sexual trauma secrets at all costs. Unfortunately, for some the only way out of their pain is suicide (Healy, n.d.).

A participant who attends a weekend is challenged to shed his belief that he is "the only one" with a secret of sexual victimization. Letting go of this myth is a profound experience, since it has likely fed his internal shame. During the weekend, survivors have the opportunity to interact with one another in ways that convey acceptance, warmth, and empathy instead of the rejection they often anticipate.

Men are socialized to be competitive (Gartner, 2005). As a result, it is common for male survivors to compare aspects of the abuse they suffered to others' stories. Men often minimize the severity of their trauma, masking their shame and propping up their masculinity. Hearing about peers' trauma experiences helps them understand more accurately the gravity of their own abuse/assault(s). Furthermore, many of the men who question if their abuse is "bad enough" to

even warrant attending a WOR (e.g., “I was only groped once”) find they do indeed belong and find others struggling with similar challenges.

Listen to alumnus Chris, (Fradkin, 2012b):

> There is no hierarchy of abuse. It was something I realized at the beginning of my first WOR as I looked around the room wondering if I really belonged there.... So many guys must have worse stories than mine…But somewhere, in the midst of all that doubt, a little voice inside of me spoke up and told me that I had to be there in that place at that time, and I had the right to ask for the help that I had needed for so long. The facilitators asked us to say anything that we needed to ask for in order to feel safe, and that's when I spoke up. I said I needed to know that no one there would tell me that what happened to me didn't matter because it wasn't as bad as what happened to some of the guys there. I was amazed and humbled when almost every person in the room agreed with me. It was at one and the same time the most foreign thing I had ever felt, and the most knee-buckling, life-changing, and deeply, desperately needed feeling to warm my chilled heart.

Men get many mixed messages about what it means to be a “real man.” For a survivor who feels his manhood was stolen, the WOR provides an opportunity to re-define what it means to “truly be a man” while in the company of other “genuine men.” For example, many participants begin a WOR believing that “authentic men” deal with personal problems by denying and minimizing pain. Many have spent a lifetime getting high or drunk, addicted to sex or gambling, or shutting down the emotional parts of themselves. During the weekend, they are invited to suspend their addictive/compulsive behaviors and risk trying new behaviors. Many participants discover there are other paths to manhood, experiencing what deep courage it takes to face problems directly, all while in the company of other men. They learn that vulnerability

and empathy are valuable tools that reflect personal strength.

Many men begin a WOR feeling terrified about issues of safety, perhaps never or only rarely having felt safe. If talking to a single therapist has been his only reference for a safe space, imagining being in a roomful of other survivors seems a huge leap. Considerations of safety within a predominantly male environment are especially complex for participants who were victimized by a male abuser.

Participants commonly vie for seats allowing access to the quickest exit. As the weekend evolves, men describe the feeling of "jumping out of my skin," the urge to run away, or a disbelief that the intensity of their anxiety can possibly diminish. Joe explains his process for opening up:

> While at my first weekend of recovery, I remember thinking that it was the safest place I had ever been in regard to my CSA. I experienced the fact that I was not alone in regard to this aspect of my life. Attending the weekend helped me establish a foundation and launched my journey of recovery… I've learned that I can safely rid myself of my protective shell. (Fradkin, 2012b)

Three days at a Weekend of Recovery creates a more holistic environment than one or more hours per week in a therapist's office. Men appreciate having a "safe enough" space so they can focus for an extended period on themselves, the sexual trauma they endured, and its consequences. Feeling, like Joe, safe enough to let down barriers, they can absorb the support and allow themselves to be vulnerable in ways they typically would not permit, especially with other men. Members of the facilitator team often report that when their own clients attend a WOR, they share more than they routinely do during individual psychotherapy.

The WOR program is structured to balance large and small group activities, thereby

titrating how male survivors address core problems of shame. There are many sources of shame, largely emerging from the degree of responsibility men internalize about the trauma they experienced. Typically male survivors have accepted responsibility for acting shamefully rather than understanding it was the perpetrator who acted shamefully toward them. Shame is reduced when a man discovers he is a victim of something that was done to him rather than something he did; fellow participants validate this through speaking their own truth about the abuse or assault they experienced. Bill shared this example of how his shame was manifested:

> Before the WOR I would stutter a lot when I got "too close" to the core of the abuse. When I told my story, it was only the second time. My therapist was the first. I stuttered and cried and didn't look up until I was finished. Everyone else was crying too. That's when I understood that I was in a room with other guys who "get it." I didn't have to clarify or explain. I was heard and validated. By the time the weekend was over, my stuttering was decreased. And bigger than that, I just did not care about the stuttering that remained. (Struve & Fradkin, 2014)

Dave underscored how attending a WOR helped him overcome and heal his shame:

> Where to start? I wasn't the monster I was so used to painting myself as. The ability to say the things I could only ever say to my therapist or wife and it was not only okay, it was encouraged. I felt "home." That may sound weird but there was no judgment, only loving support! (Struve & Fradkin, 2014)

The WOR can have long-term as well as short-term benefits. Alexander, a 48-year old survivor of father-son incest and multiple rapes, reported several years after his WOR:

> The weekend helps you to take a good look at yourself and your behaviors that are hindering you from your greatness. It pushes the envelope and makes you cross the

> boundaries from self blame to self empowerment. It helps you to discover fears that you were not even aware of until you came to the understanding of how you have built up barriers to your own healing. Those old festering wounds are now healed and the sin-sick soul is renewed. Before coming to WOR, I was a classic self destroyer. ... Now, I am getting out of the house more. I have been able to hold my job for three years compared to the six months to a year attitude I have had before because I didn't want to be too close to others. (Fradkin, 2012b)

Diversity Challenges at the Weekends of Recovery

Throughout the evolution of our program, we have sought to provide services to male survivors diverse in age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, ideology, ethnicity, and race. Because our facilitator team is more homogeneous than we prefer, education and training is an essential way for us to enhance our commitment to future inclusion of more diverse staff, which remains a priority. It also remains a priority to elicit feedback from survivors of color that can help us overcome whatever barriers are preventing them from attending. Although men of color who have attended a WOR have not directly reported to us any discriminatory behaviors or problems, we believe that a predominantly white facilitator staff inevitably influences perceptions from survivors of color.

Our staff has been vigilant about how differences could impact the experience of participants. On-going education and sensitivity training is a priority for our facilitator staff, as we want to insure the most comprehensive environment of inclusion. In turn, we have realized over time that participants are responsive to our ability to model acceptance and inclusion. We have witnessed extraordinary examples of the depth of acceptance displayed by these men.

We also have a long history of welcoming male survivors who exhibit alternative expressions of sexuality and gender. One endearing example was a homeless male survivor who identified as gender-queer. He arrived wearing a dress and exhibited minimal interpersonal social skills. Despite all of the ways he seemed different from the other men, the facilitator staff focused on supporting inclusion, and the other participants responded by warmly embracing this peer with similar inclusion.

Although we establish a norm of zero tolerance for sexual or gender prejudice and harassment, there are inevitable incidents that test this guideline. For example, participants may be triggered to use derogatory language about gays, propelled by their own insecure worry that someone has assumed they were other than heterosexual. Another participant may experience such comments or behaviors as a "micro aggression," a term that names and labels negative messages that target others based on their perceived marginalized identity (Pierce, Pierce-Gonzalez & Wills, 1977). We attempt to deal proactively with the impact of such language. We further assist in the resolution of any wounding or victimization that may be consequentially experienced as sexual or gender prejudice by the recipient of that message.

Most gay and bisexual men who have attended a WOR feel the healing impact of inclusion. They often approach a WOR with the same trepidation they have in everyday life, fearing they will encounter rejection. Some sexual and gender minority men enter the weekend with their own set of heterophobic assumptions that can also create blocks. They are often surprised that even men from whom they expect rejection may, in fact, offer acceptance, empathy, and support. Indeed, even heterosexual men who have never met a gender minority person may find they have more in common than they are different.

Our efforts at inclusion have recently led to outreach that ensures that female-to-male transgender survivors are welcomed and made to feel safe at WORs. Our attention to co-creating safety during the initial stage of a WOR has enabled other participants to extend respectful acceptance to male transgender survivors. Establishing clear norms for inclusion also contributes to an expanded capacity of participants to manage problems occurring outside our immediate view. This is illustrated by feedback from one transgender survivor who disclosed after a WOR that the overarching milieu of acceptance allowed him to deal constructively with the impact of inappropriate questions from another participant about his stage of surgical transition.

We have been less successful in attaining our goals of including a greater number of men of color in our weekends. 90% of the men who attend WORs identify as Caucasian, underscoring the lack of ethnic or racial diversity amongst male survivors we currently serve. We have initiated several outreach efforts to survivors of color. For example, we established a Men of Color Scholarship Fund, being mindful that men of color often experience financial hardship. We have conducted community awareness programs specifically in communities where men of color live and work, and we have reached out to spiritual communities that serve of men of color. Several years ago an agency that provides services to indigenous men of color contracted with us to conduct two WORs for their male survivor clients. Utilizing our staff and their agency staff provided the means for the men to trust us enough to benefit from the experience.

Accepting men with a wide range of ages (18-80) has contributed to a very rich therapeutic milieu. Many younger men fail to recognize or accept the depth of their courage in dealing with their sexual trauma at a young age. However, older participants often admire their younger peers, with the effect of instilling positive self-esteem in younger participants as they accept, often uncomfortably, this truth about their courage and resilience. Older participants,

many of whom have not in the past considered how helpful altruism can be for the "giver," find that helping younger peers strengthens their own self-esteem as well. Sometimes, older participants struggle with self-blame for not dealing with their abuse sooner, and contact with younger peers provides an opportunity to affirm their own path and schedule for healing.

Religion and spirituality are also significant aspects of diversity that influence the healing journey, as participants subscribe to a wide spectrum of beliefs. Immersion into an environment of multi-cultural religion/spirituality is unfamiliar for many of the participants. Understanding such diversity without prejudice can pose a challenge. But, as survivors find their voices, they can articulate both how they are different as well as how their experience transcends differing spiritual or religious backgrounds. Diminished prejudice sometimes allows an opportunity to establish close bonds across religious and spiritual divides, thereby offering yet another healing aspect of a WOR.

Clinical Challenges for the Facilitator Staff

Developing group cohesion is a major challenge at any WOR. Participants represent a spectrum of diversity. In addition, and most importantly, the men are varied in the types of sexual trauma they were subjected to and in their pathways for recovery. It is inevitable that participants risk multi-faceted possibilities for being triggered by peers or staff.

For example, an 18-year old participant was abused by a man in his 60's; another member of his small group is in his 60's. Or, a heterosexual participant was abused by a gay man; the presence of gay participants triggers internalized homophobia, thereby threatening his feelings of physical and emotional safety. Or, a female to male transgender participant struggles with risking disclosure of his authentic identity because he has experienced discrimination and

anticipates the same at the WOR. Or, a gay man who left an Evangelical church so he could feel safe to come out, then finds himself in the presence of Evangelical participants and an Evangelical pastor. These all pose challenges requiring skillful handling by facilitators.

Another challenge for our facilitator team is that we enter the WOR with little information about participants other than what emerges in the interview. If the participant has a therapist, that therapist may submit a letter of support that gives us expanded feedback; however, this is entirely optional. All information we receive is shared with the entire Weekend team as we place each participant in an appropriate small group of six to eight men before any given weekend. This process of assigning men to groups, which generally takes a few hours, is accomplished through careful evaluation of whatever information we have about each participant. One key consideration is diversity ; we try to be very sensitive to dynamics that can arise when a person who identifies as different is the only one in a group. For example, when possible we assign more than one gay or bisexual man to the same group. We also consider all other aspects of differences related to stages of healing and stated goals, seeking to balance heterogeneity and homogeneity in the group composition. We have learned the rewards of more vibrant relationship dynamics because of the time we devote to this process of constructing the membership of small groups.

Resolving participants' challenges about feeling safe with men and women in authority is another challenge for the team. Each small group is led by two facilitators. Each facilitator team meets ahead of a weekend to decide who will be co-facilitaters. We intentionally assign male and female co-leadership for small groups while always providing at least one small group with two male co-leaders for those participants who have communicated reservations about addressing their sexual trauma with a female. For some participants, interacting with staff of a particular

gender may be intimidating and frightening, especially since facilitators are in positions of authority during the weekend. For men who have experienced trauma at the hands of a man, their trust of men may be so damaged that they only feel safe at a weekend knowing there are women present to provide an atmosphere of perceived safety. Men who had female perpetrators often report they want little to do with the women staff. These participants usually experience at least one corrective emotional experience interacting with one or more female facilitators. Participants frequently verbalize that having staff of both genders represented on the WOR team contributes to a greater level of safety. Our commitment to gender diversity on our team thus provides a gamut of opportunities to address – and help resolve - emotional struggles participants may have with women and/or men in authority.

The "mirror environment" created in the weekend is both a strength and a challenge for the facilitators. Seeing themselves reflected in fellow survivors, men are able to absorb validation and understanding in ways that may not be possible from a professional therapist's feedback. Hearing someone else describe aspects of his own story empowers participants to share hidden parts of their past or current struggles in new ways. Facilitators must remain cognizant that this mirror effect can also be overwhelming for those men who have kept so much hidden or buried. With this awareness, a structure/process is created whereby participants can ask for additional help from a facilitator at any time. Facilitators also maintain an attunement to the subtle or indirect ways participants sometimes communicate, or not communicate, requests for help or support, for example when a participant withdraws.

The WOR provides a unique environment where participants can experience corrective healing. Interactions with peers or facilitators may replicate distressing dimensions of their trauma. These interactions may be triggering to the survivor in ways the facilitator could not

have known or prevented. In turn, the survivor may reenact with the facilitator some aspect of his trauma. These reenactments are expected, and facilitators must remain vigilant against personalizing these engagements. Indeed, such therapeutic transferences provide unique opportunities to create corrective responses within the community setting. Yet we must remain cognizant that, while it is never our intention to trigger any participant, such triggering is inevitable if our relationships are authentic.

Perhaps our biggest challenge is overcoming the reluctance of most male survivors to register. We have come to accept that despite its many benefits, a three-day WOR is simply too long, too costly, or too overwhelming for some potential participants. We continue to explore many different avenues to extend our outreach efforts.

The Core of Our Model: Team Cohesion

Developing and maintaining team cohesion is an ever-evolving process. Each weekend has five to eight facilitators. They collaborate with different subsets of colleagues from the total facilitator team of 12 members. We are fortunate to have a team of facilitators who share a commitment to collaboration, consensus, and respectful conflict resolution. We have a collective milieu that is firmly embedded in genuine faith and trust in each other as colleagues and friends. We each contribute to the team through a diversity of therapeutic models, differing levels of experience, a range of ages, a spectrum of sexual orientations, some variety in ethnic and racial backgrounds, and divergent spiritual practices and lifestyles. Some facilitators also have their own survivor history and recovery path.

This team diversity allows us to share responsibilities for the community as a whole while attending to a multiplicity of participant needs. Team cohesion, which includes modeling

respectful disagreement, has remained fundamental to our effectiveness. Maintaining authenticity when we encounter discord among ourselves about clinical interventions is another essential cornerstone to our success. Nevertheless, we have sometimes been challenged to find solutions to problems and differences between team members. Protecting the integrity of our work over the span of many years has required us to make some difficult decisions resulting in the departure of some members from the team.

Perhaps our most challenging struggle has been managing our personal emotions. The small participant-staff ratio allows us both to offer individual attention when, based on his interview, someone has greater mental health challenges, and to provide support to each other as we face the challenges the men bring to the weekend. Because many of us are survivors ourselves, managing the boundaries for emotional self-care has sometimes been tricky if we or other members of the team have been triggered while facilitating. Team members have learned the importance of monitoring the risk -- to ourselves or others -- of becoming embroiled in re-enactment dynamics. It is important that we help one another be aware and grounded in each present moment. Facilitator meetings at the end of each day help the team sort out these dynamics and monitor the safety of all participants. We also meet at the end of each weekend and share our successes and challenges with the whole team online in a confidential Dropbox and also during our quarterly meetings.

Unique Aspects of the Weekend

Exquisite Self-Compassion and Exquisite Self-Expression

On Saturday afternoon, after having told their story, many of the men have come face to face with their shame and acknowledged some of the most difficult challenges in their recovery

process. It is important for them to use the tools of offering themselves what we call "exquisite self-compassion," defined as learning to love yourself on steroids or kicked up a notch, and "exquisite self-expression," which empowers participants to speak their truth and assert themselves to improve their sense of self-value. Using sociometry and psychodrama techniques,[2] we invite them to explore the childhood and societal messages that keep them loyal to dysfunctional self images they learned when being abused, neglected, devalued, and/or unprotected. We teach them that recovery is a process of learning to be disloyal to dysfunction and loyal to functionality (Fradkin, 2012a), and invite them to share examples of both with a sociometric step-in exercise.[3] For example, we ask them to step in to the inside of the circle as they state a message they learned growing up that stops them from feeling worthy of self compassion today; all others who heard the same message also step in and see they are no longer alone. We then invite each man to identify three mentors -- personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal – with whom they will dialog using psychodrama role reversal so they can carry home functional inspiring messages to use when facing challenges.

Shame-Busting

We start "shame-busting" on Saturday evening, exploring where in their bodies men store their shame. We invite them to use this workshop as an opportunity to experience how to be freer in their bodies as they make real connections with the other men in the room. We introduce

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[2] Sociometry and psychodrama are clinical methods used to help people understand their relationships to themselves and others with whom they interact.

[3] In this exercise, participants observe how similar or different their responses are to those of other men at the weekend. Knowing they are not alone in what they think, feel and have experienced, helps heal shame.

the concept of "authentic movement," inviting them to be true to themselves and move only in ways that feel safe enough as they nonverbally experience a physically safe connection with another man. They have the opportunity to physically mirror and be mirrored so they know they are seeing and being seen as courageous, strong, and sensitive men. A powerful exercise involves inviting participants to take turns moving authentically to music with eyes closed while their partner provides protection from bumping into others. When men who arrived at the weekend frozen and scared can now freely and gracefully move around the room feeling safe, this is a testimony to the power of a community creating healing.

In the second half of shame-busting, we utilize therapeutic recreation methods to help men safely learn to be playful and spontaneous, while taking into account that participants represent a range of introversion and extroversion. For example, at a recent weekend, we lost power in the meeting space; we had just asked the men to bounce a ball to each other in pairs. With the aid of a few flashlights, they discovered they could be spontaneous and playful, with no fears of being judged for their ability to catch or bounce a ball. One of the real joys of being on the team is watching the men transform themselves from being isolated to feeling alive and connected by the evening's end.

Bridges to Home: Transitioning Back Home

Throughout the WOR we constantly seek to balance empowering each participant to go deeper into his issues with providing enough time and support to help him find enough resolution to go home safely. We are ethically committed to facilitating some degree of closure before participants leave a WOR; therefore we engage them in a "Bridges to Home" segment during the final morning of each weekend.

This Bridges segment is a core component of each WOR. In it, we review tools and resources a participant can utilize to continue his healing once he returns home. During this review session, we identity the important skills that have been woven into the three-day experience so participants can specifically name and label the resources they have acquired. This empowers them to understand new internalized aspects of personal growth and energizes them to incorporate self-growth after the weekend. This process of integration and internalization helps reduce the risk of a "post-weekend let-down," a phenomenon in which participants in intensive retreat experiences are unable to sustain their experience beyond the boundaries of the retreat.

This structured process for closure includes having each participant complete a Bridges to Home worksheet where he identifies the skills he is taking home. We review the basic skills we have introduced to them during the weekend: mind-body awareness, exquisite self-compassion and exquisite self-expression, emotional risk-taking, affirmations, practice in sharing the sexual trauma narrative, authentic movement, conflict resolution, and releasing spontaneous parts of oneself. The structured worksheet also provides a place for each participant to note names and contact information for three other men. Each member of this quartet thereby commits to become a "human bridge" to support each other when they return home by promising to contact each other at two weeks and again at four weeks after the weekend via phone or video chat. We provide them with a list of questions to discuss during the calls. Each also identifies a message he wants to be reminded of when he returns home, and each member of the quartet includes that message when they make contact.

Other Post-Weekend Resources

Peer-Led Support Groups

One outgrowth of the WORs is that men leave the weekend feeling a sense of connection to peers living in far-flung geographic locations. Many participants develop an intense desire to experience a similar personal bonding with other survivors in their home community. Early in our history of offering WORs, attendees pioneered a model of post-weekend peer-led support groups. Because there is often at least one participant in each weekend who attends a support group in his home community, we include time during the Bridges to Home segment for these men to convey the value of post-weekend support groups. This often inspires and motivates other participants to go home and form groups providing outreach to other male survivors. Or, they may join an open ongoing group, if one exists in their area.

MaleSurvivor offers supportive guidance to any alumnus who wants to start a peer group in his community. Two facilitators are liaisons for peer-led group leaders and provide a number of written guidelines to help them get started. We recommend a very specific structured approach to these peer-led groups to enhance the safety of each member.

The MaleSurvivor website maintains a registry of peer-led support groups, sometimes listing 100 or more. Most groups face an initial challenge assembling enough members to start; maintaining regular attendance is sometimes an on-going problem. Effective outreach requires peer organizers to feel comfortable being visible as survivors. This provides a growth opportunity and, at the same time, can be anxiety-producing for the peer leader, especially if he encounters negative judgment.

Survivors can be very sensitive to inclusion and exclusion, so this is an aspect of peer-led support groups that often requires attention. A peer facilitator needs to be mindful of possible rejecting or non-welcoming messages or behaviors from either himself or other group members.

Peer facilitators can consult with our WOR facilitator liaisons to help them manage these matters.

We have not yet conducted research to document the benefits of attending peer-led male survivor support groups. However, anecdotal information from men who have attended them suggests they are beneficial adjuncts to therapy. Members of peer-support groups often report the value to themselves of helping other group members, especially those newer to the recovery process. Such altruistic behavior may increase feelings of self-esteem and personal worth. Peer relationships provide an important antidote to isolation and offer opportunities for giving and receiving support and for measuring a man's own recovery progress.

As with the WORs, there is the inevitable risk of reenactments and conflicts. Such incidents provide a test for participants to develop skills to address these problems directly.

Visiting the MaleSurvivor Website

Visiting the MaleSurvivor website (www.malesurvivor.org) is often the first step a male survivor takes as he begins his journey of recovery. Frequently a significant other, advocate, or therapist makes this recommendation. Ideally, the survivor discovers through the website that he is no longer alone. The website offers opportunities for users to find reflections of themselves mirrored in the available resources, including stories from other male survivors, articles, postings in the Discussion Forum, and a peer-moderated chat room. Sometimes men visit for just a few minutes, sometimes for hours, and sometimes they return again and again. There is international user access to the MaleSurvivor website. Its platform nurtures networking among male survivors that transcends geographic boundaries and offers support to survivors in geographically remote places.

The MaleSurvivor website also lists well over 100 links to international peer resources for male survivors, family members and allies, and therapists (http://www.malesurvivor.org/partners-in-healing.html). The growth of these resources supports an underlying tenet of this chapter: accessing peer support is an ever-growing need for survivors of sexual victimization.

Closing Thoughts

Healing is more dynamic when a male survivor is able to interact with peers. Isolating behaviors hinder effective recovery from sexual trauma. It is vital that clinicians understand that a core component of the healing process involves seeking resources that provide safe opportunities for survivors to engage with one another. The benefits of expanding beyond the boundaries of an individual therapeutic relationship are both immediate and long lasting.

Interactions with peers enhance the male survivor's ability to decrease internalized shame, increase self-esteem, instill hope, and enhance the quality of his life. With the growing number of avenues on the Internet that survivors can use to connect with each other, these interactions are becoming much more accessible, comfortable, and rewarding.

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