

Great Groups

Creating and Leading Effective Groups

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Chapter 1

An Invitation to Group Work

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.

—Helen Keller

A RATIONALE FOR GROUP WORK

We'd set the stage to start a new group. Jasmine, my coleader, and I had done a lot of planning for this group, and now we were about to have the first meeting. It was a good-sized group, comprising 12 young men and women, though there were a few more women than men.

I'd been watching and listening to some of the informal banter going on before the group started, making some initial mental notes as people talked together before we officially got rolling—seeing who seemed to be initiating conversations, who was holding back, and who was not particularly engaged with anyone. I knew that Jasmine was doing the same. We exchanged some brief eye contact, communicating some nonverbal “coleaderly” solidarity in these moments before we were to launch full throttle into action.

There had been a fair amount of nervous chitchat, and now that we were beginning, everything got quiet. The silence was a signal—this silence signal is true of many beginning groups—that we were about to begin.

Jasmine invited people to briefly introduce themselves, and then she led a discussion about ground rules, the agreements that we share with one another that will help to make this a safe experience—things like confidentiality—and reiterated some of the informed consent issues that people had been briefed on in

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their pregroup meetings. I then took a little time reviewing our reasons for being together and what people could hope to get out of the experience. This did take some time because it's important, but I was aware that I was talking too much. It was time for others to get involved.

I invited people to talk about their reasons for joining the group and the kinds of things they wanted to get out of this experience. Given that this has been defined broadly as a group for "improving interpersonal relationship skills," I knew that most of the people in the group had some close relationships with partners and friends who were troubled, and that for some the group was suggested by employers or friends as an opportunity to improve their overall social skills. I asked everyone to share something about their expectations from the group.

This was a group with some talkative members, and people began to talk freely. Some talked about current and past work situations and about future work aspirations, and some talked about their families, past and present. Some even began to talk about family difficulties. We didn't do this in any kind of orderly fashion, but everyone did contribute something. Jasmine and I also participated in this by disclosing some personal things about ourselves.

Then Jasmine asked, "And what was it like for you, what were you feeling, as you were waiting to talk about yourself? What kinds of feelings—not thoughts, but feelings—moved around inside you as you thought about what you'd say?"

There was some silence as people contemplated this, but then the conversation began. People talked at first about their thoughts, saying things like "I feel like this is a good beginning" (even though the word *feel* was used, this is really an idea, not a feeling), and we needed to remind them about the differences between thoughts and feelings, and then they started to dig deeper and talked about having been nervous and a little scared. We pushed them to talk a bit about this nervousness, and they then, almost to a person, talked about the fear of being judged and the fear that other people wouldn't like them. Some began to talk about other group experiences they've had and some of them about classes they had taken, where they were actually ridiculed.

As people talked about these experiences, Jasmine and I again exchanged occasional glances with one another. We were sharing an appreciation for how this was going. People in the group were beginning to take little risks in sharing these experiences, and we were acknowledging this with each other. This was the direction in which we hoped our group would go.

In this brief discussion—this small foray into becoming personal and taking some risks—talking about these previous difficult experiences, our new group was being born. We were up and running, good to go. Our new group was under way.

Welcome to the world of group work!

A RATIONALE FOR GROUP WORK

- Practical Reasons for Leading Groups
- Great Groups Can Do Great Things for People
- Challenges of Group Work
- A Brief Historical Perspective on Group Work

Working in groups with people can be remarkably interesting and challenging. This way of working presents the helping professional—counselor, social worker, or psychologist—with some unique benefits and challenges, some of which are similar to working individually with people, some of which are not. Some helping professionals gravitate naturally to this kind of work, while others need encouragement and support to see themselves as ready for group work. Some people are naturally comfortable being group leaders, while others may need to push themselves to assume positions of group leadership.

This chapter will introduce you to some of the reasons why group work is so valuable and so appealing to people who are involved with them. The chapter will also ask you to reflect on some of your own experiences with groups and will afford you the opportunity to talk with others about those.

SOME PRACTICAL REASONS FOR LEADING GROUPS

One of the reasons people frequently cite in making the case for working with groups, as opposed to working with individuals, has to do with the relative *efficiency* of groups. It makes economic sense to be working with a number of people at once (Davies & Gavin, 1994). A couple of hours of a professional's time can be put to much more effective use when dealing with a group of people (Akos & Martin, 2003; Corey, 2008). It also saves a lot of professional energy and time, particularly when doing something like skills training, to say what needs to be said only once, instead of saying it repeatedly in individual sessions. Working with groups of people, in other words, makes great economic sense (Sochting, Wilson, & De Gagne, 2010). Program administrators typically love groups because of this—and even some practitioners in private practice situations love groups because of these economic benefits. Some would maintain that groups could be used even more than they are now in these private settings (Piper, 2008).

However, there is more to making a case for groups than this. Working in groups is a different way of working with people. While there are certainly similarities

between group and individual counseling or therapy, it can generally be said that much of the learning that can happen in groups has to do with learning about one's self in relation to others. Individual work, on the other hand, is more generally about learning about one's internal issues and conflicts as well as about one's perceptions of his or her relationship issues. While individual work has to do with learning about one's self, working within a group is more about *interpersonal learning* (Gallagher et al., 2014; Johnson, 2009). While people may talk about relationships in their talk with a professional clinician, groups afford the opportunity for the individual to actually see himself or herself in relationship action.

For you, the professional, there is also the distinct advantage of not having to be the only expert in the room. When you are working with a group, you can rely on others to chime in with their own opinions, ideas, and suggestions for any given situation under discussion (Ferencik, 1992). Thus, while you are still ultimately the leader of the group, this *sharing responsibility* for generating ideas and feedback to group members can be seen as a real asset of group work.

Some of the groups with which you'll work will have a focus on *learning skills*. These skills groups may be almost like classes, where you are the teacher. You may be teaching people with developmental disabilities, for example, skills of daily living, like shopping for healthy food or maintaining an apartment. Or you might be teaching middle school children about nonviolent conflict resolution. In any of these situations, it is easier to teach these skills in groups, where people can assist one another in learning the skills, and where you have an experimental setting, a mini-laboratory, for helping people in trying these new skills out.

For many people in groups, simply learning how to be more socially skilled is the primary issue. *Socialization*, learning how to interact and be with other people in ways that are productive and positive, is a fundamental life skill (Dugatin, 1999). Groups can be a great source of such learning (Kramer, 2009). Moreover, people in groups can learn how to empathically respond to one another. They can learn effective listening skills, learn how to give and receive from one another. *Groups can teach people about how to live in the world with more empathy and compassion*. This is one of the best things that people can learn in groups, and when people learn how to be more compassionate with others, they also inevitably learn how to be more compassionate with themselves.

For me, this is one of the keys to the beauty of group work: *Groups afford people the opportunity to help themselves via helping others*. People in groups learn about themselves, and they also learn more about how to reach out to other people. We all need help, at some point, but we all also need to be able to give help. Groups afford the opportunity to help and be helped.

When people choose to share things about themselves, they inevitably find that others have often had similar experiences, thoughts, and feelings. There is a sense

PRACTICAL REASONS FOR LEADING GROUPS

- More efficient and economical than working with individuals
- Best way to help people learn about how they interact with others
- Provides a good way to teach skills, particularly social skills
- Affords people the opportunity to be helped by others—and also to help
- Promotes a sense of connection with others—the universality of the human condition, as well as compassion and empathy for other people
- Provides an opportunity to experiment with new interpersonal behaviors

of commonality, a recognition that others share an understanding of one's personal situation. Yalom (1985) uses the term *universality* to describe this understanding. When one feels understood and connected to others in this way, there is also a sense that one belongs to a greater whole.

Any group has the potential for operating as a laboratory for learning about life in interaction with others. People usually interact with one another in much the same way as they do in other social groups. Viewing the group as a laboratory suggests that this is a setting where people can *experiment with new behaviors* and ways of interacting with people. In a controlled and relatively safe environment, people can give and receive information about one another's behavior. This information sharing, also called giving and receiving feedback, is a primary means of important learning in groups.

GREAT GROUPS CAN DO GREAT THINGS FOR PEOPLE

When groups work really well, when people have a high degree of trust and respect for one another, when they experiment with new behaviors and share about themselves, there are wonderful emotional payoffs. Most fundamentally, groups can help people *feel connected to one another*, connected to the human race. Great groups, groups that are productive and cohesive, promote a sense of *belonging* (Kögler, Brandl, Brandstätter, Borasio, & Fegg, 2013; Trotzer, 2006; Woolhouse, Cooper, & Pickard, 2013). It is a fact of life that we are born into the world alone, and that this essential “aleness” is an existential fact of life as long as we take up space on the planet. Groups afford the opportunity to create some respite from this aleness. When people share their stories with others and when they share their sufferings, their pains, and their joys, they inevitably find that others share in these. For most people, there is tremendous solace in this shared human experience. Groups

promote personal sharing with others that is rare in most other aspects of daily life. People find that behind the facades and everyday demeanors that others present to the world are some of the same fears and concerns that they themselves harbor.

When people share information that is deeply personal, they may get in touch with thoughts and feelings that are powerful, feelings that are rarely expressed. When they feel free enough to contact and express these thoughts and the feelings that accompany them, they may let themselves experience these feelings in the group.

Many people have some serious reservations about revealing themselves emotionally in front of others. Some are afraid of appearing to be “weak” or not in control of ourselves; others may have bad experiences associated with being emotionally vulnerable.

People who do choose to share themselves emotionally in groups invariably find that people usually appreciate and are drawn to this vulnerability. There is something that is cleansing about a good cry, particularly when it is done with others. This is the *cathartic effect* that great groups can provide. My personal belief is that we connect more around our vulnerabilities than our strengths, and when someone in your group chooses to be emotionally vulnerable, it promotes this sense of connectedness, of belonging (Figure 1.1).

In addition to the potential for increased connection and a greater sense of belonging that is promoted by emotional expression, there is the sense that once



Figure 1.1 Great Groups Promote a Sense of Connection With Others

someone experiences strong personal feeling, she or he doesn't typically care so much about what others think. Getting one's emotional feet on the ground is its own reward, and it is accompanied by a sense of being personally powerful.

CHALLENGES OF GROUP WORK

You shouldn't think that this work is necessarily easy.

Great groups can do great things for people, but this is not meant to imply that leading a group is a walk in the park. It can be a *complicated* way of working with people. While we'll discuss a number of specific problem behaviors you might encounter in later chapters in this book, there are some major issues about the complicated nature of group work that can be highlighted here, early on. Primarily, it stands to reason that if the dynamics between two people working together in some kind of helping relationship can be difficult—including their real and imagined ideas about each other and the ways in which one is triggered by the ways the other behaves—then the dynamics of a number of people interacting with one another would be even more complex. As a leader working with groups, you manage an interesting juggling act of paying attention to your own thoughts and feelings, to the thoughts and feelings between you and individual members (and between them, as well), and also to the dynamics of the group as a whole. This means that you will be paying attention to quite a mix of things, some of which are obvious and some of which are hidden.

Some of the material that people bring into groups is out in the open, including the ways they behave and the things they say. Some of the material they bring, however, is less obvious and more hidden. People in groups often hold many of their thoughts and feelings in abeyance. Some of these thoughts and feelings may be eventually shared, but some may remain hidden. Sometimes people even have special, hidden thoughts about the group or individuals in it that are designed to undermine the group. These kinds of *manipulative thoughts or hidden agendas* that people may carry can be difficult things to manage (Barrett, 2012).

People who are coerced or leveraged into groups (e.g., by court mandate, by a work supervisor) can be particularly *resistant and uncooperative* as members of a group. Some of these people may be really tough and challenging and may teach other people in your group exactly the kinds of things you don't want them to learn, like where the safe places to buy drugs are, for example. You are interested in creating groups where people will learn positive things, and you will want to minimize the potential for your group to be a place for *negative learning*.

Sometimes the negative people can do their best to undermine the positive work of a group, as in *intentionally violating confidentiality ground rules*—disclosing information that others have shared—as a way of acting out their resistance.

Additionally, some people you may have in your group are simply not suited for this particular group. *Some may have too many emotional needs* for the group to handle. Others may suffer from serious and persistent mental health issues that prevent them from being able to fully or productively participate in the work of the group. These people may need another kind of group, or perhaps individual attention.

Finally, all kinds of interesting things happen between people in groups that create challenges for your leadership skills. *People can get romantically entangled with one another, or in opposite fashion, develop antagonistic dislikes* for one another. These intense emotional charges between people, whether positive or negative, naturally create interesting opportunities for your intervention.

Some of these challenges may have to do with member selection. If you can screen people before a group starts, you may be able to find out who has some serious mental or emotional health problems, or who may be extremely resistant, and find some alternative ways of helping them. Other situations, naturally, occur once the group is up and running.

I would encourage you to think of any of these group challenges not as insurmountable hurdles but rather as opportunities for you to experiment and think closely about what is needed from you as a group leader. Each challenge is a puzzle, of sorts. Each of these, if skillfully dealt with, can actually provide a positive impetus toward group growth, as well as increase your own confidence and skill as a group leader. I'll help you look at ways you can constructively and creatively deal with any of these challenges in the chapters that follow.

Reflection and Group Fishbowl Lab Practice Exercise

Think about all of the group experiences you've had as a group member or at least the ones that spring quickly into mind. Some of these might have been groups you were in for personal growth experiences, either in school or work settings, or

SOME UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF GROUP WORK

- Working with groups can be more complicated than working with individuals.
- Some people in your group might be manipulative or have hidden agendas—they might even violate basic ground rules, like confidentiality, as a way of attacking others.
- Some people might need more personal attention than a group can provide.
- People can learn negative things from other people in the group.
- People may get romantically entangled with one another.
- Some people may become antagonistic—with you or with others in the group.

in some other context. Other group experiences could include coursework (yes, classes are groups, too), sports teams, or even committees. Some of these might have been positive experiences for you, some less so, and some simply aren't particularly memorable.

Think about one or two of your most positive experiences with groups, and then jot down a few notes about what made them so positive. Think about the people involved, the other members, the leader(s), the work involved. Maybe it was simply that the group fit whatever you happened to need at that point in your life. Whatever it was that made this group special, make note of that.

Then think about one or two of your most negative experiences with groups. Jot down a note about what it was that made these so negative—again, whether you think it was other member or leader issues, or something else.

After you have had some time to personally think about these questions, discuss your ideas with others in a group fishbowl exercise.

Here's the way a group fishbowl exercise works with a group of 8 to 15 people. Two people volunteer to be group leaders. If you are one of these, your job is to help lead the group in discussion of these questions. You might want to talk for a few minutes with your coleader to establish how you want to begin the discussion, focusing how you want to proceed and who will take the lead in getting things going.

Five or six people should volunteer to be group members. If you are a group member, your job is to talk with the group about your ideas related to your experiences in groups.

The other people in the group become group observers. If you are one of these, you will sit with the other observers in a circle around the leaders and members (hence the term *fishbowl*). Your job is to closely—and silently—observe the group and its interactions between members and leaders. You might want to take notes while you observe. Pay special attention to how the coleaders stimulate discussion. Do they draw people out, encourage everyone to participate? What kinds of things do they do that seem particularly effective in encouraging discussion?

Make whatever accommodations are necessary to make this work for the number of people you have conducting this exercise. If your numbers are small, perhaps you'll have one leader and only a few group members, for example.

Before the group discussion starts, take a few minutes to assure one another that personal information that is shared, either in the group discussion or in the processing of the discussion that follows, will be held confidentially.

Then take between 20 and 30 minutes for group discussion of the group vignette and the related questions. Take a few more minutes following the discussion for the group observers to share some of their observations. If you are an observer sharing some of what you saw and heard, try to be specific about what you observed, while

also being supportive in your comments to the coleaders. They took the risk, after all, in leading this first group fishbowl exercise, and they deserve your support.

GROUP WORK IN CONTEXT: A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The kinds of groups in which we are mostly interested in this book—groups where interpersonal learning is the focus—have become a fact of our cultural life. Groups are everywhere—in schools, in businesses, in mental health and social work agencies, and in all kinds of organizational settings.

The fact that groups are such an integral part of our cultural landscape is the result of a number of events and forces that have shaped our work in human services. It can be helpful to have some understanding of some of the counseling and psychotherapeutic experiments—and of the cultural contexts in which those were held—that have helped shape the group work we do today.

The Birth of the Modern Group

Much of our group work today has its roots in the social work movement of the early 1900s. Chicago's *Hull House* is symbolic of the work that early social workers did in working with groups of people to help find housing, food, and other basics for survival. They found that people could help one another—both for informational reasons and in way of support—in learning some essential survival skills.

Similarly, experiments in working with people in groups were under way at the turn of the century in vocational schools and medical settings. In the vocational groups, people were encouraged to support one another in preparing for and looking for work, and in the medical groups, people were asked to assist one another in dealing with their complicated health problems.

Therapy Groups

In the 1920s and 1930s the psychoanalytic community began to experiment much more intensively with group work formats. Alfred Adler used groups as an extension of his theoretical emphasis on *family guidance* support systems (Papanek, 1970), and Jacob Moreno began to use groups as a way of theatrically highlighting and dramatizing individuals' psychological issues. This special kind of group work, called psychodrama (Moreno, 1949; Nolte, 2014), has evolved into an established—and theatrical—way of working with people.

Much of the way in which analysts worked with these groups used groups as an extension of their individual work. In any given group session, one or more

individuals would typically work with the leader, the analyst, on his or her personal issues. Others in the group would observe and comment on this work typically by talking with and through the leader—not generally by direct discussion with other group members. This model of group work, where the leader is seen as the technical expert, stereotypically characterizes some of the differences between counseling and therapy groups today. We'll revisit this distinction again, later.

Self-Help Groups

The 1930s and 1940s also saw the birth and beginnings of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the preeminent self-help group. Alcoholics Anonymous, as you probably know, does not have a designated group leader; rather, the group meetings are guided by a fixed set of principles and steps, the 12 steps and traditions. This self-help model has become the template on which many other modern-day self-help groups have modeled themselves, and thousands of these groups are now in existence (Gladding, 2008).

Cultural Change and the Role of Groups

It was after the Second World War, however, that the modern group movement really started to take off. Much of the reason for this—in addition to the fact that many of the war's veterans desperately needed treatment, and groups were the best way to provide that (Barron, 1970)—had to do with the cultural context of the times. If you really want to understand how and why groups became so quickly popular in that postwar era, you'll want to become a bit of a sociological history buff. A number of forces came together that helped set the stage for the popular use of groups in all kinds of institutional settings.

The postwar era, that period of time between the Second World War and the Vietnam War, saw tremendous social upheaval. It was a time of relative prosperity, and also a time when many fixed notions about our societal institutions came under fire. The old order, fixed ways of seeing the world, came under attack from all sides: race relations and acts of civil disobedience, the rise of feminism, challenges to the traditional notions of family and divorce, and even questions about the church and the role of religion in our lives.

The popular films of the day included *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*, which were tributes to the disaffection of alienated youth. They portrayed the ways young people were beginning to reject cultural traditions and values. When Marlon Brando, the leader of a rebel motorcycle gang, is asked in *The Wild One*, “What are all you young people so angry about?” he answers, “What have you got?” It's a classic line that captures the youthful alienation of the times.

A national news magazine even ran a cover story titled “God Is Dead,” which was a poignant comment on the shrinking role of religion in our lives. Divorce rates began to climb, as people began to challenge notions of commitment to marriages that were no longer seen as satisfying. Young women began to demand more equality of rights under the law and more equal opportunity in the workplace.

All these challenges to the authority of the existing order were ultimately designed to afford wider opportunities for people—for civil rights for people of all races, for increased occupational opportunities for both men and women, for lifestyle choices, including whether to marry or stay married. A young woman in the 1950s began to have glimpses of a world where becoming a homemaker, a nurse, or a teacher were no longer her only occupational choices.

With increased opportunity, however, also came increased anxiety. Limited choices, such as occupational opportunities, at least bred a certain amount of security. While most would argue that wider choices and more flexibility in making choices about how to live are a movement in positive directions, there is the unfortunate down side. If I have greater choice in the world, exactly what is it that I’m supposed to do? Increased opportunity yields increased uncertainty, and if I’m challenging the very institutions that used to provide me solace (e.g., the family, the church), to whom do I turn for comfort?

This is the cultural context that laid the foundation for the growth of groups as we know them today. The proliferation of groups in our society was not an accident—it was a logical response to new cultural need.

The Study of Groups

In the midst of all of this cultural upheaval came some new ways of looking at how to use groups. In the late 1940s, Kurt Lewin and some other Massachusetts Institute of Technology psychologists had responded to a small Connecticut city’s request for help in dealing with the city’s racial tension and difficulties. They set up a series of working groups to help people talk with one another about their perceptions of the situation. What they found intrigued them—that some of the most productive work seemed to be happening around the edges of the actual work that the groups were instructed to undertake. They saw that the *process*, the ways in which people, staff, and participants were working together—not just what they were supposed to be doing—was really important.

Shortly after Lewin’s death, his colleagues set up and ran a laboratory in Bethel, Maine (the National Training Laboratory, or NTL), to continue the study of this process work in groups. Their work, coupled with that of other centers around the country (e.g., at Esalen in California), began to focus on the potential for groups to sensitize people to themselves and others—hence the names “sensitivity” or “training” group that were applied to some of these group endeavors.

Groups and the Human Potential Movement

For the growing group phenomenon, the era of the 1960s and 1970s was not just about sex, drugs, and rock and roll—though they were certainly huge influences on these “new” groups—but it was also about new influences in psychology and psychotherapy: *humanism and the human potential movement*. The psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, as well as others, suggested that psychotherapy should no longer be only for those seen as “ill,” but it should also be a vehicle for all people to explore the outer limits of personal possibility, to become fully “actualized.” They saw groups as having the potential to help with this process of actualization—to help people become more honest with themselves and more authentic with one another.

All kinds of experiments started to happen in the world of groups. Some began to think of groups not only as ways for people to learn more about how they interact with others but also as a way to explore personal limits of consciousness. Hallucinogenic drugs were used in some groups. Some groups encouraged members to take off their clothes. People who ran these groups saw this as a way of helping minimize barriers between people. Some groups met for hours on end, under the assumption that when people got tired enough they’d let down their defenses and become more authentic. These *marathon* groups were designed to help people honestly *encounter* one another. *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, a hugely successful film made in 1969, portrays quite nicely some of the excesses of this era of group experimentation.

Groups Become More Professional

Many professionals in the field became troubled by these encounter groups (Fuller, 2008; Howes, 1981) and, particularly, by the fact that some people seemed to be emerging damaged by their group experiences. They surmised that some people who were leading groups were doing so more for their own gratification and glorification than for the well-being of the people who joined their groups.

The Association for Specialists in Group Work, formed in 1973, established sets of ethical guidelines that stressed professional training and credentialing for group leaders. Irvin Yalom’s *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (1970), a seminal text on group work, was published at about the same time as the formation of the Association for Specialists in Group Work, and with its publication came considerable academic support for applying more rigor to group leader training. Counselor, psychology, and social work training programs endorsed standards for training and ethical practice and demanded better training for group leaders.

Groups Today

This increased professionalization of the profession (Scheidlinger, 2000), particularly group leader training, coupled with standards of protection for group members, has resulted in a proliferation of group work in all kinds of social institutions—schools and businesses—as well as agencies that provide community mental health care. Groups are now used in all kinds of agencies, and many of them are quite sophisticated and efficient (Stone, 2001). Savvy private counseling and social work practitioners have integrated groups as an integral part of the services they offer.

Furthermore, the concept of “group” has morphed into all kinds of informal social variations. Book clubs, running groups, and play groups for parents of young children—and now even online groups—provide a forum for people to meet, share, and support one another. Self-help groups—from Overeaters Anonymous to Gamblers Anonymous to support groups for men and for women—have multiplied. In any city newspaper, you can find a support group to fit almost any need.

Groups, in all shapes and sizes, have become an integral part of the way we live.

GREAT GROUPS IN ACTION: A CASE VIGNETTE

Let’s take a quick look at an experience I had with a group that did some really good work. This example clearly shows, I think, how a cohesive group can provide concrete assistance and support.

Some years ago, I was working at a large university counseling center and was running a group for students, all of whom were involved in some kind of professional program (mostly social work and counseling). For this group, I didn’t have the benefit of working with a coleader.

The people in the group, in addition to being in school, were also working in some kind of human service capacity. Thus, the group was serving a double purpose: (1) it was a vehicle for members’ own personal growth, and (2) it was also a training venue for their professional work with groups. I encouraged the people in the group not only to fully engage in the activities of the group but also to occasionally take a “fly-on-the-wall” perspective and to more objectively look at the dynamics of the group. I encouraged them to keep journals of their personal and professional observations.

The group was an interesting mix of people. There was a wide array of backgrounds and work experiences among members. While everyone in the group was currently working locally, most had come from different parts of this country, and a few were from other countries. The varied backgrounds and the cultural mix of members in the group made for some truly rich conversations.

Early on in the group, I was struck by a comment one of the women had made. Her name was Jenna. She was a teacher, looking to retool her resume to serve a different role in a school, perhaps as a school-based clinician or school counselor.

She had said, when asked to clarify her reasons for coming back to school, “I’m not exactly sure what kind of counseling or social work career I want to go for, but I do know that I just want to help people somehow. I need to help. So I’m sampling courses, figuring out where to go next.”

What, I wondered, was this “need” to help about?

Later, as the group matured, it came out that Jenna had been raised in a home that was very political. Her parents were both active in local politics, community organizations, and in a variety of honorable causes—fighting poverty, promoting affordable housing, organizing the local food bank. They were highly visible people in the community and were great personalities. Jenna described the two of them together as “a force.”

Early on, it had been impressed on Jenna, an only child, that it was her job to continue their work, to fight for social justice, and to help people less fortunate than herself. She had taken this message to heart, and it was easy to see how good she would be at helping others. She had a wonderful way of being with the people in the group—her enthusiasm, good humor, and genuine interest were infectious. All of us liked her.

One day, when the group was coming close to ending, we were using a “big questions” exercise to demonstrate how groups can help people step back and look at the roads their lives are traveling. I suggested that people in the group could consider the appropriateness of using this exercise in their own groups.

The group had broken into smaller groups of three, and each group was contemplating how to use a series of questions like “What would I do if I found out that I had 6 months to live?” “Am I on the right path?” “Do the people I love know it?” with a group. In looking at how to implement such an exercise with their groups, the students in our group couldn’t avoid grappling with these questions themselves.

When we got back together, I asked if anyone wanted to briefly share thoughts about the application of the exercise with groups and what had come up personally during these contemplations. Jenna, looking troubled, said, “Well, I think I got involved with this more personally than thinking about it professionally. It got me thinking. I’ve always had this burning desire to travel. My husband and I always talk about traveling, but we never have time. We get so busy! I’d just love to chuck it all and hit the road.” As she said this she was staring at the ground and looking very miserable. Absent were her usual enthusiasm and cheerful demeanor.

“Well, why not just do it?” someone asked. “Between the two of you, you must have some pretty good savings. You don’t even have kids yet. Why not travel for as long as your money holds out, and then come back and work?”

“I can’t,” Jenna replied. “That would be too selfish. It would be all about me. That’s just not what I’m supposed to be, or do.”

And here we had it. This is what the “need” to help was all about. To paraphrase the motto: “Others before self”—or in her case, others instead of self. The group

spent the next few minutes talking with Jenna about this, pointing out that the messages from her parents about being a force for good had been internalized in a way that had become personally oppressive. Maybe her parents wanted her to be a helpful force in the world, someone said, but not in ways that she'd have to sacrifice all of herself.

"How about," the woman sitting next to Jenna said, "combining some helping and some traveling? Is there a way you could do that? I mean, the stuff your parents taught you is all good, but I'm sure that they didn't mean that you should suffer or not pay any attention to what you want."

Then a number of other people voiced support for Jenna doing other things for herself, and some people talked about how much they could relate to the issues Jenna described. Jenna had clearly opened a topic that had some relevance for others.

At this point, as our ending time for the day was rapidly approaching, I short-circuited the conversation by saying, "You know this, like so many other things that have come up here, is a really interesting issue for you, Jenna—and clearly for others, as well. If we had more time today, we could really get into this and work it over. What I can do, however, is suggest you continue looking at this stuff next week. And given that we've only got a couple of meeting times left, maybe you'll also want to look at all this in a more personal, individual way. I can give you the name of a good therapist who you could continue this with, if you want." (This, by the way, is an example of the use of the skill of "cutting off," which we'll discuss again in later chapters.)

A few weeks after that afternoon's session, the group ended, with Jenna only bringing this issue up again briefly, mostly to tell us that she was going to do some personal work with a therapist.

Then, some months later, I got a note from Jenna. Here's an excerpt:

I want to thank you and the group so much for the support and encouragement to continue looking at what is one of my primary issues: "What I want to do versus what I think I'm supposed to do."

My husband and I decided to do some couples counseling, and after a lot of thought and discussion, we've decided to take leaves from our jobs and travel the country. We'll travel for a few weeks, then stop and work in volunteer positions in some place that suits us for a while, and then move on. This way I can manage my guilt about traveling (what our therapist calls my "mantel of codependency").

I couldn't have begun to really look at all this without the push from the group. Please pass this note along to all of them. Maybe I'll be in touch when I return to continue my graduate study. Who knows?

I did pass her note along to the rest of the people who'd been in the group, and for the next few months I got brief update notes from Jenna about her travels with

her husband. Finally, I got a letter that said that they had decided to relocate to another state, a place with more sun and warm weather, and that she would continue her studies there.

Reflection and Discussion Exercise

Following are some questions you could contemplate after thinking about this case vignette you've just read:

1. Think about Jenna's current situation and about how that might be influenced by her growing-up years. What reactions do you have to her disclosure in the group, and about the group's responses to her?
2. Is it the role of groups to engage people in such "big questions" exercises? Are there groups where asking these kinds of questions might not be appropriate?
3. Why would Jenna's counselor have used the expression, "mantel of codependency?"
4. How common do you think Jenna's dilemma is among the helping professionals you know?
5. How would you answer some of those "big questions" yourself? Can you think of other such questions that you might pose for a group?

Finally, if you are working on this exercise with other people, take a few minutes to discuss your thoughts with them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I started becoming interested in and working with groups while a graduate student in Buffalo, New York. We were all expected to be in groups during most of our tenure as students, and I began to see the ways these group experiences positively affected people's lives. I used those groups not only as a way of making good connections with my student colleagues but also as a way of beginning a lifelong journey of self-exploration.

I grew up in a family with emotional difficulties, and I had experienced the death of a brother when I was just finishing high school. I, like so many others who enter the helping professions, wanted to learn how to help people, but I also wanted to resolve some of my own personal questions about the meaning of these difficult life experiences.

Those early groups I was in as a graduate student pushed me to look more carefully at the ways my own life and experience—particularly my own unfinished

business—might affect my work with others. They helped me begin to take responsibility for doing my own therapeutic work. I came to see via these groups that awareness and better understanding of my own personal history and myself was prerequisite for working cleanly with others. The importance of group leader self-awareness will run as a theme throughout this book.

I also began to see the ways in which these group experiences improved people's interpersonal skills. I eventually centered my dissertation research on the hypothesis that focused group work can help people increase their sense of empathy for others, even helping them become more effective helping professionals. Then, when I left graduate school, group work became a mainstay of my professional counseling practice. I focused my work on developing groups that encouraged people to become personal and vulnerable, on creating safe spaces for people to learn how to become really personal with one another.

During the nearly 30 years that have transpired since I left graduate school, I have led many groups, and now I teach others about the joys and challenges of group work. Perhaps, as importantly, I have been a member of a number of groups that have served to support me and make my life richer. I look forward to sharing some of those experiences with you in the chapters ahead.

There are, indeed, some unique joys—and challenges—of working with people in groups. While working individually in some kind of helping relationship affords the opportunity for people to learn more about themselves in the confines of an intimate relationship with one other person, group counseling has the benefit of helping people learn more about themselves in relationship with others. The groups we are in help connect us with the rest of the human race—to help all of us see our lives in a context of relationship with others.

Groups, including groups that focus on personal growth, have become an integral part of the social fabric of our lives. They have evolved in ways that fill a critical social need for us. Learning how to negotiate them well, as both a member and a leader, is a great life skill.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Look at some of the literature about the history of the development of the use of groups in our society. How do your ideas about this development fit—or not fit—with ideas presented in this chapter?
2. Look at your local newspaper listings for group offerings in your community. What are the other sources of information about groups being held where you live? Check hospital and agency websites, also those of local schools, colleges, and universities for more information about group offerings.

3. Interview one or two people who have had significant experience with groups. They might be counselors, social workers, teachers, or coaches—or anyone else who works regularly with groups. What are their opinions and ideas about their groups? What are their particular joys and challenges associated with group work?

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