

Group Therapy: An Owner's Manual

Although originally published in a journal for psychotherapists (Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy, Winter 2007), this article is really meant to be used as an owner's manual for people who are considering entering a therapy group and for those who are already in one. In fact since it was published a number of therapists have asked for copies to give to the members of their ongoing groups and to prospective members. For a person considering group therapy it can give some idea of how powerful and valuable the experience might be if all goes well. For a person already in a group it can serve as a reminder of the important things to do in order to get the most from the powerful opportunities for healing and growth that being in group offers.

A How-to Manual for Members of Psychotherapy Groups

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Group therapy is usually understood to derive its healing power from the connections and interactions that evolve among members. Attunement of members with one another, as well with the therapist(s), occurs at increasingly deep levels over time. At a superficial level this attunement is reflected in enhanced abilities to “read” each other through facial expression, posture, voice inflection, and the like. At a deeper level it is reflected in synchronicities, such as one person having a dream about another which reveals that the person having the dream knows something about the other that could not be known through perceptual channels. Such manifestations of attunement, while sometimes disorienting, are therapeutic gold. We have developed the following manual to assist members and would-be members of psychotherapy groups to facilitate such attunement.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF GROUP THERAPY AN OWNER'S MANUAL

Group therapy can provide powerful healing, and even transformative, experiences. In order for this type of experience to occur, the members of the group must achieve a deep level of trust and interconnectedness. The suggestions given below are intended help you enter and participate in the group in ways that will make it more likely that you will have such experiences.

Initially it may seem impossible to trust or to learn from other members of the group you perceive to be different from you. You may see yourself as superior, inferior, or just plain incompatible on any one of many dimensions, such as wealth, intelligence, sophistication, education, gender, sexual orientation, religion, spirituality, criminal history, ethnicity, age, mental health, political beliefs, moral integrity, and/or self-awareness. Discussing how your perception of differences makes trusting them difficult can be the first step to building relationships.

Your ability to search out elements of common humanity (including yourself *in*, rather than *out*) will offer you wider possibilities for self-knowledge and growth.

Finding the courage to be authentic in the group will enhance your bravery in other relationships and situations outside the group. Egg others on to be more courageous, and let them egg you on.

Remember The Tripartite Theorem: As you present your life and yourself to the group at increasingly deeper levels, the material you present can be divided into three categories. The ideal response of the group depends on the category. The first category consists of beliefs and behaviors that you can change in order to reduce your suffering. The group confronts and contains you so that you can find the courage and insight to make such changes. The second category consists of suffering over which you have no control, and in this case the group's job is simply to bear witness to your suffering and to refrain from trying to talk you out of it. The third category consists of

the miracles in your life, and the group's job again is primarily to bear witness, although sometimes it must first struggle to get you to notice these.

Early in your membership in the group you may misrepresent certain things about yourself out of fear of being judged. Later you will confront three choices about how to deal with such early misrepresentations: (1) find the courage to disclose them so that you can get more out of the group; (2) keep them to yourself, knowing that the potential for maximum benefit is constricted by your secrets; or (3) come up with some excuse to leave the group in order to avoid having to make the choice between #1 and #2. Choose option #1. You will face, and probably already have faced, the same choice in other kinds of ongoing relationships, such as friendships and marriage.

At some point you will probably find yourself frustrated with the seeming artificiality of meeting only for a set time once each week with people to whom you are starting to feel meaningfully connected and therefore would like to see at other times. It is valuable to bring this frustration into the group.

Over time your authentic participation in the group will enhance your capacity to tolerate loving and being loved. Remind yourself of this when things get confusing, frustrating, frightening, or painful.

No matter how recently you have become a member, it is your group and you have a right to demand that it be helpful and powerful for you.

Take ownership of your group. If you perceive that there is an elephant in the room that nobody is acknowledging, say so. If the group does not feel as alive as you want it to be, announce that. If you are unhappy with something a therapist has done, or not done, complain. If there is a hint that somebody may have violated a boundary, challenge that person. Remember that it's *your* group.