

ADULT EDUCATION—SELF EXPLORATION FOR WOMEN

JOEL NEWMAN

University of Victoria

and

MARY JANE McLACHLAN

University of Victoria

Abstract

As schools expand career counselling services to include the adult community, the special needs of women in mid-life require new approaches. Such a programme involving communication skills, assertion training, outside speakers, vocational testing, life style planning and goal setting is outlined in this paper.

Résumé

Au fur et à mesure que les établissements d'enseignement étendent leurs services jusqu'à y inclure l'orientation professionnelle des adultes, les besoins particuliers des femmes d'un âge moyen font appel à de nouvelles approches et démarches.

Cet article indique un programme d'études qui vise les secteurs suivants: la compétence dans le domaine de la communication, la formation de l'affirmation de la personnalité, les orateurs invités, les tests d'aptitude professionnelle, la planification d'un style de vie, et l'établissement de buts.

For the past three years the authors have been co-leading a seminar called "Self-Exploration for Women" through the Division of Continuing Education at the University of Victoria. The purpose of the seminar is to assist women whose lives are changing to seek new and more satisfying life styles. This paper outlines the main elements of the Self-Exploration Seminar so that part or all of it can be used in other settings.

The idea for the Self-Exploration Seminar grew out of the authors' counselling in the Counselling Centre at the University of Victoria. An increasing number of clients were women in their late twenties through middle age who were seeking new directions. Some were married women whose children were either starting school or grown up and leaving home. Others were recently separated and responsible for supporting themselves and their children. Still others were in marriages or relationships which were faltering. Finally, there were those women who felt that they were in a rut at home or work, bored, and wondering if this was all life had to offer.

It has been noted that women at major change-points in their lives frequently lack self-confidence, and programmes have been developed to combat this limiting factor (Wilk, & Coplan, 1977; Berman, Gelso, Greenfeig & Hirsch, 1977). Workshops have been designed to

provide life-planning opportunities which go beyond sex-role stereotypes (Cochran & Warren, 1976). Setne (1977) facilitated an educational-vocational development programme for women with the core based on exploration of vocational test results. While all of the above proved valuable, it was the authors' aim to develop a more comprehensive programme in order to contribute to growth in many important areas.

The women who enrolled in the Self-Exploration Seminar tended to hold fairly traditional values although a few were becoming strong feminists and others were questioning their basic value systems. The co-leaders worked from a pro-feminist standpoint while respecting the rights of participants to hold more conservative values. Despite the trend toward eliminating men from facilitating women's groups, it was decided that having female and male co-leaders added some important dimensions to the seminar. In exploring the problems of women in transition, Di Sabatino (1976) pointed out the need for "role models both of successful, well-integrated, and competent women and of men who value feminine competence and achievement." She stressed a female role model combining work and homemaking. The woman co-leader modelled assertive

leadership behaviour. The male co-leader took a humanistic stance which was totally new to some of the women from rigid traditional backgrounds. The leaders modelled an equal working relationship and a warm friendship. Dominant roles were shared, and traditional roles were often reversed in role-playing situations. Having both a woman and man as leaders seemed to add an important dimension to the seminar and did not stifle spontaneity or bring about inappropriate behaviour among the participants.

Despite the strong demand for the Self-Exploration Seminar for Women, admission was limited to sixteen to eighteen participants on a first come, first served basis. This size limit was allowed for adequate group discussion and facilitated separating into two small groups for in-depth training and sharing. After registration, the women were interviewed individually in order to ensure that they would benefit from the programme. Of approximately one hundred participants over three years, only three decided, by mutual consent, to withdraw their applications. The authors intended to screen out individuals who were seriously emotionally disturbed or who saw the seminar primarily as an opportunity to promote a particular ideology. As it turned out, it was not necessary to exclude anyone.

The initial interview was of prime importance for many reasons. The authors stressed that the Self-Exploration Seminar was very much an introductory, general programme in which group members have an opportunity to look at their concerns and areas of their lives where they may choose to make some changes. There was group support, direction, and leadership provided with the expectation that group members would commit themselves to attend regularly, participate as fully as possible, respect the confidentiality of the group, and work on desired behaviour changes between sessions. During the initial interview, there was an opportunity for the women to become acquainted with the leaders and to mutually assess if this was the appropriate group to meet the women's needs. The educational process began in this first contact when the leaders set out guidelines for the programme: straightforward, honest communicating; identifying specific problems or concerns; setting goals; openly sharing ideas and suggestions; and actively making some personal behaviour changes for oneself. Applicants who were not appropriate for the seminar were referred to other programmes or services.

A reading list of self-help books and an outline of the programme was given to each group member during the initial interview, and she was made aware that the group leaders offered

individual counselling at the Counselling Centre to any group member who felt that she required further assistance during or after the programme. The initial interview, which averaged from thirty to fifty minutes, was a vital prerequisite to the six two-hour sessions. The sessions rested heavily upon the group process and the rich resources of group members—ideas, confrontations and encouragement.

Each session had a major focus which is set out in the following outline.

Initial Interview Session:

- A. Screening
 - (1) primarily a proselytizer?
 - (2) too many deficits?
 - (3) appropriate group?
 - (4) severe emotional problems?
- B. Exchange Information
 - (1) get acquainted
 - (2) outline programme
 - (3) explore expectations, needs
 - (4) explain availability of individual counselling
- C. Goal Setting
 - (1) identify problem areas
 - (2) specify priorities
 - (3) analyze habits
- D. Commitment
 - (1) to attend
 - (2) to participate
 - (3) to work on behaviour change outside the group
 - (4) to respect confidentiality

SIX GROUP SESSIONS

Session 1 Orientation

Communication exercise: Introduction of participants—Group members were instructed to get acquainted with one person, to focus on actively listening to the other person, and to share information about oneself. Each person then introduced her partner to the group, briefly sharing information which she had appreciated learning.

Strong Campbell Interest Inventory administered.

Session 2 Communication Skills

Demonstration and discussion of active listening, paraphrasing, perception checking, description of feelings and behaviour, giving feedback.

Practise in dyads and triads.

Facilitate role playing problem situations.

Stress open, honest, direct communication and responsibility to ourselves and others.

Homework: material on communication skills.

Session 3 Assertion Training

Define assertive behaviour as:

- (a) appropriate expression of emotions, beliefs, ideas, opinions (pleasant and unpleasant), in an open, direct, honest manner.
- (b) exercising one's rights without denying the rights of others.

Presentation to allow discrimination of assertive, aggressive and non-assertive behaviour.

Exploration and discussion of specific assertive behaviours. Divide into two groups to look at individual needs to become more assertive.

Cognitive modification approach:

- (a) identify negative self-talk; substitute positive, realistic and factual statements.
- (b) develop conceptual framework for behaviour change.
- (c) increase self-regard and self-esteem.

Stress on *choice*, choosing for oneself.

Read: *New Assertive Woman*.

Session 4 Speakers

Woman lawyer—take responsibility for oneself legally—wills, property, contracts, family finances.

Woman representative from:

- (a) Canada Employment Service.
- (b) Volunteer Bureau.
- (c) Community College (Admissions).
- (d) University of Victoria (Admission).

Session 5 Life Style Planning

- (a) interpret *Strong Campbell Interest Inventory*.
- (b) skill analysis.
- (c) goal setting (timed exercise).

Homework—goal setting (driving and hindering forces).

Session 6 New Directions

- (a) discuss goals.
- (b) sharing of changes made and plans for the future.
- (c) distribute names and phone numbers of each group member.
- (d) remind group that individual counselling is available.

Evaluation of the Self-Exploration Seminar was both formal and informal. On a weekly basis, it was clear that participants were actively interested. Attendance was excellent, participation enthusiastic, and feedback positive. At the end of the final session, the participants were

asked to hand in an anonymous evaluation answering three questions:

- (1) How do you feel about having participated in this seminar?
- (2) Would you recommend the seminar to a friend?
- (3) What improvements would you suggest?

The response to the evaluation questions has been 100% positive. The only consistent suggestions for improvement have been to increase the number of sessions and extend the length of the seminar. Many of the women in the seminar have become friends whose friendship has endured after the programme ended. Some participants have returned to school. Others have found jobs, changed careers, or become active in volunteer work. A number of women have applied newly acquired communication and assertion skills to social, family, and working relationships, generally with positive results. While the authors would like to take full credit for the positive evaluations of the programme, the real key to its success was the nature of the women who enrolled. They chose to take the Self-Exploration Seminar because they were ready and eager for changes but unsure of what to do. The seminar provided the direction, and the co-leaders acted as catalysts. The participants did the rest.

In order to be sure that the positive effects of the seminar had held up over time, an evaluation form was mailed to sixteen women who had completed the programme a year before and to sixteen who had finished six months previously. Of the thirty-two participants, twenty-four returned the anonymous questionnaire.

The results indicated that all respondents had found that the seminar contributed to personal gains in at least one of the following areas:

- (1) 57.8% gained in family relations.
- (2) 57.8% gained in other relationships.
- (3) 84.1% improved assertion skills.
- (4) 73.6% improved communication skills.
- (5) 78.9% felt better about themselves (improved self-concept).

In terms of new activities, respondents indicated the following:

- (1) 26.3% found volunteer work.
- (2) 21% found paid employment.
- (3) 15.7% entered community college.
- (4) 31.5% entered university or enrolled in continuing education.
- (5) 31.5% engaged in other new, positive activities.

A cross-section of respondents revealed that one woman was writing for a newspaper, another finishing a degree after twelve years away from

formal education, still another taking flying lessons, and one breaking off a poor marital relationship.

The Self-Exploration Seminar for Women has yielded consistently encouraging results and would seem a most appropriate offering for colleges, universities, and those progressive secondary schools which enroll mature women. The programme has been a positive experience for the participants and a gratifying one for the authors.

READING LIST—SELF-HELP BOOKS

The Assertive Woman

Stanlee Phelps and Nancy Austin
Impact, 1975
Fredericksburg, Virginia
22401

Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No

Herbert Fensterheim and Jean Baer
Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1975
New York, New York
10017

The Liberated Man

Warren Farrell
New York: Random House, 1974

The New Assertive Woman

Lynn Z. Bloom, Karen Coburn, Joan Pearlman
Dell Publishers, 1976
New York

A New Guide to Rational Living

Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper
Melvin Powers Wilshire Book Company, 1975
12015 Sherman Road
No. Hollywood, California 91605

Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life

Gail Sheehy
Bantam Books, 1976
666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019

Stand Up, Speak Out, Talk Back

Robert E. Alberti & Michael L. Emmons
Pocket Books, 1975
630 5th Avenue, New York, New York
10020

Women as Winners

Transactional Analysis for Personal Growth
Jongeward, D., Scott, D.
Addison-Wesley Publishing Company
Don Mills, Ontario

Your Perfect Right

Robert E. Alberti & Michael L. Emmons
San Luis Obispo, CA.
Impact, 1974

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- DiSabatino, Marie. Psychological factors inhibiting women's occupational aspirations and vocational choices: Implications for counselling. *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, September 1976, 25, 43-48.
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