

Making your group happen

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groupwork
SOLUTIONS

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1. The Initial Purpose Establishment Stage

Traditional needs assessment

During this stage the facilitator conducts an analysis that identifies the major needs experienced by a target group using at least two or three different sources. Possible sources include a literature review, feedback from previous participants who have completed a similar course, information from other potential participants who are not involved with the program, about what topics they may find interesting, and feedback from professionals who work with the same target group.

There are two types of needs to clarify:

- needs not met during someone's lifetime - Needs in a person's life because they lacked a certain opportunity/experience in their life, particularly during their childhood
- needs that emerge at different developmental stages i.e. needs that occur in a person's life due to a transition through a life stage/experience.

The needs that may not be fully met during someone's lifetime occur when someone had a limited opportunity or life experience that affected the development of a particular quality or skills. For example, if a child grew up in a violent household where they always felt criticized, then as a parent, they may find it difficult to express love to their children.

Developmental needs occur as people move through particular life stages and transitions in life. As people go through a particular life stage, for example – starting a new job, dealing with unemployment, parenting issues, grief and loss; they may require new skills and strengths to adequately deal with these situations. These transitions contain experiences that may be similar from different to that which other people face in the same circumstances.

Strengths assessment

Due to the influence of brief solution focused counselling and narrative therapy, it is now common for group leaders to assess groups and individuals through the recognition of existing or developing strengths. These strengths are basic foundations that allow people to make further life changes.

Group work that is strengths based utilizes three major ingredients:

Specific feedback. Learning and change flourishes through the giving and receiving of feedback. In a group setting change is maximised when people take risks in expressing appropriate observations and through giving constructive feedback to each other. This is valuable especially when people focus on giving feedback about the emerging strengths that exist in other group members. Strengths based work reduces the risk associated with expressing those observations.

Focus on what is emerging rather than using static descriptions during the group. Observations are used to give feedback about how people manage life situations. Strengths based group leader's focus on what is emerging rather than describing the problematic or negative issues. The strength of resilience, of not giving up under pressure, has been identified in research as a major force of change.

Choices/decision making – A key element of change is how people experience empowerment when they make decisions in their life and learn through the consequences. Many people limit the range of choices available to them due to a lack of reflection.

Saleebey (1992) identifies the following assumptions underlying strengths based work:

- group members have many strengths
- participant motivation is based on fostering their strengths
- the group leader is a collaborator with the group members, with the emphasis on equality rather than power
- the importance of avoiding the victim mindset and
- any environment is full of resources (Nixon, 2003).

The working principles for using the strengths based perspective in program development are (Nixon, 2003):

- Participants are in a constant process of making sense of their experience. Beliefs about self and others, expectations and social attitudes all influence the amount of information people notice about themselves and others. This in turn has a significant effect on the options for change they have in their life.
- People experience problems as distressing and generally want things to improve. Persistent problems are not due to a lack of trying but continue due to a limited range of choices and supportive feedback to maintain changes.
- Problems do not indicate pathology. Problem patterns include both attitudes and behaviours. Problems are seen in the context of human interaction and this allows group work to be an excellent environment for supporting change.
- When group members fail to solve their problems they often negatively judge themselves and the problem intensifies. When participants have the opportunity to discuss problems, these actions become less powerful and behaviours are seen as less problematic. This is the process of normalization.
- People have a wealth of resources in themselves that are often under appreciated.
- The 'problem is the problem', not the 'person is the problem'. Notions of pathology, dysfunction and diagnostic labels, while helpful in summarizing a description of problems, can reinforce and maintain the problem.
- Change is constant and in fact inevitable. The best changes are those identified by the group members and enhanced through them receiving new feedback from the leader and the other participants.
- "Every problem-dominated pattern includes examples of exceptions that serve as hints towards solutions" (Nixon, 2003, p.8).
- "If it works, don't fix it"! Encourage the group member to use useful behaviours more often. If something is not working, explore new options and use the group environment to rehearse new responses.

Development of learning objectives (initial group purpose)

Before a group commences, it is important to develop an initial group purpose and set of objectives. A broad set of objectives are developed that establish the parameters of the 'playing field' rather than determining completely the actual content. These objectives are very important for obtaining funding, organizational accountability and for the promotion of the group in the community.

Example

At a recent six-hour workshop for fathers who have a child with a disability, nine fathers attended to discuss the effect that disability issues have on their relationships. The men juggle a wide range of responsibilities, are usually in intact relationships and have an interest and commitment to building a stronger family. The initial purpose and objectives of the workshop were to:

- reduce the isolation experienced by fathers when they have a child with a disability
- increase the participants' understanding of different relationship needs in their family
- provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the strengths and challenges that their family experiences.

Collection of learning material

A set of resources is gathered for the learning program. Except for the first week's session, the order and fine-tuning of these resources is completed after the commencement of the group where they are further adapted to the individual participants' needs.

Developing a session plan

A session plan uses the following categories:

- the session title
- learning objectives for that particular session
- delivery methods for each part of the session
- plan of learning activities (and time required) to be used within the session
- duration for each learning activity
- learning materials required
- summary/overview/wrap up
- how the session or the whole group will be evaluated?

Pre-group Interview

Often it is useful to conduct a pre-group interview prior to the commencement of the first session of the group. This interview is important as it:

- creates an initial engagement between the prospective group member and the group leader/s.
- allows the group leader/s to confirm that the prospective group member is suitable for the group.
- provides a time for questions to be answered about the location of venue and what the group involves.
- allows the group leaders to gain a better appreciation of the issues that prospective group members face.

Sample interview questions

The following set of pre-group interview discussion points were developed for a social skills group for 8-10 year old primary school age children is run in the school holidays in three half-day sessions.

Parent Involvement: Children to be interviewed with at least one parent/carer.

Purpose: The interview is designed to encourage the child and parent to attend the group and create anticipation and positive participation

- Give information about the group, food, and planned activities
- Let children know something about the group content. This content includes discussions about getting on with friends and siblings, coping with a wide range of feelings Ask:” what are some of the things you are good at?”
- What special things occur in their life?
- What do they like to do with a friend?
- Tell them about the group rules - we listen and take care of others and ourselves; we follow instructions; and we cooperate
- Tell them about the last day of the group when parents can come with them and share a special time and food. Inform them about the end of group certificates and surprises

Role of feedback during the initial period of program development

Throughout this early stage of program development the group leader is absorbing a tremendous amount of information about the group members. A firmer picture is developed about the most useful direction and focus for the group. A set of resources for a group program is determined to provide the group with an adequate structure.

The group leader provides enough structure to reduce group members’ anxiety while remaining flexible enough to allow the group members to develop a sense of group ownership. The group leader values feedback from all stakeholders, representatives of the target group and potential group members.

If a group fails to obtain an adequate number of group members, the leader needs to reflect about:

- the balance of the mixture of needs and strengths as reflected in the advertising material for the group.
- the assumptions behind the purpose of the group, content of the program and the images and language used in the advertising material.
- feedback obtained from representatives of the target group regarding other possible changes for the planned group material.
- the suitability of the time and location of the group. Does the target group find the venue safe and appealing and is it being run at an appropriate time of day?

2. Group formation and identification of secondary (individual) purposes

When participants enter a group learning situation they often express a ‘safe’ purpose or reason for being in the group that mirrors the original and advertised purpose of the program.

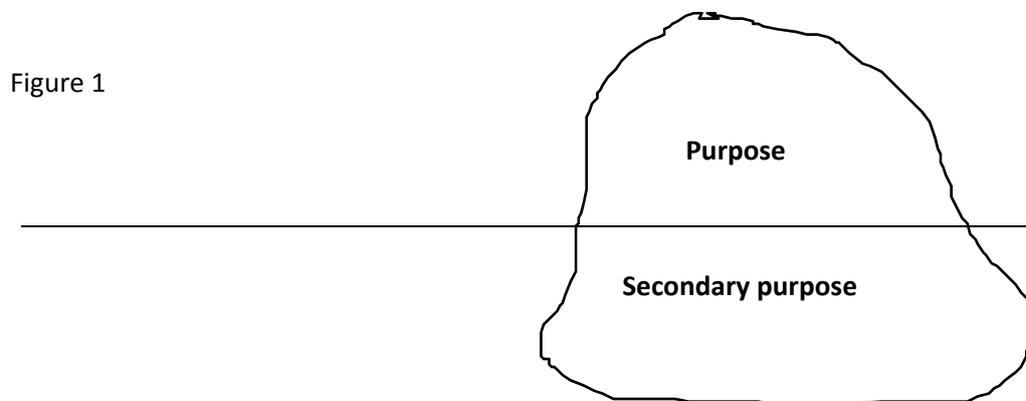
However, there is often a secondary purpose that underlies this initial purpose. If the person is to fully commit to learning in the group, this secondary purpose needs to be valued, recognised and addressed. The facilitator needs to develop a cohesive and trusting environment to allow this other purpose to be expressed. Unless the secondary purpose is addressed the participant’s attendance is likely to be irregular.

These secondary purposes may not emerge until the second or third week of the group. It is often when the intensity of the discussion develops that it will start to emerge. When enough trust exists

in the group, the leader may directly ask the group “what important issues or concerns are occurring in our group”. Once expressed, this secondary purpose provides the facilitator with the important clues about the areas of discussion that the learning group needs to address. As the learning progresses, the group leader needs to ensure he/she has a clear picture of the overt and secondary purposes, as the balance of these forces will maintain people’s motivation to attend.

The development of the initial purpose (learning objectives) and the secondary (individual) purpose is like an iceberg (see figure 1). The easily observable area is the learning objectives that are developed and expressed before the group commences. However, the secondary purpose lies underneath the water line and is less easily seen. It often contains the feelings and beliefs that create the tension or problems that are observed above the surface.

Working effectively with these different emotional energies will ultimately determine the success and effectiveness of the group.



Example

In the fathers’ workshop for men who have a child with a disability, the secondary purpose or theme that emerged was the need for participants to relax more and not pretend to be strong all the time. The image of ‘the rock’ was a powerful one that was referred to regularly by the participants. Many in the group identified with this image with at least half of the group commenting on “how their rock image was crumbling”.

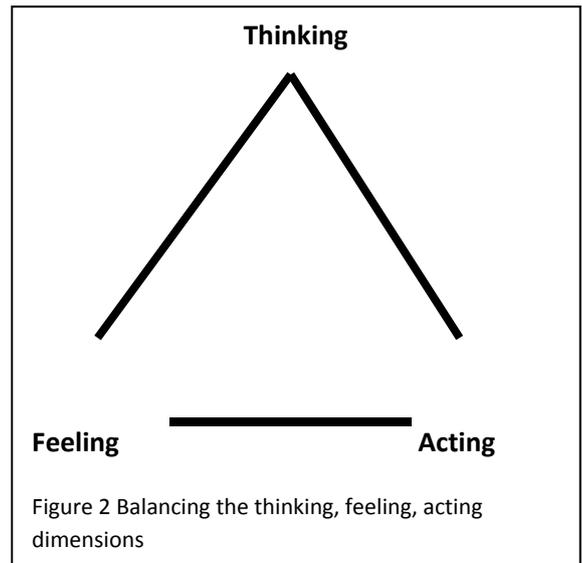
3. Formation of the group program

Adult learning dimensions: Balancing thinking, feeling & acting exercises

Exercises primarily use three different dimensions – thinking, feeling and action. Group exercises work best when there is a blend of the thinking, feeling and action dimensions (See Figure 2). Each exercise that is included in a group session may emphasise a different dimension. When these dimensions are balanced the participants are warmed up to new ways of learning. This process of warming up is similar to what an elite athlete does to perform at their best. It involves goal setting, preparation, practice and focusing on how to perform using better and faster responses.

The *feeling* exercises allow group members to reflect and recognise their feelings about different issues. The *action* exercises allow people to move and put into practice skills or responses they may usually avoid. *Thinking* exercises allow participants to connect ideas and integrate the feelings and actions through expressing their meaning. When the flow of the exercises moves easily between these dimensions, people are warmed up to learning in deeper and more significant ways.

This concept of *warm up* is valuable as it emphasises the importance of the group leader focusing on the emerging needs of the group members rather than the group content alone. As the group leader warms up they develop an inner space of self-confidence and relaxation that influences their body position and gestures. The group leader's body relaxes and they adopt a comfortable and attentive seated or standing position (Heron, 2000).



As the group leader warms up to the group members, the participants start relaxing and develop a greater trust and cohesion between themselves. The warm up continues with the facilitator's voice adopting the appropriate modulation, timing and emotional tones that is necessary to gain further group member trust.

The processes adopted in the learning group further stimulate a participant's thinking, their emotional responses and the development of new actions that support their desired changes.

Different group exercises use various blends of **thinking**, **feeling** or **action** dimensions. Many exercises use a blend of one, two or three dimensions. However it is important to ensure at the end of a workshop, or a group, or a session that the learning exercises were balanced and used a blend of these dimensions.

Phases of a group and adult learning dimensions

The beginning and end of a session use exercises that focus on stimulating the **thinking** dimension. The middle stage of the group is likely to have enough cohesion and trust to use exercises that develop the **feeling** or **acting** dimensions. When exercises focus on feeling and acting dimensions, the thinking dimension occurs during the sharing time when meaning attribution occurs. This is where people recognise what has been learnt and attribute meaning from the exercise to their wider life.

Example

In the Fathering Children with Disabilities Workshop, the first exercise involved the thinking dimension as the purpose of the day was discussed and boundaries were established for the workshop. This involved a brainstorming exercise to explore what participants wanted to gain from the day.

The second exercise used the **feeling** dimension in which participants introduced themselves and their family situation. They also spoke about what impact the disability has on them or the family. This often is the most important part of the day as it is one of the few opportunities when the

participants hear other men speak about themselves and their family life. The third exercise involved the thinking dimension that re-grounded the men after the challenge of the second exercise. The participants discussed in pairs “what is the best and most difficult thing about maintaining healthy relationships where there is a child with a disability”? Each pair provides feedback to the larger group.

The next exercise focused on the **action** dimension, with a sculpture (a form of role-play that is discussed in Topic 5) used to explore the pressure and stress in their family where there is a child with a disability. While this is initially a difficult exercise, it is often the exercise that the participants comment about at the end of the day as being the highlight of the day and which assisted them to develop new insights into their family dynamics. A debrief and discussion session responds to **feeling** and **thinking** dimensions by allowing the participants to process their feelings and apply what they have learnt to their wider life.

After lunch the fifth exercise used the **thinking** dimension as the group watched a short segment of a video that explored community awareness and concerns for the future regarding their child’s disability. The **thinking** dimension is utilised at the end of the session to ensure that the participants finish the day in an emotionally balanced way. Discussion about the video followed using three smaller groups.

At the end the day, the participants again used the **thinking** dimension as they spoke about what they had gained from the day and one or two things they needed to change in their life. An evaluation was then completed.

Group work with children and adolescents

Late childhood (8-12 years) is a time of great socialisation and change. The family environment and the wider world around them have a strong influence on children. Both of these worlds impact on the way a child flourishes through their early life.

Children in late childhood require:

- many group experiences that help them apply themselves to tasks and persist through to completion
- regular routines that provide stability and predictability
- positive feedback about the tasks they complete as their sense of self is still being developed
- lots of activities to capture their interest as their attention span is still growing
- variation in group discussions as the use of long group discussions will soon lose their interest
- repetition of the same idea in a variety of ways to reinforce learning.

Due to these factors, structured group environments are very useful. Groups can be enhanced by using a variety of exercises that involve movement, worksheets, small group activities, activities with lots of colours, regular feedback and positive reinforcement.

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