

# Survivors of Abuse Recovering (S.O.A.R.) Society



*A Community-Based Peer Counselling Service for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Hants, Kings & Annapolis Counties*

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**S.O.A.R.** is a registered, non-profit, charitable society in the Province of Nova Scotia whose mandate is to provide peer counseling and support services to adults impacted by childhood sexual abuse and to provide education about the effects of childhood sexual abuse. The activities of the Society are carried out in Nova Scotia.

## **A BRIEF BACKGROUND**

Established in 1993, S.O.A.R. is entering its eighteenth (18<sup>th</sup>) year of providing peer counseling and support services to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Two Mental Health professionals, Deirdre O'Sullivan and Rita vanVulpen, from their experience of having counseled survivors of childhood sexual abuse for many years, developed a vision of a volunteer service where survivors who had reached a place in their personal healing and had the desire and were ready would, after receiving the appropriate training, provide a supportive, active listening ear to other survivors in their communities. The validity of their belief that support and counseling provided by peers would produce positive results, be cost effective and reduce the load on an overburdened Mental Health system and staff has been proven over and over again through the years.

Through the determined efforts of these two women, the first peer counseling training was held and a small group of female survivors, with the support of Deirdre and Rita and the Mental Health Service, undertook the task of developing a volunteer peer counseling organization and equipping themselves with all the additional skills necessary to serve their community. At the same time as this project was beginning, the Kings County Women's Project was conducting a Needs Assessment Study which identified several specific needs of survivors, each of which could be addressed through a peer counseling service that would:

- a) complement the existing services for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse
- b) provide an opportunity to do recovery work with other survivors
- c) provide information regarding available resources, and
- d) provide public education and awareness to the general population

Though the findings of the 92/93 Women's Project applied specifically to Kings, Annapolis and Hants Counties, S.O.A.R. determined that similar needs exist across the province. This finding led S.O.A.R. to expand its mandate in 2002 to include all of Nova Scotia.

Those first members chose the name S.O.A.R. (an acronym of the official name of the Society "Survivors of Abuse Recovering") and the eagle symbol to represent their fledgling organization. They enshrined in the organization's constitution the idea that peer counselors would always be individuals who had an understanding of the problems and struggles faced by other survivors because they themselves had experienced childhood sexual abuse. Also they had reached a point in their own healing where they had the desire and the ability to support other survivors and the commitment and dedication to learn the necessary peer counseling skills needed to offer effective one-to-one support to other survivors. S.O.A.R., with assistance from Mental Health Services continues to provide peer counseling training to all individuals who wish to become Peer Counselors.

Cross-Gender training was added to the same gender training in 1995 after members voted to expand the organization's services to include both males and females and therefore, cross-gender peer counseling was a necessary skill that needed to be added to the peer counseling training.

The original vision for S.O.A.R. included three components, (1) provide one-to-one peer support and counseling, (2) train co-facilitators to co-facilitate Mental Health professionally-led therapy groups, and (3) to develop a Train-the-Trainer program. After this first group of peer counselors had gained some experience and confidence, a few individuals were chosen to receive additional training in Group Facilitation. This was followed by a four-stage practicum training program with Mental Health Services. Once fully trained, these individuals became a unique and invaluable part of the overall group experience of survivors in the Mental Health groups and allowed Mental Health Services to deliver their group services more cost effectively. More importantly, because they themselves were survivors, S.O.A.R.'s co-facilitators were able to provide the group participants with valuable insights into survivor issues and act as role models, and most importantly, deliver hope for a better future.

In the years following the organization's inception, the demand for peer counseling services grew and unfortunately, the services offered survivors through Mental Health continued to shrink. Faced with increasing demand for our services and requests from our peer clients for group work, the decision was made to conduct a therapy/support group. The group was designed to marry the training and experience of peer co-facilitation with the expertise and knowledge of a professional therapist to deliver a blend of support and therapy. Survivors would be encouraged to work at their own pace while at the same time move toward a place of greater health and wholeness. Participants would be given the opportunity to expand their personal support system by providing support to each other in their healing process. Equally important, participants would be provided with professional and peer guidance, knowledge and support to assist them to journey deeper and farther than they could safely go in a purely support group. In 2003, funding for this group was received from Eastern Kings Memorial Health Fund. The group was a huge success and the feedback from its participants encouraged S.O.A.R. to continue offering group services. As an additional bonus the group provided the training ground for two co-facilitators to complete the practicum portion of their Co-Facilitation training. It was very much needed as two of our most experienced co-facilitators had moved to western Canada.

In 2006 funding for a second therapy/support group was obtained from the Annapolis Community Health Board, the Western Kings Community Health Board and the Central Kings Community Health Board through the Wellness Initiative Fund. The final evaluations from this group were as positive as from the initial group, with many participants expressly stating that they had made much progress but that they felt more work remained to be done and that they hoped S.O.A.R. would provide them with that opportunity. The co-facilitators of the group also recommended that this group be provided with the opportunity to continue the work they had begun.

In 2010 funding from all 5 Community Health Boards was obtained to facilitate support groups in Annapolis and Kings Counties. S.O.A.R. facilitators conducted each support group with the intention of having the group transition to a community support group at the end of 10 weeks. This is now happening in Kings County and the group has begun to plan when they will open the group to the general public. S.O.A.R. will continue to act as a resource for them but this is ostensibly a community group now.

In addition to the above-mentioned programs, services and trainings, S.O.A.R. also conducts: an in house "Train-the-Trainer" program (to ensure the availability of trainers, to maintain the integrity of S.O.A.R. training and to reduce the cost associated with training), continuing education sessions for S.O.A.R. members and public workshops for survivors and the community. As well, from time to time, speakers and/or educational sessions are provided to other organizations interested in learning more about childhood sexual abuse and assault issues.

While peer counseling is restricted to survivors who have successfully completed the Peer Counseling training, S.O.A.R. membership is open to all individuals who have an interest in survivor issues and want to make a real difference in their community. And apart from two brief periods in 1996/97 and in 2004 when funding was made available for a part-time Coordinator, the volunteer members of S.O.A.R. have provided 100% of the administrative, organizational and promotional work involved in carrying out the above-mentioned programs and services.