

How Group Can Work For You

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle.
The sky is round, and I have heard that the
Earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars.
The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nests in circles,
for theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle.
The moon does the same, and both are round.
Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing,
and always come back again to where they were.
The life of a (person) is a circle from childhood to childhood,
and so it is in everything where power moves.

-Black Elk Speaks



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This information packet is intended for people who are about to begin a group, or for those who are considering it. It is useful for people starting group to have some general ideas about how groups help people and how they, themselves, can get the most out of the experience. Group is different from individual therapy because many of the helpful events take place between the members and not just between the leader and the members. That is one reason why it is important that all of the members have a general introduction before beginning. Please read this material carefully and feel free to discuss any part of it with me. The issues raised in this paper are also useful to talk about during the first few sessions in the group.

Do Groups Really Help People?

Groups are widely used and have been a standard part of treatment programs for over 40 years. Sometimes it is used as the main or perhaps the only treatment approach. Sometimes it is used as part of a treatment approach that may include individual therapy, medications, and other activities. Group therapy has been shown in research studies to be an effective treatment. Studies that have compared individual and group approaches indicate that both are about equally effective. The difference with groups, of course, is that a group has to form, and the members need to get to know each other a bit before it can be of the greatest benefit. Most people have participated in some types of groups, for example in schools, churches, or community activities. Therapy groups will have many of the same features. The difference is that in a therapy group the leader has as one of his/her responsibilities ensuring that the group stays focused on its goal of encouraging interconnectedness among members and for the group as a whole.

How Group Works

Group is based on the idea that a great many of the issues people have in their lives relate to getting along with other people. As children, we learn ways of getting close and talking to others and ways of solving conflicts with others. In general, these early patterns are then applied to adult relationships. Sometimes they create our greatest strengths, but sometimes these ways are not as effective as they might be, despite good intentions. Groups offer an opportunity to learn more about our "interpersonal" patterns. Very often, symptoms such as anxiety or unhappiness, bad feelings about yourself, or a general sense of dissatisfaction with life reflect the unsatisfactory state of our interconnectedness with others. Groups are designed to be especially helpful with these sorts of issues.

Common Myths About Group

- ❖ Although it is true that groups offer an efficient way of treating several people at once, group therapy is not a second-rate treatment in the sense that it has less power to help people. Actually, It is the power of the group, which creates the climate in which we can strengthen our connections.
- ❖ Some people are concerned a group will be like a forced confessional where they have to reveal all of the details of their lives. This is not the case. Groups will progress at their own rate as the members become more familiar with each other and can trust each other. In general, groups talk about the patterns in relationships and the meanings these have for them. For this, it is often not necessary to know specific details. Members will find their own level of comfort regarding how much they want to disclose about their personal lives. Details about where you live or work, even your last name, are not necessary for effective involvement in the group.
- ❖ Some people worry that being in a room with other people with difficulties will make everyone worse. This idea of “the blind leading the blind” is understandable, but in practice, people find the process of talking about themselves very helpful. Indeed, finding that others have had similar thoughts and feelings can be reassuring. Many group members are surprised to find that they have something to offer other people.
- ❖ Some of the media presentations of groups suggest that people will lose control in groups and become so upset they cannot function or maybe get so angry that they will be destructive. Very seldom is there any chance of this happening, and I will be alert and responsible to encourage the group if it gets too slow or to dampen things down if the tension gets too high.
- ❖ When people picture being in a group, they sometimes find themselves concerned that they may be rejected or excluded by the other members; sometimes the fear is that they will be judged harshly by the others, and sometimes they are afraid that they may lose their sense of themselves and be carried along by the group where they don't wish to go. All of these fears are perfectly understandable, and indeed, almost everyone experiences them to some extent when they enter a new social group situation. It is good to talk about these sorts of fears early so that they can be understood and dealt with in the group.

How to Get the Most Out of Group

- ♥ The more you can involve yourself in the group, the more you will get out of it. In particular, try to identify the sorts of things that you find upsetting or bothersome. Try to be as open and honest as possible in what you say. Please risk to spontaneously say what you think and feel. Group time is precious; it is a place to be working on patterns that block our getting close. Listen hard to what people are saying, think through what they mean, and try to make sense of it. You can help others by letting them know what you make of what they say and how it affects you. Many of the issues talked about in groups are general human matters with which we can all identify. At the same time, listen hard to what others say to you about you in the group. This process of learning from others is an important way to gain feedback on how people perceive you.
- ♥ One way of thinking about group is to view it as a “living laboratory” of relationships. It is a place where you can try out new ways of talking to people, a place to take risks. You are a responsible member of the group and can help to make it an effective experience for everybody. A good way to think about how a group can help people is this: consider a person risking a different way of talking about themselves, getting some feedback from the others that it sounds all right, and then learning from this experience.
- ♥ Do your best to translate your inner reactions into words. Work hard to become aware of what you are thinking and what you are feeling, and then let the group know. While interruptions are usually unacceptable in social gatherings, in therapy groups they are often desirable. Group is a place to try to explore the meaning of what goes on and the reactions inside that get stirred up.
- ♥ Remember that how people talk is as important as what they say. As you listen to others and as you think about what you yourself have been saying, try to think about what you have been saying--beyond the words to all the other messages being sent. Sometimes the meaning of the words does not match the tone of voice or the expression on the face.
- ♥ Because the group is a place to learn from the experience itself, it is important to focus on what is happening inside the group room between the members and between each member and the leader. Often, understanding these relationships throws new light on outside relationships. many people have found it helpful to think about themselves in terms of the things they know and don't know about themselves, and the things that others know or don't know. One of the tasks in group is to try to help members become more known to others and to themselves by three main methods:
 1. talk about things that you normally keep hidden about yourself or speak about thoughts concerning others (self-disclosure) ,
 2. listen to what others are saying about what might be your blind spots (feedback), and

3. listen hard and think hard so that you can understand more about yourself (insight).

- ♥ Members of groups often use the spontaneous interactions of their conversations to help the individual achieve his or her goals; I rely on some other techniques as well. In some group meetings there may be focused discussions, handouts, readings, or teachings in the form of small lectures. I may use structured exercises or homework to enhance the learning process. Such additional aids to learning about oneself and others can be extremely helpful if you give it your full effort.

What You Can Get From This Group Experience

You will have opportunities to learn the following things:

- **Learn to identify and communicate in the here and now**
Most of the time we live in the past or the future. Or our thoughts are “somewhere else”--perhaps tied up with some problem or worry. In the group, there is an opportunity to focus our awareness on what is going on *right this instant* so that we may regain the kind of contact we once had with ourselves and our environment.
- **Making contact with and exploring the world of inner feelings**
This includes such feelings as boredom, guilt, anger, hurt, joy, sexuality, playfulness, affection, resentment, sorrow, love, and excitement. As children, many of us have learned to insulate ourselves from this feeling world. Through disclosing ourselves to others in the group--and expressing our feelings toward them--we have a chance to get back in touch with this creative and gutsy level and experience ourselves more fully.
- **Getting feedback**
Most of the time, if people talk about us at all, they give us polite flattery or thoughtless condemnation. In the group, it is possible to get honest feedback about how we are coming across--find out what impressions others have of us--see ourselves as others see us--discover our unknown mannerisms, habits, and styles, of relating and communicating--and become aware of the unconscious messages we are transmitting.
- **Learning to initiate things**
To the extent that we refrain from imposing structure on the group, group members have an opportunity to learn how to get things going on their own, without depending on someone else to do it. Each person, with the help of the leader(s), can learn to express her or his own wishes and to act on her or his own impulses instead of continually being tuned in to the expectations and pressures coming from the other people.
- **Being honest with others**
Most of our life is spent playing social games and pastimes, being polite, not hurting others' feelings. In the group there is an opportunity to “come on straight,” to be yourself, to let submerged parts of yourself come to the surface to discard the masks and shields of everyday life.
- **Becoming more sensitive to the ways people communicate**
People generally communicate much more than the bare intellectual content of what they say. In the group it is possible to listen to the “music” instead of just the “words”--and to become aware of the subtle but powerful messages being transmitted by facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, gestures, etc.

- **Learning about closeness and intimacy**

What often blocks people from being close is the fear of being pushed around by other peoples' feelings, demands, and expectations. When they begin to get close, they get tangled up on the feeling level. In the group there is a chance to learn how to disentangle the problems that arise in relationships so that people can be close and still retain their freedom, autonomy, and self-assertiveness.

- **Experimenting with new ways of relating to the world**

Most of us rely on only one or two fixed relationship styles when encountering others. The group is a kind of laboratory where all kinds of experiments can be tried out, where new ways of relating and communicating can be risked, where a certain percentage of failures can be accepted, as with any experimental situation.

This list of opportunities is not meant to be complete. As the group progresses, you may see new possibilities and new learning goals which you may set for yourself.

Common Stumbling Blocks

- It is normal to feel anxious about being in groups. Almost everyone experiences it to some extent. One way of dealing with this is to talk about it at an early point in the group. This is a good model of the usefulness of talking about things so that they can be clarified and the anxiety related to them reduced.
- It is my role to encourage members to talk with each other and to help keep the group focused. I am not there to supply ready answers to specific problems. One of the things you will experience in group is learning to benefit from the process of talking with other people and not getting answers.
- Try hard to put into words the connection between you and other people, both in the group and outside. It is right to be emotional. This process of trying to understand reactions or symptoms in terms of relationships is important.
- Many group members find themselves experiencing a sense of puzzlement or discouragement after the excitement of the first few group sessions. Please stick with it through this stage. It almost always occurs, and it reflects the fact that it always takes groups some time to develop their full benefit for the members. Once the group has experienced this, it is in a much stronger position to be helpful.
- From time to time in the group, you may find yourself having negative feelings of disappointment, frustration, or even anger. It is important to talk about these reactions. Many people have difficulty with managing these sorts of feelings, and it is part of the group's tasks to examine them. Sometimes these feelings may be toward me. It is equally important that these also be talked about in the group.
- Try hard to apply what you learn in group to outside situations. Many group members have found it useful to talk to the group about how they might go about applying what they are learning, then try it outside in their personal lives and report back to the group about how it went. Studies have shown that the more you can do this, the more group becomes "real" and the more you will get out of it. At the same time, remember that the rest of the world does not necessarily run the same way as group. Try out your ideas in the group first to test if your plans are well thought out.

Special Issues

♥ Confidentiality

It is very important that things that are talked about in the group are not repeated outside. You may, of course, want to discuss your experience with people close to you, but even then it is important not to attach names or specific information to the talk. In my experience, it is extremely uncommon for there to be any important break in confidentiality in group. Please be sure that you don't talk about others, just as you don't want them to talk about you, outside of the group.

♥ Attendance and Punctuality

It is very important that you attend all sessions and arrive on time. Once a group gets going, it functions as a group, and even if just one member is absent, it is not the same. So both for your sake and for the sake of all of the members, please be a regular attendee. If for some reason it is impossible for you to make a session, then call in advance. That way the group will know you are not coming and won't wait for you to arrive to get down to work.

♥ Alcohol or other drugs

Groups are places for sensitive personal discussions. It is important that you do not come to sessions under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs (except medications). They get in the way of making the most of the group experience. As a general rule, you will be asked to leave the session if your behavior is significantly affected by the use.

♥ Encouraged socializing with group members

It is important to think of groups as being a treatment setting and not as a replacement for other social activities. Group members are encouraged to have outside contacts with each other. However, I caution you to be careful not to have a special relationship with another group member; that relationship gets in the way of getting the most out of the group interaction. The two of you would find yourselves having secrets from the group or not addressing issues because of your friendship. If you should have lots of contact with a group member, then it is important that this be talked about in the group so that the effects can be taken into account. You are asked to make a commitment to make the group aware of the level of your relationships within the group.

Mutual Support Group Agreement

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Group Purpose: Develop empathy and compassion for self and others.

1. Be present each week, on time, and stay for the whole time, text if you aren't coming to group.
2. In the beginning, you are expected to have a three month (12 sessions) commitment. After that, if for any reason you decide to terminate, let the group participate in the decision and then agree to come to two more sessions after your announcement. Please make the announcement at the beginning of the group session.
3. Agree to be responsible for your fee. Your fee for group is _____.
(Sliding scale fee \$25 - \$40 per session depending upon what you can afford)
[Venmo](#) to **Stephen-Andrew-13** or mail your check to Stephen Andrew at the address above.
One absence every three months; you are responsible for your fee for all other group meetings.
4. Put thoughts and feelings into words and not into action. Please do not give unsolicited advice, direction, or feedback.
5. Stay until you develop your own circle of healing.
6. Contact with group members outside of group is honored for fun, support, strokes, etc.. If you are limiting your out of group time to only one group member or developing romantic involvements, then this needs to be discussed with the group.
7. If there is an issue with another group member, bring it up directly with the person in group.
8. Maintain confidentiality and the identity of other members, meaning you share only your own experience from group and no one else's story. This is vital to creating a safe group.
9. ***Agree to risk what you think and feel in the group spontaneously.***
10. If you are having financial difficulties in your life, let us work together to keep you in group. Please take responsibility for talking to the facilitators about your financial difficulties.

I AGREE TO THE ABOVE GUIDELINES

Group Member

Facilitator