

The Power of Group Therapy: But is it for me?

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After a first counselling meeting with a new person (especially with someone who has never utilized counselling services before), it's not uncommon that he or she breathes an almost visible sigh of relief as we close the session. "That wasn't so bad", the person seems to be saying, "I'm not as off-kilter as I first thought."

By and large, most people new to counselling are incredibly relieved at how supportive and affirming it feels to sit down to talk about their experiences with someone who listens to them and interacts with interest. Much of the initial trepidation that comes with meeting a stranger to talk about vulnerable things seems to dissipate rather quickly. "I should have done this 5 or 6 years ago", is a line that I hear almost every week.

Imagine then, if you would, the idea of sitting down with a whole group of people to talk about your vulnerable experiences. Your initial impression might just be, "Whoa, not for me. Talking with one person is enough of a risk, thank you very much."

What exactly is it like to participate in group therapy? We might well imagine sitting uncomfortably in a circle waiting for someone to break the ice, wondering what possible good could come out of re-experiencing those junior high school feelings of "not belonging" all over again.

Well, take a deep breath. It's not exactly like that. There are several important features of well-led group therapy to help ensure that you have an emotionally safe experience even as you are working to grow and stretch. The group facilitator, a trained Registered Clinical Counsellor, will initially take the lead to engage the group. He or she will set some very basic, but important guidelines that will probably help everyone to relax just a bit. Here are a few examples of some guidelines:

- **Confidentiality.** One of the most basic rules of group therapy is the promise made by everyone to keep the discussion private. As a group therapy participant, you will be asked to agree to maintain the privacy of each member by keeping the conversation in the group meeting to the group – Period. No exceptions.
- **Everyone can make a valuable contribution.** It's the facilitator's job to manage the group dynamics. This might take the form of gently closing down the person who tends to dominate the conversation, or by asking the quiet person if he or she has any thoughts on the matter. Everybody will be encouraged to participate, but they will also be allowed to engage at their own pace. Above all, the facilitator's goal for the group is to create an accepting and non-judgmental space for everyone to share experiences, ask questions, and share opinions and views.
- **It's not a free-for-all.** The group therapy is based on a common theme, and the facilitator will have questions and ideas that will guide the discussion around that theme. The

facilitator will keep the conversation from taking too many tangents. And various formats for dialogue will be utilized – whole-group discussions, time for individual reflection, and conversation in smaller groups of two or three.

- **Time-limits will be respected.** Group meetings will start and finish on time.

What are the benefits of group therapy? Why not just stick with the tried and true individual therapy if I want to work on my issues in a professional context?

- When group therapy is well-facilitated, it offers a unique context to take risks where you can receive feedback from a number of perspectives in a caring and safe environment. And since those who are giving feedback are also people who are taking their own risks, a synergistic effect is often felt. “If that person can do it, so can I...”
- It is an incredibly powerful experience to hear someone else speak of feelings and thoughts that you believed were unique to you. It’s not only great to feel that you’re not the only one, but it’s also very satisfying to share your own stories that may help somebody else.
- From feedback surveys, we hear that group participants tend to be most pleasantly surprised with the camaraderie they built through the group experience. Try it....you’ll like it!
- Group therapy is a good deal. Since more people are involved, the cost of therapy is spread over the whole group, so it’s more affordable to meet in group therapy than in individual therapy.
- You might just make a new friend.

Arbour’s, Jacqueline Nikolejsin, is announcing a slate of new Group Therapy Offerings beginning in October, 2012. Groups will meet weekly for eight weeks and are available for both adults and children. We plan to offer these same groups on a rotating basis, so if you are interested, please inquire as to when the next offering will be. To register or for more information, call or [email](#) us!