

FIELD OF PRACTICE

In May 1979, the body of 16 year old murder victim, Julie Mykyta was found in a paddock at Truro. The discovery brought to an end two years of uncertainty for Julie's parents and friends. But the grief continued. The book, *It's a long Way to Truro* written by Julie's mother, Anne-Marie Mykyta, depicts many experiences and issues that are common to people who have been affected by a crime. These include shock, feeling unsafe, dealing with the legal system, loss of emotional support, curtailment of previous social activities and social and emotional adjustments in relationships with family members and friends (Moving Forward Manual Session 1, p1).

In 1979, recognising the need for support from others, Anne-Marie Mykyta and other family members of victims of the Truro and 'Family' murders in South Australia began meeting as a self-support group. Together with Ray Whitrod, they established the foundation for the current Victim Support Service, a non-government, not-for-profit agency, which provides support for victims of crime throughout South Australia. Whitrod stated at that time that *victims are not organised. All are individuals and there is no single non-political organization which looks after them.* (Mykyta, 1981, p 147). Hence his motivation to establish the organisation.

In recognition of the need that human beings have for support from other human beings, the agency had begun its life as a support group. It continues to provide support groups for victims of crime, but these groups are now facilitated by social workers employed by the agency.

As a social worker at Victim Support Service for the last three years, I have been a co-facilitator in four of the five groups that are currently conducted by the agency¹. The purpose of this paper is to consider the theories and models of social work which the social work team currently draw upon in group work practice. Through this process, I will explore my personal practice approach as a support group facilitator.

To begin, I will describe the nature of the client group and then give a brief synopsis of the specialised knowledge that is required

¹ The only group that I have not co-facilitated is the Ongoing Women's Group

to address the needs of this group. Next, I will outline the models and approaches that are currently used in our group work practice and some of the ethical issues we face. I will then describe how we develop our skills and knowledge through the review and evaluation process. Finally, I will summarise the key elements of our practice.

THE CLIENT GROUP

Clients of Victim Support Service are adults who have been affected by a crime either directly or indirectly. The nature of the crime and its impact can vary greatly. Crimes include murder, attempted murder, physical and sexual assault, house-break, home invasion, property crimes, theft, fraud, road incidents and armed hold-ups. Clients may have been the victim of one or more crimes. The crime may have occurred in the past or could be ongoing.

Support Groups

Support Groups have been designed to address the needs of a group of clients who are regarded to be facing similar issues (See Appendix I). There are currently two types of groups which are run on a time limited basis. These groups are conducted twice a year.

One, named the ACT (After Child Trauma) Group is for mothers of children who have been sexually abused. The other group, named the Moving Forward Group, is for women who have been a victim of any sort of crime. These two groups are held weekly over a period of 8-10 weeks. Each session lasts two and a half hours.

There are also three groups conducted on an ongoing basis. Two are for clients who have completed the time limited groups mentioned above. These groups meet once every six weeks for two and a half hours. The third, the LATTE Group, is a new and open² group which has been in operation since mid 2001.

The ACT Group

The ACT Group began in 1991 in response to an increasing number of referrals. It began as an ongoing, open group called

² Open groups are groups where clients are free to join and leave at any time

the Special Mum's Group and, at that time, meetings were held in the homes of group members. Following a review in 1997, some changes were made and the group (renamed the ACT Group) became a structured, time limited group with a greater focus on 'moving on'. (ACT Manual, 2001)

In response to client request, an ongoing group was re-established in 2001. The ongoing group now meets at VSS and a pre-requisite for joining the group is that the client has completed the time limited ACT group.

The Moving Forward Group

In 1990, this support group (then named the Women's Support Group) began as a pilot programme. So far, participants have included women who have been victims of crimes which include rape, domestic violence, murder, armed hold-up, home invasion and child sexual abuse (Moving Forward Manual, 2001). At the conclusion of this group, the participants are invited to join the Ongoing Women's Group.

The LATTE (Life After Threat, Terror and Endangerment) Group

Originally named the Armed Hold-Up Support Group, this group began as a time limited group to support people who had been the victim of an armed hold-up or home invasion. From 1999, a number of attempts to start a new group had failed due to lack of numbers at the time that the group was due to start. This was in spite of long list of self-referrals.

In 2001, an ongoing, open support group for these clients was piloted. Client feedback was positive and at the beginning of 2002, the group was launched with its new name, the LATTE Group. The new name was in response to client feedback that the group would be useful for people who had been subjected to any type of life-threatening crime.

The format and setting of groups

All groups are run by two facilitators. The time-limited and Ongoing Women's Group have two female facilitators and the ongoing ACT and LATTE Groups have a male and a female

facilitator. The LATTE Group is the only group with both male and female members as participants.

Each session of the time-limited groups and the Ongoing Women's Group usually includes:

- An ice-breaker/introductory activity
- A time for women to tell their stories and to respond to each other
- An input session
- Review, evaluation and planning (Moving Forward Manual)

The Ongoing ACT Group is less structured. Held as a lunch time meeting, it consists of the women sharing their stories and responding to each other. The LATTE Group has a well-defined structure and begins with a review of the group format and rules. Members then briefly introduce themselves. This is followed by members sharing their stories. During this time, attention is drawn to strategies which individuals have found useful to address the impact of the crime on their lives. The session concludes with a brief relaxation, breathing or meditation exercise.

In considering the setting for our groups, it is important that we address the needs of clients. Groups need to have a welcoming and comfortable environment. Group members also need to be sure that the setting is confidential. We establish this by having an attractive, private room with comfortable seating. There is ample space for the size of the group and refreshments, catering for varied needs and tastes are provided. What is unique about our groups is that most participants have a strong need to feel safe. This is particularly so with the LATTE Group which is held at night. For this group, so that people feel secure, we lock the front door as soon as everyone has arrived. After the group, we ensure that everyone has someone to accompany them to their vehicle

In addition, we need to be aware of and respond to individual needs. For instance, one of our clients becomes very anxious if she is approached from behind. We always make sure that she is facing the door and are careful not to approach her from behind without warning.

SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

Trauma

Judith Herman's work on trauma and the recovery process indicates that, no matter how wide-ranging the types of experiences, people who have suffered from traumatic events, suffer predictable psychological harm. The symptoms of hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction as described by Herman (Herman, 1992, pp35-42) are experienced by most of our clients who have undergone trauma. Clients frequently give descriptions of always being on the alert, of having flashbacks of the traumatic event, of being extremely sensitive to unusual sounds and of feeling frozen, incapable of action. According to Herman, the recovery process also follows a predictable course. This consists of three stages which are *establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community* (Herman, 1992, p3).

Using Herman's work to inform our practice with victims of traumatic crimes, we have been able to help clients to re-establish damaged psychological faculties. These include *the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy*. Herman states that because these capacities were originally formed in relationships, they can only be reformed in relationships. (Herman, 1992, p133).

There is considerable evidence to indicate that groups are invaluable for people who have suffered traumatic situations. *The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone. Nowhere is this experience more immediate, powerful, or convincing than in a group.*(Herman, 1992, p 215). Groups also provide the opportunity of collective empowerment. Each member has something to contribute. The strengths of each member are used and nurtured. Thus, *the group as a whole, has the capacity to bear and integrate traumatic experience that is greater than that of any individual member* (Herman, 1992, p216).

Loss and Grief

Crime is devastating because it upsets two fundamental assumptions on which we base our lives: our belief that the world is an orderly, meaningful place, and our belief in personal autonomy. Both assumptions are essential for wholeness (Zehr, 1990, p24 in Johnstone 2002).

The experience of being a victim of crime brings with it many losses. Weenolsen's description of the levels of loss that can be experienced is helpful when working with victims of crime. Losses can be:

- Primary – the loss itself
- Secondary – derivative, concrete losses
- Holistic – more remote, abstract
- Self-conceptual – loss of concept of self
- Metaphorical – idiosyncratic meaning of the loss

(Weenolsen, 1988, pp 20-25)

For example, a victim of an armed holdup will suffer the primary loss of the stolen goods, but the losses that are harder to come to terms with may include loss of feeling safe, loss of the ability to work and hence financial loss and loss of self-esteem. Other losses may include a diminished social life and changed relationships with people who are important to them. An additional issue that crime victims may have to deal with is the fact that losses are “off-time”. Here the victim loses both the life events and the expectation of them (Weenolsen, 1988, p23). An illustration of this is Anne-Marie Mykyta's unexpected loss of her daughter at such a young age.

Victims need time to mourn such losses and to deal with the feelings that accompany this process, feelings such as shock, anger, fear, guilt, denial, resentment, helplessness, detachment and meaninglessness (Bonnie Hunt, 1991). Members of the ACT Group grieve not only for their own losses, but also for the losses suffered by their children. These include the loss of innocence, the loss of their childhood and the loss of the ability to trust.

When assisting our clients through the grieving process, we find it helpful to consider the four tasks of mourning as described by Worden:

1. To accept the reality of the loss
2. To experience the pain of the loss
3. To adjust to the environment without the lost object
4. To relocate the lost object and reinvest in new relationships

(Worden, 1991, p38)

Victimology and the Criminal Justice System

The Criminal Justice System is heavily weighted in favour of the offender. It is also a very slow process. For many clients, this can mean retraumatisation by the Criminal Justice System sometimes many months after the crime has occurred.

The criminal justice system, through its apparent blindness to the fact that crime is at its core a violation of a particular person as well as a wrong against society, often adds to the injury suffered by victims. (Johnstone, p62)

Being aware of court processes, the workings of the legal system and the way that it treats victims as opposed to offenders, is essential when supporting clients through this time. It is the task of our agency to ensure that victims are aware of their rights and that these rights are upheld (See Appendix IV).

The adversarial system favours the confident and the articulate (Swain, 1995, p276), so there are many times when our clients need support as they attempt to achieve justice through the legal system. This can be in presentation of victim impact statements, appearing as a witness or contesting custody decisions. As social workers, we need to be able to identify when the central issue for our clients is purely a legal resolution, when social work interventions are the major need and when there needs to be a partnership between the two, *a partnership of different but compatible skills, values, knowledge and frameworks of understanding* (Swain, 1995, p 288).

Principles of Adult Learning

As our clients are all adults and there is an educational component to our groups, we need to keep in mind, the principles that provide the optimum learning environment for adults. These include:

- Providing a mutually supportive learning environment
- Actively involving group members
- Providing learning opportunities that are relevant to their needs
- Recognising and using the skills and knowledge of group members
- Using processes that provide for a variety of learning styles

Group Work Theory

Obviously, for our groups to be successful, we need to employ effective group work techniques. An effective group has three core activities:

1. To accomplish its goals
2. To maintain good working relationships among its members
3. To develop and adapt to changing conditions (Johnson & Johnson, 1991, p21)

As a group facilitator, it is my role to ensure that we attend to all of the above in our group work practice. The third point is particularly important for the ongoing groups which run over an extended time.

The group situation makes good use of adult learning principles in that it allows ample opportunity for participants to learn from each other. All groups allow for participants to share strategies which they have found successful in dealing with the impact of a crime. They also provide opportunities for practicing some of these strategies, such as assertiveness training and relaxation techniques.

“Experts” will be used when participants identify an area in which they feel the need to know more, and when group members and leaders do not have enough knowledge to provide the input or training.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND RATIONALE

My preferred approach to social work practice with individuals and groups is one which could be described as holistic or eclectic. It is my belief that flexibility in approach provides the opportunity to better meet the needs of the client (or client group) as a whole by making maximum use of the knowledge and skills of the leaders and participants.

Although eclecticism has its skeptics, there is growing evidence that an eclectic approach is essential to deal with the complexity of human problems. Whilst some clients may respond well to one approach, others may not find the same approach at all useful

Thompson(1996, p11). By using a number of approaches, clients can take that which is useful and ignore that which is not.

Canda and Furman describe holistic helping as *healing – making and restoring wholeness and holiness, not only with clients, but in ourselves and in our agencies and educational institutions.* (Canda & Furman, 1999, p 193)

In our group work practice at Victim Support Service, we use three main models and approaches to our group work practice. As will be shown, these are inclusive of a number of other theories, models and approaches. In the discussion that follows, I will draw attention to the ways that clients, workers and the agency benefit from our holistic approach.

I. The Mutual Aid Model

Also known as the Reciprocal Model or the Mediation Model, this model presupposes a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the group.

Each needs the other for its own life and growth and each reaches out to the other with all possible strength at a given moment (Schwarz, 1971, p 1259).

Because of the recognition of the opportunities for healing and support that come from self-help groups consisting of people who have been through a similar experience, the Mutual Aid Model has always been used for group work practice at Victim Support Service. The use of this model helps to break down the sense of isolation that many crime victims feel.

At all groups, members will describe how much they value the opportunity to meet with people who understand because they have been through a similar experience. In attending a group, there is a huge sense of relief because members know that they will not be judged by others in the group for the way that they are feeling or reacting. Even when no words are spoken, they know that the other group members understand and are empathising with them. This provides strong support to the healing process for individuals.

Our group work practice employs the four phases of the Mutual Aid Model - the tuning-in, the contract, the work and termination phases (Schwarz, 1971, pp 13-18).

The tuning-in phase

For clients at Victim Support Service, the tuning-in phase begins with their first contact with a social worker on the phone. This person, the Intake Worker³, is the first social worker in the service to hear the client's story. It is the task of the Intake Worker to assess the current needs of the client and to suggest options to address those needs. The variety of options available to the client include 1:1 counselling with a Victim Support Service social worker and/or participation in a group conducted by Victim Support Service.

If the group option is selected, the tuning in process will occur again in the first session of the group. If the client has also chosen to access the 1:1 counseling option, then there will have been another step to the tuning-in process during the first face-to-face counseling session. At times, the face-to-face counselor will also be a group facilitator. In these instances, the tuning-in information gathered from the face-to-face counseling session, can readily be used for the benefit of the individual within the group.

Under the agency guidelines with regard to confidentiality, the counselor will disclose relevant client details to the other group facilitator. If the client has not decided to access the counseling service at Victim Support Service, then for time limited groups, a pre-group interview is conducted by one of the group facilitators. This interview provides the interviewer with the opportunity to further the tuning-in process begun by the Intake Worker. Once the information from all potential participants has been gathered, the group facilitators also have the opportunity to consider whether there is a good match between the needs of the individual and the opportunities available through the group process.

Tuning in also occurs at the beginning of every session thus providing the opportunity for the group to deal with issues as they emerge.

The contract phase

³ My role at Victim Support Service includes that of Intake Worker

Early in the first session of each of the time limited groups, the group is involved in a contractual process. The facilitators use a group process to come to an agreement on group norms which will remain in operation for the duration of the group (See Appendix II). Some of the norms, such as confidentiality, will extend beyond the life of the group.

In the LATTE Group, the group rules were established in the first two sessions of the group being formed but are re-visited at every session. This is considered necessary because one or more new group members are usually present at each session. At the beginning of each group session, a facilitator checks that all present agree to abide by the group rules.

In the ongoing groups, there is not the need to do this every session as all members have previously participated in a group and agreed to abide by the rules. However, if the need arises, the group rules will be revisited.

The work phase for time limited groups

Most of the work phase is conducted in the sessions between the first and the last and it has two main parts. The first is an opportunity for the women to share their stories and respond to each other. The second is an educational session conducted by the group facilitators or an invited guest. The topics covered include the impact of crime, dominant beliefs in society, grief, loss and trauma, dealing with anger, self-esteem, assertiveness and strategies for self-care (see Appendix III).

The work phase for ongoing groups

The work phase for ongoing groups occurs at every session and usually commences a short time after the group has convened. For the LATTE Group, it is usually after the group rules have been agreed to. For the ongoing ACT and Moving Forward Groups, it can begin as soon as the women arrive, but may begin after the initial greeting and settling in process. For the ongoing ACT group, the work phase consists of group members sharing stories and responding to each other. In addition to this session at the Ongoing Women's Group, there are also regular educational sessions with topics similar to the time limited groups.

The termination phase

The last week of the time limited groups is treated as termination of the group although some of the participants will elect to continue their connection with the agency in one or more ways. These include becoming a member of an ongoing group, 1:1 counseling and use of advocacy and support services available from the agency. The termination phase includes an opportunity for group members to provide feedback orally and in a written form. Issues arising from this feedback are addressed when planning the next group.

II. The Empowerment Approach

For many victims of crime, one of the issues that is difficult to deal with, is the fact that the offender has taken control over their life or an aspect of their life. This is not necessarily only for the period of time that the crime was being committed, but often continues well beyond. For instance, victims of a home invasion often find it difficult to live in their homes after the event and feel forced to move to another home despite a strong attachment to the home where the crime occurred. When the victim is female and has suffered from a domestic violence situation or sexual assault, the power issues are much more complex. In order to heal, victims need to feel that they have regained control over their lives.

It is clear that the use of an empowerment approach to our group work practice is essential if we are to be effective. The greatest human power upon which we can draw is the power of collectivity (Lee, 1994, p9). The empowerment approach is therefore inclusive of the group work processes used in the Mutual Aid Model. It also includes other theories, models and approaches.

Judith Lee's description of a fifocal vision is helpful in identifying these. To be effective in our empowerment practice, we need to include an historical view of oppression, an ecological view, an ethclass perspective, a feminist perspective and a critical perspective (Lee, 1994, p26). At Victim Support Service, our group work practice includes all of these views, but with a particular

emphasis on feminist theory, the strengths perspective and the critical perspective.

Feminist Approaches

Feminist approaches to social work have grown out of women's experiences of oppression, but the approaches are not for women only (Lee, 1994, p108). Feminist approaches

- address all types of oppression whether they be based on gender, class, race, age, sexuality, socio-economics or any other basis
- are inclusive
- view the personal as political
- aim for personal empowerment rather than power over
- challenge the values and assumptions of our patriarchal society
- value 'feminine' skills such as nurturing, caring, intuition, creativity and mutual interdependence
- view humans as part of an interactive system and recognise the interconnectedness between the inner psychological world and the external worlds
- are multi/inter/intra-disciplinary
- are transformational - working towards a better future where feminine ways are valued as much as masculine ways
- value process and product
- realise the validity of naming one's own experience
- respect and celebrate diversity, promoting it as a source of strength
- validate the non-rational
- raise consciousness and praxis

(Lee, 1994, pp109-110, Collins, 1986, pp 214-219 and Chaplin, 1999 pp1-5)

Keeping the above in mind, our group work practices include

- aiming for equality between the worker and the client
- use of techniques such as assertiveness training
- use of symbols myths and dreams
- use of skills such as warmth, empathy, genuineness and active listening (Chaplin, 1999, p18)
- awareness raising and the provision of relevant information through educational sessions
- exploring within
- promoting collective action

Strengths Perspective

A common impact of crime is that the victim feels a sense of guilt over the event, indulges in self-blame and experiences a diminished sense of self worth. *Clients are sometimes unaware of their own strengths, that some of their knowledge, talents, and experience can be used in the service of recovery and development – their own and that of others* (Weick et al 1989). An important part of the group process is to raise awareness of, and to restore belief in, the strengths of the individual or group. The group processes provide ongoing opportunity to draw attention to and recognise the strengths of individuals and the group.

Critical Perspective

Using this perspective we encourage clients to challenge the dominant beliefs of society. For instance, in the ACT group, we explore the myths and realities around being a woman and a mother. For many women, dominant beliefs have gone unchallenged and remain an oppressive force in their lives. For these women, the process develops a new awareness which can inform their future choices and actions.

III. Spiritual Approach

It would be unethical to ignore spirituality in our social work practice, because we would be ignoring a critical aspect of the client's life. All of our group work incorporates the spiritual model of social work practice to some degree. For some clients, spirituality is more evident and more important in their lives than it is for others. Our challenge is to be inclusive of these differences.

The spirituality and existential models are closely related. The spiritual model also has strong links with the feminist and strengths perspectives and is essential in culturally sensitive social work practice. It includes a search for meaning and explores a moral framework for relating to self, others and the client's perception of the ultimate reality. Relationships are central to the approach and it requires an exploration of values and beliefs.

Spiritually orientated activities include the arts, dialoging across spiritual perspectives, developing and participating in rituals and

ceremonies, guided visualisations, meditations, journal keeping, reading spiritual materials, dream interpretation and exploring myths, symbols and traditions. (Rice & Craven 2000)

As part of the group experience, there is often a struggle to understand and accept the anxiety and suffering that are the consequences of the trauma that arises from being a victim of crime. Viktor Frankl believes that the attitude that we take towards suffering is one of the ways to find meaning in life. The other two ways are by creating a work or doing a deed and by experiencing something or encountering someone (Frankl, 1985, p133-134).

Support Groups provide the opportunity for encountering a number of 'someones' who can support clients in their search for meaning. For instance, in one LATTE Group session, there was a great deal of discussion exploring the question of why some individuals seem to experience one trauma after another and the meaning that it has for them in their lives.

From the group experience, clients may go on to create a work or do a deed. For some of our clients, writing the story of their experience and having it published in our newsletter is an important step in their search for meaning and hence the healing process. Clients have commented on the benefits that they have received from reading these stories.

CONTEXTUAL CONCERNS OF AGENCY PRACTICE

Support Groups in Australasia

As indicated by its name, one of the major purposes of our agency is to provide support for victims of crime. It is the reason that the agency was established. If we are to do this effectively, then we need, firstly, to make available services which will provide the type of support that best addresses the needs of victims of crime. Secondly, we need to ensure that information about the services we provide is readily available to the people who may wish to access them. I have previously mentioned that the provision of support groups is given high priority by Victim Support Service. This is not so in other parts of Australasia.

A mid 2002 telephone survey of victim support agencies in Australia and New Zealand found that no group support is offered

by any of the 67 agencies in New Zealand. Within Australia, two agencies in Sydney offer some group support, mostly in ongoing, unstructured groups. In Victoria, VRAS provides an open, ongoing homicide support group and states that it does not see a need for other support groups. No other Australian agencies (of which there are around 25) provide regular support groups.

Establishing New Groups

Four times a year, Victim Support Service goes through the process of establishing a time limited group. Referrals come from our own service and from other relevant services. From past experience, we know that the group is highly likely to lose some members along the way. There will also be the inevitable absences. Although we usually have a large number of referrals for each group, we sometimes have difficulty in starting a group with enough members to make it effective.

A challenge that we currently face as an agency is how to advertise our groups so that the people who are likely to benefit from the service, know that it exists. We are certain that the need is there. Feedback from past participants indicates that some have had difficulty in finding out about our service even though they were actively seeking such a service. One of the most effective means of advertising has been personal contact with workers in relevant agencies, but this can be time-consuming.

Responding to Need

The other is to provide the type of group support that best meets people's needs. These may change over time. In order to do this, we need to respond to the information available to us. For instance, the time limited Armed Hold Up Group was popular for some time, but then became difficult to establish. The ongoing LATTE Group was established in its place. It has now been running since the middle of 2001 and is regularly attended by 6-8 people. Each session has included new group members and members who have attended for one or more sessions.

We currently run no groups for men only and the LATTE Group is the only one which includes male members. There has been no obvious demand for a men only group, but there have been requests for male, non-offending parents to join the ACT Group.

To this point, we have decided not to include men in this group as most child sexual abuse offenders are male and, in these groups, there is always a deal of anger expressed about males generally. To meet the need of non-offending fathers, we are currently giving consideration to running one or two workshops which would be available to males and females.

Clearly, men as well as women, are victims of crime. We must explore the question of their need for group support. We are currently in the process of addressing the issue of how inclusive we are of other groups in society, in particular of indigenous people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

As an adult agency, we do not cater for child victims of crime, but in our role as advocate, we have done some ground work to gather evidence to support our theory that child victims of crime are not readily able to access appropriate and timely support. At the time of writing, there are no groups available in Adelaide which provide support to child victims of crime.

One of the challenges in setting up a group is that some people find it difficult to travel to our office which is based in the city centre. For this reason, we are trialling running groups in the suburbs with a social worker from another agency. This raises the issue of whether another worker's approach will fit with our eclectic model of group practice. The other issue that arises is whether Victim Support Service wishes to be protective of its intellectual property.

Facilitators

Although the time-limited ACT Group has two female facilitators to allow participants ample time to freely vent and explore their anger toward males, it was decided that it would be beneficial to have a male facilitator in the ongoing ACT Group so that the women could experience a positive male role model.

Before the group was formed, the participants of the most recent ACT Group were consulted and it was agreed to trial the male/female facilitator format for a few months and then review. At the review, it was agreed to keep the male and female facilitators. The most important issue for the women seemed to be that at least one of the facilitators was someone with whom they

had formed a good relationship. More evidence of the importance of relationships.

Regional Services

For most of its life, Victim Support Service has been a metropolitan based service, with limited support provided to country areas of South Australia. In July 2001, we began the process of establishing offices in five regional areas. This has now been achieved. Each office is staffed by a part time worker (no more than two days a week) and volunteers. The issue of providing support groups in each of these regional areas is yet to be addressed. Challenges to be faced will include level of human resources and travelling distances.

Benefits of Support Groups

The value of group work with victims of crime is stated very powerfully by Judith Herman:

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shares and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (Herman, 1992, p 214).

In addition to benefits within the group, there are also benefits external to the group. I have mentioned the value of publishing client stories. Also, group participants have volunteered to give talks in person or on video to police officers, workers in other agencies and to offenders. This has been very effective in providing victim awareness training for relevant workers in the field and for assisting restorative justice processes.

If the type of group work provided at Victim Support Service is potentially so beneficial, then we need to address the question of whether and how the information and/or training can be provided to workers in other agencies. As a social worker and group facilitator at VSS, it is my role to address the issues raised above in addition to providing an effective group programme.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Equality between the worker and the client

Feminist approaches say that group work practices should aim for equality between the worker and the client (Lee 1994). If we were to aim for this, then group facilitators would be participating on equal terms with clients. This would include sharing of stories and using the group to address personal issues. If facilitators were to do this, then time would be taken away from clients. Not only that, but the facilitator would lose focus on supporting the clients. Within the group structure, there is flexibility to respond to client issues as they arise. If the facilitator was involved in addressing personal issues, this ability to actively listen and respond would be lost. On the other hand, if no personal information is shared, there can be a very unequal balance of power. The challenge to group facilitators then, is to strike a balance between sharing enough personal information so as to bring a reasonable balance of power to the group without sharing so much that the group loses its focus of being there to assist clients.

The possibility of harm to clients

Herman (1992, p217) says that we need to provide different groups for different stages of recovery. She says that a group which is beneficial to an individual at one stage of recovery might be ineffective or even harmful to the same individual at another stage of recovery. Herman sees groups as having three major tasks:

- first stage groups which focus on establishing safety
- second stage groups which focus on the traumatic event
- third stage groups which focus on reintegration.

The structure of each group should be related to the task (Herman, 1992, p 217).

The time-limited groups at Victim Support Service do not always need to focus on establishing safety, but usually go through the second and third stages as described by Herman. Because of the nature of the crimes and because new members are continually joining the ongoing LATTE Group, there is a need to address all three tasks regularly.

If, as Herman says, there is a potential for harm, then we need to address this as a matter of urgency. I am always aware of the

possibility of vicarious traumatisation for clients through listening to the stories of others, but feedback from clients has seldom mentioned this as an issue. However, I am aware of one group member who chose to stop attending because of the distress she experienced from hearing the stories of others. Perhaps, in the ongoing groups, there are individuals who have chosen to stop attending due to vicarious traumatisation, but have not given us the feedback. In the client evaluation process which is planned for late in 2002, it is important that we seek client feedback on this issue.

Confidentiality

The norms of the group always require confidentiality within the group. However, as mandatory reporters, there may be times when facilitators need to break confidentiality. For ethical practice, it is essential that such exceptions be made clear to participants even though this may mean that participants may choose not to discuss some issues within the group.

Exclusion and inclusion of clients in groups

Occasionally, we face the issue that individuals who seek to join a group may compromise the successful running of the group. The dilemma is whether it is right to exclude such individuals from the group.

On the other hand, we need to address the issue of how inclusive are our groups. Are individuals being unconsciously excluded because of our work practices? For instance, I am not aware of any aboriginal clients who have been group members. We also do not know how well our service is being accessed by people from a non-English speaking background. These issues are currently being addressed in our strategic plan.

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Evaluation of the support group programme is a continuing process and part of our reflective practice. It is assisted by the fact that each group has two facilitators. At the end of each session (sometimes during) and at the conclusion of each time limited group, the facilitators meet to reflect on what went well and what

might need to be changed. This includes reflection on the practice of the facilitators as individuals and as a team. Information which could be helpful for future group planning is passed on to the social work team. A general client evaluation process is planned for late 2002. This will provide another opportunity to gather feedback on the value of groups to individuals.

At the conclusion of each time limited group, participants are asked to complete evaluation forms and are also given the opportunity to give oral feedback to the group as a whole. Feedback also comes in other forms such as this poem which was written by one of the participants in an ACT Group.

UNITED AS ONE

*We are a group of women
From different walks of life
We've suffered all the same things
And gone through lots of strife*

*Our children were the first
To suffer the initial pain
Now us and our families
Live each day to try to stay sane*

*They were our friends, our husbands
Who did this inexplicable act
That destroyed our whole existence
Nothing will ever bring it back*

*But as a group of ladies
Who live each day as it comes
We've come to help each other
And become United as One*

*We try to do the right thing
And make them pay their dues
To ask justice for our children
But the law doesn't; now there's some news*

*So how do we as mothers
Make things better for our kids
And how do we cope with our lives
When we feel we're on the skids*

*We take each and every day
And try to do our best
Help each other to deal with it
And organize this mess*

*We'll share our love and support
Our understanding too
And know that each of us
Is special just like you*

*So together we can do this
To let the world know we've won
Because we came together each week
And became United as One*

J K Lawrence

Feedback from participants remains positive overall. Criticism is given serious consideration and has precipitated change. Participants have said that the group:

- Complements/progresses/builds on individual work and vice versa
- Normalises their reactions
- Reduces the sense of isolation
- Provides the opportunity to learn from each other
- Is nurturing and caring
- leads to support outside the group eg court support

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

In summary, Victim Support Service views group work as an essential intervention to be available to clients who access our service. It is complementary to our counseling and court support service. We employ a variety of theories and approaches within different group formats in order to be able to address the varying needs of clients. Theories and approaches include:

- the mutual aid model
- empowerment approaches which are inclusive of feminist approaches, the strengths perspective and the critical perspective
- spiritual approaches

Our holistic approach allows the opportunity for group facilitators, as well as clients, to grow and develop personally and professionally. As the workers grow and develop, so does the agency. To ensure a healthy holistic approach, it is important that

we maintain an up to date knowledge of theory, have an integrative philosophy of human behaviour and are flexible in the way that we fit the approach to the client (Cavanagh, 1982 in Thompson 1996, p 13).