

Group Therapy

While the *Group Guidelines* is a document containing binding expectations of group members, this document is intended to be purely informational in nature. This document addresses some of the common questions students have about group therapy, so that students can make more fully-informed decisions about whether or not to pursue participation in a group and, if so, how to get the most out of it.

WHAT IS GROUP THERAPY?

Group therapy provides a safe place for you to: address the issues that are of concern to you; identify with others; offer and receive help and feedback from others; and examine thinking, feeling, and/or behavioral patterns that are interfering with your personal satisfaction, growth, and/or healing.

In most therapy groups, one or two therapists are present to help facilitate interaction, discussion, exploration, and attention to the interpersonal processes that occur in the moment. The therapists are also there to help maintain an environment of safety and respect, and a focus on growth and healing.

DOES GROUP THERAPY WORK?

According to acclaimed authority Irvin Yalom, “group therapy has a long, proven record as a highly effective and useful form of psychotherapy. It is as helpful as, and in some cases more helpful than, individual therapy, particularly when social support and learning about interpersonal relationships are important objectives of treatment. The vast majority of individuals who participate in group therapy benefit from it substantially.”

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM GROUP?

If you are like most people, you will have some initial apprehension about going to a therapy group. Concerns such as, “*What will the other people be like?*” and “*Am I capable of opening up to complete strangers?*” are commonplace and are indicative of a very normal kind of nervousness. In fact, working through this initial anxiety provides one of the many benefits that group has to offer.

In group, trust and safety are emphasized, and members are encouraged to take their own pace in opening up. Initially, new group members may be quiet and hesitant as they try to figure out what feels okay to talk about. As members become more comfortable with the group, they typically open up more and show more of themselves. This provides the opportunity for group members to receive direct feedback about how they come across to others.

Students tend to talk about a wide variety of concerns, which are usually related to something currently happening in their lives. Group members share with and provide support, advice, and feedback to each other. They benefit from realizing that other students also struggle and have found ways of working through their own issues. They have an opportunity to learn more about themselves and others. Group is also a safe place for members to try new behaviors and to develop more satisfying ways of relating to others, which they can then take into their lives outside of group.

HOW CAN I GET THE MOST OUT OF GROUP THERAPY?

This is a great question. An effective group therapy experience has much to offer to each person who participates. These are just a few suggestions to keep in mind as you begin your group experience:

- **Attend consistently:** Successful groups depend on a commitment from every member of the group, which means attending each session, arriving on time, and making an effort to participate in a meaningful way.
- **Start from where you are,** not where you think others want you to be. This is your chance to be yourself! It is an opportunity to share the things that you think and feel, as well as experiences that you often keep to yourself.
- **Think out loud:** Regardless of the emphasis, size, or makeup of your group, it is safe to say that the more you invest, the more you will benefit. Try to put words to the reactions you have to people/topics in the group and share these thoughts out loud, rather than censoring and silencing as we often do in day-to-day interpersonal interactions.

- **Focus on the “here and now”:** This is a phrase you may hear used by group facilitators or other members. It essentially means a focus on the current experiences that you and the group are having in the session. It is appropriate to share your stories, but a group that focuses *only* what has occurred in the outside lives of its members misses out on a very important and powerful dimension of the group experience. Share what you are feeling and thinking about being in the group, reactions you are having, and/or what you feel towards others. This may feel scary at times...that’s okay. Try to push yourself to do it anyway. Those kinds of risks often result in meaningful, lasting rewards.
- **Experiment with new behaviors:** Try new things out. Think of a therapy group as partly a social laboratory of sorts. If there are ideal ways you would like to interact but rarely do, group is a great place to try them out and ask for feedback.
- **Suspend judgment:** You may feel anxious about or impatient with group as you start out. Just like individual therapy, group work takes time. Try to delay making judgments about the value of group during this adjustment period, which is a very normal part of the process. It is for this reason that we ask you in the *Group Guidelines* to commit to attending at least 5 consecutive sessions before making any decisions about continuing.
- **Offer support and understanding before advice:** You may often be tempted to give advice and help *fix* the problems that others share. Because this often comes from a place of empathy and compassion, try to share that empathy and compassion first. Remember, group is primarily about the people who make up the group, rather than the problems they experience in their day-to-day lives.
- **Give and receive feedback:** One of the best things group has to offer is the advantage of getting input from several people instead of just one therapist. Take advantage of this! When you receive feedback, try to remain open and non-defensive. When you offer feedback, try to be specific, direct, and honest. This aspect of group isn’t always easy, but is one of its most powerful and growth-inducing features.

HOW LONG DO GROUPS RUN?

Because we are in an academic environment, our groups have to be scheduled around the university’s academic calendar. For this reason, groups are often not scheduled during times such as final exams or student breaks, even though the university itself and Student Health Services might remain open. Also, because the first couple of weeks of a new semester tend to be hectic for everyone and many students are working to finalize their class schedules for the term, groups are often not scheduled during these times. Finally, each of our groups is scheduled to end at the end of each semester. Group facilitators will often bring this up in group about a month before the actual end of the group. This gives time for group members to reflect on their respective progress towards their goals, to consider how they would like to end the group, and to consider whether they would like to continue in another group during the next academic term. Although different groups make different decisions about how to end, the end of group itself is an important aspect of the overall experience, often accompanied by strong feelings that are important to talk about.

MISCELLANEOUS

Fire alarms: If a group session is interrupted by a fire alarm, it is important that everyone operates from the perspective of “SAFETY FIRST.” Accordingly, any group session that is interrupted by a fire alarm will be considered ended at the time of the alarm, and everyone should evacuate the building immediately. The impact of the alarm on the group process, as well as any unfinished business for that session, will be addressed in the next session.

Physical contact: There are many kinds of physical touch (e.g., handshakes; fist bumps; hugs; high fives; etc.), and human beings are psychologically impacted by touch throughout their lives. It is important to realize, however, that not everyone thinks and feels the same way about different kinds of touch. Some people are more receptive to physical contact, while others find even the idea of physical contact highly distressing. Also, it can be difficult for many individuals to express their disinclination (i.e., to say ‘No thank you’) when physical contact is offered. When all of these differences come together in a group, it is important that each individual’s feelings and perspective are respected. The easiest (and, often, the most effective) way to deal with the desire to engage in any kind of physical contact with another group member is to tell them how you feel. In other words, put your feelings into words and communicate these words to the group. Although this can be difficult at times, it is good practice to label our feelings, and these kinds of communications honor each group member viewpoint about touch, and often lead to increased feelings of respect and connectedness between group members.