

GROUP THERAPY: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT WORK?

People seek psychotherapy for many different reasons. Many come because they have problems establishing and maintaining close and gratifying relationships. Often, they wish that they understood their relationships better and that they could be honest about their positive and negative feelings with someone. In return, they would like honest feedback. Group therapy sets up a situation where this type of close, interpersonal exploration can occur.

Why Does Group Therapy Work?

There are a number of reasons why group therapy works:

1. When people come into a group and interact freely with other group members, the difficulties that brought them to individual counseling are likely to come up in the group setting as well. Under the direction of a group therapist(s), the group is able to give support, offer alternatives, or gently confront the person in such a way that the difficulty is resolved and alternative behaviors are learned.
2. Participating in group therapy allows an individual to develop new ways of relating to people.
3. During group therapy, people begin to see that they are not alone and can be helped. Many times people feel like their problems are very unique, and that they are alone. It is encouraging to discover that others have similar difficulties or have already worked through a problem that deeply disturbs another group member.
4. Within this climate of trust, people feel free to care about and help one another.

Inevitably, members will experience others in the group in ways similar to how they experienced intimate others outside the group, or family members, while growing up. All group members should be open to learning about themselves and their relationships. To this end, all members must be committed to the goal of expressing their thoughts and feelings as they occur within the group. The way in which members can learn the most in a group is by being honest and direct with their feelings at that moment, especially those feelings toward the other group members and the therapist(s). Members' thoughts and feelings in the present are the database from which group psychotherapy flows. To foster these goals, there are several rules which are important to help make group therapy successful. They are as follows:

Rules That Help Make Group Therapy Successful

1. Members will make a commitment to attend the group regularly for at least 4 sessions before making a decision about whether or not this is the group for them. It takes a minimum of four weeks for members to feel comfortable enough to begin to evaluate the usefulness of a particular group. The course of therapy is expected to be longer than this.
2. Members agree to be present each week, to arrive on time, and remain throughout the entire meeting. As a member, it is your responsibility to notify the group leader in advance when it is absolutely necessary for you to be away or to be late for a group.
3. Members will treat matters that occur in the group with utmost confidentiality. That is, members agree to keep to themselves the names and personal sharing of all group members.
4. Members have a commitment to share feelings, reactions, and thoughts during group meetings as a way of increasing their understanding of their own interpersonal dynamics. Talking about present or “here and now” feelings is usually the most helpful way to solve problems.
5. Members agree to work actively on the problems that brought them to the group. At times this involves talking about important issues in one’s life that cause difficulty in relating to others or in living life fully. At other times it may entail choosing to listen supportively and to speak less. Groups work best when all members have a share in the group time.
6. Members will notify the group in person if they are considering leaving the group. It is important for everyone to have an opportunity to express his/her feelings about the departure and to have enough time to explore this fully.
7. Members agree to use relationships in the group therapeutically—not socially. The group provides an opportunity for learning about one’s problems in social relationships; it is not meant to be a gathering in which people meet to make friends. If used in this manner, the group loses its therapeutic effectiveness. However, if by chance members do meet outside the group, then it is their responsibility to discuss that interaction inside the group.

(Adapted from University Counseling & Psychological Services – Lehigh University)