

# **Why It's Important to Have a Feminist Perspective for Abuser Education Groups**

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**The Role of Feminism in Emerge's Intimate  
Partner Abuse Education Program**

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# Role of Abuse Education Groups

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- Teach participants to treat intimate partners with respect
- Help group members recognize their harmful behaviors and change their behavior
- Encourage accountability and change individuals
  - Help partners make informed decisions and connect with resources
- Create change by community action

# EMERGE

1977 - Present Day

## “Intimate Partner Abuse Education Program”

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- Weekly groups, 90% male, 10% female, 40 -2 hour sessions,
- Referrals include: voluntary, court, probation and CPS
- Physical, emotional, psychological, economic, sexual abuse
- Partner contacts
- Parenting group
- Community education and activism

# Guiding Principles of Emergent Abuse Education Groups

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- Abuse is a choice
- The survivor's experience is prioritized
- Assessment of dangerous behavior is critical
- "Accountability" within the group, change/and possibly accountability outside
- Collaboration with law enforcement, therapy professionals and domestic violence programs

# **What is a Feminist Perspective in IPAEP?**

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- Believing that women deserve to be treated with respect and as equals to others, and likely have not been
- Acknowledging power dynamics related to race, gender, class, and more, and understanding the effect on the person abused
- Assuming that the story of our client may be incomplete or untrue, and we may never get the true story
- Deciding that our clients include the abuser, person abused, and their family
- Not waiting for insight to precede change

# Group Member Experience

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- Intake (leaving out abuse)(anger)
- First stage: education pieces, short and long check in (focus on her behavior)(learn new types of abuse)
- Second stage: weekly check-in, giving feedback to others, relationship history, goals, self-evaluation

# Challenging Beliefs: Power With Vs. Power Over

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- Assuming others are inherently worthy of dignity and respect
- Power over, includes using physical and psychological abuse, controlling behavior, and exploiting inequalities and difference
- Choosing to reduce the personal agency of partners

# Accountability and Change

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## Must we have both?

- Accountability sometimes is confused with punishment
- Some group members think of IPAEP as their punishment
- Accountability means recognizing impact, taking responsibility, and making changes
- You can make changes without accountability



# Bottom Up vs. Top Down Feminist Approach to IPAEP

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- Not lecturing with feminist principles and language
- Change through attention to details of their abuse
- Asking them what their partner might want
- Not telling them what to do
- Pointing out consequences of their abuse
- Making them look at patterns of abuse in one, or several, relationships with relationship histories

# Impact of Abuse on Partners & Children

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## **Discussions for group members around gender equality:**

- How does your abuse affect their parenting?
- How equitable is your labor in the house and as a parent?
- Do you believe they have the right to act/make choices in the world?
- Do you do things to help them parent, be social with others, and do things they want to do, including work and spending time alone and with others?

# Stages of Treatment

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## **First Stage Group:**

### **Recognition and Description of Abuse**

- Identifying emotional and psychological abuse
- Recognizing controlling behaviors
- Challenging self-worth and ways they block partner's self agency

# **First Stage Group:**

## **Helping Participants Recognize their Abusive Behavior**

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### **Group Exercises:**

- What Counts as Violence and Types of Abuse
- Respectful/Disrespectful Communication
- Effects on Partners and on Children
- Quick Fixes/Long Term Solutions
- Positive and Negative Self-Talk

# Second Stage Group: Encouraging Responsibility and Change

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- After admitting abuse and taking some responsibility
- Giving good feedback to others
- Relationship histories
- Goals: non-abusive relationships, self-care, future plans
- Self evaluation: reflecting on effect on partners and family

# Dealing with Differences In Group Members

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- Group members may have experienced abuse or discrimination and have complex problems, including psychological or substance abuse problems
- Their experiences do not excuse their abusive behaviors
- Change, plus accountability, is key in education groups. Selfish change can happen without accountability
- Insight does not need to happen before behavior change
- Some will only stop some of the abuse

# Influence of Feminist Approach on Group Leadership

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## **Feminist group leader:**

- Looking at the impact of his past abuse on partner
- Looking at why she might be afraid, compliant, or hostile
- Not giving him extra credit for not abusing her
- Continuing to hold him to a higher standard than he has
- Not letting his self pity get in the way of our expectations to treat her with respect

# Influence of Feminist Approach on Group Leadership

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## Feminist group leader:

- Focusing on how his abuse of her has affected her ability to parent, her available choices (e.g., she must choose between monitoring her child's time with him and keeping herself safe by not seeing him)
- Empowering abused partner by not telling group participant to leave or stay, by focusing on him respecting her choices and agency
- **Example:** Heterosexual man who treats his female ex-partner badly, calls her a bitch, punishes her for wanting child support, treats her like she's lying and manipulative



# Influence of Feminism on Partner Contacts

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## Working with the Person Who is Abused as Part of Group Work

- “Partner contact” at different points in program
- PC is essential to overall plan with abuser and to serving as a wakeup to group leaders
- PC’s info is confidential, group info is shared with partner and courts

# Influence of Feminism on Partner Contacts

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## Working with the Person Who is Abused as Part of Group Work

- Providing detailed written and verbal reports, as well as testimony in court when subpoenaed
- Making Partner Contact releases mandatory and private
- Empowering partner to make more informed decisions by giving detailed reports

# Feminist Staff Differences

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- Aware of power and control in relationships
- Valuing the information outside the group: PO, partner, history
- Allowing other staff the freedom to talk about how this affects them
- Allowing staff to take a break, change groups, protect their emotional and physical safety

# Feminist Staff Differences

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- Emphasizing the importance of supervision and letter writing
- Be aware that male staff who do the work responsibly are sometimes given extra credit
- Possible expectations that you not be fairly compensated for work should be challenged

# Non-Feminist Approach

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## What Can Happen Without a Feminist Group Leader Perspective...

- The voices of survivors may not be prioritized or heard at all
- Abuser narratives may go unchallenged
- Solutions may focus on surface-level communication rather than addressing deeper power imbalances
- Leaders may wait for emotional change/growth of abuser, before expecting cessation of abuse
- Records and letter writing may not be emphasized

# Non-Feminist Approach

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## Group Leader Behaviors:

- Concern for the expressed feelings of the group member
- Not probing deeply enough
- No contact with partners
- Not challenging lies or pushing hard enough
- Having low expectations of group members

# Non-Feminist Approach

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## Staff Differences:

- Not taking past abuse into account
- Assuming its an equal playing field in the group
- Being expected to deal with a misogynistic, threatening client without support
- Not requiring experience or sensitivity to working with survivors

# Conclusions

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- A feminist perspective helps abuse education groups focus on respect, accountability, and meaningful change
- Encourages a shift from abuse of power and control to equality and empathy
- Prioritizes the safety and treatment of those who are abused
- Challenges group leaders to include the person who is abused as their client



# Thank you!

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