REFEREED ARTICLE

Is Group Therapy Effective?

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Abstract

The efficacy of group therapy as a counselling method is examined. Factors that reinforce the effectiveness of group therapy include the necessity of communication amongst the human species, the longevity of the practice of group work in the field of therapy, and the empirical research suggesting the success of the method. Barriers to the success of group therapy are considered, such as public misconceptions, ethical challenges and problems with maintaining confidentiality. A balanced appraisal of both the pros and cons are deliberated. Group therapy is determined to be a valuable method of counselling.

Group therapy is an effective method of counselling, its success explained by the biological necessity of human beings to communicate with one another. Group therapy is not new: its history began in the infancy of counselling therapy. Controversial claims regarding the legitimacy of group counselling are grounded in misconception rather than fact, because empirical research demonstrates its success. Group therapy is appropriate for clients with adjustment disorders, and counsellors aligned with certain philosophical orientations are better suited to this work. Group therapy presents organizational challenges and potential ethical dilemmas, but those challenges are outweighed by the possible benefits. Group therapy, while often regarded as a second-tier approach to therapy, is an effective method of counselling.

Group therapy capitalizes on the social nature of the human species (Narvaez & Witherington, 2018). From our earliest ancestors to modern-day humans, we have collaborated with each other to guarantee our own survival. Social relationships have not only been beneficial, but often a necessity (de Waal, 2014). Our young are helpless without the assistance of parents who provide comfort and communication as well as essential physiological supports. Children who are not effectively communicated with incur devastating negative impacts (Kenneally et al., 1998). Communication is not a luxury for us; it is necessary for survival. The critical nature of human communication makes the success of group therapy logical.

Group therapy is not a modern counselling concept. Public interest in the process has increased lately, but the practice has been around for many years (Paterson, 1973). Unofficially, given the necessity of human communication, one can assume that groups of people have collaborated to lessen conflict since the beginning of our species. Officially, in Western civilization, group therapy began in the nineteen thirties, making the practice more than 80 years old (Roller, 1986).

The modern interest in group therapy can be attributed to media depictions of the process. Over-dramatization of the emotional nature of counselling in a group setting delivers exciting stories that have engendered many myths about group work. The melodramatic portrayals ramp up the possible conflict and downplay the healing, leading to much misinformation about group work. Cinematic feature films *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *28 Days*, and *Girl Interrupted*, for example, capitalize on the emotional nature of group therapy to forward exaggerated plots. Popular sitcoms, such as *Anger Management*, portray a damaging interpretation of the therapeutic relationship. Group therapy has evolved and changed, like every other area of psychology, but despite the current interest in the methodology, it is not innovative.

Group work myths include the ideas that clients are forced into participation, and receive a weak version of individual therapy that is financially and qualitatively cheap (Marmarosh et al., 2006). The difficulty in debunking these myths is that there is a fraction of truth in each of them.

Group therapy is more time and cost-effective than individual therapy. Participation may be mandated by an outside source, not unlike individual therapy. Whether one views these characteristics as positive or negative relies on perspective. Regardless of the misinformation that exists about group work, it boasts impressive success rates (Marmarosh et al., 2006).

Group therapy has been researched for clients dealing with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, social phobias, post-traumatic-stress-disorders, and schizophrenia (Walker & McLeod, 1982). Empirical research supports the effectiveness of this method of treatment in each of these cases (Novotney, 2019). These psychological ailments are partially rooted in the social context of human nature. A group setting can exacerbate maladaptation, so it makes sense that this type of setting would provide an effective treatment method. Creating a supportive environment in a group setting, complete with a variety of personality types, may provide feelings of safety in a group of individuals that does not typically feel safe in social situations (Drožđek & Bolwerk, 2010). A group work setting resembles real-world interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, learning transfers to a client's real life.

Many empirical studies suggest that group therapy is effective for a variety of patients. It is particularly effective for anxiety and social-phobic illness (Jensen, Hougaard, & Fishman, 2013; Marker, Salvaris, Thompson, Tolliday, & Norton, 2019; Suntharararajah, 2019). In a lengthy case study involving a client with severe social-phobia, group therapy impacted her more profoundly than many other methods of counselling (Jensen et al., 2013). Compelling this client to take part in group work forced her to face her social phobia directly. Her anxiety was linked to social settings. Healing properties applied directly to her life by working through this anxiety within an interpersonal context. Social settings enhance stress in many types of anxiety disorders. These psychological issues lend themselves well to group work because of this factor.

While group work seems to be an obvious advantage for certain psychological ailments, it presents a challenge with others. For example, it can be problematic for tackling eating disorders or addictions, because group members may enable each other, and support maladaptive behaviours. However, under proper supervision, and with an effective facilitator, group work can be invaluable for these clients. Dor et al. (2019) discussed the effectiveness of movement therapy with adolescent girls struggling with eating disorders, and stated that the girls were empowered through the physical actions. The physical act alone is empowering for a client dealing with body image challenges, but being visible to others while engaging in those actions has additional healing properties. The group was not only a cost-effective method of treating many patients simultaneously; it was a necessary facet to facilitate the healing process.

Many clients benefit from their therapeutic healing taking place in a social setting. Group therapy is one of the most effective treatments for seasonal-affective-disorder (Rohan, 2009). The power of group therapy is in the recognition that the sufferer is not alone. An admission that other people have similar thoughts is one of the first steps to feeling healthy again. Depression is isolating, and often the therapy is isolating. Clients share experiences that remind them that the way in which they experience the world is significantly different from that of others. Sharing that reality with a counsellor in a one-to-one setting may serve to further isolate the individual. While group work is difficult with depressed patients who possess limited ability to engage with others, normalizing their circumstances with the other group members is therapeutic.

Normalising feelings is not only useful with anxiety disorders and depression. It can serve a purpose with clients in difficult life circumstances. For example, group work leads to positive outcomes for clients dealing with divorce (Moreland et al.,1982). Relationships between the divorcees, as co-parents, are more successful after participating in group therapy. The relationships between parents and their children were also more positive. Many divorced adults suffer in silence, believing that they are alone in their despair. Divorce can be isolating for many reasons. Group work provides meaningful connections with other adults in similar situations, so clients can support each other through what is an incredibly large transition. Groups for grief are powerful in their ability to unite people in moments of transition, and group therapy can be a

great way to maintain a healthy family unit. The experiences of grief and loss are not necessary for families to participate in, and benefit from, group therapy.

Group therapy is an effective way to counsel a family, because the dynamics of a family are incredibly complicated and nearly impossible to define for another person. Tackling family issues in individual therapy is difficult, because one person's perception gives a very limited understanding of the problem. In group counselling, the family can work through their issues as a unit. There may also be benefits to multiple families participating in one group therapy session because families may notice similar issues in others, and speak to them if they are not ready to tackle their own problems (Thorngren & Kleist, 2002). It is less threatening to speak about another family's challenges than to highlight one's own difficulties. Objective opinions may serve useful, as well. There is a high chance of this type of setting becoming emotionally charged. The facilitator of this method of group counselling needs to monitor the direction of the conversation.

Monitoring the direction of a conversation is a necessary skill for a group work therapist, because the nuances of conversation offer opportunities to instil moments of insight and provide education regarding mental health. For example, carefully guided group conversations are useful for learning and practising psychoeducation (Drožđek & Bolwerk, 2010), cognitive behavioural therapy (Jensen et al., 2013), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Pots et al, 2016; Sunthararajah, 2019). The group activities must be well organized, grounded in research, and aligned with the facilitator's theoretical orientation to counselling. The degree to which the therapist questions the strength of group work, or believes in the myths regarding group therapy, can undermine the potential of the group (Marmarosh et al., 2006). The therapist needs to have confidence in the power of group therapy for the group to be successful.

Group therapy is not easy to facilitate, even when a counsellor trusts the process. The counsellor must carefully administer informed consent at the beginning of the session. Clients must be screened to determine readiness for group therapy, and an understanding of the limitations of confidentiality in a group setting must be considered (Corey et al., 2018). A counsellor can work hard to create a supportive environment, but the willingness of all participants to engage in the process is integral to the success of a group. Careful screening will help to determine whether a client will gain from participation in a group. Human beings are changing consistently. A client who was ready for group therapy could regress, prior to the group, and affect group success. The abundance of variables that are out of the counsellor's control in a group setting makes this form of counselling a challenge.

Despite the multitude of challenges that group work presents, it has powerful healing properties, because the interpersonal nature of humanity enables healing in a social setting. It has passed the test of time and endured for decades, likely centuries. It is not a second-rate form of counselling that arises out of a need to counsel multiple clients in a shorter time frame. A stigma may be attached to group therapy because of the misconceptions that exist. The stigma will lift as the evidence continues to accumulate in favour of group therapy as an effective means of treatment for many clients. Group work is valuable for clients with a variety of adjustment disorders. It is not the AA groups, or anger management classes, depicted by modern media. It is not for one client or one therapist. It is empirically supported. It boasts success rates for a variety of clients, across the globe. It is a field that continues to grow. It presents challenges in management, execution, and ethical barriers, all of which must be carefully considered. Group therapy is a valuable methodology in the field of counselling.

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