

# SHORT TERM SUPPORT GROUPS FOR RECENTLY SEPARATED PEOPLE

JOY RAINEY, B.A., DIP. SOC.  
STUDS. GRAD. DIP. APPL.  
CHILD PSYCH.

A special acknowledgement is extended to Marion Lucas, The Volunteer Leader of the Groups

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a group support program for separated people. A simple self-report anonymous questionnaire was the only evaluative device used: the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The present program raised a number of issues, in particular — who are the most appropriate personnel to deliver the service; whether volunteer or professional. It is also noted that various researchers view social support as a critical variable for the eventual adjustment of the individual. Given the high number of those affected by separation and divorce, inclusion of such services would seem important as part of any preventive community program.

## SHORT TERM SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SEPARATED PEOPLE

During the last 10 years, the divorce rate in Australia has increased markedly (Edgar, 1980). From 1976 until 1981 the Australian divorce rate increased by almost 100 per cent (Staples, 1982). Marital separation has been described as a crisis point (Bloom, Hodges and Caldwell, 1982, Harvey, 1982), and, as such, holds the potential for growth as well as for negative outcomes according to the analysis of crises presented by Caplan (1961).

Responses to crises are variable and more likely to be resolved healthily if previous crises or developmental tasks have been successfully negotiated (Erikson, 1963; Rappaport, 1977). Bernard Bloom (1963) in Parad (1965) maintains that "Many workers who apply public health concepts to the field of mental health believe that good mental health is, in large measure, the result of a life history of successful crisis resolutions; and, therefore, by providing therapeutic interventions to people while they are in crises, the incidence of subsequent mental disorder in these persons may be significantly reduced". (P.303).

Salts (1979) discusses the potential of the person in crisis to grow; divorce representing the beginning steps toward

a new life pattern. Part of this process involves destabilisation which is often accompanied by feelings of vulnerability and lack of self confidence. Smart (1977) states — "The overall purpose of the divorce process is to enable the person to have a productive and happy life". (P. 71). As a large portion of every community will have at any given time, a significant portion of their population attempting to deal with separation and divorce (Edgar, 1980) services for separated people and their families should form part of any preventive community health program.

While most researchers have assumed that divorce constitutes a stress reaction or trauma, some authors argue that this is not necessarily a fact for everyone (Bernard, 1981). Karlsen and Noess (1982) maintain that any model on reactions to divorce must incorporate the mediating variables that hamper or facilitate adaptation, an important one, being social support. Raschke (1975), in Thiessen, Avery and Joanning (1980), also Pelt (1982) and others support this, maintaining that the stronger the divorced person's social support system, and the more social interaction with others, the more quickly that person

will achieve satisfactory adjustment to divorce.

Many human service organisations view group support as having a particularly helpful function and have provided group services for those undergoing the crisis of separation (Stephenson and Boler, 1981; Bloom et al, 1982; Thiessen et al, 1980; Young, 1978).

Bloom et al (1982) collected reports by program participants, and statistical comparisons of the 6 month adjustment scores of participants and control group members, and noted general improvement of members. These he described as reductions in anxiety and in general fatigue, along with improved coping skills and physical well being. The paper by Thiessen et al (1980) examined the effects of communication skills training on the adjustment to divorce and separation among women. Results indicated that the experimental group relative to the control group significantly increased in overall divorce adjustment and in empathy skills.

They had focused on communication skills, as they considered these were needed to improve self esteem and social support, but found no significant results in this area. Probable reasons for this, they wrote, were — the heavily



structured program with little chances of interaction, short duration of the program, and the types of measures used. Young (1978), in scanning group participants' evaluative comments, notes the positive nature of the majority, two major sources of satisfaction being emotional-supportive, and information-problem solving.

Other variables which influence adaptation to divorce have been listed by various writers. Along with social support, Thiessen et al (1980) list age, income, previous marital relationship, relationship to the initiation of divorce, and self esteem. Pelt (1982) includes proportion of family income from welfare, the quality of relationships with significant others, and remarriage of custodial parent. Moreland et al (1982) adds relationship with ex-spouse, particularly concerning parenting issues and parent-child communications.

An important issue is who delivers the service – whether the leader should be professional or not. During the last decade, delegation of responsibilities to non-professionals has become increasingly prevalent and studies indicate a high degree of effectiveness of non-professionals in a wide variety of areas (Zax & Specter, 1974).

The present paper describes a service which was developed to cater for an expressed need, and using a non-professional volunteer leader. A short term group support program was offered in 1983 by Southern Family Life Service Association (S.F.L.) S.F.L., is primarily a family and marital counselling agency employing social workers and utilising a wide range of volunteer services.

## METHOD

### GOALS

1. To provide newly separated persons with information and support.
2. To increase self-confidence and enhance communication and parenting skills (in particular – to be better able to separate parenting from spousal issues).
3. To encourage group to become "self-help" on completion.

### LEADERSHIP

A volunteer female leader who had experienced divorce five years previously and was functioning autonomously was able to convey warmth, empathy and enthusiasm. She had been a family aide for some years, having previously completed the routine 12 session agency in-service training course for volunteers.

A social worker had a consultative or supervising function. Approximately half the sessions were attended by the social worker, including the first and

final sessions, and some sessions on particular topics which the social worker conducted. Generally other sessions included a speaker.

Due to the mixed nature of the group, a volunteer male co-worker would have been desirable, but one was not available.

## PARTICIPANTS

Separated people (preferably within last 12 months) who were able to relate in a group setting.

It seemed that group participants fell into two discrete groups: those recently separated who offered statements like "I feel lonely, angry, confused, depressed, hurt, afraid" – and those who had come through the critical stage and were now concerned about what to do with their lives – "What makes a 'good' marriage?" "I don't know how to cope with the dating scene". "I'm not sure how I can manage bringing up two kids and also getting out as a single person".

NUMBERS: 8 - 10 each group.

## DURATION AND FREQUENCY

Approximately 8 sessions with an additional "follow-up" social session at the completion of each group, to which previous groups were invited. One evening per week, 8 - 10.30 p.m.

## PUBLICITY AND REFERRALS

Notices are placed in local newspapers prior to commencement of each new group. Sources of referrals – the above, word of mouth from previous members, and several workers within the Agency.

## SESSIONS

The first session always included setting group norms, which included confidentiality, individual sharing and the gathering of members' requests for future sessions. Other sessions covered topics such as children, self esteem (usually a double session), what makes a 'good' marriage (including a segment on communication) – all of which were lead by a social worker. There were also sessions on legal aspects (with a solicitor) and one session with an economist. The last session was a social session to which the members of previous groups were invited.

## OUTCOMES

The only evaluative procedure used at this stage has been a simple self-report anonymous questionnaire (copy attached). Generally, verbal and written feedback to date form the three groups run in 1983 and has been overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of what has been gained from the Group and the leadership. 90% of participants com-

pleted the questionnaire and some typical comments from these self reports are presented below:

"The Group gave me some understanding of what was happening in my life – very useful."

"I found it of great personal benefit to see and understand other people's emotional reactions to separation and divorce – made me feel less of a twit."

"The shared references to communication helped to appreciate each other's problems. I was not alone in my frustration, despair, or joy."

"Enthusiastic, encouraging, sympathetic and positive leadership which gave one confidence".

"Our Group subsequently developed into a mutually supportive one, in which, by way of regular meetings, we continue to grow. I cannot imagine that this type of social contact could have developed in any other way, except in a special Group such as this."

"I think the whole idea is very good and I think we can all look back on ourselves and see quite a few changes from when we first came along at the beginning."

Two interesting developments associated with the program were:–

- (a) Request for sessions to be increased on personal development-type topics. This was effected for the last two sets of participants,
- (b) The Group seems to have welded itself into support groups in that they are continuing to have contact regularly, e.g. dining out, etc.

## DISCUSSION

Those who had been through the initial crises were able to offer helpful support and encouragement to those in the crisis phase. This was evidenced by both interactions within group sessions and informal contacts with each other outside the group.

The leader having "been through it all" was able to act as a model for the whole group – showing that it is possible to not only survive, but to grow through the crisis to increased autonomy and a richer and fuller life. The Group felt comfortable with the leader and, apart from her warmth of personality, some comments were made concerning the helpfulness of her having been through the experience of divorce itself – "she understood". As Harvey (1982) maintains, those who have been through marital separation can understand the parameters better than those currently experiencing it.

Bandura's (1969) work on modelling suggests that the characteristics of a model influence his or her effectiveness

as a change agent. It has been noted by Rioch (1966) and Cowen (1967) in Rappaport (1977) that the perception of non-professionals by some target people as "closer" to themselves may lead to an increased willingness by clients to identify with and model after the non-professional helper such as the volunteer leader of these groups.

When using volunteers, the provision of regular professional consultation and support is very important (Zax and Specter, 1974) the social worker taking final responsibility for the Group (McGregor, James, Gerrard and Cater, 1982). The volunteer needs to have specially careful consultation concerning the identification of particularly vulnerable group members. We found that three members required more in-depth therapeutic assistance than the Group could realistically offer and these people received additional counselling from social workers within the Agency. One of the three had membership terminated as this person's extreme anxiety was proving disruptive to the Group.

Divorce appears to fit within a developmental framework and to contain elements of crises and grief theory, and this is shared with the Group in its early stages. Some writers argue that separation and divorce will be experienced as far more stressful than death of a spouse. Stephenson & Boler (1981) maintain that death being final, ambivalence, uncertainty and misplaced hope and other self blame may be less than when one feels responsible for, or a contributing factor to the "death" of a relationship. They argue, there is no societal ritual ascribed for the divorced, as there is for the bereaved through death. Also, the access parent could suffer a double loss, when there are children involved.

As stated previously, groups chose their own programs — topics which were particularly popular were — "Children", "Self-Esteem" and "What makes a 'Good' Marriage". It would seem in choosing the latter topic that the groups had some realisation that, in the management of the disengagement from one relationship, a person can be laying down important foundations for future relationships. Most divorced people remarry and enter new relationships, and interestingly, there is a higher divorce rate among those who have already been married previously (Rappaport & Rappaport, 1983).

According to Harvey (1982) a necessary part of managing separation is to realise that the task is one of redefining a relationship and not one of removing or destroying it all together. He goes on to point out that this is clearly the case when the partners have to continue



sharing the parental part of their marital roles; parenting which will continue long past the crisis of separation. Given the fact that most divorcing people have dependent children (Staples, 1982) the session on children was very important in helping participants to see their parenting in perspective, to separate spousal from parenting issues. Several writers stress that the relationship between parents appear to be a more potent influence on the children's adjustment than their marital status (Hess & Camera, 1979). Also, children's post divorce relationships with the access parent (usually father) appear to be extremely important in effecting a healthy adjustment (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). In the present groups many participants reported improved spouse relationships and a better understanding of their children's situation as a result of the group experience.

It seemed reasonable that group members did not have a desire to include their "ex" in the groups — this would have inhibited them and milit-

ated against the participant gaining a positive identity as a single person. However, the program would likely be more effective if, in the future, it were extended to include another group to which the members' ex-spouses were invited. Also, at the conclusion of the two groups, a joint session with both spouses together may increase the effectiveness of the program.

At present within the Agency, a group of children of separated parents is provided and members of the separated persons' group have been notified of this and some have used this service. It is routine that, following the conclusion of the children's group, a family session is held with each child and his or her parents. In 1984 this children's program will be extended to include concurrent separate groups for the custodial and access parents. Integration of both these programs would seem important when participants have dependent children. If there are no children a joint interview with both spouses at the completion of the group

may be adequate. Perhaps, as James Framo (1982) would advocate, the extended family should also be involved in some way — as separation involves the wider family and not merely just the separating partners, or necessarily their children.

Moreland et al, Schwebel, Fine & Vess (1982) support sharing involving both parents — “If early preventive interventions with divorcing families could reduce conflict between ex-spouses, or at least encapsulate their conflicts, then there might be substantial benefits in the post divorce adjustment of all family members.” (p.640).

Hunt (1966), also Stephenson & Boler (1981) report that the divorced are often surprised how easily they are able to tell their stories to other divorced persons. Group members found it helpful to hear each other's stories, particularly points of view of access parents compared with custodial. Members' comments indicated that this enabled them to be more understanding of their ex-spouse's situation. It seemed important that a balance of both points of view be represented in the group.

As the group progressed, self-pre-occupation became less as they heard the stories of others, and learned that their opinions were valued by the group.

“The very act of their giving presents a message of self-worth to themselves, often better received than words from others about their worth. Here the reactions, satisfactions and appreciations of others validate their worth as persons; likewise they experience satisfaction in the giving process.” (Stephenson and Boler, 1981, P. 75).

There was a very low ratio of men to women in all the groups (1 to 3). This is interesting, particularly when some writers have commented, and our experience would indicate, that men also suffer painfully through separation and divorce. (Bloom et al, 1982; Staples, 1982; Wallerstein, 1980). Young (1978) discusses a consumer-based positive evaluation of a series of lecture-discussion workshops which focussed on three primary areas: legal-financial aspects of divorce, coping with children during divorce, and understanding one's own feelings during the divorce process. He comments that most of the participants were women. Bloom, Hodges and Caldwell (1982) found that their program was more effective in the case of women than men, but commented that, had more male leaders been available, this might have had a greater impact with male participants.

Stephenson and Boler (1981) “A freely interactive group, with few structural restrictions will, in time, develop into a social microcosm of the participant members” (P. 76). Group members were encouraged to learn from and sup-

port each other — groups were planned to be short term with the hope and expectation that they would become “self-supporting”. A dilemma was to ascertain the optimum time for completing a group in order for this to take place.

Harvey (1982) contributes this pertinent comment — “It will be helpful to retain a perspective on life which sees the breakdown of marriage as part of the whole process of life itself.” (P.13).

## APPENDIX

### ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Group: .....  
 1.(a) Did you gain from attending?  
 (please tick appropriate rating)

- .....  
 Very Useful  
 .....  
 Satisfactory  
 .....  
 To some extent  
 .....  
 Not very useful  
 .....

Comments: .....  
 .....  
 .....

(b) If you gained, can you explain in what way(s)? Comments: .....

.....  
 .....

2. Is there anything you think should have been done differently? Comments: .....

.....  
 .....

3. What was the overall attitude of the leader? (Enthusiastic, Indifferent, Helpful, Discouraging, Encouraging, Flexible etc.). Comments: .....

.....  
 .....

4. Does the leader encourage questions, comments, discussion? Comments: .....

.....  
 .....

Please make any constructive suggestions you wish on the method of presentation(s) and any other comments: .....

.....  
 .....

.....  
 .....

## REFERENCES

1. Bandura A. (1969) Principles of Behaviour Modification. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N.Y.
2. Bernard J. (1981). The Divorce Myth. Personnel & Guidance Journal, 60:2, p. 67-71.
3. Bloom B., Hodges W., Caldwell R. (1982). A Preventive Program for the Newly Separated: Initial Evaluation. American

- Journal of Community Psychology. 10:3 p.251-265.
4. Bloom B. (1963). Definitional Aspects of the Crisis Concept. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 27:6.
5. Caplan G. (1961) An approach to Community Mental Health. Tavistock Publications, Great Britain.
6. Cowen E., Gardner E. and Zax M. (1967). Emergent Approaches to Mental Health Problems, Appleton-Century-Crofts., N.Y.
7. Edgar D. (1980). Possible Directions for an Australian Family Policy. Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage and Family, 1:4, p.146-156.
8. Erikson, Erik. (1963). Childhood and Society, 2nd rev. ed., W.W. Norton, N.Y.
9. Framo, James (1982). Explorations in Marital Family Therapy, Springer, N.Y.
10. Harvey L. (1982). Constructive Management of the Separation Process. Parenting after Separation: Alternative Patterns of Child Care. Proceedings of a National Conference Conducted in Canberra, 1981, by the Centre for Continuing Education, A.N.U., and the Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Canberra, A.N.U., Centre for Continuing Education, p.7-17.
11. Hess R., & Camara K. (1979). Post Divorce Family Relationships as Mediating Factors in the Consequences of Divorce for Children. Journal of Social Issues. 35:4, p.79-96.
12. Hunt M. (1966). The World of the Formerly Married, McGraw-Hill, N.Y.
13. Karlson B., and Noess L. (1982). Divorce and Social Support Nordisk Psykologi. 34:2, p.131-141.
14. McGregor M., James S., Gerrard J., Cater D. (1982). For Love Not Money, Dove, Melbourne.
15. Moreland, J. Schwebel A., Fine M. Vess J. (1982) Post Divorce Family Therapy: Suggestions for Professionals. Professional Psychology, 13:5.
16. Parad, Howard J. (1965). Crisis Intervention: Selected Readings. Family Service Association of America, N.Y.
17. Pelt M. (1982). Predictors of Satisfactory Social Adjustment of Divorced Single Parents. Journal of Divorce, 5:3.
18. Rappaport J. (1977). Community Psychology, Values, Research & Action, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, U.S.A.
19. Rapoport R., Rapoport R. (1983). Work and the Family. Discussion Paper, Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 3, P.5.
20. Riach M. (1966) Changing Concepts in the Training of Therapists, Journal of Consulting Psychology, 30, p.290-292.
21. Salts C. (1979) Divorce Process: Integration of Theory. Journal of Divorce, 2:3.
22. Smart L. (1977). An application of Erikson's Theory to the Recovery from Divorce Process. Journal of Divorce, 1:1, p.67-79.
23. Staples (1982). Singles in Australian Society. Discussion Paper, Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 8, p.7 and p.15.
24. Stephenson S. & Boler M. (1981). Group Treatment for Divorcing Persons. Social Work with Groups. 4:3-4, p.67-77.
25. Thiessen J., Avery A., Joanning H. (1980). Facilitating Post Divorce Adjustment Among Women: A Communication Skills Training Approach. Journal of Divorce, 4:2, p.35-44.
26. Wallerstein J., and Kelly J. (1980). Effects of Divorce on the Visiting Father-Child Relationship. American Journal of Psychiatry, 137:2.
27. Young D. (1978). The Divorce Experience Workshop. Journal of Divorce. 2:1.
28. Zax M., Specter G. (1974). An Introduction to Community Psychology. Wiley & Sons, U.S.A.