

Strengthening Families Through Innovative Parent Support



My Story



The World of the Special Needs Parent

- What will become of my child?
- What will be become of me?
- Will my marriage survive?
- Stress that feels through the roof!!



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- One of us needs to work, the other tend to our child — how are we going to afford this?
- Who are our friends now? Where do we fit in?
- No time or energy for family outings or evenings out!



- What did I do to cause this?
- Why me? Why my child?
- What do I do now? How do I do it?



Family Functions

- How will we manage financially -with more expenses?
- Having fun during leisure time — what leisure time?
- Need to socialize with others— but with whom?
- Everyone still needs affection
- What is each person's role?
- Intellectual growth for all



The Special Needs Family

A balancing act
often in danger of
becoming unbalanced



Multi-systemic impact

- Regional center
- Health care system
- School system
- Insurance system
- Legal system
- Extended family system
- Spiritual and other community system



Challenges for Parents

- Managing Grief
- Maintaining perspective
- Protecting a corner of life for oneself
- Finding sources of strength
- Coping with uncertainty and fears of the future
- Managing guilt, fear, and shame
- Finding healthy support outside of the marriage
- Finding meaning in the disability



Types of Support

- Informal — waiting rooms, incidental, “set-ups”
- On-line Support Groups — organized list-serves, dedicated Facebook groups
- Organized social gatherings
- Informational
- Skill-Building
- Self-help
- Facilitated “therapeutic” Support Group
- Organized Retreat



Benefits of Facilitated Support Group

- The instilling of hope
- A sense of universality
- Access to information
- Opportunity for altruism
- Sense of group cohesion
- Cathartic experience
- Existential benefit



Elements of Success of the Support Group

- commitment to 6-8 sessions over 3-4 month period
- structure and ritual (i.e. meditation, reading, use of “talking stick”)
- establishment of emotional safety
- time management
- opportunity to share full range of feelings without judgement or unsolicited advice
- time for wanted feedback and sharing of information

Healing the Mother's Heart



- ▶ In the struggle to cope with the grief of having a child with disabilities and “leaving no stone unturned”, many women find themselves depleted, burned out, or neglecting their own needs. Indeed, sometimes the very meaning of life as they once knew it has been challenged. Through music, personal sharing, art, meditation, and the compassionate understanding of a community of women in similar life circumstances, this retreat will provide a safe atmosphere in which to explore your lost dreams and face the struggle to rebuild new ones. Surrounded by the peaceful beauty of nature, this transformative experience will help you to return to the routines of your life with renewed spirit and a new perspective.

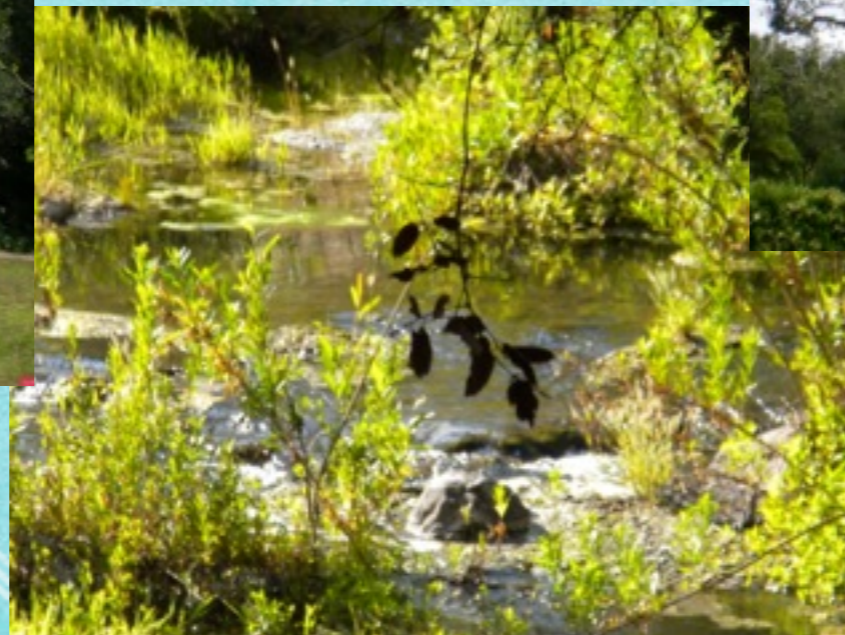
During this retreat, you will:

Talk about your experience of raising a special needs child with others who “get it”

Learn strategies for managing the particular stressors in your life

Discover strengths in yourself

Rejuvenate and replenish yourself



Creating Sacred Space

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: choose a natural setting with few distractions

EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT: use of talking stick, guidelines for confidentiality, boundaries

SCHEDULE: balance between structure, free time, small and large group activities

RITUAL: use of repeated activities, music

ATTENTION TO COMFORT AND WELL-BEING: good food, access to water and snacks, sleeping arrangements, temperature, appropriate clothing

FLEXIBILITY: be open to change course in response to external and group needs

PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP: a trained Mental Health professional, preferably with personal special needs experience.

Sample Activities and Components

Saturday: Focus is on “telling her story” through words, music, art

Sunday: Focus on self-care

- Introduction
- Music
- Mindfulness meditation
- Nature hike
- Question- in -the -box
- Readings and discussions (from Changed by a Child)



- Filling my Pitcher
- Self-care plan (seal in envelope and mail 6 months later)
- Ice-breaker activities
- Letting Go: what I can control and what I cannot control (small group discussion)
- What feeds me? What depletes me? (paper/pencil activity and discussion)
- Collage — “What is my Journey?”
- Oxygen Map

SAMPLE SCHEDULE

Saturday:

9:30 Welcome and Orientation

10am Music: "Calling All Angels"

Group Introductions

12 Lunch

1-2 Free Time / Nature Hike

2pm Mindfulness Meditation

Music - "I Won't Give Up"

Group discussion: What is my biggest worry? What part of this do I have control over? What is out of my hands?

Question-in-the Box

5pm Free time

6 pm Dinner

7:30 Collages and sharing

9:30 Sweet Dreams

Sunday:

8:30 Breakfast

9:30 Meditation

Music: "The Climb"

What Feeds Me? What Depletes Me?

Filling My Pitcher

12 noon Lunch

1 pm Music - "The Prayer"

Question in the Box

What do I want to take with me? What will I leave behind?

2pm Closing Circle; Music - "Count on Me"

The Journey Together

This day-long retreat will be an opportunity for you and your partner to leave behind your daily routines and join with other couples who have the similar life experience of raising a child or children with disabilities. Fathers will be able to talk with fathers; mothers with mothers. Most importantly, you will have the opportunity to talk with **EACH OTHER** and come away with specific strategies that will enhance your relationship as a couple.



Couples Retreat

A time for retreat, respite, introspection, and connection for couples who are parents of children with special needs

- identify the strengths in their relationship as parents and as a couple.

- Learn what your partner needs from you.



- Connect with same gender parents to hear your experiences reflected in others.

- Learn what you can do to enhance your connection with your partner.

Sample Activities and Components

- Introductions
- Music
- Question in the Box
- Taking Partners' Perspective
- Creative visioning
- Love Languages
- Meditation
- Communication/ Problem solving exercises
- Mini "Married...with (Special Needs) Children" teaching and discussion

Sample Schedule

9:30 Coffee; refreshments

9:50 Welcome and orientation

Meditation; Music "The Prayer"

Participant introductions

11:20 Married....with (special needs) children - mini-lecture and discussion

12:15 Lunch and free time

1:45 Taking our Partner's Perspective - divide moms and dads

3:15 Break and Stretch

3:30 Love Languages teaching and exercise

4:45 Wrap-up and closing