Group Therapy: How Does It Help?

Many people are nervous about the idea of joining a therapy group. They may be shy or have a hard time talking about themselves or be uncertain what they’re supposed to talk about. A person may envision being forced to tell their deepest secrets or thoughts. Others wonder just what the point of talking is, anyway. Uncertainty about group and how group therapy works often prevents people from taking advantage of group counseling. Yet a group is often an ideal form of therapy as most of our concerns are interpersonal in some way; many conflicts are in the areas of assertion, intimacy, sexuality, greed, envy, competition, or trust. Often fears are relieved by more information, so we thought it would be helpful to relay what the research says about the benefits of group therapy.

Dr. Irvin Yalom, a renowned psychiatrist, has conducted extensive research on group therapy for more than 30 years. Here are some of his findings about how group therapy helps people:

**Instillation of hope.** Therapy groups inevitably have people who are at different points along a coping continuum. Encountering people who have had similar problems and coped with them more effectively, along with observing the improvement of others, leads group members to feel hopeful about their own situations.

**Universality.** Despite the complexity of human problems, we all have much in common. After hearing other members disclose concerns similar to their own, such as worrying about their sense of worth and/or their ability to relate to others, group participants report feeling more in touch with and connected to others.

**Altruism.** Through the intrinsic act of giving to other group members, individuals also receive. It is very healing when a group participant discovers that they have something of value to offer others and that they are important to others.

**Imparting information.** Group members often learn about psychological functioning as well as receive suggestions about life problems from other group members.

**Social Learning.** Through feedback and self-observation, group members become better observers of their behavior and appreciate the impact of that behavior upon others. Longer term group members often acquire sophisticated social skills, such as acceptance, attunement and responsiveness to others, and methods of conflict resolution.

**Family reenactment.** Each group member’s interpersonal style, which is generally formed in response to earlier family experiences, will eventually appear in group interactions. As people adopt more flexible roles and test new behavior, they are also working through unfinished business from long ago. Major shifts in perspective on the past can occur.
**Existential factors.** By recognizing the capriciousness of existence and by accepting responsibility, group therapy facilitates people putting their concerns into a different perspective. Group members learn a great deal about how to relate better, how to develop greater intimacy with others, how to give to and ask for help from others. At the same time, they discover the limits of intimacy; they learn what they cannot obtain from others.

Not everyone needs the same thing or responds in the same way to group therapy. A passive individual may need to learn to identify and express their needs; a person who is impulsive may benefit from reining in emotional expression. Additionally, needs and goals change with the course of therapy. A person may come in seeking relief from one symptom, then once that’s achieved, formulate new goals, perhaps to be able to relate more deeply to others. Overall, research evidence indicates that the power of the longer-term interactional psychotherapy group issues from its interpersonal nature. People need people.