

Development of a Complex Trauma Group for Women 'Survivors' of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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With thanks to the women who took part in the piloting of the group and the commitment, effort and work that they put into its development.



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Qualitative Study Structure

The following slides contain a selection of responses extracted from the Qualitative Study Report and focussed on the Group Experience

Pre-group anticipation

"I wanted to learn and know why I was this mess, I wanted a path that I could walk on that I could make myself learn and do something about it instead of sitting in that same spot that I'd done for twenty odd years. I didn't want to be that person that sits in that spot any more I wanted to do something about it."

Participant 1019

"I('ve) been waiting all my life for it, because I've struggled with mental health since I was sixteen on and off. I've never had any support from community mental health em... so when I was given this opportunity for a CBT kind of group it was like a dynamic, I said yes I need this this is what I've been trying to get for so long from the NHS"

Participant 1015

"I wasn't sure to be honest (nervous laugh) em... especially being in a group, but em... I thought maybe it might do some good..."

Interviewer: "What do you think sort of pushed you to go?"

Participant: "Em... because I wanted to get better, I wanted to change. Em... I wanted to try and make things different."

Participant 1010

Early concerns

Participant: "I was a bit dubious because it was a man kind of thing, do you know what I mean?"

Interviewer: "Yes, so tell me a bit more about that..."

Participant: He did say in the letter though he is a man, and most women will feel uncomfortable speaking to a man about it and whatnot, but there's also going to be two women there. He told me a bit about what he does and that he's a psychologist and whatnot, and I just thought you know what I'm just going to go for it then, so yeh I did".
Participant 1004

Participant: "Part of me was thinking what to expect, I just don't like doing things like that."

Interviewer: "So what in particular where you worried about?"

Participant: "Just everything, meeting people I didn't know.....What sort of things might come out, and you know, it's all just scary". Participant 1010

"Well, at first I must admit, I was scared because I don't do well em... like I say outside of my home environment and, and, I think at first I was a bit scared of you know sort of speaking up or saying very much at all but em..... everybody here was very, very friendly and very supportive And I found after a couple of times of going I relaxed and could take part better." Participant 1008

Interviewer: "Were you worried about anything specific?"

Participant: "People, people in general. Being judged I think em... Meeting therapists who are I suppose cleverer than the rest of the world it was very difficult to be in that position."

Participant 1019

Feeling safe

“If anybody did find it too difficult or get upset they could take themselves out there was a safe room... I didn’t really use the safe room although a lot of them did, and then a member of staff will come and check do you want company or you want to be left alone, if you just want to stay where you are or you want to come back into group, you now that was, I think that was really good to know that you felt supported.” Participant 1017

“It was just right, it was just right. It was done in such a way that it wasn’t going to be scary or that you felt that you had to give more of yourself. Or that you were going to find yourself in a room full of people who were breaking down... I think because we knew from the start that there was going to be a limited size that it was going to be a small group that was helpful. I think the size of the group was just right... also the fact that we were all women of course that helped a lot...” Participant 1008

“For me it was where it was held wasn’t ideal really, it was a community centre, there was like a nursery next to it, so obviously little children playing and stuff ... that’s quite a distraction for me even though I’ve got children myself you could hear little screaming and if you’re feeling a bit vulnerable I found that a bit difficult to be honest where it was held.” Participant 1014

“The first few weeks I found it very difficult, well it all was, but it got easier as the weeks went on. I don’t think I said much at all in the first few weeks... I felt safer as the weeks went on in the group.”

Participant 1010

“I thought yes it’s a small group, because I didn’t want so many people. If it’s a big group it’s quite intimidating and that’s what my main concern was at the beginning.”

Participant 1019

Group ethos

"I actually looked forward to going each week because the girls were a good laugh, that's even when it was tough we were supporting each other which was quite good." Participant 1017

"(The) sense of camaraderie was the best thing definitely, just to be with like-minded women that have been through the mill and know how hard the struggle is daily. ... you just don't recover from abuse, I don't think you ever recover from being abused. ... and to be around other women that were genuinely broken ...It made my problems seem less ... I am faring better than some people here are. So that was good for me to see." Participant 1001

"So I'm using the term sisterhood here because we've all had similar experiences, and if it's not similar, we feel the same about the situation we've been in about the past trauma. And I suppose I don't like to use the word warrior anymore, it's silly isn't it, but when you're stuck together and you can talk to someone who has been through what you've been through, that's when I think sisterhood, you help lift each other up, because you know what they've felt like too." Participant 1022

"Being alone knowing what's happened to you is horrific. I haven't got that anymore because I know in this group there is different ages of people, old people, and different backgrounds... but we've all got that one thing in connection and that's childhood traumas." Participant 1014

Empathy

“This group makes you look at other things and you have empathy for other people and understand oh yeh, I can understand that now, when you do things a certain way, and the way I think it’s not just me then.” Participant 1014

“It makes you realise even though we’ve all experienced something similar different and how we’ve handled it is similar but different, we can all empathise with each other and with the pain each other have suffered”. Participant 1017

“I won’t lie it brought, it did bring up a lot of memories, because people would say things and I can relate to that... but I don’t necessarily think that was bad because it helped me to relate to them a bit more, especially as the group went on and I got to know them ... I could relate to them and have empathy towards them like what they were saying. And every now and then I’d be saying I understand that feeling. I might not have said anything much more about it but I was able to you know.” Participant 1015

“It felt comforting to be around people who knew exactly what I’d been through and understood, you didn’t have to go into any detail, we were all there for the same reasons.” Participant 1001

“It didn’t matter if you were having a good or a bad day you still wanted to go. You still wanted to see all the other girls and you still wanted to feel that you could talk, you could say anything you wanted to, and every one of them in the room even if they hadn’t actually experienced it themselves you got some understanding, some empathy, and that sometimes somebody having empathy with you. Because the amount of people that have said over the years Oh I understand what you mean, Oh I understand what you’ve been through. No you don’t know, you haven’t been through it. These did though so they could say that.” Participant 1017

Emotions

"It's the difference between em... Knowing something logically and looking at it from an outsiders point of view, which I did do, or feeling something emotionally and yes I can look at myself and I can say yes it's clear now from what I learnt that you are suffering from this and this and this is quite normal that you are how you are...what you call difficult and negative traits about myself were not just bubbling up from an inner badness, but has been caused by you know my experiences as a child." Participant 1008

"They did bring in one thing towards the end, I think it was the shame, I struggled with that, I did tell them if they'd done that at the beginning I wouldn't have gone then.....Because that was a big, that was the reason I got upset, I did say to [names facilitator] 'if you had brought that back at the beginning I wouldn't have come back'. But everything they did week after week they broke in gently, it was done to my ability it was done in a very subtle way."

Participant 1014

"All I did was cry. I don't cry, I have a real issue with crying because I wasn't allowed to cry as a kid, and maybe that's what it was, I felt safe enough to cry."

Participant 1017

"Knowing more about my habitual feelings and I suppose my inner voices I've benefited more from that ... I've come out of my shell more knowing that I'm not crazy." Participant 1019

"It's knowing that we all came from the same sort of place, even though we've handled it different and we're all experiencing it differently we've all agreed to respect that we are allowed to get emotional allowed to get upset as long as we are not directing it at somebody else that's fine...The first few weeks ... we were all nervous are we going to trigger somebody else's things if we say something. Once we realised actually its ok if we do get triggered, it's ok if we do get upset, it's ok to have a laugh....it really pulled us together." Participant 1017

Anxiety

“I was adamant that especially when they were talking about anxiety it was very, very, difficult (nervous laughter) at first for me to even accept that I could even have anxiety (nervous laughter) And for a good four weeks, I don’t have anxiety, I don’t have anxiety, I don’t do anxiety no (small laugh). And then the more I was reading it and the more the therapists were questioning me and it was em... well it was coming to life that I could see oh my god, I could see this broken anguished person who does have anxiety, who does not have any control of what is going on, and these people know me better than I know myself. That was a big, big, scare for me. It was quite off-putting and I became quite ill all of a sudden I had headaches, a lot coming in so it was quite overpowering and overwhelming but it was helpful as well because I was starting to understand myself.” Participant 1019

Self-kindness

"I was looking at them (day to day problems) from a different mind-set, I was like almost forgiving myself if you like and appreciating well there are reasons behind this, this is the consequence of this. So I was able to be less hard on myself when I got home and just I don't know, it made me more relaxed." Participant 1001

"It's (group) made me feel a lot better about myself, and I'm a lot stronger than what I even thought I was". Participant 1004

"We was taught in the course to not feel shame not feel guilt. I think they're all alright they can still be underneath. Again it gets you into the adult to look at what you've been through, tell yourself not to blame yourself. Know about guilt, and it should be them that are guilty." Participant 1022

"Over time I have little things that have changed in my head, for example I say, I will I'll say "you're stupid, you're stupid, for god's sake you're stupid" and that's one word I use quite a lot, and I've changed it now in my head to "no, you're just unfortunate, you're just unfortunate"." Participant 1019

Participant: "I always used to think really ...everything that has happened was my fault. When things go wrong it's my fault."

Interviewer: "Has the Group ... changed that in any way?"

Participant: "Yeh... a lot of my time, even with small things my first reaction is something you know. Somebody will say you know or make me feel is my fault and then I'll think about it and no it wasn't my fault. Sometimes it is my fault but sometimes it isn't, but I'm not to blame for everything."

Interviewer: "And that came directly from the Group?"

Participant: "Yeh."

Participant 1010

Problem dynamics

"I spoke up when I wanted too, but I didn't take over. I found that there was somebody who was kind of taking over, one of the participants, so the quiet people who didn't really speak that much they'd get half way through saying something and she'd pipe in and say something and make it something about her...She's a lovely girl and she's been through crap herself ... but, she just made everything about her." Participant 1004

"The only thing I didn't like was there was one member ... who did speak more than anybody else...but again one of the consequences of being abused is you just jibber jabber you can't control your mouth you can't just be quiet anymore... some sort of hyperactivity ... So she could have ... suffering from that. I had that in the past... where my brain is telling me shut up now and the mouth just carries on running... she might have been that sort of a person, but it was a little bit annoying." Participant 1001

"I mean there was one person who I found quite difficult because she was quite abrupt in her opinions. Everyone's entitled to their opinion but she was quite rude and I'd get quite, quite agitated with her because she was rude and I did speak to (names facilitator) a couple of times about her because there were times when it was very insensitive." Participant 1014

Creative activities

"We did a couple of activities where you were creating little friends on stones and stuff you know em... they were not perfect but they were good... it was good to have a bit of fun and not always be so serious... That was really good for the group because when you've had a really hard session but then the next session is a bit of fun it really lifts you."

Participant 1017

Participant: "I enjoyed the activities"

Interviewer: "That's good".

Participant: "Yeh, I've still got them in my box and er..... I'll keep them forever..... Like I say my box is in my front room there I keep my box there and I look at that and I smile as well and I think yeh that was a good thing that I did that group. It was one of the better things I've done."

Participant 1001

"I'm a crafty person so I enjoyed the craft side of it, and I liked how that made it a bit more light-hearted... It took some of the edge off."

Participant 1015

"I enjoyed all the little like, the little gifts that (names facilitator) used to bring in, they were kind of symbolic tokens of particular things, there was one time we painted a rock, it was about looking at the girls and seeing how much they were enjoying it as well." Participant 1022

Skilling up

Participant: "The going into a safe place that you've prepared in your mind yourself, and the helper person you can conjure up in difficult situations, yes both of that was very helpful".

Interviewer: "So tell me a bit about that..."

Participant: "Well... To if you like to build a safe place in your mind where you can retreat to be good is very good, and to do it properly, and to do it properly involves all the senses. It brings you in touch with your inner self in a way, that's good".

Interviewer: "And have you been able to use that sort of in your day to day life?"

Participant: "I do use it yes, I use it quite frequently, and also my, my inner helper who takes the form of a very large dog... A large English speaking dog... to speak words of wisdom to me, which actually are being channeled from your unconscious mind, and if you like advise you when you're in a dark place." Participant 1008

"If I'm having a bad day I'll read through the breathing exercises and get myself calmed down."

Participant 1004

"I try to put into practice what I've learnt, it doesn't always, I don't always, but when I do think about it I do try and do it."

Participant 1010

"I can handle my flashbacks a bit better now because I know exactly what they are and what's triggering them and why it happening, do you know what I mean?"

Participant 1004

"The biggest thing I learnt was, I can change that you know I don't have to keep being like this you know. I've got the chance I've got the freedom to change my thoughts and things like that you know. So a big part of learning was I could get control over this, this self-harm I didn't always have to give in, I could control it, I could you know what I mean. I could challenge the thoughts." Participant 1015

Final reflections

"I've gone back to work, I drive further now... I'm not at the point where I don't want to get out of bed anymore... I'm driving on my own now, I don't think twice about getting in the car. I'm not driving massive distances, but I can now take my little boy to the activities he goes to its like life changing." Participant 1014

"I still go through my folder now, and it was what a year ago or was two years when I went. I still go through my folder now and again. Just a little read, I don't know just a help." Participants 1004

"I'm certainly more aware because I'm telling myself its ok and I've never done that before. I've never told myself it's going to be ok. Never tried or thought about making a friend of myself before which, I really, that's been difficult, to know who I am, and that's quite difficult as well, but its inspired me to you know be normal for myself now." Participant 1019

"I just want to reiterate how important it is that this does keep going and other people not just women, men as well, get the chance to share their experiences in a positive safe environment where they might actually come out of it with some real positivity they can use in their life to get through their life in a better way." Participant 1017

Interviewer: "...Do you think the (CTG) would be helpful to other people who've had past similar experiences who haven't been to a Group ... before...?"

Participant: "I think so definitely"

Interviewer: "So would you recommend to somebody that..."

Participant: "Definitely without question."

Interviewer: "So what would you say to them?"

Participant: "Just give it a try, give one session a go and if you get anything out of it keep going, if you don't, don't go. But I got so much out of it, I did."

Participant 1001