

GROUP THERAPY: IS IT RIGHT FOR ME?

What is group therapy?

Group therapy, like individual therapy, is intended to help people who would like to gain support, increase self-awareness, and learn new ways to cope with personal or interpersonal challenges. Group therapy can be especially effective for people interested in exploring their interpersonal style and enhancing their approach to relationships in such areas as trust, intimacy, anger, conflict, assertiveness, taking risks, or improving self-esteem.

What are the different types of groups?

The Counseling Center offers two different types of groups: (1) ongoing, process-oriented therapy groups; and (2) short-term, theme-focused groups. In ongoing groups, five to eight group members meet weekly with one or two therapists. Sessions typically last one to one and a half hours, depending on the particular group.

In contrast, short-term groups bring people together for a limited period of time to explore specific themes such as assertiveness or stress management. Due to time constraints, theme groups tend to involve a strong didactic component. The size of the group and number of sessions varies. Theme groups typically last between one and six weeks.

Who can benefit from group therapy?

Group therapy is appropriate for people with a variety of interests, problems, or challenges. It is especially effective for people who would like to improve and better understand their interpersonal patterns in relationships, whether these involve difficulties in social, academic, working, romantic, or even sexual relationships. It is equally suitable for people who struggle with emotional difficulties such as anxiety or depression.

What do I talk about when I am in group therapy?

Because unexpressed feelings are a major reason why people experience difficulties in relationships, sharing your feelings in the group affects how much you will be helped by it. Of course, you control what, how much, and when you share information with the group.

Members talk about whatever is troubling them or whatever brought them into therapy in the first place. Most people are anxious about beginning to talk in group. However, within a few sessions people typically find that they are able to talk in the group and that they get support from other members as they begin to share.

For ongoing process groups, the issues discussed each week arise from the members rather than being initiated by the group leader(s). Participants can discuss personal concerns or problems from everyday life; relationships with friends, family members, or significant others; or specific reactions, thoughts, or feelings to events within the group. Essentially, no topic is off limits in the group.

In contrast, because theme groups have a strong didactic component and are time-limited, discussions and/or personal disclosures are minimal and focused only around a specific topic area. Sometimes members of a short-term theme group find that exploration of a specific topic precipitates interest in joining an ongoing group in order to explore a theme or topic more deeply. We encourage students to make use of the differing benefits of both types of groups.

How does group therapy work?

Ongoing, process-oriented group therapy works on many levels. First, it provides a confidential space to be open about issues that are troubling you and to gain support. It is not uncommon for people to feel alone with their problems or circumstances. Discovering that other people can relate to your experiences can be very comforting. Group members can offer validation, as well as fresh ideas or viewpoints for looking at a particular situation.

Another advantage of group therapy is the opportunity to learn about oneself by listening to others. It can be very helpful when listening to other members to consider how what they are saying might apply to you. You will find that you have many things in common with other members and, as they work through their concerns, you can learn a great deal about yourself. It may also be the case that someone raises an issue that seems to really relate to you, but that you might not have been aware of or brought up yourself.

Another reason people join group is to become more aware of patterns in their relationships that are problematic in some way. When people join group they usually begin to recreate those difficulties that brought them to group in the first place. Within the safety of the group, members are able to try out new ways of relating that can then be put into practice in other relationships outside of the group.

What is expected of the participants in a group?

For ongoing groups, members are asked to commit for a minimum of eight weeks but can remain in the group indefinitely until they feel they have reached their desired goals or are ready to leave. Group trust is achieved when all members make a commitment to the group. As in any relationship, the commitment to remain in the group is an important part of building trust, cohesion, and a sense of safety, which in turn allows people to talk personally and honestly.

It is also expected that any information brought up in group, as well as the identity of the participants, be kept confidential. In fact, members sign a confidentiality agreement in accordance with the District of Columbia Mental Health Information Act of 1978.

We hope your group experience is a positive one. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to raise them with your group leader or any member of the Counseling Center staff.