

group therapy – background information

what is group therapy & what types are there? Group therapy simply means that therapeutic work is done in groups rather than one-to-one. Many different types of therapy have been tried in group format. Rather than construct a long list of such therapies, it may be more helpful to divide the many types of therapy group into two general categories – structured groups and process groups. Structured group therapy often involves the transfer of skills and knowledge. It may feel a bit like a classroom situation. Frequently, structured groups are used as a cost-effective way of delivering similar forms of therapy to individual one-to-one work. Process groups, however, use groups not just for cost effectiveness but also to focus on forms of learning that are specific to the group format itself. Process groups acknowledge that the developing relationships between group members are also a major therapeutic resource.

who should consider trying group therapy? Group therapy is, in general, as effective and helpful as individual therapy (Burlingame et al, 2004). In certain situations it is more effective than individual therapy. It may well be more useful for issues that involve relationship style and social support. Unhelpful ways we have learned to relate to others may well go back for decades. Changing these deeply held patterns is likely to take some time. Group therapy is both a very good way of tackling these patterns and also, being more cost effective than one-to-one work, it makes it easier to give this work the time it needs.

how does group therapy work? Structured groups are considered to produce their benefits in much the same way as the individual form of therapy from which they are derived – for example assertiveness, cognitive behavioural, and relaxation training groups. Process groups, on the other hand, lead to benefit through a cluster of factors that include group cohesion, feedback, observation & learning from others, feeling valued, trying new behaviours & so on.

how does the group typically develop? Process groups tend to move through a series of developmental stages. These can be described in a variety of ways. Tuckman presented an early description which still contains much that is useful. His sequence was forming (orientation and dependence), storming (intra-group conflict and differentiation), norming (inter-personal intimacy and cohesion), performing (work and functional role-relatedness), and adjourning (loss and autonomy). It is important to emphasise that all stages of group development contain useful opportunities for learning and that one stage is not necessarily any better than another. It is interesting to note as well that although group cohesion is hugely important, a degree of conflict also seems helpful in encouraging better long term outcome.

what is the role of the therapist in process groups? The therapist's role involves several overlapping tasks. These include responsibility for 'structures' like confidentiality, location & timing; encouraging a balance between safety & challenge; clarification & education; and working as a group participant. A therapist's role varies with the stage of group development.

how much group therapy is enough? Individuals will vary over how much group therapy suits them best. It is sensible to commit to at least one "term" of 8 sessions. If the group is proving helpful then many people will find that it is best to continue for 5 or 6 terms across a couple of years. After 6 terms at maximum, participants will be asked to finish in the group. This does not mean that individuals cannot return at a later date, but there does seem real advantage in working with some sense of time limits rather than beginning to assume that the group is somehow going to go on indefinitely.