

## GENDER SPECIFIC SUPPORT GROUPS

Women and men who battle addiction have many underlying issues that inhibit their chances of successful recovery and some clients may continue to relapse numerous times unless these concerns are addressed during the recovery process.

A report to Congress by the Department of Health and Human Services indicate that many substance abusers suffer from untreated mental illness, are survivors of child abuse and neglect and need long-term treatment to address these issues. If these critical issues are not addressed they are at risk on continuing to cycle in their addiction.

Much has been reported about the effect that methamphetamine has on our children, our society and our communities. However, one critical issue that often goes unreported is the human aspect of addiction. Once treated many addicts become very respectful, active and driven members of their communities. Support is a vital component for success.

Based on these facts it is essential that communities and providers begin looking in earnest about setting up and facilitating gender specific support groups for those afflicted with the disease of addiction. Research shows that women in particular have a much greater chance of being successful and drug free if they have the support necessary to facilitate this process.

Clients with childhood abuse histories have been found to have more severe substance abuse disorders, to have started using at younger ages, and to use substances for different reasons than other clients. They are also more likely to have attempted suicide, to have PTSD, and to have personality or relationship problems that make them hesitant to accept help, which also makes them more vulnerable to relapse.

Clinical experience indicates that groups structured specifically for women or men are more beneficial, especially during the early stages of substance abuse treatment. Women and men have different conflicts and issues when dealing with their abuse experiences, but both might be affected by traditional societal views of gender roles.

Many women who are also substance abusers are survivors of childhood sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, and suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. Due to funding constraints many treatment facilities are unable to address these critical issues with women in treatment and relapse becomes inevitable unless treated.

Men also suffer from untreated mental illness, past childhood abuse and neglect and a myriad of other issues. Alcohol abuse disorders are more severe among men who were sexually abused as children and may include overdoses and substance related seizures. The difficulty that many men face in acknowledging past abuse is sometimes compounded by the conflict between perceiving themselves as victims and society's traditional expectations of men as powerful and aggressive.

Many treatment centers and providers continue to refer recovering addicts/alcoholics to 12-step programs and these groups have played a key role for many clients ongoing success. However, both men and women have reported that there are certain issues that they are uncomfortable discussing at Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

Gender specific support groups provide a safe, confidential and non-judgmental atmosphere for clients that they are unable to find in other areas of their lives. Due to family history of alcoholism/drug addiction and childhood abuse issues many clients do not have healthy or adequate support from their immediate family members.

Support group facilitation should involve someone who is non-judgmental, empathetic, and knowledgeable about substance abuse, parenting, domestic violence, gender specific issues, and have a working knowledge and be supportive of the child protective system.

The focus of a successful support group should be on empowerment. Clients need to be educated on how to move from victim to survivor, become accountable and responsible for losing their children, learn how to problem solve, address guilt and shame over their children, and be shown how to advocate for themselves. Above all the group should not focus on treatment, but learning how to live in a sober world.

It is important to be able to work collaboratively with domestic violence organizations, treatment facilities, child protection/juvenile court systems, law enforcement, and mental health providers. Clients should be empowered to determine what they would like to discuss in their group, who should be invited to speak, and importance should be given to maintaining a trusting relationship with the facilitator.

These groups should focus on a client's whole life, address experiences with domestic violence, sexual abuse, and how these issues are connected to parenting, substance abuse, self-image, economic and educational opportunities. It is not possible to address substance abuse without looking at the addict's whole life. It is essential to determine how different aspects of their lives are interconnected and how domestic violence and child maltreatment co-occur with substance abuse.

**The information for this document was collected from:  
TIP Manual #36, Substance Abuse Treatment for Persons with Child Abuse and Neglect Issues;  
Blending Perspectives and Building Common Ground: A Report to Congress on Substance Abuse and Child Protection  
Professional Experience working with Moms Off Meth Group/July 1999-April 2001**