

MOVING TOWARD EQUITY BY IMPROVING SELF-IDENTITY OF INCARCERATED MEN

A National Organization of Forensic Social Work Conference Presentation

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INTRO

- Goal of this presentation
- Why did I develop this group?

HISTORY OF THE GROUP

- Shift focus from:
 - Common mental health issues
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Stress
 - Criminogenic factors
 - Antisocial behaviors, beliefs, traits and associations
- Created to address underlying emotional/social factors
 - Within the mental health field there are known to be problematic if not addressed and yet they not typically discussed explicitly in prison

GROUP LOGISTICS

- Closed
 - Helps facilitate a sense of community
- Small (10-12 members)
 - Allows for sufficient time to address individual experiences
- 120 minutes
 - Allows enough time to discuss topics and some questions/thoughts
- 12-14 weeks long
 - Enough to cover the basics, though if you have a motivated group likely to be insufficient

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE

- Most members have been incarcerated for at least 10 years
 - ~Half for +15 years
 - Most with life sentences
- All self-identified as male
- Majority identified as heterosexual
- Ages ranged from mid-20s to mid-70s
 - Most were in their late 30s to 40s
- Various religious affiliations, as well as no religious affiliation
- Ethnic minorities overly represented due to higher rates of incarceration of these populations
 - Lack of diversity also due to limitations of gang politics
 - Majority Black, then Latino, few Asian or White

PREGROUP CONTACT AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- All participants were interviewed to assess for overt barriers to group participation
 - Refusal to program with other races
 - Spiritual bypass (avoidance of issue via religious/spiritual beliefs)
 - Unwillingness to interact appropriately with LGBTQIA+
 - Ability/willingness to participate in discussions and engage in activities
- Needs were identified informally
 - Accumulated over years
 - Gathered through individual therapy
 - Informal questioning

CONTENT

- Stereotypes
- Authenticity
- Vulnerability
- Toxic Masculinity
- Shame
- Values



CONTENT

- Starts with easier, less personal concepts
- Topics become increasingly more challenging and personal
- Topics build on previous weeks

STEREOTYPES

- Brings awareness to the possible conceptions others place on us and that we have of others
 - Questioning the validity of stereotypes
- Explores the idea of stereotypes translating to self-stigma
 - The ways in which self-stigma can be problematic
 - The impact self stigma has on behaviors and beliefs
- This is the starting point to thinking critically about the ways in which our identities are formed
 - Considers the influence of culture, media, family/friends

AUTHENTICITY

- Builds on the idea of increasing self-awareness
- Helps the men to think about how they present themselves to the world
 - Is there variability in the way that they present depending on audience?
- Encourages them to think about how they want to show up in the group
 - This is an opportunity for them to practice being authentic even if it is uncomfortable
- Encourages them to start thinking about barriers to authenticity

VULNERABILITY

- This is a particularly challenging concept
 - Prison culture and the associated importance of image
- Explore the concept of vulnerability
 - Often times associated with being a pushover and/or having no boundaries
 - Does vulnerability mean that we have to “put it all out there”?
- Encourages critical thought about the impact prison culture has on willingness to be vulnerable
 - Also encourages thinking re the impact of hiding true feelings/thoughts
- Discussion evolves to feeling vs being vulnerable
 - What constitutes emotional and physical safety

TOXIC MASCULINITY

- Critical and surprisingly popular topic in the self-help circuit
- Foundation for openness has been built in previous topics
- Explores the concept of toxic masculinity
 - What is masculinity (based on their experience)?
 - How do we distinguish between masculinity and toxic masculinity?
- Focuses on the ways prison culture reinforces/encourages toxic masculinity
 - Discusses the impact this has on relationships with other men, as well as the impact on relationships with women
 - How do they feel the need to defend their masculinity?

SHAME

- Distinguish between shame and guilt
 - Significant portion of the conversation focused on this component as these words are frequently misunderstood
- Explores the ways in which shame shows up in small ways
 - Utilizes an exercise of exploring common occurrences within prison and getting to the shame underneath (e.g. cell search)
- Explores the impact shame has on one's self-perception
 - Participants often able to be open about some of the shame they carry
- Incorporating discussion re: how to build shame resilience



VALUES

- Aims to challenge the notion that participants do not have prosocial values
 - Often a culminating point as they are able to connect with positive aspects of themselves
- Helps the participants to reconnect with their prosocial values

BARRIERS

- Systemic
 - Frustrations associated with program delay and other issues associated with “safety and security”
- Individual
 - Feelings of resentment and frustration at being told to make these changes, but staff continue to engage in problematic behaviors
 - Frustration at the amount of time/effort needed to elicit long-term change

PARTICIPANT INPUT

“If we come in and we’re honest about our change, it’ll work. If not, it won’t.”

“Being vulnerable- when I first learned about the word vulnerable I did a deeper search within myself and now I have a better understanding. Now I aim to be vulnerable and to express my feelings. I’m not afraid anymore to be who I am.”

“The group gave me a support system in my recovery process (both in and outside the group). I was able to go more into my Mental Health issues and get more personal than in self-help groups. Hearing other people share made it easier for me to be vulnerable and trust others. Having the group run by professionals who are personable and engaging made it easier to talk about more serious matters. The group reinforced the fact that I need to engage and relate to other people.”



PARTICIPANT INPUT

“The group helped me to be more accepting of my shortcomings and highlighted my good attributes. It made me feel less alone in my trauma and in the way I think. It helped me to grow and helped me to be more myself in this hyper-masculine environment.”

“I learned how there were things as a child that put shame upon me, but that shame from my mother/my doctor/my cousin I was able to put aside. I didn't have any reason to feel ashamed of being gay. It was their shame.”

The image features a solid black background. At the top, there is a decorative, wavy border with a color gradient. From left to right, the colors transition from a warm orange-red to a bright yellow, then to a vibrant green, and finally to a light cyan/blue on the far right. The waves of the border are fluid and organic in shape.

QUESTIONS?

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, comments or would like a copy of the article I wrote regarding this group please email me.

- Email: vanessalj@gmail.com