



# Peer Support Groups for Individuals Who Have Experienced Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder Exploratory Brief

Individuals who have experienced human trafficking often cope with a complex interplay of substance use and mental health issues that impact themselves, their families, and communities.<sup>1</sup> Some traffickers coerce individuals to use alcohol or drugs as a mechanism of control, and some individuals use substances as a coping mechanism during and after their trafficking experience.<sup>2</sup> Prior substance use can also make individuals more vulnerable to experiencing trafficking.<sup>3</sup> Peer support groups are widely accessible and frequently used by individuals with substance use disorders (SUD). Individuals who participate in peer support groups reduce their substance use, improve their coping skills, and form more supportive networks.<sup>4</sup>

Given these intersections, it is important to consider how peer support groups can best assist individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. Recommended by Human Trafficking Leadership Academy fellows from Class 3 and Class 4, this brief explores how peer support groups may be helpful to individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. By providing an overview of what peer support groups are, exploring the evidence base for existing models, and sharing insights from those with lived and professional experiences, it is our goal to help providers and practitioners explore ways to enhance services for their clients and patients.

## PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Peer support is a “process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experiences.”<sup>5</sup> NHTTAC complemented existing literature along with insights from NHTTAC focus groups and interviews to further explore peer support groups and to inform the possible application when working with individuals who have experienced trafficking.

## OUR APPROACH

In applying a public health approach, the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC) seeks to learn from related fields to inform and enhance the response to human trafficking. For this brief, NHTTAC conducted two literature reviews on the implications of adapting peer support models for individuals who have experienced trafficking and Substance Use Disorder (SUD). NHTTAC also partnered with Survivor Alliance to complete focus groups and interviews with 19 individuals with lived and professional experiences to explore perceptions of peer support groups among survivors of trafficking. Our data collection approach is described fully later in the brief.



### Shared Experiences:

Shared experiences (e.g., SUD, trafficking, exploitation) increase trust and create a supportive environment in which knowledge, coping mechanisms, validation, and recovery strategies can be shared.<sup>6</sup>

*Focus group and interview participants with lived experience said a peer does not necessarily have to experience both trafficking and SUD to provide effective support.*



### Flexibility:

Individuals value different elements of peer support groups for different reasons,<sup>7</sup> thus there is no one-size-fits-all approach to peer support.<sup>8</sup>

*Focus group and interview participants with lived experience said individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD identify their primary needs in different ways and would benefit from a variety of peer support group options and multiple modes of access.*



### Comfort:

Feeling comfortable within a peer support group has been linked to continued attendance,<sup>9</sup> and individuals who participate in peer support groups tend to have positive outcomes more frequently.<sup>10</sup>

*Focus group and interview participants with lived experience said transparency about group culture, norms, practices, and policies provide the necessary information to decide which group will be most comfortable to them.*

## Principles of Peer Support<sup>11</sup>

**Voluntary**

Not mandatory

**Nonjudgmental**

Avoid judging others based on personal moral standards

**Empathetic**

Understand and share the feelings of others

**Respectful**

Be polite and honor the experiences of others

**Honest and direct communication**

Be truthful, sincere, and candid during interactions with peers

**Mutual responsibility**

Share and hear needs without pressure to solve the problems of others

**Shared power**

Nonhierarchical – each person in the group has power and is equally responsible for decision making

**Reciprocal**

Give and receive support

There currently is no available research on using peer support groups for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. There are four peer support group models that are popular with individuals who experience SUD and one model that addresses both SUD and trauma. These peer support models may benefit individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD:<sup>12</sup>

Model	Description
<u>12-step</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support group model that primarily focuses on addiction (e.g., alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex), although a few groups focus on co-occurring disorders</li> <li>• Uses the 12 Steps to guide recovery</li> <li>• Spiritual</li> <li>• Unstructured group meetings facilitated by a peer</li> <li>• Individual interactions with a sponsor</li> </ul>
<u>SMART Recovery</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support group model that focuses on addiction (e.g., alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex)</li> <li>• Uses the 4 Points to guide recovery (building and maintaining motivation; coping with urges; managing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; living a balanced life)</li> <li>• Secular</li> <li>• Uses cognitive behavioral therapy approaches and psychoeducation</li> <li>• Structured group meetings facilitated by a peer or professional</li> <li>• Uses tools and exercises to guide recovery</li> </ul>
<u>Women for Sobriety</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support group model that focuses on alcohol and drug addiction</li> <li>• Uses the 13 Acceptance Statements and 6 Levels of Recovery to guide recovery (e.g., let go of negative thoughts and past victimization; commit to regaining control, happiness, and a new life; improve attitudes and relationships; set new priorities)</li> <li>• Secular and gender-specific</li> <li>• Unstructured group meetings facilitated by a peer</li> </ul>
<u>LifeRing for Secular Sobriety</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer support group model that focuses on alcohol and drug addiction</li> <li>• Uses the 3-S Philosophy to guide recovery (sobriety, secularity, self-help)</li> <li>• Secular</li> <li>• Unstructured group meetings facilitated by a peer</li> <li>• Uses a workbook to guide recovery</li> </ul>
<u>Seeking Safety</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treatment model that focuses on alcohol and drug addiction and trauma, recently adapted to be facilitated through a peer support group model</li> <li>• Uses cognitive behavioral therapy approaches and psychoeducation (e.g., coping skills; asking for help; establishing trust, self-compassion, and healthy relationships; self-care; relapse and safety planning; setting boundaries)</li> <li>• Structured sessions facilitated by a peer or professional</li> <li>• Secular</li> </ul>

## THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN EXPLORING PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

To further explore the approach and expand from existing literature, NHTTAC solicited feedback through focus groups and interviews with 19 individuals to provide insight for providers and practitioners consideration.

- ✓ **Provide options:** Offer a variety of peer support group options to facilitate a sense of inclusion, safety in the group, and commitment to the program.
  
- ✓ **Promote accessibility and inclusivity:** Offer different types of peer support groups at a variety of times and locations and be inclusive when developing outreach materials. This may include:
  - **Providing online support groups.** If possible, some groups should be provided online to encourage attendance for those who may not be comfortable with in person groups. Online peer support groups may increase the survivor's sense of safety, anonymity, control, and the likelihood of attendance as well as provide options for individuals with limited mobility and access to transportation and childcare.
  - **Choosing peer support group venues that are accessible and inclusive for all members.** For example, peer leaders should choose non-stigmatizing venues (e.g., libraries rather than churches, neighboring counties to promote anonymity).
  - **Providing purposeful referrals.** Practitioners should provide referrals to groups that best fit the needs of their client.
  - **Executing diverse and inclusive marketing strategies.** Although peer support group organizers may believe they encourage diversity and inclusion, they may be advertising the group in spaces not frequented by diverse populations. Consider different races, ethnicities, gender identities, abilities, cultures, and language when designing outreach materials and be intentional about where groups are advertised and held. Ensure that the purpose of the group is clearly stated in outreach materials, including gender-affirming wording and language.

“ When I think of a peer, I think equal playing field. No power dynamics, no one in charge, this person doesn't have any more say of what happens or doesn't happen. We're coming to the same space as equals. When it comes to specifics, a peer should have similar experiences. I see that as an equal playing field and solidarity—we've been through similar things and are here to support each other. ”

—Survivor interview participant

- **Create inclusive group names.** Focus on experiences (e.g., trauma, exploitation, substance use) rather than crimes (e.g., human trafficking). Most focus group and interview participants with lived experience felt strongly that the name of a peer support group affected their sense of belonging and would influence their decision to attend. Many participants said they were not aware they had experienced trafficking early in their recovery and thus would not have responded to trafficking-specific peer support outreach materials. Others are aware they may be labeled a survivor of trafficking but do not identify as a survivor of trafficking and thus would not attend a support group for individuals who have experienced trafficking. Although it may not be possible to choose a peer support group name that resonates with everyone in the diverse survivor population, some focus group and interview participants suggested using experience-focused peer support group names (rather than victimization labels) to be more inclusive (e.g., “Trauma and Substance Use Peer Support Group” or “Exploitation and Substance Use Peer Support Group”). Experience-focused peer support group names would allow survivors to choose a peer support group based on a shared experience without forcing them to disclose or identify as a survivor of a specific type of crime.



### **Prioritize safety and comfort:**

Explore opportunities for increasing safety and comfort for individuals participating in peer support groups for trafficking and SUD. It is critical for peer support groups to be transparent about group culture, norms, practices, and policies so survivors have the information they need to decide which group will be most comfortable. Several focus group and interview participants with lived experience noted that 12-step meetings are not always safe or appropriate spaces to share experiences with trauma or trafficking because disclosing trauma heightened their vulnerability to predatory behavior by other group members (e.g., unwanted sexual attention, recruitment by traffickers). They suggested several ways to address concerns with safety and comfort:

- **Establish group agreements developed by peers and read them before each meeting.** Suggestions for group agreements included (1) setting boundaries and respecting personal space, (2) agreeing on what details to share about experiences with trauma and when to share them, (3) keeping discussions private, (4) explaining action steps and consequences when group agreements are violated (e.g., decide who will hold the group accountable; asking the individual to leave the group; process to repair harm), (5) allowing members to listen until they are ready to actively participate, and (6) ensuring that relapse will not lead to ostracization or banishment from the group. It is especially important to be transparent about privacy. Clearly state the group should keep what is shared in the group private but remind them of the possibility that group members will not keep each other's experiences confidential. Peer support groups are held in public spaces without therapists, so there is no guarantee of confidentiality. This information gives individuals who have experienced trafficking the freedom to decide how much they want to share and when they want to share it.

- **Establish transparent reporting mechanisms.** Develop instructions and mechanisms for members to report that they feel unsafe in a peer support group. A peer support liaison could periodically visit the peer support group at the beginning of a meeting to introduce themselves, share their contact information, and provide reporting information. The liaison should not be a member of the group.
- **Use peer support specialists.** Peer support groups affiliated with organizations or programs could use trained peer support specialists to ensure healthy group dynamics and provide crisis management, as needed.



### **Build survivor leader capacity to provide peer support to individuals who have experienced trafficking:**

Explore opportunities for survivor leaders to partner with local organizations, adapt existing peer support models, and better support their peer communities. This may include:

- **Employing survivors as peer support specialists at anti-trafficking organizations.** Survivor peer support specialists could facilitate peer support groups as well as serve as peer mentors and navigators.
- **Emphasizing self-care** through trainings on vicarious trauma, supportive supervision, self-care plans, and wellness events.



### **Conduct research and evaluation on using peer support groups for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD:**

- Explore the (1) prevalence of peer support group participation among individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD, (2) types of peer support groups currently used, (3) interest in peer support groups tailored to individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD, (4) outcomes associated with participation in peer support groups, and (5) promising practices.
- Evaluate peer support group models that have been adapted to assist individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD.
- Explore methods of integrating peer support specialists into human trafficking service programs.

## FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW DATA COLLECTION

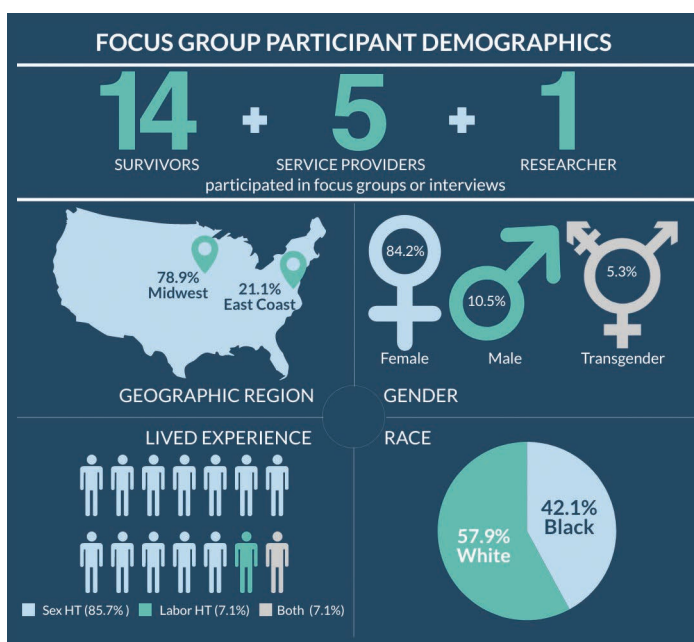
NHTTAC first conducted a literature review on the individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD, use of a 12-step peer support model for individuals with SUD, and implications for adapting a 12-step model for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. The evidence regarding the effectiveness of 12-step programming—and its suitability for use with those who have experienced trafficking—was mixed. NHTTAC and Survivor Alliance, a survivor led organization, conducted a second literature review to explore other peer support group models that may be useful to individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD (e.g., Seeking Safety, SMART Recovery, Women for Sobriety, LifeRing).

To further explore the literature review findings, NHTTAC then conducted focus groups and interviews with individuals with lived and professional experience in supporting individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. NHTTAC partnered with Survivor Alliance to conduct these discussions. To recruit participants for the focus groups and interviews, NHTTAC worked with 11 organizations that serve individuals who have experienced human trafficking and SUD. Fourteen individuals with lived experience and five individuals with professional experience participated in focus groups or interviews. Focus groups and interviews were voluntary, lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and followed a semi-structured format.

NHTTAC conducted one focus group with four providers who serve individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD to explore (1) types of peer support groups offered by their organization, (2) adaptations of existing peer support group models for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD, (3) training for peer support workers (e.g., group facilitators, certified peer support specialists), and (4) self-care for peer support workers. A second focus group included eight individuals who have experienced sex trafficking to explore strengths and challenges of peer support groups, qualities of effective peer support workers, and the importance of receiving peer support from an individual who has experienced trafficking and SUD.

“Being open...allows you to hear other’s experiences and relate to that in a way that doesn’t require so much disclosure. There is something about joining a group for trafficking survivors that outs yourself, and that’s hard when you have someone who is not sure about how they feel. They feel like they have to share what they may not be comfortable with... When I think of my experience, I have been in different places where I would feel comfortable at different groups at different times. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all group. A variety is important. You get people in different spots of their journey... That will help people to recognize there is space for them regardless and be able to see what fits them the best.”

— Survivor interview participant



NHTTAC conducted one in-depth interview with a researcher and six in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced trafficking (four sex trafficking, one labor trafficking, and one both sex and labor trafficking) to explore (1) reasons for choosing peer support groups; (2) safety, inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and ground rules for peer support groups; and (3) accessibility of peer support groups.

Many attempts were made to recruit demographically diverse individuals with lived experience (e.g., sex and labor trafficking, race, ethnicity, gender identity) to participate in focus groups and interviews. However, most of the participants were White or Black survivors of sex trafficking. Recruiting individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD to participate in focus groups or interviews is difficult because they are a hard to reach, vulnerable, and marginalized population. Not all individuals who have experienced trafficking identify as such. They may also not be in a place in their recovery where they feel comfortable participating in interviews or focus groups. We purposefully recruited a small sample of individuals with lived and professional experience to obtain preliminary feedback on the use of peer support groups for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD.

## NEXT STEPS

This brief presents considerations based on the literature reviews and insights learned from focus groups and interviews and are not intended to be generalized to the larger population of individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. This brief is a starting point to further explore how peer support groups can be used to support individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD. More feedback is needed from a diverse range of individuals who have experienced trafficking (e.g., sex and labor trafficking, race, ethnicity, gender identity) to improve the use of peer support groups for this population. NHTTAC recommends that practitioners, survivor leaders, and researchers consider implementing the feedback shared throughout this brief and evaluating peer support group programs to improve the implementation of and expand the evidence base for peer support for individuals who have experienced trafficking and SUD.

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