

Introduction to Group Therapy



Based on your concerns, your therapist believes that participating in a group will help you meet your goals. Please take a few minutes to read this information sheet to learn more about how group therapy can help you feel better.

Group therapy offers a unique opportunity to build community, explore your needs, share your experiences, offer support to others, and develop strategies to combat many different problems. In fact, studies show that group therapy is just as effective as (and, in some cases, even MORE effective than) individual therapy!

Group Basics

Most groups consist of 4-15 members and 1-2 therapists. Groups meet once per week, with meetings lasting 1-1.5 hours. Some groups are short term (lasting only 4-5 weeks), while others span the entire semester.

How Does Group Therapy Work?

In some groups, sessions revolve around members openly sharing personal issues that they are facing. Members talk about their experiences throughout the week and their responses to these events, or they can talk about past events that have greatly impacted their lives. Participants are encouraged to explore how their experiences might relate to the issues raised by other members or by the group leader(s). Other members are then able to react, give feedback, encourage, offer support, or share their thoughts and feelings with the group. Giving and receiving feedback in group can help everyone increase their awareness of maladaptive patterns of behavior, change points of view, and encourage more constructive and effective reactions. In this way, group can become a laboratory for practicing new behaviors.

In other types of groups, the focus of therapy is to learn specific skills to help you cope with your concerns. While these groups may have some opportunities to talk about your experiences, sessions are usually more structured. That is, the group leader(s) have specific topics/activities that they will cover each week. These groups may feel more like a traditional college class, but without the pressure of being graded! Growth and healing can occur in structured therapy groups if you complete the weekly "homework assignments" and if you work hard to integrate each lesson into your daily life.

Who Can Benefit From Group Therapy?

Group therapy is suitable for a large variety of difficulties and concerns, including people who would like to develop their interpersonal skills and people with problems like anxiety, depression, or other emotional troubles. Groups are especially suited to people who are struggling with relationship issues like intimacy, trust, and self-esteem. The group's interactions help the participants to identify, get feedback about, and change the patterns that are sabotaging their relationships. The great advantage of group therapy is working on these patterns in the "here and now"- in a group situation similar to everyday life.

What is Expected of You?

As a group participant, you will be expected to be present each week and arrive on time. If you are running late or ever need to miss a session, please email your group leader(s) or call the Counseling Center at (936) 294-1720 as soon as possible. **If you miss 2 sessions in a row without notifying the leader(s), we will assume that you are no longer interested in participating in group therapy, and you may lose your spot in the group.**

To protect everyone's privacy, it is required that group members' names and any information shared be kept confidential by all group participants. So long as you do not disclose other members' information, you are free to share your own experiences and insights in group with members of your support network.

Your group leader(s) will also keep group member information confidential. Confidentiality will only be broken by your group leader(s) in rare circumstances (e.g., you are a danger to yourself or others; you inform us about a child, an elderly person, or a person with a disability being abused/neglected; you inform us that a previous therapist has had an inappropriate relationship with you or another client; or your records are legally subpoenaed by a court of law).

In the group you will not be required to talk or reveal intimate issues when you do not want to. However, research suggests that more participation usually leads to greater gains over the course of therapy.

Group Therapy Can Help You By...

- Increasing your sense of hope when you feel like giving up
- Building connection with others, which can help combat loneliness and isolation
- Reminding you that you are not alone in your concerns and experiences
- Learning how to build and maintain healthier relationships
- Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem
- Exploring changes in your life including transitions, break-ups, deaths, or other losses
- Exploring bad experiences from the past, so you can put them behind you
- Providing an outlet when you are feeling overwhelmed
- Learning how to manage symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns
- Supporting you when you are feeling different or disagree with mainstream culture
- Helping you understand why you do things that you don't want to do
- Providing a stable and understanding place to go when things in life seem very unsafe or inconsistent
- And much more!

How to Get the Most Out of Your Group Experience

1. ***Be Yourself, Share Yourself, Express yourself.*** Many of us censor our expression of thoughts and feelings. We are afraid of being inappropriate or of being overwhelmed if we give voice to our experiences. A group is an ideal place to find out what would happen if we expressed what we felt, and can be a powerful and positive experience. If you have feelings that relate to the group, be willing to express them. "Sitting on feelings" can inhibit community and leave you stuck.
2. ***Decide for yourself how much to disclose.*** To find out about yourself, you need to take some risks by saying more than you are comfortable saying. However, pushing yourself should be distinguished from disclosing things about you simply because others seem to expect or need it. If you find that it is difficult for you to share yourself personally in your group, begin by letting them know what makes it hard for you to let yourself be known.
3. ***Experiment.*** Look at the group as a place in which you are relatively safer and freer than usual to express yourself in different ways and to try out different sides of yourself. Having done so, you can then seek ways of carrying these new behaviors into your outside life. In between group meetings, think of specific ways in which you can practice and experiment with the behaviors you are acquiring in your group, then report to the group how you are letting yourself behave differently outside.
4. ***Have a Focus.*** Commit yourself to getting something from this group by focusing on what you hope to accomplish. Clarify your goals, review specific issues you want to explore, specific changes you want to

make, and actions you are willing to take to make these changes. Before each group session, take time to clarify what you would like to bring up during that meeting, and write these issues down.

5. **Grow.** Groups are built on the assumption that life can be enriched by the opportunity to explore your feelings, values, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts and to consider changes you may want to make. This exploration is helpful for everyone. Even if you do not have any pressing crisis in your life, assume that issues that come up for you are worth exploring.
6. **Be an active participant.** You will help yourself most if you take an active role in the group. Silent observers are not likely to get as much from their participation in the group, and others may believe that their silence means they are being judgmental. Although silent members may be learning vicariously, they deprive others of the opportunity to learn from them. Realize that others will not know you if you remain silent on issues that are important to you. At least let people know what it is like for you to be in a particular group session. Even if you did not do any focused work yourself during the session, you are likely to have had reactions to what went on with others. Let them know how their work affected you.
7. **Be flexible.** Although it helps to approach a group session with some idea of what you want to explore, don't be so committed to your agenda that you can't work with what comes up spontaneously within the group. Be open to pursuing alternative paths if you are affected by others in your group.
8. **Don't wait to work.** It is easy to let a group session go by without getting around to what you hope to do or say. The longer you wait to involve yourself, the harder it will become. Therefore, challenge yourself to have something to say at the beginning of each group, even if it is a brief statement of what it was like for you to come to the group that day.
9. **Be "greedy" – ask for what you need.** The success of a group depends on your being eager to do your own work. This doesn't mean that you should monopolize time or be insensitive to the difficulty others may have in getting the group's attention, but if you constantly wait until it's your "turn" or try to monitor how much of the group's time should be allotted to you, you will inhibit the spontaneity and enthusiasm that can make a group exciting and productive. Ask for time. Ask for support. Ask for feedback.
10. **Pay attention to feelings.** Intellectual discussions are great, but an experiential group is about your feelings and convictions. If you do nothing but expound your theories and opinions, you will not explore your life on an emotional level. As a rule of thumb, if your sentences can just as well start "My opinion is that...", you probably are not working much on a feeling level, and you are not taking full advantage of the unique opportunity that an experiential group provides for doing so. You don't need to work hard to generate feelings, but be open to letting yourself experience them as you are in a session and as you are present for others. Also, if you are talking about a topic in the group, find some way to show how this matter is connected with you personally. Avoid abstract discussions of topics that have no personal relevance.
11. **Don't expect change to be instantaneous.** If you do seek to change some features of your life, remember that such changes do not usually happen all at once or without some backsliding. Don't be overly critical of yourself if you experience setbacks. Give yourself credit for what you are willing to try and for subtle changes you can see yourself making.
12. **Give feedback.** When people express something that touches you, let them know by emphasizing your own feelings and reactions. Even if your feedback is not easy to express and may be difficult to listen to, it can be useful if it is delivered in a caring and concerned manner. In the long run, your willingness to directly and honestly confront



another member with your reactions enhances the level of trust within the group and leads you to greater honesty in your daily life.

13. **Avoid giving advice.** In providing others with feedback, steer clear of telling them what they should do or how they are feeling. Avoid giving quick reassurance or offering them pat solutions for their problems. Rather than telling them how to solve their problems, tell them about your struggle with your own problems. Emphasize feedback that will give others a clearer sense of how their behavior affects you personally. Also, let them know of behaviors that might bring you closer to them.
14. **Be open to feedback.** When others give you feedback about their reactions to your work, remember that, like you, they are there to try out new ways of expressing themselves directly. It is easy to accept their feedback too quickly or to be too quick to reject their insights by explaining away what they say. The most constructive approach is usually to listen and to think their reactions over until you get a grasp on what parts of it fit.
15. **Approach conflict (Don't avoid it).** While stressful, conflict is normal and healthy in a community – only if it is approached and discussed and worked through. This leads to a deepening of relationships and allows meaningful work to occur.
16. **Carry your work outside the group.** You will be finding new ways of expressing yourself within the group. Don't let it go at that! Try these behaviors out in your everyday life with due respect for timing and with caution.
17. **Express your feelings.** Some feelings are easier to express than others. Groups generally focus on those feelings that are causing members some difficulty. Because we usually don't get a chance to explore ways in which our feelings affect us, try to push yourself to talk about those feelings that you frequently try to avoid. But share your joys too!
18. **Write in your journal.** Sort through all that you experience in your group by journaling. Even brief entries in a journal can be most useful in helping you monitor yourself and keep track of how well you are attaining your goals.
19. **Be willing to set action-oriented homework assignments for yourself** and make a commitment to yourself and your group to follow through with your plans. If you want to change, it will be necessary to work and practice outside of the group.
20. **Think about your thinking.** Learn to monitor your self-talk. Identify those beliefs that are contributing to your struggles. Reflect on how you can easily be setting yourself up for defeat. You may be creating self-fulfilling prophecies that keep you from feeling and acting the way you'd like. Identify some patterns of negative thinking, bring them to a session, and begin to challenge them. You can learn how to argue with those voices in your head that keep you from becoming the person you want to be.
21. **Respect confidentiality.** Keep in mind how easy it might be to inadvertently betray the confidences of others. Make it a practice not to talk about what others are doing in your group or what they are experiencing. If you choose to talk about the group to others, talk about yourself and what you are learning. If at any time you become unsure that confidentiality is being respected, bring this matter up in the group.
22. **Avoid storytelling – Focus on Internal not External.** If you go on at length to provide others with information about you, you wind up distracting yourself and everyone else. Avoid narratives of your history. Express what is present, or express what is past, if you are struggling with this past event.
23. **Risk Boldly.** Yes, being in a therapy group can feel nervous and vulnerable at times, but it can also be a place of strength and support. You can find open acceptance of your differences, a place of safety, and a community. We are inviting you to risk and grow together with us!

Reflection Questions

Please take a couple of minutes to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about beginning group therapy. Use your responses to help you get the most out of your group therapy experience!

What are my goals for group therapy?

What excites me most about participating in group therapy?

What makes me feel nervous/uneasy about participating in group therapy?

What can I do to feel more comfortable in a group? (e.g., asking the group leader(s) questions to help calm my fears or reminding myself of the different ways that group therapy can help me reach my goals)

What might prevent me from having a successful group experience?

What can I do to avoid/cope with these obstacles?

What is one risk I can take during my group therapy experience?

What questions do I have for the group leader(s)?

For more information on Group Therapy, please visit our website at <http://www.shsu.edu/dept/counseling/group-counseling.html>.



If you are in crisis, return to the Counseling Center, contact University Police at (936) 294-1794, call the Crisis Hotline at 1-800-784-2433, text "HOME" to 741741, or go to the nearest hospital.

