

## Divorce Support Groups for Women Numerous Benefits

While scanning the Calendar of Events section in my local paper, I took note of the various support groups being offered. There were support groups for alcoholics; family member of alcoholics; gamblers; stroke victims; cancer patients; cancer survivors; Alzheimer caregivers; parents of children with Autism, ADHD and the listings went on and on. I found a Divorce Support Group listed, as well. It is quite evident that people who struggle with life challenges are looking for support, assistance and encouragement, as they confront their difficult circumstances. Divorce is a life altering change and it creates a myriad of emotions and decisions.

What I have learned, from being a participant of a few different support groups as well as facilitating divorce support groups, is that making the decision to attend the initial meeting is a giant step. Admitting that “the problem” exists and that outside assistance is needed can be very difficult. **Awareness** is the first step necessary in learning to manage and deal with a difficult life circumstance. Divorce is a very personal and sensitive issue. Quite often, the idea of divorce buzzes around in ones head for quite a while, or talk of divorce occurs between spouses. But as the old saying goes, “Nobody knows what goes on behind closed doors”. Making the decision to participate in a divorce support group is taking that giant first step in admitting there is a problem in the marriage or one is struggling during the process of divorce

Women are more likely to recognize that they need and want outside assistance. Women need to share feelings, need to be heard, need to vent. Women need to tell their story. In telling the story, over and over, it becomes more concrete, more real and helps them learn to accept their new reality. The **Empathy, Understanding and Validation** that support groups offer are necessary for managing the stress, healing and recovery. The feelings that women experiences may include: loss/grief; sadness; anger; resentment; confusion; worry; fear and loneliness. This is not an exhaustive list! **Awareness** of your feelings and understanding why you are feeling the way you do is crucial. One must know that it is normal to experience these feelings. Therefore, **Normalizing** of feelings is a key benefit of a divorce support group. Knowing that you are not “crazy” for having certain feelings is very comforting.

Another old saying holds true is “You can’t understand unless you’ve walked a mile in my shoes”. Over and over I have heard how difficult it is for women when friends and relatives try to comfort them. Sometimes, people don’t know how to offer comfort because they have no idea what it is like to go through a divorce. People mean well, but often times, what they say is not helpful and in some instances, can be hurtful. Being with a group of women who are “walking the walk” is so helpful for there are no explanations necessary. There is no judgment or criticism. Therefore, **Safety** is another important benefit of a divorce support group. A participant is free to express feelings (sometimes scary ones) and know that there is a safety net to support them when they feel they are “sinking”. Some groups are available for both men and women. The Empowerment Groups that I have been conducting for over ten years are strictly for women. The reason behind this has to do with **Safety**, as mentioned above. The woman only group avoids any possibility that people come to the group (consciously or unconsciously) looking for a mate/partner/date. People can be very vulnerable during divorce and eliminating this possibility creates a safety net. Women think differently than men, express themselves

differently and therefore, seem to understand each other more readily. In a woman only group, there is no need to be defensive or weigh words in fear of offending the opposite sex.

An important factor in searching for the “right” group relies on your intent or goal in joining the group. In addition to co-ed vs. women only, groups will have other differences. Some have a religious philosophy and some do not. Some are conducted by professionals and other groups are conducted by trained volunteers. Some groups engage in open ended discussions while others have an established curriculum or book that is utilized. Often times, women who have inquired about my group are trying to decide which group they should attend. My advice is that they are all different....you must know what you are looking for. And sometimes, it is not one in lieu of the other or that one is better than another, but rather what best suits you at the time. You may need all the help you can get and may choose to participate in more than one group, at different times.

Support during difficult times is certainly necessary, but taking it a step further, I believe that healing and recovery are also very crucial areas that need to be addressed. Healing and recovery impart hope and motivation to begin planning a positive future.

In addition to sharing feelings, I believe, very strongly, that focusing on issues/topics is very important. This assists with **Problem Solving and Reality Testing**, both of which are very important for healing and recovery. Listening to others and learning from varied life experience is a valuable asset of an Empowerment Group. Going beyond validating the feelings and learning how to manage them is the next step, and that is **Self-Discovery**. We all have something to learn from our failed marriages and recognizing our contribution to the break down of the marriage is the first step in **Self-Discovery**. Learning from our mistakes helps us to grow and avoid the same pit-falls in the future. **Self-Assessment** may be difficult but it can also be very refreshing. The purpose of an Empowerment Group is to focus on the positive and plan for the future. Over time, some women give up their personal power in their marriage; whether knowingly, or unknowingly. We may not be the same people as when we first married....younger, idealistic and perhaps in-experienced. Life experiences, both good and bad, shape and change us as we journey through life. We can regain or re-discover our personal power. Taking contemplative time to do personal assessments opens up doors of opportunity. Identify strengths is a necessary step in building the foundation for a new and positive life. Discussions on topics such as of positive traits, self-esteem, assertive communication and boundary setting are very helpful in re-defining the self and **Creating Action Plans** for the future.

Most certainly, another benefit of a Divorce Support or Empowerment Group for Women is the **Motivation** it can provide. Quite often, when women hear the life experiences of other women, they may realize that it is possible to overcome and work through challenges, no matter how difficult they may seem. Women are very resilient and creative. When they share their solutions, attitudes, perceptions and viewpoints, other group members are exposed to new ways of thinking. This can result in **Renewed Enthusiasm, Inspiration** and the impetus to take risks and **Embrace Change**. Another favorite saying of mine is “When I change the way I look at things....the things I look at change.”

Oprah Winfrey once had a section in her O Magazine entitled, “This I Know to Be True”. Having experienced divorce after a long term marriage, and having conducted Empowerment Groups for Women for the past ten years, this is what I know to be true, “One certainty in life is change. Whether desired or not, it will occur. Face it and embrace it.”

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