

How To Get the Most Out Of Group Therapy: An Owner's Manual

Susan Jacobson and John Rhead

Group therapy can provide powerful healing, and even transformative, experiences. In order for this type of experience to occur, the members of the group must achieve a deep level of trust and interconnectedness. The suggestions given below are intended to help you enter and participate in the group in ways that will make it more likely that you will have such experiences.

Enter the group with openness to developing deeply personal relationships with other group members. Maintain this openness over time.

Initially it may seem impossible to trust or to learn from other members of the group you perceive to be different from you. You may see yourself as superior, inferior, or just plain incompatible on any one of many dimensions such as wealth, intelligence, sophistication, education, gender, sexual orientations, religion, spirituality, criminal history, ethnicity, age, mental health, political beliefs, moral integrity and/or self-awareness. Discussing how your perception of differences makes trusting difficult may be the first step to building relationships.

Your ability to search out elements of common humanity (including yourself *in* rather than *out*) will offer you wider possibilities for self-knowledge and growth.

Respect and guard the integrity and sanctity of the group by being very protective of its boundaries.

Early in a group's development it is difficult to do productive work in the group and look good at the same time. In a more mature group your willingness to look foolish, stupid, crazy, or unevolved — i.e. to not look good — will be appreciated by others and may, paradoxically, make you look good.

While it is natural to wish to be liked, try to remember that you come to the group to grow, to learn about yourself and to explore your ways of relating to others. If you are trying to be popular, you will miss opportunities for self-expression and expansion.

Similarly, allowing yourself not to like certain group members may be more valuable for your self-discovery than trying to find a way to like them.

Politeness may be a defense against intimacy.

Assume you have unconscious motives that will eventually be noticed by other group members. Invite and welcome, in fact request and demand, that they notice your unconscious and give you feedback about it whenever they can.

Your authentic reaction or association to what someone else brings to the group will be more valuable to the group, and to yourself, than being "helpful" or trying to solve the other's problem.

Cultivate curiosity about yourself and others, and express it without restraint. If you wonder about someone else in terms of sexuality, financial status, political beliefs, spiritual or religious practices, or anything else, feel free to ask. They can always decline to answer, and the asking will be good for the group.

Do not let your fear of love or hate keep you from expressing what you feel and believe. It is the only way to become your authentic self and is worth whatever risk you may imagine is attached to having, or being the object of, strong responses. Your life

cannot be meaningful and fulfilling unless you strive to know as much as possible about who you really are -- and are becoming.

Finding the courage to be authentic in the group will enhance your bravery in other relationships and situations outside the group. Egg others on to be more courageous, and let them egg you on.

Never assume that something you think or feel is unimportant or not worthy of sharing with the group just because it seems irrational, inappropriate, impolite or silly. Sometimes your unconscious may speak directly to another's or to that of the group, even though your conscious mind has no way to understand what is going on.

Remember that support, whether given or received, does not always come in the form of agreement or approval.

Actively cultivate the courage to share with the group your worst fears and secrets relating to how bad, defective, crazy, unlovable, or evil you fear you might be.

Group therapists are taught to "trust the process." One implication of this dictum is that the first topic that emerges in a given session is not necessarily the only topic, or even an important one. By sharing whatever is stirred in you by what is going on at any moment, you will not only have the chance to learn more about yourself, but will also facilitate the process we are attempting to trust. This type of sharing is often particularly valuable when you have no idea why you are reacting the way you are.

Be active in bringing to the group your suffering, issues, problems, dilemmas, and confusions, and asking for help with them. Don't wait for them to emerge from the group process, but if they do, seize the opportunity to get the group's help in addressing them.

Also, be active in bringing your success, joy, gratitude, and exhilaration to the group. The fact that another member of the group may be experiencing sorrow or pain is not a reason to withhold your own jubilation -- and vice versa.

Remember the *Tripartite Theorem*: As you present your life and yourself to the group at increasingly deeper levels, the material you present can be divided into three categories. The ideal response of the group depends on the category. The first category consists of beliefs and behaviors that you can change in order to reduce your suffering. The group confronts and contains you so that you can find the courage and insight to make such changes. The second category consists of suffering over which you have no control, and in this case the group's job is simply to bear witness to your suffering and to refrain from trying to talk you out of it. The third category consists of the miracles in your life, and the group's job again is primarily to bear witness, although sometimes it must first struggle to get you to notice these.

Your relationship with fate, God, Ultimate Concern, Ground of Being, Higher Power, or whatever term you may use, is just as appropriate a topic in the group as your relationship with anyone or anything else. Just as the group develops an unconscious with which your unconscious can interact, it also develops a soul with which your soul can interact.

Take advantage of the group's power to help you make better choices by bringing the group in on the earliest stages of important decisions you are contemplating making -- including thoughts of possibly leaving the group.

If you find yourself distrusting anyone in the group, especially the therapist(s), regard this as a very important issue to address as soon as possible.

Early in your membership in the group you may misrepresent certain things about yourself out of fear of being judged. Later you will confront three choices about how to deal with such early misrepresentations: (1) find the courage to disclose them so that you can get more out of the group; (2) keep them to yourself, knowing that the potential for maximum benefit is constricted by your secrets; or (3) come up with some excuse to leave the group in order to avoid having to make the choice between (1) and (2). Choose option (1). You will face, and probably already have faced, the same choice in other kinds of ongoing relationships, such as friendship and marriage.

At some point you will probably find yourself frustrated with the seeming artificiality of meeting only for a set time once each week with people to whom you are starting to feel meaningfully connected and therefore would like to see at other times. It is valuable to bring this frustration into the group.

Over time your authentic participation in the group will enhance your capacity to tolerate loving and being loved. Remind yourself of this when things get confusing, frustrating, frightening, or painful.

No matter how recently you have become a member, it is your group and you have a right to demand that it be helpful and powerful for you.

Stay in the room, physically and emotionally, as much as possible.

Take ownership of the group. If you perceive that there is an elephant in the room that nobody is acknowledging, say so. If the group does not feel as alive as you want it to be, announce that. If you are unhappy with something a therapist has done, or not done, complain. If there is a hint that somebody may have violated a boundary, challenge that person. Remember that it's *your* group.

to
P
out
pol