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ABSTRACT

                The development of a program of self-help support
groups for teachers experiencing stress in Chicago public schools is
described. These support groups attempted to alleviate stress-related
illness by reducing teacher isolation and by enabling teachers to
help each other cope with problems and fears. The support groups were
led by teachers who volunteered to attend 36 hours of training
sessions. Training emphasized generic listening, communication, and
feedback skills. Experts in hypnosis and relaxation, nutrition, and
exercise made presentations to the trainees and discussed how these
topics are related to stress. The support groups focused on stressful
conditions which members faced when teaching. Everyone in the group
briefly described a current problem, and the group decided which
problem to discuss. Methods of coping were discussed by the group
under the leadership of the trained volunteer, and possible solutions
were considered. The member with the problem chose a solution to try
in the upcoming week and selected a partner with whom to share
progress and discuss difficulties. During the school year, 159
teachers contacted the program staff, and 128 were assigned to a
support group. Evaluation of the program proved to be difficult. This
is attributed, in part, to the fact that volunteer facilitators were
not sufficiently committed to the research design of pre- and
post-test evaluation methodology. Several changes are being made in
the program for next year in an attempt to increase the number of
participants and to obtain a systematic evaluation of the program.
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Self-Help Support Groups for Teachers Under Stress

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The development and evaluation of a program of self-help support
groups for teachers under stress is described.  These support groups attempt
to alleviate stress-related illness by reducing teacher isolation and by
facilitating teachers' helping each other cope with problems and fears.  The
groups are led by volunteer teachers, whose training is described briefly.
The evaluation plan and reasons it was rot carried out are presented, as
are changes which will be made in the program next year.  These support
groups represent a low-cost, efficient method for helping teachers cope with
occupational stress.

Self-Help Support Groups for Teachers Under Stress

Recent psychological literature suggests that stressful life and occupational events can lead to anxiety, depression, and other psychological and physical disorders (see Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1978, for a review). A few studies (e.g., Bloch, 1978; Brodsky, 1977) have focused on occupational stress faced by teachers. Stressful events that teachers face are widespread and include job insecurities, problem students, difficulties with administrators, lack of supplies, etc.

Special circumstances in the Chicago Public Schools exacerbate problems of occupational stress. Transfer to achieve desegregation, the spread of the closed campus movement, and increased public pressure to improve reading scores are sources of stress for some teachers in Chicago. A recent survey of 22,500 teachers in the Chicago Public Schools (Cichon, Koff, Kotsakis, & Walley, Note 1) revealed that a majority of the 5,000 teachers who responded (56.6%) indicated that they had experienced some physical illness they thought was related to stress at work. A substantial minority (26.4%) reported having some form of psychological disorder related to occupational stress.

Self-help groups are becoming an increasingly important part of the health care delivery system and seem to be effective in helping individuals cope with stress (Lieberman & Borman, 1979). Self-help groups are groups where 1) members provide support for each other when solving problems, (2) the sanctions and origins of the group exist among the members, (3) the members rely on each other for skills and expertise rather than relying on professionals, and (4) members share a common set of experiences or problems (Levy, 1976).

This paper describes the development and evaluation of a program of self-help groups for teachers in the Chicago Public Schools who are under stress. The major premise of this program is that stress-related illness in teachers can be

alleviated by reducing teacher isolation, and by facilitating teachers'
helping each other cope with their problems and fears.

## Self-Help Support Groups

The support groups, which are led by trained volunteer teachers, are
convened as teachers request assignment to a group in response to publicity
in the schools and in the Chicago Teachers Union newspaper. The groups meet
once a week for 90 minutes at union offices or available community spaces
(e.g., churches). Not meeting in schools helps to ensure confidentiality
and to reduce fears that administrators will know which teachers are in sup-
port groups and will view these teachers as defective in some way. Three
support groups met in schools during the past year with the approval of the
school administration.

The support groups focus on stressful conditions which members face
when teaching. Sharing of common problems, giving reassurance and support,
sharing successful coping strategies, and listening empathically are emphasized
in the groups. The groups are not judgmental or diagnostic, nor do they deal
with teacher problems which are contractual. The volunteer groups leaders
are trained to focus the groups in these ways. To help the groups maintain
a problem-solving orientation, the following structured format is used at
group meetings:

1) Members share soluti ns to current problems. These
   are often solutions that were generated in previous
   support groups.

2) Everyone in the group briefly describes a current
   problem. The group decides on a problem to discuss
   and to try to solve.

3) The problem situation is described in detail.

4) The member with the problem describes his/her current
   method of coping.

5) Other members offer and explore alternate solutions.

6) The members with the problem choses a solution(s) to try in the upcoming week. The member also selects a partner whom he or she can call during the week to share progress and discuss any difficulties encountered in implementing the solution(s).

7) Another problem is chosen if time permits, and steps three through six are repeated.

## Training Group Facilitators

The support groups are led by teachers who volunteer to attend six weekly, six-hour training sessions. Volunteers are obtained through advertisements in the Chicago Teachers Union newspaper and are screened by a committee of teachers. The committee looks for volunteers who have a positive attitude toward their colleagues, who have good communication skills, and who appear to be committed to the self-help program. About 45 teachers have been trained as facilitators.

The training itself emphasizes generic listening and group facilitation skills and is modeled after a group facilitators training program developed by Stokes and Tait (1980). The first session of training uses getting acquainted and team building exercises, as well as skills-building activities which focus on generic communication skills such as active listening and giving feedback. Sessions two through four focus on group facilitation, emphasizing both conceptual knowledge of group dynamics and specific skills in making interventions in the ongoing group. During this phase of training, simulated support groups are formed, and trainees have opportunities to facilitate groups and get feedback on their performance.

The final two training sessions emphasize specific methods of coping with stress. Experts in hypnosis and relaxation, nutrition, and exercise make presentations to the trainees and discuss how these topics are related

to stress management.

## Evaluation

The evaluation plan for this project centered on an experimental design with a treatment group and a delayed treatment, waiting list control group. Teachers in the experimental groups were pretested before joining the group and posttested after about 8 weeks of participation in a support group. Control teachers were to be pretested, assigned to a 8 week waiting list, and posttested just before beginning to participate in a group.

The following instruments were administered to all participating teachers as both pretests and posttests: 1) The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Luschene, 1970) measures both trait anxiety (relatively stable predispositions in responding to threatening situations) and state anxiety (subjective, consciously perceived feelings of tension and apprehension). 2) The Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974) includes scales to measure anxiety and depression. 3) The Personal-Dilemmas Questionnaire (PDQ; Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973) measures two types of coping styles, adequate and defensive. Adequate coping involves confronting a problem, expressing feelings about it, and/or taking rational direct action. Defensive coping, which is assumed to be less desirable, includes denial, flight, and minimizing as responses to a threatening situation. This instrument was modified to measure coping with occupational dilemmas.

During the school year 159 teachers contacted the program staff and 128 were assigned to a support group. Of thes , 65 completed the pretest. Several reasons account for the relatively low proportion of completed pretests: 1) Volunteer group facilitators were not sufficiently committed to the research design. They felt awkward asking participants to spend up to 45 minutes completing the instruments before joining the support groups. 2) Project staff

were preoccupied with getting the groups started and with recruiting parti-
cipants. They did not devote enough time to training the volunteer facili-
tators in data collection or to emphasizing the importance of the research
design. Also, the staff was not effective in following up on participants
frcm whom a pretest was not received. 3) The pretest was mailed to teachers
who were in the control group; the return rate for these pretests was very
low.

For many of these same reasons, especially the low level of involvement
of the volunteer facilitators in the evaluation research and the lack of
attention to pursuing nonrespondents, the return rate for posttests was very
lcw. In all, there were 19 completed pretests and posttests from the ex-
perimental group and none from the control group. Thus, the planned evaluation
could not be completed.

We examined the data from the 19 teachers in the experimental group to
see if any changes occurred from the pretest to the posttest and found none
on any of the measures. The scores for these 19 teachers at both pretest
and posttest for both the STAI and the HSCL were very close to published norms
for normal populations.

## Future Directions

Several changes are being made in the program for next year in an
attempt to increase the number of participants and to obtain a systematic
evaluation of the program. With regard to the latter objective, we will
train the group facilitators in the method and importance of data collection.
We will also be more systematic and conscientious in following up when
data are not collected from participants.

Several changes are designed to increase participation in the groups.
We plan to hold orientation or drop-in one-session groups and to publicize

these introductory groups widely. Also, the support groups themselves will be limited to about eight weeks, thus putting clear limits on the committment a participant is making. If participants find the groups helpful and wish to remain longer than eight weeks, a new group can be formed with a new eight-week committment.

Through surveying people who made inquiry about the program but who never attended a group or who attended a few groups and left, we found the main reasons for nonattendance were logistical; that is, the times and/or locations of the groups were not convenient. In response to this, we plan to use school-based groups next year in addition to the open groups. School-based groups will be groups of interested teachers at the same school. The groups will meet weekly at their school for about 45 minutes either before school starts or at lunchtime.

## Significance

We know of no other teacher organization in the country which is attempting to solve the problems of teacher stress-related illness in this way. Other solutions which have been proposed (e.g., Reed, 1979) emphasize modification of administrative practices, rest and renewal for teachers in the form of sabbaticals or leaves, provision of additional training for teachers, or raises in pay for teachers. None of these approaches is viable in a large, underfinanced school system. Unlike most of these solutions, the model described herein relies on volunteers, is not costly, and does not require widespread system changes. It is an attempt by a professional groups to solve its own problems with its own resources.

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