

Reading for week 1

Please read this before you attend your first SAMSUN group session

Welcome to SAMSUN's group for male survivors.

We respect the courage and strength it takes to attend a group for men who are survivors of childhood sexual assault. Even though the abuse may have happened years ago the journey of recovery can often be difficult and lonely. Through these groups, SAMSUN aims to promote recovery by providing a safe space where men can overcome isolation by supporting each other.

For most of you, this group will not be the first time you have sought help or spoken to someone about being sexually abused. You may have received counselling from a professional, told a partner or friend, or may have reported the offence to the police or other institution. If this is your first SAMSUN group, it is likely the first time you have spoken to other men with a shared history of having been sexually abused.

We hope this SAMSUN group will be a powerful and healing experience for you.

SAMSUN takes a realistic approach to recovery from sexual abuse. It is not “magical” and accepts that recovery is individual and is part of each person’s journey. It does not mean that the abuse “goes away” but that the memories though remaining part of your history, don’t interfere with your life as much as they have in the past. The powerful part of being in a SAMSUN group is meeting with other men who have “walked in your shoes”. They will share some of your experiences and your desire for recovery and healing.

SAMSUN group rules

Underlying all SAMSUN group meetings is safety. We have found over the years that for the groups to assist men in their recovery, it is crucial for them to feel safe. Your safety and the safety of all our participants is our number one priority.

To help maximize safety we ask that all participants agree to following a set of rules. The rules focus on ensuring that any man who has been sexually abused as a child or teenager can be part of the group. We have a more detailed set of rules that focus on enabling everyone to feel safe and to ensure that any man who has been sexually abused as a boy or teenager can be part of the group. The Group Rules and Guidelines are provided ahead of the first night and will be reviewed at all meetings.

SAMSUN groups are open to men of any background, race and culture and are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity. This puts an expectation of tolerance and a fair go on all of us. Please read the rules carefully and if there are any aspects of the rules that you wish to discuss, please contact SAMSUN or speak to one of the group facilitators.

Confidentiality is stressed in the groups so we just use first names only. This is included in the rules and we suggest you treat other people’s details and information the way you would like them to treat yours.

The facilitators

Each group will have two facilitators. These men are experienced health professionals who have extensive training and experience working with survivors of child sexual abuse. Their job is to help maintain safety during the group and to offer information and guidance through your journey of recovery.

The group format

There will be a maximum of eight men in each group. Attendance is **free**. Although we do provide an agenda for each session we encourage group discussion rather than expecting sessions to be rigid like a meeting or a class. There are nine weekly sessions, each lasting two hours. Each week has a topic with a number of “focus questions” to help stimulate discussion. These focus questions are provided at the end of each of these weekly readings to help you prepare for the meetings.

The 8 weeks are divided into 2 parts;

- **Weeks 1 – 4 Childhood** - What happens when a child is abused? How did the abuse affect you at the time? This first part will aim to help you make sense of what happened to you and how it came to occur.
- **Weeks 5 – 8 Adulthood** - How has sexual abuse affected you as an adult? How have you coped? What steps towards recovery have you already taken? Where do you see your recovery path leading now?

The topics for the nine weeks are:

Childhood

1. Getting started – breaking the secrecy
2. Where it all began: my childhood and my family
3. My story
4. My story (continued)
5. How the abuse occurred: Vulnerability and how I was groomed

Adulthood

6. The effects on how I think about myself - shame, guilt, masculinity and sexuality
7. Emotional impacts - stress, anxiety, anger and how I cope
8. Effects on relationships: partners, children, friends and work colleagues
9. Moving on. Where to now? Ongoing support and further steps to recovery

Preparing for the first session

Every time we start a new group it feels like the room is full of men who are quite anxious and thinking, “What is going to happen here?” It is understandable to feel nervous at the beginning but by the end of the very first session most men are usually beginning to feel more at ease and that they are in a space that is safe and helpful. For some it is the first time they have felt heard and understood. So be patient and don’t push yourself. If you have difficulties making it to the first session, please contact SAMSN and we will help you get there. If you have any questions, then bring them with you and we will do our best to answer them.

To prepare for the first session spend some time thinking about what you want to get out of this group, what you expect to happen and if there are any concerns you have. This could include thinking about some myths or stories you have heard about sexual abuse and how it affects people. You might also include some of the things you have thought about yourself and how you feel the abuse has affected you.

The first session

The topic for the first session is “Breaking the Secrecy” and is the start of your SAMSN journey. Because child sexual abuse is such a confusing experience and involves sexual contact with another person, most survivors feel some level of shame and embarrassment about it. This is normal. However, one of the main aims of the group, starting with session one, is to help you overcome those feelings of self-blame, guilt, shame and embarrassment.

To help with this we encourage members to “break the secrecy” around what happened to them and use the support and understanding of other men who have had a similar experience.

Being abused as a child means something bad has happened to you. It does not mean you are a bad person.

We accept that some of this will not be easy. Having been tricked, threatened, shamed or intimidated into keeping the abuse a secret, it becomes second nature for many survivors to continue to keep it secret. Not surprisingly it will feel strange, especially at first, to talk about it. So, take it slowly. You are in control, you can choose what you want to say or you can choose to say nothing. Sometimes, the facilitators may ask members to limit details and disclosures during the first session as it takes a little time to build up trust. This is not to shut you up but to enable everyone to begin to feel safe, especially at the beginning. Remember, there are eight more weeks and many opportunities to explore any aspect of your story.

A word about triggers

Sometimes when discussing past traumas, we get triggered. That is, something or someone reminds us about part of what happened, and the memory can suddenly surprise us and make us feel fearful. These triggered memories that make us feel we are back there are called flashbacks. They can be powerful, and at times it almost feels like the abuse is happening again. If this happens to you, bring yourself back into the present where you are in a safe adult space. Breathe slowly and calm yourself. If you need to a break, that is OK. You can also ask a facilitator for help and they can set up a separate “breakout” room to talk to you individually. Remember, it is your job to keep yourself safe, and the facilitators are there to help you do this.

It is also important to maintain your safety between sessions. Attending the group may be a vulnerable time for you so get support from friends, family, counsellors – whoever is safe for you. The SAMSN phone line is also there for you.

Each SAMSN meeting follows an agenda. Although each week has a different topic, these agendas for each week are similar. They include “focus questions” designed to help the group consider and discuss the week’s topic. They are a guide only and not meant to restrict you in what you talk about.

The focus questions will be included at the bottom of each week’s reading to help you prepare for the following week’s discussion.

Week 1 topic: Getting Started – breaking the secrecy

Focus questions for week 1.

- What are my expectations of the SAMSN group – what do I want from attending?
- Is there anything I want to talk about that has helped my recovery so far?
- What stories/myths about child sexual abuse have made it difficult to be here? Have any of these stories/myths increased secrecy about being abused?
- In the past have I felt isolated or lonely because of the abuse? Could the group help with this?

**We hope this group will be a powerful and healing experience
for you as it has been for many other men.**