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An Evaluation of  
Peer Support Services for Abused Women's  
Peer Support Model

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Final Report



by

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## **Executive Summary**

The abuse of women by their intimate partners is a substantial problem in North American society. While considerable effort has been expended on interventions to lessen the impact on victims, research has focused largely on protection for women, primarily in shelters, and on treatment groups for men. Less attention has been given to community-based services such as support groups for women, although these are offered extensively across Canada. Most programs are offered by professionals: the value of utilized trained volunteers to offer peer support has not previously been established.

The current report evaluates the peer support model by looking at a number of Peer Support Services for Abused Women's programs including Growth Circles, Finding Our Voices and Moving on with Mentors. Peer Support Services for Abused Women (PSSAW) opened in 1988 as the Calgary Society for Women Plus. Growth Circles were originally conceived because of concerns that women leaving shelters often ultimately returned to abusive partners. When women initially left the shelter, they were usually optimistic about their future and had housing, social assistance, and formal counselling supports in place. So what happened? When asked by shelter staff, many of the women said that they were isolated and lonely. When their abusive partner called and offered support, they went back.

The support groups, or Growth Circles as they became known, were proposed as one strategy for women to develop support networks to help them through difficult times and social isolation. Through a support group, women could connect with others who had left abusive partners. The hope was also that women would build relationships that would be sustained outside the groups.

The Growth Circles continue to be a mainstay of PSSAW's programming. Five years ago, the curriculum was redesigned and the Growth Circles were expanded from a 10-week format to their present 15 weeks. The groups continue to provide women who have left or are in the process of leaving an abusive partner an opportunity to share their experiences and receive support from other women. Trained volunteers facilitate the groups. Some of the facilitators have also experienced abuse from a partner. Topics addressed in the Growth Circles include the dynamics of violence, anger, parenting and family of origin.

Self-esteem workshops called Finding Our Voices were developed several years ago by a psychologist who volunteered to facilitate the workshops. Due to their popularity, the workshops are now offered monthly by a contracted facilitator. Finding Our Voices is a one-day introductory workshop for all women interested in enhancing their self-esteem. Follow-up mini sessions are offered three times per month on specific topics related to self-esteem. Through the Moving on With Mentors program, trained volunteers provide individual support to women who have left or are attempting to leave an abusive partner.

This research employed qualitative methodology to assess the awareness and opinions of the respondents with respect to their experiences. Questions also queried the demographics of the women and their experiences of attending/leading the Growth Circle

group and other PSSAW programs. Two separate semi-structured interview schedules were developed for group members and group facilitators.

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Research Ethics Review Committee. Past clients of the various programs at Peer Support Services for Abused Women were initially contacted by staff members to ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed. We then contacted those women who said they would consider being interviewed. The interviews were all conducted by Cindy Ogden, either in-person or by phone. The interviews were tape-recorded and lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

In total, 13 interviews were conducted with Peer Support clients and with 14 volunteers that had facilitated Growth Circles or other PSSAW programs. The analysis of the qualitative interviews followed accepted practices of social work qualitative research methods including identifying prominent themes and sub-themes.

### **The Research Results**

The women with whom we spoke had important, and for some, life-altering experiences having taken part in the groups. They wholeheartedly endorse the Growth Circles and other PSSAW programs for themselves and for other women abused by intimate partners. The women clients raised a number of issues that provide important suggestions to PSSAW to consider when evaluating the peer support programs. Nevertheless, these should not take away from the strong positive feedback with respect to the programs as a whole. The research results focus primarily on the Growth Circles, since this was the PSSAW program most commonly experienced by the interviewees as either group member or group facilitator. When available, comments with respect to Finding our Voices and Moving on with Mentors are provided.

The volunteers, primarily Growth Circle leaders, noted substantial benefits in attending for group members and group leaders alike. From their perspectives, the Growth Circle curriculum and interaction had powerful impacts on the women, allowing them to connect, learn about themselves and the impact of domestic violence. Understanding that their experiences were common was a critical insight for most. Further, the group leaders felt personally fulfilled through their involvement with the women.

The group leaders identified a number of challenges to offering Growth Circles including finding sufficient group members to start and to maintain the sessions and dealing with difficult behaviour from a small number of women. These challenges are similar to those experienced in groups offered by professionals, but also suggest some revisions to the format or group content.

Nine volunteers had also connected with women through the Moving on with Mentors program. They commented on the power and utility of offering such one-on-one support beyond or instead of the Growth Circles.

### **The Results in Context**

The women interviewed for this research who had attended the PSSAW programs such as Growth Circles, had experienced significant psychological abuse, including death threats, and many had been significantly physically abused by their partners. Consistent

with other research that examines whether women utilize family and friends as support (Tutty, 2006), most either did not seek assistance or found that the support offered did not meet their needs. One woman highlighted that the fact that domestic violence is now more in the public eye actually became a barrier, since attitudes that women who stay with abusive partners must be somehow stupid or crazy have not shifted. As such, the shame of being victimized continues to be a barrier in women feeling comfortable seeking either formal or informal support. This also validates the need for the program, since the women that engaged in the PSSAW peer-to-peer programs, had little other support.

The PSSAW volunteers that contributed to the research have impressive backgrounds including a variety of other volunteer experiences and training. Most had their own history of abuse in their intimate relationships or family background, a factor that most group members value. On the other hand, the four volunteers without an abuse history found ways to positively connect with the group members.

The perceptions of the benefits and challenges of offering peer support groups for abused women that emerged in the current study are consistent with the small body of quantitative and qualitative research conducted on such groups. Many of the groups in the literature were conducted with a mix of women that remained in and had left abusive intimate partner relationships. Notably, the Growth Circle groups are limited to women no longer living with a partner.

Understanding the nature of their experiences and the commonalities of the abuse with other women were significant learnings for the majority of group members and the volunteer groups facilitators. These significant benefits have also been identified in the small body of research on support groups for abused women (Moldon, 2002; Tutty & Rothery, 2002a).

With respect to utilizing volunteers as group facilitators and mentors, many of whom themselves had experienced abused, neither the group members nor the facilitators that were interviewed described that as a problem. Nevertheless, they did mention rare instances when this had occurred and highlighted the importance of both screening and training in establishing that the group leaders had healed from their own abuse so that they could assist the group member, consistent with Moses et al. (2004) and Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.). Further, it supports authors such as Fearday and Cape (2004), Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.), MacLeod (1990) and Hartman (1983), all of whom suggested that women taking leadership roles in groups can do this competently and become empowered.

The challenges identified in offering the Growth Circle and other groups are common difficulties in professionally-led groups as well. They include finding enough participants to attend group and maintaining group membership over time, group members that monopolize or are in crisis and so interfere in the group process for other members. The comments from the volunteer group facilitators and group members, suggest that, for the most part, their training has assisted them in addressing these issues constructively. That the volunteers grasp these core groupwork principles and handle many difficult group circumstances is impressive and suggests the value of the training and the agency support. Nevertheless, the ongoing difficulty in attracting and keeping

both group members and group leaders suggests the need for a major review of Growth Circles practices, marketing and group orientation.

Also apparent in comments from both Growth Circle group members and facilitators is finding an appropriate balance between providing structure and information while still allowing time for the women to tell their stories in a safe and respectful setting, a factor identified by Moldon (2002) as central for abused women. This balance is not limited to peer support groups, but is commonly found in professional-led groups as well.

The early Growth Circle groups were less structured, which allowed the opportunity to disclose the abuse, but perhaps did not provide enough structure for some of the non-professional group leaders. Creating a manual for the Growth Circles groups, provided more support for volunteers, but takes the risk that the educational material meets the needs of all group members. While the majority of the group members interviewed for this evaluation valued the curriculum, several commented that they would have appreciated more time in sessions to discuss their own background and circumstances. These evaluation comments could be of value in reviewing the Growth Circle curriculum and group process.

In summary, the evaluation results provide a strong endorsement for not only Growth Circle groups, but utilizing volunteers to assist abused women in the other PSSAW programs and in general. As almost nothing has been written about the value of peer support from either the perspective of group members or group leaders, this research provides an important validation of such interventions.

As with any evaluation, there are strengths and limitations that need to be considered in interpreting the results. In terms of limitations, the respondents that were willing to be interviewed for the research had long term relationships with PSSAW. The majority of the volunteers had been associated with the agency for years and Growth Circle group members had all completed the program. As such, the voices of those that came for only a few Growth Circle sessions are not heard in this report. This is unfortunate, since we cannot discern why so many do not continue beyond the first session or drop out after only several: an ongoing question for the agency.

Further, the strong qualitative support for the Peer Support model cannot be utilized in any comparisons with different models of programs, for example professionally-led psychoeducational or therapy groups. Doing so would entail a substantially different research design, for example collecting data (probably quantitative in nature) from each program using a pretest-posttest design. The current results cannot be utilized to imply that the Peer Support model is more effective or even comparable to other approaches. Ultimately, offering a range of options to abused women including some professionally-led and some led by peers is optimal to address the diverse needs of women abused by intimate partners.

Nevertheless, the research has several strengths that merit attention. The number of respondents (13 group members and 14 group leaders) may seem small when seen from a quantitative perspective but is substantial from a qualitative one. The in-depth nature of the comments from interviews that often lasted from one and a half to two hours includes considerable feedback and suggestions that can benefit the agency.

## **Recommendations to Peer Support**

The final section presents a number of recommendations for consideration by Peer Support Services for Abused Women. These recommendations are offered acknowledging the care and thoughtfulness apparent throughout the history of the agency. Notwithstanding this, however, this juncture presents an opportunity to make an already strong program even better.

### **Recommendation 1: Continue utilizing the peer support model by offering programs such as Growth Circles**

Both the participants who had been clients at Peer Support and the volunteer group facilitators valued the services offered and validated the importance of these unique programs. In considering the continuum of services to abused women in Calgary from shelters to shelter-based support groups, to community agencies offering professionally led groups, peer-to-peer services such as Growth Circles offer an important alternative. From the perspectives of both group members and group facilitators, the Growth Circles very effectively assist women in dealing with their feelings, low self-esteem and decision-making dilemmas after having left an abusive partner. Moving on with Mentors and Finding Our Voices also offer valuable experiences and relationships.

### **Recommendation 2: Develop a more effective marketing strategy for PSSAW**

The most significant challenge, one that has continued from the early days of the agency, has been how to attract women to the programs and keep them in the Growth Circles and other peer to peer support programs. The agency has clearly attempted to address this issue in a number of ways over the years including adding additional opportunities such as mentoring, self-esteem groups and shifting the Growth Circle groups from a ten-week group to a fifteen week group divided into three modules. Despite these efforts, even in the past year, it has been difficult to convene groups of sufficient size and to maintain group members once the sessions were initiated. However, the agency may need assistance in strategizing about this pressing concern.

### **Recommendation 3: Collaborate with the other Calgary services to strategize about engaging abused women.**

Peer Support Services for Abused Women is one of a number of agencies whose goal is to provide for the needs of abused women and that are experiencing difficulties in doing so. Though the range and number of existing services in Calgary is impressive, the women that these agencies hope to attract may not understand the benefits and differences implied in each. The Calgary Counselling Centre is currently sponsoring a research project with respect to how to better engage abused women in response to difficulties attracting women to their professional-led support groups, despite the increase in referrals of men to the male perpetrator groups. The results may have value for the Peer Support peer-to-peer counselling programs such as Growth Circle as well.

### **Recommendation 4: Institute a risk assessment during intake**

The PSSAW clients disclosed significant and, in a number of cases, life-threatening abuse, consistent with the abuse reported by women in other research on support groups. That at least one Growth Circle group member was murdered by her

partner confirms that the safety needs of these women need to be considered, especially since researchers such as Ellis (1992) and Campbell, (2001) confirm that abused women are even more at risk of homicide after they have separated from partners. Lethality measures such as Jacqueline Campbell's Danger Assessment Scale (2001) could engage women more actively in understanding the potential risks from their partners, which can assist women in understanding their needs for support and safety planning. Initiating this process may more effectively engage women in considering attending Growth Circles or other PSSAW programs.

### **Recommendation 5: Consider revising the Growth Circle format**

The current version of three five-week modules was developed in part to address difficulties attracting and retaining Growth Circle group members. Although the content of the sessions is generally perceived as positive by the group members interviewed, from a groupwork perspective dividing the sessions into five-week modules is not ideal. Weekly groups are generally most powerful when they last for from eight to twelve weeks because the group becomes more cohesive as time goes on. Capping the sessions at five weeks interrupts the group development process and may actually interfere in women considering continuing (the opposite of the intention).

Without shifting too much, the Growth Circle groups could change to a rolling format whereby the sessions continue in a loop, allowing new group members to join at the completion of each five-week session, but without such an interruption. This semi-open group format would, for example, allow new members to join once every five weeks, so that the wait-list time is shorter. This group structure requires group leaders to address inclusion issues whenever new members join, however has been effectively used in other groups for abused women and abusive men. It also allows current group members to attain the status of mentoring new members, a process that is beneficial for both and is congruent with Peer Support principles.

### **Recommendation 6: Consider revising the Growth Circle content**

As mentioned previously, a common groupwork dilemma is the extent to which groups are structured and psychoeducational versus being more open and targeted to the needs of the group members. Each has benefits and drawbacks. While the content of the material in the Growth Circle manual was certainly relevant to many group members, the structure imposed by utilizing the manual topics was seen by some as interfering in their ability to address their issues. For some, this was expressed as a need for greater flexibility within the group sessions so that topics that most apply to women in specific groups could be examined in greater depth. While the majority of the participants reported how valuable they found the opportunity to share their abuse experiences with other women, they found that the structure imposed by getting through the manual interfered in this. The group members suggested building in time for them to "tell their stories" in a safe and respectful structure within the group setting.

### **Recommendation 7: Develop an orientation to Growth Circles**

An ongoing problem raised by the volunteer group leaders has been a significant proportion of group members not attending the first session of Growth Circles groups, interfering significantly in the group process. Groups are one of the more intimidating

interventions and some group experts suggest ways to overcome resistance to attending the first night; such as group orientation sessions, during which group members can come and meet the other group members, develop rules and guidelines and be informed about what to expect in group. Such orientations are less threatening, but allow potential group members to test out the group in a non-threatening manner.

**Recommendation 8: Open Growth Circles to women remaining with abusive partners.**

Given the on-going difficulties in engaging and maintaining group membership, Peer Support could consider developing a strategy to broaden the group membership base by offering services to abused women that have not left their abusive relationships. Other agencies offer groups for a mixed population and this reportedly can work well, in that the women that are considering leaving can find out about the challenges inherent in leaving; and the women that have left can see how far they have come and may mentor those group members that are considering leaving (Tutty & Rothery, 2002b).

**Recommendation 9: Request additional funding for more staff.**

Peer Support Services for Abused Women has always operated as a small agency. The staff are valued for their competence and support. However, the PSSAW clients mentioned several issues that suggest the need for more additional funding to more adequately staff the agency. Increased staffing would ensure that clients are contacted in a timely manner and that enough trained volunteers are available to offer groups more frequently. It would also ensure that support is in place for women waiting for programs to begin.

**Recommendation 10: Provide on-going training for volunteers**

While the volunteers generally found the domestic violence information and groupwork skills training valuable, and received on-going individual support from PSSAW staff, they suggested that on-going training would be valuable and also could act as a support mechanism, especially for new group leaders. These sessions could focus on topics suggested by the group leaders or could address issues suggested by group members or agency staff as needing to be considered. As an example, one issue that was raised by a group member interviewed for the research was the need for the childcare volunteers to be aware of and to utilize the safety measures in place to protect the children in their care.

In summary, the peer support model has previously had little evaluation support. Programs such as PSSAW's Growth Circles, Moving on with Mentors, and Finding our Voices each offer peer support in either a group or one-to-one context. The interviews with women that participated in each of these programs clearly endorse the value of the peer support. The volunteers that offer the peer support programs receive valuable training in both understanding the dynamics of woman abuse and learning what services and resources women might need in addition to emotional support. The current research highlights the importance of continuing to offer this option in the continuum of services to abused women in the Calgary community.

## **Chapter One: Support Groups for Abused Women**

The abuse of women by their intimate partners has been recognized as a substantial problem in North American society (Tutty & Goard, 2002). While considerable effort has been expended on interventions to lessen the impact on victims, research has focused largely on protection for women, primarily in shelters, and on treatment groups for men. Less attention has been given to support groups for women.

This chapter introduces the nature of woman abuse, what is known about offering support to abused women through groups and peer support groups for other populations. The literature review is background for the current research evaluating Peer Support Services for Abused Women's Growth Circles and other peer support programs.

### **The Nature of Woman Abuse**

Violence against women is a serious problem that results in injury, emotional harm and, at worst, death. It is best seen from a human rights/equality rights discourse that acknowledges that the violence is caused by substantive inequality for women around the globe. The 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization (Statistics Canada, 2005a) estimated that 7% of Canadian women are victimized by an intimate partner. Of those that experienced violence, 27% were beaten 25% choked. 44% were injured, 13% sought medical help. Perhaps most informative is that 34% of abused women fear for their lives in reaction to the violence (Statistics Canada, 2005a).

The abuse that women endure from intimate male partners takes many forms and typically extends throughout the relationship. Intimate partner abuse is different from the marital disagreements that all couples experience. While the context of some initial violent acts may appear to start as a couple argument, it is typically about control or jealousy. Partner abuse is not about anger in reaction to a dispute but the intentional and instrumental use of power to control the woman's actions (Kimmel, 2002). The force and form of the violence far outweighs the import of the apparent precipitating issue. Women are not merely pushed, shoved or slapped, they are beaten or injured. Every year across Canada, women are murdered by their partners as the tragic result of violence in their relationships.

Physical abuse comes immediately to mind when we think about abuse, but psychological abuse, including deliberately hurtful comments and degrading sexual slurs, erode women's self-esteem over time. Partners are often extremely jealous or force women to account for their whereabouts at all times. Financial abuse, taking control of the family income, including her pay-check, and failing to provide adequate money to cover food, and other family basic needs, is common.

The control and degradation of being emotionally abused by an intimate partner may have as strong or a stronger effect on a woman's self-esteem and, thus, impact her ability to protect herself or her children (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). Psychological abuse entails making degrading comments and sexual slurs that target the most private and personal aspects of a woman's life. Psychological abuse also includes death threats that elevate the risk of harm to a new level that must be taken seriously, especially if the partner possesses a weapon such as a firearm (Tutty, 1999).

The physical abuse of women by their partners often results in serious injuries and, for some, life-long disabilities. At the extreme, the assaults are brutal. In interviews in shelters in Alberta (Tutty & Rothery, 2002a), the women reported having had “lots of broken bones,” being “flipped over, smacked on the head and punched in the crotch,” being “thrown out of a car at highway speed”, having head or internal injuries. One woman’s partner deliberately broke her arm - another, after surgery, deliberately kicked his wife in the site of her incision. Such serious and degrading abuse occurs more often than generally thought.

Women are commonly raped and/or sexually coerced by abusive partners (Bergen, 2004; Campbell & Soeken, 1999). Sexual assault may result in serious physical injuries. In the context of being in an ongoing intimate partner relationship, the assaults are likely repeated, rather than being a one-time traumatic event, as is more often the case in stranger or acquaintance rape.

Woman abuse often extends beyond the relationship in the form of stalking and criminal harassment (Beattie, 2003). Abused women are often threatened with having their children kidnapped. Some research suggests that woman and children are at more risk of being murdered by partners after they have left the relationship.

Threats to kill women (and perhaps the children) are common in seriously abusive relationships and raise the level of fear to new heights. Some abused women and their children are murdered by their partners. Alberta reportedly has one of the highest rates of domestic homicide in the country: “Between 1974 and 2000, an average of 10 women and three men were murdered each year by their spouses (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Though considerable research has documented the traumas and negative consequences for women who live with abusive partners, we are at risk of the perceiving the women as “helpless” victims, not seeing their strengths and coping abilities to both endure abuse and, ultimately, decide to leave. Acknowledging their resilience and finding ways to support their strengths is a critical aspect of intervention (Tutty, in press).

In summary, the nature of the abuse that women suffer from their partners is serious and disconcerting. While focusing on physical injuries is important, many women endure years of intense psychological abuse that devastate their lives and the lives of their children. Most women are abused in multiple ways, each of which has a cumulative effect on their feeling trapped and ineffective in either addressing the abuse or fleeing their abusive partners.

The research that has highlighted that women are at most risk of murder immediately after having left an abusive partner (Ellis, 1992), adds a new consideration that can paralyse women from acting. How can we most effectively assist women who have left violent partners in the hope of creating new lives? Support groups are a common intervention.

### **The Rationale for Support Groups for Abused Women**

Group intervention with abused women began in shelters where, since women were already living communally, it made sense to provide information about partner abuse in a group format (Tutty, 2006). The value of the information was enhanced when residents had the opportunity to share their own experiences and provide feedback to others. Of all the

benefits of group intervention, the sense of commonality, the “all being in the same boat phenomenon,” relieved the guilt that many of the women felt about being abused by intimate partners (Yalom, 1995). The group format was adopted by community agencies serving women who wanted to learn about abuse, who were considering leaving an abusive partner or who had left but still felt the need for support.

As early as the 1980s, MacLeod (1987; 1990) and Bowker (1983) described peer-led support groups for abused women. MacLeod (1987) interviewed shelter staff across Canada and found that each city had at least one self-help group for abused women. The women’s groups for abused women in the United States described by Bowker (1983) were sponsored by feminist organizations serving abused women, social service agencies, Alanon or Alcoholics Anonymous. Of the 146 women Bowker surveyed, all of whom had been successful in leaving their abusive relationships, over a third (36%) were involved with women’s groups at some point.

Groups for abused women are primarily presented as being supportive, implying that although the results might be therapeutic the women were not necessarily perceived as “needing therapy” (Pagelow, 1992; Tutty, Bidgood & Rothery, 1993; Tutty, Bidgood, & Rothery, 1996). While abused women commonly report low self-esteem (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Trimpey, 1989), anxiety (Trimpey, 1989), depression (Cascardi & O’Leary, 1992), learned helplessness (Wilson, Vercella, Brems, Benning & Renfro, 1992) and social isolation (Pressman, 1989), these are best seen as the result of being abused by an intimate partner rather than as factors predisposing them to enter into such partnerships.

More recent research (Astin, Ogland-Hand, Coleman & Foy, 1995; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Kemp, Green, Hovanitz & Rawlings, 1995; Tutty, 1998) suggests that symptoms such as anxiety and depression reflect posttraumatic stress disorder, conceptualized as a normal response to traumatic events. This supports the argument that women assaulted by their partners do not necessarily require therapy, since they are responding quite normally to painful and confusing difficulties. However, even after women leave an abusive partner they may struggle with troubling after-effects (Tutty, 1993) as well as with the economic and emotional problems associated with a marital separation. Given this, supportive services will often be appropriate.

Several writers have described individual approaches to working with abused women (Mancoske, Standifer, & Cauley, 1994), or a combination of group and individual (Webb, 1992). Interestingly, Rinfret-Raynor and Cantin (1997) found that a feminist perspective is more important than whether the counselling is in a group or individual format. Still, most authors propose using support groups (Campbell, 1986; Holiman & Schilit, 1991; NiCarthy, Merriam, & Coffman, 1984; Seskin, 1988; Trimpey, 1989; Tutty et al., 1993).

The benefits of offering support in groups include the fact that groups reduce social isolation, one of the significant effects of being abused by an intimate partner. Members of support groups provide encouragement to each other, allowing women to see that their reactions to the abuse are not unique. Group members are experiencing differing risks to their safety and are struggling to maintain their safety and dignity in the face of their partners’ abusive actions. Women often find it helpful to strategize with other group members about how to cope with their partner’s abusive behaviour. Women may also wish

to explore if they are going to remain with their partners. Some group members may have left their partners, or may be in the process of deciding whether to do so or not. The opportunity to learn from others' experiences is clearly present and is seen as a prime benefit of the group process.

### **Guidelines for Support Groups for Woman Abuse**

Most authors recommend that those who work with battered women adopt a feminist belief system that condemns violence, avoids assigning responsibility for the violence to victims, recognizes how social institutions perpetuate violence, and focuses on the partner's violence rather than the couples' interactions (Pressman, 1984; Hartman, 1983).

In 1984, Pressman listed guidelines for intervention that remain common themes in abused women's support groups, including peer-led support groups. First, the safety of the woman is critical and, if she has not already made one, the group should assist her in developing a safety plan if her partner is abusive in future. Denial or minimization of the abuse may need to be identified and confronted in a supportive way, or through education about the dynamics of intimate partner violence. The women may need to explore their reasons for having stayed in the abusive relationship in an effort to reduce self-blame. Assisting them to identify ways that they have resisted the abuse or acted to protect themselves and their children can help with this goal – and may have a positive impact on women's self-esteem and sense of efficacy.

Many groups discuss not only traditional male and female roles, but also how such beliefs legitimize the abuse of women by allowing them to be seen as men's rightful property. Further, women may need to be allowed to feel angry about having been victimized as well as to grieve the loss of their relationship and the hopes they had invested in it. Finally, isolation is reduced if women develop strong bonds that may evolve into support networks that operate beyond the boundaries of the groups' formal meetings.

Most of the support groups described in the literature can be considered psycho-educational, since they offer information about intimate partner violence in addition to providing opportunities for women to interact with each other (Abel, 2000). Group approaches for abused women that are not as easily categorized as support groups tend to be more structured and take a skill-training focus, such as making vocational plans (Ibrahim & Herr, 1987), or learning to be assertive (Cox & Stoltenberg, 1991; Hartman, 1983). Another exception to the support group model is the "You're Not Alone" groups described by Babins-Wagner, Tutty and Rothery (in preparation) that utilize a narrative and feminist approach with abused women and are seen as therapeutic rather than supportive. The women are provided with little standardized information and the emphasis is on group interaction and process. Nevertheless, across settings the most commonly utilized group format is support groups.

### **Types of Groups for Abused Women**

Schopler and Galinsky (1993) see group interventions as on a continuum with self-help groups at one end, therapy groups at the other and support groups falling in the middle. An essential component of support groups, whether peer-led or professionally-led, is that group members support and teach their peers. The main difference between peer support

groups and other support groups is their leadership. Whereas support groups are led by one or two professionals, self-help groups have at least one peer facilitator, who may or may not have experienced abuse.

### Peer Support Groups for Abused Women

As described in the literature, the boundaries between professionally-led support groups and peer support groups are not clear-cut. Some groups for abused women are called self-help groups, but are actually led by paid professionals or by a professional and a trained peer volunteer. Canadians Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.) described the usual model of peer-facilitated groups as involving co-leadership by two trained volunteers, who may or may not have experienced abuse.

The degree of responsibility peer facilitators take for the leadership of groups varies. In the groups described by MacLeod (1990), the women who had experienced abuse were not the leaders; they were assisting the professional facilitators. Among the 60 counsellors interviewed for MacLeod's study, was a general belief that professional support was needed as women in the groups would be unable to handle the organizing and maintaining of the self-help groups.

In contrast, volunteer facilitators in Ginter's 2005 Canadian study and Hartman's 1983 American study, took primary responsibility for facilitating the groups. These peer facilitators were also participants in the groups. Professionals, who in both cases were the authors of the studies, acted as consultants. Hartman (1983) described her role as consulting to the group: teaching, providing resource materials, and supporting the group through difficult situations. In addition, if the peer facilitator had issues she wanted to deal with as a group member, she could pass her facilitating duties to Hartman.

Group members took on even more responsibility in the groups described by Fearday and Cape (2004) and Moses, Huntington and D'Ambrosio (2004). These peer-led support groups were for women dealing with current or past violence, as well as substance abuse and mental health issues. The group was developed by the support members. Staff involvement was limited to facilitating a start-up meeting and supporting the peer facilitators. Fearday and Cape (2004) also described a peer support program where women in recovery were involved in program planning and service delivery as well as staff training. Reporting on a five-year study funded by the American Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Moses et al. (2004) noted that all nine study sites had peer-run services. Some of these sites also had services designed by peers and peer-led support groups.

As well as some ambiguity about what constitutes a peer support group, the authors tend to include limited information, making it difficult to know whether the groups were, in fact, led by peers or by professionals. Shepard (1999) noted that self-help groups for abused women were offered as part of the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, but she provided no details about who led the groups. Breton and Nosko (2005) described a "mutual aid" group for abused women run out of Family Services Association of Toronto; however the two women co-leaders were apparently professionals.

## Advantages and Challenges of Peer Leadership

A number of authors have described the advantages of peer-led groups while others have raised cautions. In terms of the positives, Fearday and Cape (2004), Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.), MacLeod (1990) and Hartman (1983) all identified the empowerment possible for women when they take leadership roles in groups. Fearday and Cape (2004) argued that for women who have experienced the power imbalances of an abusive relationship, attention needs to be paid to power issues. According to Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.), professionals may appear more detached and take on the role of experts, which may duplicate the power imbalance abused women have experienced with their abusers. Peer facilitators are better able to provide leadership without taking over the group, allowing the group members to share responsibility for the group's direction and content. In self-help groups, women take responsibility for themselves, making decisions about how and when to participate (Hartman, 1983). Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.) noted that using peer facilitators reduced the expense of running groups.

Another advantage of peer facilitated groups noted by Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.) was the trust and closeness that can develop and which encourages sharing in the group. In Moldon (2002) and Stenius and Veysey (2005), the group members commented on the value to them that the facilitators, whether professional or not, had themselves experienced abuse. The facilitators in Moldon's Canadian study shared their experiences of emotional abuse with the group members who commented that they believed that the facilitators could understand their experiences on a deeper level and valued them as positive role models.

Stenius and Veysey (2005) asked 18 women who had experienced physical or sexual violence as children or adults what professional intervention, in groups or one-on-one, was most helpful to them. The women valued working with service providers who had experienced violence themselves because they had more understanding of the problems they faced and what would help. As well, when service providers shared their experiences, group members had an increased sense of trust and safety.

Several researchers also identified challenges to peer-led support groups. Moses et al. (2004) noted that training and support is needed for peer providers and women in their study found it difficult to facilitate the group and also be a participant. Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.) suggested that peer facilitators with their own abuse experience must have healed sufficiently to have some distance from this. Moses et al. (2004) also noted that staff concerns about the suitability of peer support versus professional support needed to be addressed.

### Drop-in or closed groups

Peer-facilitated and professionally-led support groups for abused women also differ in how long the groups run and whether they allow members to drop-in or are closed groups. Most professionally-led support groups for abused women are time limited, and are offered in weekly two-hour sessions over ten to 16 weeks. The few self-help groups described in the literature were more likely to be longer term and at times had a drop-in format.

In the self-help group described by Hartman (1983) attendance was flexible with some members only coming for one or two sessions while others participated in the group for over 10 months. After leaving, members were also allowed to drop-in to the group if they wanted the group's support. Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.), in their guide to peer-facilitated groups, advised that the groups could either be closed or allow continuous entry. After the group is officially ended, members may continue to meet and share the facilitation. Freeman and Larcombe called these groups self-help or mutual aid groups. Breton and Nosko (2005) described a Toronto self-help group in which the co-leaders and the group members made the decision about whether the group should stay open or be closed after they have been meeting for a few weeks. The women also negotiated how long the group should run.

### Research on the Efficacy of Support Groups for Woman Abuse

Though support groups for abused women are a commonly used intervention and considerable anecdotal material supports their usefulness, little formal research on their efficacy exists. Of six published quantitative studies on support groups for women, five (Cox & Stoltenberg, 1991; Holiman & Schilit, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2001; Rinfret-Raynor & Cantin, 1997; Tutty et al., 1993) found statistically significant pretest/posttest improvements in areas such as self-esteem, anger levels, attitudes towards marriage and the family, anxiety and depression.

With a sample of 38 women attending a more process-oriented group, Babins-Wagner et al. (in preparation), reported statistically significant pretest-posttest improvements on physical and non-physical abuse, self-esteem, clinical stress, family relations, depression and sex roles. However, marital satisfaction worsened to a significant extent, a probable consequence of women acknowledging the severity of violence and emotional abuse in their relationships. Another unpublished Canadian study, McBride (2001), also found significant changes in pretest/posttest scores on depression, self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress for women attending the Phase I (53 women) and II (28 women) groups.

Rinfret-Raynor and Cantin (1997) compared feminist group treatment to feminist individual treatment to non-feminist individual treatment for 60 abused women. The variables were abuse, as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scales, self-esteem, assertiveness, social adjustment, marital assertion and dyadic adjustment. The authors found no significant differences between the approaches; women changed, on average, in all three. In another comparison, Cox and Stoltenberg (1991) reported improvements in one skill-training group, but not the other. In contrast to the primarily significant improvements noted in the aforementioned quantitative studies, the results of Rubin's (1991) single-case design with six group participants, showed inconsistent responses to the group from the participants, with some women improving while others did not. In Kim and Kim's 2001 Korean study the only significant difference between the experimental group (16 women) and the control group (17 women) was on one measure: how prone they were to anxiety. On other measures of current anxiety, self-esteem, and depression, the two groups were not significantly different.

This body of quantitative research displays methodological problems that are typical in exploratory research in a developing field, such as small sample sizes (Cox &

Stoltenberg, 1991; Holiman & Schilit, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2001; Rubin, 1991), a lack of random assignment to conditions, and no control groups (the exception being Cox & Stoltenberg, 1991 and Kim & Kim, 2001). Despite these deficits, the results can be interpreted as providing initial evidence of the efficacy of group intervention with abused women.

A secondary analysis of the Tutty et al. (1993) data is the only research to date that examines the contribution of group process elements to outcomes. This re-analysis found no consistently superior program outcomes that could be attributed to group characteristics. The data, while based on small sample sizes, suggests some advantages of two-leader groups over time. Efforts to determine whether particular client groups received greater benefits from the program revealed no consistently superior outcomes at posttest for select subpopulations: clients with previous support group experience versus “first-timers,” cohabiting clients versus those living with no adult partner, or younger versus older clients. The limited number of follow-up cases revealed that gains might be less sustainable for older clients and those with repeated group involvements, suggesting their need for different kinds of post-program support.

Several qualitative studies of groups for abused women support that such groups can have significant benefits. Tutty, Rothery, Cox and Richardson (1995; cited in Tutty & Rothery, 2002b) conducted qualitative interviews with 32 women who attended a support group at the YWCA Sheriff King Home in Calgary. The authors conducted second interviews with 19 of the 32 women several months after they had completed the support group. As with members of many support groups for abused women, there was a mix of those still living with their abusive partner and those who had left. There were no important differences between women who remained with their partners compared to those who had already left. Both sets of clients commented on the competence of the group leaders (in these 10 week groups, most of the leaders were social workers), the utility of the support that they received from fellow group members, and the value of information provided.

Several women shared an initial hesitation about going to group, fearing that it would simply be a place where people griped. The same women noted that what they found, instead, was a supportive environment where group facilitators and members were easy to talk to. Many remarked that the group was an excellent experience.

Finally, Moldon (2002) conducted a qualitative study of support groups, interviewing eight women who attended a support group called the “Safe Journey” program in Lethbridge, Alberta. From the comments of the women, Moldon developed a framework to describe how the group provides an environment in which abused women move from the ‘lost self’ to the ‘reclaimed self’. She entitled the process “Reclaiming Stories” and views it as a spiral that incorporates both the content and process of attending group. “The framework has three distinct stages: the lost self, sharing in sisterhood, and reclaiming the self. Two tools facilitate the process of moving from stage to stage: establishing safety and knowledge building. The main focus of the themes is connecting to self and other to begin re-writing stories” (p. 93). In other words, re-writing stories describes a process of psychological and relational healing and change that is generated through the group connections.

The group members develop a sense of safety both from building trust with the other members and the leaders, and by disclosing some details of the abuse in their intimate partner relationships. They begin to realize how much of themselves they have forsaken to cope with their partner's abusive behaviour and begin to develop bonds with each other as they identify common experiences that result from being abused.

The group members utilize information about the cycle of violence and the common experiences of women in abusive partner relationships to consider reclaiming their lives and making new decisions either about how they will behave differently in their current relationships or whether they will separate and start anew. This succinctly-described process model provides a useful overview for conceptualizing the interaction of group content and process and is congruent with other descriptions of the benefits of groups for abused women (Hartman, 1983; Nicarity, et al., 1984; Seskin, 1988, Pressman, 1989).

### **Self-Help Groups**

Self-help groups cover a wide range of issues experienced by members. Wituk, Tiemeyer, Commer, Warren and Miessen's 2003 American study identified common types of self-help groups by counting the number of people who phoned the Self-Help Network wanting to start a group. The most common types were groups dealing with physical illness, parenting, addiction, aging, abuse, and disability. Of the people phoning in, 8% wanted to start a group related to abuse issues. The type of abuse was not specified.

Evaluating self-help groups can present significant challenges. Kurtz (1990), Goldklang (1991) and Lieberman and Bond (1979, cited in Lieberman, Borman & Associates) all identified challenges in researching self-help groups, including finding a control group, collecting data, and choosing outcome measures. Without professionals involved, Kurtz (1990) found that collecting data can be difficult because the groups tend not to keep records. Lieberman and Bond argued that outcome measures should be different from the usual psycho-therapy outcome measures, because with self-help groups it is more important to look at changes in group members' functioning in roles. Self-help group members may also use other forms of help, which could impact their outcomes.

Both Goldklang (1991) and Lieberman and Bond (1979 in Lieberman, Borman & Associates) identified timing of measurement as an issue, because people are usually involved in self-help groups for a longer period than therapy groups or professionally-led support groups and pretests are often not feasible. As well, members may not attend regularly, so administering a posttest can be difficult. Goldklang (1991) argued the advantages of longitudinal studies, which allow researchers to study how groups evolve over time as members become veterans, new members join, and groups become more structured.

A number of researchers have favoured using qualitative research methods (Goldklang, 1991; Powell & Cameron, 1991; Rappoport, 1993; Tebes & Kraemer, 1991), which are less likely to interfere with how the group operates or impose structure on groups because of record keeping requirements. Qualitative research also allows researchers to focus on the meanings group members derive from events and processes and are less limited by the researcher's perspective (Rappoport, 1993; Tebes & Kraemer,

1991). According to Powell and Cameron (1991), qualitative research methods are well suited to the complexity and variety of group members' experience of self-help.

Breton and Nosko (2005) described a unique way to measure outcomes developed for a "mutual aid" group for abused women run out of Family Services Association of Toronto. Every time the group meets, members share ways in which they have been able to "throw out" old ideas and behaviours, as a way to chart their progress. The women find this a meaningful way to measure their progress and it has become a routine part of the group's process.

Though most outcome evaluations of self-help groups utilize relatively weak research designs, Kyrouz, Humphreys, and Loomis (2002) and Kurtz (1990) both found studies that used strong methodologies. Kyrouz et al. (2002) reviewed over 40 studies of self-help groups, all of them using strong methodologies, such as comparison groups or longitudinal research. In all of these studies, the group members experienced positive changes. Kurtz (1990) examined studies that used pretests/posttests, comparison groups and time-series designs. Group members in these studies also experienced improvement, including greater life satisfaction, less dependence on professionals, and greater self-esteem. However, this research was not able to establish symptom removal. Generally, the researchers reported that group members experienced greater benefit if they attended frequently and both gave and received support from the group.

#### Research on Self-help Groups

Though the effectiveness of self-help groups for other populations has been studied in some depth, research on self-help groups specifically developed for abused women is missing. Three studies (Bowker, 1983; Ginter, 2005; Hartman, 1983), none with strong research designs, identified the benefits for group members as increased self-esteem or self-confidence. Group members also experienced greater personal power (Bowker, 1983) and increased skills (Hartman, 1983). In Moses et al.'s 2004 study, service providers said that members of peer-led groups benefited, though how they benefited was not specified. The groups described by Ginter and Hartman were co-led by a professional and a peer.

Bowker (1983) argued that the positive changes experienced by group members were related to the benefits of helping others and the modeling from group members who had successfully left an abusive relationship. Group members (no numbers given) in Ginter's 2005 Canadian study reported that their increased self-confidence was due to support from the group and being able to help others. The aspect of the groups that the women found most helpful was sharing during the check-in time at the beginning of each meeting. They also commented positively on being validated by the group and the egalitarian environment of the group.

In summary, much of the attention on interventions for abused women has focused on shelters. Shelters are necessary but not sufficient: they do an excellent job of protecting the safety of many women and helping them in the first step to a transition to a violence-free life (Tutty & Rothery, 2002b). However a majority of abused women do not use shelters, and those that do have needs for support that continue well after they are

back in the community (Bowker, 1984; Bowker & Maurer, 1985; Gondolf & Fischer, 1988).

Support groups are essential complements to residential shelter services and the women themselves tell us that they provide essential knowledge, resources and social support at a time when an escape from violence seems impossibly difficult. While many support groups are led by professionals, peer-support groups are arguably important alternatives. Given the lack of research support for such models, the current research with respect to Peer Support Services “Growth Circles” has the potential to provide important information about the efficacy of this alternative strategy.

## **Chapter Two: The Peer Support Growth Circle Evaluation**

This chapter outlines the history and services offered to women abused by intimate partner violence by Calgary's Peer Support Services for Abused women. Peer Support Services is a non-profit society whose mandate is to provide a support system for women who have experienced abuse. Peer Support Services for Abused Women provides individual and group support and resources to women who have left abusive partners.

This evaluation seeks to understand and measure the effectiveness of the Peer Support Model in working with women who have experienced abuse through the use of semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interviews with women in the Growth Circle groups. The chapter also outlines the research process, analysis and ethical considerations.

### **The History of Peer Support Services for Abused Women**

Peer Support Services for Abused Women (PSSAW) opened in 1988 as the Calgary Society for Women Plus. Women Plus was first conceived by a Board member, a glass artist and a crisis counsellor, all connected to shelters for abused women. Each were concerned that women leaving shelters often ultimately returned to abusive partners. When women initially left the shelter, they were usually optimistic about their future, had housing, social assistance, and formal counselling supports in place. So what happened? When asked by shelter staff, many of the women said that they were isolated and lonely. When their abusive partner called and offered support, they went back.

Support groups were proposed as one strategy for women to develop support networks to help them through the difficult times and the social isolation. Through a support group, women could connect with other women who had left abusive partners. No one else could credibly say, "I've been there and successfully left." They hoped too that the women would build relationships with other group members that would be sustained outside the groups.

At the time, the organizers found little information about peer support groups. Though peer support was often used in the context of substance abuse, few peer support groups for abused women were documented in North America. The program developers found nothing in the family violence literature about offering peer support.

Another challenge was resistance in the family violence community and among professionals in Calgary to the idea of formerly abused women taking a primary support role. Those who were providing services to abused women were concerned that they would no longer have a role if peers were able to provide the support the women needed. They also questioned whether women who had been abused could provide adequate support. Women Plus responded that peer support was not intended to replace the professionals. It would be part of a continuum of services that would include the services of professionals. Over time, as the program was able to show that it was making a difference for the women, its credibility increased with the family violence community and with funders.

The first Growth Circles were co-led by a volunteer professional facilitator and by a woman who had experienced partner abuse (MacLeod, 1990). As well as receiving support from other group members, women in the groups shared their experiences and

learned from each other. For some groups, the women pre-registered for 10-week sessions. Drop-in groups were also offered. Women Plus aimed to have one group in each quadrant of the city, so group members could meet other women who lived close by. Some groups were set up in low-cost housing developments.

By 1991, ten Growth Circles were running in a number of Calgary communities. Women Plus also organized peer telephone support, matching women who needed support with women who have been out of abusive relationships for some time. As well as facilitating these self-help initiatives, staff offered back-up crisis counselling and referrals to professional counsellors. A volunteer training program and a training manual were developed in 1992.

PSSAW or Women Plus has collaborated with a number of other agencies to offer peer support groups or a modified version of the groups. Drop-in groups were offered for a time in the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter. Some of the other collaborators included the Family Life Education Council, the Victoria Order of Nurses and the Older Women's Long-term Survival (OWLS) program.

Over the years, PSSAW's programs have been restructured and adapted to the changing needs of women. For example, when income assistance requirements changed and women needed to get jobs, day-time groups were replaced by evening groups. Some successful program initiatives are still part of PSSAW's programs today.

### **PSSAW Program Descriptions**

The Growth Circles continue to be a mainstay of PSSAW's programming. Five years ago, the curriculum was redesigned and the Growth Circles were expanded from a 10-week format to their present 15 weeks. The groups continue to provide women who have left or are in the process of leaving an abusive partner an opportunity to share their experiences and receive support from other women. Trained volunteers facilitate the groups. Some of the facilitators have also experienced abuse from a partner. Topics addressed in the Growth Circles include the dynamics of violence, anger, parenting and family of origin. The groups were originally offered in neighborhoods throughout Calgary, but are now only available at the Peer Support office.

Self-esteem workshops called Finding Our Voices were started several years ago by a psychologist who volunteered to facilitate the workshops. Due to their popularity, the workshops are now offered monthly by a contracted facilitator. Finding Our Voices is a one-day introductory workshop for all women interested in enhancing their self-esteem. Participants increase their understanding of self-esteem by learning about negative self-talk, the importance of self-care, and assertive behaviour. Follow-up mini sessions are offered three times per month on specific topics related to self-esteem.

Through the Moving on With Mentors program, trained volunteers provide individual support to women who have left or are attempting to leave an abusive partner. Five years ago, the peer telephone support that had been offered to women since the early days of PSSAW, was restructured and became a formal mentor program. In the new program, some of the mentoring is done in-person and staff provide support to the mentors. Many of the peer mentors have experienced abuse from a partner.

The Women Hurting Women workshops educate domestic violence service providers about how their services can be more accessible and relevant to lesbians and bisexual women. Promotional campaigns provide information about services in the community that can assist lesbians and bisexual women experiencing abuse from a partner. An advisory committee of women from the lesbian community and their allies runs Women Hurting Women in partnership with PSSAW. The program was evaluated by RESOLVE Alberta in 2000, with primarily positive comments (Tutty & Nixon, 2000).

### **The Evaluation Methodology**

The project call for proposals to evaluate the Peer Support model was developed collaboratively by PSSAW and representatives from the funders, the United Way of Calgary and Area and FCSS- city of Calgary. The call for proposals included the following questions for the evaluation:

1. What are the strengths of the peer support model in a one-one setting?
2. What are the strengths of the peer support model in a group setting?
3. What are the drawbacks of the peer support model in a one-one setting?
4. What are the drawbacks of the peer support model in group setting?
5. What is the short-term and long-term effectiveness of the peer support model?
6. When in the healing process is the peer support model most effective?
7. Who would not benefit from the peer support process?
8. How does the effectiveness of group peer support compare to the effectiveness of a psycho-educational group therapy model?
9. What are the psychological benefits of the peer support model?
10. PSSAW has observed that the peer support model attracts 'high risk' clients? Why is that? What does the model offer that meets these clients needs?
11. PSSAW has observed that the peer support model attracts clients that face multiple systemic barriers, Why is that? What does the model offer that meets these clients needs?
12. What are the axis of need and change that the peer support model primarily address? (i.e. self-esteem, self-efficacy...)

While the interview guide constructed for the research attempted to address each of these questions, not all could be examined given the current research methodology. For example, with respect to Question 8, it is not possible using qualitative methodology that focuses on one model of group intervention to make any declarative statements about whether it is comparable or more or less effective than another method. The results apply only to the program in which the participants were involved. In fact one cannot make any generalizations about whether the comments are applicable to other group members that were not interviewed.

Similarly, one cannot determine whether PSSAW attracts more high risk clients than other services or why this might be so. In listening to the voices of women at considerable risk, however, we can discover the extent to which they found the peer support model helpful and in what ways. The next question with respect to attracting clients that face multiple systemic barriers is similarly difficult to address using qualitative methodology. Nevertheless, the evaluation provides considerable information with respect to the majority of the areas requested in the call for proposals.

The decision to evaluate the Peer Support Model using qualitative methods was specified within the call for proposal, prior to the involvement of the research team. Nonetheless, this makes conceptual sense given the group structure and potential difficulties utilizing quantitative methodology. Qualitative interviews provide in-depth descriptions of the group process. Such an approach allowed the researchers to contact women group members and group facilitators from a number of years ago, as well as those that are currently involved.

This research component employed qualitative methodology to assess the awareness and opinions of the respondents with respect to their experiences. Questions also queried the demographics of the women and their experiences of attending/leading the Growth Circle group. Two separate semi-structured interview schedules were developed for group members (see Appendix One) and group facilitators (see Appendix Two).

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Research Ethics Review Committee. Past clients of the various programs at Peer Support Services for Abused Women were initially contacted by staff members to ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed. We then contacted those women who said they would consider being interviewed. The interviews were all conducted by Cindy Ogden either in-person or by phone. The interviews were tape-recorded and lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

In total, 13 interviews were conducted with Peer Support clients and 14 volunteer Growth Circle group facilitators. The analysis of the qualitative interviews followed accepted practices of social work qualitative research methods including identifying prominent themes and sub-themes (Tutty, Rothery & Grinnell, 1996).

### Chapter Three: The PSSAW Program Participants

Thirteen participants in the Growth Circle Groups and other Peer Support Services for Abuse Women (PSSAW) programs were interviewed with regards to their backgrounds, the abuse they experienced from their intimate partners, their experiences with the PSSAW programs and recommendations for improving service.

Their involvement with the agency ranged from women who were currently receiving services from Peer Support Services to those who had been involved eleven years ago. Nine study participants had attended programs within the last two years while four women had attended programs more than three years ago. All thirteen women had been abused by male intimate partners. Four women had been in common-law relationships, one had been dating, and eight had been married to their abusive partners. When interviewed, eleven of the participants were no longer with these men. Of two women that remained with their abusive partners, one woman resided with her abusive partner; the other was seeing her abusive partner but lived in a separate residence. Three women were in new relationships.

Slightly over half of the women (7) had younger children living with them, four had adult offspring and two had no children. Seven women were employed either part or fulltime. Two worked in service positions; two were in clerical jobs, and three as professionals. Two women worked at more than one job. One woman was also a student. Six were not working and, of those, four were on various forms of disability insurance.

The women were predominately Caucasian (11), one woman was Aboriginal/Métis and one woman was of Chinese-Canadian background. Ten women were Christian, one was Jewish and two women stated that they had no religious affiliations. One woman had immigrated as an adult to Canada.

We asked the women about the abuse they had experienced from their intimate partners. All thirteen had experienced emotional and verbal abuse.

*[I remember] him tearing up things that were important to me. One of my profs leant me a textbook and my husband tore it up. I had just cleaned the kitchen and he dropped a little bit of milk on the floor and so I said, "Are you going to clean that up?" and he took the carton of milk and poured it all over the floor.*

*Because I have asthma, I spend a lot of time in bed, just trying to get my breath. When I got sick, he'd get mad. The sicker I got, the madder he got because it meant the chores weren't getting done, there was nobody to cook meals for him, pick out his clothes for work. I did everything. To him, the house was not his job. He could yell so loud. I just used to let him yell until he was yelled out. I didn't try to yell back after a while because it was no point. I wonder if that might have damaged my ears. He just screamed at me for all those years. If you've ever been to a loud rock concert and you feel like you are partly deaf for a couple of hours. That's how it was after he'd scream at me.*

*The emotional abuse is probably the hardest part. He used to do little things like control what you eat. Going grocery shopping, I wasn't allowed to go down certain aisles. I wasn't allowed to eat certain cereals. I had to eat what he wanted me to eat. He used to control the way I flossed and brushed my teeth. If I didn't*

*floss properly I was hurt. I was called a bitch, a slut, smacked around if I didn't floss properly. If I didn't brush my teeth the right way, that would piss him off. [So he tried to control everything.] Yeah, everything! What I wore, what I watched on TV. I wasn't allowed to go see my friends because I was a slut. I was cheating on him. It was insane! Every aspect of my life was controlled.*

*At first it was just little comments. Then it got to the point where I didn't even know who I was anymore. Honestly didn't know if I could turn left or right without asking him. (laugh) So it definitely stripped me of who I was. Progressed to basically there was a shell there but nothing left inside.*

Eight women had experienced financial abuse.

*He's very controlling with money. I ended up with nothing and he had most of it.*

*We were dirt poor and he would take the car and get parking tickets and not pay them, so the parking tickets would be double. He'd eat out all the time. Meanwhile I'm walking home instead of taking the bus to save the \$1.25 and not eating right. He no qualms about spending all of our money.*

*He would keep money from me, like when we needed milk, he wouldn't buy it; he wouldn't give me money for it. I had no access to our bank account.*

Two women had experienced spiritual abuse from their partners but provided no further details on these experiences. However, one woman did remark, "my ex threw it in my face when he said, "You're supposed to forgive."

Eleven women had endured physical abuse from their partners.

*He pushed me against the cupboard and was choking me and I couldn't breathe. I took my foot and rammed him one. I think that was probably the worst. He kicked me in the leg and in the hips. We went shopping and he was saying he was going to get an illegal driver's license and start driving again. I said, "You're going to wait until you can get a legal license" When we walked across the street, he kicked me here (indicates lower back). If he would have been 1/4 of an inch closer he would've broke my spine. That was the worst. Oh my God!*

*I never got hit in the face. He was afraid to because he said other people would know what was going on if they saw a bruised face. But I could cover the rest up with my clothes. That's what he said to me.*

*He pushed me around, dragged me across the floor by my hair. The physical abuse was slower in escalating. In the beginning it wasn't there. Then it was pushing. It took a couple more years and then it was choking me. It was really rough on me. Oh God, I can see how women get worn out. I can see why they'd just let the men do what they want. If I locked the door, he'd knock down our door; break the windows in the house. He took out all of the locks on my house one time so I couldn't lock him out. He was something.*

*He felt more in power if I was naked so he'd always strip naked and then beat me. He'd strip me naked, lock me in the basement for all night or a full day. One night in the middle of winter he locked me on the balcony, naked. There's nothing I*

*could do. I wasn't going to climb down, I'm naked, and I was on the second floor so I huddled in a corner and cried and pleaded for him to let me back in.*

The police charged four men for the assaults on their partners. Three women did not provide further details, but one woman described the incident in which her partner was charged.

*He picked me up by my neck and threw me across the room. I told him that it was over and he didn't like that. He couldn't handle rejection; the fact that I was independent. I can live quite fine with out him. He tried his utmost to control me. The entire time I've had our son he's always used him to entrap me and I always felt that. It started with little things and got worse: he pushed me, threw things. Then it got more extreme. That day, he came over and while he was trying to break the door down, I called 911. The police came in right after he threw me by my neck. They handcuffed him on the spot, charged him and took him away.*

Six men threatened to kill their partner and/or actually attempted to murder them.

*He was so manipulative. The things he'd say to me! That was the worst. He'd tell me he'd bury me. But he'd never get charged because they would never find my body. He'd pick up our baby and say, "Say good bye because you'll never see him again." I knew what he meant. He meant he'd kill me.*

*One time he beat me and told me to stay on the bed, that I was dead this time. He came upstairs, he had the big silver thing that looked like a knife in his hands and came right at me and slammed it into my chest. It was tin foil and he started laughing saying, "Ha, ha, how much did I scare you?" I thought I was dead. That one really scared me. There was no physical damage: it was all emotional.*

*He pushed me down and got on top and started choking me. When he did release me I thought I would make another effort to leave. He pushed me up against the wall and again started choking me. The smothering incident was after my mom passed away and he had locked me in a room with him. He wouldn't let me out and I became quite upset and physically aggressive back trying to leave. He pushed me down and took a pillow and put it over my face and smothered me. [How did you survive?] I don't know. I didn't think he would stop. I was almost at that point of succumbing and that's when he stopped. I don't know if he realized or why he stopped.*

*My ex-husband holding a gun to my head. You're wondering in that split second, what changed his mind? He told me that if he killed me, he'd only get about ten years and he could do most of his business from prison and he'd probably get out in five years for good behaviour.*

After she had left him, one woman was stalked by her partner.

*He would constantly stalk, break into our apartment, smash windows, wait for me outside work. I had to have security walk with me every day. It was pretty intense.*

Seven women had also been sexually abused by their partners.

*The worst, I left when I realized things were really awful. I was breastfeeding so I wasn't on the pill; we were using condoms. My husband told me that he had a*

*condom on but he didn't. I was very upset. I said, "That's completely inappropriate behaviour." It would have been fine had he said, "Okay, I understand" but he said, "We haven't had sex much this year and I've had to put up with so much!" So he (was) not apologetic about the fact that I could have gotten pregnant and that's my body. You do not try to impregnate me.*

*The big part was sexual. I wasn't good at it and the act was excruciating and painful for me so I was reluctant. He called it "the wifely duty." It wasn't fun for me and a big thing for him. He was never satisfied, I guess. He never forced himself on me but he made me feel bad if I didn't want to do it when he needed it. [So pressuring you?] Yeah. After a few years I didn't want to be physically close to him because he became so angry and bullying that the intimacy went away.*

*We had been sleeping in the same bed because there was nowhere else to sleep. So I'd been sleeping in pyjamas on top of the sheet so there would be a separation. That morning he said, "I have needs, you know." I said "Well, that's too bad". He said, "I just want to masturbate while I look at you." He masturbated on me and I was very upset. "Are you satisfied?" and he said "No, my goal is to have sexual relief without masturbation." He wouldn't leave me alone all day. I couldn't even go to the washroom without him hovering over me while I'm on the toilet. It was really scary and I got him out of the bathroom and locked the door. He received a phone call and went off.*

We asked the women what strategies they had used to help them deal with their partner's abusive behaviour before coming to Peer Support Services for Abused Women. The women had considered asking for support regarding their partner's abuse from various sources including family, friends, informal support programs, formal support services, and shelters for abused women. The women were hesitant to talk to others about the abuse they were experiencing.

*[Did you have anybody to turn to?] Nope. Nobody, not even my doctor. I didn't talk to anybody. I think one of the biggest problems is education with people in general. You hear women, even if they hear something on TV about a woman (whose) husband almost killed her and stabbed her, (say). "I'd never stay in that relationship. I'm not that stupid." It's really hard to go, "I'm going to tell them and they're going to think I'm stupid."*

A number of the participants considered asking family members for help while still living with their partners, but most decided against this.

*So many things you can't talk about with your family. My mom lives here and two of my brothers and their families but there's just no way to talk to family about it. I never discussed it with any of my family. I didn't feel comfortable and there's always repercussions. Once you've told them, it's always there. It colours the way they interact with your family and it's just too difficult. Besides, I'm the one in my family that everybody else comes to for help.*

*My family comes from a history of abuse. My dad was abusive towards my mom when I was younger and my dad's side of the family is quite emotionally withdrawn. So, those things aren't talked about in our family, at least on my dad's*

*side. My mom's side of the family lived in (city) and the only person I would have been able to talk to was my grandmother but I never mentioned it to her just out of the fact that I was embarrassed and I didn't want to have to get into that sort of thing with my family. I didn't feel I could do that.*

*I was afraid to tell them and he didn't want anybody to know. I wanted to tell like my siblings but I was afraid because I was afraid my brothers might go after him and he'd take it out on me if they knew.*

Only two women had spoken with family members while they were living with their abusive partners, not necessarily to good effect.

*It took a while for my parents to realize what was going on. When we first came to Calgary, my mom came to visit. When she was leaving, I was weeping in the airport, I really didn't want her to leave, "Mom, take me away. These people are crazy. They're horrible." She said, "No, no. You're in the first year of marriage; you have to stay and work it out and don't run away from your problems." She has (since) apologized profusely and said, "You really had good instincts."*

Seven women received support from family members after they had made the decision to leave their abusive partners.

*I've gotten very close with my family and had some real heart to hearts.*

*[Did you have support?] My sisters, just my sisters. My one sister's older than I am. She phoned my mom and said "Mom, she needs you, get out here now." She told my mom what was happening, because they were all terribly afraid that he was going to kill me. My mom came out and stayed with me for three months which was awesome. He hated her but he was terrified of her. It gave me some safety and a lot of support.*

Four women decided to tell their partner's families about his abusive behaviour.

*I used to go to his mom but that didn't help because she didn't know what to do.*

*I would talk to his mom about it. I would call her up and would be like, "This is what your son is doing to me. What's going on?" I told her what he was doing to me and she said, "That's what his dad did to me."*

*My mother-in-law knew we were having problems and said, "Just keep having babies" What horrible advice! She had six and she was in a horrible marriage. So her advice was to keep having babies and that's what would keep the marriage together. From my standpoint that's cruel and horrible to bring children into the world when you know that the marriage is faltering.*

Only one woman considered talking with her in-laws helpful. She had called them in a crisis and "his own dad even told me to call the police."

The participants also considered reaching out to friends. Several women found that this was not necessarily helpful.

*They've never had anything like this touch their life. So it's not something I discuss with them. I don't even go there with them.*

*There's a lot of people who just don't understand and they give up on you after a while. They just give up! They look at you like you're crazy.*

*I used to go to my girl friend for help. Well, a couple of them. But you could tell they were getting fed up with hearing about it. It was repetitious. They didn't ever go through anything like this so they didn't understand. I do have one friend that's very understanding. That friend made a difference to me because she could listen and she understood, but I think that was because she'd been through it.*

Some of the women accessed informal support groups such as life skills, Alanon, church groups, and church mentoring programs for support. They had also used a variety of formal services such as community distress lines, their doctors and/or medical clinics, counselling agencies, shelter services. The two women who had accessed distress lines had opposite experiences.

*I called this hotline and the girl was completely unqualified and baffled by everything I was saying. She didn't understand and she didn't know what to do. She actually said, "I'll have to get someone else to help you. I don't know what to do." I just hung up on her. I was like forget it! She put me on hold and you don't do that to somebody in that state of mind. I needed help and I was searching everywhere and nobody knew. Nobody understands. Nobody knew what to do, what to say to help me. If they're not in your position they didn't understand.*

The other woman called a distress line and the staff member arranged for counselling sessions at their agency for her.

*I phoned the distress line and hooked up with one of the counsellors there because I was starting to forget things at work. I knew I wasn't coping well anymore and needed some help. I started going through the (agency) first and that point was a very low point. What I was doing with alcohol and valium was probably making me more depressed about everything. It probably wasn't helping matters. So I started there. Stopped doing the valium, stopped mixing it with the alcohol.*

Four women went to doctors and/or medical clinics for help.

*Your doctor is a safe person; they're not supposed to give away your information.*

Ten women went to various counselling agencies to access help for dealing with the abuse.

*I went to a couple of psychologists and didn't get much there. One was helpful but it would have cost me a lot of money to keep seeing him and that wasn't an option. I got sent to another one, a woman, but I didn't really click with her.*

*When I went to (agency), within the first ten minutes I knew it wasn't the place for me. I never got that feeling at all with Ada.*

*I'm still going for counselling. The more counselling I go for, the more I see where he's still at. I'm grateful that I'm seeing a counsellor that understands that part and that I have my spirituality because I searched out my own spiritual support. But there's a lot of people that don't have that. That's why they go back because you're human. You don't want to be abused but you don't want to be*

*alone. That's what I'm learning through the counsellor right now. Nine out of ten women go back because they are lonely and don't want to be alone.*

Six participants had also accessed services from shelters for abused women. Four had resided in shelters and found the informal contact with the other women residents helpful, perhaps planting the seeds of interest in peer support groups.

*I loved it! I didn't like the first night because all the women in there (had) bruises on their faces and big bad attitudes but had been through a lot worse than I had. They had stalker boyfriends and husbands. My ex's not even close to being a stalker which I'm thankful for. It was scary the first night. My sister said if we were too scared she would pick us up the next day. But I called her the next day and she changed her mind and didn't want us. So we wound up staying. But I wound up liking it. I got to know some of the women and we'd go to the dining room at midnight and we'd have little late night, I call them pow-wows.*

*Very shocking how much abuse actually goes on. I didn't realize until I went to the shelter. You see women with bruises and you expect that, but then you see little kids toddling after them and they're bruised and banged up too. That was pretty scary. I was only there for three weeks but I learned a lot. The people there (are) from all walks of life, all nationalities, and they are all in the same boat. Being rich doesn't protect you from being abused. We had informal groups in the smoking room and we'd talk amongst ourselves. That helped a lot. I don't think we had any structured groups. I remember talking to my counsellor and sometimes sitting down with other people in the common room and gabbing about this and that. It was nice, everybody was very helpful.*

Four women had attended formal support groups for abused women through the shelters.

*It was powerful. Really good. Peer Support was after that. So I already had a pretty good knowledge of the abuse cycle and the denial.*

*You can go and do groups like different levels. I went through two of those. I didn't get through all of them. I found them actually kind of boring. They give you handouts which I'm sure I have somewhere still, but it's a lot of very dry lecturing when you sit and listen. You don't get to talk that much.*

One woman compared her experience with the shelter support group she attended with the services at Peer Support:

*(The shelter) was very good for giving the bookwork, but I needed more than that. Peer Support really helped in a sense of friendships and being able to talk, about things that were going on in your life. The shelter was a very big group-started out with twenty and ended with ten. We only got so much hearing time, there's so much that they needed to say because it was structured. So you needed to do the assignments. They had things you would do, answer questions and work with a partner sometimes. It wasn't getting out what you needed to get out.*

### **Pathways to Peer Support Programs**

The thirteen women found out about Peer Support Services for Abused Women in a variety of ways: six were told by other professionals (counsellors, doctors) in their

lives, five learned of the service from friends and two women learned of the agency through advertisements. Most of the women had wanted to attend programs at PSSAW for the opportunity to talk with other women who had also been abused by intimate partners.

*I knew that I needed somebody to talk to that had actually been through it.*

*I was looking for something where I could sit down with other women in my experience. I knew that was what I needed because I was looking for help. I talked to counsellors. I felt so alone because I felt nobody understood what I had gone through. I decided that counselling wasn't going to work. I needed to find other women who had been through what I had been through.*

Three women mentioned having had negative experiences with professional counsellors and, thus, were searching for alternative sources of support. For example, one woman had gone for couples counselling with her abusive partner. Her partner had arranged the appointment and had given her the address

*When I got there it was someone's residence. We sat across from each other on two couches. He told me that I was sexy. Put his hand on me, told me I was a sexual addict. This was within fifteen minutes of our beginning our session. To me that felt very much like he was in collusion with my former common-law. [So the counsellor said that?] Yeah. I wasn't really comfortable at all. I wasn't sure what to do and a friend suggested that I call Peer Support.*

Other women were referred by their counsellors to Peer Support because they were looking for additional support.

*[My counsellor] got me to where I was feeling better, but I thought I needed more support in my life to keep me going. So he suggested the Women's Peer Support group. I phoned there and decided to take the classes. [What made you decide to follow through and call?] Basically it was survival. I had a clear suicide plan and, I had a song in my head that I liked and I had the means and it was either get myself help or it's time to go.*

The women commented that when they contacted Peer Support Services for Abused Women they were hoping to find:

*Support, understanding. Some women that I could learn from a new way.*

*Education, knowledge. How to go forward with my life. At the time it did help. It showed me that women are not alone.*

*I'd been out of the relationship about three years and was living on my own. I'd seen the advertisement on a bus stop. I thought that might be worth looking into. I had counselling after the relationship, probably about six sessions. I was trying to learn more about my own cycles and the abuse that I've gone through. Trying to get my life together.*

One woman had a difficult time connecting with the agency: "It's hard to get a hold of people (half laugh). Trying to actually talk to someone is hard. You have to leave quite a few messages."

After the women had conducted an intake with a PSSAW staff member, they entered various programs. As mentioned earlier, PSSAW offers several programs for women abused by intimate partners. Growth Circles are peer support groups led by trained volunteers. In Moving on With Mentors trained volunteers meet individually with women, and Finding Our Voices is an introductory one-day self-esteem building workshop. Follow up workshops targeting specific issues are also offered throughout the year for women who have attended Finding Our Voices.

The thirteen women attended a variety of Peer Support programs. Nine participants attended Growth Circles; seven participated in other groups, such as Finding Our Voices; one participated in Moving on With Mentors; four received support from staff members; three women became volunteers with the organization after they had completed their client work.

Several women noted how carefully staff members at PSSAW matched their particular needs and circumstances to the program they attended:

*I think she was worried that I might run away if I faced a group. I felt really, really, really scared of stories of people ending up in hospital. I wasn't ready to [be in a group]. I have to give her credit that she knew my comfort zone and that I wasn't ready to go to group.* In addition, four women had accessed PSSAW on more than one occasion. As their lives changed, four women returned for further support. At the time of the interview, another woman was planning to reconnect with Peer Support:

*If there's another group happening soon, I hope to go because I still have some issues I need to vent and get other people's ideas on. Things you can't really talk about with your family. It would be good for me right now especially.*

## Chapter Four: PSSAW's Growth Circle Groups

This chapter documents the feedback specific to the Growth Circle groups from the nine women interviewed that had participated in this program. The feedback comments on the structure and organization of the groups, the curriculum, the interaction with other group members, the leaders and challenges.

### Growth Circles Organization and Structure

Several participants described the organization and structure of the Growth Circles. Two women mentioned that it was helpful that the groups were free. *“It’s nice that these services are free. Tell them to keep it that way. (laughs) Some of us don’t have any money.”* They commented that if a cost had been involved they would not have been able to attend.

Two women appreciated that food was provided. One woman commented that it was especially helpful because groups were right after work and this freed her from worrying about how she would have time/money to eat before group began. She also commented that the food was good: *“They usually have a fruit platter and some cheese and crackers.”*

One woman described how helpful it was that childcare was available, stating that it freed her from the worry and expense of having to find such care. She considered this service especially important for women who had left their partners and were single parenting. She stated that this freed women from worry about their children’s safety:

*I think being closer to the kids, like even hearing them in the other room, playing, is really calming for someone. It gives you that sense of security knowing okay, nothing bad is happening to them. They’re having fun in there, I can hear them. It really helps you relax and focus on what you’re talking about.*

Six women appreciated the efforts made by PSSAW staff to ensure their physical and emotional safety in the Growth Circles. The women noted that the effort involved other group members, the group leaders, and the staff members. Being with other group members who had also been abused helped build safety in the group:

*Just knowing that there’s other people there that are-like a safe place, you’re always looking for a safe place to talk and I found that just knowing that there were other people that were going through the same things.*

The group leaders helped to ensure safety by stressing confidentiality, boundaries and respect within the Growth Circles. In addition, groups were closed to new members.

*When they started group they said, once we start we don’t accept anybody else. That’s important because you’re scared enough to start sharing and once you start you don’t want new people coming in because there’s an intimacy that gets built. Trust starts to build so then you start opening up. So if anyone else comes in, you can see everybody put their walls up again.*

Nevertheless, in one group in which the numbers were small, the leaders asked if the group could be opened to new participants, and the group members decided another three women could join.

Finally women noticed that staff and group leaders ensured that the physical environment was secure for everyone within the Circles.

*They keep the door to the building locked so nobody can get in who's not supposed to be there. They have all that in place as a safe environment.*

*The doors were locked. I thought it was odd at the time but it was a safety thing. A lot of these women are going through issues with their partners and it's taking into consideration their physical safety. There was concern of women who may still be in contact with their partner, whether it's because of child custody or their partner is harassing them. How they could ensure their safety. Was there a plan they [the women] could make? Is there somebody that they can contact?*

### **The Growth Circles Curriculum**

All nine participants commented that they had learned useful information and ideas from group leaders' presentations in the Growth Circles. As one woman commented "It's so right on, their pamphlet, where it says the hardest part is learning how to live after all the abuse" and the participants' responses indicate that the Growth Circles have helped them in this endeavour. But understandably, different women were drawn to different ideas in the curriculum.

*Certain classes don't strike a chord, but for other women they might. Sometimes topics don't really relate to me and I let other women talk about it.*

None of the women perceived this as a drawback but, rather, noted that certain ideas seemed more relevant to their individual circumstances. This next section examines some of the ideas and information from the Growth Circles curriculum that the participants found helpful. Six women commented on the helpful nature of the information on abuse.

*They teach you the different types of abuse and I had **everything**. There's physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, every aspect of my life was abused, everything. I only thought it was women that were married that were in abusive relationships. I had no idea it went on in colleges. Why would a young guy do that? I thought kids this day and age knew better than to hit a girl.*

*He said I was going through the baby blues. Well, that's six years ago now. I'm not going through the baby blues! I wasn't then and I'm not now. The last time he used it was just a couple of weeks ago. I said, "You'd better change your story. Our daughter is six now. It can't be the baby blues." He was always trying to make it sound like I was crazy. That's manipulation. He's so manipulative. Through Peer Support I've learned that that's how a lot of them do it. I've learned a lot from Peer Support.*

*I started to understand the cycle. Now I can see his manipulation. At one point I would have never even taken the time to meet with you. He doesn't know I'm meeting with you because that would just flick him off the deep end.*

Five women found that the information presented by the group leaders on family histories of abuse gave them a lot to think about.

*That is an eye opener. We did these charts. I still have mine. You do your mom and your dad and if they had any abuse problems and their extended family. That was really an eye opener, to see how family history can affect you.*

*I grew up with an abusive father so I mentioned this to the women that run the Peer Support group last week. They're like "What! Why didn't you tell us this?" So I'm like, what? My father was abusive so I'm attracted to abusers? I don't think that. But that definitely has a tie, your family background. Maybe that's why I'm not confident in that area because I didn't have a proper father figure in my life. I had an abusive father.*

One woman commented that through the work she did at the Growth Circles she can now see how her family history has affected her. In addition the information she gained in the Circles helped her decide how she wants to approach issues in her life now.

*I learned that taking care of myself wasn't necessarily selfish. I had neglected myself for years. This started when I was ten years old. I helped my mother raise my two younger brothers, and took care of the house while my mom was sick. I got married, went from my father's house to my husband's house and took care of my husband and then my children and never really took care of myself for years and years. Now, I got in the right mind frame to take care of me and that's why I'm so content right now because I'm finally doing things for me.*

Three women stated found the information and discussions defining healthy and unhealthy relationships helpful. One woman utilized the information to identify and deal with a man she was dating.

*Very, very possessive and I saw the red flags. I was going to the groups at the same time I was dating him. Whoa. That one was scary. We were going to sit down, have something to eat. He was very argumentative. I said "Look, if you don't stop this, I'm leaving." I don't think he believed me and I got up and took a cab home. That was while I was taking the courses. Inside I was getting stronger, whereas before, I probably would have stayed.*

She also credits the Growth Circles for giving her the skills to now be in a healthy relationship with a new partner. In fact she sees the Growth Circles curriculum as so helpful she believes it should be offered in the school systems:

*I don't think I would have got to this place had I not gone through the Peer Support groups, in fact I know I wouldn't. It should be in the school systems for every woman to take. A lot of young girls get into relationships with verbal abuse and it slowly erodes your self-esteem and you don't realize it. If women or young girls could take courses like this before their first marriages, it might not stop women from getting into a relationship that may not be healthy but with the right knowledge, they would be able to get out of it and see the red flags.*

Four women found the information and discussions on increasing self-esteem helpful.

*It really helps one's self esteem and helps you grow from your experiences.*

*A lot of the things that they talked about had never occurred to me. Like every person's bill of rights—just the right to have your own feelings. It just turns your way of thinking around. It validated you as a person. A lot of times when you go through verbal abuse your self-esteem is so low that you don't think of yourself. You don't have self-confidence. I learned that I didn't necessarily need to be with someone because I didn't want to be alone. I was worthy enough just myself.*

Two women specifically mentioned how helpful they found the information and discussions on the stages of grieving.

*They talked about the grieving process and how to deal with that. It makes you think about a lot of things in terms of what my new goals would be, what you've lost through a divorce or leaving a relationship, what you plan on doing to replace those losses.*

*Anybody that's been through a traumatic experience, you're either going to go through the stages of grief and progress through all those stages. We learned about it in class.*

Two women found the information and discussions on dealing with difficult emotions helpful. One group member commented that they learned, “*about different ways to deal with our anger. I have learned that if somebody makes me angry and then to hang onto that anger, I'm giving away my power to that person.*” Another woman found the information and discussions regarding assertiveness helpful.

*The biggest part was all the information and learning that it's okay to say no. Learning that you're allowed to have your own opinions and that if something doesn't feel right, it's okay to walk away from it. That it's okay to say, “I'm not happy here.” I have the power, I can get up and leave, which is what I did.*

Other women mentioned finding the guided meditations, relaxation exercises, discussions on how to deal with children, and boundaries helpful. Three women perceived Growth Circles as only part of the process in their efforts to deal with having been abused by their partners. They noted that the Growth Circles helped with this, but that also that “*it's an ongoing process.*”

*I'm sure I gained, whether it's a refresher, or a new piece of information. You're able to take on new information as you're ready and able to.*

One woman summarized what she learned in the Growth Circles:

*Days when I don't have a lot of confidence, they've given me enough skills to make choices. So I don't feel locked into anything anymore. I feel like if I had a dollar in pocket I could leave no matter what situation I was in and I could get myself help and move ahead if I had to.*

### **Interaction with Growth Circle Members**

We asked the nine women who had participated in Growth Circles about their experiences with the other group members. All nine stated the importance of talking with other women who had also been abused:

*It felt like a safe place to go and hear other people and know that you weren't alone and that other people experienced the same things you did. When you're talking to people out here (general public), people either trigger their own stuff, or they've never been there so they don't understand. So it was someplace you could go and unload and feel like there was support.*

Sharing their experiences with other group members was important to the participants because they believed that these women could understand.

*That was helpful for me to talk to other people and see what other people have gone through to understand where I've been.*

*That's what brought you back every week, not the group itself, not the service. It's the women that brought me back. We had so much in common. It's incredible. Every Monday night it was great. I thought, "Okay, now, somebody understands!" It's not the women that are running the show, maybe the one in an abusive relationship, but it's these women that understood. It was such a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Every Monday I felt better. I was starting to become a little healthier, with my character and how I felt.*

They found the support from the other group members invaluable.

*As long as you have other women to talk to at least you're connecting. I can see why some women run into another relationship because they feel alone, they have no one to talk to. All of a sudden you have the whole financial burden: you have to get a job. Your kids are going off to their dad's; you worry about them. You have to take care of things you never took care of before, maybe financially, or a vehicle. It's pretty scary to realize this is your new reality. If you had something really bad happen that week, you could go and get support.*

Further, they learned from each other.

*Different people go through different things. We liked to hear each other's stories and what we've been through because we could learn from each other.*

*You saw the same people every week and "How are you doing? What's new with you?" A lot of times you'd get more information and help from someone in the group because they'd been through it.*

For example, one woman noted that hearing the other women discuss their partners' abusive behaviour clarified for her that the abuse was not her fault:

*All these guys start off the same. They are sweet talkers; they make promises. They fill your head with dreams of taking a cruise ship across the world. Some of the dreams were the same. The lines that the guys were throwing to us—the girls were married and had been in these relationships for years, they were saying the same stuff I was being told. I was like, "Hey, there's something about these guys." I stopped blaming myself after that first day.*

The participants noted that the group members were in different places in their lives and the women used these differences as a means of hope.

*It makes you realize that there are other alternatives. It shows you that you are not alone. It helps show you what trauma does to you. All traumas leaves scars. It shows that it's happened to other women. If they can get through it, so can I.*

*I found the group very helpful. A lot of women [were at] different levels in the healing process. Some had found total peace, but it didn't happen overnight. I'm still in the beginning parts; there are lots that I have to do. [Some] had been to lots of the seminars and workshops and found peace within themselves where they didn't need a partner to find peace. They seemed at a higher level of—happiness is kind of an understatement—serenity in their lives. They seemed so strong, so focused and so at peace. That's where I want to be eventually.*

*It's the friendship, the connection, the understanding that there are others out there who have gone through what you have gone through. You have the opportunity to reach out and support each other. Abuse is very isolating for a lot of those women and they haven't had the opportunity to make those friendships or connections before. And to make a connection with someone who's been there is a huge thing. A lot of people have misperceptions about abuse. Unless you've been there and gone through it, it's difficult for people to fully understand why you would stay in a relationship as long as you did. To have somebody there who's gone through that can make a big a difference. So it's really important.*

We asked the women if they had stayed in touch with any of the group members after the Growth Circles had ended. Five women made friends with other group members, which have endured past the ending of the Growth Circles they attended.

*I still talk to one of the girls that was in that class. We've been friends for, let me think, it would be four or five years.*

*I still have contact from one woman in group. We've been friends since we met at Peer Support four years ago. Friendships are always important. Some people say when you're going through abuse you lose friends. That's true, you lose touch because he makes it hard and then you're embarrassed and ashamed. But it's nice to have one person that you can stay in touch with through the years.*

One woman could only talk with friends from the Growth Circles about some of her experiences such as when her ex-husband had held a gun to her head and threatened to kill her. She has always wondered why he changed his mind and did not pull the trigger. Yet, she still has contact with him because they have children together and he has visitation with them:

*That fear stays when my kids go there. He still has access to guns. (sigh) Some moms don't have a problem sending their kids to their ex's. They go out and have fun, but for me, I can't wait till they get home. It's not free time. (laughs) It's worse than prison. I try to pray that they'll be protected, but honestly there's lots of times I feel, "Is this the last time I'm going to see them?" It's horrible, horrible going through that every two weeks. [Is there anybody you can talk to about that?] Who's safe to talk to? People don't get it, haven't been through it. I definitely save those conversations with the friends that I've met at Peer Support.*

On the other hand, four women commented that they had not formed long-lasting friendships with other group members.

*When it was over I didn't find that a lot of connections between people in the groups. Everybody kind of goes their own way. So once the Peer Support Group was over, you're back out there by yourself again.*

Two participants had no desire to form friendships with other group members.

*I didn't make any long-term friends. In my experience when you're in a group and people who have abusive situations, you don't really want to bond with them. I didn't want to get involved with anybody in an abusive situation. Some of them were back and I didn't want that in my life, even vicariously. I wanted to move on. So I never considered making long-term friendships with anybody in there.*

*It was nice that the whole idea of the group was based on peer support. I didn't make a huge connection on a friendship level with the women I went to group with. It was enough for me just to be in the group. I didn't feel I needed to extend and make those friendships out of group.*

### **The Growth Circles Group Leaders**

We asked the women about their perceptions of the group leaders. The nine participants saw the group leaders as an integral part in the Growth Circles groups.

*Women who have been abused are looking for guidance and a light at the end of the tunnel. I think the instructors were able to do that.*

They noted that the group leaders had influenced their experiences in the Growth Circles. All of the women had had some good experiences with group leaders.

*They did the best. Obviously each person is different, but definitely I think they tried their best.*

The participants described a number of qualities or characteristics they saw in their facilitators that made them good group leaders. The women liked leaders who made the groups interactive. They believed that this helped create a positive group atmosphere. And several stated that another quality that contributed to a positive atmosphere were facilitators who displayed good listening skills, who did not push their ideas on group members but presented ideas and information in the form of suggestions based on what had worked for them in similar circumstances.

*She was very open-minded. She seemed able to see everyone's point of view and the fact that she had been through bad experiences. If you'd start to describe something that that happened to you, she'd say something and it would click. She knew what she was talking about. It was the experience and the open mind. I remember that she was very easy to talk to.*

*I like the two current facilitators. They are tremendous. (name) is very upbeat, she moves around a lot. (name) is quieter but she is upbeat too. They're great. It makes for a positive atmosphere. It's lively. It's interactive. We're able to talk and participate and you keep things lively. They have a genuine concern for each of our stories and what we tell them. I like that the facilitators genuinely care.*

[What makes a good facilitator?] *Definitely have a listening ear, and sometimes not as pushy—I would like it when you related a situation to something, and, [the group leader would say] “Well, it sounds like when I was a kid and this happened and this is what I did and it really helped.” That really helps because it’s not saying you ‘should’ do this.*

Other qualities that the participants used to describe good group leaders were: *“nice, pleasant, open-minded, easy to talk to, non-judgemental, empathetic, approachable, friendly, strong, independent, knowledgeable, supportive.”*

In addition, six women stated that they considered it helpful that some of their group leaders had themselves experienced abuse by an intimate partner.

*The key thing about a facilitator is they have gone through what we’re going through so they know what we’re feeling because they’ve been through it themselves. That’s important to me. Maybe it helps to be able to do what they do. Maybe it helps them heal too by helping other people.*

*There’s a big difference between somebody who has lived through something and somebody who has read about it in a book. They don’t know the fear that you live under. Someone who has never been through an assault will never understand triggers. You can talk to them about triggers, but they’ll never understand triggers or what it’s like to live through it.*

Nevertheless, three women were not concerned about whether the group leaders had actually experienced abuse themselves or not.

*I don’t think my group leaders had been abused. But I don’t think it would’ve added anything if they had been. The only time that helps is when you’re talking to friends. They’re often judging and criticizing. As much as abuse is more out in the open, people are judging and criticizing, like, “I’d never be in a relationship like that. I’d just leave.” But counsellors and instructors don’t judge and criticize even if they haven’t been through it. The instructors I had were respectful, responsive, caring. They took confidentiality seriously. The group felt safe. I had no concerns at all about the group leaders. I thought they were great.*

All of the participants perceived the facilitators as knowledgeable about the issues associated with intimate partner abuse.

*She was very knowledgeable. I don’t know if she took courses or what but just the amount of stuff that we got through. She had a lot of information, how good you were, change your mindset about things that are dragging you down.*

*The instructors were wonderful, really approachable and knowledgeable.*

*The facilitators were knowledgeable and supportive. It was nice that the whole idea of the group was based on peer support. It’s more about being empathetic towards the situation and using the knowledge that they were trained with to work with [women in group].*

However, one participant questioned the training given to the group leaders. She described an incident in group in which the topic and associated questions didn’t make

sense. She saw the group leaders struggling, resulting in the group members also struggling with the ideas presented in that particular class.

*There was a huge miscommunication between the girls running the class and the questions. I don't know who is making up these questions or topics of discussion. We had to rearrange and change the questions altogether. Nobody in the room understood. I think they need to get together and make sure that everybody understands what's going on because that just makes the class confusing.*

Each participant perceived the group leaders as respecting their confidentiality.

*There was the discussion about how the group was confidential, the information was confidential. Nothing was ever discussed about other individuals outside of group. So as far as I know they took it seriously.*

*Things that I talked to (group leader) about in private were never discussed in the group. I had one session where I was the only one that showed up so I had them both to myself, which was nice. I got quite a bit off my shoulders that night. I don't think there was any question of confidentiality. Just listening to the other women; I was never worried that they were going to say something about me to anybody else. I felt comfortable anyway.*

These nine women also described the group leaders as respectful and responsive.

*If you didn't understand something, she would describe it in a different way until you did understand it.*

*She was concise, to the point, but would elaborate when elaboration was requested. She seemed to have compassion.*

*Being empathetic, listening. They never seemed forceful in their approach. It's part of their training, but if someone's not feeling comfortable it wasn't like they were trying to force the issue. I think that listening and being empathetic was huge. Showing the respect. Not jumping in with their own opinions or beliefs.*

The participants noted that one way the group leaders showed their respect and responsiveness to the group members was by balancing the night's agenda with the needs of the women.

*You're not even focusing because, "Oh, I have to talk about this." You feel like you really need to get something [out] or you need advice. I think (group leader) can sense something. She definitely has a gift to pick that up. She can tell you weren't paying attention. Then you can talk about whatever it was. It just helped to get things out. With her, (we) still got everything done but it definitely, definitely helped to talk about what was happening.*

The participants also commented about how the group leaders balanced the needs of a group member in distress with the needs of other group members.

*Sometimes one would go off with this woman to the side, and they would talk and the other [group leader] would continue on with the agenda. I thought they handled everything well.*

Three participants commented on how the group leaders specifically built emotional safety within the group.

*At the first session there was a speech about boundaries and respect for other people in the group. It was safe. I'm sure that had something to do with it. (group leader) wasn't a judgemental kind of person at all which helps.*

*They're a supportive environment, a safe environment. They keep your confidentiality, not sharing what they're not supposed to. Anybody abused could learn a lot if they are willing to put in the time. It's okay if you want to pass and not talk. Nobody's going to hold that against you. There's some places where they insist you talk. We made up our own ground rules, and that was one of them. The right to say, "I don't feel like talking right now." It's very relaxed in there.*

One woman commented that the connection she had made with one of the Growth Circle group leaders was strong enough that she felt comfortable contacting her when she experienced a difficult time after the end of group.

*They were quite knowledgeable. I made a connection with one leader in particular. I had some issues after the group and made an appointment to work through those. It was really nice to feel like somebody did care and they weren't just there because they were supposed to be. They genuinely were empathetic.*

Although all the women who participated in Growth Circles commented about good experiences with their group leaders, three women also described experiences with group leaders about which they felt uncomfortable.

*I didn't feel like she was genuine. I felt she put on airs a little bit. She said she went through it (abuse) but I don't know. It looks like she was pretending. I thought she was a bit of a phoney.*

One participant compared her experiences with a facilitator with whom she had felt comfortable and another with whom she had felt uncomfortable:

*We got different feedback from the different facilitators. I will compliment (name) hugely. She seemed to add some more to each group. She was able to read between the lines and offer on some things a bit more. The first gal, the flippant gal was kind of like checkmark, checkmark, checkmark. (tapping the table).*

Two women had experienced incidents in which they felt a group leader acted aggressively. For example, one woman described a negative experience she had with a group leader:

*I was shocked that everybody had their own mode of conveying a message. Something she said triggered me and she was all excited because it triggered me. She said something— "or I will kill you." I was taken aback. Not that she was threatening to kill me but it was said in jest. It wasn't funny and it struck me like something that an abusive person would say. I almost packed up and left at that point. She said, "Well that's good that you're standing up for yourself." Then she said, "Oh this is great! It's triggering you! I'm so excited we're getting a reaction out of you." Well you know what? It wasn't like I came in there as comatose and that I was just sort of coming to life.*

This participant had called the group leader on her comment and that the leader took her concerns seriously. “*Good for me for recognizing what she said was inappropriate and calling her on it and having her back pedal and said ‘Oh good for you for being alarmed with that’.*” The participant decided to stay in group because the group leader “*back-pedalled that day and then again the following week.*” However, it was a relief to her that this group leader did not stay through the entire group, although she did not know the reason for this.

### **Challenges for the Growth Circles**

Although the nine women identified many benefits to the Growth Circles, they also mentioned challenging situations. Three women were disappointed about having to wait months for a group to begin.

*I hate to think that there is someone else like me that is really eager to go through it and having to wait for months and months. That’s the one thing that wasn’t helpful. Having to wait for months because they couldn’t find enough people to train as facilitators. They wanted two facilitators and they won’t run the group with just one. That wasn’t helpful, having to wait all that time.*

Another woman waited six months for the Growth Circles to begin. In retrospect, she felt that it would have been helpful to have support while she was waiting.

*All women in my position want to do is talk about what happened and be heard. Have somebody understand what we went through. That’s all I was looking for. It would’ve been helpful if they had suggested anything, maybe something that they didn’t even provide as a service: anything that was near what I was looking for. Somebody could have teamed me up with some other women. Maybe we could have done it outside the Growth Circles or not had that set plan of you had to register. Maybe the mentorship could have offered that; they pair you up with another girl that’s been in the same position.*

Four women were disappointed that their Growth Circles did not run to completion because of issues finding facilitators. Once facilitators were found, there was a problem with the space.

*The hardest part was the lapse in between because you start feeling comfortable with that group of people then when poor (name) was trying to find facilitators, there was a long lapse. If somebody was still in crisis or in an abusive situation, that lapse could stunt them moving forward where they could fall back and maybe not reach out again for help. Even if there’s one woman that just needs some help I think they just got to keep going because literally they restored my faith.*

*As far the facilitators, it’s much like when you hire employees. You can go through a raft of people in six months. So no one can guarantee that. It’s really unfortunate for someone in a state of perhaps, unease. There was a facilitator issue and then it was the space issue: they didn’t know whether they could host it there at night. If they had appropriate funding to have a set space and an individual room where it’s set up with their, flip board chart and they got adequate seating. I understand real life happens. )*

Eight women noted the importance of speaking with other group members about their experiences of being abused by their partners. Yet they were disappointed that the group format did not specifically include time for women to tell their stories. Women only disclosed the pieces that applied to a specific topic.

*I was looking for something where I could talk to other women about what happened to me. I want to hear what happened to them. We skirt around it a lot. There's no specific class where we actually talk about what happened to us. There's topics that they present and you bring in examples of stuff that happened. But it's good to hear the women talk about, "Well my husband did this." Then I'm like, "That happened to me too!" I appreciate those classes the most.*

Five women mentioned it would be helpful to have greater flexibility with respect to the group topics. For example, one woman mentioned in the Growth Circles she attended many of the group members were dating or thinking about dating.

*A lot of us thought about dating. You can see girls are trying to date and you really have to watch out for yourself. If you have kids, with a lot of pedophiles, protect your kids. I've even seen girls who let their new boyfriend watch the kids while they go shopping. I don't think that's a good idea. You don't have to let them even meet your kids in the beginning.*

This woman suggested that it would have been helpful in the Growth Circles she attended to have been able to spend more time discussing dating and how women could ensure their own safety and that of their children. Five women stated that it would be helpful if the Growth Circles had the time to address issues in greater depth.

*I thought the curriculum would have been more in depth. If you got a chapter of a book and there's all these exercises and information over here, and then there's two pages that's the summary. I thought we were getting the summary. That's the best way I can explain it.*

The women recognized that if issues were addressed in greater depth, sessions might need to run longer.

*Maybe they could have it more than once a week. It wouldn't bother me if I went more than once a week. That way there would be more meeting time, maybe more stuff in the meeting. Or maybe there could be more than three levels.*

Four women commented that once the group ended, they were again isolated and yet still struggling to rebuild their lives. They suggested that it would be helpful if another level of group was offered.

*You need to move through the pain of everything that has happened. What they need is a group that is those three levels. There's a point in time that you need that because you need to talk about it but once that phase is over you need to move. Now you're coming out on the other side, now let us help you to learn a non-violent way yourself. Let us help you to move into a healthier realm of people: show how you to get out around different people.*

This respondent saw the Growth Circles aiming to teach women how to live free from their abusive partners. She would have liked a new set of sessions created in which these ideas are explored in more depth.

*They were veering towards personal freedom. That was a good thing. To imagine what your life would be like free from the violence and to visualize it and draw your picture of what freedom would look like. But then what's after the group? You're a caterpillar when you go in there, in a cocoon and then the cocoon starts to open and you start to become a butterfly. Well, you have to learn how. Not only me, but a couple of the other women too. One girl that was coming with me said, "You start to feel like there is freedom, but how do you live that freedom?"*

Three women had difficult experiences with other group members:

*Some people come and take over a meeting. I don't like that. Lots of people that have stuff to say, so stop, you've had your time.*

*One group member I found irritating. We didn't have any arguments or anything but the way she talked about things was kind of whining, and it grated on my nerves. But other than that, nothing. (Did she whine to the point that it was a detriment?) On some occasions because we'd go through the whole thing and not get through our agenda; we'd be concentrating on her. She was in a bad situation, I certainly felt for her but I needed to get other things from the group too. It was just she was in her own personal crisis and needed a lot of help.*

One woman saw splitting the groups according to where participants were in their process as a potential solution for dealing with difficult group members.

*Their story took over three quarters of the session; I didn't get what could have been offered. But it indicated that I wasn't at the same state of being distraught as they were. I recognized that it was a process. So, maybe it needs to be divided into a couple of sectors. There was one gal that had someone trying to kill her. Another who was sexually abused. There was just such a divide.*

However, this participant also saw drawbacks to dividing participants in the Growth Circles.

*The feedback that we gave to two of these gals, supporting them, if we'd all be in the same desolation they wouldn't have got. I understand why it is bulked together. If there's funding for a more intense program that can help them. I don't think that an eight week program would have given them what they need. It wouldn't have been enough for me.*

One woman considered it important that childcare was provided at the Growth Circles, although she did experience one negative incident while her children were being tended.

*The babysitting is good, only one time they had a new babysitter, and she let my daughter go to the bathroom by herself. It's at the community centre and that freaked me out. She was only about three and a half.*

Two women expressed concerns that they had to travel a long ways to reach the Growth Circles.

*I wish it were closer, but it's worth it to go. If they could train more facilitators maybe they could have groups in the communities so some people might not have so far to travel.*

But the women also recognized that this might not be practical.

*Although I indicated maybe breaking it up in to two or three different sectors, it depends. It's a numbers game, right. Got to find the facilities, got to find space, you've got to have the number of participants.*

Three women raised the issue of the group size being small.

*More participants would be good. Sometimes a small group is good. More interaction with other people. But if there's more people you get more ideas. It's amazing how much you learn when you hear about other people's woes. Sometimes it makes yours not so bad. It makes you realize you're not alone.*

*A larger group would be nice. I like it small but sometimes I wonder if a larger group would add more diversity. [What did you like about the bigger group?] More input. But a lot of them had a lot of problems and sometimes it got to be too much to listen to. They were really unhappy people.*

In summary, although the last section documents a number of issues that provide important suggestions to PSSAW to consider when evaluating the Growth Circle groups, these should not take away from the strong positive feedback with respect to the groups as a whole. The women with whom we spoke had important, and for some, life-altering experiences having taken part in the groups. They wholeheartedly endorse the Growth Circles for other women abused by intimate partners.

## Chapter Five: Other PSSAW Programs

As noted in Chapter Two, Peer Support Services for Abused Women (PSSAW) offers a variety of programs in which many of the interviewees participated. As well as the Growth Circle Groups, seven women participated in Finding Our Voices and related self-esteem groups, one participated in Moving on With Mentors, four received support from staff members. After completing their client work at PSSAW, three participants returned to the agency as volunteers.

This chapter presents feedback on these other PSSAW programs and the women's comments regarding volunteering. It also examines the reasons that participants lost contact with the agency, and the women's summary comments with respect to the entire agency.

### Finding Our Voices and Related Self Esteem Groups

Seven women attended Finding Our Voices, the introductory self-esteem workshop, and related self-esteem seminars. One woman was interested in attending these particular workshops because:

*I wasn't trusting my own decisions. I was double guessing everything. I felt like I was getting out of control, so when I heard about it, I thought this would be great for me. I needed something to ground me or get me thinking in one direction. My thoughts were so scattered I just couldn't seem to figure anything out.*

The women found the self-esteem workshops helpful: *"I came out of it feeling really empowered."* Like the Growth Circle groups, the women found different aspects of the program helpful. Four women noted that sharing their experiences with others who had been abused by their intimate partners was an important aspect.

*What I found most uplifting was the sense of fellowship at a time when I felt very alone. That sense of fellowship was immeasurably important to me.*

*The people were outstanding! We were all in similar situations, all wives struggling with their partners. There was physical abuse but lots of verbal abuse and that was something I could talk to women about, relate to them. There was so much group interaction. I really liked it! It validated how I was feeling.*

Two women enjoyed the follow-up seminars more than the introductory workshop because these were held over a longer time period. One woman noted that the ongoing workshops helped the group members build a sense of safety and community with each other.

*Longer time to have ongoing camaraderie and build a sense of community within that safe place. It was more comfortable sharing when you had a sense of how others were struggling with their own problems. It maybe made you introspective about your problems, how you could deal with them differently and how maybe they weren't as bad as you thought. (laughs) Maybe they got that from me.*

From Finding Our Voices and the related self-esteem workshops, only one participant had maintained contact with the other group members.

*I ran into a couple of them, not together, on various occasions. They chose to seek me out in a public situation when they didn't have to. To come and say, "Hi, how are you doing?" They could have remained anonymous or not acknowledged me.*

The women also mentioned that the group leaders played an integral part in their experience with these groups.

*I felt safe and welcome. I felt I could say anything. [How did the group leaders make that environment?] She had brought in tea. It gave us a chance to chat, to get to know each other a bit beforehand. It was a lot of talking, a lot more time getting to know each other. We get to do an introduction. I thought all that was fantastic. Lots of smiles and just letting us know she was there in case we needed to talk about something or weren't sure of things. I really liked it.*

The seven women also noted qualities within the group leaders that helped make the groups they attended a success. One woman mentioned how the group leaders encouraged the women to support one another.

*It was very interactive. The facilitator was great. She was involved with us. You know, sitting around with us, giving support that way.*

The women also commented on the manner in which the group leaders also paid attention to the individual group members.

*She really listened and tried to put herself where you were coming from and thought about it before she responded.*

*When you're speaking, your facilitator is looking right at you and you know that she's really is listening to you. I think that is extremely important.*

Other qualities that the participants used to describe good group leaders were: *nice, eager, enthusiastic, genuine, empathetic, and compassionate*. Four women stated it was important to them that the group leaders had also experienced abuse from intimate partners.

*They were willing to share [abuse] experiences of their own which for me was pivotal. I don't think I would have been as quick to share if I had to go through the same situation with someone that I wasn't aware had been through similar situations. I think it was better to talk to someone who had a similar experience than to someone who I might have had the impression was perfect.*

The seven women took away valuable information away from the self-esteem curriculum. Similar to the Growth Circles different discussions and ideas stood out for different women. One woman noted it was helpful to her to learn:

*How to evaluate your relationships: which ones make you feel good and empowered and which ones don't, and whether you want to keep the relationship or if you're going to try to change it and what the result of that effort might be. Setting personal goals. I found it a really, really good session for me.*

Other women appreciated the information on assertiveness, journaling, positive affirmations, and visualizations. One commented that the information on communication

styles stood out for her because “it was good to learn how I’m reacting and feeling isn’t abnormal.” A specific exercise stood out for one woman:

*She [group leader] put little trinkets on a table and told us each to choose one, not telling us why. After we picked she said, “Think of why you picked that.” I took a little tiny medal. I picked it up and said “Realizing that maybe I’m not a loser” (laugh). That stayed with me, trying to get over that loser feeling.*

Another woman stated:

*Aside from the resources handed out at the session, those suggestions of other books and readings were very helpful - allowed me to continue to work on my own. I got the sense that all of the sessions that I attended had threads of these particular suggested readings woven into the fabric of the sessions. It allowed me, when I was taking home these readings, to recapture some of that comfort level and very quickly get into the context of what I was reading.*

Two women preferred the follow-up seminars to Finding Our Voices because these sessions were ongoing and it gave them more time to consider the information and how these ideas fit in their lives.

*That was really good because you had time to look more in depth at a concept or a methodology of how to evaluate things that occur in your life and your responses to them. Responses verses reactions and have a whole week to think about it and address the next week before you moved on to the next concept.*

Four women had attended various additional workshops that are offered throughout the year.

*They offered different topics on a monthly basis, different speakers from reputable organizations from the community. I thought that a good offering.*

Two women mentioned how helpful it was when PSSAW brought in a lawyer one evening. They also liked the opportunities in these groups to address financial issues. “The groups were really good because they gave a lot of good advice: especially financial and legal questions.”

### Self-Esteem and Workshop Challenges

The women participating in these groups mentioned that being with other women was important to them. They often made connections with other group members. In retrospect two women suggested that they would like a way to contact other group members.

*I felt so alone at that point. Then I shared, with these strangers, something very intense and personal. Their anonymity allowed me to share, but then to share and feel that close and lose any opportunity for that relationship to go forward felt like another loss. I would have liked a contact sheet. Not one that gets handed out, but one that you can put your name on as you’re leaving and say I’m willing to have others call me. If you are interested in calling me you can.*

*It would be nice to connect with some of the girls. But, sometimes you don't have that opportunity. Maybe a good thing would be a message centre where you could leave messages for someone that you met. Like if they want to meet for coffee.*

During an exercise, one participant had experienced difficulty with another group member. The leaders had assigned breakaway activities in which group members worked in pairs. She was working with another woman to make positive affirmations:

*My experience with that exercise wasn't as helpful as it could have been because the individual that I was paired with was distracted and off topic.*

She was not sure if the group leaders could address her partner's inattention. *"I think that had to do with the participants: who you are paired with and their willingness to work. I don't think that can be controlled."* But on the other hand, she thought if there was *"five minute supervision of each breakaway team, just to get them going, that leadership I think would have maybe salvaged that."*

Two women noted the extensive information given in the group sessions and recommended that the groups be lengthened to offer smaller amounts of information over a longer period of time. *"It was informative, but it may have been too much for me all in one day."* One woman would have liked to examine various ideas in more depth. She also suggested that the groups be extended: *"expand on it a little bit; it was really good. I really enjoyed that."*

The comments regarding the leaders are similar to those made by the participants who had attended the Growth Circles. The quality of the facilitator strongly influenced how much the women benefited from attending the Self-esteem Workshops. One woman was concerned that the group leader in the workshop she attended did not discuss self-esteem in relation to having been abused by intimate partners.

*I don't know if the word "abuse" was even said. I didn't understand it. I thought, "Why are we really here?" We're all looking for some answers and some help. It's great to feel better about myself but I'm really here because things are not good. So if we can't openly discuss that I'm not really sure. We're all here for the same basic reason. We're all looking for something. So we need help. I don't know if very many people were getting the help they needed.*

In addition, she felt judged by the group leader. She described having made a comment that the group leader told her was incorrect.

*I felt like I could be judged. I was looking for certain responses and I didn't feel safe in getting a positive response. [What kind of responses were you hoping for?] I think wording, a certain phrase—instead of her saying, "No, that's wrong!" which I was told. I thought 'Maybe it's wrong to you, but I don't see it as wrong.' You're looking for encouragement; for someone to say you're doing okay.*

She compared this experience with another Peer Support Services for Abused Women group that she had attended. In the group, she had felt comfortable, describing the leader as approaching group members' viewpoints differently:

*Everything was a discussion. If people didn't 100% agree with it, "Okay, let's talk about it" or "Maybe you should be thinking about that in a different way". There was always "let's try to come up with a solution." Not "Ah, no."*

Three women were concerned about the physical space in the locations in which the groups were offered.

*[Did you feel safe with the other group members?] Not so much at Self-Esteem. I think the location was too large a space for the number of participants and so you didn't quickly develop that cohesiveness. I think the setting is really important. If you're going to share intimate things, you can talk in intimate settings. The Self-Esteem was held at church, but the space was too large and it felt irreverent to me sharing those kinds of things in a church.*

### **Moving on With Mentors**

One woman had participated in the Moving on With Mentors program, stating that it was her preference to work one on one. The connection that she made with the mentor was helpful to her personally: she had learned a lot and talking with her mentor helped improve her self-esteem.

*She made me feel so much better about myself and understand that I can do this; I do have the power. I was already finished school but I still needed that little push. [How did she help you build your self-esteem?] It's so hard to say, it was letting me talk about it. Understanding that I am a person and that he cannot control my life anymore: I can do whatever I want if I put my mind to it. She was a professional woman. She told me where she is now after her situation, "If I can do it, anybody can do it." If it wasn't for Peer Support I would never have known that there were so many women out there, all the different forms of abuse and the stats. It's important because you're not the only one that was treated like that; it can happen to almost anybody, you're not really stupid. During my relationship he always said I'm so stupid, I can't do anything and I truly believed it. Then all of a sudden, "Maybe I'm not that stupid! Hello. There's other people out there."*

She had no concerns about her mentor or this program.

### **Support from PSSAW Staff Members**

As previously mentioned, four participants also sought support from staff members at Peer Support Services for Abused Women. These women sought support from staff for a variety of reasons, often because they were in a crisis.

*I got in with Ada fairly quickly. She was a great help. Right after I went to the Self-Esteem (laughs) session he masturbated on me and the next day he kicked me out. I saw her the Tuesday after the assault charge was laid, after I fled. She was very, very helpful, helping me calm down and see what my options were and how to protect myself and getting counsel.*

Another woman sought support when she started a new relationship.

*My big concern was I making a wise choice? Was he a man who would abuse me? I had a **really** good conversation with Ada.*

One woman contacted the agency staff member even after she had moved to another province.

*Ada sent me the next courses. She gave me her email address and if there is something I want some help with, she's more than willing to try and help. Because it is a process. I don't believe I'm done working with it yet.*

The women commented that the support offered by the agency staff members was helpful.

*One reason that I still needed counsellors is that I don't trust my thoughts and I have to hear something out loud. We don't really take other people's advice unless it's something we've thought of ourselves. As soon as she said it, it made sense but I had to hear it from the outside because inside I still didn't trust. I think that's part of the healing process. I have to really learn to trust my instincts.*

The staff members were safe to talk to.

*I've never met someone so non-judgemental. [I felt] totally safe telling her anything! [How did she make it safe?] She told me a bit about her, and didn't push me in one direction or another. I had tried another counsellor at (agency) and it was horrible. I didn't think I would ever go to counselling again. They put ideas to push me in a certain direction that wasn't what I was thinking! I was very intimidated! I was very concerned about going back. But she didn't push me, didn't force me to talk if I didn't want to about certain things. It was all about me. Before it was more about what they thought I should be going through. With Ada there was no set agenda.*

Three women noted that the staff member validated their concerns.

*A couple of phrases I still remember when having a tough time. The first time I spoke to Andrea she went "You're obviously in crisis" and just that word. This is a crisis? That makes a lot of sense. They teach you what you're talking about is valid. She showed me a video, which was very powerful and made me believe that my story was legitimate, about Jewish women in abusive relationships. A few were quite well off and discussed how their husbands would humiliate them. One woman said, "I had to call the police and Jewish people just don't do that." It doesn't happen; family life is so sacred. It's all about everything being peaceful and wonderful so they just felt, first of all, amazed and then ashamed and ultimately said, "Okay, this is enough." Very, very powerful. A couple of weeks before this had happened, he was freaking me out so much, I said, "I'm going to call the police if you don't stop." Even when I said that, I couldn't believe I was considering doing that because it's not something I thought I would ever do.*

Three women mentioned how talking with the staff person helped clarify the issue and determine their options.

*She would help me try to sort everything out instead of just feeling overwhelmed, just by listening to me. She could pick up on little details that even I wasn't even thinking about and it would be right on and that would help me focus. She would always give me something to think about.*

None of the women had any concerns about the support they had received from agency staff.

### **Volunteering with PSSAW**

Four participants had considered volunteering with Peer Support Services for Abused Women but believed that their lives were not ready at this point.

*Right now I still have problems of my own. Possibly in the future if I had my life on track and had some training. It's something I've thought about down the road. Maybe I can give back something.*

Three women joined the volunteer program at Peer Support Services for Abused Women after they had completed their programs within the organization.

*From what I had gone through and working through my issues, I felt that I would be able to connect with other women in that situation and I might support them. Having gone through that experience, I definitely have a deeper understanding where some of those women have come from and the emotional side of it.*

The women noted it was between six months to a year after they had completed their programs at Peer Support Services for Abused Women before they started as volunteers. They felt that the process they went through to become volunteers was helpful. First, they were interviewed by a staff member:

*They interview you before you become a volunteer and part of the interview is to see where you are in this stage of your own development and understanding about abuse and if you are emotionally stable enough.*

Two women had participated in the volunteer training and found it helpful.

*It's preparing you on a deeper level, professionalism on how to conduct yourself in a group and the knowledge and resources for the people you are trying to support. It's going beyond that emotional aspect to prepare you that these issues may come up. That's going to be quite personal for most people depending on their background. But just to extend past that and really prepare you with the information to help these women further. So the resources, the support, the extra support systems, developing empathetic responses. How are you empathetic towards somebody whether you've had that experience or not. How do we interact with women who may be still going through traumatic issues?*

After their training was completed, a staff member paired them with experienced group leaders.

*I think she knew that this individual was quite, you know a bit, had quite a bit of experience, quite knowledgeable and felt they would be a good partner to be working with that I would learn a lot through working with that person.*

One woman did not go through the training but started with an experienced group leader as a helper:

*All I did was help set up and basically help in what ever way I was needed. But I did participate in the group: gave my own opinions, and paired up with people. I got to know the girls. It was great. The women in the classes were really great.*

However, one woman commented that her experience volunteering was not positive because the group leader with whom she was paired seemed uninvolved with the group members.

*There was no real empathy or really trying to help someone. Basically, going through the motions and giving the information. It definitely wasn't that safe environment that was in the first time. [Is there anything that could've been done differently to make that environment safe?] I don't know. Maybe if there is genuineness. We're real people with real needs and problems; people who are genuinely concerned and genuinely wanted the help.*

### **Losing Contact with PSSAW**

Of the thirteen participants, nine no longer have contact with the agency. A number of factors contributed to the women losing contact with Peer Support Services for Abused Women. For most, contact with the agency ended when they completed their programs. Two lost contact because they moved out of Calgary. Two have health issues that made it more difficult for them to travel, and thus made it difficult for them to attend groups. One woman mentioned that her experience volunteering was not positive. She stated that the group leader with whom she was paired seemed uninterested and indeed influenced her decision to leave PSSAW.

*I didn't like the way it was going at all. I didn't think it was the kind of atmosphere I would do well in. [What did you notice?] Disinterest (half laugh).*

One woman stated that though she is longer actively involved with Peer Support Services for Abused Women she would still like to hear from the agency about what is happening.

*It would be nice to get a mailing or something to say this is happening. Because I've stayed single so far and being single sometimes is really hard, that alone feeling, like you're after you put the kids to bed at night.*

During the interviews, we asked the women if they had any ideas about what Peer Support Services for Abused Women could do to be even more helpful to other women and children. Interestingly, six women responded that PSSAW needed to get the word about their programs out into the community. They stated that the various programs needed to be more visible and prominent.

*What Peer Support Services offers isn't well known. [Any ideas to get PSSAW more out there?] I can't think of anything unless they could do more advertising. The group is important because we can talk about our own situations. No matter what it is, we all want to be heard. I think all the group members got heard.*

The participants would like other women to have the opportunity to experience what the agency has to offer. Six women had ideas about how PSSAW could advertise their services:

*Maybe the Women's Show, having a booth to show what they offer. Different trade shows, fairs where people could see and maybe not feel as scared to go and talk to them. I'm not sure if doctors give out that kind of information, other*

*counsellors that would be good. All I know is if there would be more (advertising) out there; there would be a lot more people using the services.*

Another woman suggested advertising in the secondary institutions. She said that she “*could throw up some posters—I’m with the student association.*” Other ideas included advertising on the bus, through the police, medical clinics, information pages at the beginning of the phone book. One woman also thought Peer Support Services for Abused Women should offer more information online: “*I think it would be great for people that are in more rural areas.*”

### **Refer a Friend?**

We asked participants what advice they would give to a friend who was being abused. The thirteen participants stated they found the programs offered at Peer Support Services for Abused Women helpful. All thirteen stated that if they had a friend being abused, they would like to suggest Peer Support Services for Abused Women as an option.

The women stated that if a friend came to them for advice, they would want to know about her circumstances so they could give suggestions that would be most appropriate to her needs.

*It’s difficult because you don’t know what position they are in or how bad it is.*

*[If you had a friend, what advice would you give her?] Definitely to call someone. Takes a lot of courage but call someone and just, first of all, get information. I think that’s the hardest step at the beginning— to pick up the phone and talk to someone. Sheriff King has that nightline that they can call. Peer Support you can call—it’s knowing those numbers are there.*

*I would tell every woman I meet to make sure that she can take care of herself, has her own credit cards, so when she makes the decision to leave ...*

*I would be quick to say, “Just get out. Get out of there!” just because I would want my friend safe. But you can’t really force people to, I can attest, to think one way or the other, even if you know which situation is the best for you. So one thing is to get as many resources so she can make those decisions and just be there to support her in any way. But if you have people around you who are genuinely wanting to give you as much help as possible that would be the best way.*

*I’d be looking at resources such as Peer Support Services for Abused Women if she was willing or had left the relationship.*

Only one participant expressed hesitation about referring to Peer Support Services for Abused Women and for her that was a reflection of her experience of having attended a Growth Circles group that did not run to completion. She stated, “*I’d have to know what the program entailed right now before I’d actually recommend it.*” The other women stated that they would refer others to Peer Support Services for Abused Women.

*I would tell her absolutely to call Peer Support because they can not only help her that way, they can get her in touch with people who can help her get out of a bad situation, find her safe places to be. They have so much information.*

*It's a safe atmosphere that she can go and she can feel that there's people that understand. There's a beginning for her to work towards her freedom.*

The women stated they would refer to Peer Support Services for Abused Women because they have found the agency so helpful.

*This is the only thing that I've had that's been helpful.*

*I've had good results and they are very sympathetic. I told them I needed something and they did their best to help me to get that something that I needed. And I think if they didn't have that something you needed, they would help you find it. They would be there.*

*I would recommend Peer Support to everybody. Peer Support was one of those places that I felt comfortable and helped give me strength.*

In summary, the feedback about Peer Support Services for Abused Women's other programs parallels that with respect to the Growth Circles groups. In general the programs were considered helpful and the leaders supportive. The fact that three interview respondents went on to become volunteers for the agency and four others were considering volunteering is another testament to the power of peer support in changing women's lives.

## Chapter Six: The PSSAW Volunteers

As a further strategy to evaluate the peer support model of Peer Support Services for Abused Women, we interviewed fourteen volunteers with respect to their backgrounds, how they became a volunteer, their experiences leading the groups and recommendations for improving the program. As is noted later, many of these volunteers had a long history with Peer Support/Women Plus. As such, some of their comments about the program might not be current, as several had not led groups for a number of years.

The volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds. All are currently working in jobs ranging from office administration and consulting firms to professions such as the law, social work and psychology. With respect to marital status, of the eleven that were asked, five are divorced, one is single and three are married. Ten of the fourteen women have children, but all are adults. Most (13) are Caucasian and Canadian born, but two are of East Indian origin and one is from the Middle East and immigrated to Canada several decades earlier.

Of the 14 volunteers, only three had no prior volunteer or relevant work experience. Two of the eleven with previous experience had been employed working in counselling or support positions. The other nine had worked in a variety of volunteer positions, many with abuse related services such as women's shelters (3), Parent's Anonymous (1), Calgary Catholic Immigrant Aid Society (2) and the Violence Information and Education Centre (1) or a telephone distress line (1). Several had previous experience leading support groups for college students or bereaved children. In summary, the majority of the women group leaders began volunteering for Peer Support with already impressive backgrounds in understanding how to work with women victimized by intimate partners or counselling/support training.

Further, many of the volunteers had led groups for Peer Support for a number of years, some starting shortly after the initial organization, Woman Plus, was created in the early 1990's. Only five volunteer interviewees had been involved for two years or less. The other nine interviewees had been involved for from five to 12 years. In addition to leading Growth Circle groups, four volunteers became Board members for Peer Support/Women Plus and ten also provided one-on-one peer support through Moving on with Mentors (although one woman was not able to connect with the women that she was assigned to mentor).

Volunteers often connect with agencies that reflect some aspect of their personal histories. While three volunteers had not experienced violence in their current relationships or family of origin, two women had been Peer Support clients before receiving training to lead Growth Circle groups. Each had left their abusive relationships before their group involvement.

*I met my ex husband when I was fifteen. I moved out with him when I was sixteen. We got married when I was twenty and the abuse started prior to our marriage. At that point I felt totally stuck there because he threatened to kill my family. He used every form of abuse you could think of, emotional, physical, mental, financial, all of it. The whole marriage was total abuse. It never stopped. I woke up one day because he started on my kids and I told him, "That's it". I kicked him*

*out of the house and everybody feared for my life. I slept with a steel bar and a baseball bat for years by my bed. I was terrified. I thought I was dead.*

*I was a client at one time. Then I decided I would like to become involved as a facilitator.*

Another nine volunteers had also experienced family violence of some form. Four had been in abusive intimate partner relationships (but had not gone to the Growth Circle groups):

*I'm a survivor of spousal abuse; 16 years in a violent marriage. There was some physical abuse but over time that became less and it became more emotionally and psychologically abusive. After I left, I spent 10 years angry and bitter.*

*I married a man who is rather authoritarian. My experiences in my family and in my married life: well, "you made your bed and you lie in it". I wasn't really allowed feelings ever. I mean, it would shut him down and shut me down. And I lived with that. So did I ever get shot at or knifed? No. But the abuse is insidious and subtle, and overt. Mostly, I felt I deserved that for whatever reason. It eroded my self-esteem in a huge way. I'm still grappling with that. Life is a constant learning and being able to express myself is a constant challenge.*

One volunteer had experienced dating violence in high school:

*It was awful. He wrecked my car! He phoned where I babysat over 100 times; they had a police tap. He would threaten guys if I would just talk to them and this was after I had finished dating him. He was physically abusive and mentally abusive. He told me I can't talk to people. Don't do this. Don't do that. He was 17, captain of the football team, good looking. I was a real nerdy 15 year old; skinny girl and stuff. You're star struck! It was a learning experience (laughs) for sure! You end up doubting yourself. You get to the point where you believe them more than you believe your parents.*

Several others were exposed to their mother's abuse by their fathers as children.

*I think everybody brings a little bit of something to the Growth Circles. You end up sharing a lot because it is very private and the more you share too, the more people end up sharing themselves. For me, my parents had an abusive relationship. I've never been in one. But I was a child who saw that side of it: verbal, a little bit of physical.*

*My parents had an abusive relationship, throughout my early childhood and my teenage years and I needed to go through a process of figuring out what the effect was on me of not myself being worried about relationships. Forgiving my mom for staying and forgiving my father for causing that situation. When I got into serious relationships, I had to deal with some of those issues as well.*

Almost half of the volunteers (6) had received counselling (not including the Growth Circle Groups) for the abuse in their relationships (primarily partner abuse). Five of the six found the counselling helpful.

*Mine is years! (laughs) years of work. Personal growth groups. Spending time with different therapists. You name it; I've done it (long pause). [Did they help?]*

*Oh, absolutely! I think it is all a process. I don't care which one you pick. I think they will all do the job, just depends how quickly you want to get there.*

*I started looking around for help, I went to Catholic Family. I saw Ann. She was great! She was running a group, Women Who Love Too Much. I went for 1 ½ years. The first six months I didn't say a word. I just listened. I was too scared to say anything in front of those people. I just listened. But I got a lot out of all that listening. I learned that I wasn't the only. And that was huge, because you know how abuse is, we are all suffering in isolation. And I learned that there. Boy that changed things for me. And after the first six months, I started talking.*

The volunteer that did not find the counselling helpful commented:

*I went to see a counsellor in university after all this happened in high school and you sit there and you ramble on like to this person. And unless you find the right person, you sit there and it's like, "You're judging me." Like you know, when you can see them looking at you, going-this can all be in your mind.*

### **Pathways to Volunteering**

Aside from the two volunteers that had been Growth Circle group members prior to facilitating the groups, most became volunteers because of an interest in women's issues and in assisting abused women in practical ways and in person.

*I've always been interested in women's issues. A lady from Discovery House talked about how she was in an abusive relationship and how the volunteers and not the counsellors had helped her. She became a volunteer at Discovery House. I thought, if she can do that, why can't I? So then I went down the list of different organizations and I came up with Peer Support Services.*

*One of the classes I was taking was Women's Study, so I thought it would be beneficial to be involved with women directly so I can get some first hand experience. That led me to Peer Support.*

*I had a lot of experience doing, phone distress centre type of work, and I wanted something more group oriented as opposed to individual and also something where I would meet with the women in person.*

The three women with no personal experience shared the following reasons for volunteering:

*The Violence Information and Education Centre, VIEC is a resource centre for people dealing with any kind of abuse (I was a volunteer for VIEC). So they had a little library and bulletins, all the relevant bulletins. I decided I wanted to get more into the practical side and that would involve Peer Support.*

*They were advertising (for) volunteers to facilitate growth group sessions. I was looking for an opportunity to volunteer, cause I had a bit of time.*

*Years ago when it was called Women Plus, I started volunteering with them. I was new in Calgary and wanted to learn more about women's situation in this society and their rights and responsibilities. That's how I got involved.*

Several of the women who been abused by partners, including the two that had been Growth Circle group participants, wanted to give back and share their healing with other abused women.

*I think it was the desire to help somebody else and having somebody else realize there is hope and potential to get out of those situations, and to develop healthy life styles and healthy relationships.*

*I read "Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives." That book changed my life. It's about women who had terrible things happen and how they struggled to make a new life. The book said the final stage of healing is to help others. That's when I made the decision to volunteer. I knew I wanted to work with abused women.*

*I was a victim of domestic violence also. I needed to put my voice out for women who are looking for some help, not maybe for themselves but also for their partners. So that's how I came across Women Plus.*

*I had just come out of a very bad marriage and I had, through counselling, come to realize it was an abusive situation. With the counselling when I felt that I had dealt with my issues and everything then I was ready to give back.*

## **The Volunteer Training**

The original volunteer training consisted of a session on intimate partner violence that was a conjoint presentation for volunteers across the spectrum of Calgary's domestic violence agencies. This introduction to abuse was followed by more intensive training at Peer Support focused on leading the Growth Circle groups and other peer support programs.

A number of the volunteers made general comments with respect to the training, all positive.

*Training was excellent. Some of the things I have some background in but you always learn something and it's personalized to the population group you're working with, such as communication styles, when you use examples of women in problematic situations. The training is excellent with a lot of opportunity to provide feedback, to dialogue with each other. It's a very supportive, nurturing environment for people facilitating the workshop.*

*I think the first part was really good. Kelly and Ada giving the history. It's awesome because it's good to see where they've come from and how they've begun. Learning about it and learning how they developed.*

Several women commented on how the training had changed over the years.

*It was very good, very thorough. It was very different when I started. They had no manual. They had to do a manual and now the groups are structured. When I started there wasn't. We just sort of learned as we went along.*

*Peer Support offered training workshops and they'd have guest speakers come in and speak with the facilitators and that was very good learning. They had a lawyer come in and a psychologist and different resource people for the facilitators: do an hour presentation, it was good information. [Did the training*

help prepare you for doing groups?] *Oh there was definitely some benefit to that training just in learning how to do a Growth Circle with the introduction: how you get people to be included in the group and learning to build trust within the group. So yes the training was an essential part.*

*The training got better over the years. At first it was not as in depth as now. The training's not bad now but over the years they've had enough input from people and agencies that help them pull together a pretty good training program.*

Others made specific comments about the joint information sessions.

*It was **really** good training. The different organizations would sponsor training and they had speakers from, like, the Immigration Society, Women's Society, all these organizations under one umbrella and you got a flavour for what they provide in Calgary for women. The speakers explained the cycle of abuse and everything. It was very informative. It made you understand the issue and that there was a real need out there for people to make a difference. I really came away with that. It's not helping everybody. It's helping one family at a time; one person at a time. That can make all the difference in the world.*

*The first batch of training was a community training. People from VIEC, the shelter; it was quite a cross-section. You'd look at the nametags, "Oh good! You're from Peer Support!" Great. We'll keep in touch. We did a lot of role playing and [learned] about resources in the community. It was excellent.*

Several volunteers described the subsequent training in group leadership skills that they received from Peer Support. Again, most were very positive about the training, especially the role-plays with respect to potentially difficult situations that might occur in group.

*After the training about family violence, we came back to Peer Support and we had training within group circles. We did role playing on issues in group sessions, like somebody taking over the group, how would you handle it. Went into triads and did role playing. That was really good.*

*The training is excellent and you do role-playing but all the training in the world cannot prepare you for your actual first group. I don't care if you've been abused or not. You have to actually do it before you can be totally prepared. That's why new trainees always have somebody (with them) who is experienced. If I recall we did exercises where we would be role-playing and one lady would be talking and this other lady would start crying. So yeah, it was addressed pretty well. Some people would do it instinctively but not everyone.*

*We did a lot of role-playing, which is really good, a lot of fun (laughs). Let's say, someone was rude or disrespectful: we role-played that situation. We role-played somebody who is hogging the conversation. It helped us learn how to be assertive too. Because you don't want to interject, take away from the person who is hurting but there are also other people in the group who are hurting too. So the role-playing really helped. There were six or seven of us that trained, so you could see the dynamics of the other people's personalities, of the facilitators. You*

*can feel out what you want to do for a facilitator and you can also feel out how it is in the group, and how you do.*

The volunteers made a number of suggestions to improve the training. These included spending more time on the content included in the group manual, offering more in-depth content, more specific to woman abuse. Several suggested that the training be on-going with additional meetings at Peer Support.

*The second weekend was on the 15 weeks. I think they should've been more in-depth because we raced through the fifteen weeks, and then we walked out going "oh, wow." Now that we're giving the sessions, you're almost sort of going, "what does this mean?" So maybe going more in-depth of the fifteen weeks. Overall the training was really good. It's just that it was back in June and we're starting in September. So I think the refresher of going over sessions again would be beneficial. That's the only thing I think would be beneficial.*

*They have one big workshop. To be honest I've been to quite a few other workshops dealing with the issue and this one was only average. It was very, very broad. If I was going to recommend Peer Support to do anything, they need to have one more focused on their client base, than that first general session they share it with a bunch of the women's shelters and transitions house. So I think you could focus more on the issues that actually face Peer Support volunteers.*

One volunteer commented on the shocking nature of some women's stories and queried whether there might be a way of better preparing group leaders to hear these.

*I did hear the stories: it was a bit shocking. But how could you really prepare someone for that? I don't really know. I suppose some videos, then you think, "Oh I really didn't know that I would be getting myself into this area".*

Two volunteers suggested that more personal growth training for the volunteers would be beneficial. Two of these had been involved in previous training early on with the Family Life Education Council (no longer available) had made a significant impact to their personal lives, that also impacted their skills as group facilitators.

*Women Plus sent some of their volunteers to a workshop probably, maybe ten years ago with Family Life Education Council. It was really awesome. It was Group Facilitating Training called "Leadership For the Nineties." They took us to Banff on a weekend. It was training and a retreat at the same time. I think that was the money that was well spent. I think those kind of trainings would definitely benefit the women and the society. It helps you find out who you really are and what you really want. It was the best training I've had.*

*We also got training from FLEC which was about eight weeks, so you learnt the psychology part of it. So, it was pretty good.*

### **The Value of Peer Facilitators**

We asked the volunteers what they saw as the value of the group leaders being peers as compared to professional counsellors (although several of the group leaders did have such qualifications). One of the major benefits from their perspectives (mentioned by nine volunteers), was bringing their own abuse experiences to the Growth Circles,

using it to validate and sometimes to challenge the group members to see their circumstances differently or consider other options.

*It's a myth that women are the only ones getting beat up. The kids hear everything. I think they were all surprised that at such a young age, I remembered everything. I said, "Those are my childhood memories and I don't think any child should have memories of that!" That's one thing I could bring. I loved it. I loved the direction of the women. I think I got just as much out of it with meeting these women and empowered by what they've gone through in their lives.*

*I think as a leader, we were role models. We'd all had a different story and we would share the story, and they thought "Well jeez, if you could get through that, I have a leg up already because I came for help." So coming for help was a really good sense that they were on their way already.*

*[Did your experiences with abuse influence with your ability to connect?] Absolutely, because I understand. I can relate, even if it's not the exact same thing. I could relate to how they feel. I'd say, "Do you feel lonely? Do you feel no one hears you?" I'm trying to help her feel that she's not the only one. Somebody else understands. Somebody else has felt what I've felt. I'm not the only person. I'm not crazy. I'm not weird. I think that is the biggest piece, to have them recognize that what they are going through is normal for their world. [So would you share your story?] Absolutely, that's where the fellowship comes in.*

*We could share without being scared to expose ourselves, our feelings, especially when they knew that their facilitator also was a victim. It helped them a lot more.*

One volunteer put this into perspective with comments from some of the group members' experiences with professional counsellors:

*You talk to women who have gone through the frustration of being in the shelters and what they haven't been able to provide for them. I think we fill that void.*

The women volunteers that had not themselves been abused also perceived their lack of experience as beneficial.

*I was about the only one that had never had abused in my nuclear family. My sister had abuse but I was very young. So for me, it was different because I had never been through any of it. I think it was beneficial. I was honest with them. I didn't pretend that I had been abused. But they saw me, a normal person, not having been abused; they saw that it could happen. There are people out there that aren't abused that are happy with their husbands, with their life. I think that was a benefit. They liked to hear my reinforcement that there is a normal world out there with normal relationships*

*The women were at such different stages: some of them never wanted a relationship again; some of them wanted their old relationship back in a better form; some were just starting to go on dates. I think they liked that I knew lots of people that had normal relationships and hadn't had abuse. So I think that was very beneficial. The question was asked, before I took the course and started in the group, the question was asked by all of us, I wonder if that's going to be a factor. But truly it wasn't.*

*When I hear about it, when I see it happening to others, it doesn't have to happen to me. I can feel exactly what they feel (pause). How it makes me angry. Because it's not right.*

## **Facilitation Strategies**

The volunteers provided considerable information about what group leading strategies they thought worked well in the Growth Circle groups. This section details their observations about how to approach being a group leader in a peer support group, including ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of co-facilitation.

One factor, mentioned by three volunteers was the importance of supporting the group members from the position of being an equal.

*That we would support their learning to become more of themselves, to have more self-esteem or to be a little more assertive and just feel good about themselves.*

*You can't lecture them. You can't just say these are the stages of grieving, you have to interact or you lose them. So you say, "So what stage are you at?" Everybody is at a different stage, so how did you get out of that stage? We're told that's something you should do. It's okay for me to say "Yep, when you're in this stage, how are you going to get out?" But I'm not the one that has to get over this. But **they** can help each other.*

*You can't preach. You can't tell them what to do. You can give experiences on how you deal with things. Really it is their group. We're just there to spur them on. We're there to make them think; make them laugh once in a while because I don't think a lot of them laugh that often. The very first night, we said, "This is for you. You're going to get out of it what you can. If you're not comfortable saying anything, please don't say anything. We may ask you a question and you're going to feel singled out. But if you don't want to say anything, don't say anything."*

In a similar vein, three Growth Circle leaders mentioned that it is critical to create a safe environment and to not be judgemental.

*Volunteer picking is very important because somebody that isn't truthful or is the least bit judgemental, you lose them (group members). It's hard to keep them as it is. Or if a woman is going out and hopping in and out of bed, you have to be careful how you address that. You talk about relationships; you don't talk about whether it is good or bad. We have women and you know they are going to go back. It's okay for the group to say, "You're an idiot." But it's not okay for me. You would ask questions like "Do you think that's a good thing?"*

*It was one of our goals to ensure that it was a safe place for these women so that there's no judgment, no hierarchy. We are there too, just learning. We said things like, "We're new at this too; we all have personal issues to deal with." We really worked at the beginning to ensure safety and build trust. You set ground rules and confidentiality, and one person talking at a time, respecting everybody's feelings and thoughts and not placing any judgment. But they allow people the opportunity to be heard. Validating thoughts and feelings, whatever they might be, there theirs and you honor them, you just acknowledge them. Asking for general feedback*

*from people, “What do you think about this?”, “How does that sound to you?” Trying to encourage people to be expressive, that their feelings do matter.*

Nevertheless, one volunteer commented that being supportive and non-judgemental does not preclude giving appropriate feedback that may challenge group member’s perceptions of themselves.

*One woman in group always complained about her mother. One day I said to her “Do you realize you’re doing the same thing as your mom?” It never dawned on her that she was doing the same thing. It was intense! She said, “Oh my goodness! You’re right.” That’s not the kind of thing she’s going to hear from her friends or anyone else. It’s in group you get those kinds of challenges.*

Setting up ground rules and structuring the sessions was also mentioned by two volunteers as essential in facilitating a positive and safe group environment.

*Everybody has been very respectful. You set ground rules at the beginning. They’re there on time. They create the rules also so they know they are accountable for what they’ve put up there too. It’s been really good so far. And if it’s bad it’s your fault because you’ve said it out loud (laughs).*

*Part of it is planning. One ground rule is that we start and end on time, so they know that by 8:30 we will be wrapped up. So trying to look at what needs to be discussed in the manual which outlines the topics. Usually, we plan prior to, so if there’s handouts there’re done ahead of time. Look at within two hours, we’re going to do this first, it’ll take fifteen minutes, this next, it’ll take ten minutes. You break down the evening so that you don’t get crammed at the end. I’m using that as a guide because we all know that the best laid plans... (laughing).*

One group leader described the importance of being flexible within the structure.

*There were times when issues had to be dealt with and the information had to be tabled until either the next week or you just handed out information sheets and they did their own reading. The women in the group participate in that decision. It’s being able to read what’s happening with the participants. I also have the women decide what topics they wanted to talk about in the first one or two weeks; “here’s some topics, what ones would you like information?”*

Another described the need to change facilitation style as the group phases progress.

*The first phase is anger, grief, sadness and then the second phase is a bit more advanced: co-dependency, building a new life, how to move on, how to feel safe in another relationship. They talk more, ask more questions, initiate more. They’ll bring in articles from the internet or recommend books. Much more active. They take much more of a mentoring role. They’ll take the other ones under their wing and maybe go out for coffee before the group. Watch out for each other. We try to foster an open environment where it’s going to happen but, but we try hard not to put any pressure to make that happen because that seems to backfire.*

### **Co-facilitation**

Nine of the volunteer Growth Circle Group leaders described the benefits of co-facilitating groups, the model primarily adopted by Peer Support.

*One of the advantages of two facilitators is that you can talk together about your ideas and plan together, trying to build it up and it is well thought out and it can be fun. If there's six women and you don't have a connection with one or two of them, but they are gravitating to that other co-facilitator, it's really excellent. Because then everybody's needs get met*

*In any group, there are always two (leaders): one can watch what's happening in group, and one can do the interaction. It's good for the other person to watch. If you're the one interacting, talking, your eyes can't be wandering; they need to be on the woman you're talking to. The other person can watch what's happening with the other group members. Maybe she'll notice somebody else is going through something, or has tears welling up. So for safety it's really good.*

*Co-facilitation is excellent. My co-facilitator and I hit it off really well. We did the training together, but I think that's a big factor to work well together.*

*I think the groups that have sort of worked the best have been where there is one facilitator that has gone through it or been in a family situation where there has been family violence and then on facilitation where they're coming at it with a fresh set of eyes. It's just nice to have the two perspectives.*

*We always had a co-facilitator so that there was never one person alone, so you could work with each other in providing whatever support was necessary. I know in a couple of situations, having taken someone outside of the circle to talk to them and the other facilitator would be carrying on with the group.*

Several volunteer group facilitators mentioned circumstances in which a particular co-facilitator presented challenges.

*If you didn't like who you were paired with that would be a drawback. But the concept is good (pause). Some of the people I was paired with I might not have chosen myself. It was all a learning experience.*

*I had one difficult situation and Ada removed the lady as a facilitator. I don't remember the circumstances - she hadn't dealt with her own issues and it was causing conflicts within the group. I carried on by myself until they found someone else. You don't let down a whole group. You just carry on.*

*Some people don't work with some people. "This isn't working because the person just isn't my type of person to work with." Nothing against them, but certain people just don't go together. You can't ever show that in group. So if it happens that you have to stay with that person then you just make the best of it and they don't know. It's not like you're arguing.*

## **Chapter Seven: The Strengths and Challenges of the Peer Support Model**

This chapter documents the volunteer peer facilitator's perceptions of the benefits and challenges of offering and participating in peer support programs such as Growth Circles and the other PSSAW offerings. This chapter first presents feedback with respect to Growth Circles, then about Moving on with Mentors: none of the volunteers interviewed for the research had led a Finding our Voices program. Overall, the advantages for both programs far outweighed the problems. The difficulties that were raised were problems not only for the group members but for the volunteers in their roles as group facilitators and will be documented in a later section.

### **Benefits for Growth Circle Group Members**

Nine Growth Circle groups leaders mentioned connecting/bonding between the group members as a significant benefit of being in group.

*Great insight can come from doing group work, even if it's just sharing with other women. Women definitely need to bond. Once they recognize that group is all about understanding yourself, giving you tools to change your life and take control back, it can be extremely powerful. Women can leave there having a whole different outlook on life.*

*The bonding is really important. The women have been so isolated. So when they leave (their abusive partners) they have to learn how to bond with others. Group can show women how to express themselves to others. In a bad relationship they don't necessarily have any bonding or any unconditional love like parents give. That's what group can do. It's important that everyone have a place where they can feel unconditionally accepted. We do that in group and try to build on that.*

*Connection with other women, connection with the group and also the resources out there: where to go for the help and how to get there. So it was helpful at least in those two ways. First of all, they're not isolated and they, there's a support group that understands them and listens to their concerns. And secondly, it was almost like a referral place. There was, if there was a need for it, group or resource or information, or something, it was there. They've got it there.*

Group members gaining new understanding was the second most commonly identified benefit of Growth Group participation, according to the group leaders. Eight group leaders mentioned this as central.

*The program has always made people think. Like the family tree. They do the spouse side and then their side. They see the patterns in their family. Then they highlight any family violence or abuse and you wouldn't believe the pattern on both their mother's side and father's side. You pick somebody that's similar to your dad. It's a cycle. One girl had been stabbed by her partner. On her spouse's side, someone had murdered their wife! She was very upset because this guy (partner) had said he was going to kill her and she had blocked all that. It didn't hit her that he almost killed her! Even though she was stabbed, she'd gone to hospital, he was in jail. But seeing this family tree made her realize how close she had come to being killed*

*Just the patterns, it's amazing! That's what really gets the women because they think they are the only ones going through this. They realize the behaviours of the men are so similar that they realize it's not them. They realize all these guys are saying the same things to all these women. The light bulb starts coming on: it's not them! It's the guy. It's never been them. It's been this guy. "You could've been the most perfect woman in the world and everything like that. You could've done everything." Like this one guy would get mad at his wife if she left the fridge door open two seconds too long! Or the sink had one dish in it and she had three kids. They all had similar stories. Actually, they kind of one up each other. It's hilarious! And then they laugh about it. We all laugh. Because then they realize they did it. Not laugh at them, but they laugh at the guy: how ridiculous this is, that he needs it to be in control. So it's an amazing process.*

*I can give you one example that was an "ah ha" for one lady. We were talking about being passive, aggressive or assertive. One gal (said), "Oh my god, oh my god, I'm really aggressive! I wonder why people say to me you're rude; you're not nice to that person." Now, is that going to change her behavior? Perhaps not, but that seed of awareness was there.*

*Phase One is difficult, pretty intense and, for most women, pretty eye-opening. They've not really looked at the issues in those ways. One of the first few session's on grief, learning to grieve over the loss of your relationship, the loss of your dreams. Another lesson on anger allowing yourself to feel anger over what happened. So those are eye opening and freeing because they've been so busy trying to survive that they haven't had the chance to feel grief or anger.*

Five volunteer group leaders commented that the extent to which the women group members changed over the course of the Growth Circles was a significant benefit.

*It was just beautiful to see them get confidence and say, "This week I did this!" or "I met a new friend for coffee" or whatever. And it was great to see them taking charge of a little aspect of their life knowing they could do more and more.*

*In the end, there is a huge difference from when those women enter to when they leave. Those who made it through the whole program, there's an increase in self esteem, in confidence.*

*This kind of help and support is essential. With the groups, if out of ten women even one made a step forward by the end of the ten weeks it was worthwhile. Hopefully they've heard the information and through the experiences of others, took home some tools. Maybe some information would come back to them that would see them through a situation or, hopefully they gained something from it whether it was obvious or not.*

*By progress I mean their willingness to talk about the issue and realize that they had the strength to leave the relationship and recognize that they were strong. They deserve credit for being able to do that. See them take charge of their own lives again. One example is they'll start to talk about it without feeling ashamed.*

Four volunteers mentioned the importance for women to learn that they are not alone, that their experiences are common.

*They know that they are not alone. They can talk freely and have people understand. It's somewhere they can feel safe, they know they're with women that have been through the same stuff. They have that commonality whether it be emotional, physical (abuse). I think it's huge.*

*Group is important because you meet other people in the same situation. When I was getting out of my relationship I thought I was the only person. It's important that you recognize that you're not the only person that goes through this.*

*Especially for a woman who has been in an abusive relationship, the feeling of isolation...to come to somewhere where you're not isolated makes a huge difference. Peer Support is a support system and you are encouraged to help yourself and other people are there to point you to other resources.*

*It provided somewhere where they could meet other women in similar circumstances. It was an opportunity for learning: how did they deal with their kids, with their own emotions. Again it gave them commitment, something to look forward to each week. But I think lots of times it was the friendships that formed within the group that were very important.*

#### Validation from Others

Two group leaders described the benefits of having one's experiences validated by other group members.

*It was empowering when someone said, "You know what? You're okay. You went through a lot." Validated that what I saw wasn't right. Validating that what I saw wasn't really normal or wasn't right and how it affected me. Basically saying "You came out of it okay. You're functioning." That's what you need.*

*It might be a generalization but many women that come out of abusive relationships have not had their voice heard. That could be because of the abusive partner or the nature of their experience growing up. So does it meet the needs of women? I would say hugely yes. To be able to give an opinion about how things were and not having anybody judge it. The woman being able to say "I've never been able to talk about this."*

#### Other Benefits of Growth Circle Groups

Two volunteers noted benefits of the Growth Circle groups that are important but not mentioned by others. They are providing support for women's basic needs, and giving women the opportunity to tell their stories. Their comments are detailed below.

*There are so many resources in Calgary, some are duplications. But nobody understands that women need support like holding their hand, putting them in the car, driving them down. They need that push. They're so devastated, they're so scared. We also provided supper. If a mom came straight from work, we prepared them a little hot something so they are not on empty stomach and the kids are not crying. Kids are coming from home, daycare, moms are coming from work or home. They don't have time to cook and all that within a few hours. So it's better to give the basic needs. How much can you understand on an empty stomach.*

*Just debriefing. That was the first time I ever talked about what I saw when I was a kid and that **helped**. That's why Growth Circles help. Some people are talking about stuff that has happened to them for the first time and just getting it out and not having it play in your head over and over like a tape recorder.*

### **Benefits Extending beyond the Growth Circle Groups**

Four volunteers talked about benefits for women after the group ending. Three volunteers described the long-term connections that some group members made with each other, remaining in contact after the Growth Circle groups completion.

*What I found with my groups is that they keep in touch.*

*Typically, as time had passed, a lot of them connect with each other. Sometimes they exchange numbers, go for coffee, sometimes not depending on where each person is. But for the most part they are connecting with each other. There is some sharing of experience and a lot of helping.*

*Over time, the women get really close. I had one group that once we had finished they wanted to carry on. They decided to go on meeting for coffee once a month. That happened for a while, and then it was every couple months. They did that for a long time. That's the whole idea of Peer Support.*

Another volunteer mentioned that one of her group members went on to become a volunteer and is happy with that decision.

*I've had people in my groups go on to become volunteers. I remember one lady in particular. I said, "You are amazing! You could do this and you could give so much back." I just put that bug in her ear. She even went back to school to help with youth, counselling. She's a volunteer at Peer Support. She's part of that new group. I've chatted with her and it's really good.*

### **Growth Circles Generally Valuable**

Four volunteer group facilitators made comments about the value of the groups in general.

*I've just seen the value of the program, how the individual modules help women, like boundaries, self-esteem, the issues of family, nurturing yourself. It was very well put together.*

*The girls really enjoyed it. Most did stay for the six or eight weeks that we met. They were so happy that they came and they felt that they had changed and things had happened in their lives. So it was very rewarding because we treated them with respect and they treated us with respect. It was very nurturing.*

*I've seen some great things happen when women come and stay through it. A lot of women wish it wouldn't end. Women who have gone through it and stayed through the whole thing are sad when it stops. For a lot of them this is a life altering experience and when it stops, where do they go?*

*Major benefits. The first is realizing that there are other people out there that have been through this and that it's not your fault. Just talking about things helps people deal with them. Then the tools they get from some of the lessons.*

## Growth Circle Challenges for Volunteers and Group Members

Group interventions can be powerfully helpful and yet present common problems for both group facilitators and group members, whether professionally-led or using a peer support model. The volunteer group leaders raised challenges they faced as facilitators and challenges they saw for group members. While the issues presented in this section were originally separated into challenges for leaders and challenges for group member, there was considerable overlap. Ultimately, factors that interfere in the development of a positive group climate and process affect everyone in the group.

The challenges include difficult group members, not having enough members to get the group “off the ground and the challenges hearing some of the horrific abuse and volatile circumstances experiences by the group members.

### Difficult Group Members

Ten volunteer group facilitators identified group members who presented difficult behaviours/reactions as challenging. This is a rare occurrence, but can be significantly disruptive to the group bonding when it occurs.

*Somebody controlling the group... Ada does a good job of screening but you can't be 100%. If you have somebody that's more geared for individual as opposed to group then that person gets “zapped” from the group because they are taking too much out of everybody else. That has only happened a couple of times. Sometimes they drop out on their own because we aren't meeting their needs. Sometimes they phone and complain to Ada, “I'm not getting what I need from this.” So she'll say, “Well, maybe this isn't for you. You need a professional organization because basically we're run by volunteers.” So she will give them names.*

*You always get people who are a little resistant until they feel safe. Probably the biggest thing is just being consistent. We had a woman who had mental disorders, suffering from probably some type of delusional disorder. Every time that she came, she was defensive. But we found ways that we could relate to her, showing that we had some shared experiences so that she didn't feel so odd. And when she said things, like hearing voices in her room, people didn't go “Oh, you're crazy.” They went, “Wow. That must have been scary.” They accepted that that must have happened to her and then she felt okay. One person who was suffering from a bipolar disorder and I had spoken to Ada, saying, “This woman is not ready (for group).” Because Peer Support also does one on one. It's not just group work.*

*A lady came the first night; there were mental problems to do with--she was very abused. In group, I could see the other ladies getting very upset. So I took her in the hall and said, “This just is not working. This group isn't to talk about the hate we have or fear. So I don't think the group is for you.”*

*Another woman was difficult. She was so self-centred that nobody else mattered. She didn't want to hear the other women's stories.*

*Certain women want to talk about their experiences all the time and you need to not allow them to totally control the group and to encourage everyone to participate. We tend to have one facilitator be in charge of presenting the*

*information and the other facilitator monitor the group. To see any tell-tail signs of people not being involved or being too involved or encourage other people to respond. I thought it worked pretty well.*

### Readiness/Motivation to be in Group

Eight Growth Circle group facilitators commented that one of their most significant challenges was group members starting but not completing the groups.

*One group got down to two people and we started off with six. It was still a good experience for the people who were there. But to me it was a real drag to gear up and not really have any idea that it's going to go.*

*It's hard to get women there and it's hard to keep women there. And this has been a problem since I've been doing this. I don't know how to solve that. Some of the people are very motivated but they can't get there. Something happens and they are terrified to leave their house. I think a lot of them come with the hope that they we are going to fix them. That's not what we're there for: we're there to help them fix themselves and each other.*

*They worked quite well as long as the women attending the group actually wanted to attend. I did one group where it was a condition of their probation that they attend. I didn't think that worked out because these are difficult issues and you have to want to be there. It's helpful if the women are all at the same stage of acceptance and wanting to move on. There are some women who just, just aren't ready for that intense focus on issues.*

*I don't know if I ever had a group that the women stayed throughout the whole group. They usually drifted off. I'm not so sure what Peer Support mandate is. I understand that they want to provide groups and peer counselling, but they don't seem to be addressing it the right way. Ever since I've been involved there's always been this issue with the women showing up and then not showing up. People get there through word of mouth. They've had an altercation with their man and they're in crisis. They can't get into the shelter so they go to Peer Support. By the time the group is ready, they've long forgotten whatever it was and they're not interested in the group now. That has happened many times.*

*Some of those are going, "I need the help, I want the help," but they're not quite sure on where we stand and sometimes it's just too much emotionally and they may only attend maybe six sessions and then decide, "I'm not ready to commit to the rest of this at this point". That's part of their process. So, you let them work through at their own pace and try to be empathic towards that.*

### Not Enough Group Members to "Get Off the Ground"

As an issue related to women not remaining in group, two volunteer group leaders described frustrations in not being able to get groups off the ground because so few members showed up the first evening.

*I signed up to co-facilitate five or six other groups but I showed up expecting to see three, four, five people and they never got off the ground. We would phone the*

*people on the list, it's like "Oh is it tonight? I didn't know that." Or they didn't go until 7:15 at night when they should've been there at 6:30. So there was a gap between people registering and the actual group.*

*I wish more women would come and stay. You ask any organization, especially a non-profit, how do you get people to come? How do you get people to stay? It's very difficult, especially when they don't have to pay. When someone pays for it, it's different. They'll say, "I paid for it, I want my money's worth." So it's difficult. There has to be a pay off or you won't do it.*

### **Coping with Hearing Women's Abuse Experiences**

Six group facilitators described difficulties with respect to hearing about the details and the volatile nature of the abuse experienced or disclosed by some group members.

*So when I met people in the Growth Circles, who said, "I was stabbed this many times." It's like, "Pardon?" (half laugh). Sometimes it's like, "Oh my God!" I hoped that I hid the 'oh my God' part. I didn't really know that **that** went on. Sometimes you just don't think about it.*

*One lady in my group was trying to move on with her life and her husband killed her. That was a hard funeral. Because we provide childcare, we knew the kids. That was really hard (crying), losing a client like that. It doesn't happen that often; it's so rare that you end up crossing paths with someone like that. You just feel for the kids and what they are left with. So it's really sad.*

*I went to court with one lady as support because her husband was going to be there. Imagine, in the courtroom she's terrified of her husband. The things she had to go through just to get a restraining order, it was unreal. They don't work anyway and then you're dealing with fear because a lot of their husbands have tried to kill them, so there is lots of fear and that's hard to deal with.*

*Having a history of violence isn't all bad. You understand what the women are talking about. It's so hard for them. Some of the women I've seen go back because they have no options. Women can only stay in a shelter for three weeks and then what? Then they are out on their own. Peer Support was created to support women after they left the shelter because they still need someone to talk to. And once she's gone, the men are so manipulative. They'll bring flowers, treat her nice. She starts hoping he's changed. And the kids are whining about going home: they want their toys, their friends, their pets.*

*Some women let their partner know what they were doing (in group). But their safety nets didn't help. I don't know if they did that out of love or out of being honest. So you see them with a big black eye or something and you felt guilty.*

### **Growth Circle Benefits for Volunteers**

Offering programs using volunteers has its own challenges. Although the most important focus is meeting the needs of the women group participants, unless the volunteers benefit in some way, they will not continue. As such, we asked the Growth Circle group facilitators about what they perceived as the benefits to being a PSSAW

volunteer. The most compelling benefit, mentioned by nine volunteers was that they found the experience fulfilling.

*I loved it. I got just as much out of meeting these women and (being) empowered by what they've gone through in their lives because I don't have those obstacles. But yet these women are doing amazing. They would be so beaten down with self esteem and I would say, "You would not believe the strength you have". They didn't see a lot that I would see in them.*

*Before the new manual it was quite free-flowing as long as we covered self-esteem or life planning or whatever. How we handled it was up to us and keep Ada in the loop. But because I had been training as a facilitator it was really cool to put my theory into action. I liked that and the girls really enjoyed it.*

*It's exciting to watch the group. Sometimes you see the light come on in the women's eyes. It's kept me going, wanting to be more helpful. It's not enough to know and understand. Coming like I did from abuse I could understand as much as one person can of another person's experience. But I wanted to learn how to better help. Learning, that's the fuel that keeps me going. They were learning and I was learning. It was so exciting seeing people changing.*

*It was a really good experience. I had the opportunity to be there as a resource and a support for somebody else. The partner I worked with was fantastic. She was very knowledgeable, very helpful. She had great resources, good information. I learned a lot from her.*

One other benefit, mentioned only by one volunteer was that leading the group helped her realize the strengths in her own relationship.

*The first time I did a Circle one person described how they were in the bathroom and they were ploughed in the nose and just drilled against the wall. Their nose was broken. I came home to my husband and we were debriefing, not giving out any information, telling my experience. My dumb dog bumped me in the nose one time with his head **and that hurt!** It was stunning. I can't even imagine what it would feel like to be drilled in the face like that! It would hurt like hell that somebody who professed to love you did that. It made me thankful that I had the relationship that I have and that I've made the choices that I have in my life.*

### **The Moving on with Mentors Program**

In addition to the volunteer's experiences with Growth Circles, we also asked about their experiences with other peer-to-peer support programs such as "Finding Our Voices", the one-day self-esteem workshops, and "Moving on with Mentors" one-on-one support. While none of the 14 volunteers that we interviewed described leading the Finding our Voices workshops, ten spoke about their experiences as mentors (although one was not able to connect with the woman she was to have mentored).

Mentoring is offered in a variety of circumstances, before group, after group or instead of group. Several volunteers provided examples of the timing for one-on-one mentoring:

*Some women aren't ready for group. They're not ready to say anything about anything. But one on one they are quite happy. Again, it's a feeling of being safe, of not being judged.*

*You've only got one person, but they have to be at a certain stage. They have to have gone through the other program because otherwise it's hard to keep them off victim mode. You're there to reinforce.*

All enjoyed their experiences mentoring. Several mentioned that one could have a deeper, more personal conversation one-on-one than in group:

*It's no different than the group. You're dealing with someone on a more personal level, so their experiences can be shared a little deeper than in a group where we may be sensitive to what type of discussion we might have. But one on one you can go to a very personal level.*

*It was really helpful because sometimes people are a lot more comfortable to speak with one person and they don't like to bring up their issues in a group of other women so that is one aspect. You probably get to know this person more than if it was in group. So it's a more personal relationship and encouraging and helping them find their way.*

*For my experience women got more out of the one on one sessions. I had a gal that was with me almost a year. I met her every week. I think she got a lot out of that. She'd talk about her family and when he came and wanted her back. We worked through that and she didn't go back to him.*

Several mentors spoke about positive experiences with particular women:

*I did that for two years with one lady. We used to meet at a restaurant every second Sunday morning and have coffee. It was great. I think it is very beneficial. The lady I was with had two children. She was on her own. She didn't have any money. So it's just reinforcement, like, she'd say her little guy did this. The advice you give isn't what you think you would like to happen. You reinforce what they have done. A lot of them know the answers. It's just they haven't had a chance to express a view in years. So that's important.*

*There are women who really wanted to progress and it's just wonderful to watch them change and grow. I remember one woman who really did. And after the groups she and I did the one on one. We'd meet and have coffee or lunch, just to talk about what was happening in her life and what she was doing. It was so rewarding.*

In summary, the volunteers that were involved with Moving on with Mentors were universally positive about the mentoring as either a stand alone resources or building on the other Peer Support Services for Abused Women peer counselling programs.

### **Agency Support to the Volunteers**

Another key factor in agencies that utilize volunteers, especially to address sensitive issues such as intimate partner violence, is providing support when difficulties arise for the group leaders. While the volunteers noted that they almost always received

the support that they needed from the agency, three group leaders mentioned circumstances or incidents when the volunteers did not experience the agency response as supportive.

*[Did you feel supported by the agency?] I absolutely did except for one time. One day Ada said, "We're doing an evaluation of our volunteers", kind of a report card. It was like back in school: participation: good; or commitment to volunteerism. I really didn't get this. I didn't feel that that was appropriate and I didn't feel supported. It didn't make sense to me.*

*One of the girls in my group got murdered by her ex-husband. That really shook me up because was there something that we could have done to prevent this. I got told, but I didn't get any like debriefing or counselling from Peer Support. I felt let down, it was quite traumatic.*

*My partner was not able to be at session so it was my job to call the women and see if they were interested in coming or wanted to wait. I called the list of women and only managed to contact directly one woman, leaving messages with the other and a number to contact me back. I never heard back from the others and had made a wrong, assumption that the meeting wouldn't go. Some women actually showed and nobody was there. (PSSAW staff member) was quite upset about that. I proceeded to give an apology the following session to the women who did show up. I was called at work at the time. Twice actually and I just didn't feel that was right. I had already made an apology. I think that it would have been more beneficial if we could have actually sat down. She (PSSAW staff) could have called me at home, left a message. We could have made a meeting to discuss the issue and made a plan on how to prevent such a thing again from occurring.*

In contrast, seven volunteers noted ways in which the PSSAW staff had been very supportive

*(PSSAW staff) would always check in and see how things are going. I don't think I've ever had to call them over a problem. They would be there for me if I needed help. Ada is always there. I know she started debriefing volunteers. That's really important. Volunteers aren't trained like a professional. So it's important that the volunteers don't have to face a crisis alone. Especially when someone is new, Ada arranges to meet with volunteers on a regular basis to see how they're doing.*

*I realized that he was verbally and monetarily, to some extent a little physical. The way he treated my mum. It scared her. It scared me. That's, that's violence, you get desensitized. You don't realize how wrong that is until you go to training. I remember going to training and the films where the escalation of the verbal. I was going right back there as a kid. Ada saw me watching that film and reacting to it. I didn't even realize and she pulled me aside and talked to me about it.*

*Ada's always available to counsel the people doing groups; to talk about issues, what can be done. She's like a supervisor.*

*I felt totally supported. If we ran across something we couldn't handle, Ada's door would've been open, or phone to say, "What happened and what you think should happen" So there was a lot of support.*

In summary, the volunteer Growth Circle facilitators were candid about both the strengths of the group model and several limitations. Their comments are congruent with the group members', highlighting the importance of connecting with other women, the value of the information and the insights as a result of participating as particular advantages. Challenges included attracting enough participants to group and maintaining group membership, occasionally dealing with group members who presented interpersonal challenges to both the leaders and the other members and balancing the structure of the information in the manual with women's needs to share their stories. The general support from the PSSAW agency was also a constant.

## **Chapter Eight: Summary and Recommendations**

This evaluation of the Peer Support model through examining Growth Circle and other peer support programs offered by Peer Support Services for Abused Women in Calgary provided the opportunity for one of the first studies of the efficacy of peer support women abused by intimate partners. The interviews with 13 women participants and 14 volunteers provide an in-depth view of the strengths and challenges of offering these services. Further, although not necessarily intended in the original conception of the study, the feedback spans the agency's history documenting several significant shifts in providing training and support as well as feedback with respect to Peer Support's other programs.

This chapter considers the research findings in light of the available literature on groups for abused women highlighting similarities and differences and what the current study has added to our understanding of providing support to this population. Limitations and strengths of the evaluation are documented. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for the agency to consider in continuing to offer Growth Circle groups.

### **The Results in Context**

The women interviewed for this research who had participated in the Peer Support model whether by attending the Growth Circles or PSSAW's other peer support programs had experienced significant psychological abuse, including death threats, and many had been significantly physically abused by their partners. Consistent with other research that examines whether women utilize family and friends as support (Tutty, 2006), most either did not seek assistance or found that the support offered did not meet their needs. One woman highlighted that the fact that domestic violence is now more in the public eye is actually a barrier, since attitudes that women who stay with abusive partners must be somehow stupid or crazy have not shifted. As such, the shame of being victimized continues to be a barrier in women feeling comfortable seeking either formal or informal support. This also validates the need for the program, since the women that engaged in the Growth Circles and other peer support programs had little other support.

The volunteers that contributed to the research have impressive backgrounds including a variety of other volunteer experiences and training. Most had their own history of abuse in their intimate relationships or family background, a factor that most group member's value. On the other hand, the four volunteers without an abuse history found ways to positively connect with the women seeking services from PSSAW.

The perceptions of the benefits and challenges of offering peer support groups for abused women that emerged in the current study are consistent with the small body of quantitative and qualitative research conducted on such groups. Many of the groups in the literature were conducted with a mix of women that remained in and had left abusive intimate partner relationships. Notably, the Growth Circle groups are limited to women no longer living with a partner.

With respect to women that have left abusive relationships, the Growth Circle group members and facilitators noted improvements in self-esteem, anger and depression consistent with other research (Cox & Stoltenberg, 1991; Holiman & Schilit, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2001, Rinfret-Raynor & Cantin, 1997, Tutty et al., 1993).

Understanding the nature of their experiences and the commonalities of the abuse with other women were significant learnings for the majority of group members and the volunteer groups facilitators. These significant benefits have also been identified in the small body of research on support groups for abused women (Moldon, 2002; Tutty & Rothery, 2002).

With respect to utilizing volunteers, many of whom had themselves experienced abuse, neither the group members nor the facilitators that were interviewed described this as a problem. Nevertheless, they did mention rare instances when problems with group leaders had occurred and highlighted the importance of both screening and training in establishing that the group leaders had healed from their own abuse so that they could assist the group member. This suggestion is consistent with Moses et al. (2004) and Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.). Further, it supports authors such as Fearday and Cape (2004), Freeman and Larcombe (n.d.), MacLeod (1990) and Hartman (1983), all of whom suggested that women taking leadership roles in groups can do this competently and become empowered.

The challenges identified in offering the Growth Circle groups are common difficulties in professionally-led groups as well. They include finding enough participants to attend group and maintaining group membership over time, group members that monopolize or are in crisis and so interfere in the group process for other members. The comments from the volunteer group facilitators and group members, suggest that, for the most part, their training has assisted them in addressing these issues constructively. That the volunteers to grasp these core groupwork principles and handle many difficult group circumstances is impressive and suggests the value of the training and the agency support. Nevertheless, the ongoing difficulty in attracting and keeping both group members and group leaders suggests the need for a major review of Growth Circles practices, marketing and group orientation.

Also apparent in comments from both Growth Circle group members and facilitators is finding an appropriate balance between providing structure and information while still allowing time for the women to tell their stories in a safe and respectful setting, a factor identified by Moldon (2002) as central for abused women. This balance is not limited to peer support groups, but is commonly found in professional-led groups as well.

The early Growth Circle groups were less structured, which allowed the opportunity to disclose the abuse, but perhaps did not provide enough structure for some of the non-professional group leaders. Creating a manual for the Growth Circles groups, provided more support for volunteers, but takes the risk that the educational material meets the needs of all group members. While the majority of the group members interviewed for this evaluation valued the curriculum, several commented that they would have appreciated more time in sessions to discuss their own background and circumstances. These evaluation comments could be of value in reviewing the Growth Circle curriculum and group process.

The women interviewees and the nine volunteers had also connected with women through the Moving on with Mentors program. They commented on the power and utility of offering such one-on-one support beyond or instead of the Growth Circles.

In summary, the evaluation results provide a strong endorsement for the Peer Support model, not only with respect to Growth Circle groups, but utilizing volunteers to assist abused women in the other PSSAW programs and in general. As almost nothing has been written about the value of peer support from either the perspective of group members or group leaders, this research provides an important validation of such interventions.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Evaluation**

As with any evaluation, there are strengths and limitations that need to be considered in interpreting the results. In terms of limitations, the respondents that were willing to be interviewed for the research were more likely to have had a longer term relationships with PSSAW than those that declined. The majority of the volunteers had been associated with the agency for years and Growth Circle members had all completed the group. As such, the voices of those that came for only a few Growth Circle sessions or the other PSSAW peer support programs are not heard in this report. This is unfortunate, since we cannot discern why so many do not continue beyond the first session or drop out after only several: an ongoing question for the agency.

Further, as noted in the evaluation methodology section, the strong qualitative support for the Peer Support model cannot be utilized to make any comparisons with different models of programs, for example professionally-led psychoeducational or therapy groups. Doing so would entail a substantially different research design, for example collecting data (probably quantitative in nature) from each program using a pretest-posttest design. The current results cannot be utilized to imply that the Peer Support model is more effective or even comparable to other approaches. Ultimately, offering a range of options to abused women including some professionally-led and some led by peers is optimal to address the diverse needs of women abused by intimate partners.

Nevertheless, the research has several strengths that merit attention. The number of respondents (13 group members and 14 group leaders) may seem small when seen from a quantitative perspective but is substantial from a qualitative one. The in-depth nature of the comments from interviews that often lasted from one and a half to two hours includes considerable feedback and suggestions that can benefit the agency.

As mentioned previously, there is little research on support groups for abused women and most is with respect to professionally-led groups. Not only does this evaluation focus on peer support groups led by volunteers, but it also presents the perspectives of the peer group leaders, which has never before been documented. Importantly the group leaders' views support and validate the strengths and challenges of the Growth Circle groups as seen by the group members.

### **Recommendations to Peer Support**

The final section presents a number of recommendations for consideration by Peer Support Services for Abused Women. The recommendations stem not only directly from the voices of the research participants but also from the literature on groups for woman abuse. These recommendations are offered acknowledging the care and thoughtfulness

apparent throughout the history of the agency. Notwithstanding this, however, this juncture presents an opportunity to make an already strong program even better.

The research results focus primarily on the Growth Circles, since this was the PSSAW program most commonly experienced by the interviewees as either group member or group facilitator. When available, comments with respect to Finding our Voices and Moving on with Mentors are provided.

### **Recommendation 1: Continue offering the peer support model in programs such as Growth Circles**

Both the participants who had been clients at Peer Support and the volunteers valued the services offered and validated the importance of this unique program. In considering the continuum of services to abused women in Calgary from shelters to shelter-based support groups, to community agencies offering professionally led groups, Growth Circles, Finding Our Voices and Moving on with Mentors offer important alternatives.

It is commonly acknowledged that only 11 to 13 percent of abused women connect to shelters (Transition House Survey 2004, cited in Statistics Canada, 2005.), especially women that have the fewest resources and require immediate safety (Tutty, 2006). Women abused by their intimate partners may not perceive the need for counselling per se, especially since they may have important questions about whether they have, in fact, been abused. An agency such as Peer Support offers an important, relatively non-threatening option for women to explore their needs and experiences.

Further, from the perspectives of both group members and group facilitators, the peer support programs, especially the Growth Circles, very effectively assist women in dealing with their feelings, low self-esteem and decision-making dilemmas after having left an abusive partner.

### **Recommendation 2: Develop a more effective marketing strategy**

The most significant challenge, one that has continued from the early days of the agency, has been how to attract women to the programs and keep them in the Growth Circle groups. This issue was highlighted by the majority of the volunteer group facilitators and several group members that had hoped for more women with whom to share their experiences.

The agency has clearly attempted to address this issue in a number of ways over the years including adding additional opportunities such as mentoring, self-esteem groups and shifting the Growth Circle groups from a ten-week group to a fifteen week group divided into three modules. Offering a meals and child care were other strategies to both attract and meet the needs of women that might benefit from the groups. Despite these efforts, even in the past year, it has been difficult to convene groups of sufficient size and to maintain group members once the sessions were initiated.

One can hope that documented research evidence that the groups have benefits for many of its group members may enhance the agency's ability to attract new Growth Circle group members. However, the agency may need assistance in strategizing about this pressing concern.

**Recommendation 3: Collaborate with the other Calgary services to strategize about engaging abused women.**

Peer Support Services for Abused Women is one of a number of agencies whose goal is to provide for the needs of abused women and that are experiencing difficulties in doing so. Though the range and number of existing services in Calgary is impressive, the women that these agencies hope to attract may not understand the benefits and differences implied in each. The Calgary Counselling Centre is currently sponsoring a research project with respect to how to better engage abused women in response to difficulties attracting women to their professional-led support groups, despite the increase in referrals of men to the male perpetrator groups. The results may have value for the Peer Support Growth Circles and other peer-to-peer programs as well.

Further, in interviews with 70 women who had been contacted by the HomeFront domestic court caseworkers (Tutty & Nixon, 2004, in Cooper, Warthe & Hoffart, 2004), many were confused about the number of agencies contacting them to offer assistance. The community could benefit from the agencies developing a strategy to better inform women about what different services provide and which would best meet their needs.

**Recommendation 4: Institute a risk assessment during intake**

The women connected with PSSAW disclosed significant and, in a number of cases, life-threatening abuse, consistent with the abuse reported by women in other research on support groups. That at least one Growth Circle group member was murdered by her partner confirms that the safety needs of these women need to be considered, especially since researchers such as Ellis (1992) and Campbell, (2001) confirm that abused women are even more at risk of homicide after they have separated from partners.

Lethality measures such as Jacqueline Campbell's Danger Assessment Scale (2004) area being utilized routinely in Alberta's shelters for abused women with perceived benefits from both staff and residents (Tutty, 2006). The benefits are in engaging women more actively in understanding the potential risks from their partners, which can assist women in understanding their needs for support and safety planning. Initiating this process may more effectively engage women in considering attending Growth Circle groups or other PSSAW programs.

**Recommendation 5: Consider revising the Growth Circle format**

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which Peer Support staff has expended considerable time and energy into developing and revising the Growth Circle groups. The following are several suggestions about how Peer Support might revise the groups to better engage and maintain group members. A more in-depth consultation with an expert in groupwork would provide additional ideas.

The current version of three five week modules was developed in part to address difficulties attracting and retaining group members. Although the content of the sessions was generally perceived as positive by the group members interviewed, from a groupwork perspective dividing the sessions into five-week modules is not ideal. Weekly groups are generally most powerful when they last for from eight to twelve weeks because the group becomes more cohesive as time goes on. Capping the sessions at five

weeks interrupts the group development process and may actually interfere in women considering continuing (the opposite of the intention).

Without shifting too much, the Growth Circle groups could change to a rolling format whereby the sessions continue in a loop, allowing new group members to join at the completion of each five-week session, but without such an interruption. This semi-open group format that would, for example, allow new members to join once every five weeks, so that the wait-list time is shorter. This group structure requires group leaders to address inclusion issues whenever new members join, however has been effectively used in other groups for abused women and abusive men. It also allows current group members to attain the status of mentoring new members, a process that is beneficial for both and is congruent with Peer Support principles.

### **Recommendation 6: Consider revising the Growth Circle content**

As mentioned previously, a common groupwork dilemma is the extent to which groups are structured and psychoeducational versus being more open and targeted to the needs of the group members. Each has benefits and drawbacks.

While the content of the material in the Growth Circle group manual was certainly relevant to many group members, the structure imposed by utilizing the manual topics was seen by some actually interfere in their ability to address their issues. For some, this was expressed as a need for greater flexibility within the group sessions so that topics that most apply to women in specific groups could be examined in greater depth. At least one volunteer group facilitator mentioned that she invites the group members' input into considering the topics and their relevance.

In addition, though, the majority of the participants reported how valuable they found the opportunity to share their abuse experiences with other women. They found that the structure imposed by getting through the manual interfered in this. The group members suggested building in time for them to "tell their stories" in a safe and respectful structure within the group setting.

Finally, one group member suggested that the curriculum materials need to include and acknowledge more diversity.

### **Recommendation 7: Develop an orientation to Growth Circles**

An ongoing problem raised by the volunteer group leaders has been a significant proportion of group members not attending the first session of Growth Circles groups, interfering significantly in the group process. Groups are one of the more intimidating interventions and some group experts suggest ways to overcome resistance to attending the first night, such as group orientation sessions, during which group members can come and meet the other group members, develop rules and guidelines and be informed about what to expect in group. Such orientations are less threatening, but allow potential group members to test out the group in a non-threatening manner.

### **Recommendation 8: Open Growth Circles to women remaining with abusive partners.**

Given the on-going difficulties in engaging and maintaining group membership, Peer Support could consider developing a strategy to broaden the group membership base

by offering services to abused women that have not left their abusive relationships. Other agencies offer groups for a mixed population and this reportedly can work well, in that the women that are considering leaving can find out about the challenges inherent in leaving; and the women that have left can see how far they have come and may mentor those group members that are considering leaving (Tutty & Rothery, 2002b).

**Recommendation 9: Request additional funding for more staff.**

Peer Support Services for Abuse Women has always operated as a small agency. Over the years, the staff, especially Ada Baxter who has been involved from almost the beginning, are valued for their competence and support. However, the Growth Circle clients mentioned several issues that suggest the need for more additional funding to more adequately staff the agency. Increased staffing would ensure that clients are contacted in a timely manner and that enough trained volunteers are available to offer groups more frequently. It would also ensure that support is in place for women waiting for programs to begin.

**Recommendation 10: Provide on-going training for volunteers**

While the volunteers generally found the domestic violence information and groupwork skills training valuable, and received on-going individual support from PSSAW staff, they suggested that on-going training would be valuable and also could act as a support mechanism, especially for new group leaders. These sessions could focus on topics suggested by the group leaders or could address issues suggested by group members or agency staff as needing to be considered. As an example, one issue that was raised by a group member interviewed for the research was the need for the childcare volunteers to be aware of and to utilize the safety measures in place to protect the children in their care.

In summary, the peer support model has previously had little evaluation support. Programs such as PSSAW's Growth Circles, Moving on with Mentors, and Finding our Voices each offer peer support in either a group or one-to-one context. The interviews with women that participated in each of these programs clearly endorse the value of the peer support. The volunteers that offer the peer support programs receive valuable training in both understanding the dynamics of woman abuse and learning what services and resources women might need in addition to emotional support. The current research highlights the importance of continuing to offer this option in the continuum of services to abused women in the Calgary community.

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## **Appendix One: Interview Schedule for “Growth Circles” Participants**

1. It would be helpful to know a bit about you and your family:
  - Do you have children? If so, how old are they? Do they live with you?
  - Are you working now? If not, how do you support yourself?
  - What is your ethnic/religious background? How does your ethnic/religious background perceive/deal with partner violence?
2. How long were you in a relationship with your partner that abused you?
  - Were you married, living common-law, dating?
  - Are you together now? If separated/divorced, for how long?
  - How many previous abusive partners have you been in relationships with?
  - What is your current marital status?
  - If in a relationship, is this a new partner?
3. How did you meet your partner that brought you to Peer Support?
4. When did he/she start acting abusively towards you? Did the abuse change over time?
  - What was the most severe incident of abuse?
  - Did a particular incident lead you to become involved in Peer Support Service? If so, what happened?
5. How did you do to deal with the abuse when you were together and how helpful were these strategies?
  - To whom did you turn to for help? (i.e. friends, family, programs?)
  - Did you use the crisis line or call the police?
  - Did you use any other abuse-related programs such as shelters or professionally led groups for abused women?
6. How did you hear about Peer Support Services for Abused Women?
  - When you connected with the agency what did you hope to get?
  - Did you come for a specific program? If yes, which one? Did you utilize this service?
7. How long ago did you attend the “Growth Circles” group?
  - Have you attended all three levels of group?
  - If just Level 1, how many of the five sessions did you attend?
  - What was your experience in the Growth Circles?
  - What had you hoped to gain from going to this group?
  - What was most helpful part for you about attending?
  - Was there any aspect of group that was not helpful to you?
  - How did the other participants find the group?
  - Was there anything missing that you had hoped would be addressed in group or that could make it better?
  - What was it like being in a group led by your peers?
  - Did you stay in touch with any of the group members after the Growth Circles had ended?

8. How did you find the group leaders?
  - Were they knowledgeable about intimate partner abuse?
  - Were they respectful and responsive to group members?
  - Did they take confidentiality seriously?
  - Did you feel safe in group?
  - Did you have any concerns about the group leaders?
  
9. Besides the “Growth Circles”, what other PSSAW services have you utilized and how helpful were they? These might include:
  - Finding Our Voices for Self Esteem
  - Moving on with Mentors
  - Tools for Change
  - Volunteer Program
  
10. Do you have a continued involvement with PSSAW? If yes, in what way?
  
11. If you have led a Growth Circles group, how did you find the experience?
  - Please describe what typically happens across the process of the Growth Circles groups?
  - As a leader, what do you see as the major benefits of the groups?
  - As a leader, have you experienced any problems?
  - Did the training prepare you to deal with the group dynamics? If yes, how so? If no, what more did you need?
  - Did you feel supported by the agency as a volunteer? Have you had occasion to ask for support (i.e. in a crisis). If yes, was it helpful?
  - Does the structure and process of the group meet the needs of the women? If yes, how so? If no, what do you think should be different?
  
12. If you had a friend in an abusive relationship what advice would you give her?
  - Would you recommend that she go to PSSAW?
  - If so, why? If not, why not?
  
13. Do you have any other suggestions to make PSSAW more helpful for other women and their children?

## Appendix Two: Interview Schedule for “Growth Circles” Leaders

1. It would be helpful to know a bit about you and your family:
  - Do you have children? If so, how old are they? Do they live with you?
  - Are you working now? If not, how do you support yourself?
  - What is your ethnic/religious background?
2. How did you hear about Peer Support Services for Abused Women?
  - When you connected with the agency to become a volunteer, what did you hope to gain?
3. Before coming to PSSAW, had you been a volunteer with any other agencies? If yes, how did you find the experience?
4. Before coming to PSSAW, had you been a participant or a leader with any other support or counselling groups?
5. Some of PSSAW’s volunteers have a history of family violence. Do you have such a history?
  - If yes, can you tell me a little about your healing process, and whether you received services that helped?
  - How did having or not having experienced abuse affect your connecting with women when leading the Growth Circle Groups?
6. How do you find leading the Growth Circles group?
  - Please describe what typically happens across the process of the Growth Circles groups?
  - As a leader, what do you see as the major benefits of the groups?
  - As a leader, have you experienced any problems?
  - Did the training prepare you to deal with the group dynamics (i.e. difficult members etc.)? If yes, how so? If no, what more did you need?
  - Did you feel supported by the agency as a volunteer? Have you had occasion to ask for support (i.e. in a crisis). If yes, was it helpful?
  - Does the structure and process of the group meet the needs of the women? If yes, how so? If no, what do you think should be different?
7. If you had a friend in an abusive relationship would you recommend that she go to PSSAW?
  - If so, why? If not, why not?
8. Do you have any other suggestions to make PSSAW more helpful for other women and their children?