

# Understanding Psychosocial Support Groups: Three Successful Models

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Additional Q&A

## **Do you suggest any screening criteria for assembling psychosocial support groups?**

Jess Dalpe: Eligibility criteria are always great to have, especially when considering group cohesion and safety. They are often based on the purpose of the group and whether or not a prospective participant is a good fit for its format, topic, and facilitation. Criteria can sometimes include screening measures, though you would want to ensure the screening measure is appropriate for the client and relevant to the group topic. Things to consider include:

- Emotional stability—is the prospective participant in a place of relative emotional stability? Are there concerns about them sharing traumatic experiences, adhering to group agreements, or being able to meet activities of daily living?
- How the participant engages with others—are they able to share space and time in a group setting? Are there concerns about how they interact with others based on their experiences of trauma (e.g., skepticism or fear of those from their community)?
- Group format—is this format accessible for them and aligned with their expectations and capacities?

## **Do you require consent forms for all groups? What is important to cover in those consents?**

Jess Dalpe: This is another best practice. Part of being trauma-informed means gathering informed consent for all of the services we provide—so that we’re being transparent about the service, any data being collected (for funder reporting or monitoring and evaluation), and client rights and responsibilities while accessing services. Consent doesn’t always have to be granted on a signed form; a verbal conversation that is documented in a note or database will suffice.

## **When mental health referrals are unavailable, how do you manage supporting clients? This one has been an ongoing and big challenge. Is it better to offer something than nothing?**

Jess Dalpe: This is a challenging issue. Generally, offering something is better than nothing, with careful consideration. For example: while group support can be beneficial, it can also cause harm if the individual isn’t a good fit for that setting. It’s important to evaluate inclusion and exclusion criteria for group membership. In extreme cases, such as severe mental illness where someone can’t safely engage with others, group activities may not be suitable. However, finding ways to foster community and connection is key to supporting overall mental health.

**What kind of group retention strategies do you use?**

Jess Dalpe: Beyond assembling a group that participants find helpful and are therefore motivated to attend—which isn't always as predictable as we would hope—flexibility in implementation is one of our most effective retention strategies. Examples of flexibility include allowing the option of meaningful virtual participation, hosting the group outside of normal business hours, and providing diverse resources and supports to overcome barriers.

Megan Rafferty: Newcomers have many competing priorities, so finding time to attend groups can be challenging! Remember to normalize newcomers' concerns and celebrate their efforts to attend groups. Helping clients identify and connect to their reasons for attending the group, and following up with those who have missed sessions, can be helpful.

**How do we combat the assumption that clients should be paid for attending, or that facilitators are paid based on client attendance?**

Katie Medlin: One important point to note is that transparency is key when setting the expectations for groups or workshops with clients. Since we do offer a financial incentive for the majority of our workshops (due to clients' time commitment, willingness to participate, and need for direct financial assistance), when financial incentive is not available, we transparently make clients aware ahead of time. It is important to set clear expectations for your group, and for staff and clients to agree on these expectations. We also ensure that our programs offer benefits beyond the financial, such as tangible skills, community connection, and, sometimes, donations-in-kind.

**What does interpretation look like in your groups when it's needed? Or do you not use interpretation for any of your groups?**

Katie Medlin: When interpretation is needed for a program offered at the Women's Resilience Center, we work with either an IRC San Diego in-house interpreter or a contracted interpreter from a local interpreters' agency. We normally utilize the consecutive interpretation model, where the speaker and interpreter take turns providing content and then offering interpretation. We also prioritize using a female interpreter when possible, as we work with all female-identifying clients.

**Do the speakers have any experience and/or advice related to leading groups of men?**

Jess Dalpe: Yes! Though support groups for men tend to be less widely available and attended for many reasons, we have had groups in which all genders are welcome and attend (e.g., an Attachment Vitamins group where heterosexual couples attended together). We have also had success in groups for men centered around activities or places (e.g., a coffee and soccer group that also created space to talk about emotions and coping; and adjustment support groups). As with other recruitment strategies, I am a big fan of the "let's just get together once" approach to see if the space is something the group wants to continue. It also offers a great opportunity for co-creation of the group, topics, and activities.

**Do you, as female facilitators, have any suggestions for facilitating all-male support groups?**

Jess Dalpe: The first step is assessing if that's appropriate. Sometimes, despite good intentions and a clear conviction that what we have to offer is helpful, an idea may not be received that way by the communities we serve. That's disappointing, but real and valid! I would suggest having a focus group discussion with a few men from the community to see



what feels most accessible. Gender congruency isn't always the most preferred, so we can be open to different preferences and comfort levels.

**Is there any plan in the future to bring the self-defense program to any other state?**

Katie Medlin: At this time, there are no concrete plans to expand the program. Our San Diego office was directly approached by our researcher/facilitator, making for a unique opportunity to host self-defense instruction while allowing the researcher/facilitator to obtain necessary course hours and complete her academic project. If other offices or agencies are interested in running a similar program, I would suggest reaching out to local martial arts academies, gyms, or universities to discuss collaboration opportunities. Sometimes, this is more effective if multiple nonprofits work together, providing a collaborative outreach effort.

**I would love to hear more about the type of groups other agencies are running for their clients, in particular Ukrainian clients. We have found here at our agency that Ukrainian clients are typically highly educated and do not face the same challenges as those who may, for example, not even be literate in their own language.**

Jess Dalpe: This is the beauty of psychosocial support groups—they are highly adaptable! We have implemented Attachment Vitamins with Ukrainian clients with great success, and we rely on contextualizing the materials and discussions to the group.

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