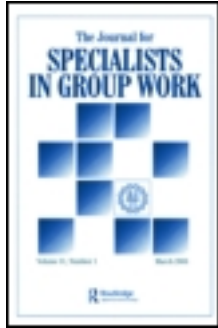


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Psychoeducational Groups: A Model for Choosing Topics and Exercises Appropriate to Group Stage

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Conceptualizing and planning psychoeducational groups are important tasks for group counselors. One difficulty in this process is determining the appropriate order or sequence of group session topics and structured exercises. Although the literature contains substantial information on group topics and exercises for a wide variety of themes of psychoeducational groups, little information is found in the literature to help group counselors conceptualize and design an entire psychoeducational group, particularly in choosing stage-appropriate group activities. The purpose of this article is to provide group counselors a specific model to follow for conceptualizing and developing all types of psychoeducational groups.

Psychoeducational groups are designed to help participants develop knowledge and skills for coping adaptively with potential and/or immediate environmental challenges, developmental transitions, and life crisis (Association for Specialists in Group Work, 1992). Because psychoeducational groups can be used with a variety of populations, age levels, and group themes in a relatively short period of time, they are increasingly being used in various settings including schools, hospitals, mental health agencies, social service agencies, and universities (Brown, 1998; Corey & Corey, 1992).

The distinct feature of a psychoeducational group is its significant educational component (Brown, 1998). Because of the educational component, structured exercises are used to help facilitate group process. Group leaders typically plan the topics and exercises for each session in advance, similar to developing a curriculum. Determining the curriculum for the group and deciding which exercises to use in each session are important tasks for group leaders. Group activities must be approp-

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riately timed in consideration of the group stage. Thus, how to decide the order or sequence of group exercises becomes the task for psychoeducational group leaders.

Group leaders are educated about the stages of group; the various theoretical approaches to group; the wide variety of group exercises available; and how factors such as group theme, member population, developmental level, and cultural considerations must all be taken into account when planning a group; however, little information is available in the literature to help group leaders conceptualize and design an entire psychoeducational group, particularly in terms of sequencing group session topics and exercises. The purpose of this article is to provide a model for conceptualizing and planning group topics and structured exercises for psychoeducational groups regardless of the theme of the group. This model was designed to help counselors develop a curriculum for a psychoeducational group based on the factor of intensity of the group session and the structured exercises. This article will (a) present the group model and discuss why it is useful for conceptualizing and planning psychoeducational groups, (b) present guidelines on choosing group activities appropriate to group stage, and (c) provide an example curriculum of a psychoeducational group demonstrating the application of the group model.

GROUP MODEL

Theoretical Framework

This model was formulated to follow the normal stages of group process. All groups go through stages, regardless of the type of group or style of leadership. Generally, there is a beginning stage, a middle or working stage, and an ending or closing stage (Battagay, 1989; Corey & Corey, 1992; Dreikurs, 1951; Shapiro, 1978; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jenson, 1977; Yalom, 1995). The beginning stage is characterized by members' anxiety about being rejected, revealing themselves, meeting new people, and being in a new situation (Corey, Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 1988). The focus of the middle or working stage is on the purpose of the group. Although conflicts and negative feelings can occur early in the middle stage, the central characteristic of the working stage is group cohesion—group members experience universality and are willing to explore underlying issues, feelings, and needs with more intensity and depth. The ending stage of group represents the process of termination for the group. Members say good-bye and deal with feelings associated with the ending of the group.

The model (see Figure 1) consists of two axes with a bell-curve design. The y axis is labeled as *intensity*, and the x axis is the number of group sessions. The vertical lines splitting the x axis in thirds represent the group stages. The model demonstrates that as the group progresses from the first few sessions to the halfway point of the group (i.e., from the beginning stage to the middle stage), the intensity of the sessions increases to its highest point. Then, as the group aims toward termination or the ending stage of group, the intensity of the group sessions will decrease.

Intensity is defined as the extent to which the group topic, structured exercises, and group techniques do the following: (a) evoke anxiety among group participants, (b) challenge group participants to self-disclose, (c) increase awareness, (d) focus on feelings, (e) concentrate on the here and now, and (f) focus on threatening issues. Intensity can be related to the concept of depth of a group (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 1998). Groups operating with surface-level talking or sharing experience little depth, whereas groups experiencing depth can move to deep and intense personal sharing.

Counseling, psychotherapy, or other unstructured groups progress to more intensity naturally as they move toward the working stage of group. It is the members' responsibility to decide what issues and what level of self-exploration they wish to engage in the group (Corey, 1999). Because of the structure inherent in psychoeducational groups, the topics and exercises—planned by the group leader—help determine and affect the level of self-exploration or intensity in the group. Thus, group leaders must first be able to assess session topics and structured exercises in terms of intensity (e.g., Does the topic for this group evoke anxiety among group members? Does the structured exercise challenge participants to self-disclose?), and second, the leader must plan the sequence or order of the curriculum. Counselors planning structured group sessions would choose group topics that are less intense at the beginning stage of the group, more intense during the middle or working stage, and less intense during the ending stage of group.

Intensity follows the stages of the group. For example, during the beginning stage of group, members feel less comfortable and more anxious about being in the group. Thus, more intense session topics or exercises would be unproductive because of members' lack of readiness to engage in self-disclosure and discuss personal awareness or personal issues. Topics that focus on safety, trust, and other less-intense issues are more appropriate at this point.

As the group moves into the working stage, members are usually eager to explore themselves on a deeper level (Corey et al., 1988). Although psychoeducational groups may not experience the depth of counseling or

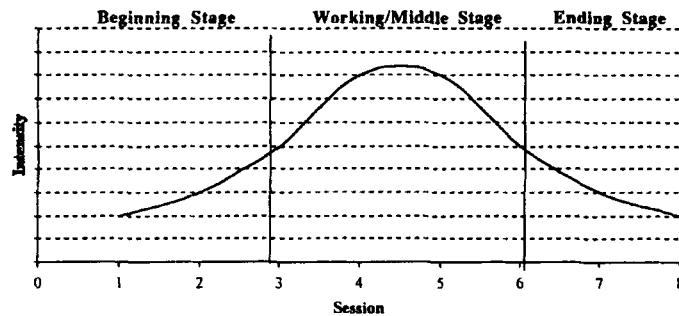


Figure 1. Psychoeducational Group Model

therapy groups in the working stage (due to the structure, short-term duration, and the cognitive nature of the group), they are ready to explore thoughts and feelings in more concentration. In this stage of group, most participants feel more safety and trust in the leader's input, interpretations, and suggestions and are less cautious about going along with the leader's suggested techniques. Having participated in less-intense exercises, they feel more comfortable participating in sessions with exercises that challenge them to address issues with greater depth. Intensity increases as members want to explore personal issues of which they have particular concern. They trust themselves more and are more ready to speak their minds, experiment with different behaviors, and push themselves to explore personal issues they may find frightening.

By the final stage of group, members may continue to want to work on more intense issues. Despite group members' readiness, counselors must be mindful of the need to decrease intensity in preparation for termination. Counselors must slowly move clients toward closure of the group. By choosing less-intense topics and exercises, leaders prepare clients for the ending of the group. Topics and exercises should be as meaningful and applicable to the group theme as previous exercises chosen for the working stage of group. Counselors should simply decrease the intensity by focusing more on integration of learning rather than on intense personal issues.

This group model is helpful to both counselors and group members. For counselors, it provides a framework to follow while planning a psychoeducational group. Certainly, the counselor should be flexible in deviating from the model when necessary. For group members, it provides a meaningful and organized plan of group session topics and exercises that respect the members' readiness for exploring importa

issues. Group members will not feel thrust into self-disclosure or confronted with a threatening personal issue before they are ready.

It is important that group leaders spend an adequate amount of time processing the activities they use in group. *Processing* refers to spending time discussing thoughts, feelings, and ideas that result from doing an exercise (Jacobs et al., 1998). Exercises can be processed in many ways: through rounds, in dyads or triads, through writing, and/or in the entire group. The type of processing questions will direct the focus of the processing (Kees & Jacobs, 1990). For example, questions such as "What happened?" and "What did you learn?" are common processing questions that will get members to talk about their experiences. But to focus the group discussion on a deeper level, the leader could ask, "What feelings were stirred up for you?" and "What insights did you get from doing this?" Please refer to Kees and Jacobs (1990) and Jacobs et al. (1998) for more information on processing group activities.

Choosing Group Activities Appropriate to Group Stage

Choosing the appropriate structured exercise or activity is a vital part of planning an effective psychoeducational group. This article has described a model counselors can use in the organization and planning of a psychoeducational group; however, the importance of the timing of group activities cannot be overemphasized. Counselors must be cognizant of their clients' readiness to approach certain activities. "To push beyond a client's readiness to move is to violate the client's integrity. To assault defenses without consideration for their importance in maintaining equilibrium is to expose a client to possibly serious psychological damage" (Corey et al., 1988, p. 5). To choose the appropriate activity with the appropriate timing, understanding the issues and goals of the group stages are of key importance. The following are step-by-step guidelines for counselors when choosing activities appropriate to group stage.

Step 1: Brainstorm group activities appropriate for the group theme. Brainstorm and list as many activities as possible that are appropriate for the theme of the psychoeducational group. The activities can come from a variety of books, journal articles, and other resources. It is appropriate to use activities from a variety of theoretical approaches such as Adlerian, person-centered, Gestalt, behavioral, and cognitive.

Step 2: Assess the intensity of each activity. Assess the intensity of the activities, that is, the extent to which activities do the following: (a) evoke anxiety among group participants, (b) challenge group partici-

pants to self-disclose, (c) increase awareness, (d) focus on feelings, (e) concentrate on the here and now, and (f) focus on threatening issues.

Step 3: Choosing activities for the early stages of group. From the brainstorming list, decide which activities are appropriate for the early stages of the group. Choose activities that focus on goals of the early stages of group. These include creating a trusting climate, teaching the basics of group process, assisting members in expressing their fears and expectations of the group, and teaching basic interpersonal skills such as active listening and responding (Corey, 1999). Choose activities that are less intense. Some common early-stage activities include getting acquainted, creating trust, and exploring fears. An excellent get-acquainted exercise involves asking group members to pair up, get to know as much as possible about their partners, and then later introduce their partners to the entire group. For exploring fears, group leaders can ask group members to brainstorm and list their hopes and fears for the group. As members brainstorm their ideas, the group leader can list the terms on a flip chart or blackboard for everyone to see. In this way, members can discuss what they hope they will learn from the group and address their fears about the group. Activities such as these will help to build the therapeutic relationship and create a feeling of safety in the group.

Step 4: Choosing activities for the middle stages of group. From the brainstorming list, choose activities that fit the goals of the middle or working stage of group and are higher in intensity. The goals of this stage include members' recognizing and expressing a range of feelings, dealing with conflicts, developing a high level of trust and cohesion, and gaining a willingness to risk exposure to and disclosure of threatening material (Corey, 1999). Activities during this stage can be more intense and focus on the theme of the group, focus on threatening issues, encourage member self-disclosure, focus on here and now, and increase awareness. For example, in a group for abused children, an appropriate middle-stage activity would be addressing anger. Each group member would individually write down all of the reasons why he or she is angry with the abuser. As a group, the reasons would be written on a blackboard or newsprint hung on the wall. The group could then rip the paper up or in some symbolic way express the anger.

Step 5: Choosing activities for the ending stage of group. During this group stage, members deal with their feelings about termination. They prepare for generalizing their learning to the outside world. It is during this time that members evaluate the impact of the group and decide what changes they want to make and how to go about making them

(Corey, 1999). From the brainstorming list, use activities that address these issues and are less intense in nature. Appropriate closing topics building up to termination include coping skills, client self-care, and preparation for closure. The last session is devoted either in part or entirely to termination issues such as reviewing and summarizing the group experience, assessing members' growth, and handling good-byes (Jacobs et al., 1998). As an example of an appropriate closure exercise, group members can write short letters to say good-bye to each group member and each counselor. The counselors would also write letters, providing each member with positive feedback about group participation and progress. Once the letters are completed, the members are given all of the letters, which are read aloud in the group.

Application of the Group Model

To demonstrate the application of the group model to an actual psychoeducational group, a curriculum on a children-of-divorce group is presented. The group is a 9-week group specifically for adolescents from divorced families (Thompson, 1996). Each session is identified with the session topic followed by a description of the structured exercises and/or activities planned for the session.

Session 1: Introduction and group rules. Group members form pairs, and partners interview each other to determine likes, dislikes, hobbies, and interests. Partners are introduced to the group. Consensus for group rules is also established. (Note: The activities address the beginning stage issues of helping members get acquainted and building trust. The activities are of low intensity; they require less self-disclosure and less self-awareness and elicit less anxiety.)

Session 2: Feelings. Adjective checklist and pleasant and unpleasant feeling words are processed so that clients can feel more comfortable about self-disclosing and discussing feelings. (Note: The activities address the beginning-stage issues of learning about and exploring feelings and include session topic and exercise of low intensity.)

Session 3: Bibliography on divorce. A story is read about parents getting a divorce. Participants discuss their feelings and thoughts about the characters' feelings and behaviors. (Note: Activity increases in intensity and requires self-disclosure about thoughts and feelings on divorce, although not about personal experience; it may generate some anxiety and self-awareness in participants. It is appropriate for entering into the middle stage of group.)

Session 4: Divorce-related self-disclosure. Members draw a shield and divide it into four parts. They are asked to draw a picture of a good time they had with their families in one block, an unpleasant time in another block, why they think their parents were divorced in the third block, and what they would like to happen to their families during the upcoming year in the fourth block. Members share their shields and discuss them with the group. (Note: Activity focuses on the theme of the group and is higher in intensity; it focuses on the middle-stage goal of exposure to more threatening material and requires self-disclosure and self-awareness about personal experiences. It may elicit anxiety from group members.)

Session 5: Role-playing the problems of divorce. Members brainstorm the problems of divorce. Then, they are divided into smaller groups. Each group selects one problem and role-plays the situation for 3 to 5 minutes. The whole group processes the experience at the end of group. (Note: Activity is higher in intensity, requires work in the “here and now,” and may generate self-disclosure and self-awareness and elicit anxiety. It is appropriate for the middle stage of group.)

Session 6: Positive aspects of divorce. Members discuss things that have turned out pleasant, or for the better, because of the divorce. Members complete a personal collage that reflects the pleasant experiences and share them with others. (Note: The activities in this session reflect the issues of the middle-to-late stages of group. Session topic and exercise decrease in intensity. Self-disclosure is still required, but it will generate less anxiety because the focus is on positives. It is appropriate for the middle stage of group heading toward the ending stage.)

Session 7: Coping with parents' divorce. Ways of coping are introduced such as stress management techniques. (Note: Activities focusing on coping skills are appropriate for the final stage of group. The session topic and exercise are of less intensity, a less-threatening issue is explored, requiring less self-disclosure and generating less anxiety.)

Session 8: Building self-esteem. Members select adjectives that best describe them, and members receive positive feedback from the other group members. (Note: Group activity again less in intensity, and less anxiety is elicited. It is appropriate for the ending stage of group.)

Session 9: Wrap-up. A summary of the sessions is conducted. Members express their feelings and give feedback on what they have learned.

(The session topic is of low intensity; it is appropriate for the last session in the closing stage of group.)

CONCLUSION

Because of their diversity of use for a variety of themes, populations, and ages, psychoeducational groups increasingly are being used. Counselors need a model to follow in developing psychoeducational groups, regardless of the group theme. Because a cognitive component is present in psychoeducational groups, counselors frequently use structured exercises and activities as a means of facilitating group process. An effective plan for developing a psychoeducational group includes developing a curriculum for group topics and structured exercises that relate to the group stage. This group model was developed as a means for helping counselors conceptualize a psychoeducational group to aid in the planning and preparation for the group. Using the model, counselors planning psychoeducational groups would choose group experiences that are less intense at the beginning stages of the groups, more intense during the middle or working stages, and less intense during the ending stages of group.

Little information is presently in the literature regarding the appropriate sequencing of group-session topics and exercises in a psychoeducational group. This model was developed as a means for counselors to conceptualize and develop a psychoeducational group, regardless of the theme of the group. The flexibility of this model to be used for any group theme is the strength of the model. Future research could include empirical studies examining the effectiveness of the model with any type or theme of psychoeducational group. In addition, future research could also examine any benefits of the model for group counselors in terms of helpfulness in developing psychoeducational groups.

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