Evidence on the Effectiveness of Group Therapy

During the last 30 years, studies have shown the growing benefits of group psychotherapy in a number of areas of life challenges. Through groups, individuals find a forum of peer support, gaining strength as they share their feelings and experiences with others who are facing the same obstacles as themselves. Some gain strength in seeing the resourcefulness of those in the same situation, while others renew their feelings of self-worth through assisting others.

During the group process, people develop a support network through each other -- no longer feeling isolated by their condition and gaining a greater sense of normalcy. With certain medical conditions, group psychotherapy can contribute to general improvement in one’s psychosocial functioning. Research also has shown that survival rates have, in some cases, actually increased, with proper therapy. Research has demonstrated that various forms of group psychotherapy are equally beneficial with positive results found across the board for a variety of disorders. Group therapy is also cost-effective when compared to individual treatment. When a therapist’s time is spent with an entire group instead of one person, the expense for individuals is significantly reduced while the benefits remain and, in some instances, prove to be even greater.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM GROUPS

Addictions and Substance Abuse
Cancer Patients
HIV/AIDS Patients
Character Disorders
Depression & Grief
Eating Disorders
Youth Violence

Addictions and Substance Abuse
Support for group therapy as an essential element of substance abuse and addiction treatment is unequivocal and overwhelming. It is rare -- if not impossible -- to find any treatment program in this country that does not utilize group therapy as a crucial component of its treatment regimen. Recommendations from expert clinical practice guidelines and best research evidence all indicate that it is vital that group therapy remain a staple of substance abuse and addiction treatment. Enthusiastic collaboration from directors of training and Federal guidelines from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA) have resulted in the mandate that group therapy be a part of every substance abuser’s treatment. While therapeutic efficiency and cost-effectiveness play an increasingly important role in the utilization of group therapy, the benefits of group therapy are clear and compelling.
therapy as the treatment of choice for this population, there are other distinctive features and advantages of group treatment. Over the last twenty years, a general consensus has emerged that group treatment provides a number of unique opportunities for substance abusers to learn about themselves and alter their abuse of substances.

Some of the advantages of group therapy include:
1. mutual identification with and acceptance from others going through similar problems as they learn they are not alone or unique as they struggle with their compulsive use of substances,
2. positive peer support with the abstinence or reduction of substance use,
3. role modeling for abstinence or reduction of substance use is enhanced because the substance abuser has the opportunity to better understand their own attitudes about substance use and their defenses against giving up or reducing substance use by confronting similar attitudes and defenses in others,
4. affiliation, cohesiveness, social support while learning to identify and communicate feelings more directly,
5. structures, discipline and limit setting while permitting experiential learning and exchange of factual information about recovery and drug use,
6. installation of hope, inspiration for the future and the pursuit of shared goals and ideas.

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Cancer Patients
Many cancer patients have witnessed positive results with group therapy. For patients in the early stages, group therapy helps them deal with their illness in a multitude of ways. For instance, as emotional distress decreases, a person’s social activity, coping and self-esteem has increased. For those in more advanced stages, people have not only gained a greater sense of purpose in life but have also found pain and fatigue to become less of a problem. When those who are unaware or in denial take part in therapy, their deterioration is often lessened, while improvements are enhanced for those already aware of their condition. People who are limited in social and personal resources find group psychotherapy can lead to greater benefits. More compellingly, studies support the value of long-term interactive groups for those with advanced cases of widespread disease. In the case of breast cancer, for example, patients in a group psychotherapy test survived significantly longer than those in the control conditions. Additionally, members of cancer support groups notice a reduction in their amount of pain and stress-related physical problems.

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HIV/AIDS Patients
HIV/AIDS patients undergoing group psychotherapy have reported lower levels of stress and burnout as well as improvements in their physical condition as well as greater self-efficiency and hardness. For homosexual men suffering from depression, group therapy often provides improvements in psychiatric symptoms. With adolescents, self-esteem has increased while behavioral problems, distress and family stressors have often decreased. Patients who participated in Cognitive Behavioral Stress Management groups noticed reductions in depression, anxiety and self-reported healthcare visits.
**Character Disorders**

Intense group psychotherapy sessions have yielded significant results for people with character disorders. As patients improve interpersonal skills, mood control and self-esteem, dysfunction levels in social and family situations, along with the severity of their disturbance can diminish, leading to an overall improvement in life satisfaction. Group psychotherapy also has helped reduce depression and suicidal tendencies in some instances of personality disorders. Improvement has been shown through working in a variety of different groups and situations, giving patients the opportunity to work with a large number of peers and staff. In such circumstances, patients show improvement solely from group therapy, without having individual treatment. Further, once patients are involved in therapy they may be more apt to experience a reduction in symptoms particular to their specific disorder.

**Depression & Grief**

Group psychotherapy is also used to help treat people with depression. For example, women who have suffered the loss of a child have reduced their amount of grief and post-traumatic stress syndrome through group. Surrounding themselves with a peer group helps women heal and regain a sense of hope. Likewise for single depressed mothers, participants can increase their self-esteem and function better within their families with the right support.

**Eating Disorders**

Eating disorders are also treated by group. In the case of bulimia nervosa some group participants have been able to reduce the amount of bingeing and purging with even greater benefits resulting from earlier interventions and more intensive therapy. Overall, eating behavior has been shown to improve while simultaneously reducing anxiety and depression.

**Youth Violence**

Youth violence is a disturbing trend. As violence has risen in our schools, prevention methods are being sought to prevent young people from such detrimental behavior. By bringing versions of group therapy into the classroom, students are shown how to avoid aggressive behavior and its consequences. In studies where youths previously involved in violence took part in group therapy, a significant reduction was seen in aggressiveness and in subsequent arrests; academic performance also was shown to improve. With early intervention and active discussion about violence, many students can learn how to curb violent tendencies and interact more normally with others.

**About the American Group Psychotherapy Association**
The American Group Psychotherapy Association is the foremost professional association dedicated to the field of group psychotherapy, operating through a tri-partite structure: AGPA, a professional and educational organization; the Group Psychotherapy Foundation, its philanthropic arm; and the National Registry of Certified Group Psychotherapists, a standard setting and certifying body. This multidisciplinary association has over 3,000 members, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, clinical mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, pastoral counselors and creative arts therapists, many of whom have been recognized as specialists through the Certified Group Psychotherapist credential. The association has 31 local and regional societies located across the country. Its members are experienced mental health professionals who lead psychotherapy groups and various non-clinical groups. Many are organizational specialists who work with businesses, not-for-profit organizations, communities and other "natural" groups to help them improve their functioning.

For information on group therapy and AGPA call 212-477-2677, toll free at 877-668-AGPA (2472), or visit our website at www.agpa.org.

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