

Frequently Asked Questions about the Wisdom Years Weekend

1. Who attends the Wisdom Years Weekend?

This weekend is attended by men who are at least 50 years old and from all backgrounds regardless of race, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or economic status. Many of our participants 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 early 50's into the 70's.

2. Why do men attend this weekend?

Men attend this weekend because they want to explore and decide how they can live the second half of their adult lives with greater fulfillment and meaning. This involves examining 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, loss of job, forced retirement, 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 and share with each other about these issues in a safe place, among other men who understand and who are going through similar experiences.

3. What happens at the Wisdom Years Weekend?

All activities occur in the context of a group of up to 29 men, consisting of up to 21 participants and eight staff. The environment is comfortable, safe, and private. While the work we do with each other can be very serious, our activities also include music, song, and ample doses of good-natured humor.

Friday night's program begins just before dinner with introductions, some thoughts about what it means to have reached this age and the coming years of our lives, and a discussion of safety and confidentiality. After dinner, the balance of the evening is devoted to a variety of interesting and heartfelt exercises in both a large and small group setting. Men have the chance to think "out of the box," learn how to communicate deeply and honestly, and explore the most important issues they face at this stage of their lives.

Much of Saturday's work happens in small groups of up to seven participants and two experienced staffers. It is here that men explore the core issues in their lives, identify what may be blocking them from moving in the direction they really want to go, and learn how to emerge into greater fulfillment, satisfaction and meaning. We create a safe place where they can learn from each other about the important issues of aging – whether related to health, retirement, occupation, intimacy, or any other question that uniquely affects men in the second half of adult life. We also explore our feelings about death. Saturday typically ends with a campfire, singing, joke telling, or simply quiet conversation in an unstructured setting.

After breakfast on Sunday we discuss how to take home what we've learned about ourselves on the weekend and turn our intentions into reality. We acknowledge the work done by each man and discuss opportunities for continuing the work of the weekend, including participation in a personal growth group (described below). After lunch, the weekend concludes with a farewell ceremony. The men are reminded of their agreement regarding confidentiality, but are encouraged to share their own feelings and experiences with their loved ones as deeply and openly as possible.

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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 Wisdom Years Weekend can be very enlightening and frequently provides the impetus for further personal growth. However, it is not and is not intended to be group therapy. It is a weekend experience that offers men a 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 six servicemen. 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 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 realize that they want something more out of life or need to make an important change. Attending a program that may address ingrained attitudes or beliefs can be 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, your participation in any of

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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 participants 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 about ten years ago by two gifted psychotherapists, Bob Mark and Buddy Portugal, who realized that men over 50 could really benefit from a program specifically tailored for them. After many years of working with men, Bob and Buddy came to believe that men's physical and emotional health is materially enhanced when they participate in deep, honest, and meaningful relationships. Although this 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, 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 hotel. 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 5:30 PM on Friday so that they can be checked into their rooms. The program begins at 6:30 PM shortly before dinner. Friday's and Saturday's formal activities end by midnight. Sunday's program concludes after lunch at approximately 2:30 PM. We allow enough time in the evening for a good night's sleep.

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15. What about the accommodations and other administrative details?

Most Wisdom Years Weekends are conducted at a small inn where ours is the only group that is using the space. Sleeping and bathing accommodations (complete with bedding and towels) are provided in rooms housing one or two men. Dress is very casual. All meals from dinner on Friday through lunch on Sunday are provided and taken communally. The food is healthy, fresh, and excellent.

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 involves facing the same challenges 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 at a time, on a regular schedule, every few 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, renewal, meaning, retirement, death, loss and changing relationships. The weekend offers many powerful opportunities to obtain clarity and experience the deep emotions associated with these issues. The central work of the weekend is done in a small group discussion setting.

The BreakThrough Weekend is open to adult men of all ages and is concerned with broader issues. The program enables men to explore underlying core issues of abandonment, betrayal, abuse, loss, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and powerlessness. The central work of the weekend involves individual psychodrama exercises that allow a man to tap his deepest emotions, examine his core issue, and provide him with the insight and emotional tools to deal with it more constructively.

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.