



Bringing Your Groups to Their Full Potential

by Ildiko Ran, MFT, CGP

So many of us had our first group experience leading therapy groups at agencies during our internships or early career with not much preparation or specialized training. It can be agonizing as without the appropriate tools, and often working with very demanding populations, we fail to create the therapeutic environment that we succeed working with individual clients. Leading groups can become some of those shameful experiences that we would like to forget about. Many of us bow out from the arena of group therapy before realizing the rewarding and energizing experience that facilitating groups could mean.

I was lucky enough to have capable mentors at my first placement where I was leading co-parenting classes for parents in high conflict divorces. As I moved on to hospital groups, I realized the power of groups and I sought training.

As I kept working with groups, looking patiently at the evolving group process, I started seeing the emerging beauty of the here-and-now experiences and the group-as-a-whole process. I started paying attention to the intricacies of the multiple relating styles in the room. I started realizing the power of transferences and my varied countertransferences that were happening simultaneously. I knew I tapped into a modality that could be a natural expansion of my work and interest in psychodynamic and family systems orientations.

Since my initial encounter with group training, I have learned that the answer is not only leading but also participating in as many groups as I can. The more we process through our own participation, the more we feel at ease with the complexities in group treatment.

While I still enjoy the intimacy and the safe container of individual work, I have learned a great deal about the power of intimacy in groups.

In one of my groups a bipolar client, who had a manic episode during his time in the group, had enough rapport with the other participants and me that he was able to settle into the exchange and feedback he received from the group: we were able to address the pain of his inner world and the havoc he wreaked among other members. By that time he was used to verbalizing his feelings, which is a cornerstone of group treatment. Intimacy and honesty go hand in hand in these groups, even when the relationships are difficult. Working with one individual therapist he would have lost the valuable feedback of his peers.

People's inner worlds feel really alive in groups - different parts of one's self are triggered. Self objects start filling the room. It can be scary, confusing, and once you give yourself to the process, it can be exhilarating. It is a brave step to join a group but given a skilled facilitator, the benefits make it worth participating.

One can also take participation slowly. In one of my support groups a woman could not talk for several sessions - just cried when she tried to talk. Once she started participating actively she thanked the people who talked while she had been quiet. She felt they talked for her, too. She felt accepted, her feelings normalized and validated. Her shame eased to the degree that she felt safe enough to share.

I have learned so much from my groups. I can sometimes take my time, be more contemplative than in individual sessions, see where the group takes an issue. I am there to move the process along, notice group stalling resistances but not necessarily lead the discussion.

Sometimes participants take the easy road and shift into discussing a shared practical experience. In one of my divorce groups they started discussing how to find a lawyer; in one of my new parents' groups they discussed best online deals on diapers. As a facilitator I needed to be on my toes and steer them back to the therapeutic task at hand.

In weekly therapy groups in private practice clients come and leave right after the session. At agencies, in intensive, time limited groups, clients spend time together in breaks so you need to teach them to respect the boundaries of group material and not to discuss it outside of group time.

Blessed with lots of good opportunities in the Bay area I have found great resources in NCGPS (Northern California Group Psychotherapy Society) and AGPA (American Group Psychotherapy Association). I have attended local and not-so-local conferences, trainings and workshops. At each of these events I meet more and more group therapists and I keep hearing the same message: in order to do this work, we greatly benefit from being part of the community of group therapists and participating in groups.

Being part of groups is a basic human experience. Going from the safe motherly embrace and the intimate therapeutic encounter of individual therapy, one can understandably be hesitant to step out to the playground or enter group therapy. Group therapy is a practice playground, the secure base where we can practice the skills we want to learn, the skills we admire in others and the ones we have wondered about whether is our strength or weakness. If you join a process group you will find out for yourself what those skills are for you.

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