

Women's Experiences of Recovery from Substance Misuse

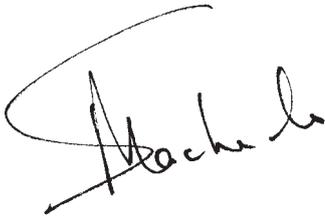
A review of women's only group therapy

"I have got my life back. The group provided me with a safe haven. It was for the first time in years that I had woken up and did not want to give up."

Executive Summary

The review of the Women's only group shows that over the two years since its launch, it has had a positive impact on women's general wellbeing and recovery. Importantly, it demonstrates the value of providing a safe women-only environment for contagious recovery to take place and to provide an effective entry point into treatment.

As a model, it is effective in engaging women in substance misuse treatment presenting with multiple issues such as domestic violence, mental health and safeguarding concerns and has helped them sustain meaningful long-term outcomes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sandra Machado', with a large, sweeping flourish above the name.

Sandra Machado

Director - EACH Counselling and Support

Background

EACH Counselling and Support (EACH) works with diverse communities across West London providing specialist services to individuals and families to address their alcohol, drug, mental health and domestic violence concerns. EACH commissioned Cambridge Policy Consultants (CPC) to collect and review participant experiences of the Women's Group developed and delivered by EACH under RISE (Recovery Intervention Services Ealing) a borough-wide drug and alcohol recovery service.

EACH identified a gap in the treatment offer of an intervention that solely focused on women's needs though there were several support groups and psycho educational groups on offer within the RISE partnership. EACH recognized that women experienced additional challenges to engage in drug and alcohol treatment due to gender-specific barriers like : caring responsibilities; safeguarding and social services involvement; concerns about engaging in group work with male service users (in particular for women who have experienced domestic, sexual violence and abuse); cultural stigma and shame around substance misuse and mental health (dual diagnosis) and gender socialisation and values around the expected role of a woman.

The Women's Group was set up in July 2013 to address these gaps and empower women to access and engage in treatment, providing a safe environment to alleviate and overcome gender specific barriers.

The overall goal of this group is to instil hope and promote contagious recovery among a group of women participants at different points in their recovery journey - those contemplating abstinence (currently using drugs and alcohol); those working towards abstinence as a goal (harm reduction); and women who have achieved and maintained abstinence, the latter acting as positive role models.

The Women's Group is run as a rolling twelve-week-programme to explore gender specific and sensitive concerns that women may feel unable to disclose in mixed gender groups. The Group meets weekly at a Community Centre in a women-only space to foster and enable service users to build trust, feel safe and confident in accessing treatment. Women attending the group also have access to other support services such as 1:1 counselling, open groups and EACH's twelve week abstinence-based group programme (SDP).

Approach and methodology

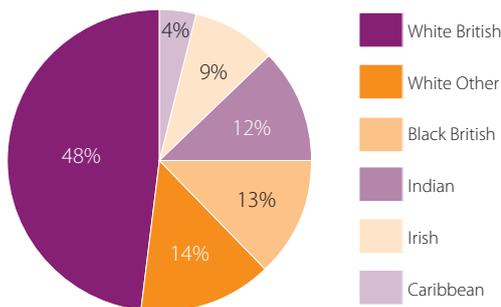
The overall objective of this qualitative review was to explore 'what works' with this group programme alongside exploring how the group had benefitted its participants. The evaluation methodology included:



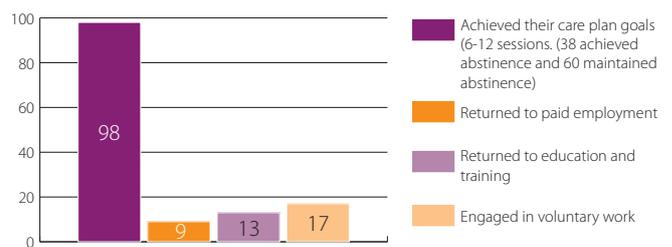
Project Outputs

In total, 121 women have accessed the Women's Group since July 2013. The charts below provide a breakdown of participants according to:

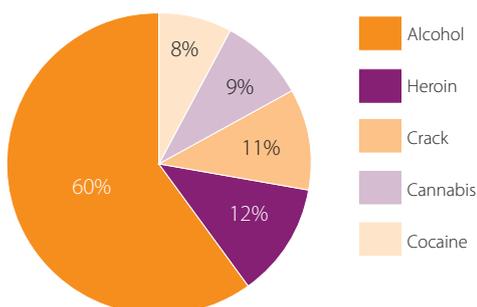
Ethnicity of Clients – 2013/15



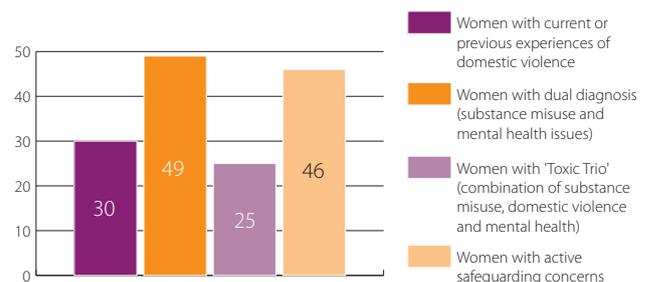
Outcomes over two years since launching



Primary Presenting Substance – 2013/15



History of domestic violence, mental health and safeguarding concerns



Findings

The following analysis is based on feedback from two focus groups, nine in-depth case studies and written feedback from 13 women (approximately 20% of the two-year cohort). The sample of respondents was broadly representative of the overall cohort, representing different ethnicities, ages and presenting substance at different stages of recovery.



Learning for EACH

A 'bridge'

The women's group provided a 'bridge' from less structured services into an abstinence based service and prepared participants for more structured work, demonstrated by the number of women (54) who went on to participate in the abstinence based SDP.

A 'safety net'

The women's group helped to facilitate women through their recovery by providing a safety net, adding to their experience of contagious recovery. The group provided a safe space for women to talk about those concerns and issues they felt could not be addressed within mixed gender groups.

A holistic response to women's complex needs

The women's group allowed EACH staff to explore and address within a safe space the inter-related and complex issues of substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health ('toxic trio'), providing an integrated and holistic response. The group enabled EACH staff to provide a step-in/step-out service for women with the above concerns.

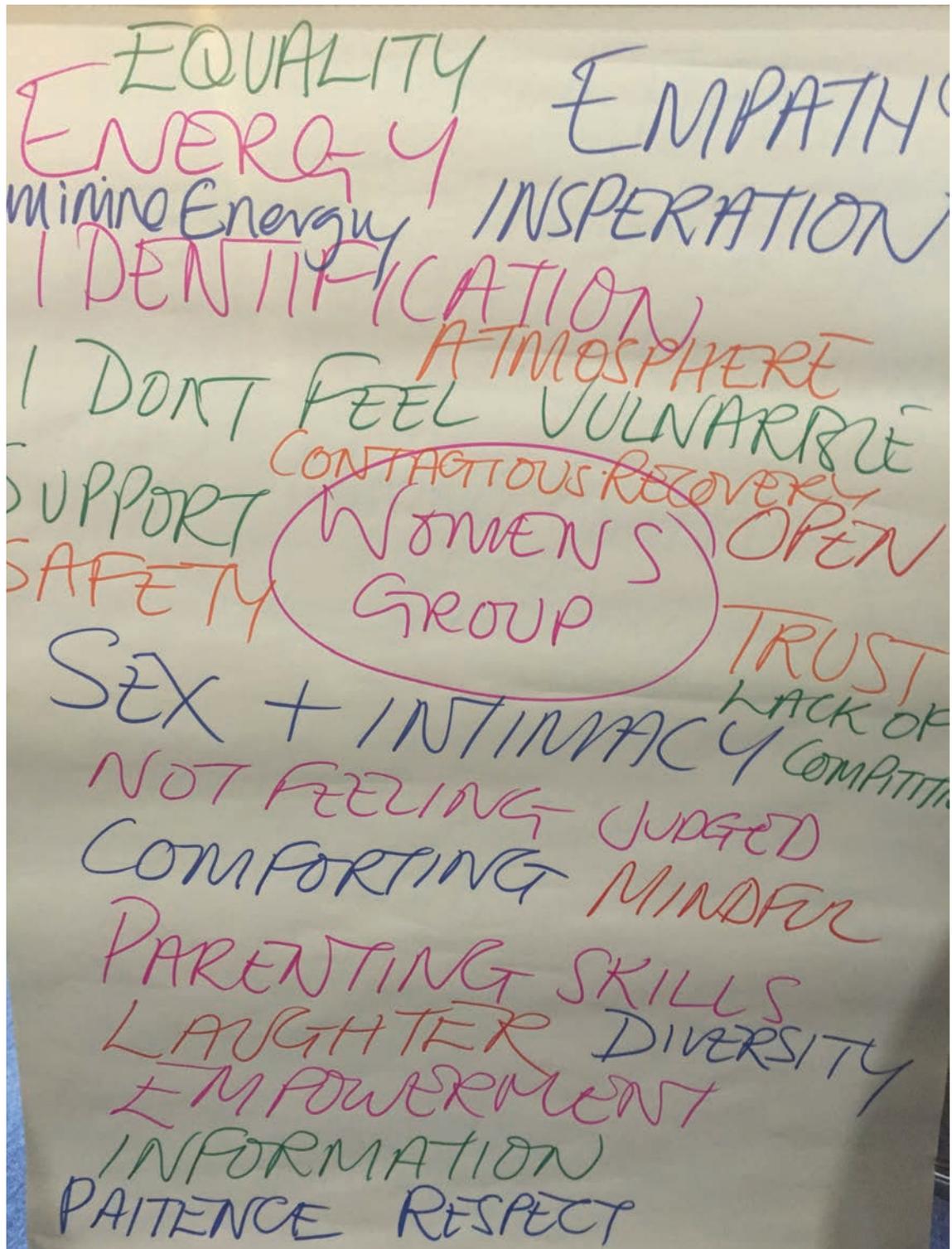
This has reduced the risk of women falling into the gaps between different services to meet their needs around substance misuse, mental health (dual diagnosis) and domestic violence.

Effective model of working with women to achieve abstinence

The proportion of women participating in EACH's abstinence based mixed gender group programme has increased since the launch of the women's group. The high level engagement of women (44% over the 2 years in the abstinence based mixed gender SDP) clearly demonstrates that this group model is seen as relevant and effective by women in helping them sustain meaningful long term outcomes related to their health and social well-being.

Annex A

A1: What has been good about the Women's Group?



Focus group feedback from women's group participants.

Annex B

Jane's (not her real name) testimony illustrating her experience of EACH's Women's Group Programme.

Jane is 32 years old and has a long history of substance misuse. She experienced a violent childhood with abusive and alcoholic parents. Jane was 15 years old when she was introduced to heroin and had to leave school without any qualifications. She is now a mother of two children, a six-year-old and a six-month-old who live with her.

Jane learnt about the Women's Group from EACH two years ago when she started a six-month residential rehabilitation course. Following this, 12 months ago she started attending the abstinence based SDP alongside the Women's Group. Below is her testimony:

"If the detox was the foundation for my recovery, the Women's Group helped me to get out in the community and find myself. I had done many groups over years. This was something different.

Every week was helpful. For example, once I spoke about how I was stressed because my dad, who is an alcoholic, keeps phoning me drunk and asking to see his grandson when I have told him that I don't want to give access when he is drunk. It was pointed out [by other women participants in the group] that I had not kept my boundaries because I had picked up the phone. So even if I thought I had established clear boundaries, I had not. That session was really useful.

I had been using drugs for a long time. I never had a job or finished school. I have been off drugs now for two years and am now a mum. I am proud of myself. I feel so different. I used to feel anxious and looked for reassurance from everyone. I am not looking for that anymore, I now know that what I am doing is working and is right.

It is good to have a mix of women on their journey of recovery in this group. Some have been off 18 months, others four weeks. Those who are new to recovery feel lost and then reassured as others will 'get' where they are. Those who have been off for longer can give advice and show they totally understand; 'I felt like this'. I like to give my advice and share my experience as I remember how it was. The new people help as well, for example understanding emotional issues [to do with having a child who has been adopted]. It is amazing support."

Jane has now completed the Women's Group programme and feels confident about her future. She plans to start a course in September in a local college to get her Maths and English qualifications.

Acknowledgements

EACH would like to thank the following people for their time and the valuable contributions they have made to this report.

A very special thanks to Cambridge Policy Consultants (CPC) for undertaking this evaluation, Gail Ferguson group therapist for facilitating and sharing her experience of the women's group, Lindsay Canham, Project Manager EACH, RISE Abstinence based hub for her contributions to the women's group and Dr Gayatri Shah, Clinical Lead for EACH.

Finally our heartfelt thanks to all the women who took part in this analysis for sharing their experiences and to all the participants of the women's group without whom this report and insights gained from the evaluation would not have been possible.

The full report is available on EACH website www.eachcounselling.org.uk and provides a more detailed explanation around the outcomes with quotes and case studies.



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