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How Interpersonal Group Therapy Can Work For You

It is useful for people starting group therapy to have some general ideas about how groups help people and how they can get the most out of the experience. Group therapy 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 your therapist. The issues raised in this article are also useful to talk about during the first few sessions in the group.

Do Groups Really Help People?

Group therapy is widely used and has been a standard part of treatment programs for over 50 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 non-therapy 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 a responsibility to ensure that the group stays focused on its treatment goals and that all members participate in this.

How Interpersonal Group Therapy Works

Interpersonal group therapy is based on the idea that a great many of the difficulties that people have in their lives can be understood as problems in their relationships 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 in adult relationships. Sometimes these ways are not as effective as they might be, despite good intentions. Groups offer an opportunity to learn more about these “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 important relationships. Groups are designed to be especially helpful with these sorts of problems. Other treatment approaches might help in other ways.

Common Myths About Group Therapy

- Although it is true that groups offer an efficient way of treating several people at once, group therapy is not a cheaper or second-rate treatment in the sense that it has less

power to help people than other treatments. As mentioned above, studies show that many of the “talking therapies” are about equally effective.

- Some people are concerned that a therapy 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. Member 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 that the process of talking about their problems is very helpful. Indeed, finding that others have had similar problems can be reassuring. Many group therapy patients are surprised to find that they have something to offer other people.
- Some of the media presentation of groups suggests 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 the group therapist 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 therapy group, they sometimes find themselves concerned that they may be rejected or excluded by the other group members; sometimes the fear is that they will be judged harshly by the other members, 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 in the group so that they can be understood and dealt with.

How to Get the Most Out of Interpersonal Group Therapy

- 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. Group time is precious; it is a place to be working on serious issues, not just passing the time of day. 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 your part in the group. This process of learning from others is an important way to gain from the group experience.
- 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 some 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 personal matters, getting some response from the other members 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. Group is not a “tea party” where everything has to be done in a socially proper fashion. For example, 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 beyond the words to 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).
- In addition to the spontaneous interactions between members that groups often use to help the patient achieve his or her goals, some group leaders may rely on some other techniques as well. In some groups there may be some teaching in the form of lectures, focused discussions, handouts or readings. Some leaders 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.

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 the role of the leader to encourage members to talk with each other and to help keep the group focused on important tasks. The leader is 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 just getting pat answers.
- Try hard to put into words the connection between how you are reacting or feeling and what is happening between you and other people both in the group and outside. It is all 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 in a constructive fashion. Many people have difficulty with managing these sorts of feelings, and it is part of the group's tasks to examine them. Sometimes these negative feelings may be toward the leader. It is equally important that these also be talked about.
- Try hard to apply what you learn in group to outside situations. Many group members have found it very 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 therapy 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 a therapy group. Try out your ideas in the group first to test if your plans are well thought out.

Group Rules

- **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 our experience, it is extremely uncommon for there to be any important break in confidentiality in therapy groups. Please be sure that you don't talk about others, just as you don't want them to talk about you outside 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 and discuss it with your therapist or at least leave the information. Then the group will know you are not coming and won't wait until you arrive to get down to work. It is useful for the group to spend some time periodically talking about major absences such as trips or vacations and discussing how to plan for these as a group.
- **Initial commitment.** Most interpersonal therapy groups are intended to be long-term in nature. It takes time to appreciate how much a group can help you, so it is important that you commit yourself to the group. Before the group starts, discuss with your therapist what the expectations are in terms of your commitment. Once you join, it is expected that you will discuss with the group any feelings you might have of wanting to leave the group.
- **Alcohol or drugs.** Groups are places for sensitive personal discussions. It is important that you do not come to sessions under the influence of alcohol or drugs except medications. This is not to say that it is good or bad to use alcohol or drugs, but 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.
- **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 strongly advised not to have outside contacts with each other. The reason for this is that if you 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 some outside contact with group members, 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 report such contacts with the group.

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