

# Choosing exercises for psychoeducational groups

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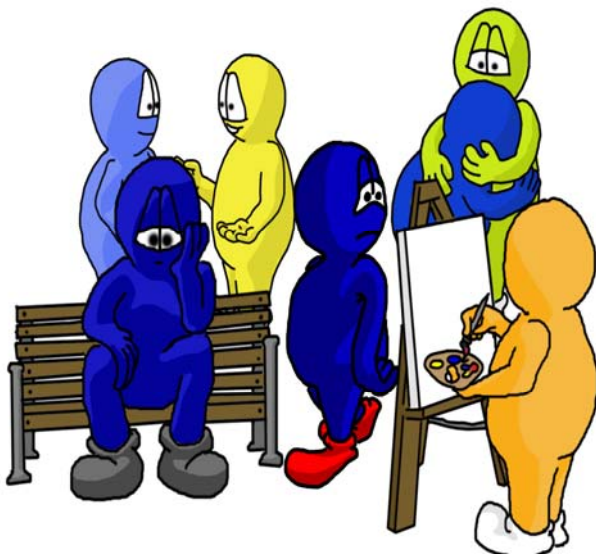
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**Survival Cards** (Downloadable PDF or Pack) are a tool for discussions with individuals or groups that name the positive and negative solutions people use to cope with life challenges. People often use negative coping strategies, even when they detest those responses. The difference between these choices is more governed by the interaction between our significant hopes and dreams and our fears/anxieties. Survival Cards use a life systems approach to support change in people's lives. Survival Cards are symbolised as:

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For psychoeducational groups it is important for the group leaders to determine the curriculum and choice of group exercises. This choice needs to be determined by the stage of the group development and the intensity of the exercise itself.

Intensity is a key consideration for structured exercises that can be categorised by the following features (Dayle Jones & Robinson, 2000, p.358):

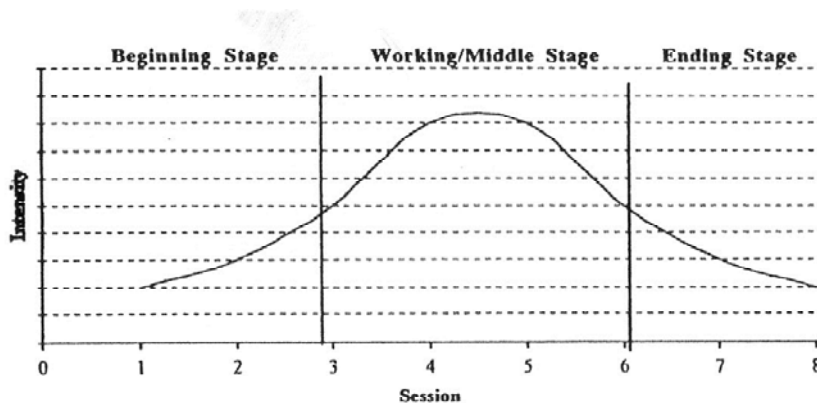
- “Evoke anxiety amongst the group participants

- Challenge the group participants to self-disclose
- Increase awareness
- Focus on feelings
- Concentrate on the here-and-now
- Focus on threatening issues”

The group facilitator assesses each of the exercises based on the level of intensity that they generate and then allocates it to the most appropriate developmental stage of the group.

The *Figure 5:1* uses a bell-curve to show increasing intensity on the y-axis and the session number or stage of group development on the x-axis. At the beginning and ending stages of the group, the participants are more anxious and less comfortable. Exercises are chosen that are lower in intensity and involve less self-disclosure or discussion of personal issues. Topics that focus on building safety, trust and other less intense issues are most appropriate.

**Figure 5:1 Variation in exercise intensity over an eight week period in a psychoeducational group** Dayle Jones & Robinson, 2000



## Selection of group activities appropriate to group stage in a psychoeducational group

Choosing the appropriate activity is an essential part of group facilitation.

The following five guidelines are used for selecting appropriate activities (Dayle Jones & Robinson, 2000).

1. *Brainstorm group activities appropriate for the group theme.* Brainstorm as many exercises as possible. Use a number of different sources and select activities that use a variety of theoretical approaches.
2. *Assess the intensity of each activity.* Using the brainstormed list (see step 1) assess the intensity of each activity for each of the categories, such as, evoking anxiety amongst group members, self-disclosure, increased awareness, focus on feelings, focus on here-and-now and focus on threatening issues.
3. *Choose activities for the beginning stage of the group.* Using the brainstormed list (step 1), select a variety of activities that are suitable for the early stages of the group. Many of these

exercises have a low intensity and allow participants to slowly get to know each other, build trust and cohesion.

4. *Choose activities for the middle stage of the group.* Using the brainstormed list (step 1), select a variety of activities that are suitable for the middle or working stage of the group. These activities will demand more risk, trust and challenge.
5. *Choose activities for the ending stage of the group.* Using the brainstormed list (step 1), select a variety of activities that are suitable for the ending or termination stage of the group. These activities will have a lower intensity and allow people to 'let go' of their emotional involvement in the group and evaluate the impact of the group on the participants.

## Group counselling: using structured exercises (activities) and unstructured exercises (growth games) in the same group context

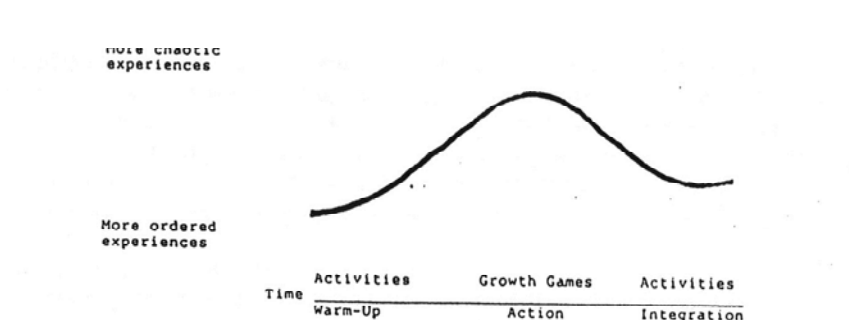
Using systems theory, Manor and Dumbleton (1993) identified that a group has a changing intensity that involves a fluctuation between order (structure) and chaos (spontaneity). These phases are dependent on the stages of group development and group dynamics.

Manor and Dumbleton (1993) refer to structured exercises as **activities**. An activity is defined as "behaviour to help group members further understand their relationships with one another, and increase their competence in handling these relationships, in an agreed set of rules" (Manor & Dumbleton, 1993, p.253).

They referred to unstructured exercises as **growth games** as they enable creative chaos and spontaneity to be experienced in the group. These exercises and interactions target the following emotional needs that exist in group development: inclusion, control and affection.

"Growth games tend to increase the sense of chaos for a short time. The ensuing chaotic experiences can lead to a revision of the roles, rules and underlying principles governing the system" (Manor & Dumbleton, 1993, p.253).

**Figure 5:2 The change of intensity in a group as it moves between the use of activities and growth games (Manor & Dumbleton, 1993)**



Manor and Dumbleton (1993) use a systems approach that views the intensity fluctuation as a wave that changes over time, between different stages of group development. *Figure 5:2* illustrates the movement of a group through the warm-up stage (commencement); the action stage (working phases of a session); and the integration stage (consolidation).

Manor & Dumbleton recognise that periods occur in groups where neither an activity nor growth game seem appropriate. Often in these periods, it is useful to spend time reflecting and expanding the meaning of the group experiences (meaning attribution).

### **Example**

Manor & Dumbleton (1983) provide an example of a children's counselling group where 4 boys and 4 girls met for 7 months to support their integration into school. The group largely consisted of play and activities. They had been meeting for several weeks and the children's behaviour rapidly deteriorated with some children acting out and the others isolating. No group activities were successful. In supervision it was recognised the children needed to release some of their chaotic (destructive) energy before more positive social skills could be developed.

Instead of fighting the participant's behaviour, the facilitators brought a number of large boxes to the next session and the children were allowed to destroy or do what they wanted to the boxes. The session had a significant amount of energy release with the following session more calm and stable where integration of the new learning could occur more easily.

Since structured exercises are predominately used in psychoeducational groups, this will be the focus of the remainder of this topic. A subsequent topic will focus on working in the here and now or unstructured group experiences.

## **Creative psychoeducational group work**

Peter Slattery is an educator and therapist who works with young people and adults. He views group learning as a process that results in personal transformation. The key ideas for developing structured exercises are based on the following concepts (Slattery, 2001):

**Engagement** – “is the opening part of the process, where a person's interest needs to be caught. You need to do something so that the person feels inclined to continue” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Participation** – refers to making sure a group participant “is able to have input into the process. As this is not always automatically possible, you may well have to do something to help this happen” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Mutuality** – “is about working together. It is about input from each of you” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Questioning** – “is one powerful way to help a person explore things which concern or interest them. Questions can be asked and answered verbally or non-verbally, by use of image, or by actions. They can be asked with the intention of answers being shared, or with the intention of them being privately reflected on” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Balancing** – “means exploring all possible outcomes of any path; the terrific and the not so terrific; the advantages and disadvantages; the best things and the worst” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Integration** – “means that as you explore things together, you combine what you are doing with how you are doing it. Perhaps a playful approach combined with a serious issue so as to make it more approachable. Perhaps a quiet moment to reflect as part of a tense and emotional discussion” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

**Difference** – “is the final key idea. The more different the process is from what a person expects the more likely it is to be fresh and interesting and invite new responses from them, and to bring into focus new options. As differences may well be an aspect of any moment in this process; it is shown in the following diagram as operating throughout and impacting on the whole process” (Slattery, 2001. p.22).

<b>Stage of group process</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Key idea</b>
At the beginning	To capture a person’s interest	Engagement
In the middle	To invite responses and then explore them	Participation Mutuality Integration
At the end	To identify new paths	Questioning Balancing Difference

(Slattery, 2001, p.23)

Slattery (2001) uses an example of an exercise with young people where he explores thoughts and feelings about who they are and how society perceives them.

**Example of how to develop an exercise for a of young person’s group**

<b>Stage of group process</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Key idea</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<i>Beginning</i>	<i>To capture a person’s interest</i>	Engagement	Move around room	Physical, playful, light-hearted, minimally verbal
<i>Middle</i>	<i>Invite responses and then explore them</i>	<i>Participation Mutuality Integration</i>	<i>Think of how you will be described? Discussion</i>	<i>Reflective and non-verbal Verbal and interactive</i>
<i>End</i>	<i>To identify new responses or actions</i>	<i>Questioning Balancing Difference</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Quiet, reflective and introspective</i>

(Slattery, 2001, p.25)

Some important guidelines for the creative use of structured exercises especially when a group leader is working with a challenging target group:

**Listen very hard and really hear what is said and not just what we want to hear.** (I am put in mind of a parent who was told by his son that everything was okay. It clearly wasn't and a great deal of suffering followed) (Slattery, 2001).

**Explore the ideas which emerge and not just focus on things, which we think, are important.** Is there room for comment and contribution by the young people with whom we work? At the end of any 'conversation', can we look back over it and identify the contributions of the young people? The things which they identify as important? (Slattery, 2001).

**Build ways for young people to let us know if we have got it wrong.** This may mean directly asking them, or it may mean asking for written comments, or it may mean developing a 'feel', which invites such feedback (Slattery, 2001).

## Rituals

Rituals are structured exercises that have a *significantly higher level of meaning than the activity itself*. Rituals in group work are used to address the group members' important emotional needs of inclusion and 'letting something go'. Rituals are often used:

- in the beginning of the group
- at the end as the group as it prepares to termination
- to deal with key transitions or to help group members 'let go' of significant emotions

Grief and loss groups routinely use rituals. Many group leaders use structured exercises in a ritualistic way as they believe the experience will develop greater cohesion and support in the group.

Some of the rituals used in group work involve the use of movement, the Name Game (an exercise that normalises the importance of mistakes and not being perfect), candles, music, a talking stick or having a refreshment break. It is common experience in group work that major issues in groups are often addressed after a refreshment break has occurred as people have had an opportunity to nurture themselves with sustenance.

To develop a wider use of rituals in group work, group leaders can:

- identify and emphasise the meaning contained in a structured exercise
- slow down an exercise and build greater connection between group members and the experience
- use a wide variety of visual and tangible resources (like photolanguage cards) that increase the involvement of group members
- explore what the completion of an exercise means and how it can be applied to peoples' life

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