



Joining a Support Group

Joining a support group can be very important for your recovery. However, it can also be a scary and challenging step to take, especially if you have no idea how it will be.

Read about Silke's experience with a support group run by NAPAC – the National Association for People Abused in Childhood.

I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. It has caused me uncountable problems, especially as a teenager and throughout school and university. When I found the NAPAC support group I was 26 years old and had already made it through all the most difficult times. I had gotten my life together, had a masters degree and a job that I love. From the outside, people would always see this happy and successful person and could never tell how different and difficult my journey had actually been. My experience of sexual abuse still felt like a big taboo, something I couldn't really talk about or even mention in every day conversations. For me, that meant that I was constantly hiding a huge part of my life, myself, and my lived experience. I knew the statistics, I knew that there are way too many of us around in the world, but I still *felt* like the only one.

This all changed with the moment I went to the first group session: Suddenly I found myself sitting in a circle of people who shared my experience. It was a life changing moment, the first time I didn't feel different from everyone else around me. The first time I didn't even have to explain anything, because everyone just got it. We were complete strangers, but finished each other's sentences and understood each other without words. The group sessions gave me a space that had been so painfully lacking in my life: A space where you can say all these things that you usually can't. Where people can truly hear, understand, and share them. Where isolation turned into belonging, and shame into pride. Yes, pride. Some of my friends asked me if it isn't quite daunting to go every second Wednesday for two hours and talk about the most horrible thing in your life. Well, no, it absolute is not. I looked forward to every session and always left uplifted, empowered, and proud. Someone once said to me "if you expand the line of your horizon, you can't just put it back again". Once I had experienced this space, where I could be, for once, fully myself, I couldn't go back into hiding and silence anyone. I started speaking openly about my experience of sexual abuse outside of the group. I started the activism project The Survivors' Collective to bring more of us together, to make us visible and our voices heard.

I have to admit that, initially, the decision to go to the group was not an easy one (I half-purposely waited until after the deadline to contact them - maybe because I was too afraid of actually getting a place...). But it was also one of the best decisions of my life. I went there for the very thing that I was probably most ashamed of in my whole life, and left feeling proud.

If you are a survivor of sexual abuse, or of any kind of childhood abuse, I can only encourage you to go to a group. I had tons of therapy before, but nothing could compare to meeting other survivors in a safe and non-judgmental space like this.

BTW: Yes, we cried, yes we heard incredibly sad stories. But you'd be surprised how much fun we had, how much humour, and how much laughter.