

Group Therapy*

What is group therapy?

A counseling group is usually comprised of 6-8 people who meet face to face with 1 or 2 trained facilitators and talk about what is concerning them most. Members listen to each other and openly express thoughts and feelings about what someone does or says. These interactions give members an opportunity to increase understanding, try out new ways of being with others and learn more about the ways they interact. The content of the group sessions is confidential; members agree not to identify other members or their concerns outside of group.

Why does group therapy work?

When people learn to interact freely with other group members, they tend to recreate the same patterns of interactions that have proved troublesome to them outside of the group. With the facilitation of the group leaders, members develop awareness of the effects of their ways of dealing with their feelings and others'. The group therapy environment provides a safe confines to experiment with alternative ways of treating yourself and others that may be more satisfying. Many people feel they are somehow weird or strange because of their problems or the way they feel; it is encouraging to hear that other people have similar difficulties, and can grow past them.

What do I talk about in group therapy?

Talk about what brought you to Counseling Services in the first place. Tell the group members what is most concerning you. If you need understanding, let the group know. If you think you need pointed feedback about something you say or do that seems to have a negative impact, let them know that also. It's important to tell people what you expect of them. Unexpressed feelings are a major reason people experience difficulties. Revealing feelings - self disclosure - is an important part of group and affects how much you will gain from the group experience. The most useful disclosures are those that relate directly to your present concerns. How much you talk about yourself is your decision; it will depend in part on your own comfort level and how much you are committed to change in a given area. If you have questions about what might or might not be helpful, you can always ask the group.

What is the nature of group therapy?

1. Participation in the group

- You control, and are ultimately responsible for, what, how much, and when you tell the group about yourself. The more you become involved, the more you are likely to benefit.
- Most people find that when they feel safe enough to share personal issues, therapy groups can be very growthful and affirming.
- Many people are helped by listening to others and thinking about how what others are saying might apply to themselves.

2. Advantages of group therapy

Ways that group therapy may be more enriching for some than individual therapy include:

- You can benefit from the group even during sessions when you say little but listen carefully to others. Most people find that they have important things in common with other group members, and as others work on concerns, you can learn much about yourself. In the group environment, others serve as “mirrors” that reflect aspects of yourself that you can recognize and explicitly choose if you want to modify or change.
- Group members may bring up issues that strike a chord with you, which you might not have been aware of or known how to bring up yourself.
- A natural process of enhanced acceptance of self and others occurs as one learns to relate more honestly and directly with others in the group.
- The group provides an opportunity for personal experimentation - it is a safe place to risk enough to learn more about yourself.

3. Group atmosphere

- The first group task is to establish an atmosphere of safety and respect; group leaders are trained to help the group develop an environment conducive to doing the work of personal growth.
- An important benefit of group therapy is the opportunity to receive feedback from others in a supportive environment. It is rare to find friends who will gently point out how you might be behaving in ways that hurt yourself or others; this is a unique benefit of the group. The leaders will help members to give feedback in a direct, yet respectful way so that you can understand and utilize new awareness and experiences.

4. Group therapy vs. individual therapy

- Groups are often the most effective method to treat the types of concerns that university students are facing.
- A common myth is that groups are somehow second rate treatment. Group therapy is recommended when your counselor believes that it is the best way to address your concerns.
- Your counselor can discuss the advantages or disadvantages of a group for your particular concerns and needs.

5. Fears about beginning

It is common for people to experience some discomfort over the prospect of talking in group initially; this initial anxiety is quite normal as most people have never been exposed to a group therapy environment and don't know what to expect. Almost without exception, within a few sessions people get comfortable enough to interact in the group.

What are the expectations for my participation in the group?

If the group is to be effective, your commitment to the following is key:

- Don't miss sessions if at all possible - if you do have to miss, please let one of the leaders know in advance. Many people also find that the sessions they attended on a week when they didn't really feel like coming to group were among their most valuable.
- The group meeting times have already been set by the group leaders; groups work best when everybody arrives and the group finishes at the agreed upon time.
- Feelings are an integral part of your experience, including those that seem "negative" or not acceptable, or that you have avoided before. You are encouraged to talk about them as directly as possible in group. Hostile expression of feelings, however, is seldom constructive for you or other group members. Your group leaders will help you and other group members to express difficult negative feelings in ways that are constructive and growth producing.
- We ask that all group members respect the confidentiality of group discussions; this is crucial to promote a trusting, safe environment.
- When you are ready to leave the group, we ask that you discuss your decision in the group before your last session to provide a sense of closure.

*Adapted from Appalachian State University Counseling and Psychological Services Center