

INTRODUCTION TO CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

I feel that the Women's Liberation Movement has been strengthened by the women who meet in small consciousness raising groups where they come to know and trust one another. Many women have found that meeting in these groups builds for them a true feeling of closeness with other women, often referred to as "sisterhood". The small group also gives women who are politically active a base of supportive women with whom to work or to go to for help or suggestions. This means that we do not feel as though we were working alone or with people who really do not care about us or even know us, but rather that we are working with sisters.

Consciousness raising has also helped me as well as other women to understand in a more personal and detailed way some of the various forms of discrimination against women and the ways in which we ourselves, as well as society in general, perpetuate this discrimination. This awareness has made me more dedicated to the Women's Liberation Movement and more willing to do something for women.

How Consciousness Raising Works

Many groups follow a certain structure for consciousness raising which was developed by some of the early groups in the movement. This structure can and should be modified to meet the individual needs of groups. If your group develops a more effective means of consciousness raising, please share it with other women.

The general structure for consciousness raising begins with all the women in the group sitting in a circle. A topic has been selected for the evening. This may be done at the beginning of the evening or at the previous meeting (so that women in the group have time to think about the topic before the group begins). Sometimes a topic emerges spontaneously from early social conversation in the meeting as something of particular concern to the women in the group.

After the topic is selected and the group is ready to start, someone volunteers to begin. She then speaks about her personal experiences and feelings related to the topic. We have found that limiting her to talking about personal experiences (and not about generalizations applying to all women or to women she knows) makes the group more of a sharing experience and increases feelings of closeness among group members. After she has spoken (anywhere from 2 minutes to 15 minutes), other members of the group may have questions to ask her if they don't understand something she has said or if they wish to relate similar experiences which have happened to them. After this discussion is completed, the woman next to the first speaker continues with her personal feelings about the topic and discussion follows again. This continues around the circle until everyone has had a chance to speak in their turn. All women have many things to contribute to a small group and therefore, we ask every woman to speak at least a few minutes so that she can learn to speak comfortably in groups and come to know that what she has to say is valuable.

During this procedure, it often helps if someone acts as "facilitator" to help keep the discussion on the topic and to keep the women in the group from unwittingly judging each other or telling each other how they "should" feel. It is important that this be done so that members of the group will not be hurt or turned off by one another. Women will react this way when they are given unasked for advice or told in one way or another that they are not liberated. Since there are no rules that we know about that work for everyone, it is important to remember that we all adjust to society in ways determined by our individual situations and that no woman really knows the answers for someone else.

A "facilitator" may be chosen on a permanent basis by the members of the group or this position may be rotated from one member of the group to another. Often, after a group has been meeting for several months, the need for a "facilitator" disappears as all members assume her responsibilities.

After every woman has spoken in her turn around the circle, the group may then wish to generalize what has been said to all women or to other women than themselves. They may also discuss ways of dealing with the problems raised in the discussion in a political way.

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?

Have you ever felt pressured into having sexual relationships with men? Have you ever lied about orgasm?

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 than the monogamous 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, if anything?

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?

How do you feel about lesbians? Have you ever been sexually attracted to a woman?

How do you feel about Black men and women? Have you ever been sexually attracted to a Black man?

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 they are 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?

* Many of these topics are modifications of those used by WL-1.