

**SUPPORT**

Support group for victims an outlet, educational tool



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Whether it's during a domestic abuse situation or years afterward, victims in Cayuga County have a new place to go to talk about their issues, ask questions and learn about what life can be like without abuse.

The Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency offers a weekly support group for victims of domestic violence. Beth Cereo, who runs the weekly program, said there are

no set topics for discussion. Topics are based on what the victims in the group need and want to talk about.

The support group is only a few months old, Cereo said. The service is intermittent and varied, based on the needs of the victims.

"We're a voluntary services model," Cereo said. "We don't want anybody to come to support group unless they want to."

Cereo said support group is not a place for victims who are in the middle of a crisis, but more for those who are in an ongoing abusive relationship, recently out of one or out of one for years.

She said if an abuser learns of a victim's efforts to get outside help, it could turn into a worse situation for the victim, so support group times and locations are kept private.

Victims interested in starting the program attend an initial meeting and complete an intake process, and then personnel at the CSCAA decide if they are candidates for support group. The process is flexible, so victims don't have to give personal information they don't want to give.

"Sometimes people just want to come and talk about what has happened in the past month," Cereo said. "I'm not the expert on their lives. They are. They know what they need."

Support group participants are the same ones who are served by the agency's other domestic violence services, Cereo said.

"It's the same people who we serve in the program," she said. "Usually they've experienced a piece of (domestic violence) or all of it. ... Typically, abuse doesn't stop at one type of abuse. It runs the gamut."

Domestic violence victims who attend the support group have often dealt with verbal, financial, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse, Cereo said.

In the support group, victims can learn about and discuss what a healthy relationship looks like, as many of them have been in unhealthy relationships for so long, Cereo said. They almost forget, or maybe never knew in the first place, what a healthy relationship looks like.

Cereo said she tries to put abusive behavior into context and take examples from the materials she shows to the victims. That way, no one is pressured to come out and talk about their specific situation.

"I like to do that," she said. "It doesn't put anyone on the spot."

The support group is not an introduction to domestic violence, Cereo said.

"They tend to have a pretty good understanding of what domestic violence is by the time they get up the gumption to come to support group," she said.

Cereo also addresses myths about domestic violence with group members. Some of these "myths" are the excuses the abusers use and that the victims start to believe about why the abuse occurs. Victims believe their abusers can be "fixed," Cereo said.

They can start to believe that things like drugs or alcohol, bad relationships in the past, stress, anger management issues or abuse as a child are making the person abusive and that if those factors are removed or fixed, the abuse will stop.

"A lot of victims, or some victims, will want to find that excuse," she said.

Victims will sometimes believe that if they do something differently, the abuse will stop.

"I'll also hear a victim sometimes say, 'I need to take some of the blame,'" Cereo said. "It's not their behavior changing that's going to make the relationship healthy."

Victims also sometimes express shock that their partners have "changed" so drastically from the nice people they used to be.

Cereo said victims sometimes think, "I don't know how he could just change. He was great in the beginning."

Cereo said since the support group is fairly new, more interest in it from victims is one of the program's goals.

"It would be great to have a bit more interest to develop over the next couple months," she said.

Another goal for the CSCAA is to develop a children's program — not a sit-down support group, but a time for children living in homes where there's domestic violence to get out and have some fun.

The recreational group would offer children the experience of just being a kid, something that is difficult when there's a domestic violence situation in the home, said Sarah Barnard, domestic violence services director at the CSCAA.

Trips to the movies, the zoo, going out to eat, doing crafts and other fun activities would be part of the program if the agency can get the proper funding, Barnard said.

"Everyone in the family needs to heal," she said.

Coming online Monday

Head to auburnpub.com Monday to see a video story about the locally operated domestic abuse hotline.