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TALKING IT OUT: A GUIDE TO GROUPS FOR ABUSED WOMEN

NiCarthy, G., Merriam, K., & Coffman, S.
Seattle, WA: Seal Press

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Talking It Out is a book written for women interested in running groups founded upon a feminist orientation for abused women. In the first section, the authors outline the basic theories of feminist therapy and battering. Also included here is a history of the shelter movement. The second section discusses in great detail the nuts and bolts to starting and successfully running shelter-based groups for battered women. Included in this section are several helpful suggestions on a variety of topics: paying attention to group process, planning timed activities in order to maintain a comfortable flow, balancing power amongst the group members and leaders, and using the members as their own catalyst for change in their relationships. The final section provides a variety of group exercises and offers suggestions for avoiding "burnout." The non-academic tone of this book allows even the beginning group leader a map for starting feminist groups for battered women.

However, the major theoretical and practical flaws inherent in the first section undermine the book's purpose and its potential for success. The major purpose of this book is to "protect the victim" and "assert the accountability and responsibility of the abuser" (p. 4). The authors participate in "theory bashing" of all perspectives that pay any attention to the relationship between the partners, and assert an extreme feminist approach to conducting groups for battered women.

Family therapies, based upon systems theory, which are often employed to successfully work with abusing couples, are described as "inappropriate and even dangerous for women who have been battered, and that systems therapy may be especially damaging" (p. 21). These and other theories were accused of blaming the victim (meaning woman) and failing to balance power. These reviewers assert that by carrying feminist theory to its extreme, as done throughout this book, these authors may not only fail to keep women safe, but run the risk of undermining any perceived competence these women may have had.

An example of the narrowness this view promotes involves the recommendations about group leaders. The book's authors assert that the only appropriate group leaders are those who have successfully left an abusive relationship themselves. The rationale is that they can act as role models for women in the group in leaving their abusive spouses. In addition, these leaders are directed to pose questions that constantly direct women to make only one choice — to leave the relationship. By continual reinforcement of leaving as the goal for each woman, women are forced into making decisions that may not fit with their understanding of themselves or their relationship, therefore undermining their personal competence. This view also subtly reinforces the transference of a dependency-based relationship from the

abusing husband to the group leader.

In addition, the goal of leaving the relationship is part of a major contradiction found in this book. The authors consistently stress that group members must not be allowed to *discount those* women who decide to remain with the "abuser." However, the authors label this decision as one made by women who are vulnerable to depression and feeling like failures. Therefore, many women may perceive that the only "healthy choice" is to leave the relationship. Those women who wish to continue to work with their partners on the relationship are apt to feel like they have failed, and leave the group feeling worse than when they began.

There are many women (and men) involved in violent relationships who want the strength and motivation to leave the relationship. For these women, groups based on feminist theory, as presented by NiCarthy, Merriam, and Coffman, could provide the caring and support necessary for them to follow through with their decisions. However, there are a great many women and men who believe that their relationship is worth saving and are asking for help to accomplish that goal. The strict theory and practice of group therapy as described in this book would not only inhibit any progress in that direction, and discount the alternative points of view held by some group members, but could lead to greater "damage." For example, a shelter resident who wants to preserve her relationship comes to a group. During group meetings, her desire to stay in the relationship is subtly or overtly presented to the woman as a failure on her part. If the woman feels misunderstood, which is likely, she may argue her decision with the group and eventually leave the group to return home. However, all of the epithets used in the group to describe her partner, herself and their situation — batterer, brainwashing, abuser, overpowering, victim, etc. — may become ammunition for the next fight these partners have. Using this information received from the group places the former group member in even greater danger, since the information can now be used as a weapon to hurt the other partner. The member may return to the shelter more battered than before she joined the group. This situation is not uncommon. Therefore, ignoring the needs of the client may lead to greater peril.

In summary, groups for abused women are a valuable resource for exploring alternatives and promoting change. For those leaders who need some practical guidelines for starting and running a group, this book could be a valuable resource. Potential group leaders are reminded, however, that while there are many women who desperately want help in leaving the abusive relationship, there are also many who want help in staying in the relationship and improving it. Therefore, group leaders must always be cognizant of the clients' beliefs and goals so as to provide the best services available to these partners in distress.

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