The Essence of Being Real

Relational Peer Support for Men and Women Who Have Experienced Trauma

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Sidran Press
Baltimore, Maryland
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Acknowledgments

To the Advocates, my deepest gratitude for believing in this work and for teaching me how to walk out what I talk more gracefully. This manual would not have been possible without you.

To my colleagues at the Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute, my thanks for your support during this project and for all the ingenious titles you pitched for the manual; Life Doesn't Have to Suck will always be a close second choice in my book!

To Esther Giller, for standing beside me during this project as I faced some obstacles that put what I have written to the test. I am better for it all.

To Barbara Pilert, my special gratitude for introducing me to the amazing experience of group work and for encouraging me during my first years as a facilitator to just be myself and keep faith in the power of being real.

The RICH model is a trademark of the Risking Connection Curriculum.
Preface

When I was beginning work on this manual, a friend remarked— with more meaning than I suspect she may have realized at the time— “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to open up a book like this and have it speak directly to you? This is the manual for ______ (insert name), and it will fit your current situation and past experiences perfectly.” Pondering this, I realized that in much of the helping material and literature I read, I do look for myself to be represented in some way, and I long to be spoken to personally. This material has been written with the hope that it will reach this goal: to speak to each of you personally. Traumatic experiences can bring to each survivor a common and fundamental need to be understood and to connect with others; not only in the pain of what you have been through, but in the hope and confidence that what you have been through does not dictate who you are or how others perceive you. One of the most sinister things that trauma can induce is a feeling of being different, alone, and misunderstood.

I also want this manual to inspire you. During its preparation, one of my colleagues suffered the loss of two very important women in her life. I did not know them personally, but I could tell from her grief how much they had meant to her. Her loss reminded me of my true motivation for writing this manual. I want to do more than teach you how to run a group; I have a secret agenda as well! My goal is to infuse you with a desire and a drive to enjoy your life, to take in the hope that each new day brings. You have today. That’s it. It may sound like a cliché, but it’s the truth, and it certainly levels the playing field. All any of us has is today, no matter where we have been or what we think the world still owes us or how we feel it may have failed us.

This is an evolving manual in many ways. The original inspiration and need for this manual came specifically from survivors of trauma whose lives had been dramatically shaken and derailed by traumatic experiences. Hope, connection, and the ability to function day to day had
been disrupted. Many of these men and women were diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative and anxiety disorders, and/or major depression. Some of them sought help through treatment facilities and therapy, but many still expressed a feeling of disconnection from their community, family, friends, and even themselves.

This manual offers survivors a way not only to explore their experiences and receive support, but also to work through the stigma often associated with needing help to heal. We live in a bootstrap society where people are expected to tough it out and get over it. This manual acknowledges the reality of the impact of traumatic experiences on our lives while affirming our ability to heal ourselves and each other.

Although this is a manual about group work and group dynamics, it grew out of efforts to address the individual needs and experiences of trauma survivors. Everyone's story is unique and personal. So the peer support groups that you will be creating and participating in will inevitably include individuals who have experienced many different types of trauma, at different times in their lives, and who are at different stages in their healing process. For this reason, some issues discussed in this manual, such as safety or boundaries, will resonate more with some of you than others.

To provide mutual support it is vital that you learn to recognize and understand the different ways in which traumatic experiences can impact a person's life. Education is the key to helping you help one another.

Our nation received a devastating education about trauma on September 11, 2001. Although this manual was begun long before that tragedy, it has been powerfully influenced by it. We were getting ready to print the manual and waited because it seemed crucial to address the impact of this event. The tragedy of that day has united us and revealed the pain that individual survivors of trauma have endured, often silently, for years. Most Americans know that people get attacked, raped, beaten, or exposed to horrifying events in combat and other disaster situations. However, if you haven't experienced those events yourself, it can be very difficult to understand how they affect others. People may work very hard to distance themselves from awareness of that kind of suffering. As a result, victims and survivors may not get all of the support and understanding they need to heal and move on. Now our nation has been assaulted. Now we all know what it is like to feel unsafe, vulnerable, and afraid for our loved ones. We see that traumatic events, in any form, can affect the way we think, feel, and view the world. So whether someone is a combat veteran or a victim of violence, terrorism, or natural disaster, we know that the universality of the effects of traumatic events can leave people feeling shocked, alone, confused, and grieving. It can bring up the question of meaning: the meaning of your life and what your purpose is. It can bring up the question of hope and ultimately prompt a re-
evaluation of your place in the world and your relationships.

Today is a library filled with volumes of thoughts, wishes, feelings, and possibilities. We choose what kinds of things we fill ourselves with today. We have a choice each day to choose better things for ourselves; better thoughts when our feelings are low, better behaviors when our spirits are down. I could write an elaborate manual about running a peer support group for survivors, with instructions and charts and graphs galore. But if, as you read this, you are still unsure that there is hope for you, unsure that you even like yourself, unsure that you are ready to consider taking the risk of letting people know you in a real way, and I do not address these things, then I have done little more than take up your valuable time. This manual is about hope.

There is no secret formula for making a peer support group successful, just as there is no perfect equation for a friendship or a partnership. I believe the one variable that makes the difference in all relationships is simply this: you must be willing to risk being real. Your ability to be honest about who you are, where you are, and what you need are all part of being real. Connecting to others helps you get there. That is the Essence of Being Real.

Inspiration and support without education cannot promote lasting change in the lives of people who have experienced trauma. The objective of this manual is to provide you with a deeper understanding of the effects of trauma, particularly within the context of relationship to self and others, in order to create long-lasting and meaningful change. It is my hope that these pages will help to both inspire and educate you about peer support for men and women who have experienced trauma, utilizing a relational approach.
Introduction

And a woman spoke, saying, Tell us of Pain.
And he said:
Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the
sun, so must you know pain.
And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life,
your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy;
And you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always
accepted the seasons that pass over your fields.
And you would watch with serenity through the winters of your grief.
— Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

A grassroots peer support group is a powerful force promoting community, connection, and hope in the lives of survivors of traumatic stress. This manual presents one approach to creating, facilitating, and maintaining a peer support program for people who have experienced traumatic events. Whether you are interested in starting a new group or adding to an existing one, this manual can help guide the discussions you have about the effects of traumatic experiences and the path to healing.

We will discuss the framework, methods, and techniques that facilitate the development of successful peer support and also examine some of the obstacles likely to be encountered. We will also explore the social, psychological, and relational elements that have contributed to past difficulties in establishing peer support groups for survivors of trauma.
As you read through these pages, please realize that they constitute a living and evolving document. There is no established formula for running a relationship-based peer support group for trauma survivors; each group will be uniquely shaped by the gifts and needs of its participants. Included here are agendas, notes, and summaries from actual peer support groups to provide concrete ideas for group topics and format. The RICH model (Respect, Information, Connection and Hope), discussed in the Framework section, is a valuable cornerstone in building a successful group. You may want to incorporate some of the suggestions offered regarding format and structure while adding your own ideas, as well.

One final note: you’ll notice that the words victim and survivor are used interchangeably throughout the manual. Because our perceptions of ourselves change as our feelings about our experiences evolve, it seemed best to avoid one term. These words are used for convenience.
The Essence of Being Real
Peer support for men and women who have experienced trauma can be an effective component of the healing process simply because of the nature of the relationships it fosters among survivors. Peer support picks up where friends and family leave off. The love of family and friends is incredibly healing, but it isn’t always enough. Creating and maintaining friendships with others whose experiences have been similar to our own can fill the gap and meet the need for understanding. You can think of this as a chosen family, the people we gather close to and care deeply about, many of whom mirror our life. For people who have experienced trauma, connecting with others is sometimes extremely difficult. For some, this is a short-term obstacle, for others it can last a lifetime. Even understanding the meaning of connection can be something of a complex task. Some individuals who have been traumatized report that they have never felt connected to other people, and the prospect of these connections is frightening. How can you understand something fully—including how it might be healing—without ever experiencing it? How do you risk the experience if it terrifies you? It makes sense that without experience, understanding is incomplete. Peer support provides the experience as well as the understanding of what healthy connection with others is. This is the ultimate purpose of peer support.

So what is connection? Connection is a sense of belonging, an awareness of feeling united to something or someone. We know it when we feel it. You can feel connected to a person, an animal, a sports team, or an ideal. These connections reflect who we are, what we believe in and stand for.
What does connection have to do with trauma? Unresolved trauma is a disconnecting force that potentially separates people from themselves, their loved ones, God, and sometimes humanity. It can be an incredibly alienating force. However, connection is the antidote to alienation.

Learning to connect with one’s self and with others in a healthy way is the essence of what we mean by support. Connection provides the basis for addressing and overcoming the effects of trauma. Having healthy connections to self and others simply means that our method of communicating and relating to ourselves and to one another serves to support and encourage rather than to deplete and discourage. Boundaries, honesty, and hopefulness are some of the components that allow for making and sustaining healthy connections. Improving our methods of relating and communicating is work that challenges each of us daily. We are all, most likely, in the midst of at least one relationship that challenges our ability to connect, that stretches us to work harder, and sorely reveals the pitfalls in our current ways of communicating. No one is exempt from this task. We have an innate need to connect with others, to be understood by others. Life is about relationships and relationships are all about connection. Trauma can inhibit connection. The more shaming the traumatic experience, the greater the potential for alienation. Trauma can create such a deep sense of shame and alienation that an individual may not even feel that he or she exists in the world! Such persons may feel completely disconnected from themselves and from everyone else. Some survivors of trauma describe their existence as feeling dead inside.

If there is a single facet of human experience that can enable a person to heal from trauma, it is the balm and comfort of human connection. Peer support provides a safe environment for survivors to test out what it is like to establish trust with others, experience safety, and make meaningful, healthy connections.
The Philosophy

An old Chinese proverb says that if you want to correct the world, you must first correct the state; if you want to correct the state, you must first correct the family; if you want to correct the family, you must first correct yourself. Working at self-correction is of the first and perhaps only importance. By making one's attitude correct, great changes in others' attitudes are made possible.

— Carol Anthony, A Guide to the I Ching

This approach to peer support is present-focused and hope-driven. It is not intended as a replacement for therapy. It is designed to capitalize on the strengths of the individual, recognizing and validating what is already working in a person's life. It encourages each one of us to use those strengths as a resource in moving further along in the journey toward healing.

Effective peer support relies heavily on the power of hope and on the belief that every person who has experienced trauma can do more than merely survive it. In the past, peer support groups were often formed to help people cope with mental illness or trauma, but they usually failed to employ a framework that made hope a primary component. There has been a tendency, when working with victims of trauma, to take an inventory of pain more readily than to assess what is already working, what has already healed, what is already strong in a person's life. In peer support groups, we attempt to support each other in the weak places by using the strength that has allowed us to come this far.

Some trauma survivors, particularly those who have been hospitalized, have difficulty viewing themselves without a label or without being defined by traumatic events. Words and labels are
powerful. The words we use to describe ourselves reflect our identity. A lot of our language surrounding getting help limits us to looking at weakness or deficits. This, in turn, can create a blind spot where our strengths are concerned. These blind spots tend to expand, and we risk losing sight of our true identity. Reclaiming a sense of identity that is not trauma-based requires an effort and a focus on self-awareness, one of the primary components of this peer support framework.

Ask individuals who have struggled with something painful what gave them hope, and they’ll tell you it was the knowledge that others had made it through a similar experience. If knowing that someone else has made it through a similar situation gives hope, then knowing how he or she made it gives direction. And we are all in the process; none of us has arrived. Sometimes hope comes in the form of just showing up and being real, even if you doubt that you have anything to offer. All too often we are taught that we have to offer more than ourselves to be acceptable. This manual supports the notion that you are an amazing gift all by yourself.

A present-focused approach suggests that each of us has a new opportunity every day to rediscover meaning in our lives and to challenge old ways of coping with difficulties. Staying focused on past traumatic experiences can snuff out the hope and potential for healing that each new day offers. Therefore, it is imperative to avoid focusing solely on your trauma story. It is a detriment to your own healing if the everyday successes that have been achieved in your life, no matter how small, are overshadowed by past trauma details. It can prevent you and others from connecting to the parts of your life, past and present, which could serve to strengthen you. This concept is in no way intended to deny the intensity of your trauma. Deflecting the focus from the graphic details of the trauma story and concentrating on the details of everyday life, which has been affected by both trauma and healing experiences, enables you to know each other and yourselves within a holistic framework. More detailed and intense work on trauma issues, traumatic memories in particular, is a process appropriate for therapy, and, although peer support is an excellent adjunct to therapy, it is not a replacement for it.

Peer support helps you to recognize and make sense of the life experiences that have made you who you are. Trauma is not the hub of your personal story. You are the hub: uniquely shaped by all your accumulated life experiences, good and bad.

The success of a peer support group is maintained through each individual’s pursuit of healthier ways of connecting with and relating to self and others. This goal reflects the need to address and to understand what it means to have an inner connection, as well as a connection to others. So what does inner connection mean? It refers to how well we know, communicate, and listen to ourselves. Are we able to notice our feelings? Do we pay attention to our needs? Do we notice the ways we manage distress? Most of our outward-relating patterns simply reflect how we relate
to and feel about ourselves. Some people who have suffered from a traumatic event report that they forget what life was like or who they were before the experience. Some people explain that they have lost their sense of identity and have difficulty separating who they are from what they’ve been through. Remember that this can increase feelings of alienation, and this leads to those blind spots mentioned earlier. One of the most painful and problematic blind spots occurs when we lose sight of our potential, our competence, and our gifts.

Each individual has within a higher self, the self that contains the potential for all that person could become, all the great things he or she may accomplish. Peer support reinforces the benefits of speaking to the higher self in order to support the traumatized self. This allows people to use their sometimes hidden resources, to heal from pain. The essence of being real is that through maintaining your healing attitude, you will naturally support, comfort, and heal the hurting and broken places.

Everyone, even at the lowest points along the journey, deserves to be treated with respect. One way you can respect one another is to recognize the higher self in each of you. Here the component of hope is truly tested. We have all met people whom we automatically consider “stuck” or in a hopeless situation. (Some of us have even been that stuck person.) Sometimes we arrive at this conclusion after the briefest of encounters. These conclusions are conveyed with or without words. We readily identify and judge a person based on his or her behavior and outward appearance. (Indeed, we often judge ourselves in this same manner.) This is especially true when a person’s outward behavior (isolation, denial, or substance abuse) is masking their true identity and feelings. Sometimes a person’s behaviors are so loud and scary to us we can hardly hear the person inside, particularly when their behavior is hurtful to the people around them.

The essence of being real and helping others be real involves a concerted effort to relate to the person and not the behavior. Let’s not confuse the who with the do! It is no surprise how easily we fall into hopelessness when we cannot distinguish our who from our do. For survivors of trauma in particular, it is difficult to separate behaviors and outside events from self-identity. Many people internalize the trauma as a reflection of the totality of who they are. Remember the blind spot? “I am what happened to me…I must be bad, wrong, sinful, etc. for this to have happened.” This is a shame response. What has happened to you does not define who you are. How you respond to what happened to you does not define who you are either. On the contrary, it is amazing that you have survived such difficult circumstances. Your experiences may have left you feeling alone and tired, acting in ways you do not understand, and thinking at times that you might be crazy. One way to diffuse the power of the crazy notion is to better understand the nature of trauma. The feelings and behaviors that make you feel crazy actually make a lot of sense within the
context of your traumatic experience/s.

To better support yourself and others, you must look more deeply into the reasons for your behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. These facets of expression do not exist in a vacuum. They tell a story, and they serve us by showing us what we need. The problem is this is not always clear. But it does get our attention, and that’s the point. We then have an opportunity to shed light on the story itself and the needs it represents. So the focus shifts from the behavior to understanding the message that behavior tries to convey.

The essence of being real is learning to tell your story with words and without blind spots. It carves room to hold hope for those who appear hopeless. It provides recognition of the higher self within you and others and allows you to be honest along the way.

Questions to Consider

• When have you found it difficult to hold hope for yourself? ____________________________________________
  ____________________________________________
  ____________________________________________
  ____________________________________________
  ____________________________________________

• When have you found it difficult to hope for someone else? __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________

• What labels do you use to identify yourself? (Mom, Dad, Daughter, Partner,...etc) ____________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
• How have others labeled you? List positive and negative labels.

• How do these labels affect the way you see yourself?

• List three strengths.

• List three weaknesses.

• Which was easier for you to do, and why?

• What do you do that makes you feel good about yourself?
The Nature and Effects of Trauma

A clear perception of a situation gives us the strength to deal with it.
Insight opens the door.

— Carol Anthony, A Guide to the I Ching

This peer support manual is designed to help trauma survivors cope with present, day-to-day difficulties as well as to celebrate the achievement of daily successes. Peer support is present-focused. It is important to think about how your traumatic experiences may affect your present functioning and your ability to be present-focused. Here we take a brief look at the nature of trauma and at some specific aspects of it that are important to keep in mind when working with survivors of trauma in a group setting.

Trauma, as psychologists define it, refers to the witnessing or experiencing of a stressful event or series of events that overwhelms a person’s ability to cope or threatens their safety or sanity. It may include severe neglect; emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or assault; or criminal victimization, combat, terrorism, or other life-threatening experiences. Some individuals have suffered a single-blow trauma, such as a natural disaster or a violent crime, while others have endured repeated trauma, such as living in a war-torn country or experiencing ongoing neglect or abuse.

Relationship-based peer support designed for survivors of trauma is different from other peer-run groups because of the very nature of trauma. As we discussed earlier, trauma can derail connection. Trauma can deeply overwhelm an individual in every aspect of the self—emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical. To be successful, the framework, techniques, and methods used in a support group for trauma survivors must be specifically designed to address these issues. Simply put, you must pay attention to the whole person, because the whole person has been affected.
Several factors contribute to how a traumatic event can affect an individual. In a nutshell, three things largely determine the effects of trauma:

1) the event itself—its magnitude, how horrifying it was, whether it was possible to understand it at all, whether it was accidental or purposeful, natural or man-made;

2) who you were at the time of the event—how old you were, how responsible you felt, whether you were the only victim or one of many, and your ability to cope at the time, and;

3) your social climate at the time of the event—what people were in your life, who was supportive, how society viewed your experience, and what kind of help was available.

If you consider your situation and mix and match these three factors, you can probably see why you’ve been affected the way you have. It makes sense.

These factors account for how two people can undergo the same traumatic experience and have completely different responses. With so many variables, we can understand how later traumatic events may affect individuals differently. For example: many people who witnessed the terrorist attacks on September 11 reported that it awakened within them awareness of unresolved traumatic experiences, while others said it re-invigorated old traumas that they had previously dealt with and felt closure about. So what can explain this? Perhaps the nature of the event was so overwhelming that even good support and internal resilience couldn’t protect them from the effects.

By looking at the factors mentioned above you can trace where in your life and to what degree trauma may have derailed your connection to yourself and others. For example, experiencing repeated and intentional abuse or violence at an early age, specifically at the hand of a caregiver, may well leave a person feeling unable to trust, to feel worthy of love and life. Such a person, traumatized during an early developmental stage, when others were having their basic needs met in the form of safety, security, nurturance, and love, may have the hardest time connecting with others. Recognizing where trauma stopped you in your tracks helps you to figure out and make sense of where you are now, how you act, how you feel, how you relate, and what you need.
Questions to Consider

• Choose a difficult or painful experience that you believe you got through successfully, and briefly describe it below. __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________

• How did the three factors listed below influence your ability to get through the situation?
  
  Nature of the event:________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________

  Who you were at the time:___________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________

  Your social climate at the time:______________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________
• Choose a difficult or painful experience that you believe is still unresolved and briefly describe it below.

• How did the three factors inhibit your ability to get through the situation?
  Nature of the event:
  Who you were at the time:
  Your social climate at the time:
Boundaries: Meeting a Need

We must become resigned to slow, patient self-development to reverse the trends which have become established. To try to overcome them all at once is foolhardy; the situation will improve only to the extent that we improve ourselves in an enduring manner.

— Carol Anthony, *A Guide to the I Ching*

Have you ever tried to support someone without understanding what he or she needs? It is a very difficult task! Sometimes it is hard to let someone know what you need, especially if you don't know yourself. For some people, many of the difficulties experienced in relationships are tied up in trying to meet needs that have never been met. You might find yourself pushing someone away when you really want to be closer. You may have experienced someone being too close but you didn't know how to establish an appropriate distance. Some of your work in your peer support group will be to help one another identify needs and determine how best to meet those needs in healthy ways. Part of making healthy connections with others is being able to express what you need and to get those needs met in a mutually supportive and respectful way. This means attending to boundaries.

Boundaries support healthy connections between you and others. While we normally identify boundaries as limits set on relationships, boundaries also represent areas of need in relationships. For example: sometimes I feel lonely and need to be around someone who knows me well, but sometimes I feel crowded and tired and I need time to myself. Depending on what I need at the time, I am free to move closer or farther from others without losing connection. The point is, I have a choice.
Traumatic boundary violations can make you feel that you don’t have a choice. It can become hard to recognize when boundaries are being crossed, which makes it doubly difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries with others. Ideally, boundaries should be naturally elastic. They change depending on environments, situations, and relationships.

For example: when you walk down a crowded street, you expect to be jostled and for people to be close to you. You probably don’t think of this as a violation because of the context of the situation. On the other hand, if you are alone on a street and another person walks by, you expect the distance between you to be greater. If that person comes too close, you feel it. It is an infringement on your boundaries, your space.

However, if your boundaries have been routinely violated in the past, your awareness of what’s reasonable in different situations may be unclear. Imagine a rubber band being stretched so hard that it loses its elasticity; this is similar to the way that traumatic situations can stretch boundaries out of shape. Some experiences are so invasive that there is no time or opportunity to think about boundaries. The level of shock you experience is overwhelming. It feels as if you’ve lost something that you can’t even name. This may leave a survivor believing: “I don’t have any boundaries; they don’t exist; they don’t help anyway; nobody respects them.” In effect, a blind spot has developed where boundaries are concerned. Remember that boundaries and needs are connected. In the absence of boundaries, there develops a sense of desperation around getting needs met. The result is that needs get met at the expense of boundaries. Peer support provides a safe place to talk about your needs and how to meet them in a direct and healthy way. This can restore the elasticity to your boundaries.

**Symptoms: Meeting a Need by Adapting**

What the mental health community identifies as symptoms—for example, eating disorders or avoidance—are really adaptations. They represent an effort to manage the overwhelming effects of what has happened. It helps to think of them as normal responses to abnormally stressful situations. The essence of being real involves identifying and discussing how trauma has led to the difficulties that survivors are currently experiencing. We do not identify these difficulties as symptoms because symptoms only define an experience on a surface level. They tell you what but they don’t tell you why.

**Example**

Dave is a new member in your peer support group. He is a bike messenger who was making his early-morning deliveries in downtown Manhattan on September 11 when the first plane hit the World Trade Center. He is an energetic 27-year-old who has lived in the city all of his life. Dave was a few blocks away from the towers and witnessed the explosions. He has had an increasingly difficult time eating since that day, and his girlfriend and family are frustrated and scared.
for him. He has lost a lot of weight. His girlfriend worries that he has an eating disorder and thinks he should see someone who specializes in this field.

Dave feels lost. He doesn’t know why eating is such a problem for him these days. He immediately feels nauseated when he sits down for a meal and says that he just loses his appetite when he looks at food. Dave feels ashamed and embarrassed and says he is spending less and less time with his girlfriend and family because of this issue. Dave recognizes how 9/11 may have been traumatizing to him but cannot understand how it could connect to his problems with eating.

In this example, we automatically see the what—the symptoms. Dave feels nauseated around food and he is avoiding socializing, particularly around food. It might feel like a natural conclusion (if you hadn’t read this section yet!) to brainstorm with your group about ways to help Dave feel better about eating, especially around others (for example, change his diet, eat smaller meals more frequently, or take medication). Some group members might wonder if Dave has anorexia and needs to check in to a hospital. Others may struggle with the belief that eating disorders only happen to girls so they seek another name/explanation for what Dave is experiencing. The what, in this case, is pretty obvious to the people in Dave’s life. Everyone can see he is losing weight and becoming increasingly distant to the people he loves. The why, however, may not be as obvious.

So the group might start to brainstorm on the following questions related to what you have learned about symptoms as adaptations, as well as the effects of trauma. You can brainstorm on these questions right now and see what thoughts or ideas come up for you.

• How could not eating be adaptive?

• How could this be a normal response to an abnormal situation?

• How could it be meeting a need for Dave?

• What is resulting from his difficulties with food?

• What personal experiences can anyone else in the group offer to help make more sense of the why?

Answers do not always come easily. Remember that you can support someone in a really powerful way without having all the answers to their problems. The point of this
not so much to find answers but to practice asking questions that have to do with the deeper message hidden within the behavior. Asking these types of questions, more about the why than the what, helps to alleviate blind spots. They can help point you in the right direction. Here are some thoughts that might come up in the process of asking the questions above.

• **How could not eating be adaptive?**
  We know that people internalize trauma differently. Dave witnessed something that changed his life forever. He may be having feelings of grief, horror, or denial about this event. Maybe there is something about feeling nauseated that reminds Dave of how he felt on 9/11. Maybe what he saw caused him to feel or get sick to his stomach. Maybe avoiding food is really about avoiding the feelings he had that day. Maybe avoiding food helps him avoid connecting with others; we often connect with people around meals.

• **How could this be a normal response to an abnormal situation?**
  Some people lose their appetites when the death of a loved friend or family member has occurred. That’s one reason people bring casseroles to a person who is grieving! It makes sense that not having an appetite in this situation is pretty normal. In some cultures, people actually fast as a part of the grieving process. This might be true for Dave. This does not mean he doesn’t need help from a professional with this issue. It just means the behavior might make a lot more sense in the context of what he has been through and in the broader picture of how human beings respond to trauma and loss.

• **How could it be meeting a need for Dave?**
  For some folks, particularly those who have difficulty expressing feelings or emotions with words, feelings come out through behaviors. Maybe Dave’s body is trying to tell him about the feelings he has that he is not putting into words.

• **What is resulting from his difficulties with food?**
  He is becoming more alienated from the people he loves. Sometimes being alone when we are hurting is what we think we need when what we really need is contact! Having time to ourselves is different from alienating ourselves because we are afraid of what we are feeling inside and don’t want people to know.

  Concentrating solely on the symptoms resulting from trauma, such as substance abuse or eating disorders, can actually serve to distract trauma survivors from the deeper message that these behaviors are signaling and how these symptoms are adaptive. This deeper message, for many survivors, speaks to unmet needs and the unacknowledged fear of connecting with the self and others. So the what may be substance abuse, and the why may be to keep pain away. If you get beyond the surface of the behavior to the reason for it, you may find a message of unresolved pain. That message can become obscured by the way a person acts. The point may be missed,
leaving the survivor feeling more alone and misunderstood. So a person may be ashamed of what happened and doubly shamed by how s/he is coping with it.

What helps is to remove that blind spot created by shame and help the person see the behavior as adaptive. Because we can learn new ways of adapting, a victim can become empowered by understanding the need that opens the door to a better option. The essence of being real means that you explore the meaning behind your behavior and ask honestly how it serves you. Then you choose whether to continue.

**Questions to Consider**

- What boundaries are you able to hold firm?

- What boundaries are hard for you?

- What needs in your life are you able to meet and feel good about meeting?

- What needs in your life make you feel shy or ashamed?
• **What needs do you meet at the expense of your boundaries?**

• **How does your attitude change when you think of symptoms as adaptations?**

Think about a “symptom” and use the lines below to identify how it could help you adapt.  
**Example:**

**Symptom:** *Avoidance*  
**Adaptive value:** It helps me adapt by protecting me from things that bring up overwhelming feelings of sadness.

**Symptom:**  
**Adaptive value:**

**Symptom:**  
**Adaptive value:**

**Symptom:**  
**Adaptive value:**

**Symptom:**  
**Adaptive value:**

**Symptom:**  
**Adaptive value:**
The Framework

The basis for true joy is inner independence—a stability created through accepting life as it is, and through accepting each new moment without inner resistance.

—Carol Anthony, A Guide to the I Ching

The Essence of Being Real entails constant attention to how we relate to ourselves and others. This takes lots of practice. The way you relate to yourself and others lays the foundation for feeling safe, connected, and happy. A helpful way to remember the basics of how to relate to yourself and others is by using the RICH model. The RICH model, which stands for Respect, Information, Connection, and Hope, can be the foundation for developing healing and meaningful relationships. It is simple and quite universal. Use it as a checklist during interactions with others (and even with yourself) when you begin to wonder if the interaction is healthy and helpful. Even though it was developed originally for professionals to use with survivors of childhood abuse, it makes sense to treat everyone this way. I think of it as a relational checklist for dummies! Sometimes our blind spots are more obvious than we think.

How does this work in practice? Agree to treat yourself and others with respect. Find out what conveys respect to other people. Don’t assume you know. Offer and receive information that will encourage each person’s journey toward healing and wholeness. Be open to receiving information about yourself and how you come across. Strive to establish and maintain a connection within yourself and with others. Learn to build trust and nurture connections. Believe there is hope for each of you to heal from trauma and support each other in this belief. Remembering the higher self in each other supports the maintaining of hope.
If the relationship is the foundation, then you have to create an environment where relationships can be supported. To do this in a peer support group, you'll need to attend to the following areas.

**Safety**

Most people take safety for granted. But it’s the nature of trauma to shake your sense of safety. Many survivors never had the opportunity to feel truly safe in their lives. The randomness, invasiveness, and terror of some traumatic experiences can severely damage a person's sense of physical and psychological safety. Therefore, it is essential to create and maintain a safe environment within the group. One way to begin to establish an atmosphere of safety is to agree upon the confidentiality of the group meetings. Safety is thereby revealed in mutual trust and respect for one another’s privacy. Safety is further supported by consistency and reliability. Group members need to know when and where the group will meet, who will facilitate and what will be expected of them. Facilitators can promote safety in the group environment by maintaining an up-to-date resource list of all trauma services available in your area. That way, members can be aware of the options they have for support as well as the names of professionals in the area who specialize in trauma work. (The Sidran Institute can provide you with this kind of information.) This sends an unspoken message: it’s okay to need help, and here’s where you can get it.

In a group full of hurting people, it’s natural to worry about people's safety sometimes. So it’s a good idea to discuss what could potentially feel unsafe or scary. Many people worry that they will say the wrong thing and lead another to some desperate action. Make sure that you discuss this openly. For some groups this may mean agreeing upon some course of action in the event that a group member engages in, or considers engaging in, self-harming or suicidal behavior. For others it’s as simple as acknowledging the fear. Troubleshooting this issue at the outset will strengthen and support the feeling of safety experienced by group members.

This does not mean you have to figure it all out; individual situations and circumstances will require you and the group to respond to the needs of the moment. However, you will need to set down some mutually agreed-upon expectations and norms in regard to this issue (see Guidelines). For example, you may decide that, in order to participate in group, members must be living at a level of functioning that does not involve repetitive self-harm or perpetual difficulties with suicidality. This is not a judgment meant to alienate or punish someone who is having a hard time. You may be thinking, “We all have hard days! I have hard days! Who am I to tell someone who needs help that they can’t participate in group?” But energy is drawn away from the group when an individual is in constant crisis. The fact is that there are other resources available that can better serve an individual who is having a hard time existing day to day, not just having a hard day. And the role of the
group is better served by meeting the needs of all the members.

Choosing not to address this issue in group is to avoid offering someone the best option for support they can receive at the time.

Early on in the group, ask your group members:
• What will help you to feel safe about talking in this group?
• What is helping you feel safe and connected these days?
• What would help you tell the group when you don’t feel safe?

These questions will help you shape the norms and expectations the group sets in regard to safety. We’ll look at that specifically later on.

Consistency

Traumatic experiences may leave a person with the feeling that nothing or no one around him or her is reliable, that there is little to count on. Issues of reliability and trust are often intertwined for trauma survivors. In order to support the feeling of safety within the group environment, consistency must accompany the group process. This means that:
• Peer support groups begin and end at an agreed-upon time.
• The structural format of the group remains consistent.
• Norms and expectations developed by the group are acknowledged, maintained, and formally revised by the group as needed.

Consistency, however, does not imply rigidity. The ability of the co-facilitators to remain flexible should be a consistent component of the group process. It is tempting when facilitating or even participating in a group to want to keep strictly to the agenda for that session. However, no agenda is more important than the present need of any individual in the group.

One of the editors of this book shared a really great example with me that highlights the importance of staying flexible. She was in the first weeks of nursing a newborn baby and was experiencing a lot of difficulties. She decided to seek help by attending a weekly open meeting of the La Leche League, an international organization that supports women in their efforts to breastfeed. As a brand-new member, she walked into her first meeting with a lot of anxiety and questions about the process. The leaders didn’t pick up on her distress or ask her at the outset if she had any issues or concerns (even though she was the only new member present), instead they launched into their prescheduled topic—weaning (which was certainly what she felt like doing at that point, but not very helpful).

Staying attuned to the needs of group members may mean changing the original agenda in order to best address those needs. After all, the purpose of meeting together is to support one another consistently. The vehicle of that support will take many forms and will certainly not be confined to any specific method or planned topic.
Self-Awareness

In order to form meaningful connections with others, we must first be able to connect with ourselves. Too often we attempt to empathize with the pain of others without first feeling our own emotions. Jumping into someone else’s story may be a great way for you to avoid dealing with your own life. How can someone connect with another’s experience if neither individual is capable of an inner connection? Self-awareness is a life-long process that begins with noticing the connections between our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We’re talking about eliminating those blind spots that block our true vision of ourselves. But remember that those blind spots are protective and don’t give way easily. We need to be gentle as we work through this process.

Have you ever just been sitting somewhere, at work or at home, and suddenly found yourself angry or irritable for no apparent reason? Sometimes, when this happens, it feels as if the emotion came out of nowhere. Tracing your thoughts back, you may find that a “seed” thought had been settling in your mind, eventually causing you to feel irritable. The seed thought may have been “This day will last forever” or “That person will never change” or “I’m dreading going home today.” Taking an inventory of what you have been thinking about may reveal the reason for your current feelings. On the other hand, you may be using these emotions to distract yourself, and it could help to ask, “What would I be thinking about if I weren’t thinking about feeling irritated?”

This process requires self-awareness. Participating in group requires a similar kind of self-awareness. Keeping track of what feelings or distractions come up for you when discussing certain issues, particularly difficult topics, will help you to maintain connection with yourself and others.

Questions to Consider

• What are some ways you convey respect, information, connection, and hope in your daily life?
• Who in your life conveys respect, information, connection, and hope to you and how? ____________

• What do you notice about relationships where respect, information, connection, and hope are absent? _____

• Where do you feel safest, the most able to be yourself? ________________________________
• Under what conditions do you feel the most disconnected and unaware of yourself?

• What or whom can you count on in your life as consistent?
Guidelines

Conflict with others can generally be avoided at the beginning if we carefully determine fair and just terms. In business relationships the written contract serves this purpose, but contracts are reliable only if they correspond with what everyone, in his heart, would consider to be just.

—Carol Anthony, A Guide to the I Ching

Norms and Expectations

Norms and expectations are terms used in peer support to describe the established agreement among group members as to how they want their group to operate. In essence, these terms describe guidelines that remain fluid to accommodate the changing needs of the group. Norms are the operating guidelines, a set of informal rules for the group that describe how members will behave toward one another. Expectations are what people want to get out of being in the group. Norms and expectations are created and decided upon by the group, not just the co-facilitators.

Your group can brainstorm and create a “working” list of norms and expectations during the first or second meeting (use the guidelines worksheet to help your group identify expectations and create its own norms). Crouching ideas in behavioral terms is helpful; for example, respect is a common norm within groups, but how does respect manifest itself? How is it displayed and received? Safety, as we discussed earlier, is also a common norm expected by group members, but what does safety look like? Remember that we often use words without considering the meaning felt behind them. Since safety means different things to different people, it’s important to have an open discussion about it. You may need to have a number of discussions about the various norms your group establishes.
Acceptance: Of Ourselves and of One Another

Acceptance is one of the most difficult concepts to practice in relationships. It doesn't necessarily mean we're in agreement, it just means we'd rather spend energy loving each other and ourselves than criticizing and cataloging shortcomings. Acceptance always speaks to the higher self. And, as such, it always encourages. Acceptance is the foundation for change. You must accept what is in order to have room for what can be. Peer support does not advocate judging the way a survivor has coped with his or her trauma. Many survivors have endured and are still battling symptoms that may include addictions and other self-harming behaviors; we recognize these to be adaptations rather than symptoms. They are a survivor's best attempt to cope with the extreme disruptions in identity and everyday functioning caused by traumatic stress. The guilt and shame produced by engaging in such harmful behaviors only serves to reinforce the guilt and shame many survivors already feel about themselves. Remember those blind spots. They inhibit acceptance. You have to be able to see clearly to accept reality. Acceptance is a risk for some people because it implies that you are making peace with your experiences. As long as you fight that reality, you have an excuse for not changing. Acceptance also involves honestly acknowledging strengths. It is a balancing force that allows strengths and broken places to coexist.

Example

Charlotte is a group member who has a really hard time with acceptance. During the first few group meetings, she did not try to hide her critical attitude toward herself. She was also openly negative about the opportunity for hope and support offered to her by the group. She seemed determined to be upfront with the group about how she felt about herself and her situation. Charlotte has a lot of energy for being negative and hopeless but seems exhausted by the idea of doing anything good for herself. Charlotte conveys a strong belief that, because of her abuse history, she knows that things will never change for her. Some of her ideas include:

- If I accept that my parents abused me then I’m saying it was okay.
- I can’t just let this go—it ruined my whole life.
- If I try to get close to anyone again I’m just going to get hurt.

With these ideas the foundation for Charlotte’s relationship with herself and others, it is easy to see why acceptance is going to be a challenge to achieve. So many areas in Charlotte’s life remain void of acceptance or peace. Remember when we talked about separating our who from our do? Charlotte cannot separate yet who she is from what happened to her in the past or how she has responded to it. The irony is that Charlotte is showing up for group! The mere act of showing up is, in a sense, going against these expressed ideas and beliefs she so strongly conveys to the group. Her higher self is really
at war with her traumatized self and this is evident in her push/pull behavior. The higher self in Charlotte sees the hope available for her and longs to be close to people; the traumatized self in Charlotte feels like she is still in an abuse relationship with her parents, still at war, still fighting, still trying to change what happened. So, Charlotte shows up for group and yet fights feeling better.

We stay actively engaged with painful things in our lives when we fail to accept them. It is as if we wake up each day and still live as if it were the past. Charlotte uses up all her energy in the present still engaging in and reacting to the past.

Charlotte lives in two worlds. Her body is in the present while her attention and energy remain engaged in past relationships. Charlotte shows up for group, listens attentively and with compassion to others, and even finds herself laughing and enjoying herself during social time. However, when the group's attention is focused on her, Charlotte shuts down. She is defensive and stubborn. Charlotte is stuck and one path to getting her unstuck is through acceptance.

Let's look at her beliefs again and see where some blind spots might be:

• If I accept that my parents abused me then I'm saying it was okay.

Acceptance does not mean that what happened to you was okay or right or justified. What would it mean to accept what has happened to you while acknowledging it was wrong?

• I can't just let this go— it ruined my whole life.

Letting go and accepting gives us the energy and space to repair and heal, not to forget or deny. It is a mental position that acknowledges that which cannot be undone in the past, but also grants you the motivation to change what can be done today and in the future. How much choice do you believe you have about making your life better? What would it mean if you actually had the choice to feel better and were choosing to keep feeling like your life was ruined?

• If I try to get close to anyone again I’m just going to get hurt.

Have you ever met a person who believes this and, at the same time, is self-aware and accepting of him or herself? I haven't! Remember our outward ability to connect with others is a direct reflection of our inner connection to ourselves. Sometimes the deeper underlying fear of this particular belief is: “If I get too close to knowing myself I will not like who I am; I might find out I am the type of person that people just want to hurt.” Acceptance of others allows us to see that we are all fallible and capable of hurting one another as well as ourselves. In recognizing this reality we remove a potential blind spot in our expectation of relationships. We realize that relationships are not black and white. We have all been wounded by them and we have also found great strength through them.
Questions to Consider

• What are some norms and expectations that come to mind when thinking about participating in a support group?

• Describe what it feels like to you when you know you are accepted.

• Describe how you feel when you are not accepted.

• What makes it hard for you to accept others?
The Process

You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

— Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

Leading, Following, and Observing: A New Way of Relating

There is a leader, a follower, and an observer in each of us, whether we recognize it or not. Leading, following, and observing are all roles we exchange during a given day depending on the circumstances of our interactions with others. In our society, leadership often implies having ultimate responsibility or being in charge. Followers are viewed as passive or lacking in initiative. And to say one is observing suggests superiority, lack of engagement, or even disinterest. That’s not what I mean!

The essence of being real means exploring all of these relational stances and accepting the possibility of holding different roles in different contexts. Sometimes we have blind spots about the ways we influence others. Even if we deny our influence, it still exists. It’s ironic that people who sometimes seem the most passive have the greatest influence—think of Ghandi. Relational peer support asks that we step outside of predictable roles to try out a new role and its effect on us.

The essence of being real emphasizes the relational stances of leading, following, and observing and recognizes the changing roles and relational dynamics within a group context. The role of facilitator may be exchanged by group members at different times. Those in leadership roles shouldn’t be viewed as healed experts.
However, as a peer support group facilitator, you may need to take a much more active role as a leader when first beginning a group. At this time you are a model, in some sense, for the rest of the group. You and your co-facilitator are responsible for providing living examples of the framework and techniques on which peer support is founded. The RICH model—respect, information, connection, hope—is a nice concept to read about, but it can only be believed when put into action.

As members of the group come to understand this philosophy and framework better and learn to put it into practice, leadership shifts. The role of the facilitator becomes less distinct as members feel more comfortable leading themselves, needing less intervention from the co-facilitators. This covert shift often occurs once the group has established trust and safety among its members and collectively feels empowered; thus, whoever in the group is sharing at a particular moment is actually leading. The different roles of group members and facilitators are now much more fluid and balanced.

We often associate different roles with different levels of power and control. Group facilitators are seemingly in “control” of the group because they are in a leadership position. However, this model for peer support recognizes that all members are responsible for the group and have equal ownership of it. The word peer indicates a lack of hierarchy. No matter what role a person may be engaged in, all members are equal partners in the process. The roles of leading, following, and observing will be important topics to discuss in group and to be continually aware of during meetings.

The Power of Observation: Three Steps

Whether you are acting as a group facilitator or a group member, your observation skills can be a powerful tool and extremely helpful in the group process. Observation is a wonderful method for promoting self-awareness, group awareness, and more authentic ways of communicating and relating. Sometimes the best way to intervene or give feedback in a situation is simply to state what you observe.

Example

Taylor is a group member currently in her final weeks of study for a master’s degree in graphic design. A gifted artist, Taylor has found much of her joy and healing from trauma through the use of her art. Right now, during group, Taylor looks as if she hasn’t slept; she is fidgeting, and she asks the group for feedback about school issues. She says she is going into the last week of finals and is ready to give up. “What is the point of trying? I am too tired to do this anymore,” she states. “It’s not worth getting this degree. It was a stupid idea and I can’t believe I thought I was good enough to get through this program.” These comments seem so unlike Taylor, who, until now, has loved school and earned excellent grades.
Step 1: Observe outside source (the issue or person of focus)
You look at Taylor. She hasn't slept, she looks very sad and uncertain, and the way she is talking doesn't sound like what she really believes about herself.

Step 2: Observe inside yourself
Check your gut; how you are feeling or reacting emotionally or intuitively. Your first inclination may be to solve this problem (that do something response). You feel tempted to ask Taylor about finals and figure out some ways she can study harder to feel more confident. Looking deeper, you feel that there is a hidden issue. You feel Taylor's sadness and confusion and want to know more about these feelings.

Step 3: Observe others' responses
How do others appear to be feeling? The group members seem extremely surprised and confused at Taylor's statements. They seem ready to empathize with Taylor's situation but are unsure what the real problem is. One group member starts to chime in about how finals “suck” and it's just a burnout phase of the program.

Say what you have observed.
“Taylor. You look so tired and confused and I can really feel your sadness. The group looks as if they feel your sadness too, but I think we may all be wondering where these feelings are coming from. It seems so unlike you to talk like this. I know you love this field and I know you love school. I know you believe you are talented enough to finish this degree and you have performed amazingly well in this program. I was tempted to think of ways to help you get through this last week of finals—get a study partner, good munch food, etc.—but in my gut that felt like a distraction from the real issue. What do you think?”

Through using your tool of observation you have given Taylor some valuable feedback without having to understand what the real issue or problem is or attempting to solve it. You have simply stated what you see. This encourages Taylor to look more deeply inside herself while she takes in what you have said. It turns out that Taylor is actually afraid of finishing her degree. She is afraid of getting the thing she has always wanted—her master's degree in graphic design—because so often in her life the things she has wanted have been taken away from her. This is such a new experience for Taylor that she almost feels inclined to sabotage it! The group readily understands this dilemma and gives Taylor some great feedback and personal stories about this very issue.
The Tools

Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.

— Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

There are a few basic and essential materials for running a trauma-informed peer support group. Here is a simple list of some of the tools you will use when facilitating a peer support group.

You

As a group facilitator, you are the most valuable tool you will ever use in a peer support group. You are a container of hope, equipped with the gifts of your attitude, experiences, beliefs, stories, and convictions. Your ability to be honest about where you are in your life and who you are—to keep it real—will support the members of your peer support group in immeasurable ways. Your example is one of the best means to help others be real with themselves and practice self-acceptance. The essence of being real requires that you not simply model the model, but rather that you are the model. You embody the model by employing it in your own life.

A Book (or Two!)

Using a daily inspirational book is a great way to enhance group discussions. Choose two passages to use separately as opening and closing readings. This provides the group with structure and promotes a collaboration of thoughts and feedback. It is also a nice transitional object for members to have when apart from group, to provide continued inspiration and support. I recommend and use a book entitled Each Day a New Beginning: Daily Meditations for Women. There is also an edition for men. You may wish to choose excerpts from other
books or articles to read together during group and discuss. Some favorites of mine quoted throughout this manual include: Man’s Search for Meaning, by Viktor Frankl, The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran, and The Guide to the I Ching, by Carol Anthony.

An Agenda
Life certainly provides us with enough topics and issues for a million group discussions. Ask your group what topics they want to cover and select one that you feel is appropriate for the particular stage your group is in. After choosing a topic with your co-facilitator, brainstorm some questions that will enhance the discussion. Remember to phrase these questions in a way that promotes hope.

Format
Your group format may include brief check-ins, opening reading, introduction of the topic, discussion, and closing reading. You may consider using handouts or creative material like poems, artwork, or music. Members of the group may want to provide original works. (See Sample Group Format.)

Wrap-Ups
Provide a wrap-up handout that summarizes the events of the past meeting to distribute to each member. Looking over what was discussed at that meeting helps you to appreciate what was gained and to tie up loose ends, and it allows group members to put closure on any thoughts or feelings they may have had about the group in retrospect. (See Sample Wrap-Up.)

Humor
Humor: use it and never lose it! I recommend writing down funny things said during group or memorable quotes that made everyone smile. Include these quotes in your wrap-ups. See Joke of the day (Sample Wrap-Up). This is a wonderful way to keep the spirit of group positive and light. It serves to remind all of you that, despite your current struggles and difficulties, there is always time to laugh and breathe—and that is encouraging!

Creativity
Use the creativity of the group. Does anyone play guitar? Does anyone sing or paint or write poetry? I encourage you to use music and art as tools to enhance the topic being discussed or simply to use them to inspire and enjoy as a group. Request that group members choose selections that are not graphic in nature. Let your group members decide what they consider to be graphic, for example, poetry that describes self-harming behavior, suicide, or details of violence or abuse. Add this to your list of norms and expectations.

Now that we have discussed some of the tools you may use, let’s look at a few sample formats and questions that will give you a better understanding of what the structure of the group may look like.
Sample Group Format

You can structure each group as much or as little as seems appropriate, but always keep in mind the need for boundaries, consistency, and other group norms. Keeping group norms and expectations posted can help. Here is one example of how to structure a group that is two hours long. Included in the structure are some questions that may help you to keep things moving.

Review wrap-up from last group (10-15 minutes)
• What thoughts or ideas did you consider after last group's discussion?
• Were there any feelings you had that you’d like to share briefly?
• Did you find you could apply some of the ideas we discussed in your day-to-day routine?
• Was the topic helpful in some particular situation you encountered during the week?

Check-ins (10-15 minutes)
• How have you been since we last saw one another?
• Does anyone have any “news” about their week they would like to share briefly before we begin?
• Did anyone do anything fun this past week?

Opening reading (2 minutes)
The opening reading is used to support the topic you have planned for discussion. Choose a reading that ties into the theme of your agenda. You may ask the group if one person wants to read or if the group would prefer taking turns reading one or two sentences individually. This may differ depending on group size.

Discussion of the reading (5-10 minutes)
• Did any section or sentence or idea in this reading speak to you in a particular way?
**Topic discussion (60 minutes)**
Have questions in mind or written down for group members to answer. Use creative techniques to enhance discussion—art, music, poetry, or brainstorming in small groups and reconvening to share responses. (You may wish to take a 5- to 10-minute break after the discussion.)

**Closing reading (2 minutes)**
Choose a reading that is hopeful and allows the group to close on an inspiring, peaceful note.

**Closing check-ins (5 minutes)**
- Does anyone need to check in before we end group?
- Does anyone have an issue they feel they need the group's prayers for this coming week?
- Does anyone have a goal for the week they would like the group to hold them accountable to?

**Social time**
Stick around and enjoy some coffee and snacks and chat. Good food and beverages are always an incentive for the entire group to stay and socialize afterward. People may want to rotate responsibility for the goodies.
Processing the Format

Synthesizing the philosophy and process of this model into the group format takes practice. There is no better way to learn how to do it than to just do it! You may have read the last section and wondered, “How in the world am I going to fill up an hour’s worth of time on a topic? What if no one talks?” To prepare for the possibility that no one will talk (which is a normal fear), troubleshoot some ways you can imagine handling the situation. One way to break the ice is to say what you observe. You may say, “It’s funny but I was actually a little anxious this would happen. So I really appreciate your helping me to face this fear! It seems we have all become quiet and unsure of where to begin with this topic. So let me start. Here are some things I had in mind when I chose it.…”

In this brief example, you managed to stay real using several different aspects of the process and philosophy to help you get the topic started:

- You used yourself as a tool by staying real in an uncomfortable situation.
- You used humor.
- You used your observation skills.
- You made it okay for people to feel anxious by being honest about your own anxiety.

A number of years ago, I facilitated my first group, which was for at-risk homeless women in recovery from substance abuse. Our first meeting was filled with innumerable anxieties like the one cited above. I can’t tell you how nervous I was about filling up the time, looking cool and knowledgeable, and getting the women to like and accept me. My mind, already buzzing with these anxieties before the group began, registered alarm when I realized, after the group members had gathered around me, that I was not only the youngest (by far) in the crowd but also the only white woman. I know now that these dynamics were not a conflict, but in my heightened state of anxiety, these minority elements appeared like further obstacles to getting
the women to relate to and trust me. I heard in my head what they might have been thinking about me as they sat down: “What in the world does this little white girl have to offer me?” and “What could she possibly know about what I’m going through?”

I felt a momentary temptation to ignore what I was noticing and feeling and to act cool, but instead, to my surprise, I told the group how I was really feeling and what I was noticing. (They don’t really train you to do this in school, so this felt like a huge risk.)

After briefly introducing myself, I told them what I imagined they might be thinking. And they laughed. Hard! Then I told them about some things I thought we had in common. I shared small pieces of my history, my own pain, and my healing. I told them that I expected them to teach me as much as I hoped to teach them. I let them know how honored I felt to be a part of their journey through this group. And so began some amazing relationships, based on the risk of being real.
Sample Wrap-Up

6/23/01 (Date of last meeting)

Present: Jen, Susan, Tracy, Kim, Karen, Carol, Jenny, Tony

Check-ins: Everyone's word for the past week was blah! except for Jenny. She finally finished exams and she is exhausted. The rest of us have led extremely boring lives for the past week and had little to report.


We discussed: Last week's topic was safety when dealing with tough emotions. Performed a writing exercise: Describe what you believe it means to feel safe and what role being listened to by someone else plays in feeling safe. Write down some comforting words or thoughts you would share with someone who was feeling unsafe, unheard, or misunderstood. Write about a situation you have experienced and describe how someone helped you feel safe and understood.

Our responses differed greatly, as Carol noted. Some of us wrote poetry; others defined safety in a more concrete manner and described how feeling listened to can help you feel safer when interacting with someone else. Either way, this was a great opportunity to realize and discuss the power of just listening to one another, particularly when someone is feeling scared and unsafe in their emotions.

Closing reading: A poem chosen by Jenny entitled “Women” (author anonymous).

Closing check-ins: Susan asked that our thoughts be with her on Tuesday, when her friend will be having surgery.

Next week's topic: We will discuss the roles we play in social situations.

Joke of the day: Carol to Susan concerning Susan's husband, “He was very concerned because he couldn't find you so he called me!” Susan replies, “Yeah, that's because he's never concerned enough to listen to me when I tell him where I'm going!”
Sample Group Topics: Facilitating through Questions

This section offers ideas for group topics and gives examples of how to facilitate group discussions through questions. Consider these topics and questions only as examples intended to help you develop your own. Remember that the primary motivation behind asking these questions is to inspire hope, clarity, and insight into the topic being discussed.

How you ask a question influences the answers you get. Part of your role as facilitator is to guide the direction group discussion takes through the questions you ask. Develop positive questions for each group topic. It is very easy, when discussing difficult issues that revolve around trauma, to fall into a discussion that is negative and disabling to group members. The very nature of trauma is negative and disabling! However, if you use questions that reflect hope, you can guide your group through a tough topic in a way that is positive and empowering to group members.

(Note: Our peer support group was small enough that every member had an opportunity to share his or her responses. In larger group settings it may be more appropriate to ask for volunteers to share one or two responses.)

Introductions

These are questions you can use during the introduction phase of the group. Normally, this begins with the first meeting, but it may continue through a few meetings. You may spend a whole group on one question, or you may get through several. The pacing is up to the group. You may want to take some time and answer these questions for yourself now.
How did you arrive here; what has led you to this group?

This phrasing allows individuals to discuss the aspects of their lives they feel are relevant for the group to know. Remember that this group is based on safety and respect. It is not a group that promotes the retelling of trauma stories, but one that taps into the restoration that is made possible through meaningful connections with others.

Where have you found your support in the past?

Taking an inventory of former sources of support and encouragement is a valuable way to assess how supported this individual has been prior to attending this group. Have they had any support at all? If so, who has been helpful to them in the past?

What or who are your current sources of strength and support?

We often find we have more sources of support than we realize. Taking a quick inventory of these sources can actually strengthen us. Continued development of resources will better equip us to help others. Especially if you hope eventually to become a peer support facilitator, you must continue to work on yourself in healthy ways.

What are three of your strengths and three of your weaknesses?

We are human—we have both! How can it help to know only what is broken in someone but not what is already working? It is important to take an inventory of our strengths and weaknesses and to continue to examine both. Sometimes what we consider a weakness can actually be seen as a strength by someone else. It is particularly useful for co-facilitators to be aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses so that they can balance each other.

In what ways do you think peer support can help you?

Peer support is designed to replenish all members of the group with encouragement and fellowship. Just as attending school provides you with information to apply in the real world, peer support gives you an opportunity to learn and practice new ways of relating and thinking before going out and applying them in your everyday life.
**Expectations and Norms**

Following introductions, discussion about the way the group will function is a natural next step. These questions will help guide you through the process and make sure you address some of the important issues related to norms and expectations.

When it comes time to develop the group norms and the group expectations, it's a good idea to use a flip-chart to write down everyone's initial ideas and go over them together. In this way, the group can decide what it wants.

**How does expecting something make you feel?**

**What does expectation mean to you?**

Expectation implies that you have an emotional investment in the outcome of something. Expectations are normal but can easily get out of balance. Some people believe that if they expect something good they will only be disappointed. Others have unrealistic hopes, setting their expectations too high. Before developing expectations for the group, it is important to establish what meaning this word holds for group members.

**Can expectations be fluid and change or are they set in concrete?**

When you design expectations with your group, it is important to consider whether these expectations can change. There are times when we shift our expectations to match the reality of the present and times when we stand firm.

**How have your expectations of the group changed from the first group meeting until now?**

This question really encourages self-awareness. Many group members may not even be aware that they had expectations about their peer support group until they reflect back on the first meeting. They may also find that some of their thoughts and expectations about group have shifted over time. Do not be surprised if some members initially held negative expectations about peer support (for example, I won't be listened to, it will be boring or depressing, etc.).

**While considering norms for the group, think of some norms you have set in your everyday life; is there a difference?**

Norms can be defined as the ways in which we agree to relate to one another. To respect someone who is sharing an opinion by not interrupting them may be a general norm that you use in group, as well as in your everyday life. However, some group members may not practice this manner of respecting someone in their everyday life. They may not expect to be
respected by others when sharing their opinion. This inspires the question: Why do we set different norms with different people and situations in our lives?

What are some examples of overt and covert norms? [Overt norm: behavior that is acknowledged and accepted openly. Covert norm: behavior that, while observed, is not discussed.]

You will be setting overt norms for your peer support group, but it is valuable to look at the difference between overt and covert norms. Overt norms may include sitting in a circle during your meeting, respecting someone’s silence, confidentiality—these are the things a group acknowledges openly. Covert norms are rarely discussed or acknowledged openly. For example, sitting in the same seat at every meeting or one group member bringing snacks to every meeting without being asked are covert norms.

Relational Roles

The way we relate is the foundation of how we get our needs met. There is a strong connection between role and identity and how we get our needs met. So it is very important to explore ideas about roles in the group, and in life.

With which role are you most comfortable in your everyday life: leading, following, or observing?

What makes this particular role comfortable for you? How does it serve you to stay in this role? (Does it make you feel more secure? Is it more predictable?) We all gravitate toward one particular role when relating to others. Although this may serve us as a strength, it may also keep us from enjoying other ways of relating to people. There is value in all three methods mentioned above.

With which role are you least comfortable—leading, following, or observing?

What makes this way of relating difficult or uncomfortable? Are you interested in challenging your ability to assume this role?

What stereotypes do you associate with leading, following, or observing?

Sometimes we associate particular people with particular roles. If we’ve had bad experiences with leaders, we may not want to lead because we don’t want to be like those people. This can keep us from fulfilling our potential or even from doing things we’re very interested in.
How can you begin to change your comfort level with one or more of these roles in group? ________

This entire exercise is an important step in self-awareness. Peer support provides an excellent opportunity for you to challenge old ways of relating and to practice new methods. The group can provide an individual with helpful feedback and encouragement while he or she is learning to feel comfortable with each of these roles.

Who Are You in a Group?

This exercise is designed specifically to identify roles that are commonly seen in group situations and that are sometimes viewed as negative or embarrassing. If you have ever been in a group situation, formal or casual, you have probably encountered some of these characters. In this exercise, group members are able to be honest about their feelings about these roles, to explore the meaning behind their use, and to help other members identify when they fall into or get stuck in one of these roles.

Consider the following list of roles (post them), which you may have encountered in group situations. Do you notice yourself in any of them? Choose two.

- Storyteller
- Caretaker
- Late person
- Other
- Observer/quiet one
- Interrupter
- Talker/dominator

How does it feel to identify yourself in this list? ________

Each of these roles can and does serve a purpose for us. The question is: What purposes do each of these ways of relating serve for the individual? For example, dominating may help some people feel more in control or safer when relating to others; other persons may dominate conversations for fear of silence and the feelings silence evokes in them. We have all met people who play one or more of these roles, and the common thread among them is simply this: they can make us feel very annoyed! We all assume one or more of these roles at times, so none of us is immune. Therefore, we must consciously and collectively look for the meaning behind the role rather than become irritated or personally offended when someone relates to us in one of these ways.

How we relate to others in group settings or social situations can be tremendously telling about ourselves: What do we fear? How do we find our sense of control and safety with others? If we fail to identify these seemingly embarrassing ways of relating, we miss a valuable opportunity both to tackle some of our insecurities about being in a group and to explore our deeper reasons for relating to others in these ways. Discussion can provide some relief by shedding light on ways of relating that may cause shame or fear in someone.
Your Relational Tools

Remember that focusing on your strengths helps support you in the weak places. Here are some questions designed to promote this idea.

What do you, uniquely, bring to group? __________

This open-ended question may be answered positively or negatively. If the response is negative—“There is nothing unique about me”—use the group to challenge this person’s way of thinking about himself or herself.

What are some of your gifts? __________

These may include artistic gifts, physical abilities, etc. Being able to survive your trauma and find the courage to seek support through the use of this group is in itself a gift!

What are some of your relational strengths? __________

It is common for some survivors of trauma to wrestle with their ability to relate to others. Past and present difficulties in relationships can sometimes prevent an individual from seeing his or her own strengths in terms of relational style. Ask those who have difficulty answering this question to recall a time when they helped to support someone, a situation in their life that may reflect a relational strength they don’t give themselves credit for.
Helpful Hints for Facilitators

What about supervision?
Supervision is a form of self-care that allows you to discuss and explore, on a more personal level, some of the feelings and issues you have about your group. For example, you may be having difficulty relating to a particular group member or giving advice about a specific situation. Supervision is where you get support in your role as a facilitator. It is a place where you can deal with some of the intense feelings that come up as a result of facilitating the group. It is a place where you can process negative feelings related to the group and get perspective and ideas about how to manage your feelings.

As a group facilitator, your role is to serve as a tangible example of hope and support for other survivors, and your responsibility is first to take care of yourself. This means finding someone—a professional or a mentor—to sit down with on a regular basis and examine your feelings about your work with the peer support group. But, supervision is not therapy. If you are currently working with a therapist, I do not recommend using your therapeutic time for this purpose.

How do I address someone who is suddenly explosive in his or her disclosure of trauma?
Sometimes when traumatized people are telling part of their story, they seem unable to stop. It can be overwhelming for the person speaking and for those around her/him. This is known as flooding. When someone is flooding, they often need help recognizing it. One of the best ways to intervene in an explosive or flooding situation is to convey how you are reacting to the other person’s behavior. This is an example of using your observation skills as a tool for intervention, as we discussed earlier (The Process).
Ask if you can interrupt for a moment, and if you are ignored, just dive right in! “Can we stop for a minute? You seem scared and pressured. Are you feeling that way? Sometimes our stories are so powerful; they take over. I want you to feel like you can be present while telling your story. As you were talking, you seemed more pressured and less present to me. Did it feel that way to you? Did it feel that way to anyone else in the group?”

Checking in with the rest of the group helps to validate their feelings and also lets the person who is disclosing see the impact he or she has on others. It also provides a breathing space for everyone.

Telling a story in an overwhelmed state often leaves the listeners feeling overwhelmed. If the speaker is disconnected and anxious it may leave the group feeling disconnected and anxious. The group, in essence, is channeling the person’s feelings. Bring this issue into the open. Discuss the feelings that come up. Ask if others have had similar experiences of being unable to stop themselves when overwhelmed.

What do I do if a group member tells the group he or she is suicidal?
If a group member expresses suicidal thoughts, stay real, put first things first. This can be scary and sad, and you don’t have to pretend otherwise! Don’t jump immediately to conclusions or solutions; sometimes just acknowledging the feeling of this person’s wanting to die, and the feelings it brings up in you, can be immensely relieving and validating. “Wow, I care so much about you, it’s hard to hear you talk about wanting to die.”

First check in with yourself. The more nervous or frightened I feel in a situation, the more I want to distance myself from it and control it. I feel and talk more like a robot than a human being, which is not helpful to anyone, including me. Sometimes, in order not to do this, I simply acknowledge out loud to others that this is not what I want to do! “I feel anxious, and I don’t want to distance myself because of it.”

Next, consider checking in with the group. “What is everyone feeling right now, what’s going through your minds?” Let the group describe the feelings they are having in the moment, if they choose to. Ask the individual who is feeling suicidal how it feels to hear feedback from the group. This is all feeling-focused. No actions have yet been taken—or so it seems.

However, the discussion has shown each person in the group that there is room to sit and feel feelings, even in the midst of an alarming situation that seems to cry out for action. Discussion supports the idea that you can feel suicidal and not have to take action. You can sit and talk about how it feels. Talk about how it sucks to feel so tired and sad that you just want to go away. Acknowledge the things in this person’s life that have produced such powerful feelings. How often do we give someone permission to feel like ending it, to feel like giving up? We are more likely, initially, to tell them to do something or threaten them by saying we will do something.
A useful group discussion may arise out of this response, as well.

There are things you can do as a facilitator in this situation:

• Ask if the individual feels comfortable remaining in the group or prefers to step outside and speak individually with one of the group facilitators. If the person chooses to stay in group, does the group wish to continue with the original agenda or spend the rest of the time discussing the individual’s issue?

• After group is over, assess the individual’s needs and what options he or she has for meeting these needs: can the group member contact a therapist? go to the emergency room with a friend? stay with a friend with whom he or she feels safe? etc. You are not a family member or this person’s therapist so you can do little more than explore options and empower this individual to choose a good one.

• Accept the limitations of your role. This is difficult but important. Peer support groups are not designed for individuals in crisis or as specialized therapeutic intervention. It is appropriate to acknowledge this with your group members and agree that it is okay for someone in crisis to stop participating in group in the event that more intense help is needed. People can always rejoin the group at a later time.

• Last, but certainly not least: seek supervision! Get some support for what you’ve gone through. Vent your feelings, and don’t be afraid to process more of the situation the next time the group meets.

**What do I do when a group member becomes too dominating in the group?**

When a group member dominates, take a risk and name the behavior. Again, use your tool of observation. Notice what you are observing about the person dominating, the feelings you are having, and how others appear to be responding. Everyone knows what is happening, including the person who is dominating, although he or she may not be fully aware of the effect this behavior has on others. That is the gift in naming it out loud: you let this individual know, through your observation, how their way of interacting is affecting you and the group. “It seems that the other people in the group don’t have time to give you feedback on what you’re saying.”

You can disclose this information without being judgmental. This issue is not about a right or a wrong way of relating. Your purpose in bringing this up is to look at the deeper reasons behind the action of dominating the group discussions. Ask how this person feels when he or she is quiet and listening. Discuss some reasons why being quiet might make him or her feel uncomfortable or less in control. Let the group share their own examples in order to support the individual.

**Where do I draw the line on self-disclosure as a facilitator?**

The amount that you disclose to the group about your life is your choice. That goes for everyone in the group. Self-awareness is essential in this decision. Consider these questions:
• Do I have peace about sharing this part of my life?
• Is there a part of me that is hesitant? (If so, ask yourself what reservations you have and honor them.)
• Am I disclosing to meet my own needs or the needs of the group?
• How will disclosing information about this part of my life affect the members of the group?

• How will this information about me help to promote hope in the lives of the group members?
• Am I feeling pressured to disclose? Does this feel like a choice?
Your Summary

Instead of the classic "Here is what I attempted to tell you in 50 pages in a paragraph" kind of summary, I want you to write your own summary of things you want to keep in mind. Think about the material we've covered and the issues that stand out most clearly in your mind. Use this place to collect your thoughts, revisit sections, and make notes of your feelings and ideas. 

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• Topics I would like to learn or read about further:____________________________________

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• Ideas I have for group topics and formats:________________________________________

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• New goals I would like to set for myself:__________________________________________

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Conclusion

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are challenged to change ourselves.

—Viktor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning

We have discussed and reviewed a wide range of intense and meaningful topics fairly briefly. I do not believe that, having read this manual for the first time, you should expect to feel completely equipped to start your own peer support group. What an unrealistic expectation! I recognize that this manual will leave you with questions still unanswered. Write these questions down in your summary section or in the margins of this book. Revisit sections of this manual to help answer these questions. Re-read this manual with some peers and brainstorm how best to use this information. Compare your notes and responses to questions posed in these pages. Use the resources listed in Recommended Reading to further inspire, educate, and support you as you consider the information presented here and your role in a peer support group.

I wholeheartedly believe in the philosophy behind this approach, and I am challenged daily to mirror it in my own life, both professionally and personally. The Essence of Being Real does not just apply to peer support groups. It is a way of being that you can choose each day.
I have not tried to sell you one bit of information that I am not attempting to practice in my own life. The philosophy infusing this model provides an excellent foundation for anyone wanting to start a new peer support group or to strengthen an existing group. I have experienced the success of this model with my own peer support group, and I am confident and enthusiastic that it can work for you and your peers!

I hope this manual has planted some seeds of new possibilities in your life: to understand more deeply the role trauma has played in your life, to inspire you toward greater self-acceptance and enjoyment of your life, and to encourage you to risk being real with yourself and others. There is no risk more worth taking.

Please feel free to contact me with suggestions, thoughts, and feedback about this manual.

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I welcome the opportunity to respond to any feedback or questions you may have.
References and Recommended Reading


About the Sidran Institute

The Sidran Institute, a leader in traumatic stress education and advocacy, is a nationally focused nonprofit organization devoted to helping people who have experienced traumatic life events. Our education and advocacy promotes greater understanding of:

- The early recognition and treatment of trauma-related stress in children;
- The understanding of trauma and its long-term effect on adults;
- The strategies leading to greatest success in self-help recovery for trauma survivors;
- The clinical methods and practices leading to greatest success in aiding trauma victims;
- The development of public policy initiatives that are responsive to the needs of adult and child survivors of traumatic events.

To further this mission, Sidran operates the following programs:

The Sidran Press publishes books and educational materials on traumatic stress and dissociative conditions. A recently published example is *Growing Beyond Survival: A Self-Help Toolkit for Managing Traumatic Stress*, by Elizabeth Vermilyea. This innovative workbook provides skill-building tools to empower survivors to take control of their trauma symptoms.

Some of our other titles include *Risking Connection: A Training Curriculum for Working with Survivors of Childhood Abuse* (a curriculum for mental health professionals and paraprofessionals), *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art* (an interactive workbook to promote healing), and *Understanding the Effects of Traumatic Stress* (a manual for community agencies).

The Sidran Bookshelf on Trauma and Dissociation is an annotated mail order and web catalog of the best in clinical, educational, and survivor-supportive literature on post-traumatic stress, dissociative conditions, and related topics.

The Sidran Resource Center—drawing from Sidran's extensive database and library—provides resources and referrals at no cost to callers from around the English-speaking world. The referral database includes: trauma-experienced therapists, traumatic stress organizations, educational books and materials, conferences, trainings, and treatment facilities.

Sidran Education and Training Services provide conference speakers, pre-programmed and custom workshops, consultation, and technical assistance on all aspects of traumatic stress including:

- Agency Training on trauma-related topics, such as Trauma Symptom Management, Assessment and Treatment Planning, Borderline Personality Disorder, and others. We will be glad to customize presentations for the specific needs of your agency.
- Survivor Education programming including how to start and maintain effective peer support groups, community networking for trauma support, successful selection of therapists, coping skills, and healing skills.
- Public Education workshops on understanding PTSD and the psychological outcomes of severe childhood trauma for a variety of audiences: adult survivors, partners, and supporters; caregivers of abused children; and nonclinical professionals (such as teachers, social services personnel, clergy, etc.).

For more information on any of these programs and projects, please contact us:

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The Essence of Being Real offers men and women who have experienced trauma the education and inspiration to create relationship-based peer support groups in their communities. This framework relies heavily on the power of hope and the belief that every trauma survivor has an opportunity to rise above merely surviving. Portrayals of peer support groups in action depict a present-focused and connection-based philosophy that is compatible with other mutual support protocols. This manual can be used to form a new group or to enhance a pre-existing support group. By using the tools in this manual, you will develop a deeper understanding of how trauma affects relationships and how peer support can create long-lasting and meaningful change. If you want to learn how to develop a peer support group that facilitates hope and the power of relationships, The Essence of Being Real was written for you!

“An excellent resource that really absorbed me. The Essence of Being Real is a sensitive, insightful, and hope-driven book that will undoubtedly help survivors of trauma find courage and inspiration in reestablishing connection to themselves and others. This long-awaited approach to trauma support capitalizes on survivors’ strengths and reveals the healing power of relationships when fueled by authentic connection.”
— Laura Davis, author of I Thought We'd Never Speak Again and The Courage to Heal

“Jennifer Wilkerson sets a definitive new standard in peer support group dynamics that is destined to become a powerful and useful new tool for trauma survivors. The Essence of Being Real is a hands-on workbook of hope that offers us all a compassionate and mindful understanding of trauma and provides survivors with a roadmap to recovery.”
— Ira H. Minot, CSW, Publisher, Mental Health News

“Thank you, Jen, for your persistence, insight, and willingness to hear our struggles and collectively work towards solutions, finding the essence of what peer support and advocacy can be for trauma survivors. I see this manual as a great introduction to advocacy work for anyone wanting to learn how to effect change...”
— Susan Mockus, Victims of Violence Program/Outreach Coordinator/Director of Advocacy Services, Maryland Department of Special Populations/Peer Support Facilitator for fellow trauma survivors

The Essence of Being Real

ISBN 1-886968-12-8

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