

Just what is group therapy?

In group therapy, five to ten people meet face-to-face with one or more trained group therapists and talk about what is troubling them. Members also give feedback to each other by expressing their own feelings about what someone says or does. This interaction gives group members an opportunity to try out new ways of behaving and to learn more about the way they interact with others. What makes the situation unique is that it is a **closed and safe system**. The content of the group sessions is confidential; what members talk about or disclose is not discussed outside the group.

The first few sessions of a group usually focus on the establishment of trust. During this time, members work to establish a level of trust that allows them to talk personally and honestly. Group trust is achieved when all members make a commitment to the group.

Why does group therapy work?

When people come into a group and interact freely with other group members, they usually recreate those difficulties that brought them to group therapy in the first place. Under the skilled direction of a group therapist, the group is able to give support, offer alternatives, or gently confront the person. In this way the difficulty becomes resolved, alternative behaviors are learned, and the person develops new social techniques or ways of relating to people. During group therapy, people begin to see that they are not alone. Many people feel they are unique because of their problems, and it is encouraging to hear that other people have similar difficulties. In the climate of trust provided by the group, people feel free to care about and help each other.

Some of the many benefits of group therapy:

- Exploring issues in an interpersonal context more accurately reflects real life.
- Group therapy provides an opportunity to observe and reflect on your own and others' interpersonal skills.
- Group therapy provides an opportunity to benefit both through active participation and through observation.
- Group therapy offers an opportunity to give and get immediate feedback about concerns, issues and problems affecting one's life.
- Group therapy members benefit by working through personal issues in a supportive, confidential atmosphere and by helping others to work through theirs.

What do I talk about in group therapy?

Talk about what brought you to the counseling in the first place. Tell the group members what is bothering you. If you need support, let the group know. If you think you need confrontation, let them know this also. It is important to tell people what you expect of them.

Unexpressed feelings are a major reason why people experience difficulties. Revealing your feelings (self-disclosure) is an important part of group therapy and affects how much you will be helped. The appropriate disclosures will be those that relate directly to your present difficulty. How much you talk about yourself depends upon what you are comfortable with. If you have any questions about what might or might not be helpful, you can always ask the group.

Common misperceptions about Group Therapy:

1. "I will be forced to tell all of my deepest thoughts, feelings and secrets to the group."

You control what, how much, and when you share with the group. Most people find that when they feel safe enough to share what is troubling them, a group can be very helpful and affirming. We encourage you not to share what you are not ready to disclose. You can also be helped by listening to others and thinking about how what they are saying might apply to you.

2. "Group therapy will take longer than individual therapy because I will have to share the time with others.

Actually, group therapy is often more efficient than individual therapy for two reasons. First, you can benefit from the group even during sessions when you say very little but listen carefully to others. You will find that you have much in common with other group members, and as they work on a concern, you can learn more about yourself. Secondly, group members will often bring up issues that strike a chord with you, but that you might not have been aware of or brought up yourself.

3. "I will be verbally attacked by the leaders and by other group members."

It is very important that group members feel safe. Group leaders are there to help develop a safe environment. Feedback is often difficult to hear. As group members come to trust and accept one another, they generally experience feedback and even confrontation as positive, as if it were coming from their best friend. One of the benefits of group therapy is the opportunity to receive feedback from others in a supportive environment. It is rare to find friends who will gently point out how you might be behaving in ways that hurt yourself or others, but this

is precisely what the group can offer. This will be done in a respectful, gentle way, so that you can hear it and make use of it.

4. "Group therapy is second-best to individual therapy."

If group therapy is being recommended to you it is because your counselor believes that it is the best way to address your concerns. We do not put people into group therapy because we don't have space in individual therapy, or because we want to save time. We recommend group therapy when it is the most effective method to help you. Your counselor can discuss with you why group therapy would be effective for you.

5. "I have so much trouble talking with people, I'll never be able to share in a group."

Credit: This article draws heavily on a similar brochure produced by the counseling center at Virginia Commonwealth University

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