

MINI GUIDE

Conducting Groups for Incarcerated Survivors of Sexual Abuse

1. Introduction

Just Detention International developed this mini guide to support rape crisis counselors who want to offer group counseling to incarcerated survivors of sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The mini guide has been adapted from JDI's more detailed publication, *Groups Guide: Conducting Groups for Incarcerated Survivors of Sexual Abuse*.¹

As both guides explain, many of the strategies that are effective in the community can be applied in detention. By applying tips explained here, counselors can tailor the group experience to better meet incarcerated survivors' needs.

A Word about Language

This guide uses the word *survivor* to refer to anyone who has experienced sexual abuse or sexual harassment. The term *corrections facility* is used to refer to any building where people are held in custody and *corrections officer* or *corrections official* to refer to a person who works in such a facility.

The guide occasionally uses the terms *men's facility* or *women's facility*. However, across the country many women are housed in men's facilities and vice versa, due to the fact that people who are transgender are often housed

¹ The longer Groups Guide can be downloaded at <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Conducting-Groups-for-Incarcerated-Survivors-of-Sexual-Abuse.pdf>

according to their assigned gender at birth, and not their gender identity. In addition, non-binary and intersex people are housed in both men's facilities and women's facilities.

The term *sexual abuse* is used to refer to any form of unwanted sexual contact, including exploitation, and *sexual harassment* to refer to any unwelcome lewd, sexual, or demeaning comments, requests for sexual activity, and any derogatory language about someone's body, sexual orientation, or their gender.

We use the terms *rape crisis center* and *service provider* to refer to organizations that provide direct, specialized emotional support and advocacy services to survivors of sexual abuse; *rape crisis counselor* or *advocate* refers to a person who works at such an organization.

2. Benefits of Groups

Groups for incarcerated sexual abuse survivors can create a healing space within an environment that is usually antithetical to healing. A well-managed group expands a survivor's support system, decreasing the sense of isolation that is so common in the aftermath of sexual assault. Groups can also lead to a shift in the culture inside facilities, where speaking out is taboo. Further, the presence of an outside organization in a facility can be beneficial in itself; in addition to programs, such organizations bring a new perspective, and in particular, an openness to discussing trauma.

Before starting a new group program, most facilities will request to see a group curriculum or an outline and a description of the expected benefits of the group. Some things to include in the description are:

- When trauma survivors receive rape crisis services, they build coping skills, have an outlet for processing difficult feelings, and are better able to participate in other programs and mental health services.
- Groups for sexual abuse survivors promote conflict resolution, good communication, and pro-social behavior.
- Participation in such a group supports positive re-entry by helping people to create connections with community organizations and practice seeking help while they are still inside.

Rape crisis centers that also run group programs in their local communities can include data about their broader groups program — including the demand for groups, an analysis of evaluations, and any other measures of progress of the effectiveness of the groups program.

3. Deciding to Run a Group

Survivors of trauma are overrepresented in corrections facilities and, once inside, many face yet more abuse. All survivors deserve to receive competent, nonjudgmental, supportive services from trained rape crisis counselors. Yet not all rape crisis programs have board or leadership support to provide services inside corrections facilities. Before deciding to start a group, or any services inside a corrections facility, agencies and individual advocates must

examine their own biases against incarcerated survivors, to develop awareness of how such biases might affect decisions around services. Survivors and incarcerated people are not mutually exclusive groups. There are many survivors of sexual abuse and sexual harassment inside detention facilities, and just like survivors in the community, they need services.

Types of Groups

Psycho-educational: structured groups intended to educate and inform.

Groups sometimes have an overall topic and arc, or sometimes have a topic of the day.

Open-Ended Support Group: runs continuously, and membership is fluid or rotating. It is also referred to as a continuous group because it runs weekly without a set beginning and end date.

Closed Counseling Group: more structured than an open-ended support group. Generally, the counselor or therapist leading it will have a particular clinical orientation and plan interventions for each group. These groups are closed and time-limited. There is a screening process that not only assesses each individual's appropriateness for the group but also looks at the overall group composition. Facilitators will likely need to work with mental health staff to form such a group in a detention setting.

4. Pre-Planning: Logistics, Safety and Accessibility

Key Service Provider Assessment Questions:

1. Does the rape crisis center currently have the capacity?
2. Is there an established relationship between the rape crisis center and officials at the facility?
3. Does the rape crisis center have the expertise to run a group inside a corrections facility?
4. Has the rape crisis center assessed the corrections facility's readiness for a survivors' group?

Getting Ready: Planning the Logistics of the Group

Before starting your group, you will have to be prepared to do the following:

- Find out what you can bring inside the facility.
- Make sure any handouts or materials are approved before you show up for group.
- Ask about the use of staples, paperclips, and other materials.
- For your comfort, bring snacks and water (but don't eat outside snacks in front of group participants).
- Get to the facility early.

Safety and Security

Discuss with the facility their need for security staff to observe the group. The level of supervision will be determined in part by the status the facilitators have within the facility. The higher the facilitators' security clearance, the more privacy they will have with the group.

Things to know:

- The clearance process for facilitators is often in-depth, lengthy, and can seem invasive.
- You will have to learn from the facility where officers are usually posted during group sessions.
- Whether or not a facility officer is required to be in the room will change the kind of group you offer.
- You will need to check if the room is monitored through camera or audio surveillance (and negotiate for a room that is not).
- There are different ways that officers may do security checks (rounds); it may feel odd and intrusive to rape crisis counselors, but this is one of the realities of working within facilities.

Rape crisis counselors should always advocate for the highest level of privacy possible for their clients. Be respectful of facility rules, but do not accept that privacy is not possible just because that is the norm.

Physical Accessibility

Work with the facility to make sure that your group sessions will be truly accessible to people with physical disabilities. You can ask people with disabilities who live in the facility for help in making the space accessible.

Accessibility of Communication

When developing exercises and written materials, make sure that any participants who are blind or have low sight can benefit. The most effective communication strategy with any group is one of universal precautions — always assume that clear, simple language is best.

In some facilities, people with significant cognitive disabilities or mental illnesses are placed together in a housing unit. If you are doing a group in such a unit, meet with the unit staff and the mental health staff to determine what other kinds of groups and activities work well in the unit.

Gender Accessibility

Detention facilities are structured in a way that is gendered; there are men's facilities and women's facilities. Remember, however, that there are transgender women in what are called men's facilities, transgender men in what are called women's facilities, and nonbinary people in both.

Before advertising the group, decide if you will do a mixed-gender group. If not, then will you offer a group for people of other genders? There is value in offering such a safe space for transgender women, but if low numbers of

transgender women in a facility would mean that they do not get to participate in a group, consider offering a mixed-gender group.

If the rape crisis program is planning a group in a men's facility and has not run groups for men before, it might be a good idea to offer individual services first.

5. Confidentiality

Confidentiality guidelines must be worked out before the group starts and communicated clearly to participants during the first group session or, preferably, the screening process. Privacy will not be exactly the same as in the community — but confidentiality within the space where the group takes place should be as close to the community standard as possible.

Talk through with the facility what the expectations are around what will be shared and what will not be shared. Document the agreements in a memorandum of understanding or other written agreement. Identify a contact person at the facility to whom group facilitators can disclose information when required — such as a credible threat of suicide or homicide, and child or elder abuse.

6. Choosing Facilitators

The most important characteristic of a group facilitator is having the desire to run a group inside a detention facility. This work is not a fit for everyone — but when there is a good fit, it can be transformative.

Whenever possible, groups should have more than one facilitator. Two facilitators can balance duties of observing process, responding to participants, time-keeping, managing activities, and helping to guide discussions and manage challenging or intense conversations. A third facilitator who is trained and ready to step in if needed is a useful asset. Rape crisis programs with a small team can consider working with interns or more experienced volunteers as co-facilitators. An experienced rape crisis counselor can be a tremendous asset as a co-facilitator, even if they have not run groups before. Try to have a mix of people of different genders, races, ages, abilities, and sexual orientations, if possible. Facilitators should make it evident to participants that they are open to hearing about, and believing, their experiences of being incarcerated. They should also take care not to minimize the daily challenges of being a survivor behind bars — nor should they imply that they understand how it must feel. The facilitators build connection by listening without judgment, showing unconditional positive regard, and treating everyone with respect.

7. Documentation and Evaluation

In order to maintain confidentiality and protect privilege, any files or records should be kept in secure, fireproof cabinets in the rape crisis center's home office.

Documentation should include:

- An intake form that has basic demographic and contact information

- An intake assessment that includes the person’s goals for the group and a measure of trauma reactions or symptoms
- An informed consent form that includes a description of the group; the benefits and risks of participating; and limits to confidentiality
- Group notes that include who participated and a brief discussion of the group dynamics, activities, and any notable discussions or safety concerns
- Group evaluations

Group facilitators must balance collecting necessary information with group participant’s privacy and comfort. Information collection should never be invasive, overly burdensome, or seem manipulative. The only documentation the group member must complete in order to participate in group is the informed consent form and the most basic of contact information.

8. Forming the Group

Begin by figuring out: **Who** is allowed to attend? **Where** will the group be held? **How** many participants will be in it and how will the group be advertised?

Group member selection criteria:

- A desire to be in a group
- The ability to function in a group setting
- Goals that are realistic given the group timeline, structure, and topic

- An ability and willingness to discuss
- A need for support and feedback from peers
- The ability to witness other participants' feelings and experiences and provide supportive feedback
- Whether or not participating in a particular group is safe for the individual
- Group facilitators should consider:
 - Demographic information
 - If the group composition poses risks to people who are more vulnerable within the facility. For example, if there is a transgender woman in a men's facility, consult with her and with any mental health staff about whether participation in the group is safe. Facilitators should err on the side of inclusion, not exclusion
 - Who needs programming most urgently; what groups of people tend to be excluded from other programming
 - Including members convicted of violent crimes. No matter what a person's history, rape crisis services should always focus on healing from sexual abuse
 - Feedback from relevant staff members, like mental health or program staff or your primary contact person; feedback from groups of leaders who live in the facility, such as advisory or leadership councils
 - How each group member will interact with others and the group as a whole
 - How each group member will affect the whole

- If group members have pre-existing conflicts (rival gang members, recent fights or assaults, ex-partners) or close relationships (parent-child, siblings, people in a romantic relationship, people who committed a crime together)
- If there is a mix of communication styles, of introverts and extroverts, more dominant and more submissive

If more people are interested in the group than can participate, the group facilitators must determine how to select participants. Because programming is so important to incarcerated survivors, facilitators should be thoughtful and notify people why they were not selected to the group and inform them of plans to hold subsequent group sessions in which they might be able to participate.

Group Process

All groups, whether they meet just once or for months, go through a process of coming together, figuring out how to work together, getting to work, and ending. The following is a helpful model in predicting the stages that most groups go through.

Forming: At the beginning of the group, participants and the facilitator are getting to know each other. The group is developing group agreements, and goals and members usually look to the facilitator to be a strong leader and direct the group. Setting the stage for future work is important in this stage and facilitators should be ready with discussion suggestions and activities to help participants learn how to function in the group; set clear guidelines and model active listening and respectful interactions.

Storming: The second stage is marked by transition. Group participants are working to define themselves within the group, to gauge their relationships to each other and the facilitator, and, sometimes, to push the group to be something other than what it is. Group members sometimes challenge each other or the facilitator, form alliances with one or two other participants, attempt to exclude certain participants, or push the norms of the group. The facilitator must reinforce the group agreements, assist the participation of anyone being excluded, continue to model respectful and compassionate behavior, and emphasize the point of the group. Sometimes group members leave the group during this stage and the group returns to the forming stage.

Norming: The third stage is when the group begins to become productive and cohesive. Participants work together and begin to see each other as allies. The group interactions become more enjoyable and cooperative as group members bond. Conflicts might arise and are dealt with easily because the group members have a foundation of respect for each other and the group as a whole. The facilitator must still guide the process but can be less directive. The facilitator's role becomes encouraging, reflecting, sharing information, and supporting the work of the group.

Performing: During this stage, the group takes on its own identity. The facilitator might begin to feel like they are there to hold the space and little else. Group members interact fluidly and support each other — even outside of the group. Group members might have ideas for what the group can work on to further the group's goals. The group members make strides in their goals and have a unique community identity during this phase.

Adjourning: The final stage of the group is an important opportunity to help members leave something in a healthy manner and to maintain any progress they made in the group. Facilitators should make space for feelings of loss, sadness, fear, or anger about the group ending. Near the end of the group, membership might drop off or participants might create conflict that has not been seen since the early stages. For incarcerated people the group has been a safe place and respite from daily life in a facility, and the end can be painful. Facilitators should begin to prepare participants for the ending several sessions beforehand and validate participants' feelings about termination.

Celebrate: Regardless of the type of group being offered, it is always important to celebrate whenever a group cycle ends or a milestone has been achieved. Participants like to know they are appreciated for their contributions and will be incentivized to promote the group and attend other groups offered by the same agency if they are acknowledged for participating in a meaningful way. Holding graduations and offering certificates of participation and letters of completion can be helpful tools in this regard.

Although the stages make the most sense in the context of closed groups, open-ended groups with rolling membership will also experience these stages when there is a shift in membership or other major transition. Awareness of the stages can help facilitators to anticipate and manage the group process.

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