

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
DIVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH
FEMINIST MENTAL HEALTH SEMINAR

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

Consciousness raising as defined by the women's movement is a process of attaining self-awareness which is intricately related to the social and political system in which we live. CR takes the seemingly personal feelings and experience of women and subjects it to a systematic political analysis. The sharing of thoughts, feelings and experiences enables women to see their common subjection to various forms of discrimination. One of the objectives of CR groups in the women's movement is to move women from a stage of understanding themselves and their position in society to a stage of changing conditions which cause and perpetuate inequality and oppression. The objectives and structure of CR groups differ depending on how, where and why they are organized. Ordinarily, CR groups are formed voluntarily as women hear about such groups from friends and movement sources such as newspapers, centers and organizations.

How Consciousness Raising Works

1. Eight to ten people sit in a circle. A topic usually has been agreed upon. (a list of topics for discussion is attached). Before ending the meeting, it is advisable to decide upon the topic for the following meeting. Groups usually meet for 2 or more hours a week. Commitment to the group is shown by regular attendance, arriving on time and leaving at the end of the meeting.
2. Choose a facilitator whose role is to keep the discussion on the topic and to remind each woman to take her turn. Rotating the facilitator role keeps the group from developing traditional leaders yet gives everyone an opportunity to develop leadership skills.
3. Set a few rules to make the group safe for its members:
 - a) Share time equally. Each member takes her turn speaking. This should be flexible so that if a woman has a great deal to say, she should be able to do so, but she also needs to be aware of the need for other women to speak. Therefore, the group should have some idea as to how much time is available for each member.
 - b) Confidentiality is a must! No personal information about any group member should be discussed outside the group. Trust is essential to a CR group. There can be no trust if information about a group member is given to outsiders.
 - c) Listen to each person attentively without interrupting. Each woman has an important experience to relate which should not be judged or challenged. Feelings are valid, no one should be told how to feel.

- d) Speak about your personal experiences, not in generalizations or abstractions. This increases the feelings of closeness and women learn from each other's personal experiences.
- e) Strive for complete honesty. This need not be in conflict with protecting the feelings of others.
- f) Avoid side remarks to a person sitting close to you. Share all remarks with the group. Comments, questions, opinions are of interest to all members.

4. Analysis:

After everyone has spoken, there is a period of political discussion when the group discusses the common elements in all the experiences. What are the common problems, the similarities of oppression? What conclusions can you draw from the role of women in society? What factors in our social system enforce oppression? What ideas do you have for change? What personal changes do you want to make? What keeps you from making them? What kind of support do you need? How can you get it?

Suggested Topics for Consciousness Raising

What are your relationships with other women like? Do you feel different from other women? Have you ever felt competition with other women?

How have your relationships with men evolved? Have you noticed any recurring patterns?

How do you feel about your mother? What kind of relationship did she have with your father?

How do you feel about marriage or living with a man? Have you ever considered any alternative living arrangements other than the nuclear family?

What did it mean to be a little girl when you were growing up? Were you treated differently than the boys you knew?

How do you feel about growing old? What do you fear most?

Have you ever felt like a sex object? Do you ever feel invisible?

Do you smile a lot? How often do you try to smooth things over and make everything OK?

What have you most wanted to do in life and what, if anything, has stopped you?

What enraged you most this week?

How do you feel about women who have really "made it"? Do you feel different from other women?

What would you most like to have the Women's Liberation Movement accomplish?

How do you feel about abortion? Would you have a child if you weren't married?

Have you ever been hit by a man or been afraid of being hit?

How do you feel about rape?

What does it mean to be unfaithful to a man? Have you ever been "unfaithful" to a woman?

What are the responsibilities of a mother for her children? Husband? Rest of family? Or self?

What are the "rules of marriage"? Monogamy?

What was your self-image during pregnancy? If you have never been pregnant, do you want to bear children?

How do you feel about the role of wife? Of mother? Of mother-in-law?

How do you relate to your son? How did your mother relate to her sons? How would you keep your son from being a male chauvanist?

What would you like to have (or did you want), a girl child or a boy child? Why?

How do you feel about earning less money than your husband? About earning more?

Should boys and girls be raised the same or differently?

What is sexual attractiveness in a man? In a woman?

How do you feel about love? What have been your past experiences with love? Do you feel as though you can love other women? Can you love yourself? How much of your life is organized around love?

In what way are you living the sisterhood concept? How can you help other women?

If the choice seems to be "not being yourself with a man vs. being lonely", what do you do?

Who should do the housework? Errands? Shopping? What new arrangements in living groups, families, couples are you aware of?

What are the problems between married women and single women which make close relationships difficult? Between younger women and older women? Between working women and housewives? Between women of different social classes? Between women of different races?

What have your adult sexual experiences been like? How do you relate to contraception? Seduction? Street hassling? Sexual affairs of varying durations? Affairs with husbands of friends?

What was your parents' relationship like? Can you trace your sense of self or some of the patterns of your relationship to your parents?

This paper represents a compilation of information taken from CR groups and writings by women in the movement. Special acknowledgements to Lynn Tabb, UC Riverside and Irene Frieze, University of Pittsburgh for a description of CR groups and how they work.

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