

Article 37

**Career Intervention for Domestic Violence Survivors in a Group
Setting: A Psychoeducational, Skill-Building Curriculum**

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Domestic violence can be defined as "a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors used by one person to gain and maintain power and control over the other" (Florida Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2010). According to the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence (FCADV), approximately 25% of women in the United States will experience domestic violence during their lifetime (FCADV, 2010). Domestic violence is also the leading cause of injury for women in the United States, and the leading cause of death among African American women in the United States. These statistics illustrate the prevalence of those affected by domestic violence in our country. Despite these staggering numbers, limited services are currently available for domestic violence survivors, especially those that help survivors with their long-term needs (FCADV, 2010).

The stigma surrounding domestic violence is still prevalent and victims are subsequently plagued by the question, "Why don't you just leave?" To most, this question seems like a reasonable one. However, research has indicated that leaving an abusive relationship is not as easy as it may appear. Anderson (2003) conducted a study to determine the average number of times it takes a victim of domestic violence to leave her abuser before she is successful. The results indicated that almost 80% had left their abuser at least once before and 20% had left at least ten times. If, and when, a person is able to escape the abusive situation, she is then faced with significant physical, emotional, and social barriers that often complicate her adjustment back into society (Chronister, 2006).

One social barrier that is often overlooked by practitioners is that of career development. According to a survey conducted in 2003 by the Centers for Disease Control, victims of domestic violence "lose a total of nearly 8.0 million days of paid

work—the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs—and almost 5.6 million days of household productivity” each year (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003, p. 1). The lasting effects of domestic violence often hinder a woman’s ability to pursue and achieve her career goals. This deficit affects her ability to obtain financial stability and independence. However, if this barrier is addressed, it may then, hypothetically, reduce the likelihood of the victim returning to the abuser (Chronister, Linville, & Kaag, 2008).

In addition, domestic violence survivors often have a difficult time obtaining and keeping steady employment, both during and after the abusive situation. This may be due to both internal and external variables. For example, domestic violence survivors are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, substance abuse issues, and health problems, which could, in turn, affect work attendance and/or work performance. In many cases, survivors have a significant level of education, but no work experience to match their credentials. Victims often have large gaps in their employment history, which many employers find unattractive in a potential employee. Many abusers do not allow their partners to work, so as to control them further. If they are allowed to work, it is not uncommon for the abuser to garnish their wages. They may have limited access to childcare, which may force them to quit their jobs prematurely. Many domestic violence survivors also have histories of legal trouble due to the nature of their previous relationships and this may hinder their ability to obtain employment. These factors can create obstacles for members of this population, but can also be overcome with some guidance and support.

Providing career development services to this population, preferably in a group setting, will potentially provide them with the guidance and support needed to get back on their feet. This paper will describe in detail a curriculum that was developed by the author specifically to provide career services to domestic violence survivors in a group setting. With that being said, this group aims to better equip female domestic violence survivors with the tools necessary to obtain and maintain employment, thus increasing the likelihood of participants gaining and maintaining financial independence.

While individual career counseling has the potential to be effective for this population, a group intervention was implemented because researchers have found that this population most likely benefits from the relational nature of the group setting. Members can draw from each other’s experiences and strengths, hold each other accountable, and build healthy relationships within the safety of a group setting (Jagow-France, 2010). The group setting will also prove to be more financially feasible for domestic violence agencies or career centers to implement. This group attempts to teach members how to successfully search for, and apply for, employment. The group focuses on developing a person’s ability to identify and communicate their values, interests, and skills while using Cognitive Information Processing theory. Ultimately, this group aims to reduce the likelihood of recurring violence in the lives of the group members. The goal of this intervention is to increase the likelihood of women in this population obtaining and maintaining employment.

This program is focused on career interventions for female domestic violence survivors because domestic violence agencies predominantly serve women. Specifically, the group aims to provide survivors with the tools necessary to obtain employment. The goals and sessions were developed with two specific theoretical underpinnings: Cognitive

Information Processing (CIP) theory and narrative therapy from a feminist perspective. CIP is used as the main theoretical framework for this group; however, narrative therapy from a feminist perspective proves to be a good outlook for facilitators to use during some of the self-exploration exercises.

The CIP approach to career counseling is one that focuses on developing individuals' career readiness and decision-making. "The aims of the CIP approach are to help persons make an appropriate current career choice and, while doing so, to learn improved problem-solving and decision-making skills that they will need for future choices" (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004, p. 2). CIP incorporates two core constructs: the pyramid of information processing and the CASVE cycle. In simplistic terms, the two core constructs relate to the questions, "What do people know?" and "What are they going to do about it?" (Lenz, Reardon, Peterson, & Sampson, 2001). One of the many benefits of CIP theory is its universality to a variety of counseling and intervention settings. For a comprehensive description and understanding of this theory, please refer to *Career Counseling & Services: A Cognitive Information Processing Approach* (Sampson et al., 2004). The core concepts of CIP theory will not only help domestic violence survivors increase their ability to make decisions related to career, but also aim to develop their decision making skills as a whole. The hope is to make these survivors better decision makers so that they may thrive in all aspects of their lives. Another benefit of using this theory is that it addresses individuals' negative metacognitions, which is something that is important to do when working with domestic violence survivors. Improving an individual's ability to reframe negative thoughts and events also has the potential to improve their overall mental health.

This theoretical approach and the overarching goals of the group curriculum go hand-in-hand. First, the main focus of the group is to provide domestic violence survivors with the necessary tools to successfully enter and remain in the workforce. Since many individuals in this population struggle with career decision-making and job readiness, CIP is the ideal approach to educate these women in the field of career services. Second, CIP approach contains a readiness assessment instrument, the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a), and the Career Thoughts Inventory workbook (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996b). The CTI determines an individual's level of negative career thoughts and is written at a 6th grade reading level. This is important because it will allow the group facilitator to determine an individual's appropriateness for the group as well as provide baseline data. The CTI workbook teaches individuals how to reframe their negative career thoughts. Both instruments were incorporated into the curriculum and screening interview to determine candidates' appropriateness for the group. Third, the CIP approach provides life-long career knowledge in a short period of time. This is convenient for this population because many of these women are in need of immediate employment. In addition, while there is a heavy emphasis on obtaining employment in the group, there is also a need to address the emotional issues that accompany domestic violence; this brief career intervention is both convenient and necessary.

Narrative therapy, founded by Michael White, views the problems of individuals from a non-blaming approach, based on the idea that problems are created in social, cultural, and political contexts. Narrative therapy focuses on the stories of the clients. In respect to narrative therapy, stories are fictional events that encourage individuals to

discover their “untold” stories, including their intentions, values, desires, and dreams. Individuals create new stories to replace the ones that revolve around traumas that oppress them. These stories negatively impact the way an individual views their life and capabilities. Counselors listen to the stories in the hopes of obtaining clues of knowledge and skills that could assist individuals to live their life in a preferred manner – the manner in which they presented their “untold” stories. In essence,

the focus is not on ‘experts’ solving problems, ...it is on people discovering through conversations, the hopeful, preferred, and previously unrecognized and hidden possibilities contained within themselves and unseen story-lines [that] Michael White [referred] to as the ‘re-authoring’ of people’s stories and lives. (Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto, 2010, para. 4)

This therapeutic approach relates to the curriculum for fairly obvious reasons. For starters, writing a trauma narrative is an intervention that is commonly used in both physical and sexual abuse treatment. By reframing their stories and establishing new hopes and dreams in regard to their personal life and employment, the group members can create new identities in which they are no longer victims, but rather survivors. Narrative therapy will be presented from a feminist perspective. Feminist therapy not only focuses primarily on females, who are the identified population for this curriculum, but also focuses on validation. Similar to the narrative approach, Feminist therapy is “built on the premise that it is essential to consider social, cultural, and political context that contributes to a person’s problems in order to understand that person” (Corey, 2005).

Feminist therapy focuses on valuing women’s experiences. Feminist group therapy focuses on increasingly specific problems, including, but not limited to, abusive relationships (Corey, 2005). Corey (2005) identified six core principles that form the foundations of feminist therapy: the personal is political, commitment to social change, women’s and girls’ voices and ways of knowing are valued and their experiences are honored, the counseling relationship is egalitarian, a focus on strengths and reformulated definition of psychological distress, and all types of oppression are recognized. Each principle relates to this curriculum’s target population. The principles aim to empower women, focus on their strengths (or in this case strengths and career skills), and identify any oppression that may be negatively impacting their ability to make decisions, in regard to life and employment. While CIP theory is the primary theory used in this group, these other theories provide a good perspective for working with this population.

It is important for potential members of this group to be screened appropriately. Administering a Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) to prospective members is an accurate way of assessing the level of services the individual needs. It is up to the group leader’s discretion as to whether or not members are more appropriate for individual services. The exclusion criteria for this group were (whether or not) the individual was currently cohabitating with their abuser, currently using or abusing substances, not currently adhering to medication management (if appropriate), and an inability to read and write at or above a 6th grade level. Individual career services will still be available to the people who do not meet the inclusion criteria for the group.

The group consists of ten sessions. Depending on the setting, the group may be done twice a week for 5 weeks, or once a week for 10 weeks. If the group is being implemented in a domestic violence emergency shelter, a 5 week group would be more

appropriate. However, if the group is being implemented at a career center or in an outpatient counseling setting, the curriculum may be spread out over 10 weeks. The time sensitivity of the group members' needs should be taken into account when developing the group schedule.

Some additional things to be aware of when establishing this group are group member mortality, confidentiality concerns, location of the group, and childcare services. Due to the volatile and unstable status of many survivors' lives, it is not uncommon for members to start the group and not finish. Some potential threats to a survivor's completion of the group could include safety concerns, fear of failure, or returning to their abuser. Due to these reasons and many not mentioned, it may be a good idea to start with a larger number of individuals in the group, so that the group will end with a sufficient number of people. Confidentiality is always a concern in group counseling settings; however, domestic violence creates additional safety concerns when addressing confidentiality. It is important to stress this to group members. If group members want to use a fake name, allow them to do so. One factor that practitioners may not consider is that of the group location. If the group is being implemented in a domestic violence agency, this will most likely not be an issue. Domestic violence shelters are very well protected and they take every precaution possible when it comes to protecting their clients. However, if the group is taking place at a career center, it may be necessary to provide extra security. One way of doing this may be to only give out flyers about the group to potential group members directly. It may not be a good idea to post flyers around the career center, so that non-members do not know the days and times that the group will meet. Childcare should be offered to group members whenever possible, as a lack of childcare is often a barrier for this population. The most important thing to remember when creating a group for domestic violence survivors is to remain flexible. If an issue arises, do your best to fix it in a way that will meet the needs of the women that are participating in the group.

The first group session covers an introduction to the group and psychoeducational overview of domestic violence and how it affects career development. Group members will be shown the power and control wheel, definitions of economic abuse, and the emotional effects of domestic violence. The second, third, and fourth sessions will cover values, interests, and skills. These three things make up the self-knowledge domain in the CIP information processing pyramid. CIP interventions such as the Decision Space Worksheet and Self Directed Search Form E (4th ed.) can be used for these sessions. In this particular group, original materials were developed that encouraged survivors to explore their values and skills. The fifth session teaches members how to effectively research occupations using resources such as *O*net* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. These sessions cover the options knowledge domain in the information processing pyramid. Session six provides a resume and cover letter workshop. It is important to show examples of resumes and cover letters that are appropriate to the level of education and amount of experience for the members of the group. The levels of education and ability within the group may be extremely varied, so it may be a good idea to have several examples available. Members can also give each other feedback on each other's resumes and cover letters during this session. The seventh session focuses on job searching and provides members with effective ways to search for employment. Interviewing and professional dress will be discussed and practiced during the eighth

session. If it is possible to provide vouchers to local charities/thrift stores to the group members, this would be the time to give these out. Session nine encourages members to bring in three to five job postings to which they intend to apply. Rejection and appropriate coping mechanisms will also be addressed in this session. This is important to cover because many survivors have significant issues related to rejection. The final session will consist of the members taking their final Career Thoughts Inventory assessment, discussing how their job searches are going, and overall impressions of the group. If further help is needed, members can be referred for individual career counseling services.

The focus of this group is one that, despite its importance, has not been extensively researched or implemented by helping professionals. The current gap between domestic violence services and career services is one that needs to be bridged. The hope is that after members complete the group curriculum, facilitators will notice lower CTI scores and group members will be able to verbalize a list of career goals and will be pursuing them in some capacity. By providing domestic violence survivors with adequate career services, the likelihood of them returning to their abuser is reduced. However, it is important to mention that, while this group curriculum has been successfully implemented in the past, there is a good chance that the group process will not be effective for each survivor that participates in the intervention. It is important for practitioners working with this population to remember to meet survivors where they are emotionally. It may be necessary for some individuals to complete the group process more than once. Do not be discouraged if the group does not “work” for everyone. The important thing is to keep providing services, so that when people are ready, the resources are available to them. Implementing career services at a domestic violence agency or adding specialized community services at career centers can literally save lives.

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