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Newsletter 10

PSYCHOEDUCATION GROUPs:

‘PLANTING SEEDS’

In our annual planning meeting last spring, our TIGS team engaged in lively debate and settled on *Psychoeducational Group Leadership* as our theme for the coming year. The theme we select each year informs our decisions regarding invited guests for conversations and workshops, and gives focus to our seasonal newsletters and reading lists.

We began this newsletter several months ago but have struggled to gather our writing energies as the contexts of our world continue to change. We have been so grateful for each other and our weekly meetings and reflections. We have drawn on our knowledge of group theories to help us ‘lean in’ and have difficult conversations. We believe in the power of groups to effect meaningful change, and group leaders in all arenas will be called upon to use your facilitation skills in service of healing … In that spirit, we will continue to gather materials related to various themes. We offer here in this newsletter some reflections and resources related to psychoeducational group leadership.

REFLECTING ON OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSES

In the unofficial hierarchy of therapy groups, psychoeducational groups have been at times undervalued and the skills­­ required to facilitate these groups may go unrecognized. Creating an atmosphere conducive to learning, where members feel safe enough to open their boundaries to new information and new ways of living, is a challenging task for any leader.

Psychoeducational groups may also be a ‘first-line’ therapy group experience for many participants. It is important to recognize that attending a group and opening up to others is often an act of true courage, since many participants have been negatively impacted in previous groups (families, classrooms etc.) In fact, in some settings, the word *therapy* may not be used in referring to these groups as stigma continues to be a barrier for some potential members.

Psychoeducational groups are often used by Family Service Agencies, Educational and Counselling Centers across the country, addressing common issues that arise across the lifespan. These short-term groups combine education with support. Leaders are advised to limit their exploration of historical material in seeking to understand participant behaviour.

While sharing content and learning from others is valued by the participants, effective group leaders also seek opportunities to build self-understanding and emotional self-regulation. Facilitators can enliven sessions by incorporating experiential activities into their sessions. This can be planned in advance, developed as a role play situation in response to discussion within the group or highlighted by exploring the here-and-now of the group.

Given the time limited nature of these groups, facilitators may struggle to cover their content while still allowing for supportive discussion. At the same time, they recognize that the effective use of group process can enhance and enrich the group experience.

In a recent *Conversation about Group Leadership*, seasoned group leader, prolific author and teacher Nina Brown spoke about the incredible value of psychoeducational groups and the therapeutic factors that are activated within these groups. *Imparting of information* is an obvious factor and focus for group leaders, while *installation of hope* and *universality* are often even more important factors for the group participants. Balancing content with process, gently facilitating connections between members while simultaneously attending to the group climate requires considerable skill and sensitivity. Her advice? “Talk less and listen more/reflect more.” She also stressed that there is more than 1 way to deliver information, and suggested potentially using activities, not just words in some of these groups. She used the metaphor of ‘planting seeds’, (which we adopted in the title of this newsletter) and noted that these groups are not intended to ‘fix’ everything but rather encourage participants to come back for more. You may listen to her full conversation with us [here.](https://youtu.be/JeNwr7dl170)

It is our hope that the conversations we have and the information we share in the coming year will encourage and support the psychoeducational group leaders in our community to approach their important work with renewed energy and pride.

*Risk*

*And then the day came,*

*when the risk to remain*

*tight in a bud*

*was more painful than*

*the risk*

*it took*

*to blossom.*

*Anais Nin*

Psychoeducational groups have emerged as effective and essential components of group practice in many settings, including clinical private practice, hospitals, community agencies and school systems. Today, psychoeducational groups play a vital role in a range of contexts including helping people address life transitions, learning skills to deal with physical, mental health or socialization issues and receiving support in relation to coping with various health and life challenges.

Most psychoeducational groups serve a dual purpose of both educating group members as well as offering an element of support around the illness- or issue-specific group theme. These groups typically emphasize education or learning over self-reflection and self-exploration, with program materials reflective of the group’s theme. The cognitive components of psychoeducational groups generally take precedence over emotional processing.

Nina Brown (*Psychoeducational Groups, 4th ed. (2018) New York: Taylor & Francis/Routledge*) describes the main features of psychoeducational groups:

* an emphasis on didactic instruction
* use of planned structured activities
* goals tend to be defined by leader
* the leader operates as facilitator/ teacher
* a focus on prevention
* no screening of members
* no limits on number in group and groups can be very large
* self-disclosure is accepted but not encouraged-nor is it the focus
* privacy and confidentiality not primary concerns or emphasis
* sessions may be limited to one
* task functions are emphasized

Leaders of psychoeducational groups have the primary responsibility for forming the group and selecting activities that foster learning and optimize the therapeutic value of the group experience. Leaders who understand group properties and group dynamics are able to facilitate educational and task groups more effectively and efficiently.

When the frame is set and infrastructure is in place and reinforced to guide communication in the group, we know that the possibility of activating the therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020), such as cohesion and installation of hope will follow. What can be observed in cohesive groups is an increase in a sense of community, belonging, feelings of being understood, appreciation for the other group members, and a sense of optimism as individuals build relationships and witness each other’s growth and potential.

We asked 2 Canadian experts who work with specific models of practice in short-term psychoeducational groups. Here’s what they had to say:

Sheri Van Dijk, MSW, on using DBT in groups:

In a DBT group the primary goal is skills training – it’s not a processing group. Of course, we can’t prevent processes from happening, we’re just not delving into them with the client. Instead, the goal would be to validate the client’s experience, and then encourage the client to make changes through skills use. Likewise, when there are issues that arise between clients in the group setting, the clients are validated, and skills-use is encouraged as in this example: “It can sometimes be difficult to understand others’ perspectives (validate). Can you think of what skills you could use in this moment? (encourage use of skills)”. In this way skills are taught in group and reinforced through the processes that occur within the group dynamics.

Sheri’s book, *DBT Made Simple: A Step-by-Step Guide to Dialectical Behavior Therapy* was published in 2013.

Ingrid Söchting, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, on using Cognitive Behavioural Group Therapy:

Psychotherapy groups can be roughly divided into process and content groups (or some combination), where process involves the way group members relate to each other including to the group leaders, and content refers to the materials that are taught to the group by the group leaders. One can also understand this as the difference between the work done BY the group as opposed to IN the group. This difference is described in more detail in my book *Cognitive Behavioural Group Therapy: Challenges and Opportunities* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

Psycho-educational groups are on the extreme end of the process-content continuum. As the word implies, there is a key emphasis on learning (education) about matters pertaining to the mind (psyche; my personal preference would be to have kept the psyche and not psycho given the common definition of that word!). Members in a psycho-educational group can expect to be recipients of new learning that was not previously available to them.

More technically, psychoeducation is defined as a therapeutic intervention with a focus on the didactically skillful communication of key information within the framework of a cognitive-behavioural approach. Through this, clients (and sometimes loved ones of the client too) will be empowered to better understand and accept a particular problem (e.g., insomnia) or diagnosis (e.g., obsessive-compulsive disorder; OCD) they are struggling with.

The emphasis is on helping group members better understand the psychological mechanisms that keep their problem going, and often getting worse. This is typically illustrated by the group leaders presenting a model on the board that connects an initial trigger, e.g., touching a door handle, to a sensation or a thought, e.g., “am I contaminated?” which is then connected to a particular meaning or appraisal, e.g., Yes I believe I am very likely contaminated, which then shows an arrow to a resulting behaviour, e.g., repeated washing of the “contaminated” hands. Skilled psychoeducational group leaders will interactively sketch this cycle and set it up such that group members on their own and in discussion with each other are able to exclaim, that they now see the *vicious cycle* of short-term gain and long-term pain, as they realize that so long as those obsessions are taken at face value the washing will not stop and only get more intense and time-consuming.

This psycho-educational information can be powerful to receive and understand, and thus rewarding for leaders of psychoeducational groups who enjoy hearing clients express “I have never thought of it this way before,” or “now I understand what I am up against and can see it’s just not that I am weak,” or “having a name for what I am suffering makes me feel less confused and less blaming of myself.”

Psychoeducation can be a first component of a group or can be the only component of a group depending on the setting and the type of group.

Giorgio Tasca, the Director of the Psychotherapy Practice Research Network (PPRNet), recommended a chapter by Gary Burlingame and Bernhard Strauss in the Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change (2021). Burlingame and Strauss’s chapter, *Efficacy of Small Group Treatments: Foundation for Evidence-Based Practice,*

offers a comprehensive review of group research, with references to research using psychoeducation in groups for various conditions.

Last week we hosted a *Conversation about Group Leadership* with expert psychoeducational group leader, Kathleen Ryan from Calgary. Kathleen has had over 35 years of clinical experience leading a variety of groups in the hospital setting. She talked about how challenging it is to balance delivering specific group ‘content’ and managing and encouraging group process elements that make group membership so rewarding. Her parting recommendations?

* Keep the goals of the group in mind.
* Look for opportunities to connect members and keep the group interactive.
* Look for ways to make interchanges experiential – focused in the here-and-now.

You can hear the full conversation with Kathleen Ryan [here](https://youtu.be/6-KP-h9yaOM).

Another Canadian expert in our field, Yvonne Bergmans, Ph.D. has developed a model of working in a psychoeducational format with individuals at high risk for suicide. The National Film Board of Canada produced a film which documents her innovative work. You can access the film here: <https://www.nfb.ca/film/drawing_from_life/>

THE VALUE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTION

In all groups, including those with a psychoeducational focus, the impact of belonging cannot be overstated. A recent report put out by The American Immigration Council, *The Belonging Barometer* (2023) identifies that, *“*Belonging is a fundamental human need, and one that is linked to many of the most complex challenges of our time. Without a sense of belonging, individuals and communities suffer; with it, they thrive. Yet, because belonging is notoriously difficult to measure, it is often ignored in efforts to address the deep fractures in our societies.”

The report identifies a new tool, *The Belonging Barometer,* and discusses considerations for interventions aimed at bolstering a sense of belonging in our lives.

You can read the full report here:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/64074072d3daa3704b5774d0/1678196851632/The+Belonging+Barometer+%E2%80%94+The+State+of+Belonging+in+America+%281%29.pdf>

We were interested to read that Ontario has created a new role of an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario ~ that of *Poet Laureate.*

Our first Ontario Poet Laureate is Randell Adjei. In a March 2023 interview with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Adjei describes the role and his goal:

***“****The role was created to commemorate the life of Gord Downie, the lead singer of the Tragically Hip, who used his poetry and music to raise awareness of the issues across Canada. The position is the first of its kind and was created to help bridge and raise awareness of the role of Arts and Literacy with the people of Ontario. As the first, my goal is to inspire more connection and community building through vulnerability. My work primarily focuses on celebrating Ontarians, poets, and youth to plant seeds for what Ontario can look like in our future.” (AGO Interview)*

Because the AGO was celebrating the work of Leonard Cohen, Canadian poet and singer-songwriter, Randell Adjei was asked to comment on the words of Cohen’s classic song, *Dance Me to the End of Love (1984).* Adjei reflected, *“For me, it isn’t just about dancing to the end of love, it is about the eternal need to belong and of being held and loved as you are, where you are for who you are. We all need this kind of love - not just romantically.”*

The full interview can be found here:

<https://ago.ca/agoinsider/randell-adjei-reflects-leonard-cohen?utm_source=AGO+email+communications&utm_campaign=a404619a67-AGOinsider_March+29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d4ab708299-a404619a67-246083481>

OUR COMMUNITY

One of our own group therapy mentors, Dr. Eric Jackman, will be celebrating a milestone birthday in the new year. In appreciation of Dr. Jackman’s enormous and enduring contributions to the mental health of Canadian children, and to the field of group psychotherapy, the members of the Board of the Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation (CGFP) have launched a fundraising campaign in Dr. Jackman‘s honour.

The Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation is a registered charity in Canada, whose mission is to support education, training, research, and application of the group psychotherapies. CGPF has offered significant support to our TIGS workshops and trainees. If you are interested in supporting this campaign in honour of Dr. Jackman, please consider submitting your contributions by May 2024 to ensure they are included in this recognition.

Donations can be sent to:

c/o Dr. David Kealy, CGPF Secretary Treasurer, UBC Department of Psychiatry

#420-5950 University Blvd.

Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z3

As a final note, we are very saddened to share the news that our colleague and friend Anne Mahoney, who several of us came to know during our affiliation with the former Canadian Group Psychotherapy Association, passed away on September 30th. Anne was a dedicated therapist, teacher, mother, animal lover, mindfulness practitioner and group leader. She will be missed and mourned by many! Her obituary can be found at: <https://mhfh.com/tribute/details/44048/Anne-Mahoney/obituary.html>

*it is a soft landing;*

*a bird in the trees,*

*these tears on my pillow.*

*A poem from Nocturnal, by Wilder*

We’d like to end this newsletter with a quote from Priya Parker’s recent online newsletter, which was titled, *Gathering as an antidote to grief.*

“We know that connection is an antidote to loneliness. It is also an antidote to grief. Spending time together in authentic ways can be deeply healing. And doing that without denying the context of grief is a way through the pain.  
**This season, especially in the midst of so much loss and grief in the world, I invite you to ask yourself how you might gather in ways that are nourishing for you and the people around you.“ Priya Parker is the author of***The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters* (2020) Riverhead Books.

With beautiful wishes to you all for a peaceful new year ahead!

Respectfully submitted,

Aida Cabecinha, Susan Farrow, Maureen Mahan, Allan Sheps and Terry Simonik,

December 2023.