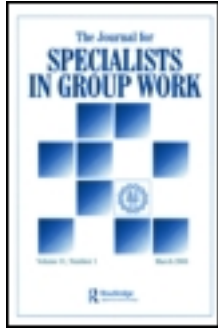


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### A group approach to stress and anxiety management

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# WORKING WITH GROUPS

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## A Group Approach to Stress and Anxiety Management

James Archer, Jr.  
Janice Singles Reisor

*This article describes an anxiety management class with a focus on the training model and its use in a small group setting.*

The development and use of various techniques to help people learn better management of stress and anxiety has increased dramatically in the last few years. Although a number of these techniques, such as biofeedback, meditation, muscle relaxation, and stress inoculation, have been reasonably well-described and researched, little has been written about how they can be used in a group setting.

This article describes a small group discussion-oriented anxiety management training course. It will give particular attention to the training model and to an analysis of how the group process relates to the acquisition and use of knowledge about anxiety management. The course was developed in response to student interest in the general area of

anxiety management as expressed on a student needs assessment form. It was offered during a short, midsemester term and consisted of 10 2-hour sessions.

### TRAINING MODEL

The training model consisted of a variety of cognitive and relaxation-oriented anxiety management techniques. The relaxation-oriented approaches were deep muscle relaxation, originally developed by Jacobson (1938) and modified by a variety of others (Deffenbacher, Mathis, & Michaels, 1979; Deffenbacher & Payne, 1977; Goldfried, 1971) and Benson's (1975) relaxation response, a kind of no-nonsense meditation. Cognitively oriented approaches included Meichenbaum's (1977) stress inoculation and Ellis's (1962) rational-emotive approach applied to anxiety. An underlying assumption in using this kind of eclectic approach is the proposition that different people

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will find different techniques useful. Thus, if a variety of approaches are taught, participants can pick out one or more techniques that work for them.

In order to describe the approach and analyze the role of group process, each session will be described in terms of content and process. (Additional training materials and group exercises are available in *Managing Anxiety and Stress*, Archer, 1982.)

### Session 1

*Content.* This session included pretesting, a mini-lecture introducing the concept of anxiety management, and exercises designed to introduce students to each other and to encourage them to analyze and explore their present methods of dealing with anxiety. The leaders used a round-robin approach, with each student asked to respond to several different questions. A variety of anxiety related issues were discussed, including the following:

- fear of academic failure
- worry about the future
- anxiety about male–female relationships
- parental expectations
- worry about teenage children
- lack of assertiveness
- worry about anger and negative feelings
- job performance anxiety
- worry about personal adequacy

*Process.* The major purpose of this session was to set a discussion-oriented tone and to introduce students to the concept of anxiety management. Although some of the students were surprised by the personal sharing-oriented tone of the course, all of them quickly adapted to this format. Two factors seemed most important in starting off the group. One was the leaders' model-

ing of self-disclosure at an appropriate level, and the other was the round-robin structure that quickly forced all participants to participate while giving them a choice as to the level of their self-disclosure.

### Session 2

*Content.* This was the first of four sessions devoted to cognitive approaches to anxiety management. The instructors presented a short lecture stressing the importance of thinking in the anxiety process and students were asked to consider the cognitive aspects of their own anxiety process. A discussion followed, with each student and the instructors discussing the role of thinking in his or her own anxiety process. As homework, students were asked to record their thoughts for two anxiety situations that they encountered during the next few days.

*Process.* The most important process goal for this session was to encourage students to react to each other's comments. The instructors again modeled this behavior by responding themselves and by pointing out similarities and differences in group members' comments. As in most groups some members emerged as more active and responsive; however, each member was able to describe his or her own thinking as it related to anxiety. The trust level built rapidly and most students were reasonably self-disclosing. The fact that all participants were interested in learning how better to manage anxiety seemed to help students feel free to discuss their own difficulties with anxiety.

### Session 3

*Content.* The next two sessions were devoted to teaching students how to

use Ellis's (1962) system of analyzing irrational thinking. After a mini-lecture explaining the idea of irrational thinking and emphasizing Ellis's 13 irrational statements common to western societies, students were asked to identify the two or three irrational ideas that they most frequently used and then to think about how and why they learned to use these particular statements. This was followed by a discussion, then the class compiled a class profile of irrational beliefs. A general discussion of the influence of irrational thinking in anxiety then ensued.

*Process.* Many of the students were surprisingly open in discussing their own irrational beliefs, and several of them revealed a clear understanding of their developmental history. Many similarities were apparent, particularly in terms of parental influences, and the group seemed to be moving toward increasing levels of trust. The instructors were able to be less active in this session except that on a few occasions it was necessary to move the group on.

#### Session 4

*Content.* Albert Ellis's (1962) ABC theory of Rational Emotive Psychotherapy was taught as a way of helping students learn to analyze how irrational thinking causes anxiety. Several examples of anxiety situations were analyzed by the entire group. The instructors emphasized the importance of picking out underlying irrational beliefs. In each situation alternative ways of challenging the irrational beliefs were discussed. For homework, students were asked to use the ABC theory to analyze at least two personal anxiety situations before the next class. They were given a work sheet with space for the situation (A), the feelings (C), and the belief (B).

*Process.* Because the students had

discussed their own general irrational beliefs earlier, this discussion seemed to flow naturally into a discussion of personal situations and how to modify irrational thinking. The leaders encouraged this personal discussion and promoted the underlying assumption that everyone does some irrational thinking. Some students offered very constructive suggestions on how to challenge irrational thinking. The leaders took an active teaching role, particularly when underlying irrational beliefs were missed or when the situations presented were too difficult for students to analyze. At this point some conflict arose relating to different perceptions of irrationality.

#### Session 5

*Content.* After the homework assignment was discussed with a focus on how the students were able to challenge irrational beliefs, the cognitive part of Meichenbaum's (1977) stress inoculation method was introduced. The importance of positive self-statements were emphasized and students were asked to construct positive coping statements for the four stages: (a) preparing for a stressor, (b) confronting a stressor, (c) being overwhelmed by a stressor, and (d) rewarding oneself for having coped. Students were then required to use what they had just learned in a real anxiety situation. They were asked to sing a song, do a dance, or give an impromptu speech in front of the group and to deal with the anxiety by using stress inoculation. For homework students were asked to use the self-statements that they had developed in two of the anxiety situations encountered before the next class. They were asked to record their reactions and any difficulties in using the method.

*Process.* This in-class practice of stress inoculation turned out to be quite useful. The energy and shared anxiety that was generated made this session a high point as far as the group experience. A feeling of accomplishment and the satisfaction of getting through a tough situation seemed to prevail. Also, the discussion of student reactions to the task assignment helped illustrate Meichenbaum's (1977) distinction between a "coping" and a "mastery" model.

### Session 6

*Content.* The session started with a brief discussion of the previous homework assignment and proceeded with a short introduction to relaxation approaches to anxiety management. The leaders explained the difference between cognitive and relaxation methods and emphasized the usefulness of both approaches. The remainder of the session was devoted to an explanation and practice of deep muscle relaxation (Jacobson, 1938). After practicing, students were asked to discuss their reactions and describe the parts of their bodies that were most difficult to relax. The leaders asked students to discuss how they might build one or two 15-minute sessions of deep muscle relaxation into their daily schedule. For homework they were asked to try out the method, record reactions, and report back.

*Process.* Because this session included less opportunity for discussion, the development of group cohesiveness slowed down. This was clearly one of the points where group development was slowed in order to teach a specific skill. A discussion of reactions to the deep muscle relaxation helped to reactivate the group.

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### Session 7

*Content.* After discussing their successes and failures with regular deep muscle relaxation, the students received instructions in active or cue-controlled muscle relaxation (Deffenbacher & Payne, 1977). This involves pairing the relaxation with a particular cue. In this case students practiced deep muscle relaxation using the word relax and a deep breath as relaxation cue. In order to learn to actively use relaxation in anxiety situations (as opposed to regular sessions for general relaxation), students were asked to walk around campus and to periodically signal (cue) themselves to relax. They were instructed to go to places where they had experienced anxiety (classroom, etc.). After their return from this exercise, the class further discussed strategies for relaxing on cue. For homework they were asked to try out cue-controlled relaxation in several settings during the next few days.

*Process.* Although much of this session involved individual activity, the development of the group continued through the discussion of individual relaxation experiences. Many of the students went beyond a discussion of the exercise into a description of various anxiety reactions that they typically experienced in various campus locations. The leaders encouraged class discussion, even though at times it was not directly relevant to the immediate teaching objective.

### Session 8

*Content.* In this session students were taught to meditate using Benson's (1975) "relaxation response." Similarities between this approach and deep muscle relaxation were discussed and

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students practiced meditating in the class. The students shared their reactions, difficulties, and successes, and they were asked to compare this method with deep muscle relaxation. The class discussed problems of finding the time to meditate. They were then assigned homework along the same lines as in previous sessions.

*Process.* At this point the development of the group seemed to reach a plateau. The level of development seemed to complement the learning process, but further group development would have required more focus on individual reactions and on the here-and-now aspects of the group. The leaders at this point did not push for any further group development.

### Session 9

*Content.* This session covered the topics of exercise and stress and discussed the pros and cons of active exercises like jogging and swimming. Students were asked to share their own favorite exercise. They were then asked to decide how they could fit exercise into their daily schedule and also how they might be distracted from doing regular daily exercise. The class began a review of the different anxiety and stress management techniques during the session and students were asked to bring a specific anxiety management plan with them to the next session. This plan was to include the technique(s) that each student planned to employ in the future, with a discussion of implementation strategies and potential difficulties.

*Process.* The level of group involvement was somewhat less for this session. Students seemed to be pulling back their degree of personal involvement, probably in anticipation of the ending of the class.

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### Session 10

*Content.* Each student shared his or her anxiety management plan with the group. Members of the group responded to the plans by asking questions, reinforcing certain proposals, and questioning others. Students also discussed their reaction to the course and to the group format. Student comments on their reaction to the experience were positive and personal. They uniformly praised the discussion, small-group aspect of the course, and they also highly valued the anxiety management techniques they learned.

*Process.* The students were very active in discussing each other's plans. Although students received encouragement to carry out their proposed plans, a stronger, underlying message of caring and concern was evident.

### VALUE OF THE SMALL GROUP APPROACH

We are convinced that the small group process contributed significantly to the students' acquisition of anxiety management knowledge and skills in this course. Teaching this kind of life skill encourages the development of an effective group that allows members to participate at the level of self-disclosure necessary for personal learning to take place. We observed a number of factors that have been labeled as curative or therapeutic by various researchers and theorists (Corey & Corey, 1977; Yalom, 1975).

*Hope.* By discussing the anxiety-coping abilities that they already had, students encouraged each other. Also, as they began to share successes with the various techniques, they helped increase each other's hopefulness and motivation.

*Commitment to change.* The support by group members for each other

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helped individuals confront and accept anxiety problems. The ongoing nature of the class and the relationships that developed provided a strong impetus for change and improvement.

*Universality and humor.* Many of the usual, "Do you feel that, too?" comments occurred early in the course, and participants learned that stress and anxiety are universal. This feeling enabled many of them to gain a better perspective of their own anxiety and thereby give it less power over them.

*Group cohesiveness.* The development of cohesiveness was important in allowing class members to discuss their personal anxiety-coping mechanisms. As the semester progressed and as cohesiveness increased, students were more and more able to discuss honestly their own anxiety problems. Many of the assignments and subsequent discussions could only have taken place in a relatively cohesive setting.

*Care and altruism.* Students quickly demonstrated a caring attitude toward each other. They wanted to be helpful to each other and genuinely tried to encourage each other to learn the various anxiety management techniques. This concern became a strong reinforcer and was a crucial learning aid.

*Interpersonal learning.* Although a major focus of this group was not on interpersonal learning, many of the participants learned something about themselves as a result of the experience. This most often occurred when they were discussing people-related anxiety situations when other class members gave them feedback about their behavior.

## EVALUATION

Although we used no control group for the study, we did ask participants to complete a pretest and posttest using Wolpe's (1969) Fear Survey and the Cognitive Somatic Anxiety Question-

naire (CSAQ) (Schwartz, Davidson, & Coleman, 1978). The Fear Survey includes a variety of common phobic fears and the CSAQ has a cognitive and a somatic scale. The mean score for student participants on the Fear Survey ranged from 112.7 ( $SD=42.9$ ) on the pretest to 83.1 ( $SD=67.3$ ) on the posttest. On the CSAQ Somatic scale the pretest mean score was 19.7 ( $SD=4.2$ ) and the posttest score was 17.4 ( $SD=4.1$ ). On the Cognitive scale the pretest mean score was 23.2 ( $SD=3.8$ ) and the posttest score was 20.9 ( $SD=4.3$ ). In addition to the decrease in anxiety level indicated in these inventories, students reported a decrease in tension and anxiety on the course evaluations.

Although no formal follow-up was conducted, several of the participants stopped in to see the instructors after the course to report on their progress. These reports were uniformly positive except for one student who was having trouble applying the cognitive techniques. She decided to work on her problems further by joining a general therapy group.

Participation in a small group can greatly enhance a student's learning, particularly in subject areas where the instructor is encouraging a direct personal application of the material being covered. To use a small group effectively in this way, the instructor must have some knowledge of group process and must be able to facilitate group development at least to the point where participants can learn from and be touched by each other. To do this he or she must be able to set an informal, group oriented tone, while maintaining the expectation that certain material must be read and mastered. It is also helpful for instructors to be willing to discuss their own approach and experiences. Counselors, psychologists, and group workers can contribute a new and needed dimension to education by

bringing their skills and knowledge about groups to the classroom, either directly or by consultation with other faculty members.

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