



Group Counseling Skills

Group Counseling is a very effective tool for discussing common issues, sharing ideas and learning new skills.

- Groups can act as a support network and sounding board when the other members help come up with ideas for improving a difficult situation.
- Talking with others often helps to put problems into perspective. Sometimes people may feel they are the only person struggling, but it can be a relief to hear that others have challenges too and they are not alone.
- People have different personalities and backgrounds and look at situations in different ways. Members may discover a whole new set of strategies to face their concerns.

The effectiveness of the group depends on a combination of many factors, as is discussed here.

Pre-Group Planning

Good planning is essential to lead meaningful groups. The skilled leader will:

- Understand the objective of the group – the reason the group is formed, how it can help its members, potential challenges, and expectations of outcomes.
- Form the membership of the group. The ideal group size is 8-12 members, which allows for all to interact, yet not form sub-groups (cliques). Consider the power dynamics of the group and strive for balance. Members should have common concerns.
- Establish the time frame for group meetings, keeping in mind the age of the members (young children cannot focus for more than one hour). Make sure you hold firm to the set time.
- Locate a place for the meetings that is quiet and comfortable. Plan to sit in a circle or semi-circle to allow for a sense of equality and flow of communication.
- Learn about the topic of the meeting, not to make you an expert, but to allow you to ask good questions that will help the group generate ideas.
- Plan the warm-up, realizing that the opening few minutes of any session is very important. The warm-up should never be boring or too long.
- Plan for the closing phase of the session--it should not end abruptly.

- Have a back-up plan in case what is planned does not work.

First Session Starting Points

Connect with the members in your group, and help them feel connected to you. Greet them warmly as they enter. Let them know that you care about them.

- Begin with introductions and an icebreaker. Have a dynamic start to the first session to kick things off.
- Introduce the goal and purpose of the group.
- Explain the leader's role to be facilitator, not person in charge
- Briefly create simple rules with the group such as:
 - Everyone should treat everyone else with respect: no name-calling, no emotional outbursts, no accusations.
 - Confidentiality is critical. Nothing discussed in the group should be shared outside of the group.
 - No arguments directed at people – only at ideas and opinions. Disagreement should be respectful – no ridicule.
 - Don't interrupt. Listen to the whole of others' thoughts – actually listen, rather than just running over your own response in your head.
 - Respect the group's time. Try to keep your comments reasonably short and to the point, so that others have a chance to respond.
 - Consider all comments seriously, and try to evaluate them fairly. Others' ideas and comments may change your mind, or vice versa: it's important to be open to that.
 - Don't be defensive if someone disagrees with you. Evaluate both positions, and only continue to argue for yours if you continue to believe it's right.

Group Leadership Skills

Build and use these group leadership skills in order to lead effective groups. You will notice that many of the skills are the same basic counseling skills you have been strengthening through these lessons.

- Use active listening skills - Of all the interpersonal skills associated with group leadership, listening is the most essential. Remember to listen with full attention and strong eye contact.

- Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words. Lean forward when people are talking, for example, keep your body position open and approachable, smile when appropriate, and attend carefully to everyone, not just to those who are most talkative.
- Put yourself in someone else's place (empathy). Be aware of people's reactions and feelings, and respond appropriately. If someone is confused or has been hurt by comments, use your sensitivity to deal with the situation.
- Model the behavior you wish the group to achieve. That includes respecting all group members equally, admitting when you're wrong or don't know an answer, listening carefully to others, supporting your arguments with fact or logic, accepting criticism, etc.
- Show enthusiasm – it is one of the best ways to lead. It energizes others and helps them become self-motivated.
- Ask open-ended questions which encourage members to expand on what they have said. Ask follow up questions such as “What makes you say that?” “How do you feel about that?”
- Think of members as unique individuals with varied backgrounds and interests, yet link individual members to the group – they need to feel like they are part of the whole. Highlight the common elements they share.
- Facilitate - make sure that all opinions are shared and that no one dominates or withdraws into quiet isolation.
 - Call on members who have not spoken up, but avoid putting them on the spot. Calling on members who are uncomfortable in the group often will not help, but will just make them feel more uncomfortable. Try calling on two quiet people at once: “Priya, you haven't said much....nor have you, Raj. Do either of you want to comment?” This takes the spotlight off of one person. If they still seem uncomfortable, move on.
 - Pause the talk of dominant people with something like “The group values your opinions, but in fairness to everyone, we need to give others a chance to speak. I'd like for you to listen a bit before you speak again.”
- Clarify – focus on key issues by sorting through confusion or conflicting messages.
- Summarize – highlight important material so the group doesn't get caught up on details or irrelevant points. Help the group see the bigger picture of what was said.

Additional Key Points

- Encourage playfulness as well as work. People need time to relax to be productive. Take a 5-10 minute break. Involve a playful/energizing activity. Encourage members to get to know you and each other informally.
- Celebrate accomplishments, give compliments and positive feedback. Celebrate team accomplishments.
- Written exercises, drawing, role play, and other activities can be very helpful in drawing out members. Working in pairs can also help group members feel more comfortable participating.
- Always wrap up the session by reviewing the discussion and making plans for next steps. Review any assignments and deadlines for those activities. Get feedback on the session from the group; ask for suggestions for improvement. Thank the group for their work.

**If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more,
do more, and become more, you are a true leader.**

Plan a Group Counseling Session

Take some time to plan a group counseling session, either just for practice, or to prepare for a real session. Consider the following items:

Objective/Purpose of group:

Membership (number of members, who?)

Place and room set-up:

Warm Up Activity:

Closing plans:

Where will you learn about the topic of the group?

Practice Handling Challenging Situations

Consider ways to handle the following challenging situations in a group:

1. One of the group members disagrees with another and tells him he is wrong, stupid and just doesn't get what he is saying.
2. The group seems to have lost control over a controversial issue – everyone is chatting at the same time and no one is listening to each other.
3. One member keeps looking down at her hands and does not contribute at all.
4. You present a topic and ask how everyone feels about the issue, and no one speaks up. There is an uncomfortable silence.
5. One group member is completely negative and finds the wrong in every suggestion.
6. Several boys sitting next to each other keep whispering and giggling inappropriately.
7. One member keeps dominating the discussion. She seems to have something to say about everything
8. The group keeps getting off topic and caught up in telling personal stories.
9. A member says to you, "You're the leader here...you should have all the answers. What should we do about ___?"
10. A member shares something about another member that is very personal and should not have been shared with the group.