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**EVERYTHING YOU
WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT
GROUP THERAPY
BUT DIDN'T THINK TO ASK**

Getting Into A Group

Why am I being referred to group therapy?

Group referrals are made when a client's treatment needs are better served in a group atmosphere. Sometimes this stems from matching a client concern (e.g. lack of assertiveness, loss of a loved one, bulimia) with a theme oriented group designed specifically to address this problem. Other reasons for a group referral can be when the therapist senses the client feels different from peers, makes choices based on what others want or expect instead of evaluating decisions for self, or has concerns about relationships with others. A group is the most direct way to provide the type of contact needed to work through these concerns.

What are some of the reasons people come to group?

The reasons are as varied as the people, but the common theme is that people want to learn how to change their thinking, feelings and/or behavior to feel better about themselves and cope more effectively with life. Learning areas include: overcoming shyness, risk-taking, assertiveness, expressing needs and wants, expressing negative feelings, dealing with conflict in relationships with family, authority, roommates and peers, accepting limitations and grieving losses and past hurts, etc.

How can I trust that group will be confidential?

It is natural for people to feel uncomfortable at first. The issue of confidentiality is an important one which is always addressed in group immediately. Group members are asked to make a commitment to protect each other by agreeing not to divulge details which would identify others outside of group. While it is okay to share your own group experience with friends or family, it is not okay to discuss other members in any way.

While a group therapist cannot provide you an absolute guarantee of confidentiality since we cannot control every group member, our experience shows that group members really respect each other's privacy because they want their privacy respected just as much as you do.

I can't imagine what it would be like to tell a room of people about my problems. Aren't people too scared or uncomfortable to really talk in group?

It is expected that when you meet a group of people for the first time it is hard to know what to say or how much you can trust them. Trusting others is a process that develops over time as group members are willing to take risks and talk about the concerns that brought them to the group. It's important to remember that you won't be speaking to the whole world, but a group of 6-10 peers who are struggling with some of the same concerns you are. While there will be a



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range of responses in terms of how quickly members disclose information about themselves, it is most important to make a commitment to be there and be willing to open up as you feel comfortable. Letting the group know you are uncomfortable can be an important first step.

If I go to my first group session and don't like it, what should I do?

Prior to your first session, you will meet with the therapist(s) who will be leading your group to get to know him/her, have your questions answered and discuss your commitment to group. Hopefully this will address any concerns you might have about group prior to attending. However, sometimes members do feel uncomfortable at the end of a session and do not want to return. Your reaction means that something is happening as a result of being in group and often it is when we explore our uneasiness that we learn the most about ourselves. There will be times when you do not want to come, but chances are good that this is when you could benefit the most from attending and talking about why you are feeling uneasy about the last session. While it is a risk to do this, many times members find they are not alone in their concerns and it provides the group important information on how to adapt, to adjust to the needs of the whole group. When people don't return to the next session, the group feels rejected, similar to the kind of rejection after a first date if he/she doesn't want to see you again. The worry is that your leaving was a result of something they said or did in the last session. It is a hard issue to address when someone leaves without an explanation. The bottom line is that group participation is voluntary and it is your choice whether you attend or not. We just hope that you would recognize that your choice does impact others.

Group Participation

What is my role as a group member?

Letting the group know why you initially came and what you expect to gain from group is a good place to start. As the group proceeds, you will have reactions to issues that come up in group as well as other individuals. Taking a risk and sharing these reactions can benefit everyone, because we often worry about what others think of us without getting accurate feedback. It is important to know you do not need to have the issue all figured out before you talk about it, but your willingness to share it will convey your trust in the group and the group process and allow the group to help you. We have found that the people who benefit the most from group are those individuals who accept a sense of responsibility for making the group work by sharing their concerns and speaking up when the group feels uncomfortable to them.

What is the therapist's role in the group?

The therapist's role is to provide a safe and trusting atmosphere for members to discuss their concerns and reactions. Therapists accomplish this by encouraging members to talk, asking questions to gain clarification, suggesting alternative strategies when dealing with a problem situation or person, sharing their own feelings and encouraging members to relate their



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experiences to each other. The therapist is not like a professor who brings a set agenda for each meeting or a responsibility to evaluate your performance and participation. The therapist's role is much more like a band conductor who is dependent on each member of the band to play their part for the song to become the work of art it was intended to be. The group only works if both the therapist(s) and the members participate in a collaborative effort.

How much time do I get to talk about me in group?

There are no set rules about talking time in group and it is typically an issue that has to be addressed often. Initially, you are likely to observe two extremes – those people who talk non-stop and those who won't talk at all. For those who talk non-stop, the goal in group is to learn how to be an active listener and assimilate other's feedback and experience with their own. For those who won't talk it is important to define specific needs and to risk asking for what you need in group. The challenge for the group is giving other members information about their communication style so that everyone develops a balance between talking and listening. Each person is responsible for taking their share of the time.

What does it mean when I have a reaction to another group member?

A reaction is valuable information and there is a message in it for you. The group provides a place to evaluate reactions and learn new ways of responding to people or situations that may be problematic for you. Many times members will experiment and try out new responses in group so that they feel more confident before using them outside of group. Group also provides you with the experience of learning how to support others, letting them figure out how they need to handle situations without telling them what they should do or doing it for them.

When I have a reaction to a group member, how should I share it?

We are always wondering what others think of us, but few of us get feedback as well as the privilege of responding and evaluating whether the feedback is valid or not. The group provides a place to process this feedback and often times will provide you different perspectives which gives you the freedom to choose what fits best for you. Giving immediate reactions in group like "I'm hurt you said that to me" are typically scary but their immediacy gives the individuals involved an opportunity to deal with the feelings directly. The direct approach, which often feels intimidating and risky, is the one people value most.

How do I confront another group member?

People get nervous when they hear the word "confront", and want to stay away from this type of interaction. The reality is that learning how to confront is an important communication skill. The group provides a safe place to learn how to do this. It is important that you trust your reaction and know that it is okay to share it. To help the member you are confronting hear your



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concern it is helpful to be specific and non-judgmental. If you state your concern with an “I” statement (e.g., “I feel angry that you keep interrupting me and wish you would stop.”) the chances are better the person will respond to what you said instead of defending him/herself against accusations (e.g., “You are a jerk to keep interrupting me.”) The success of a confrontation depends on your willingness to take the risk knowing you can’t control another’s response.

Is it okay to socialize with other group members?

One of the reasons people are in group is to learn how to relate better to others, so to forbid socializing would be counter-productive. However, socializing can hurt the group if small subgroups within the group have secrets that prevent their open participation in group. This is why we try never to put roommates, boyfriends/girlfriends, or siblings into the same group because these alliances would already be in place. It also limits those individuals in being able to share concerns and reactions about those special intimate relationships. For this reason, we recommend you do not engage in any type of exclusive relationship with another group member while you are both attending the same group.

When will I be ready to leave group?

Members are asked to make a commitment when they begin group to a specific period of time. Most groups continue for a year or longer, and acquire new members as others leave. If you want to leave early, it may be a sign that you are fearful of talking about some concern and leaving would allow you to avoid it or that you’ve gotten what you need from group and are ready to say good-bye. In either case, it is important to talk about these feelings in group so you understand what they are about and the group understands your leaving is of benefit to you instead of a reaction to them.