

Helping Men Recover: Open Group Guidelines

Helping Men Recover is structured as a treatment curriculum ideally suited for a closed group. When a cohort of men begins and moves through the material together, they experience a unique, and powerful, shared journey. However, the authors are fully aware that most treatment facilities are unable to run exclusively closed groups. For this reason, each of the four modules and a majority of the individual sessions were designed to be self-contained. The treatment facility where the curriculum was first piloted and refined has been running open groups for over two years with great success. We suggest the following guidelines when using *Helping Men Recover* with an open group.

Starting A New Client

An orientation to the curriculum is essential when a client begins the group at any time other than Session 1. The orientation should precede the initial session and include an overview of the curriculum and the main themes that are covered. Particularly critical is a summary of the foundational themes addressed in Session 2. New clients should be given a workbook and instructed in its use. They should be assigned to read the brief introduction and the section in Session I entitled "Group Agreements".

Assigning a senior peer as mentor can be extremely helpful for each new client. If a new client is struggling with assimilating into the group, an individual counseling session may be necessary. If possible, having each new group member complete dyadic encounters with several group peers will usually expedite the assimilation process.

Each session is designed to begin with a brief review of the previous session – this element is particularly critical when running open groups. Asking group peers to lead this conversation has multiple positive effects.

Scheduling New Starts

Some facilities have adopted a hybrid approach with the curriculum; the groups are open, but new members can only join at the beginning of a module. This is an extremely effective and practical compromise. If you must run a completely open group, we strongly urge you not to start new clients at Sessions 7, 9, 10, or 14. Sessions 7 and 14 address abuse, violence, and trauma in a very direct manner. A high level of trust and safety is essential for the group members to fully engage in these discussions. Sessions 9 and 10 require the immediately preceding session to establish a foundation for the group activities.

Modifying Sessions

The only session that requires modification is Session 18. The Facilitator Guide allows for a considerable amount of time for “Honoring Our Time Together”. This activity is essentially a group graduation ceremony. In an open group, clients will be completing the curriculum on an ongoing basis; therefore this exercise is unnecessary. We recommend ending the session with the segment on “Saying Goodbye”. Even though most of the men will be continuing in the program, a discussion on healthy ways to end or transform relationships is an important topic to cover.

Session 1 allows time for an introduction to the “Group Agreements”. We recommend keeping this activity despite the fact that all of the clients will have already been familiarized with these expectations. A review and a renewed commitment to the group rules is a beneficial exercise.

Graduating Clients

In an open group, clients will be completing the curriculum at various times. It is essential to acknowledge and honor their work. Depending on the size of the group and the number of men who will be leaving, allow five to fifteen minutes at the end of the session for a graduation ceremony. We recommend using the same format that is outlined at the end of Session 18 in the Facilitator Guide. You will need to plan for these ceremonies by making adjustments in the timing for the session.

Building Trust and Loss of Leadership

The most significant advantage of a closed group is the familiarity and trust that the men develop with each other over time. In an open group format, each new member brings an unknown dynamic to the process. (Open groups have many offsetting advantages, such as the effect that senior peers can have on maintaining a positive group culture.) We recommend that time is allotted for new members to introduce themselves briefly at the beginning of their first session. The facilitators should reinforce the notion that each individual adds to the richness and texture of the group. All therapy groups experience ebb and flow. Normalize the difficulty of building trust, and frame this within the broad context of the curriculum’s emphasis on male socialization. Each variation in the group dynamic is an opportunity for insight and growth.

Over time, certain individuals will inevitably emerge as group leaders. When one or more of these leaders graduate, the group will experience a sense of loss and a vacuum is created. Facilitators can mitigate this effect by not allowing one or two clients to dominate the group. It is also important for facilitators to openly acknowledge the loss and gently challenge remaining members to step forward and assume leadership roles.