

Preparing for Group Therapy: How to Get the Most from Your Experience Gus Kaufman, Ph.D. and Stephanie Ezust, Ph.D,

What follows is an introduction that may be helpful in preparing you to join group. Please read this information and feel free to discuss it with us either in individual sessions or in the group.

You were born and raised in a group -- your family -- where you began to learn about who you are and what you could expect from others and the world. Therapy groups offer a unique opportunity to re-learn inaccurate teaching from childhood, to learn how to get your needs met, and to express yourself in a more adaptive way. Groups help you to realize that you are not alone, and that others understand your experience. They are a forum for learning about how you currently relate to yourself and to others, and a safe place to risk change and growth. Group therapy works best when all members of the group feel safe enough to share their experience in an open, direct, and genuine manner.

In spite of the advantages, participation in groups is intimidating for most of us. As a new member, you may worry about how you are perceived by others or whether your problems and experiences are worthy of others' time and attention. We hope that the following information will help you to become more comfortable in group and begin to risk putting yourself out there.

Group and Individual Therapy

Group therapy has been used as a treatment modality for more than fifty years. Current research shows group therapy to be as effective, and in some cases more effective, than individual therapy. We believe that a combination of both offers an ideal format. There are similarities and differences between the two: individual therapy offers more personal focus, while in groups you can access a more varied and general picture of how you relate to others and they to you. One difference between individual and group therapy is that groups take time to form. Members need to get to know each other before the greatest benefits of group treatment are generated. This is part of the reason that we ask for a minimum commitment of three months.

Goals of Group

Group therapy is based on the idea that many of the difficulties that people have in their lives can be understood in relationships with others, as well as with the self. In childhood, we learn ways of getting close and talking to others, as well as strategies for solving problems. However, when these early ways of relating are applied to adult relationships and situations, they often don't work as well. Despite your good intentions, you may have become dissatisfied with your important

relationships, or you may be seeking a mutually beneficial relationship with another person, or you may find it difficult to accept yourself. The main goals of group therapy are to help you develop more effective ways of relating to yourself and to others, and to help you become more authentic both with yourself and in relationships.

How this Group Will Help you to Reach Your Goals

There are many different kinds of groups. Some are designed to offer support, such as grief support groups; some help you to develop skills for a specific problem, such as assertiveness training groups; others focus on particular topics, such as eating disorders. This group focuses on **inter-personal and intra-personal relationships**. We will definitely offer support, develop skills, and focus on specific topics from time to time; however, the main focus will be on how we relate to each other and to ourselves. In addition, we will use techniques from Pessio-Boyden Psychomotor Therapy (see www.pbsp.com) to help you through stuck places and to provide new relational learning.

It helps to think of group therapy as a living laboratory where you can safely take risks and try out new ways of talking to others, getting your needs met, and supporting others. You will also get practice in translating your feelings and thoughts into words.

Your job is to get all the help from this group that you can. The more you involve yourself in the group, the more you will get out of it. So the following goals are important to focus on:

1. Identify your reactions: Specifically, try to identify your reactions to others. As you listen to the other group members, begin to notice your thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, 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, competition, hope.
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 your inhibitions. Some common reasons people

fail to express themselves authentically in groups, as well as in life, are:

- They feel their problems, thoughts, and feelings are not as important as those of other members;
 - They worry about taking more than their share of group time;
 - They feel they should be able to help themselves without burdening others;
 - They are concerned about hurting or offending others;
 - They worry that others will judge them negatively;
 - They worry about making others angry.
3. Be respectful of others at all times: Disagreements are natural, and we encourage you to express them openly and respectfully. When you feel judgmental about someone in group, please talk about your judgments without labeling others, but by describing the behaviors with which you take issue. For example, the label, "you're such a bore," should be replaced by an equally accurate reaction which allows you to take ownership of your reaction: "When you speak with such detail, I become frustrated and lose my motivation to listen and understand you." And don't worry if this seems difficult: we'll help you practice and get more comfortable with these interactions.

Our Job as Group Leaders

As leaders of the group, our job is to ensure the safety of the group, which involves managing time boundaries and keeping the rules (which is really everyone's job), to facilitate effective working exchanges between members, to keep the group focused on important tasks, and to model effective relating behavior. We are also responsible for identifying our reactions and expressing them authentically and respectfully. We will focus on different levels of group experience: the group as a whole, interpersonal and dyadic exchanges, individual process, and our own reactions. You will also notice that we encourage you to focus on the here-and-now. We will process interactions between members and help individual members extract meaning from their experiences in group.