

# 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 counselling and support services to adults (both female and male) impacted by childhood sexual abuse and to provide public 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. has over twenty years of providing peer counselling and support services to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Two mental health professionals, Deirdre O'Sullivan and Rita van Vulpen, from their experience of having counselled 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 to counsel 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 counselling 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 year in and year out since its inception.

Through the determined efforts of these two women, the first peer counselling training was held and a small group of female survivors, with the support of Deirdre and Rita and AVDHA Mental Health Services, undertook the task of developing a volunteer peer counselling organization and equipping themselves with 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 counselling 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 symbol of an eagle to represent their fledgling organization. They enshrined in the organization's constitution the idea that peer counsellors 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 ability to support other survivors, as well as the commitment and dedication to learn the necessary peer counseling skills needed to offer them effective one-on-one support. S.O.A.R. continues to provide peer counselling training to individuals who wish to become peer counsellors. Many of the referrals come from Mental Health and Addiction Services, but anyone can self-refer.

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 counselling was a necessary skill that needed to be added to the peer counselling training.

The original vision for S.O.A.R. included three components: (1) to provide one-on-one peer support and counselling, (2) to train co-facilitators to co-facilitate therapy groups led by professionals from AVDHA Mental Health Services, and (3) to develop a "train the trainer" program. After this first group of peer counsellors 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 counselling services grew and, unfortunately, the services offered survivors through AVDHA 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 support-group setting. 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 evaluations had been 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 2007, S.O.A.R. initiated its own facilitation training course to provide leaders for support groups. In 2010, funding from all five Valley 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 ten weeks. This is now happening in Kings County, and the group has been open to new participants. We are working on a process for groups to become independent yet remain affiliated with S.O.A.R. so that S.O.A.R. can continue to act as a resource for them.

In addition to the above-mentioned programs, services and trainings, S.O.A.R. also conducts the following: 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. In 2011, S.O.A.R. received funding for a full update to the peer counselling training program and manual. In 2012, funding was obtained to train more peer counsellors and to train more group facilitators.

S.O.A.R. has received two Meaningful Involvement Consumers Awards (MICA) from the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, one in 2010 for the organization itself, and one in 2012 for our past chair Karen Martin, who has volunteered with S.O.A.R. in many capacities for all 20 years of its existence. S.O.A.R.'s history and organization was presented at a talk at the Canadian Mental Health Nurses' Conference in Toronto in 2011 as an example of an innovative model of care.

While peer counselling is restricted to survivors who have successfully completed the peer counselling 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.

**Nova Scotia Society No: 2483696**

**Registered Charity Status: BN 876605726 RR0001**