

Preparing for Group Psychotherapy

Group psychotherapy is a unique and highly effective form of treatment for a wide variety of mental health issues. This document provides a brief introduction to the basics of group therapy for prospective members. In order to be successful, group requires a significant commitment on the part of the therapist(s) and the members. As a client considering group therapy, it is important that you have an idea about how group therapy operates and how you can get the most out of your experience.

The Group Premise

You were born and raised in a group – your family – where you began to learn about who you are and what you can expect from others and the world. Therapy groups offer a unique opportunity to re-visit unhelpful, often painful lessons from childhood. The group process naturally stimulates these old, familiar ways of relating to ourselves and others and gives members the opportunity to replace them with new, more nourishing relational experiences. We often believe that our painful internal conflicts and struggles set us apart from others, making us feel alone in the world. A well run therapy group can help members realize that they are not so different from others and that our internal and external experiences can be shared and understood. Ultimately, group can be thought of as a forum for interpersonal learning as it creates a secure space within which to risk change and growth. Group therapy works best when all of the members of the group feel safe enough to share their feelings and experiences in an open, direct, and genuine manner.

In spite of the advantages, group therapy can be intimidating for many prospective members. You may worry about how you will be perceived by others or how your feelings and experiences will be treated by the group. You may recall past experiences where your feelings were hurt by one or more members of a group. It is quite common that prospective group members feel anxiety about joining a new or ongoing therapy group. The following information should help to orient you to the potential benefits of group as well as how it actually operates. Group members tend to receive from group what they put into group. The more you risk putting yourself “out there” to have your internal life seen and known, the more you will engage meaningfully with the therapist and other members, and the more you will grow.

Group vs. Individual Psychotherapy

Group psychotherapy has been used as a treatment modality for more than 50 years. A large body of research has shown group therapy to be as effective, and in some cases, more effective than individual therapy. For many people, some combination of both is ideal. Frequently, the intimacy and more personal focus of individual therapy is the most comfortable way to get started. Group can then be a forum within which to behaviorally test out some of the insights gained in individual therapy in a safe setting. For example, a client might learn in her individual therapy that she is afraid of being judged or criticized by others when she shares her more tender or painful feelings. While this might be dealt with fairly quickly (but narrowly) with an individual therapist, group offers the opportunity to test out new ways of relating to others that would allow her to confront and overcome this fear in all of her relationships, not just with her therapist.

There are important similarities and differences between individual and group therapy. One important similarity is that any area of concern can be addressed in either setting. In individual and group therapy, clients are invited to talk about anything that feels emotionally important to them. Both involve talking about your feelings, sharing sensitive experiences, engaging in self reflection, and being open to giving and receiving feedback from others. While individual therapy does offer an intensely personal focus, group allows for a more varied and general picture of how you relate to others and they to you. In group, there are often times when people have more direct one-on-one contact with the therapist or other members in a way that is similar to individual therapy; however, when this happens in group, it can also positively influence the observing members and it promotes feedback from people other than the therapist.

Just as it takes time to form a relationship with your individual therapist, group relationships take time to form. Members need to get to know each other very well before the greatest benefits of group therapy are generated. For this reason, you will be asked for a commitment to attend group for six months (roughly 26 sessions) before deciding whether or not to be an ongoing group member. Ideally, it is suggested that you commit to one year in order to evaluate the benefit of group, and perhaps keep an open mind to the idea of staying significantly longer. Members often stay for far longer than they originally imagined because they continue to find great value in group therapy. The more that each group member shares feelings, gives feedback to others, and takes emotional risks, the faster the group will come together to create increasingly deep and meaningful interpersonal experiences for the members.

Goals of Group Therapy

Group therapy is based on the idea that many of the difficulties that people have in their lives can be observed and understood in relationships with others, as well as within the self. In childhood, we learn ways of being close to others, getting our needs met, as well as strategies for solving problems and protecting ourselves emotionally. Depending on the nature of our childhood experiences, it is often the case that these ways of relating don't work well when applied to adult relationships and situations. Despite your good intentions and effort, you may be dissatisfied with your important relationships, or you may be seeking a new, meaningful relationship, or find it difficult to accept yourself. The main goals of group therapy are to develop more effective ways of relating to yourself and to others, and to help you feel more authentic within yourself and your relationships. To that end, it is expected (indeed inevitable) that each member will relate to others in ways that are familiar and based upon past experience. The problems that one experiences in relationships outside group will often develop inside group as well. A main goal of group is to examine and work out these problems in new ways that can translate into improved relationships in one's life.

Group Norms and Expectations

There are many different kinds of groups. Some are designed to offer support, such as grief support groups or AA; some are designed to teach skills for a specific problem, such as an assertiveness training group; other groups focus on a special topic like eating disorders. This group focuses on our relationships

to ourselves and the other members of the group, including the therapist(s). Indeed, there will be times when support, skill development, or special topics emerge as a focus in group; however, examining and working with feelings and relationships within us and among group members is the central theme. This means that in addition to support, we will stress an open, honest discussion of all feelings, including negative feelings. The ability to skillfully address both positive and negative feelings is a cornerstone to effective interpersonal functioning.

In order for a group to function effectively, it is critical that group members understand and adhere to a consistent set of expectations known as the *group contract*. This is an explicit agreement about what group members (and the therapist) can expect from one another as we strive to meet the goals of the group. Predictable behavioral guidelines allow members enough structure to safely take emotional risks and create a foundation for meaningful relationships to develop. A clear group contract also provides opportunities to openly discuss group experiences that may deviate from the contract and thus threaten the viability of the group. The following points represent our group contract:

The Group Agreement (or Contract)

Group Goals:

1. Each member shares with the group the emotionally-significant story of their lives, past and present.
2. Each member attempts to put into words all of their thoughts and feelings about themselves and others.

Group Guidelines:

1. Confidentiality: Everything that members reveal in group stays in group, as does the identifying information of all of the group members.
2. There is no socializing outside of group. Accidental outside group contact is brought back to the group.
3. Group will start and end on time.
2. Each member pays for each group, whether they are present or not.
3. Members pay the fee on the day of the first meeting of that month, counting up the number of meetings that month, unless other arrangements have been made. Payment is made by check, cash, Venmo or Zelle. Credit cards are not accepted.
4. Members announce absences from group (or late arrivals) in advance, whenever possible.
5. There is no action (i.e., touching, hugging, getting up, leaving, throwing things) in group. Impulses to act are put into words, not into action.
6. Each member will, over several groups, take up a roughly equal amount of talking time.
7. All thoughts and feelings are welcomed. All content areas or topics are open for discussion.

8. Group members are committed to sharing their thoughts and feelings about other group members, the group itself and the group leader.

9. Members stay working in group until they feel they have met their treatment goals, which may change over time. At that time, a departing member attends four full groups to allow time for exploration of the conscious and unconscious motives to leave and, primarily, for a thoughtful “goodbye” process to be had with the other members.

The reasons for these guidelines are relatively straightforward. Group therapy requires a significant commitment on the part of its members. Starting and ending on time shows respect for each member’s time, commitment and outside group responsibilities. Likewise, unexpected absences contribute to a lack of group continuity. A high level of participation is central to all successful groups. The group contract is designed to increase attendance and group effectiveness. Likewise, communicating via behavior (rather than words) or setting limits on what feelings can be discussed will inhibit members from sharing openly. Since group is about examining and learning from relationships, it is important that all members have access to everything that takes place between the members of the group. This goal can only be achieved by limiting interactions among members to the time during which the group is meeting.

Confidentiality is another aspect of the group contract that facilitates emotional safety and risk taking. While you may discuss anything you yourself say in group, contributions by other group members are not to be discussed with anyone outside the group, other than your individual therapist (who is likewise bound by confidentiality). Finally, the four session “goodbye” process is meant to prevent the sudden, unpredictable departure of a group member. Abrupt endings deprive that member and the group from openly reflecting upon the relationships and experiences that have developed in the group over time.

How to Reach Your Goals in Group

It helps to think of group therapy as a living laboratory where you can safely take risks and try out new ways of relating to others, getting your needs met, and supporting others. You will also get practice in translating your feelings and thoughts into words, which is a critical life skill. The level and nature of how you participate in group will, to a great degree, determine how quickly you achieve your goals and reap other benefits. The more you involve yourself in the group, the more you will get out of it. To that end, you should keep in mind the following:

1. Identify your reactions: Specifically, try to identify your reactions to others in the room including the therapist(s). As you listen, begin to notice your thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, fantasies, urges, and anything you feel compelled to do. Notice if you feel judgment, if you want to give advice, if you want to comfort or protect others, whether what they are saying creates any discomfort for you, any admiration, envy, competitiveness, hope, anger, etc.

2. Express your reactions authentically: Once you identify your thoughts and feelings in response to others, notice what blocks you from expressing yourself. Of course you won’t need to express each and every thought, but notice when you are inhibited from expressing relevant reactions and talk about what is getting in the way of sharing with the group. Some common reasons that people fail to express themselves authentically in group, as well as in life, are that they:

- Feel their thoughts and feelings are not as important as others' thoughts and feelings.
- Worry about taking more than their share of group time.
- Feel that they are being a burden to others.
- Are worried about hurting or offending others.
- Are concerned that others will judge them negatively.
- Fear generating anger in, or conflict with, one or more group members.
- Feel pressure to “please” (or fear of disappointing) the group leader(s).

3. *Be respectful at all times:* Disagreements are a natural aspect of all relationships, and you are encouraged to express them openly and respectfully. When you feel judgmental about somebody in group, please talk about your judgments without labeling others, but by describing the behaviors with which you take issue and your reaction to them. For example, the label “you are such a bore,” should be replaced by a more complete description of your feelings in which you take ownership of your reaction, such as “when you speak in such detail, I become frustrated and lose my motivation to listen and understand you.” And don’t worry if this seems difficult to do. It is the therapist's job to help you practice and get more comfortable and skilled with this kind of interaction. In group and life, conflict is inevitable. Helping people deal with conflict and anger more effectively is a particular strength of group therapy.

As group gets started, the most important thing of all is that you introduce yourself to the group. Early in group therapy, this introduction process involves having each member gradually tell his or her life story. This story is much more than sharing the facts of one’s life. A meaningful group introduction involves telling the *emotionally-salient* story of your life. This means that in addition to important facts about you, other members will be interested in your struggles, losses, hopes, conflicts, and past experiences linked to unresolved, painful feelings such as guilt, shame, anger, and fear. This is not the life story that most people are used to telling and it can be uncomfortable at first. In the long run, tolerating the discomfort that comes with self-exposure allows for growth, change and healing.

The Group Leader

A group leader's role is first to help create an atmosphere of safety within the group, which involves introducing and observing the group contract (for which members have a responsibility as well). There will be times when we remind the group about aspects of the group contract and wonder out loud with the group about the meaning of any deviations from the contract (members should do the same). In addition, we work to facilitate effective sharing by, and exchanges among, group members, keep the group focused on important issues, and to model effective relationship skills. We are also responsible for identifying our emotional reactions and expressing them authentically and respectfully. At different times, we

will emphasize different levels of the group experience: The group as a whole, interpersonal exchanges, individual process, and our own reactions. By design, we will often tend to focus on the here-and-now interactions of the group and will work to help members extract meaning from their experiences.

How to Avoid Early Group “Traps”

Every new group member is anxious, whether joining an ongoing group or an entirely new group. Anxiety tends to cause us to engage others with more rigid and scripted modes of behavior. Sometimes, this initial anxiety causes new members to fall into what I refer to as “early group traps.” The term “trap” refers to how a new group member can become mired in a way of relating that prevents them from joining effectively with the other members of the group. Once a new member falls into a “trap,” it can be hard to get out and often people in this situation leave group prematurely. Even more worrisome than an early departure is the fact that such members often have some of their most painful feelings about themselves and others reinforced, rather than changed for the better. The following is a short list of early group traps of which you should be aware:

- *Not sharing enough.* Anxiety can cause a new member to shut down his emotional process out of a desire for self protection; however, this prevents others from getting to know him and vice versa. A failure to share one’s meaningful experience can generate negative feelings in members who *have* taken the risk to share.
- *Dominating the discussion.* Many people talk a lot when they are anxious. More importantly, they talk in such a way that they are not sharing feelings, but sharing facts or advice, with others. This too prevents the other members from getting to know the person in a meaningful way and again tends to generate negative feelings instead of allowing for early bonding to take place.
- *Violating the group agreement.* Members who arrive late, do not pay each time, miss meetings, or deviate from other aspects of the treatment contract tend to arouse negative feelings in the other members and likewise impede the bonding process within the group. A single instance rarely disrupts the group process for long; repeated deviations from the group agreement almost always do.
- *Sharing angry feelings too intensely.* For many people, anxiety tends to magnify the expression of anger unintentionally. It is important to remember that in a new relationship, one needs to be especially aware of being respectful and thoughtful about sharing anger with another group member.
- *Suppressing negative feelings.* This is perhaps the most common early group trap. As a group is forming, it is natural that most members want to get along well with the other members in order to be liked and accepted. It is equally true, however, that some negative feelings will be generated in the early group phase of therapy. As new members often fear being viewed as causing “trouble” or complaining, they sometimes deal with negative feelings toward other members or the therapist(s) by suppressing them. If the negative feelings are strong enough, the process of pushing them down can cause the member to slowly withdraw and emotionally disconnect from the group process. The suppressed negative feelings can “metastasize” into a hardened resentment that prevents the member from fully joining the group emotionally and often leads to premature dropout from group therapy. Remember, it is very

important for success in group therapy that you share your full range of feelings, even if it is uncomfortable to do so. That way, early negative tension can be released and addressed. This process, though anxiety provoking, often leads to deeper levels of trust throughout the group.

One final note: If you find yourself worrying about falling into any of the early therapy traps or having difficulty with the early group process for any other reason and don't feel able to raise the issue openly in group, please contact the group leader(s) so you can get some help figuring out what to do. Raising the issue openly in group is frequently the most effective way to begin to deal with difficulties you might be experiencing; however, you are also welcome to make contact with your group leader in order to discuss the matter one-on-one before bringing it up in group. It is sometimes recommended that group members who have a different individual therapist schedule regular check-in sessions with the group leader, whether once a month, once a quarter, or more often when group is too activating. Chances are your group leader will have some good ideas about how to address the issues with which you may be struggling. It is your group leader's responsibility to help you engage in the process in the most effective way possible.