

Strength at Home Men's Program

Strength at Home is a trauma-informed, evidence-based cognitive-behavioral intervention for individuals who have engaged in some form of intimate partner violence. These are closed groups conducted with eight or fewer individuals (not couples) per group and consist of 12 two-hour weekly sessions plus assessment and monitoring time. Group material focuses on psychoeducation regarding how group members learn abusive behavior patterns and core themes for abuse (e.g., power and control, inability to trust others), conflict management skills to deescalate difficult situations, assertiveness training, and communication/emotional expression skills. Elements of motivational interviewing are incorporated to assist those who are in earlier stages of readiness for change. Below are the session topics.

Session 1: Introduction and Welcoming

This session introduces participants to the structure, expectations, and philosophy of the group. After initial introductions and discussion of the philosophy and goals for the group, the leaders lead a discussion of the “pros” and “cons” of abuse as a motivational strategy. Leaders then give insight into the structure and expectations for the group, explain the importance of practice assignments, and answer questions about the group. The main clinical tasks are to begin establishing a working alliance with each group member, to validate and address group members’ concerns and reservations about counseling, to model and encourage healthy group interactions, and to facilitate motivation for behavior change.

Session 2: Trauma and Relationships

Group members explore their beliefs about healthy and unhealthy relationships and their goals for group. The session then shifts to discussing psychoeducational material that focuses on understanding forms of partner abuse and the impact of trauma and other negative life events on group members’ relationships. The main clinical tasks of the session are to enhance motivation, to educate group members regarding abuse, and for group members to gain insight into the effects of trauma and difficult prior events on their own relationships.

Session 3: Conflict Management I: Understanding Anger

This session begins with a discussion of the practice assignment focusing on understanding how trauma has affected the participants’ relationships in order to further facilitate contemplation of behavior change and to build upon psychoeducational material from Session 2. The group discussion then shifts to a focus on understanding the anger response and expressing anger assertively. This material is designed to assist group members in recognizing and understanding the components of their anger and the importance of striving toward assertive expressions of anger. The practice assignment focuses on self-monitoring the different components of anger and further practicing assertive responses to anger.

Session 4: Conflict Management II: Time Outs

This session is devoted to strategies intended to defuse difficult relationship situations in which abuse may result. After reviewing group members’ self-monitoring practice and assertiveness assignments, Time Outs are discussed. Group members learn to take a "break from the action" to cool down during difficult relationship situations. The rationale behind Time Outs is discussed, and each group member begins developing a Time Out plan to use during potentially conflictual situations. The development of these plans is an important crisis management tool that helps ensure safety and provides a skill that helps to lay the groundwork for future work on communication.

Session 5: Coping Strategies I: Anger-related Thinking

This session is devoted to exploring and identifying automatic thoughts associated with anger reactions and that may characterize participants with problems with abuse. Group discussions focus on developing realistic appraisals of threat and of other people’s intentions, and the group generates active coping thoughts to counter anger-enhancing thoughts. Session material focusing on information processing issues in trauma is based on a growing research and clinical literature indicating that social information processing deficits help explain the association between trauma and aggressive behavior directed towards relationship partners and others.

Session 6: Coping Strategies II: Dealing with Stress

This session focuses on stress and stress management, as stress and anxiety may place participants at risk for relationship adjustment problems and abuse. Practice assignments focus on identifying sources of stress and coping strategies for handling stress.

Session 7: Communication Skills I: Roots of Your Communication Style

After discussing current anger and stress management strategies, group members participate in an exercise in which they write about and discuss how they learned their style of communicating anger and other emotions. Specifically, they discuss lessons learned as a child, in school, as an adult, and in other settings. The primary clinical task of this material is to illustrate how participants typically are socialized to be passive or aggressive, not assertive.

Session 8: Communication Skills II: Active Listening

After reviewing Anger Analysis Forms, group members discuss aspects of good and bad communication, after which the group focuses specifically on active listening skills. Active listening skills are emphasized in this session because they are the foundation of good communication and are critical for the de-escalating conflict and enhancing intimacy. Listening skills are particularly important when significant trauma symptoms are present in one or both members of the couple because information processing abilities are often compromised by emotional arousal.

Session 9: Communication Skills III: Assertive Messages

After reviewing group members' communication self-monitoring forms, group discussion focuses on how to give an assertive message. Next, group members are introduced to a scripted role play depicting both assertive messages and active listening and then they practice these skills in session. The continued focus on enhanced communication skills is intended to reduce the negative association between trauma and communication skills deficits and to further improve relationship problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

Session 10: Communication Skills IV: Expressing Feelings

Group members review their communication self-monitoring forms and the assertive messages and active listening practice assignment. Group material then focuses on how trauma-related avoidance can lead to difficulties expressing emotions in relationships. Strategies for expressing feelings are provided. Emotional expression skills are important for enhancing intimacy and understanding in relationships.

Session 11: Communication Skills V: Common Communication Traps

After discussing the anger and communication and feelings expression self-monitoring assignments, group material focuses on five communication traps that undermine assertive communication. These traps are particularly important for participants with trauma. Strategies to avoid these common communication traps, and to cope productively when they arise, are introduced and discussed.

Session 12: Reviewing Treatment Gains and Planning for Future

After discussing the emotional expression practice assignment, group members explore gains made in the group. They identify goals and strategies for future change along with barriers to change and strategies to overcome these barriers. Much of the session is spent discussing thoughts and feelings about the group ending, exploring plans for future change, and saying goodbye. The primary clinical tasks of the session are to help group members develop a realistic appraisal of changes made and to help group members identify areas needing continued attention and strategies for continuing this work after the group ends.