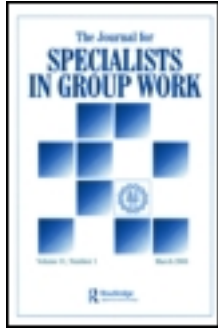


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### A psychoeducational school-based coping and social skills group for depressed students

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# A Psychoeducational School-Based Coping and Social Skills Group for Depressed Students

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*This article describes a model for school-based group designed to enhance the social and coping skills of depressed or subclinically depressed middle-school students. Primarily drawing from a cognitive-behavioral theoretical base, goals for treatment and correspondent topics, techniques, and homework assignments are detailed in a format that accommodates the school setting. Weekly themes reflect central features of coping skill and depression intervention treatments, supported by efficacy research.*

Over the past few decades, childhood and adolescent depression has become a major professional and public concern in the United States (Seligman, 1995). Clinical depression prevalence rates have ranged from 0.4% and 2.5% in children to 8.3% in adolescents (Birmaher et al., 1996). An adolescent's lifetime prevalence rate for major depressive disorder is between 15% and 20% (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, Seeley, & Andrews, 1993). Childhood depression is a serious, debilitating condition deserving of effective treatment and prevention efforts. Besides the many impairments in functioning resulting from subclinical depressed mood and from depression, depressive disorders in adolescents are strongly associated with suicide, which is the third leading cause of death among adolescents (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998).

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Depressive disorders do not have a unitary set of causes but are best understood as a bio-psycho-social phenomenon with a variety of developmental pathways (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Because both social skills deficits and poor self-concept (Seligman, 1995) have been shown to be correlated with the development of depressive disorders, addressing deficits in both coping and social skills is a promising way to intervene in subclinical, mild, and/or moderate childhood depression. Such intervention likely serves a preventative role as well. Many researchers have pointed to a relation between impaired social functioning and depression (Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Cole, Martin, Powers, & Truglio, 1996; Ferro, Carlson, Grayson, & Klein, 1994). For instance, in a study of depressed sixth and seventh graders, Herman-Stahl and Petersen (1996) found lower levels of active coping, mastery, and optimism, as well as less positive relationships with both peers and parents as compared to same-age nondepressed cohorts. Others have found similar results, which suggests that social and interpersonal coping skills are essential to well-adjusted children (Bell-Dolan, Foster, & Christopher, 1995; Cole & Carpentieri, 1990). Additionally, the absence of these skills appears associated with depressive symptomatology (Reed, 1994; Thompson, Bundy, & Wolfe, 1996). Such findings are consistent with a cognitive-behavioral understanding of depression, in that depressogenic thoughts about self, others, and the future (Beck, 1967) would be altered with the addition of positive social and coping skills.

Counseling and psychoeducational groups are a component of comprehensive developmental guidance programs in educational settings (e.g., Jensen-Scott & DeLucia-Waack, 1993; Myrick, 1993; Wittmer, 1993). Structured groups provide members with information about a particular problem area or developmental issue and also provide a safe environment to learn and practice new coping skills. Generally, group work with young people is a natural and effective method for teaching social and coping skills (Roland & Neitzschman, 1996). Groups offer social environments that, with the right structure, material, and atmosphere, can foster effective learning opportunities for almost any child. Because significant research evidence indicates that depression among young people is partially caused and maintained by social, cognitive, and behavioral factors, school-based counseling and psychoeducational groups are an appropriate and effective context for both depression prevention and treatment (Stark, 1990; Wilkes, Belsher, Rush, & Frank, 1994).

There are a number of challenges and obstacles that school counselors face in designing and implementing such a group. Essentially, school counselors must provide these groups in a manner that fits into the rhythm of the school day and culture. The model described in this

article represents a distillation of central themes and techniques that lend themselves to school settings and cover basic areas that research has shown to be critical in developing social skills and preventing or remediating depressive symptoms. This article provides a model for a 12-week structured counseling group designed for middle-school students who display subclinical, mild, or moderate depressive symptomatology who are at risk for depression. Each group session has a theme and a home project for the next week. The thematic order moves toward more complex cognitive concepts, and each week uses some aspects of the previous week's themes. Group discussion, role-play, activities, exercises, and take-home assignments are all used as types of group interventions. The themes selected reflect central features of coping skill and depression intervention treatments, supported by efficacy research. These themes address thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, including (a) understanding the spiraling effect of a negative focus and the positive potential in focusing on pleasant or uplifting thoughts and actions, (b) learning the use of relaxation to combat tension and anxiety, (c) learning basic problem-solving strategies in a group context, (d) understanding the social effects of irritating habits versus attempts to be friendly, (e) goal-setting, and (f) communication skills. These basic themes appear and reappear through a number of the exercises and home projects throughout the 12 sessions.

## THE COPING AND SOCIAL SKILLS GROUP

### Theoretical Basis

The majority of the specific interventions are derived from a cognitive-behavioral framework. The format was developed specifically to accommodate constraints common to school settings. Modules were adapted primarily from two sources: Clarke, Lewinsohn, and Hops's (1990a, 1990b) *Adolescent Coping With Depression* leader's manual and participant workbook and Seligman's (1995) book *The Optimistic Child*. Other common cognitive-behavioral techniques were also integrated into this model (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1995; Stark, 1990; Wilkes et al., 1994).

### Pregroup Issues

*Member recruitment and selection.* To begin building an appropriate group, students with mild to moderate depression must be identified. The school counselor often knows many of the children who would qual-

ify. In addition, it is wise to seek the input of teachers, administrators, and parents regarding both indicators of general social and coping skill levels (Miller, 1990) and specific referral possibilities. It is also important to make it possible for children to self-refer for psychoeducational and counseling groups, an approach that is most effective when a group program has been promoted in a manner acceptable within the child's culture (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1997). For instance, groups that are perceived as desirable often have snacks and fun activities and are believed by potential participants to be worthwhile. Also, student motivation and cooperation also can be enhanced if teachers or administrators whom they respect recommend that they participate in group.

Past experience and research suggest that children suffering from serious attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) or significant impulse-control problems do not easily integrate into a group of children who have social skills deficits and/or some depressive tendencies but do not have serious chronic impulse-control problems. Although it is true that children who have ADHD also have a significant likelihood of being or becoming depressed (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1997), group cohesion is a central feature of most successful groups (Gladding, 1995; Yalom, 1995), and impulse-ridden, distracted children require so much group and counselor time and energy that cohesion suffers. Also, children who are engaging in predelinquent or delinquent behaviors (e.g., smoking, using drugs) may be excluded from group participation because of their likelihood of influencing other group members in a negative manner. As pointed out by DeLucia-Waack (1996), group member differences can affect outcome, even in psychoeducational groups.

*Screening.* After identifying children who might be appropriate group members, the counselor needs to screen potential members. Parental permission and support is essential. To maximize this support, provide parents with a comprehensive, inviting, and well-written information sheet as part of obtaining consent for their child's participation. Included on this sheet should be a description of the intent of the group; basic description of themes, activities, and homework assignments; length of time group will meet; who will lead the group; where parents can call to ask questions; and permission to discontinue the child's involvement if so desired. It is also important to have an informed consent sheet for students to sign, containing information similar to that in the parent form, indicating agreement to participate in group.

Arrange to have students participate in pregroup individual interviews designed to address issues such as (a) obtaining informed consent

for group participation, (b) screening out inappropriate members, (c) answering student questions, (d) beginning the socialization process, and (d) obtaining assessment data. Ideally, the interview would be scheduled for at least one half hour and done on an individual basis with each prospective group member. Depending on school policy, counselors may wish to obtain parental consent before even having a pregroup interview with a child.

It is important to administer a brief child/adolescent behavior or depression inventory, such as the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1992) or the Reynolds Child Depression Scale (Reynolds, 1989) to obtain a general sense of depressive symptoms, screen for suicide ideation, and provide one possible benchmark for measuring progress. Counselors also could choose more general behavioral checklists, such as the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991a, 1991b). Of course, children who report themselves to be or score as severely depressed (as defined by the particular instrument) should be referred for more intensive intervention. Ethically and professionally, having both quantitative and qualitative pre-post assessments is advisable. Qualitatively, inquiring as to how well potential members believe they function socially and what their wishes and goals might be for the group is important. This information serves as another form of baseline for later assessment and directs attention toward positive goal attainment.

*Group size.* Group size should be determined based on space available, member composition, the availability of a cofacilitator, and scheduling constraints. Ideally, groups range in size from four to eight (Corey, 1999). It is certainly possible for one professional to conduct a group like the one described successfully. However, most group counseling theorists agree that there are many benefits of having cofacilitators, if possible (e.g., Corey, 1999; Gladding, 1995; Yalom, 1995). Depending on the potential for disruptive behavior of prospective members, slightly larger groups, up to 10 or 12 members, may be possible.

*Group format and composition.* It is a truism to note that schools and school counselors are asked to do too much with too few resources and too little time (Kendrick, Chandler, & Hatcher, 1994). The model described in this article is designed to meet for one 50-minute period per week. Planning the group to run for 12 weeks corresponds well to the academic schedule. Timing is obviously a very important part of setting up a successful group. If possible, it is important to consider the impact of holidays and other school events and to avoid the last week of school or the last week before winter break. For example, having the group start 1 week and then miss the next week due to a music festival can delay the

formation of group identity and cohesion. Also, terminating from group is an important aspect of group work (Gladding, 1995) that can be overshadowed seriously by the excitement most students feel during the last few days of school before a long break.

In terms of composition, the sexes and ages of the children should be considered, ideally having roughly the same number of boys and girls of approximately the same age (Gladding, 1995). In some settings, there simply are not enough children to achieve this ideal. The group leaders should be aware that it takes extra energy and care to include one eighth grader with five sixth graders or one boy with six girls.

*Materials and setting.* Counselors wishing to run a group like the one described need very few materials. Basic art supplies (paper, markers, tempera paints, drawing pencils, glue, old magazines) are used once toward the end of the series. Plasticine clay is suggested as a "fiddle" item midway through the group and used thereafter. During the week, home projects are suggested that usually involve recording some thoughts or observations, so providing each student with a small notebook is a nice addition. Finally, healthy snacks such as crackers or fruit can make the group much more appealing to the average middle schooler. The room designated for the group should be free from outside distractions, small enough to feel a sense of being together, and consistently available at the meeting time of group.

### **Group Themes and Activities**

*Session 1: Introduction.* The goals of this first session are to get acquainted, establish ground rules, talk about the goals of the group overall, and understand the take-home project. During the initial group meeting, students should be engaged in group rule and goal-setting procedures. In this type of group, school counselors may have at least three ground rules in mind: (a) basic confidentiality, (b) participants agreeing to try to learn new and effective ways to handle problems; and (c) participants agreeing to examine how they get along with others and to experiment with new social skills. It is often effective to have participants brainstorm group rules that might be helpful; this helps everyone get involved and can demonstrate the norm of having respect for each individual's ideas (Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 1993). Outrageous or silly suggestions such as a ground rule that requires everyone to burp can serve to lighten the atmosphere and get creative juices flowing. An icebreaker game designed to get students more acquainted with each other is also important, such as various name-games that involve repeating each

member's name a number of times. It is a mistake to assume that children know each other very well, even in small schools. Modeling how students can get acquainted in meaningful ways can contribute to social skill development. In addition, it is important to capitalize on the fact that this is group counseling, not just a social gathering. This means that activities are not only enacted but also are then processed (DeLucia-Waack, 1997a). For example, after practicing each other's names, the group can talk about how it feels to be known or how it feels to be sure of someone else's name and how that contributes to feelings of belonging.

Regular use of take-home projects is a central feature of this model. However, it is wise to refer to such assignments as "projects" to minimize negative associations with academic assignments. As suggested previously, providing each child with a notebook can facilitate cooperation. For the initial project, ask students to bring to the second group at least one example of a thought, feeling, or behavior of their own that they find troubling in their lives. Counselors can use examples from their own lives, such as one used by one of the authors: "When I am late in the morning, I get so mad at myself and then I get mad at other drivers on the road, and at all the traffic lights and pretty soon, I am so mad I almost ruin my day." It is also effective to use examples from media and literature familiar to the children. Many popular movies and television shows have characters who get into trouble due to their anger. The goal of the assignment is to get youth to consider thoughts, behaviors, or feelings of their own that bother them or cause them consistent trouble.

*Session 2: Mood and focus.* The goal of Session 2 is to enable members to understand the way troubles multiply themselves when given a lot of attention. At the beginning of Session 2, students should warm up with an exercise that includes a review of names. This serves a double purpose, in that it will increase group cohesion and a sense of being known in the group, and name recall, in general, is an important social skill. This review also can be paired with a recall of individual participants' personal interests and used as a springboard for talking about the troubles people were able to think of for their project. Even if people forgot to think of troubling behaviors, thoughts, or feelings during the week, they usually can generate some during the group. Have them write their ideas down in their notebooks or on blank paper that they can later tape into their notebooks. When the information is safely stored in the notebook, give the member a "good job" sticker or a stick of gum or some other small item or gesture that denotes and rewards completion.

Instead of trying to solve the identified troubles, which may be the group's impulse, the concept of upward and downward spirals (from



Clarke et al., 1990a, 1990b) can be introduced. This concept and associated illustration demonstrate how extra attention to troubles can magnify and multiply the troubles, starting a negative spiral downward. The counselor needs to use a large piece of paper or chalkboard to create a list of troubles that lead to more troubles, using a tornado-shaped spiral that moves downward. At the bottom, the counselor can darken an area and invite the group to name it. Some suggested names might be “the pit of doom” or “the black pool of helplessness.”

Using the personal example from last week, the counselor can share how being late can make her feel bad about herself and angry at the things that “made” her late. She can explain how being mad makes her forget things, which either makes her get later or makes her have to do without the things she forgot (like her lunch), which just makes her get more angry or crabby, and so the spiral goes down, down, down. Students are able to visualize the momentum that can result from patterns of positive or negative choices with the spiral illustration. Discussion should then be guided toward exploring attitudes, thoughts, feelings, events, and behaviors over which it is possible to have control and those over which it is not. In addition, to process the activity in the here-and-now, members can reflect how it felt to dwell on the troubles, to begin playing with the spiral idea, and to talk together about management of troubles.

The home project for the coming week is the creation of a pleasant events schedule (Burns, 1980; Clarke et al., 1990a). This project involves noticing things that are pleasant throughout the week and making a list of activities or events the member finds pleasing. The events do not need to have occurred during the week. Children can be encouraged to list as many pleasant possibilities as they can think of on their list. This assignment helps children begin to identify and understand what they find pleasing.

*Session 3: Pleasant events.* The goal of Session 3 is for members to understand and experience the effects of pleasant activities and events in their lives. Fun is the order of the day at the beginning of Session 3. Group activities from the *Tribes* manual (Gibbs, 1995) or *Icebreakers* (Forbes-Greene, 1983) enliven the group, build cohesion, and enhance the experience of pleasure. After having fun together, members report some of the pleasant events from their lists. The group can then discuss how pleasant events affect our mood, our outlook, and our ability to relate to other people. It is important to help members begin to make connections between being in a good mood and improved social skills, social standing, and problem-solving ability (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). Counselors can encourage here-and-now processing by encourag-

ing reflection on how the pleasant activities that began the session affected the rest of the time spent together. Having students remember times when a similar process occurred in their lives helps with the generalization process.

Reviewing the pleasant events project is useful for two reasons. First, most children notice that simply listing and thinking about pleasant things can make people feel happier (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1995, 1997). Second, it is also possible to facilitate reflective linkage back to last group, noting that which is in our control and that which is out of our control. A good example to discuss is that many oppressed or unlucky people, even people in concentration camps or in jail, can use their minds to actually make themselves feel happier, even if nothing in their outside world changes. Not surprisingly, because of negative in-school experiences, some middle-school students relate to the trapped or incarcerated feelings in the analogies.

The assignment for next week is to have children observe someone (e.g., themselves, a family member, someone on television) who is anxious or uptight. In the context of giving the assignment, have the group discuss terms used for stressed-out people, such as wound up, freaked out, wired, manic, or out of control. Have the youth plan to observe all the possible signs of "uptightness" and also observe how the person handled or failed to handle the situation or themselves. Have them record their observations in their notebooks, either in words or sketches of their observation.

*Session 4: Reducing tension.* The goals of Session 4 are to enable members to make the connection between being relaxed and being in control and to give members basic relaxation skills. In Session 4, check-in can begin by having participants describe their experiences of watching for "uptightness" in others or themselves. Furthermore, they can be encouraged to share anxiety-provoking, stressful, or maddening situations in their lives. Differences and similarities in what produces anxiety can be identified and discussed by the group. The focus can then be gradually shifted to how people sometimes can have two feelings simultaneously, like fear and anger, but that rarely can people feel both tense and relaxed at the same time.

Wolpe's (1958) Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS) is useful as an illustration of identifying levels of tension or anxiety, partly because *suds* is such an easy mnemonic for people to remember and partly because it underlines the idea that stress is a subjective experience that can be measured. To construct a personal SUDS, have students imagine a scale from 1 to 100, with 100 being the most anxious, most upset, most uptight they can imagine, and 1 being totally carefree and relaxed.

Explain that a person who was afraid of snakes would rate having the snake crawl all over their skin and bite them as 100, and that being on a continent where there were no snakes would be a 1. Another example might be having everyone you know ask you to do impossible amounts of work, like practicing piano, doing homework, doing chores, and so on. This would earn a 100 rating. The 1 rating would be no homework, no chores, and being told you could sleep in as long as you wanted on Saturday morning. After members indicate they understand the general concepts, explain that people with very severe fears can actually gain more control by learning certain relaxation strategies, thereby gaining self-control and control over their fear reactions. Reiterate the theory: People cannot simultaneously be uptight or scared to death and be relaxed and chilled out. Relaxed people are in control. Freaked-out people are not. Learning to relax, therefore, can greatly increase our control over situations that used to make us lose control and freak out. However, not everyone knows how to relax.

The group can then participate in progressive relaxation exercises or relaxation imagery. Counselors unfamiliar with this area might read and practice strategies from Wolpe (1958), Burns (1980), Clarke et al. (1990b), or many other authors writing in cognitive-behavioral areas. Practicing on oneself and one's colleagues is highly advisable before directing such an exercise with young people. The suggestions of Clarke and colleagues are especially helpful at minimizing disruptive or inattentive participant behavior. These include (a) having students face away from the center of the circle to decrease self-consciousness, (b) talking with students who might sabotage the activity to emphasize the importance of the student's cooperation, (c) sitting near a likely disruptive student to use quiet or nonverbal interventions to provide support and encourage cooperation, and (d) providing an opportunity for a disruptive student to practice the technique immediately outside the group room.

After relaxing for approximately 10 minutes, have the group reflect on the experience. Ask members to share images, distractions, and ideas about how they can learn to relax more. Again, having had the experience, it is prime time to process the effects both of simply relaxing and of trying to experience relaxation together. Some members may share feelings of shyness or frustration at not being able to get very relaxed. The counselor should be ready with reassurance that relaxation is a skill and requires practice.

For their out-of-group project, students are asked to practice a basic tension reduction strategy during the next week and record their results in their notebooks. The strategy involves scanning the body at least once

a day for spots of tension and deliberately relaxing those spots, breathing deeply, and inducing a sense of relaxation and calm. After practicing in group, members are asked not only to try to relax themselves once a day, but also to share these concepts and strategies with friends or family members, which, of course, increases the sense of familiarity and mastery of the concepts.

*Session 5: Strength bombardment.* The goals of Session 5 are to have members improve skills in giving positive feedback to others and experience the effect of receiving positive feedback. Check-in for this week involves everyone sharing their experiences relaxing and/or helping other people relax. As an additional component, students can be given a half fist-sized piece of clay and told that their clay hunks will be available during the rest of the group meeting times to fiddle with and use for various activities. As students begin to use the clay, group discussion can be guided toward how the use of fiddle objects can sometimes serve a stress-reducing function for people.

The focus on this fifth group then moves to individual strengths of the members. As Fay and Funk (1995) stated, "We do not want kids to ignore what they need to work on, but if they do not learn what their strengths are, their weaknesses become defeats" (p. 130). By Session 5, a well-functioning group has a history with each other, a sense of cohesion, and a level of trust that will allow for a strength bombardment activity. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the temptation to scapegoat and criticize will remain. A good message for the group is to tell them that this is one of those times we are simply going to focus on all good stuff. Nothing negative is allowed, even if meant in the nicest (or funniest) way.

For strength bombardment, provide a box of magazine clippings full of positive words and phrases. Participants sort through the box to find words or phrases that they feel fit other group members in a positive way. After assembling these phrases into collages, encourage group members to add their own positive comments about themselves. Finally, lead students in a discussion of how it felt to have positive things said about them. Some focus on how it can be difficult to give and receive compliments is appropriate.

The at-home project involves noticing positive things about other people, giving positive feedback to at least three people outside of group. Have members discuss how they might increase their awareness of "the positives" in life. Explain that next week, when everyone shares how it went, there will be time to talk about the positives people noticed, how it felt to give positive feedback, and how the person reacted.

*Session 6: Positive thinking.* The goals of Session 6 involve furthering the learning from Sessions 1 and 2 with regard to the power of the focus of our internal attention. One way to begin Session 6 is to have the leaders think aloud a series of negative thoughts about themselves and their skills. Unfortunately, most humans can quite readily think poorly of themselves. After sharing the examples, leaders should have participants speculate about the likely consequences of such negative or self-defeating thoughts. The focus then shifts to what group members think and feel when they make mistakes; a review of messages we give ourselves when we have “screwed up” can be appropriate and engaging for middle schoolers. Most group members will agree that it is very easy to compound mistakes by dwelling on them rather than by simply learning a lesson and moving on. Of course, this is a revisiting of the negative spiral. Have group members reflect back on the spiral and see how “beating ourselves up” is a form of negative spiral.

It is important to end this session on a positive note, possibly by conducting a practice relaxation period combined with positive self-statements designed to counteract typical negative thoughts. Members can be asked to generate at least three good things about themselves before leaving. If they want to, they can use phrases they remember from the strength bombardment session. Have members then briefly reflect on the shift that happens inside the group and inside each individual as the focus moves to the positive.

As their weekly project, members are asked to scan the newspaper funny pages and/or comic books for cartoons that show connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. These cartoons should be brought to Session 7 for discussion.

*Session 7: Problem solving.* As a warm-up for Session 7, roll out a section of newsprint so members can temporarily tape on their cartoons. (They can later be taped into each member’s notebooks. If possible, the group leaders can make copies of favorites for everyone’s notebooks.) Group leaders should bring cartoons as well and contribute them, as needed, for the group discussion. Use the newsprint and cartoons to review topics previously discussed in group. For example, cartoons can be used to point out when particular characters shift their thinking, use different social behaviors, or take a relaxation break. Cartoon strips that focus on family humor or day-to-day struggles are carried in most newspapers and often provide humorous ways to underline connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as shifts in thinking.

The main work of Session 7 is a group problem-solving task. Such tasks can provide structure for considering other people’s points of view, building listening skills, facilitating positive social interactions, and

decreasing impulsivity by considering consequences (Shure, 1992). Use a well-planned group problem-solving activity (e.g., *Lost on the Moon*; Mahar & Zins, 1987). Before actually tackling the problem, though, have students generate lists of both helpful and unhelpful problem-solving behaviors. Group leaders should make sure that participants identify research-based problem-solving strategies such as alternative solutions, consequential thinking, and solution-consequence pairs (Shure, 1992). Guide the group in creating a poster describing the five basic cognitive steps to problem solving: (a) What is the problem? (b) What are the different things I can do about it? (c) Which of my possible solutions will work best? (d) Try the solution; (e) Evaluate. Did the solution work?

Following the problem-solving activity, guide the group in reflecting on the process they went through. Make sure everyone has their ball of fiddle clay from Session 5 and have them break off little pieces to give each other for specific behaviors they appreciated from each other. It is best to have this done one person at a time, making sure each person is noted for at least one positive contribution. Group members can then be asked to process what it felt like to get a little bit of someone else's clay, and, in general, what it feels like to be noticed, given a gift, or appreciated. In addition, have group members consider the role of rewards in the whole framework of problem solving.

The home project for this week involves noticing people being treated with respect. Tell members that next time, the group will be discussing respectful, friendly interactions, and it would be good if there were lots of examples to talk about.

*Session 8: Friendly skills.* To begin Session 8, have students share examples of people being treated well—either respectfully or kindly. Then have students brainstorm how to interact in respectful or friendly ways with other people without seeming phony or insincere. Essentially, the brainstorming activity is designed to reorient participants to problem-solving strategies. After talking about positive, friendly skills, ask the group to generate a list of irritating habits that seem unfriendly or disrespectful (for a sample list, see Clarke et al., 1990b). Group members should select one habit they have themselves that they would like to change. Ask members to role-play their various habits, with the group brainstorming alternative social behaviors. Each participant should have an opportunity to role-play more constructive social behaviors. Feedback and support from the group is crucial during this session. Careful discussion of how difficult it can be to actually change a habit should occur, with a special focus on how hard it is to actually generalize from group counseling situations to out-of-group situations. When

group members begin tensing up during this somewhat more realistic and potentially negative activity, it is excellent practice to have them take a short relaxation break and, of course, to reflect together on their increasing sense of options and control.

The recommended weekly project for Session 8 consists of having students occasionally practice new skills discussed and role-played in group. Students also should monitor the effects of these new social skill strategies. Using group enthusiasm and cohesion, counselors can emphasize that everyone will be eager to hear about each other's social experiments, both the successes and the not-so-successful attempts. Have students record in their notebooks the times they used relaxation during the week, the ways it worked, and the difficulties they encountered.

*Session 9: Goal setting for generalization.* Begin Session 9 with an invitation to review notebooks and share about their effort to apply "group things" outside of group. As students discuss their previous session's project, the counselor can use this as a springboard for noting that "we only have three more sessions after today to work on these things as a group." Eventually during this session, students should be encouraged to disclose how they feel about group ending and to express any hopes they have for remaining sessions. Termination discussions also can be used to help students focus on short-term goals for the rest of group. Teaching children to formulate realistic short- and long-term goals is an important component of coping skills development and sometimes is easier in the group, rather than individual, format (Seligman, 1995; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1996).

Have group members select at least two of the group themes or lessons they want to work on and think out loud with each other about how to set reasonable goals toward improving their skills or choices in their chosen areas. Review the problem-solving steps covered in Session 7 and have the group compare goal setting with problem solving. In some groups, it is possible to divide into dyads or triads and have the members help each other use problem-solving strategies to set future goals. It is important to save time for everyone to rejoin the group and share how it went working together.

The home project for the coming week is to try out self-directed improvement in one of the selected areas. Encourage members to keep detailed notes and assure them that everyone in the group will benefit from hearing about everyone else's attempts to take group learnings out into their usual environments.

*Session 10: Building communication skills.* During Session 10, the group focus is on active listening skills, message clarity, and *I* statements when sending messages. Therefore, before checking in or talking about last week's home project, group leaders should provide a very short presentation on basic communication skills, explaining that during check-in and during the rest of the time, the group will be practicing these skills. Communication skills are essential for both successful social relationships and for social coping (Becky & Farren, 1997; Clarke et al., 1990a, 1990b). As part of the short presentation, plan to demonstrate humorously the effects of irrelevant verbal responses, poor eye contact, and effective listening. A volunteer can be assigned the job of describing how he or she celebrated a recent holiday. The group leader can hum a tune, interrupt, stare or look away, change the subject, and so on, to demonstrate "nonlistening."

Following the nonlistening, it is important to demonstrate basic active listening, including paraphrasing and attending behaviors (eye contact, head nods, smiles, and so on). After demonstrating, ask members to work on listening skills while everyone checks in and shares how their efforts are going to work on things outside of group. Have members paraphrase, try out new attending skills, and so on, with feedback provided by the one attempting to communicate. Explain that adults just love to be listened to and ask members to imagine which adults they might practice their new listening skills on for the coming week.

For this week's project, members can be asked to experiment with new listening skills with a friend or family member, including responding with *I* messages and using active listening techniques such as paraphrasing and attending behaviors. Be sure to remind members that there are only two sessions left and that next time group will hear about the home project and then begin the process of ending the group and planning to say good-bye.

*Session 11: Reflection and preparation for group ending.* Session 11 should begin with a check-in on active listening. Briefly review the tenets of active listening. Then have students pair up and tell each other how their active listening attempts worked out during the week. Have them report to the group for each other and then ask members to reflect on how it felt to talk and listen to each other. For the last half of this group meeting, the focus needs to shift to consolidation of the experience of group and the emotions attached to the experience. Although art materials and art projects can be useful in almost any kind of group with young people, this medium seems especially useful in processing the ending. Bring basic art materials and, after the extended check-in, let members know they are going to have a chance to work quietly on a



painting or project. Ask them to reflect on how it has been to be in group, what they have learned, and how they would like to express that nonverbally in their art. Provide a list of the main topic of each previous session and suggest that they may want to represent all or some of the topics covered in their artwork. Allowing members to take time to consolidate their experiences nonverbally through art provides a tangible representation for sharing and for taking home.

After members have worked for 15 minutes or so, they can begin sharing whatever they want to share about their project. This often happens intermittently, as children complete or want to share about their art projects at varying paces. As this activity winds down, group members are invited to think about how they would like to have group end. The group leaders should be sure to talk about the importance of endings. Encourage the group to choose a ritual for ending. Sometimes children want a party. Sometimes they want to play a game or sit around and reminisce fun times together. With minimal encouragement, they also often want to talk about how they will use what they have learned in group in their lives "out there."

*Session 12: Closure.* The final group session needs to provide ample opportunity for students to express their feelings about ending group. Group leaders can set the tone by self-disclosing and telling students that in some ways, it will be nice to have group end and in other ways, there will be sad feelings. Individual, written good-bye messages by every member to every member are an effective way to practice giving and receiving positive feedback. This can be done on blank cards or in each member's notebook. Also, background music can enhance the sense of ritual and underline the "good-bye feeling." Providing extra snacks or some other special food or drink can also provide a celebratory tone to the final meeting.

Remind members that they will meet for an individual time in the near future for an exit or closure interview and review the ground rules the group established at the beginning. Take time to discuss what confidentiality means, now that the group is ending. Make sure members have their fiddle clay to take home as a tangible reminder of their ability to relax. Also, placing one last good-job sticker in each notebook or giving each member one last memento of participation can help add a sense of closure and completion to the group experience.

### **Evaluation of Group Process and Environment**

The use of group work to enhance learning and skill acquisition is a central feature in this model. Hence, it is important to not only assess

member development; it is also important to assess the environment and process of the group. Many instruments exist for measuring various aspects of group environment and process. However, many are cumbersome and time-consuming and seem more geared to research and training than applied settings such as schools. However, for continued growth and development as a group specialist, it is essential for the school counselor to determine the goals for group environment and process and seek efficient and meaningful ways to measure goal attainment. For this group, two possible instruments would yield helpful information (DeLucia-Waack, 1997b).

The Interpersonal Relations Scale checklist (Shadish, 1984) can be either self-report or observer-report. It assesses a number of important areas of interpersonal functioning and can be used both as a pre-post treatment measure and as a during-group measure. Because of its focus on interactive behaviors, it can serve to enhance the focus on social skill acquisition, even if group content is focused in other areas.

Another possible group process assessment instrument is the Group Sessions Rating Scale (GSRS) (Cooney, Kadden, Litt, & Getter, 1991). In an article providing detailed information about the administration of the GSRC, the authors (Getter, Litt, Kadden, & Cooney, 1992) suggested that two 15-minute segments of group be analyzed in 1-minute blocks. Of course, this necessitates videotaping the group, which may or may not be feasible in a given school setting.

Another good option might be the Group Environment Scale (Moos, 1981). DeLucia-Waack (personal communication, May 1999) has developed a child version of this scale. Preliminary reliability measures show it to be a promising measure.

The following are essential in evaluating the participants' experience of and response to this group: (a) administer the chosen measure of group process/environment and analyze results as appropriate to the instrument, (b) have students retake the chosen behavioral inventory and compare pre and post scores on an individual basis, (c) obtain feedback from teachers and parents, and (d) conduct exit interviews with all students individually. Having members reflect on their own sense of coping skills and social efficacy and any gains they may have made is another good measure of group success. Asking members what they liked best and least about their group experience can be an important component of ongoing professional evaluation. Such requests for input also can encourage the kind of self-awareness and communication skill development stressed in the group. To assist students in reporting their internal changes, counselors can ask such questions as "If there was a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being *I can't get along with anybody*, and 10 being *I can get along with anybody in the whole world*, what number

would you have given yourself at the beginning of our group, and what number would you give yourself now?"

## CONCLUSION

Many excellent manuals and treatment protocols exist for the prevention or treatment of childhood depressive symptomatology (Clarke et al., 1990a, 1990b; Seligman, 1995; Stark, 1990). These treatment protocols invariably contain aspects of social and coping skill acquisition. However, often these manuals are not designed to fit into the school counselor's (or the student's) usual day. This article provides a brief model for conducting a school-based group using central components of these well-researched prevention and intervention protocols. The protocol deals with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated both with alleviation of childhood depression and with coping and social skill acquisition. Group activities and home projects are designed to increase members' awareness of both cognitive and behavioral methods of changing or controlling emotional reactions. Of course, the group experience itself also will act to increase social awareness and social skills if activities are processed effectively.

Based on the authors' experience in offering this group in a rural Western school, the following practical suggestions are offered. First, if possible, ensure that a small, private, out-of-the-way room be secured for group purposes. Second, allow members to join up to the third meeting, but after that group should be closed. Third, making a positive connection with teachers can enhance timeliness and attendance at group. It is ideal for group norm development to encourage and establish perfect attendance and punctuality. However, if teacher support and group norming do not adequately address this issue, using positive reinforcement or response cost procedures to enhance compliance may be necessary.

Some depression-prevention and/or intervention models advocate direct psychoeducational groups for parents as well. Although this seems ideal, in many school systems today, this expectation stretches the school counseling resources too thin. Parent awareness can be increased by a thorough, understandable informed consent sheet that includes a description of the main topics that will be covered each week.

Although the school setting is neither ideal nor easy, the social and coping skills group in schools can serve an important function and be a feasible tool in the school counselor's repertoire. We believe it is worth the effort and can make a significant impact in the lives of depression-prone students. In addition, this model could prove useful for simply

addressing social skills deficits or self-esteem concerns, or it could serve as a guide for working with young people in a group context. No matter what the level of sophistication already attained, enhancing a young person's coping and social skills is a worthy goal.

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