

Counselling Young People

7

Working with Groups

Relevant BACP (2014) competences

G5: Ability to work with groups of young people and/or parents/carers.

Introduction

- Group-work potentially offers a time- and cost-effective therapeutic approach for young people and their families. This chapter looks at the benefits of group-work along with the process of organising and facilitating groups.
- By the end of the chapter the reader will have knowledge of the processes involved in planning, facilitating and evaluating group-work with young people.

Therapeutic groups

Therapeutic group-work is a widely used approach with a strong evidence base for its efficacy (Burlingame et al., 2003; Stein, 2013). In many youth-counselling contexts resources are limited, making group-work economically attractive. Counsellors working with groups can offer more young people a therapeutic intervention than in individual work, as well as potentially reducing time spent on a waiting list. This is, however, not the main reason why group-work is an effective approach and should not mean that important factors such as careful selection of suitable participants and a clear therapeutic focus are overlooked in favour of economic concerns.

Reflective questions

Can you think of any non-economic reasons why group-work might be particularly appropriate for young people?

How might you need to differentiate when planning for groups of 11–12-year-olds and 15–16-year-olds?

Why work with a group?

As well as offering economic benefits, working in groups with young people can also be therapeutically beneficial. Groups can be set up to work with various specific issues or concerns. For example, groups can be set up to address issues such as bullying, social anxiety, anger management, or they can be created for a particular membership, i.e. girls experiencing friendship issues, young people who have been affected by bereavement or family break-down, young people with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, etc. Groups can also be tailored to the needs of parents or other family members when relevant. For example, groups can be offered for parents of children experiencing issues with substance misuse, or for parents or siblings of children on the autistic spectrum.

Benefits of therapeutic group-work

One of the major benefits of groups targeted in this way is that they provide participants with an experience of not being the only one experiencing an issue or difficulty (Avinger and Jones, 2007). Groups offer the possibility for participants to share similar experiences allowing a reduction in feelings of shame or embarrassment associated with the issue, and to be helped by and to offer help to those in similar situations. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) describe these therapeutic factors as ‘universality’ and ‘altruism’. Box 7.1 shows all 13 of the therapeutic factors of group-work identified by Yalom and Leszcz (2005) which are accepted across most therapeutic modalities today.

Box 7.1: Therapeutic factors (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005)

- **Universality:** Participants recognise that others in the group share similar feelings, thoughts and problems.
- **Altruism:** Members gain a boost to self-concept through extending help to other group members.

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- **Instillation of hope:** Participant recognises that other members' success can be helpful and they develop optimism for their own improvement.
- **Imparting information:** Education or advice provided by the therapist or group members.
- **Corrective recapitulation of primary family experience:** Opportunity to re-enact critical family dynamics with participants in a corrective manner.
- **Development of socialising techniques:** The group provides participants with an environment that fosters adaptive and effective communication.
- **Imitative behaviour:** Participants expand their personal knowledge and skills through the observation of other participants' self-exploration, working through and personal development.
- **Cohesiveness:** Feelings of trust, belonging and togetherness experienced by the participants.
- **Existential factors:** Participants accept responsibility for life decisions.
- **Catharsis:** Participants' release of strong feelings about past or present experiences.
- **Interpersonal learning input:** Participants gain personal insight about their interpersonal impact through feedback provided from other participants.
- **Interpersonal learning output:** Participants provide an environment that allows participants to interact in a more adaptive manner.
- **Self-understanding:** Participants gain insight into psychological motivation underlying behaviour and emotional reactions.

These factors demonstrate some of the benefits of group-work. Groups offer participants the opportunity for a range of interactions with others in a social context which are not possible in individual counselling. There are opportunities for participants to receive feedback from others which may enhance self-awareness and lead to an increase in learning about themselves both as an individual and as part of a wider group. Groups also offer live opportunities for participants to work on issues. For example, a group which is working on anger issues can offer direct feedback on how a participant's anger is received, as well as modelling strategies for expressing emotions in different ways. In this way, group-work offers opportunities for social learning, in accordance with Bandura's (1969) view that an individual's social behaviour is often influenced by seeing the behaviour of others in particular circumstances.

Alongside this positive perspective on group-work, it is important to note that groups can be stigmatising and labelling for young people. For example, being in the 'anger' group might entrench the idea for some young people that they are 'bad' and can only connect with other 'bad' people. It is important that counsellors bear this possible unintended consequence in mind when preparing to offer a group approach.

For Rogers (1970), the group experience was a vital part of the therapeutic process, representing the fundamental concept of, '... the "fully functioning person", not simply as an individualistic self, but as a self within society ...' (Schmid and O'Hara, 2013: 225). The group comes closer to a representation of the complexity of human life, as young people struggle with not only their own individual sense of self, but also of their self in relationship with others. Rogers (1970) suggested that a group travelled along the same

trajectory towards health as an individual. He wrote of trusting the group, ‘... given a reasonably facilitating climate, to develop its own potential and that of its members’ (1970: 49), meaning that, if the relationship conditions were established, a group would inevitably move towards health (Pearce et al., 2015).

Planning a therapeutic group

In the initial stages of planning, counsellors need to be clear about who the group is for, any issues the group is intended to focus on, as well the therapeutic model or method to be employed.

Counsellors offering group-work need to be aware of and sensitive to the developmental stage of participants before deciding on a particular approach or group structure (Avinger and Jones, 2007). Approaches should be tailored to participants’ age, intellect and emotional maturity, so all participants are able to understand how the group works as well as the goals it is intended to meet. Counsellors may wish to consider using creative methods in engaging participants and structuring sessions such as art-work or therapeutic board games (Morton, 2000; Streng, 2008; Benson, 2010) when developmentally appropriate.

Counsellors need to be clear regarding what theoretical model they are using and, if appropriate, what issue/s the group will focus on. There are a range of models appropriate for group-work including humanistic, CBT, solution-focused, creative/expressive-arts, etc. The model selected should be closely matched to the needs of the group.

Once the purpose of the group has been identified and agreed, likely demand will need to be established as well as the size of the group. Groups tend to work best with between five and twelve participants, but eight is an optimal size (Pearce et al., 2015). Demand will depend to a large extent on the context in which the work takes place. For example, a CAMHS eating disorders team may want a counsellor to run a targeted group for young people experiencing low-to-moderate issues with eating and body image. As part of the planning for the group the counsellor would need to establish that enough young people fit the criteria and are happy and able to take part. It may be possible for this to be ascertained through communication with other professionals who have already had contact with prospective participants and who are aware of those who might benefit from group-work. If demand is likely to be high, criteria need to be established to decide how to offer places fairly. The parameters for acceptance and exclusion of participants will need to be established by the counsellor/s who will be running the group before the necessary pre-assessment screening is carried out. This screening is an important part of the planning process as it allows for the careful consideration of prospective participants and their suitability for the group before they are invited to an assessment. For example, it may not be appropriate for the group to include young people who are actively traumatised and who may find group-work overwhelming.

Managerial support

In most agency or educational settings managerial support is essential for setting up a group. Group-work requires practical resources to run smoothly, such as a space big

enough for the group to be accommodated comfortably which will be available throughout the duration of the group. Staff roles need to be discussed with managers. The group may be led by one or two facilitators, depending on preference, size of group, or availability of resources. Where there is only one facilitator, other members of staff may be needed to provide support if a participant needs to leave the group because they are distressed or finding the sessions difficult.

Decisions also need to be made regarding evaluation of the group and the measures to be used for this (see Chapter 9).

Recruiting participants

Once pre-assessment screening has been carried out and a list of potential participants drawn up, it is usual for the facilitator/s to then meet with individuals to explore with them the possibility of taking part in the group. This means outlining the basic structure of the group and talking about the group's primary goal or focus, giving potential participants the opportunity to make as fully informed a decision as possible regarding taking part. If an individual decides that they do not want to take part, it is helpful if the counsellor is able to give advice regarding other available options for support.

Counsellors also need to explore factors which could present a barrier to individuals taking part in the group, and consider ways of overcoming these where appropriate. Barriers may be practical and include issues with the timing or location of the group. These could be overcome by looking at transport options or rescheduling the group time. If the group is aimed at parents or those with babies or small children it may help to provide crèche facilities. Other barriers might include concerns about social stigma in attending a group and/or emotional barriers such as feelings of shame or embarrassment. School-based counsellors need to be sensitive to concerns participants may have about possible clashes or issues with other prospective participants. The initial interview offers an opportunity to explore such issues and decide if the potential benefits of taking part will outweigh concerns about negative impact. Participants' concerns need to be considered sensitively and realistically in this initial stage in order to avoid potential difficulties and drop-outs once the group has begun. If a young person is concerned about who else will be there, the counsellor could say something like,

'I hear that you're concerned about who else is in the group. Joining a new group can feel scary for everyone. The group will have some ground-rules about behaviour and everyone there will be experiencing similar issues to you. Often people find the gains of taking part outweigh any difficulties. You could have a think and let me know.'

Once a decision has been made to take part in the group, the assessment can be used to explore collaboratively the participant's hopes for the group as well as the goals they would like to focus on. This parallels the establishment of the therapeutic relationship in individual work, as facilitator and participant work together to formulate goals which are relevant for the individual as well as fitting in with the overall aim of the group.

Beginnings

Once recruitment is complete and the structure and practicalities established, the group can begin. Counsellors need a clear sense of how the group will run, i.e. timings, how they will begin and end each session, how 'ground-rules' will be established, etc. as well as any intended structure for individual sessions. These factors will depend to a large extent on the type of approach or theoretical basis selected. For example, a group based on CBT techniques for working with anxiety may be firmly structured or even manualised, while a person-centred group may be less structured by the facilitator, leaving more space for the participants to decide how each session proceeds. Counsellors need to take care in selecting an approach which they are trained and well-prepared in the use of and which is most likely to meet the needs of the participants and achieve the intended goals. Counsellors also need to feel confident in structuring the group and in following the chosen model so the group can be of maximum benefit to participants. They also need to be familiar with the material they will be working with so it can be communicated clearly and without confusion to participants.

Establishing the group

Regardless of approach, an environment needs to be established for the group which is as safe as possible from the outset. If we reflect on our own experiences of joining a group for the first time we are likely to have felt some sense of anxiety regarding what would happen and how we would be received by others. In a therapeutic group these feelings can be heightened and there may be a sense of vulnerability amongst participants in the early stages. It is important for the facilitator/s to establish the ground-rules for the group as quickly and effectively as possible in a way which is appropriate for the developmental stage of the participants.

Reflective questions

Think of some examples of appropriate ground-rules for a group of Year 11 students in school.

Would these ground-rules be any different if the group was younger? Older?

Ground-rules

Ground-rules for group-work parallel contracting for individual counselling. They can be discussed by the group as a whole and will need to be agreed to by the participants before the group begins. Ground-rules need to cover basic boundaries such as confidentiality, attendance and punctuality, and listening to each other with respect. Young people may want to draw up a list of boundaries and rules as a poster which they can then all sign their names to. These ground-rules can be displayed in the room for the

duration of the group and re-referred to as necessary. Often young people will take responsibility for enforcing the rules themselves, reminding each other when they are not listening or treating another participant with respect. At other times the facilitator may need to be ready to remind the group how they agreed to behave at the outset. It may also be necessary to agree on what the consequences will be if participants consistently break the rules. It can be useful to allow participants themselves to decide on this, including any necessary 'sanctions' to be applied. The facilitator can explain that this needs to be a space where the participants feel safe to share their experiences and feelings so that everyone can benefit from participation. Facilitator/s need to keep a close watch on whether the environment is one which feels safe for everyone to take part.

Engaging the group

Once the group has started it needs to be kept engaged and focused on the task. This means working in a way which is developmentally appropriate and congruent with the model being employed. Once the counsellor has a sense of the level at which the group is functioning they can match content and activities accordingly while keeping an appropriate pace. For example, a group of 11–12-year-olds may need to spend more time engaged in activities during the session than an older group who might be happier talking and discussing issues together. Counsellors need to build a rapport with individual participants while being mindful of any tensions which may emerge as these relationships develop. Some participants may be particularly sensitive to how they are related to by the facilitator in comparison with other participants. Counsellors also need to find a way to manage the group which allows all participants to take part in a way which suits them and which is appropriate for the whole group. It may be useful to use modelling and explicit social reinforcement to encourage participants to take part. For example, saying something like,

'I think it was really helpful then when Samir asked Megan to finish what she was saying. It seemed like he was really interested and wanted to hear more. How was that for you Megan?'

Counsellors must be mindful themselves to model appropriate behaviour in terms of listening respectfully, not interrupting, etc.

Pearce et al. (2015) suggest that in order to be effective in work with young people, group counsellors need to demonstrate a range of attributes, including:

- Flexibility.
- Willingness to hear young people and honour each person's unique contribution.
- Willingness to allow conflict in the room.
- Attention to the process.
- Warm accepting presence, and ability to set clear boundaries.
- A sense of humour.
- Ability to remain mindful of child protection/safeguarding issues within the group. (2015: 216)

Reflective questions

Are you aware from your own experience of other important attributes for group facilitators?

Can you think of attributes in a group facilitator which would be unhelpful?

Managing challenges

Group dynamics and processes can present challenges for group facilitators. The group needs to be kept functioning at an optimal level where possible. Encouraging participants to attend regularly and be punctual so sessions can begin on time will help with this, although it is also important not to stigmatise participants who miss sessions or who cannot attend regularly. Counsellors need also to be aware if subgroups have formed in the group which may have a negative impact on other participants.

The impact of problems can potentially be reduced by deciding during the planning stages how to manage potentially disruptive factors such as: challenging behaviour; persistent lateness and absence; persistent non-engagement; participants who leave the group before the session ends; participants who dominate the group; and participants who appear to be experiencing high levels of distress during the group. Having plans in place of how to deal with these issues, including possible involvement of other colleagues, can reduce any potential negative impact that challenging behaviour might have on the group as a whole.

Lifecycle of the group

Groups tend to follow a predictable developmental path and while aspects of this process will be unique for each group, some understanding of the likely stages can be helpful. Tuckman (1965) identifies five stages of group process, shown in Box 7.2.

Box 7.2: Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development

1. Forming: Orientation, testing and dependence.
2. Storming: Resistance to group influence and task requirements.
3. Norming: Openness to other group members.
4. Performing: Constructive action.
5. Adjourning: Disengagement.

Being aware of these different stages can help counsellors choose appropriate activities or respond to any challenges as the group develops. For Rogers (1970), it was essential to have trust in the group and its ability to find the correct course. He wrote,

I believe that the way I serve as facilitator has significance in the life of the group, but that the group process is much more important than my statements or behaviour, and will take place if I do not get in the way of it. (1970: 52)

Endings

Often, group-work with young people or parents will run to a fixed number of sessions. Counsellors need to make sure that participants are aware from the outset how many sessions there will be and restate this regularly throughout the work, just as in time-limited individual work.

When the group is coming to an end, counsellors need to give space for discussion of this so participants have enough time to explore and express their thoughts and feelings. Participants may find ending brings up feelings relating to previous endings and separations. It may feel sad for some participants to end, while others may feel anxious or angry. Counsellors can support participants in reflecting on and sharing these feelings in the group.

Endings offer an opportunity for participants to review their experience of the group and to consider what they have gained, as well as what might have been difficult or disappointing. Participants can be encouraged to reflect on their progress in the group and to celebrate this as appropriate. With some groups, it may be appropriate to run the final session differently, perhaps with time for a celebratory element to be introduced, while for other groups this will not be appropriate. Counsellors will need to judge how to manage the ending according to the developmental and other needs of the participants.

Evaluation

Most contexts will require group-work to be evaluated. This allows any evidence for its efficacy to be fed back to managers as appropriate as well as for counsellors to evaluate how well the group worked. Counsellors will need to explain to group participants the rationale for any evaluation tools they are using. Ideally this will happen at the initial meeting so participants will be prepared for this part of the process and will be familiar with any forms or questionnaires to be completed. Counsellors may decide to have individual interviews with participants after the group has ended in order to complete any final evaluations and get feedback on their experience in the group. This can also be a way of ensuring that individual participants are not left unsupported after the group has ended.

Supervision

As in individual work, it is important that counsellors have a supervision space where they can reflect on both the processes of the group and develop self-awareness regarding the impact they are having on the group (see Chapter 13).

Chapter summary

- Group-work can be a time- and cost-effective approach with young people.
- Groups need to be structured and planned according to need and developmental level of participants.
- Counsellors need to offer a warm, accepting and non-judgemental approach in order to create optimal conditions for the group process.
- Group process can be challenging at times and counsellors should be prepared to keep participants engaged and safe in the group environment.
- Counsellors should be aware of the normal stages of development in groups and structure accordingly.
- Endings can bring up strong feelings in participants and time needs to be given in the group for exploring these.

Further reading

- Pearce, P., Proud, G. and Sewell, R. (2015) 'Group work', in S. Pattinson, M. Robson and A. Beynon (eds), *The Handbook of Counselling Children and Young People*. London: Sage.
- Yalom, I.D. and Leszcz, M. (2005) *The Theory and Practice of Group Therapy*, 5th edn. New York: Basic Books.
- Westergaard, J. (2009) *Effective Group Work with Young People*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill/OUP.
- Benson, J.F. (2010) *Working More Creatively with Groups*. Hove: Routledge.