

SHAPING THE FUTURE

2019 ATSA Conference | Friday November 8 | 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

F-09

Using Neuroception in SOS Groups to Activate Engagement, Reduce Defensiveness, and Improve Self-Regulation

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Group therapy for males who sexually abuse can function as a therapeutic “neural exercise” to promote biobehavioral adjustments of several psychosocial processes associated with attachment styles, emotional regulation, stress reactivity, and social relationships. As social mammals, our nervous systems are designed to automatically evaluate risk and safety in any given situation or interpersonal encounter. This is not learned, nor are we aware of neural cues that trigger either our positive feelings of safety or negative feelings of danger and threat. When safety is detected, a bias toward social engagement behaviors is primed for activation. If there are no cues of safety, a bias toward defensive mobilization (fight/flight) or defensive immobilization (freezing or becoming numb) is primed for activation. This workshop will describe an array of practical neural-based techniques that group therapists can use in sex offense-specific groups to activate and maintain the innate bias toward social engagement, while averting the activation of defensive responses.

Learning Goals:

- This workshop will emphasize experiential learning of practical hands-on techniques for running effective groups for males who sexually abuse.
- We will review the recent theory of neuroception that shows how the human nervous system is sensitive not only to physical environment but also to human social cues, such as the intentionality of movements, which can either trigger or dampen defensive physiological reactivity. In a safe environment, the nervous system is no longer vigilant for danger, and a qualitative shift in physiological state occurs that activates social engagement and is better able to function as a neural platform for facilitating neural circuits involved in optimizing mental and physical health.
- We will then apply the principles of this theory in terms of actual practical techniques that can be used by group therapists.

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References

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- Sawyer, S. and Jennings, J. (2014). Facilitating group-centered treatment groups for sex offenders. In M. Carich and S. Mussack (Eds.), *The Safer Society Handbook of Sexual Abuser Assessment and Treatment*. Brandon, VT: Safer Society Press, pp. 125-150.
- Flores, P. & Porges, S. (2017). Group Psychotherapy as a neural exercise: Bridging polyvagal theory and attachment theory, *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 67, 202-222.
- Jennings, J. and Sawyer, S. (2018). Using Group to Treat Attachment Deficits and Promote Good Lives. Presentation to ATSA conference, Vancouver, Canada (10/16/18).
- Jennings, J. and Deming, A. (2016). Review of the empirical and clinical support for group therapy specific to sexual abusers. *Sexual Abuse*, 29(8), 731-764.

Jerry L. Jennings, Ph.D. is Vice President of Clinical Services for Liberty Healthcare. He has published over 50 journal articles, chapters and books on topics that include clinical and forensic psychology, domestic violence, group therapy, and treatment of adult and adolescent sex offenders. Dr. Jennings coauthored the first book devoted entirely to the topic of *Group Therapy with Sexual Abusers* (2016), as well as client workbooks titled *Responsibility and Self-Management* (2007) and *The Mindfulness Toolkit* (2014). Most recently he co-authored a comprehensive review of the empirical and clinical research specific to group therapy with sexual abusers in *Sexual Abuse*. Dr. Jennings has conducted workshops and presented on topics related to sex offender treatment at many conferences, including ATSA (2018, 2014, 2009), NOTA (2017), ILATSA (2017), MARATSA (2016), AGPA (2016), MATSA/MASOC (2019, 2015, 2014), NYATSA (2012), and NAPN (2003), as well as trainings for correctional/forensic audiences in Indiana (2017, 2008), Alaska (2016), Illinois (2016), and Virginia (2004). He has been a member of ATSA since 1999.

Steven Sawyer, MSSW, LICSW is the founder and President of Sawyer Solutions, LLC, a private clinical and consulting practice. He was a founding board member and Executive Director of Project Pathfinder, Inc., a founding board member and past chapter president of the Minnesota ATSA and past board member and chair of the Minnesota Board of Social Work. Mr. Sawyer has delivered dozens of lectures and trainings locally and nationally on sexual abuse prevention and treatment. He co-authored the first book devoted entirely to *Group Therapy with Sexual Abusers* (2016), and has published articles and chapters on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, group therapy with sexual offenders, sexual dysfunction in sex offenders, and sex offender treatment program outcome research a program for men who use prostitutes. Over the past 30 years he has assessed and treated hundreds of sexual abusers and supervised the treatment of several thousand more. He consults with Catholic religious orders on sexual abuse prevention and management, provides clinical supervision services for the State of Minnesota, operates a sexual abuse treatment program, and manages a program for men who pay for sex.