

Increasing Adolescent Self-Esteem: Group Strategies to Address Wellness and Process

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Abstract

The authors present a therapeutic resource for school counselors who need a tangible method to integrate self-esteem strategies into their psychoeducational group programs. The focus of the group is a comprehensive wellness model based on five senses of self and how each self must be addressed to promote healthy life decisions. Special attention is devoted to providing self-esteem information that relies less on teaching concepts and more on integrating process work into the group.

Keywords: adolescents, psychoeducational group, process, self-esteem, wellness

influence on many adolescent life decisions that may continue to affect the course of their lives (Searcy, 2007; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Furthermore, Haney and Durlak (1998) highlighted research that showcased how low levels of self-esteem are associated with alcohol and drug abuse, higher rates of teen pregnancy, suicide, loneliness, juvenile delinquency, social anxiety, and alienation. This article contains information that supports the use of processed-based psychoeducational groups (PEG) and a summary of a 10-week program for a wellness- and processed-based PEG that may increase adolescent self-esteem.

Increasing Adolescent Self-Esteem: Group Strategies to Address Wellness and Process

Self-esteem has been extensively studied in the behavioural and social sciences (Robins, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2012). In addition, adolescent self-esteem has been a major focus in research over the past 30 years (Searcy, 2007). It is a crucial topic on which to focus, as low self-esteem has been shown to have a negative

Utilizing Group Approaches in a School Setting

According to Paisley and Milsom (2006), PEGs are commonly used with adolescents in a school setting to impart new information and promote the refinement or development of new skills. The focus in PEGs is to develop members' cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills through the presentation and discussion of factual information (Brown, 2011; Corey, Corey,

& Corey, 2010; Furr, 2000). In addition, PEGs are often preventative in nature and are used to teach members coping skills applicable to the topics being covered in the specific group (Brown, 2011; Furr, 2000).

In working with adolescent self-esteem, a PEG appears to be a valid approach as these groups (a) mesh with many adolescents' experiences in an educational setting (Corey et al., 2010); (b) offer a developmentally appropriate venue through which to impart and discuss information on a selected topic (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2006; Corey et al., 2010), in this case self-esteem; (c) have been found to be particularly effective in school settings (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Brown, 2011; Corey et al., 2010; Paisley & Milsom, 2006); and (d) often focus on teaching coping skills (Brown, 2011; Furr, 2000), such as how to handle assaults to one's self-esteem. While these characteristics provide support for using a PEG format for adolescents with low self-esteem, PEGs can be very structured in nature (Corey et al., 2010), which is not usually conducive to the creation of an environment in which meaningful process work can occur (Champe & Rubel, 2012). However, according to some of the literature pertaining to PEGs, these groups should involve a balance of process and content (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Corey et al., 2010; Furr, 2000). Champe and Rubel (2012) stated that, despite the important role that an integration of process can play in members' acquisition of knowledge on the topics covered in PEGs, hardly any literature focuses on how to integrate process into PEGs.

The powerful therapeutic effects of process work cannot be overstated. In Fertman and Chubb's (1992) study of a PEG aimed at increasing self-esteem, no reference

to process was made in the group's description, and this PEG was not found to increase adolescent self-esteem. To provide further support for the power of process in a group setting, Lee and Harvey (2014) found that participants receiving cognitive behavioural therapy recalled more therapy points than those in the PEG without a process base. As such, counselors working in a school setting can work to maximize students' learning through focusing on integrating process into their group practice.

The Indivisible Self Model of Wellness

Wellness models have long been used as tools to assess individual functioning (Myers & Sweeney, 2007) and as theories to explain health and illness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). While the roots of counselling have been traced back almost 100 years, the roots of wellness models go back almost two millennia (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). According to Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000):

[Wellness is] a way of life orientated toward optimal health and well-being, in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community. Ideally, it is the optimum state of health and well-being that each individual is capable of achieving. (p. 252)

Theorists have proposed myriad different wellness models, but only two are grounded in counseling theory (Myers, Willse, & Villalba, 2011). The first is the "Wheel of Wellness" (Sweeney & Witmer, 1991, p. 528; see also Myers et al., 2011, p. 28), which was used to inform Myers and Sweeney's (2005b) second model,

the indivisible self model of wellness. In the creation of the wheel of wellness, Sweeney and Witmer (1991) identified characteristics correlated with longevity, a high quality of life, and healthy living (see also Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Myers and Sweeney (2004) then organized these characteristics according to Adler's major life tasks of work, friendship, love, self, and spirit. In their stringent testing of the wheel of wellness model, Myers and Sweeney (2005a) found that it fell short; thus, they made changes and created the indivisible self model of wellness.

Myers and Sweeney's (2005b) wellness model contains the original 17 dimensions of Sweeney and Witmer's (1991) wheel of wellness, but they are grouped differently to reflect one, higher-order factor—the indivisible self—and five, second-order factors—the coping self, social self, creative, self, essential self, and physical self (Myers et al., 2011). The identification of five second-order factors allowed for the exploration of the many variables that interact and contribute to an individual's overall wellness—the indivisible self (Myers et al., 2011).

The Indivisible Self as an Evidence-Based Model

Myers and Sweeney (2008) asserted counselors have an ethical responsibility to utilize evidence-based techniques. Consequently, Myers et al. (2011) examined the extent to which wellness factors were predictive of self-esteem in 225 adolescents (spanning 15- to 17-years-of-age). They found the coping self, social self, and creative self, which are three of the five wellness factors identified in Myers and Sweeney's (2005b) indivisible self model of wellness, had the greatest impact on increasing self-esteem in this

population of adolescents.

Villalba and Myers (2008) tested a three-session classroom guidance unit based upon the indivisible self model of wellness on 55 Grade 5 students. The majority of the participants in their study had significantly higher wellness scores post testing. While the main aim of the group therapy program is to increase self-esteem by utilizing Myers and Sweeney's (2005b) indivisible self model of wellness as a framework, it also has the potential to increase the wellness of participants as a whole.

Although Myers and Sweeney's (2005b) indivisible self model of wellness is relatively new, preliminary findings support the efficacy of this tool as the basis for effective counseling interventions. Moreover, Sweeney and Witmer's (1991) wheel of wellness, upon which the model is based, has been employed since 1991 and has been empirically supported using a wide range of populations and presenting issues (Myers, Madathil, & Tingle, 2005; Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

Overview of the Group Therapy Program

The eight main group-counseling sessions are based on the five second-order factors identified in the indivisible self model of wellness. A more in-depth examination of the rationale and support for each lesson's objectives, activities, and process instructions as well as detailed session instructions and information about activities can be found in Mills (2015) work. Each of the following sections contains an outline of the focus and activities for a particular session. In addition, each section describes the processing tools that help the adolescents reflect on what is being

accomplished by them in the group.

Session 1: Pregroup Activities

In this session, the main objective is to orient members to the group process. This objective is accomplished by reviewing the group rules, inviting members to help personalize these group rules, and going over group-related concerns members may have. Focusing on here-and-now interactions is included in the group rules as a way to introduce members to a here-and-now focus and to group process. Members also complete the School Short-Form Coppersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI; Coopersmith, as cited in Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011), which includes 25 items and takes approximately ten minutes to complete.

During this initial session, facilitators can scan the room (Middleman, 1978) to get a sense of members' levels of comfort (e.g., looking at the nonverbal communications that members are expressing through observing their body language) and the underlying group dynamics that are emerging. They can note their initial observations of the members' nonverbal communications so these may be brought up for discussion during the middle or end stage of the group to highlight members' progress over time.

Session 2: Essential Self–Spirituality, Gender Identity, Cultural Identity, and Self-Care

In this session, the objectives are to create a safe environment within the group and to help members get to know one another. Additional objectives are to address and explore the diverse backgrounds and identities the members bring into the group setting. The method used is to have each member explore his or her essential self

through the creation of a personal poster. The label in each quadrant is one of the elements of the essential self. A member writes four words in each quadrant and then uses any of the supplied art materials to explain what the words represent or mean to him or her. Each member then shares the poster with another member. Once this discussion ends, the facilitator takes time with the members to process the activity.

Process commentary revolves around exploring what it is like for members to know that there are similarities between members' experiences, regardless of the different meanings they attach to culture, gender, spirituality, and self-care. It also focuses on exploring differences (e.g., What was it like for you to know that there are differences between members? Is being different than others okay?).

Session 3: Social Self I–Friendship and Love

In this session, group members explore their understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship and the link between healthy relationships and high self-esteem. Group members write down two words they think are important characteristics to have in relationships with others and then share their words with a partner. The partners are to discuss how healthy relationships may help to increase self-esteem. These characteristics and possible connections are then discussed as a group.

The members also begin to create their own Indivisible You Toolbox that will be used throughout the program. Members will add the new tools they learn to their toolbox, such as new coping skills, self-esteem building statements, member-identified strengths, community resources,

and insights gained.

To assist members in processing the activity, the facilitators ask, What was one feeling or thought that occurred for you when you completed this activity? This is followed with a round-robin check in which the facilitators ask each member, What is one word that describes how you are feeling right now? During this part of the session, facilitators can be looking for opportunities to amplify subtle messages conveyed by the verbal or nonverbal communication of members (Middleman, 1978) that relate to the group topics being discussed (Champe & Rubel, 2012). Process commentary centers on discussing, as a group, the subtle messages that the facilitators choose to bring to the group's attention and how these interactions relate to the topic being discussed.

Session 4: Creative Self I-Thinking, Emotions, Control, and Positive Humour

In session three, the main objectives are to highlight and explore the connections between situations that may impact group members' self-esteem and their subsequent beliefs, feelings, and behaviours. Group members discuss different situations that could have the potential to affect adolescent self-esteem (e.g., a relationship break up). The focus is on examining the connections between individuals' beliefs about themselves after these types of situations and their resulting feelings and behaviours. The facilitator assists members to replace any negative beliefs about themselves with positive, alternative beliefs. The members write self-affirming statements based on these alternative beliefs and place these in their toolboxes.

Useful questions to help members with processing their experiences are, What is one word to describe how you felt when thinking about a negative belief about yourself? What is one word to describe how you felt when thinking about an alternative positive belief about yourself? Facilitators can be scanning the room searching for information and feeling links (Middleman, 1978) to be discussed with the group in order to help explore members' relationships to the topics being covered (Champe & Rubel, 2012). Process commentary is aimed at using here-and-now group interactions in a way that works to normalize the experience of low self-esteem.

Session 5: Coping Self I-Stress Management, Leisure, Self-Worth, and Realistic Beliefs

In this session, members explore Fox and Sokol's (2011) give-up and go-to thoughts as way to develop an understanding of realistic beliefs. After learning about give-up and go-to thoughts, members, working in pairs, pick two scenarios out of a hat. Based on these two scenarios, they generate two give-up thoughts and two go-to thoughts. When the activity is complete, members share their experiences in this activity with the whole group. Near the end of this session, they think of recent situations where they had give-up thoughts and write down two, alternative, go-to thoughts. These go-to thoughts become new tools in their Indivisible You Toolboxes. The purposes of the process questions in this session are to help identify and work through any resistance in this stage of the group, create a safe group environment (Champe & Rubel, 2012), and encourage members to directly address each other using "I" statements (Middleman, 1978). In the group, the facilitators ask the

members to recall when they were asked to brainstorm give-up thoughts and go-to thoughts and to take time to think about any sensations that occurred in their bodies then. The purpose of this is to integrate the use of silence into the session and to help members start to become more aware of the signals that their body may send them. Facilitators also help the members become more comfortable with silences by helping them explore the answers to the questions, What was it like to sit in silence with others in the group? Did you find it easier to sit in silence with some members over others?

Session 6: Physical Self–Exercise and Nutrition

The foci in this session are on providing members with information on the benefits of eating healthy foods and exercising regularly and highlighting how these benefits relate to increased levels of self-esteem. This is done by providing handouts on healthy eating and facilitating an interactive group discussion on different types of exercise and ways to make exercising regularly enjoyable. In addition, the discussion includes how eating healthily and exercising regularly both help to increase self-esteem. Goal setting is part of this session as each member identifies and records two goals related to the foci of the session that he or she would like to work towards. These two goals become yet another tool in his or her Indivisible You Toolbox.

Key processing questions are, What is one word that describes how you felt completing today's group discussion on exercise? What is one word that describes how you feel when you think about changing the way you exercise or eat?

Session 7: Coping Self II–Stress Management, Leisure, Self-Worth, and Realistic Beliefs

This session returns to a consideration of the coping self. While the focus in session four was realistic beliefs, in this session the main objective is to explore members' self-doubts and to help them start thinking about how they can challenge this lack of self-confidence. After contemplating what their self-doubts are, members then use the available art supplies to illustrate their self-doubts. They are given the opportunity to share and discuss what their self-doubts look like with the whole group. Then, working in pairs, they brainstorm ideas on the different ways that they can work to fight off their self-doubts when they emerge. These ideas, and any others the members develop before the next session, will be the main topics of discussion in the following week's session. The members' hobbies and how they may be used to lessen thoughts of self-doubt are also highlighted in this session. Again, a written description of how each member will fight off self-doubt becomes a new tool in his or her Indivisible You Toolbox.

In the group discussion, members state two words that represent their experiences while thinking about and drawing their self-doubts. This is followed with a check in round where members describe the feeling that best represents how they felt when thinking about ways to fight off their self-doubt. The main foci of process commentary during this stage in the group are to normalize members' experiences of self-doubt and to ensure that all members feel safe. As such, facilitators focus on reaching for feeling and information links related to self-doubt as well as redirecting and toning down strong messages through the use of "I" versus "you" statements (Middleman, 1978).

Session 8: Social Self II—Friendship and Love

This session incorporates the processing of the self-doubt activity from the previous week, a group discussion on the different strategies to fight off members' self-doubts, and how to build a confidence mindset (Fox & Sokol, 2011). There is also an interactive group discussion of what healthy social support entails, and the members receive a handout outlining the various local support resources available for adolescents. The ideas and resources provided in this session become additional tools in the members' Indivisible You Toolboxes.

In the group discussion, members name two words that represent their experiences in thinking about building a confidence mindset. In the following check in round, they state the feeling that best represents how they feel when they think about their social support network. Facilitators can be scanning the room looking for opportunities to amplify subtle messages (Middleman, 1978) in the form of a group discussion that relates to the type of body language that may occur when someone demonstrates confidence (i.e., that they are good enough, do have talents, etc.).

Session 9: Creative Self II—Thinking, Emotions, Control, and Positive Humour

As this is the final official group session, the main objectives are to explore members' learning in the group and to provide emotional closure to the experience. Two activities help accomplish these goals. First, members have the opportunity to complete an individual, art-based exercise, adapted from Fox and Sokol's (2011) Positive Picture of You activity. They draw words or images that

represent their strengths in relation to academics, friendships, physical abilities, personality, physical attributes, and so forth. If needed, group facilitators can provide members with examples of the different strengths that could fall under each of the categories covered.

The second activity is geared towards providing members with emotional closure and is adapted from Townsend and Manieri's (2014) Positive Picnic Closure activity. In this activity each member writes his or her name in the middle of a paper plate. He or she then selects a coloured marker. Members pass their plates to the right and have 40 seconds to write one thing that they really liked, admired, or learned from the person to whom the plate belongs. Messages written are to be positive and supportive. This process continues until everyone gets his or her plate back. The remainder of the group time is spent processing this activity. At the end of the session, members can add their plates to their Indivisible You Toolboxes. The facilitators provide everyone with information about the postgroup session and explain that they will be adding a strength and one hope or wish they have for each member into each of their toolboxes.

During the processing portion of this session, facilitators ask the group members to think back to the first day of group and what they were thinking and feeling at that time. Then, they ask the members to take time to think about what they are thinking and feeling on this last day of group. The key question is, If you could only pick one or two words to describe the difference between what your experience was like on the first day of group and what your experience is right now, what would

the word (or words) be? Facilitators look for opportunities to highlight members' progress and the success of the group as a whole. Again, looking for feeling and information links that relate to self-esteem helps to accomplish these goals (Middleman, 1978).

Session 10: Postgroup Individual Sessions

In these individual sessions, the main objective is to complete the CSEI (Coopersmith, as cited in Hills et al., 2011) to track any changes in members' self-esteem at the end of the group experience. Another objective is to provide members with an opportunity to provide feedback on the group by completing a group evaluation form. These sessions will be completed privately with each member to enable facilitators to determine if referrals need to be made for individual counseling or other local resources. At the end of each of these individual sessions, members are given their Indivisible You Toolboxes to take with them from the group.

The primary processing question is, If you could pick two accomplishments that you are the proudest of during your time in this group what would they be? Facilitators can use members' answers to this question for more in-depth discussion and to celebrate the growth members have experienced throughout the group's duration.

Conclusion

The group therapy program previously summarized provides a straightforward and tangible way for school counselors to work towards increasing self-esteem in adolescents. This group therapy program also outlines one method through which a model of wellness can be integrated into such a program. As adolescents are the

future of this world, working to promote and support the development of healthy adolescents through assisting them in increasing their self-esteem is a very important undertaking.

This article highlights the value of having an in-depth understanding of process work and how to actually integrate process into PEGs, which are commonly utilized in a school setting. However, the process instructions contained in this group therapy program (Mills, 2015) are based on suggestions from experts in the field of group counseling, the utility of these directions working with adolescents in this program has not yet been tested.

Overall, this wellness-based PEG provides a unique, strengths-based approach that school counselors can utilize to promote higher levels of self-esteem in students by integrating an empirically tested model of wellness based on identity factors into their group programs. School counselors can also promote a deeper understanding of identity and the effects that wellness choices can have on one's sense of self. Moreover, this group therapy program can be a valuable resource for school counselors who want a tangible method through which to integrate process work into their PEGs and, thus, work to increase knowledge acquisition by their students of the topic (or topics) being covered (Champe & Rubel, 2012).

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