

Understanding the Impact of Group Counselling in a Classroom Setting

A Program Evaluation of the *Breaking Free* Program Facilitated by Family Counselling and Support Services Guelph-Wellington

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Introduction

The intent of this report is to provide a program evaluation of the Breaking Free program hosted by Guelph-Wellington Family Counselling Services. Breaking Free is defined as a psycho-educational group program for youth ages 13-18 that have been considered high-risk of using abusive behaviours in intimate relationships (Muscat 2018). This consideration can be due to a variety of factors such as experiencing domestic violence, abuse, neglect, substance abuse, and/or mental health disorders that have led youth to show increased chances of engaging in abusive behaviours in their own relationships (Muscat 2018). The group program runs once a week for ten weeks where students are able to discuss a wide range of issues and coping mechanisms with two facilitators.

The objectives of the Breaking Free program are:

1. To engage youth who have been exposed to family violence to adopt healthy, appropriate strategies for managing stress and resolving conflict.
2. To increase community's capacity to work with youth to prevent family violence.

The goal of this report is to inform Guelph-Wellington Family Counselling Services and vested partners, such as local school boards, of the experiences of youth in the Breaking Free program and its impact on their relationships, coping mechanisms and well-being.

To better understand the impacts that Breaking Free has on its participants, researchers conducted a mixed-method analysis to encourage a wide range of feedback from the youth participating in the program. Researchers attended three sessions through the duration of the program to facilitate surveys, and two semi-structured focus group discussions were held one week after the program ended. The survey gave participants an opportunity to share their understanding of abusive behaviours, what behaviours they determine are acceptable, and their choice of coping mechanisms. The focus group discussions allowed participants to share their experiences through the program, how Breaking Free changed their perspectives and how it has impacted their life outside of the group program.



Key Findings

After conducting a thematic analysis of the data, three overarching trends appeared from the data that encapture experiences of youth participating in the Breaking Free group program. These themes are further explored in the thematic analysis section on page 6. Participants also discussed some changes that they believe would be beneficial to incoming groups, which are explored further on page 9.

Changes in Coping Strategies

- Out of the **8 coping strategies** included in the survey component of the program evaluation, **noticeable positive changes were found in the use of 3 coping strategies.**
- Both male and female participants' results reflect **lower use of drugs and alcohol when they are feeling angry.**
- Results depicted that **females are less likely to engage self-harm, and males are more likely to walk away** when they are angry, which was reaffirmed in focus group discussions.

Relationship Building

- The **consistency of students, group facilitators, and classroom expectations** throughout the 10 weeks **had a positive impact on the development of trust and relationships** among participants.
- Dynamic relationship building often occurred through **sharing similar experiences and gaining a range of perspectives** from peers.

Structural Supports

- Bringing a supportive program into a school setting creates an opportunity to **ease the stressors of reentry into secondary school after various disruptions.**
- Participants noted that **goal setting and managing expectations validated the feelings, struggles, and successes they experienced** throughout the program.

Participant Feedback

- Participants suggested that everyone would benefit from **longer sessions to ensure everyone has a chance to be heard.**
- One participant noted that some people come to the program with a **“barrier”** and avoid discussing their true emotions and experiences for some time, They noted that it may take participating in the program **multiple times before they truly open up.**



Methods

Program Participant Focus Groups

Measures

To gather qualitative feedback from program participants, two separate Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were held: one with participants in the male group, and one with participants in the female group. Both FGD followed a semi-structured format, in which eight previously determined questions were asked. The format was flexible, with discussions being allowed to diverge from the specific questions contained in the guide, as the participants reflected on their experiences. Topics explored included growth and changes experienced as a result of participation, positive and negative experiences in the program, and suggestions for improving participant experiences in future program offerings.

Recruitment

Members of the research team invited all participants in attendance to participate in FGD at the end of session on the final day of programming, after program facilitators had left the room.

Procedure

Before both FGD, participants were given the opportunity to consent to participation or decline without consequence. Participants were notified that their responses could not be anonymous, because of the public nature of an FGD. The FGD took place at St. John Bosco, a local secondary school in downtown Guelph in December 2019. In total, there were 10 participants, including both male and female groups. Both FGD lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, during which the participants were encouraged to share their responses verbally. During both FGD, comprehensive written notes were made by the research team to provide a record of participants' responses to discussion questions. Notes were then thematically analyzed by members of the research team.

Program Participant Surveys

Measures

To gather quantitative feedback from participants, a 30-item survey developed by the group facilitator, was provided to participants in paper format at three time points for both males and females during the 10-week program. Survey questions were closed-ended and invited participants to identify whether they viewed particular behaviors as abusive or acceptable, on a five-point scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), and to indicate how often they use different strategies for coping with anger-related emotions on a five-point scale (Never to Always).

Recruitment

Members of the research team invited all participants in attendance to complete paper surveys at the end of session on three programming days, after program facilitators had left the room.

Procedure

Before completing the survey, participants were informed of their right to decline to complete the survey without risk of negative consequences. Participants were notified that their responses would be anonymized. The survey took an average of five minutes to complete at each collection point. In total, 17 completed surveys were collected from the male group, and 18 completed surveys from the female group, across the three time points. After all data was collected, the data were analyzed to explore any changes in participants' survey responses over time throughout the program.

Thematic Analysis

Changes in Coping Strategies

Participants explained that the Breaking Free program provided them with new coping strategies that they apply in their everyday lives. Participants expressed that learning how to recognize emotions in themselves and others provided them with a sense of control over their options for how to respond in difficult situations. This allowed them to make better choices in their daily life, such as making compromises to meet needs of others, or starting a new activity instead of using substances to cope with feelings. For instance, participants expressed that they felt better prepared to identify situations in which another person was trying to manipulate them as a result of what they learned in the group, which made them feel better able to protect themselves if the need arose.

Some participants stated that they now felt better able to communicate their needs to others, whereas in the past they often internalized interpersonal problems and remained silent about their own feelings. Group participants expressed they now take “cool-down” periods to allow intense emotions to subside before communicating with others, due to strategies learnt in the group. This represents a shift from attempting to communicate about interpersonal problems while angry. This was felt to have reduced unnecessary hurt, and the overall number of arguments in which participants found themselves.

Increased Emotional Awareness

Participants expressed that the group helped them to distinguish between problems that are within their control and those that are not, which was felt to have reduced stress, anxiety, and anger. Participants explained that this learning allowed them to gain a more accurate sense of the bounds of their own responsibility, which provided them with a new set of options for how to respond in difficult situations. For instance, whereas previously participants may have instigated conflict as a means of trying to solve problems (e.g., unfairness at school or work), after participation in the program they felt better able to choose more appropriate modes of action (e.g., reporting to a school administrator or work supervisor).

Minimizing Risk when Reacting to Anger

Participants stated that the group helped them to learn that they may be able to exercise some responsibility in minimizing escalation of conflict. For instance, participants indicated that they now looked to their past experiences for insights about the circumstances in which conflicts with particular people might arise, so that they could anticipate and minimize their role in conflicts as much as possible. Participants recognized that Breaking Free provided them with the ‘tools’ they

needed, but it was up to them to implement them in situations that arise. A couple of participants noted that they had taken up different hobbies to manage their anger, such as seeking employment or watching shows. In these respects, participants expressed that they had learned how to be more proactive in preventing and limiting interpersonal conflict as a result of what they had learned in Breaking Free.

These changes were also notable in participants survey responses for both groups. As depicted in Figure 1, males participating in the Breaking Free program appear to be walking away from situations that made them angry more often than when they had entered the program. They also reported to be using drugs and alcohol less often to cope with anger throughout the program. One participant in the focus group noted that they had been using cannabis to cope and avoid fighting, but their experiences in Breaking Free motivated them to limit their cannabis use and use physical activity as an outlet.

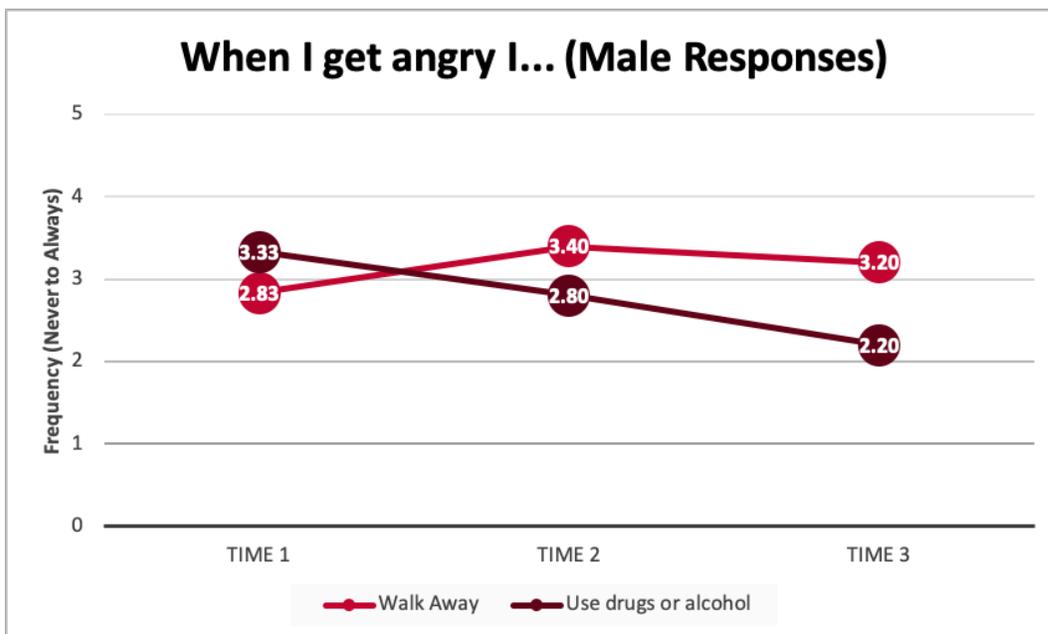


Figure 1. Male Participants' Responses to Survey Question "When I get Angry I..."

In Figure 2, female survey responses show that over the course of the Breaking Free program, participants engaging in self harm and using drugs and alcohol were doing so less frequently. While this data shows a change in the trend of participants' behaviours, it is worth noting that conversations around self harm and drug/alcohol use did not surface in the focus group with female participants. Focus group responses from female participants focused on adjusting how they decide to communicate with loved ones. Participants noted that they 'negotiate more' and manage their aggression when trying to get their point across to people in their lives.

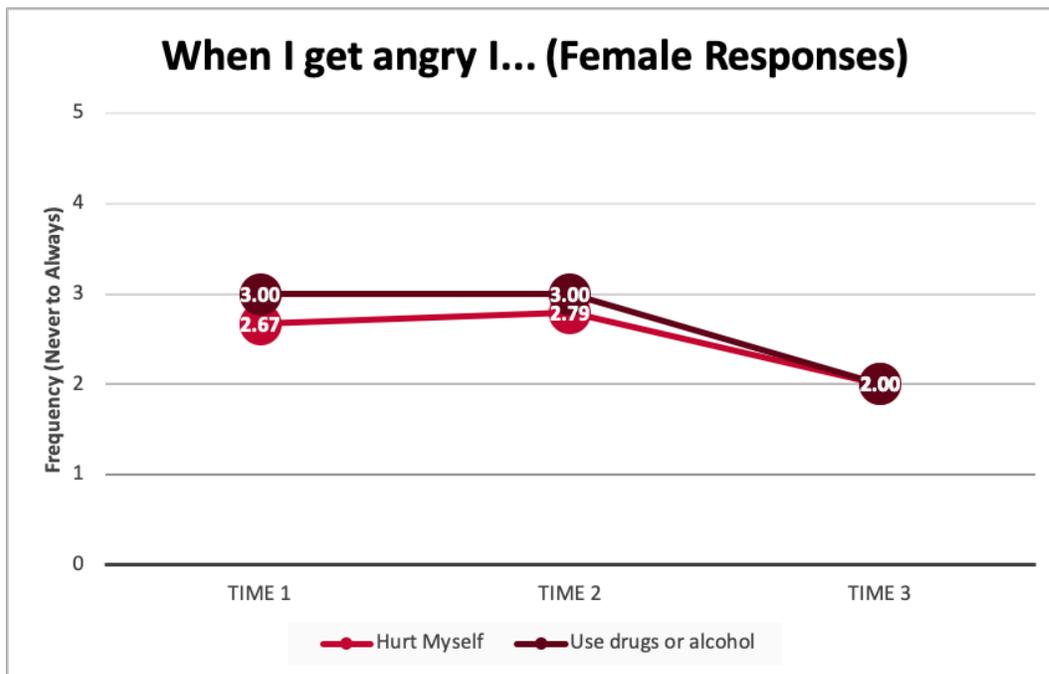


Figure 2. Female Participants' Responses to Survey Question "When I get Angry I..."

Relationship-Building

Participants expressed that the group provided a valuable opportunity for them to build relationships in a trusting and safe environment. Specifically, participants felt that the group provided important opportunities for them to build relationships with other students, which helped them to feel more connected to their school community. This held particularly true for those who were new to the school. They expressed finding it easier to relate to peers of similar ages than to adults in authority positions, and that the group offered a valuable opportunity for them to help their peers.

Participants explained that the sense of safety and trust provided by the group allowed them the opportunity to share their experiences, and to be heard and recognized by others. Participants observed that the process of sharing their experiences would often lead to stories from other members of the group. This dynamic process was felt to provide the participants with alternative perspectives that enabled them to reinterpret their own experiences more positively. As well, the experience of listening to others' stories was felt to allow participants the opportunity to practice assuming the perspectives of others during times of conflict in their own lives. The development of trust in the peer-to-peer relationships was something that some participants noted they had not experienced before participating in the program.

Participants identified that the presence of consistent facilitators during all 10 weeks was essential to the process of building trust in the group. Group rules about confidentiality and limited phone use during meetings were also felt to facilitate participants' sense of safety and trust in the group. As well, the group rule emphasizing the importance of listening without giving advice was felt to promote a supportive and non-judgmental environment where participants felt welcome to share their experiences. These features were felt to instill participants' confidence in



the group as a place where they could share their stories without fear of judgment or other negative social consequences.

Structural Supports

Participants felt that the flexibility of the group and its integration in the school environment were crucial features of the group's success. They stated that the group was fun and enjoyable, and that it provided a "good energy". The group was felt to offer a welcome change to the school day that encouraged people to be kinder while at school, by allowing them the opportunity to access supports, "let off some steam", and let their guards down.

Some participants expressed that the group was the primary incentive that got them to attend school. As well, participants who experienced school-related anxiety as a major barrier to consistent attendance felt that the group helped them to manage their anxiety and to be more functional at school. On days where participants did not feel like engaging, they were able to observe and listen in group which can increase their school attendance on days they would traditionally not attend class at all.

The flexibility of the group was also seen as an asset by participants. Specifically, participants felt that the group's approach to adapting goal dates as needed, and flexibility around attendance ("come when you can"), helped them to feel supported by the group regardless of their circumstances, which fostered a sense of safety and acceptance.

Moving Forward

Participants' Suggestions

In the focus groups, participants were asked what aspects of the Breaking Free program they would suggest changing. Some participants noted that they may benefit from having more time for everyone to contribute. It was emphasized that everyone should have a chance to speak if they chose to, and there is not always enough time for everyone to engage on the topic of the day. Participants also noted that some of the specific topics related to anxiety, anger, and relationships may have been too specific, and that some participants may not have experiences or issues in those areas.

Another topic of discussion on the structure of the program focused on conflicting ideas surrounding the phone policy in the program. A participant noted that they are allowed to use their phones but recording anything in the classroom is prohibited. One participant acknowledged that they feel "it's disrespectful" for peers to use their phone during discussions.

Some participants may be less inclined to share their experiences upon entering the program due to a lack of familiarity with facilitators and peers. Some may stay quiet or make jokes to find comfort in the program. Another participant referred to this as hiding behind barriers and stated that it can take years for some people to open up to others in this setting. It was acknowledged that participants may find increased benefits from the program if they attend Breaking Free as it restarts at the school consecutively.



Future Research

This program evaluation depicts the value of psycho-educational programs being brought into the school setting, and the experiences of participants in Breaking Free in Guelph, ON. Two methods of analysis could provide further insight on the impact this program may have. One could involve exploring the experiences and perspectives of support staff in schools that host such programs, including but not limited to: principals, guidance counsellors, teachers, educational assistants, and custodial staff. Comparative and longitudinal studies that gather participants experiences over time, or the experiences of students involved in psycho-educational programs in different schools could also provide additional insights.

Limitations

Due to the confidential nature of the Breaking Free program and the vulnerability of participants who attend, the research team chose to not track participants during data collection. As participants emphasized the importance of the confidentiality of the group, the decision not to track participants was made to minimize the risk of compromising the features of the group that participants find most valuable.

The Research Shop team recognizes that participants may not be completely forthcoming with perceived authority figures entering their space. While the team took cautious efforts to ensure participants felt validated and safe sharing their views, it is recognized that participants may choose to omit information for a wide range of personal reasons. This may have had an impact on variation in survey responses and focus group responses, as some may not have felt comfortable sharing with the Research Shop team.

Conclusion

The Breaking Free program offered by the Family and Counselling Services of Guelph-Wellington has provided a wide range of benefits to participants. Participants demonstrated notable changes in use of coping mechanisms and acknowledged that Breaking Free gave them the tools needed to utilize healthy coping mechanisms. During FGDs, participants were given the opportunity to further discuss their experiences throughout the 10-week program. Participants acknowledged the development of their emotional intelligence, increased levels of patience and trust, and behavioural changes that have decreased the risk in conflicts experienced in daily life.

Breaking Free has outlined two clear goals in their service delivery: to engage youth who have been exposed to family violence to adopt healthy, appropriate strategies for managing stress and resolving conflict, and to increase community's capacity to work with youth to prevent family violence. The experiences of these participants would indicate that the program successfully achieves the first goal. Creating space in a classroom setting to conduct psycho-educational programming further increases community's capacity to decrease rates of familial violence. To better understand the impacts psycho-educational group programs, it would be beneficial to conduct a study focusing on support staff perspectives, a longitudinal study, or a comparative study. These options could each contribute a dynamic understanding of the reach Breaking Free can have on participants and the community-at-large.