

# MEN'S RESOURCE CENTER

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## **Why we use group therapy for anger management and domestic violence treatment**

By Paul Lee, LCSW

For the past 25 years, we at the Portland Men's Resource Center have worked with men who have problems with anger and aggression, and we have come to the conclusion that group counseling is the best way to treat this problem. When personal or situational factors have prevented men from participating in a group, we have occasionally provided anger management counseling individually. Having tried both, we continue to believe that group therapy is more effective.

Our groups are "open-ended," meaning that new members can join any time (rather than a group in which all members start together). When a man enters a group, he meets other men who have been in the therapy process for anywhere from a few weeks to several months. These men tend to discuss their problems without blaming others or otherwise justifying their actions. New group members are encouraged to be accountable by other group members through this modeling. As men continue to feel supported, they often discuss behaviors that they have never shared in therapy due to shame.

We teach and encourage men to use specific anger management skills, and the men in the group encourage each other to use these skills. The group may also discuss obstacles to using the skills, and problem-solve how to put them into practice in various situations. Men often identify with a situation, a thought, or a feeling described by another group member, providing an opportunity to work on a problem they may not have been able to identify in individual therapy.

The group provides men an opportunity to talk about "being a man" with each other. For some, this may be essential to stopping abusive behavior. Many participants have little experience expressing difficult feelings other than anger. As they listen to other men express anxiety, sadness, and hurt feelings, they often identify with these emotions and feel permission to express them. This often contrasts with their experience as males, as well as their upbringing that taught them to suppress such feelings. Some men are able to use this new vocabulary of emotions in their relationship with their significant other.

In our groups, men are respectful in their discussion of women, and discuss gender differences without disparaging women. This allows re-evaluation of sexist beliefs that might contribute to the problem.

Group also provides an opportunity to practice relationship skills that may be lacking such as listening, empathizing, and validating others. As men discuss their relationships, it is not unusual for other group members to suggest that they "see it from your wife's point of view" or imagine what she might be feeling.

Many men are resistant to entering an anger management group because of preconceptions and stereotypes about the other men who might be in such a group. Upon joining the group, they are relieved to find that the other participants are much like them and that the atmosphere is safe and supportive.