

An Introduction to Psychodynamic Group Psychotherapy

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The following is an introduction to group therapy. I hope it will help you understand how the group works. As with any "manual", you will learn much more in the experience of actually participating than reading about it!

Group psychotherapy can be a tool to better understand the conflicts in your life. Even more, it will help you to see better ways of moving beyond those conflicts in your interactions with others. My approach to group psychotherapy utilizes the interpersonal model which assumes that each person develops his individual personality through interactions with others. In group therapy, you learn through interactions with other members as you receive feedback from others about yours and their impact on one another and on the group as a whole.

I draw upon psychodynamic theory to understand personality development. In this perspective, I seek to help my patients identify roles and patterns first learned in our families of origin and early peer groups, and later replayed in our lives more or less consciously. These roles will naturally recur in the therapy group and you will have an opportunity in the group to learn more about them and to experiment with new ones.

Each participant in the group has made the following commitments: to offer honest, responsible feedback and use others' feedback to uncover old ineffective patterns and learn new effective ways of relating. This process is also a way to learn to appreciate your strengths and resilience.

To summarize, the group's purpose is to help you know yourself better and to help group members know themselves better. As such, the group becomes a "laboratory"--a chance to learn more about your patterns of relating: how you get close to others and how you push others away and what triggers your feelings and how you get stuck. Our membership agreements are designed to facilitate that work, and become the "vows" of our relationship, if you will. When honored, these vows lead to a growing trust around intimacy; when broken, the level of trust is shaken, and the effectiveness of the group is stalled for a while.

At the same time, the broken agreement offers us a chance to understand the feelings that led up to the break and followed it. I will pay particular attention to these agreements in order to gauge members' willingness and capacity and what gets in the way.

Confidentiality: To make the group a safe place to share personal information and to protect the privacy of members, each member agrees to keep names or identifying information about other group members to themselves. What happens in group stays in group.

Boundaries: Group members agree not to socialize with each other outside group. By keeping the relationships inside the group, you are creating a "safe container" in which everyone is on the same page. By keeping the relationships therapeutic and not social, you have a unique opportunity to explore topics such as sex and money which are often taboo in ordinary social relationships.

This therapy group is an on-going group. All members make a minimum of a year

commitment. When you consider leaving the group, it's advisable to share your decision process with the group. This process helps others understand you better and will help you understand yourself better. Sometimes when people express the wish to leave, it is the right time to leave. At other times, especially when confronting a challenging moment in the group, you may feel the urge to leave quickly which would relieve your anxiety but would undermine an important opportunity to work. Enlisting the perspective of others can help you sort this out. Ideally, the group will come to some consensus about whether this is a good time for you to leave. If you are leaving, it's helpful if you give the group several weeks notice in order to have an opportunity to say goodbye and bring the relationships to as much closure as possible.

Time: The group begins promptly. If you are late or sick, please call. All members appreciate knowing in advance if you will miss a session.

Fee: The group fee is \$55 per session, whether you attend a particular meeting or not, similar to a tuition for a class, or rent on an apartment. I will bill on the last meeting of the month and expect payment by the 20th of that month. I will give the group ample notice of any change in the fee. As with all topics pertaining to group business, you agree to explore payment problems in the group.

How the group works:

You'll discover many ways that group therapy can be helpful to you. You can find support from the other group members and offer some support to them. You can practice communicating, recognize the universality of your experience, break out of your isolation, and learn to trust. All these healing aspects of group will be yours for the taking--the more you engage with the group. These aspects of our work are supportive.

In addition, there are some techniques which I'll use to heighten our ability to do therapeutic work together. These techniques are useful in intensifying our engagement and identifying patterns which have interfered with your ability to relate elsewhere. The techniques include: "using the here and now", practicing reactive and reflective communication, confronting broken agreements, assessing safety, making connections to childhood experience, and exploring the whole group's development.

Using the Group Relationships in the "Here and Now":

With the exception of the beginning of your first session, sessions won't be structured. Each group member decides for himself if he needs time. Although there are no rigid rules about what's okay to share, often the most change-enhancing work comes out of your ability to stay in the present with feelings about your experience of what's happening inside the group. The group's focus includes relationships, intimacy, sexuality, self-image, shame, grief, loss, aspirations and victories. All these topics will have meaning within the relationships in the group in the "here and now". Equally important to you may be discussing a recent encounter with a family member, a problem on your job, a realization about yourself, or a question that's been on your mind from the previous group's session. Feel free to bring them up. As your group therapist, I will bridge these experiences back to what is happening within the room. Examining dynamics right in front of us increases your awareness and adds meaning to your life outside the group.

We can then explore how your dynamics originated in your earliest relationships in your family.

Communication:

As in any important relationship, relationships within the group are a balance between spontaneous reaction and more thoughtful reflection. You can practice both **reaction and reflection** and you can work at finding a healthy balance of both modes in your relationships in the group.

You can practice spontaneity and honesty; a **reactive** mode. You can go with your gut feeling, owning your own reaction as valid and worth expressing and understanding. A useful way to own your reaction is by saying, for example: "I'm feeling _____ in reaction to your saying _____" or "When you do _____, I feel _____". You may not feel ready or wish to share each feeling but you will gain more from the group by taking risks and being responsible and honest about expressing your own experience. Expressing your feeling is different from acting on your feeling.

You also can practice **reflecting** on your feelings and impulses: "What feelings are being triggered in me? Are my feelings familiar? When have I felt this way before? What are my dynamics here? What am I repeating in this? Which of my buttons are getting pushed? Why now? Is it me or is it him? Is it the group?"

Leader's role;

What to expect from me: One of my main jobs will be to address times when the agreements don't hold. For example, members agree to put feelings into words not action. If a member is late or skips a session or forgets to pay his bill, I'll explore what feelings are expressed in action (i.e. the act of tardiness, absence, or nonpayment) not in words. I'll enlist the group to help us all understand what the action means for the member and for the whole group.

For example, if a member is late, is he feeling anxious and avoiding what's been happening in the group? Or is he feeling inadequate and sacrificing his time because he feels unworthy of full membership? Is the group feeling competitive and colluding with his low self-regard by ignoring his tardiness? By keeping to our agreement to put feelings into words, we get back to the goal of knowing feelings and connecting with each other and increasing the climate of safety.

Safety in group doesn't mean a guarantee of pain-free experience. Rather, the safety in the group is based in trust that your feelings will be respected. If you do feel dismissed or injured, you have a right to be heard and we'll work to understand the source of your injury.

Let me elaborate on this point. Every child has an understandable wish for relationships to be pain-free. In childhood that wish gets broken. How we adjust to that pain and disappointment has enormous impact on how we relate later in life. These are our scars, our vulnerabilities, and our triggers. We defend ourselves from reexperiencing hurt by using our various defensive styles. Growth includes the capacity to risk tolerable pain and weather tolerable injury.

Especially because many members' childhood relationships included intolerable abuse or neglect, members will dread that our relationships in the group will be abusive or dismissive and cause intolerable pain and intolerable injury. In this way, fear triggered

by past injury gets in the way of current experience. Injury and disappointment happen in the group. When a member is injured or disappointed in our relationships within the group, my commitment will be to work with you and the group to help you name your feelings and identify where the pain and hurt come from. We'll then work together to help you recover and find more flexibility and vitality.

In this way, despite the pain and injury, you will have a corrective experience. You learn that rather than using old ways of avoiding engagement to avert old pain, you can risk engagement and be less vulnerable. The old wish isn't fulfilled but a fundamental need is honored--mutual respect. Rather than retreat to protected isolation, members can find deeper connection and interdependence. The whole group deepens and grows through this process.

I will have different ways of understanding what happens in our interaction. I will offer my perspective as a way to make what have been unconscious patterns of thinking and acting more conscious. With awareness, comes freedom to change rigid patterns. Let me describe two of the ways. I'll listen: I will pursue how members' words and actions are suggestive of dynamics from their childhood experience.

For example, a member makes jokes and distracts the group whenever conflict occurs between members. With the help of our inquiry, he identifies he is afraid of conflict in the group because his father was intolerant, explosive and physically abusive. For this member to fight and confront in the group stirs up fear of physical and emotional injury. Now aware of this pattern, he is able to manage conflict in a new constructive, engaging way.

I will also identify dynamics in the whole group's development. For example, the group may be coalescing and becoming more intimate--or it may be fracturing and resisting out of fear or anxiety or competition. Often members have never had an experience of being a member in any group. This perspective can help you find your way as a part of the whole group.

I will not be the only one with useful perspective and insight. Each member's perspective is valid and adds to our enriched understanding of the dynamic and complex dimensions of our relationships. I will affirm the importance of our diverse perspectives.

One final thought: I am open to hearing your concerns at any time within our sessions. You may feel a need to talk to me between sessions. If you are in crisis, I'm an additional resource to you. I'll encourage you to bring your concerns back to the group.

If you have any questions about this material, please bring them up in our meeting.