

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Healing Power of an Alternative Supportive Community for Spiritual Seekers

Elizabeth J. Sabet
Lubbock, TX

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Holistic Options for People Everywhere (HOPE) is a 501(c)(3) organization that was founded in May of 2007 in Lubbock, Texas, to provide a safe place for people having spiritually transformative experiences (STEs) and/or pursuing the topic of spirituality who did not feel comfortable or welcomed in traditional conservative spiritual/religious communities in the area. At the time, my co-founder and I had heard about, witnessed, and experienced how someone openly displaying non-traditional spiritual inquiry and/or practice was often ridiculed and ostracized by family members and co-workers. We were aware of several groups of people who were studying non-traditional spiritual texts and who had experienced many different kinds of STEs; it was our observation that, in order to prevent public scrutiny and anticipated negative judgment, most of these people conducted closed groups. To the extent that a given person was aware of the various groups and shared the interests of those groups, that person may have

Elizabeth J. Sabet is co-founder and Executive Director of Holistic Options for People Everywhere (HOPE) in Lubbock, TX. This extended abstract is a condensed version of her presentation at the American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE) 3rd Annual Conference on Therapeutic Issues of Spiritually Transformative Experiences, November 6–8, 2014, Dallas, TX. This work was supported by the Lubbock HOPE Community members. Correspondence concerning this abstract should be sent to Ms. Sabet at HOPE, 3213 79th Street, Lubbock, TX 79423, or e-mail: elizabethj.sabet@gmail.com.

been attending two or three of them. However, there was little to no engagement on a broad community level between these groups or public advertisement concerning their activities. Because the majority of these study and practice groups were kept underground, many people seeking connection and community were unaware there was anyone else in the area they could relate to and, we observed, were prone to feeling isolated and depressed to varying degrees.

The founders of HOPE had the intention of creating an environment in which any person seeking understanding of one's spiritually-related experiences or seeking others who studied or practiced alternative forms of spirituality could meet in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. Our intentions were to learn from one another and to learn how to meet each other from a place of holistic wellness. Over the years, we have observed that this atmosphere created a sense of safety and allowed participants to openly share their wisdom and experiences one-on-one in large and small group settings. This process, in turn, produced transformational healing for most people who engaged in the community.

Necessary Components of a Spiritually Supportive Community

Both in our founding of HOPE and our experience with it over the past seven years, we identified what we considered necessary components of a spiritually supportive community. These components served to guide us as the organization evolved. They include community conversation, engagement, and information.

Our first purpose was to create conversations relevant to the needs of the community. Our first step in the process of creating conversations that were relevant, safe, and on purpose, was to ensure that participants experienced the freedom and safety to speak about their experiences and created opportunities to associate with potentially like-minded people or at least people who had similar experiences or interests. To achieve this step, we encouraged participants, when listening to others, to listen empathetically to, and to seek to understand the speaker. In this social context of empathy and understanding, the second step was to encourage participants, when speaking, to speak authentically. We observed that this kind of honesty was sometimes difficult for people who had intentionally been ridiculed for speaking openly of their experiences and who, in response, had suppressed or re-

pressed their experiences and ideas. A third step was that community facilitators needed to be skilled at empowering and encouraging people to share only when they were ready to do so. One ground rule has been no requirement for participants to share or disclose their experiences. A fourth step has been facilitating conversation when requested community members have so requested. Some forms of this step have been providing a lecture on a specific topic or facilitating two people to speak openly with each other with the intention of resolving differences or offenses. The fifth step has been to provide resources, spaces, and opportunities for conversation in verbal and non-verbal ways via community events, workshops, small groups, and group meditations or exercises.

The second necessary component in our development of a spiritually supportive community has been community engagement. First, we provided opportunities to gather. Creating social events in large and small groups, in public places and in private home settings, has offered participants different levels of interaction to choose from. On-line forums such as Facebook and private on-line forums have also been useful. Second, participation has been based only on desire and interest and not on any membership requirement. Third, we sought to ensure that community facilitators were skilled in helping people understand issues and each other. Fourth, community facilitators were required to help participants create and connect to activities that made a difference to them—that met their needs.

Community facilitators are those people who feel a calling to serve the community in different formats. Board members and committee chairs are the only community facilitators who are vetted out and asked to participate and provide basic leadership roles. We discovered that once people became engaged and find value in the community, some wanted to contribute to the work of the community or to enrich the community with their gifts and knowledge. Many of these people chose to engage in roles that facilitate a specific interest of their own. For example, in response to our use of recorded music during our bi-monthly Kirtan, a devotional activity that community members had requested, one member, a talented singer and songwriter, was inspired to write her own renditions of Sanskrit mantras to perform at the Kirtan. She is now the Kirtan leader.

Members occasionally want to conduct a talk about one of their interests or are asked to perform a talk by a member of the leadership team. The executive director meets with the event facilitator to discuss the talk and give guidance on time constraints and the general

order of the event. To ensure our goal of providing an emotionally safe and accepting community, guidance is given to ensure the event facilitator is respectful of all viewpoints and does not condemn or “make wrong” other points of view. Other than these general guidelines the only other requirement is that the event or talk that is being facilitated is in alignment with HOPE’s vision and mission statements.

We have had difficulties with some community facilitator volunteers who asked to help with activities. Some did not have the communication skills or emotional maturity to handle situations that arose in the activities they were leading and behaved in ways that made others uncomfortable. Members of the board have had to guide and educate volunteers in effective communication skills. Only on one occasion did the board decide that a facilitator would not be asked to take on any further tasks for the community. Over the years we have definitely learned that not every eager offer to help may quite be ready for the rigors of community development and have become more adept at selecting facilitators and finding other opportunities to help people share than in a leadership role.

Fifth, our goal was that, beyond basic leadership, the community would be self-organizing. In this regard, facilitators help people find each other and help them take the action they want to take. A sixth aspect of the community engagement component has been to help participants review what has been happening in the community and to discuss that information to help create a shared vision.

A third necessary component has been community information. As a first step, to facilitate the effective conveyance of information, all forms of communication and perspectives have been welcomed. Secondly, each community member determined for oneself the forms of communication and perspectives they would like to engage. The third step involved community facilitators helping the community gain access to relevant communication. The fourth step in offering information has been to gather experiencers, experts, processors, and research and present this information in formats the community indicated they preferred.

Transformation and Healing Acquired in a Spiritually Supportive Community

HOPE community members have reported the following reasons for their psycho-spiritual healing. They developed a sense of belonging

and validation for the newfound purpose in life that was discovered during their spiritual emergence or emergency. They found an opportunity to openly share their wisdom and experience, which developed their confidence and self-esteem. Their sense of isolation and the stigma of being crazy were removed, which gave them permission to more deeply explore the meaning and function of their experiences. Deeper exploration created new understanding and insight of old traumatic events, which resulted in expanded healing and growth.

Members also had the freedom to explore differing spiritual pathways free from ridicule and ostracism. When this freedom was available, many members no longer felt the need to throw away the religion taught by their family of origin; they were able to develop a sense of autonomy and renewed spiritual identity while retaining some or all of their religious upbringing. Some members have demonstrated the desire not only to explore differing spiritual pathways but also to enter into a deeper study of the religion in which they had been raised.

Some members experienced emotional trauma from family and friends in the form of rejection, condemnation, and fear of and disbelief about their experiences. This caused some experiencers to become resentful and to completely reject their family's religious belief system. Whether they had a broader acceptance of, or a complete rejection of, their religious upbringing, their participation in HOPE activities helped them develop the ability to understand and relate to those belief systems from an expanded understanding resulting in an increased ability to relate to family members from a place of understanding and compassion. The experiencers, and some family members, have report that they have, and appear to have, matured emotionally and no longer need to make others wrong for living from different self-selected spiritual identities and beliefs.

HOPE has been able to mobilize community resources when a member has been in need. We have accumulated contact information for knowledgeable and understanding counselors, holistic practitioners, and a broad base of other spiritual resources to which we can refer people when a need is identified. For example, when the most extreme cases of spiritual emergency resulted in the loss of family support, homes, and businesses, other community members opened up their homes to house and feed these people, free of charge, until the affected members were able to reenter society and become independently functional. Without these generous members, the experiencers may have been homeless and without resources for their daily needs.

We have observed that, due to having access to this type of com-

munity support and resources, members both in acute spiritual emergency and the more gradual and manageable spiritual emergence have been transformed. Experiencers were empowered to become grounded, focused, and purposeful in their own unique way and in their own time. Being engaged in a supportive and knowledgeable community and integrating their experiences, people were empowered to become more respectful of different views and experiences as they observed others process the challenges of varied spiritually transformative experiences. Because experiencers had healthy relationships in a loving and understanding community, they developed the courage and abilities to live their purpose within the community or to take their work out into the world at large.

In the process of creating and managing a spiritually supportive community, we have encountered several challenges. For example, environments that are open and accepting can initially be overwhelming or distressing to individuals who have adopted guarded and protective coping mechanisms against a harsher worldview of their experiences and knowledge. Community facilitators must be skilled in identifying discomfort in participants and offer comfort, understanding, and information on community resources if requested. To be truly supportive of all experiencers, the HOPE community has no dogma or doctrine. There must be allowance for all viewpoints. This degree of tolerance can occasionally turn people away who are looking for validation or agreement that their path or experience is preferred or superior. Because there is an open door policy, community facilitators must be skilled in helping people understand this policy and not allow members to use the HOPE name to endorse any one spiritual tradition, practice, or health and healing protocol.

Conclusion and Future Work

In a politically and spiritually conservative West-Texas community of over 230,000 people, we believe that HOPE has been successful in creating a community dedicated to the healing, integration, and education of healthy psycho-spiritual development. We have several hundred interested people in our contact database and are gaining new participants on an increasing basis. As we continue to develop our education and outreach program, we plan on hosting our second local academic symposium on the therapeutic issues of STEs in 2016, and plan to offer a lecture series to universities, hospitals, and churches in Texas and New Mexico beginning in the fall of 2015. We are extending

our work to other areas around the country by creating Sister Cities that will host their own gatherings and develop organically based on the needs of each individual community.

Our goal is to educate as many mental health professionals, pastors, coaches, and experiencers as possible to reduce the unnecessary suffering of spiritually transformative experiencers and their families. Case studies of the healing and transformation of experiencers are in the process of being fully developed and will be ready for publication in 2016.