Facilitating Safety in Group Work

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE STRATEGY IS APPROPRIATE

Bereaved participants in a facilitated support group benefit from the establishment of safety in the group process. This strategy is appropriate for adults, but the principles are applicable to all. Group work (and this approach to it) is less likely to be helpful for people who, for whatever reason, are unable to engage with group processes or significantly disrupt or inhibit the helpfulness of the group for other participants.

DESCRIPTION

As many writers have described (Schmid & O'Hara, 2013; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), therapeutic groups have the potential to be frightening places. They can generate considerable anxiety, leading to a variety of distressing experiences for participants including feeling misunderstood, angry, rejected, isolated, and shamed. Grieving people are frequently already grappling with heightened levels of anxiety and vulnerability. Many may avoid group situations, and those who do not may approach them with even greater trepidation than is usual with other populations.

One response to this can be to facilitate bereavement support groups in ways that are highly structured and facilitator-led, which focus on more cognitive or task-oriented

approaches, and which may minimize distress. Our approach (Spence & Smale, 2015),

however, persists in the conviction that for many bereaved people, group work is most

deeply beneficial when it creates space for mutual and honest experiencing and exploring

of practical, cognitive, affective, existential, and spiritual issues, with compassion and

acceptance, and without preconception or agenda. This encounter can constitute an

important and healing part of the 'grief work' that is central to most contemporary

understandings of grieving.

Attempting to describe the processes of therapeutic psychological change, Carl

Rogers proposed that "under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of

threat to the self structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived

and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such

experiences" (Rogers, 1951, p 517). Grieving can be understood as a process of

assimilating and including our often painful and confusing experiences of loss into our

ever-evolving and revised understandings of who we are and how we link with the world

around us. For group work to meet the needs of individuals, an adequate sense of

personal safety must be perceived. This sense of safety arises from a growth in trust

within the group and, being therefore a relational matter, is not something that can be

unilaterally imposed by facilitators. Facilitators nevertheless have a significant ethical

responsibility to do all they can to engender a safe-enough group. Additionally, if Rogers

is correct, doing so represents a significant contribution to what is a highly potent

therapeutic factor in and of itself.

The following suggestions indicate ways in which facilitators may pay attention

to this therapeutic need for safety. Specific techniques can of course be developed and

modified to suit specific contexts and preferred ways of working.

- **Pay attention to the recruitment of participants**. Whether or not formal screening is undertaken it is important to carefully consider individual participants, and any factors (e.g. gender, age, type and recency of bereavement, personality and personal preferences) that may potentially undermine group cohesion and development. Consideration should be given to possible options should any irresolvable tension emerge between the needs and tendencies of the group and those of an individual.

- **Think about the practicalities**. How groups are set up and managed on a practical level can send powerful messages to participants. Initial information should explain clearly what to expect and invite questions and the expression of any uncertainties. How participants are met when they arrive at the venue can convey the importance or otherwise that it attached to their comfort and wellbeing. Where can they hang their coats? Are tea/coffee or other refreshments available when they arrive? Making the room as comfortable and welcoming as possible might involve using reduced or indirect lighting or fresh flowers. It can also be helpful to offer the chance to gather informally after each meeting, giving an opportunity to 'wind down' from the intensity of the meeting and to engage in social chit-chat without having to pretend that 'everything's fine', something that is often difficult for bereaved people.

- **Spend significant time 'preparing the ground'**. Establishing a sense of safety in groups cannot be hurried. It is important to give adequate time and opportunity for participants to articulate their hopes and fears about involvement and to support the group in developing a mutual understanding of which 'ground rules' are most likely to lead toward the fulfilment of hopes and addressing of concerns. Confidentiality is

of central importance. Participants can be supported to identify what this means to them and what agreements need to be established to ensure that a sense of safety is developed in the time *between* meetings as well as when people are physically together. Additionally, safety is enhanced when participants feel a sense of ownership of the group and are enabled to use it to address what really matters to them in their grieving. It can be helpful to give time for the group to develop an agenda for the meetings, not as a restrictive list of what is to be covered in linear fashion, but as a way of ensuring that what matters to each person can receive ongoing attention as, if and when participants so wish. Participants are often impatient to begin to talk about their experiences. It is important that facilitators find sensitive ways to allow them to begin to tell their stories, but which do not subsequently prove unsafe because insufficient attention has been given to establishing the norms upon which the work of the group is based (see Neimeyer & Sands, 2015).

- **Explicitly welcome and discuss difference and diversity within the group**. It can be helpful to explain that similarities with others in the group are likely, but so too are differences and disagreements. These may be a challenging and possibly unexpected aspect of the group, but it should be noted that, with adequate mutual respect, each can be as fruitful as the other. Sometimes an event in the group will prompt such a conversation early on, but if not it should be initiated by facilitators.

- **Work as transparently as possible.** A sense of safety can be compromised when facilitators allow any air of mystique to gather around their work. This transparency can be communicated (and modelled) simply by remembering to explain why a suggestion is being made, question asked, or comment made. It can also serve as a

stimulus for facilitators to regularly check with participants if the group work is meeting their needs or whether any modifications in focus and/or approach are required, ensuring that the 'fit' of the group keeps pace with its ongoing development.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

In the first meeting of a closed eight-session support group, Kevin became gradually quieter, having initially been actively involved in discussion about hopes and concerns for the group and also beginning to speak about the circumstances of his wife Wilma's distressing illness and death ten months before. It was not immediately apparent that he was unhappy, but at the end of the evening he confided to a facilitator that he might not return due his fear that honestly describing his experiences had been upsetting for others, particularly those with obviously different experiences and understandings of their grieving. The facilitator reiterated the value of difference and diversity within the group and gently encouraged Kevin, if he felt able, to return for the next meeting when further conversation and discussion could take place.

Kevin, with considerable apprehension, did return and facilitators spent substantial time in the second meeting "preparing the ground," seeking agreement on exactly how the group could best work together. As part of this, Kevin was supported to describe how out of place he had felt when he had spoken openly and emotionally about his raw experience. He described his fear that he had 'created unpleasantness' for others. This conversation illustrated to other participants the potential benefits of openness to discussion about personal experiences of being in the group and not only to its subject matter; to its 'process' as well as its 'product'. It modelled and encouraged honest sharing and offered a concrete situation from which to explore, over the

subsequent meetings, the inescapable reality of both similarities and differences from griever to griever. Within the increasing sense of safety that developed in the group over the following weeks, these were gradually articulated, acknowledged and validated amongst the group participants. They provided valued and instrumental opportunities to be supported in preferred ways of grieving, to be challenged by the existence of alternatives, and to examine and re-consider thoughts and feelings that may have felt taboo in family or other social situations, just as they had initially appeared to Kevin to be taboo within the group.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Bereavement support groups provide a range of support to participants, including psycho-education and the imparting of useful information and ideas for grieving individuals. However, with careful, responsive, and ongoing preparation and thought, they also can provide a valued interpersonal climate in which, with sufficient attention to its safety, profound and meaningful conversation can develop that recognizes commonalities of grief, deeply respects the reality and centrality of each person's experience, and explores the interplay between the two.

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