

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



A Community-Based Peer Support 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 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.

BACKGROUND

Established in 1993, S.O.A.R. is in its twenty-seventh (27th) year of providing peer support services to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Two mental health professionals, Deirdre O'Sullivan and Rita vanVulpen, from their experience of counseling 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, listening ear to other survivors in their communities. The validity of their belief that support provided by peers would produce positive results, be cost effective and reduce the burden on an overextended mental health system and staff has been proven again and again through these 27 years.

Through the determined efforts of these two women, the first peer support training was held and a small group of female survivors, with support from Deirdre and Rita and the Mental Health Service, undertook the task of developing a volunteer peer support organization and equipping themselves with the additional skills necessary to serve their community. At the same time 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 support service that would:

- a) complement the existing mental health 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 supporters would **always** be those individuals who understood 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 support skills to offer effective one-to-one support to other survivors. S.O.A.R. continues to provide peer support training to individuals who wish to become Peer Supporters. Many referrals to S.O.A.R. come from Mental Health and Addiction Services, but anyone can self-refer.

Cross Gender Peer training was added to the same-gender training in 1996 after members voted to expand the organization's services to include both males and females and therefore, Cross Gender Training was a necessary skill that needed to be added to the peer support training. S.O.A.R. recently expanded the training and offered the new Gender Awareness training in January 2015 for all members. The expectation is that all new S.O.A.R. members will have this training while they receive the basic peer support training.

The original vision for S.O.A.R. included three components, (1) provide one-to-one peer support, (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 supporters 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 S.O.A.R.'s inception, the demand for peer support services grew and unfortunately, the services offered survivors through Mental Health & Addictions Services has continued to shrink. In fact, there are no more groups for survivors offered by Mental Health & Addictions Services. Many referrals to S.O.A.R. are received from Mental Health and Addictions, either directly or indirectly. Faced with an increasing demand for our services and requests from peer survivors 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. 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 hoped S.O.A.R. would provide them with that opportunity. The co-facilitators also recommended the group be provided with an opportunity to continue the work they had begun, so nine more sessions were added.

In 2007, S.O.A.R. initiated its own facilitation training course to provide leaders for support groups. In 2010, funding from all five 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 did happen in Kings County although the group is not currently meeting. We have recently developed a process for groups to become independent but remain affiliated with S.O.A.R. so that S.O.A.R. can continue to act as a resource for them. We are hoping to renew our group work soon.

In addition to the above-mentioned programs, services and training, 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. In 2011, S.O.A.R. received funding for a full update to the peer support training program and manual. In 2012, funding was obtained to train more peer supporters and to train more group facilitators. In 2013, S.O.A.R. also celebrated its 20th anniversary by hosting a "Celebration of Hope" dinner which was a huge success. In 2014, S.O.A.R. was able to fund peer support training to 11 new trainees who have all graduated and are peer supporting now. Currently, we have been asked to revise our peer support training manual to provide that model of peer training to people who work with adults who have recently suffered sexual assault, and not specifically just adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. At the same time, S.O.A.R. will be able to enhance and expand our Train-The-Trainer course and be able to offer this training to people in other areas of the province. This has since been completed in 2017.

All S.O.A.R. members are expected to continue their ongoing education and training every time we fund additional training for them. We have offered Mental Health First Aid (training for front line workers), Non-violent Crisis Intervention, SafeTalk Suicide Prevention, Stewards of Children, ASIST and training about Addictions Spectrums, Border-line Personality, Healing Techniques, Grounding, Boundaries, Health and Wellness, Heart Math, What are Triggers, etc.

S.O.A.R. has received the Meaningful Involvement of Consumers Awards (MICA) from the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, in 2010 for the organization itself, and in 2011 for our Past Chair, Karen Martin, who has volunteered with S.O.A.R. in many capacities for all 27 years of its existence. S.O.A.R. was also invited to present at the Canadian Mental Health Nurses' Conference in Toronto in 2011 as an example of an innovative model of care. Another member, Mary-Lee Chaddock, was also one of 4 people acknowledged at the Inspiring Lives Awards luncheon in May 2013 sponsored by the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia. In early Spring of 2014, S.O.A.R. was also a runner-up for the STRIVE awards which is a \$10,000.00 reward for excellence awarded to a non-profit and is sponsored by Doctors Nova Scotia. Although S.O.A.R. did not win the award that year, we were awarded a runner-up plaque and sent a wonderful letter by the president of the Board of Directors. Leo Glavine, who at the time was the Minister of Health has also read and entered into the minutes of the legislature, a letter about the work of S.O.A.R. It was a great opportunity for S.O.A.R. to gain recognition and visibility in Nova Scotia, as well as financial aid to continue providing services to survivors of childhood sexual abuse. In addition, our previous two Coordinators were interviewed by Eastlink about the workshop held in 2018 and general information about our work.

While being a peer supporter is restricted to survivors who have successfully completed the 16-week Peer Support 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. 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.

In addition to the information mentioned above, S.O.A.R. has also been awarded some financial funding from the DRM Foundation each year for the past 8 years. With that annual funding, the organization was able to access office space in the Open Arms building in Kentville beginning in October 2015. At the same time, S.O.A.R. hired a part-time Coordinator for 6 hours per week, to assist with the business of S.O.A.R. and be responsible for some of the work that was previously being solely handled by volunteer members. This will give the peer supporters an opportunity to concentrate on the business of peer support and to address the requests for peer supporters. This is our main mandate and we always strive to keep that foremost in our endeavors. Our hope is that we continue to use the DRM Foundation funding for the part-time Coordinator's position in the future. In February 2020, it will be 5 years that S.O.A.R. has had a Coordinator. The Coordinator's hours have also been increased to 7 per week and we are working to increase those hours to half time at least.

S.O.A.R. is also in the process of expanding its services to other parts of Nova Scotia with the help of partners in South Shore and West Nova areas. With assistance from partnerships in the areas mentioned above, we started in November and carried it forward to 2016/17. Meetings were conducted to follow through with the planning. 2015 was a very productive year and an exciting time for S.O.A.R. and 2016 followed that trend. In fact, we were able to provide a Train-the-Trainer course in 2017 for participants from all parts of Nova Scotia (45 people), sponsored by Women's Place Resource Centre with funds from the Peer Support portion of the Sexual Violence Against Women grant from the Provincial Government. Our trainers are currently training peer supporters from Annapolis and Kings Counties to respond to recent sexual violence. It has also been suggested that S.O.A.R. become the "hub" of all Peer Support Training in Nova Scotia.

In 2018, S.O.A.R. celebrated their 25th Anniversary and the Planning Committee was very busy planning events and workshops. Mike Lew, author, therapist and speaker from the United States provided us with a workshop, one day of which was for male survivors, an evening session for the public and a day for family, friends and allies of survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Participants came from Pennsylvania, Ontario, New Brunswick, Newfoundland & Labrador, Cape Breton, the South Shore and the Valley of Nova Scotia. It was a wonderful and inspiring weekend. On October 13th, S.O.A.R. hosted an auction and dinner, catered by the Berwick Lion's Hall. It gave us the opportunity to fund raise and gain recognition from the community and to celebrate our 25th anniversary.

In 2019, we received a large grant from the Department of Health and Wellness to develop a community network with other organizations in Nova Scotia that have similar interests or are working with a population having need of our expertise. In this way, we would add our voice to many. We are continuing this work in 2020 and are also working on other funding opportunities.

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