

Frequently Asked Questions about the BreakThrough Weekend

1. Who attends the BreakThrough Weekend?

This weekend is attended by men from all backgrounds regardless of race, age, religion, sexual orientation, or economic status. Many of our graduates hear about us from a therapist, marriage counselor, or life coach. Others attend based on the recommendations of friends or loved ones. The ages of the men who attend this weekend typically range from the late 20's to the 70's.

2. Why do men attend this weekend?

Men attend this weekend because they want to take a close and honest look at themselves and explore what changes they might be willing to make in order to deepen their personal relationships and improve their lives. The immediate impetus for attending the weekend might be a personal crisis (such as, divorce, loss of a close relationship, death of someone close, health crisis, etc.), sadness, feeling stuck and isolated, or simply the sense that something is missing and that life should be more fulfilling. The program enables men to explore underlying core issues of abandonment, betrayal, abuse, loss, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and powerlessness.

3. What happens at the BreakThrough Weekend?

All activities occur in the context of a group of approximately 30 men consisting of about 20 participants and ten staff. Friday night's program begins with a discussion of safety and confidentiality. We remind the men that their participation in any of our processes is voluntary and that they can choose not to participate without being pressured or shamed. The balance of Friday is largely devoted to several communications exercises and also offers men the chance to explore what they might wish to begin changing about themselves. Saturday's activities begin with an invitation to identify something important in a man's life that he wants to face. The rest of the day is devoted to individual psychodrama exercises that allow him to examine the issue and provide him with the insight and emotional tools to deal with it more constructively.

Shame, guilt, and secrets are the subject of Sunday morning's processes. It is here that men confront the deeper issues within themselves and begin to understand and heal the pain they may have caused others. Men complete this exercise with greater compassion for themselves and others.

The weekend concludes with a discussion of the return home and other opportunities to continue the work of the weekend. The men are reminded of their agreement regarding confidentiality, but encouraged to share their own feelings and experiences with their loved ones at an appropriate time and place.

Finally, while this program can be pretty serious, humor and laughter are also welcome and play an important role throughout the weekend.

4. What about confidentiality?

All men attending the weekend — participants and staff — are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that they will not disclose the statements or experiences of another man. Participants are always free to discuss their own feelings, insights, experiences, etc. with whomever they choose. The leadership team is obligated to maintain confidentiality except in the case of an imminent threat of harm to self or others. The agreement also contains an acknowledgement that the structure and components of the training are the property of Victories of the Heart and may not be copied or used without written permission.

5. What is the difference between this weekend and psychotherapy?

Attending a BreakThrough weekend can be very enlightening and frequently provides the impetus for further personal growth. However, it is only a weekend experience that offers men a brief chance to open their hearts and connect with their feelings in a deep way. Hence, while it may be an excellent adjunct to psychotherapy, it is no substitute for the ongoing services of a mental health professional who is licensed to conduct individual, couples, or group counseling. Victories of the Heart does not offer psychological or psychiatric services.

6. Who is on staff?

Each leadership team is composed of two senior leaders and about eight other men. Everyone on the team has attended our weekend programs and received training in the group processes we employ. Men are chosen for leadership based on their own personal growth, their integrity and compassion, commitment to our work, and ability to function as part of a team. Although Victories of the Heart does not offer psychological or psychiatric services, our policy is to have at least one man on the team who is a licensed mental health professional. The senior leaders have many years of experience with the processes used on the weekend.

7. How will I know if I am ready to attend this weekend?

Men are ready for this weekend when they decide to make an important change in their lives. Attending a training that addresses ingrained attitudes or beliefs can be physically and emotionally challenging even when it occurs in a safe and supportive environment. So, if you are under the care of a therapist or physician, please discuss your attendance with them before proceeding. If you would like to speak with one of our leaders, please call our administrative office.

8. Does Victories require men to subscribe to any particular set of beliefs? Will I be told what to do with my life?

The simple answer is "no." Our leaders are facilitators. Their role is to deepen a man's personal experience so that he can make his own choice as to how to live and improve his life consistent with his own values and beliefs.

9. Self disclosure and expressing feelings can be hard for me. Will I be pushed into doing something that I don't want to do?

Attending this program with a group of other men provides some incentive to participate fully in the components of the weekend, which include self disclosure and connecting with feelings. However, as noted above, your participation in any of our processes is voluntary, and we will always respect your decision about participation

without undue pressure or shame. We invite men to go only as far as they can with this experience in the moment, knowing that with time and patience they frequently choose to take the work much farther.

10. Is this weekend suitable for gay men?

Yes. As noted above, all men are welcome at this program. Gay men attend our weekends and achieve much for themselves. Even though our processes do not specifically address sexuality, the issue is open for discussion and mutual understanding. Many of our gay and straight graduates have reported how healing it was to participate together in an experience that reduces fear and promotes mutual respect. If you wish to discuss this further, please call the office and ask to speak with one of the leaders.

11. Who started this program? Does it have a religious component or affiliation?

This program was started in 1985 by two gifted psychotherapists, Bob Mark and Buddy Portugal. Their personal and professional experience lead them to believe that men's physical and emotional health is materially enhanced when they participate in deep, honest, and meaningful relationships. Although the program has no religious component or affiliation, it welcomes men of all religious, spiritual, and secular persuasions.

12. I am in a 12 step program. Is this weekend right for me?

Victories of the Heart does not offer professional psychological or psychiatric services or addiction counseling nor are its programs specifically designed to address the issue of addiction. Nevertheless, men facing addiction issues have benefited from attending the weekend because it gives them the same opportunity as others to learn more about themselves and to build the kind of meaningful relationships that are frequently missing in their lives. Since the weekend frequently stirs deep emotions and explores issues, like shame and secrets, men with a history of addiction should consult their mental health professional before attending.

13. Are there any rules or expectations that I should know about?

We believe that the weekend experience is enhanced when men take a break from the cares of the everyday world so that they can concentrate on the larger issues of life. Consequently, upon arrival the men are asked to put away their watches, cell phones and other communications devices while the program is in session. Unless there is a genuinely important reason to contact others or keep track of time during the program, these can become a real distraction from the main purpose of attending. For similar reasons, we also ask the men to use their first names and avoid discussing sports, business, politics, and religion.

We also strongly encourage carpooling to and from the camp site. Getting to know someone on the way up and having a friend to talk to on the way back really enhances the experience. Finally, smoking is not allowed indoors, and alcohol and other intoxicants are prohibited.

14. What is the weekend schedule?

We ask the men to arrive by 6:30 PM on Friday. No dinner is provided that night, unless they make arrangements with us in advance. The Friday and Saturday processes usually end by midnight. Sunday's program concludes no later than 2:00 PM. We allow enough time in the evening for a good night's sleep.

15. What about the accommodations and other administrative details?

The BreakThrough weekend is conducted on the site of a summer camp in Illinois or Wisconsin. Sleeping and bathing accommodations are provided in heated cabins that accommodate 14 to 20 each. Men bring their own towels and bedding. Dress is very casual. Saturday and Sunday meals are provided. The food is simple, fresh, and excellent. All meals are taken communally.

16. What about the post-weekend personal growth groups?

A weekend experience can be a great opportunity for a man to get in touch with things that really matter and to make some important personal commitments for the future. Following through on those commitments takes time and effort and is fraught with the perils that brought him to the weekend in the first place. One of the ways to continue the work of the weekend is to join a personal growth group. Men from the weekend agree to meet for three hours every two weeks. For a fee of \$120 (scholarships available), Victories will provide trained facilitators during the first six months to help get the group started. Our groups are a source of support and connection and a place where men are held accountable for the commitments they have made to themselves and others. Joining a group is optional and is not for everyone. However, for those who are interested, we recommend that they make a commitment to the group and the process for six months.

17. What is the principal difference between the BreakThrough and the Wisdom Years Weekends? Are they mutually exclusive?

The Wisdom Years weekend is specifically designed for men over 50 who wish to explore the issues of aging, retirement, death, loss, and renewal. Although it does not use the techniques of psychodrama, this weekend offers many powerful opportunities to obtain clarity and to experience the deep emotions associated with these issues. The BreakThrough Weekend, on the other hand, is open to adult men of all ages and is concerned with the broader issues discussed in the answer to question 2 above. These experiences are not mutually exclusive and many of our graduates have chosen to attend both.

18. Can you comment on the advantages of participating in a group?

Exploring important issues as part of a group deepens the experience in a way that cannot be duplicated in a one-on-one setting. Men are particularly susceptible to isolating themselves and embracing the belief that "I am the only one who is experiencing this." Participating in a group does much to dispel such feelings and provides the validation and healing that comes from the realization that one's concerns and stories are shared and accepted by others.