Women's Therapy Groups

PT 103 - Professional Training

By

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Women's Therapy Groups

Women's therapy groups have long since been regarded as treatment of choice for women for various reasons. Women's groups are often geared for those who may benefit from validation of gender identity. They help women realize that they can nurture self as well as others, and receive mutual support and nurturance from other women. Women may often better learn to value themselves and other women as a result of membership in women's groups. Women's groups also provide the opportunity for members and leaders to focus on, from women's perspectives, those issues that are uniquely or primarily the concerns of women. Additionally, women's groups allow women to re-establish or develop connections and satisfying relationships in which such feelings as sadness, loss, and anger are tolerated, encouraged, understood, respected, and worked with.

Overview of Effective Groups

Women's groups generally fall into two primary categories: general therapy or theme groups. The primary purpose of general therapy groups is to repair or reconstruct the self. Often, therapy groups are used as adjuncts to individual therapy, but may also be treatment of choice for women whose needs involve dysfunctional life patterns or recurring problems (Drum & Lawler, 1988). Theme groups, on the other hand, tend to be focused on developmental concerns, such as predictable developmental tasks or transitions that arise from problems and challenges common to particular periods during one's life (leaving home, establishing or ending an intimate relationship, beginning a career, childbirth, "empty nest" syndrome).

However, groups do not always fall so cleanly into "therapy" or "theme" categories. Therapy groups can also serve supportive functions and provide the opportunity for growth, and theme groups can also focus on the degree and
intensity and time spent on processing, which adds to them more of a therapeutic note. Consideration of whether to focus more on the therapy or activity aspect of a theme depends on goals and purposes of the group, needs of group members, leader style and preference, and topic or issue of the theme group. If the goals and purposes are minimal, and involve raising awareness and improving self-understanding, then informational activities are enhanced. Skill development through designed activities may be the focus of some groups (assertiveness training, conflict resolution, leadership training). If resolving or eliminating the problem is the primary goal, then strategies more oriented to process are utilized. Process goals focus less on the group's content or topic and more on such things as the cohesiveness and interaction patterns of members.

Various factors are related to effective group work with women. Regardless of whether the group is theme or therapy oriented, some degree of attention must be provided to the developmental nature of the group and its progression. Five phases of group development contribute to effectiveness. While those groups which are more informational and less process oriented may not progress through these phases, some attention and knowledge of the phases are important.

**Establishing Trust and Cohesion**

Guidelines such as confidentiality, cancellation policy, and expectations of involvement provide structure and identify possibilities, which are usually experienced as supportive interventions. Typically, a period of searching for commonalities and means of relating to and supporting one another is necessary. Members are searching for a role and looking for approval, acceptance, respect, and power. Those who are open to intimacy are involved; those who have difficulty with trust and intimacy hold back. Initial content is often a discussion of interpersonal problems external to the group.

Leader behavior is an important force during this phase. Responsibilities include: establishing norms of mutual empathy and empowerment; modeling
openness, respect, caring, genuineness, and honesty; facilitating a norm of members responding to each other rather than taking the role of expert; creating a comfortable ambiance and implementing interventions that help members: a) trust their observations and feelings; b) develop skills of communication and assertiveness; c) become empowered to assert their needs and, thus, directly and powerfully influence the group or individual members.

Attending to Conflict and Struggle

During this phase of progression, issues of power and interpersonal dominance may surface. In women's groups, the expressions of anger, disagreement, or disappointment may be difficult. Individuals who are conflicted about intimacy may become more verbal and involved, and the danger exists that they will be scapegoated or punished. Those fearful of conflict may flee. It can be helpful to know ahead of time each member's family history of conflict resolution.

A period of disappointment in one or both leaders for what is or is not happening may emerge, especially if members believe that a leader is not being supportive or taking care of others. The leaders' role during this phase includes acknowledging and processing the value of constructive experience and expression of negative feelings. In order to serve as an alternative model for most daughters, it is important to draw anger to you as leader and to be able to separate personal attacks from attacks on your role. Admitting one's own contributions to hurts and disappointments, acknowledging feelings, showing that you are not afraid to admit you did something wrong, and modeling that anger need not be lethal and can be expressed and understood in the group are valuable interventions during this phase. Leaders basically demonstrate a willingness to respond to attacks by understanding and working through the sources and effects of the attack.
Developing Cohesion

After a period of conflict, the group gradually develops into a cohesive unit. This phase is often characterized by increased morale, mutual trust, and self-disclosure. Secrets or "real" reasons for coming to the group are shared. Concerns are expressed about missing members. Intimacy and closeness are chief concerns. This can be a euphoric phase that fades as all feelings are encouraged to emerge in a more spontaneous and genuine way.

Mature Working Group

Members take on many leadership roles and tasks during this group phase. They experience relative comfort and expectations of genuineness, and a sense of purpose and direction are evident. The group has the resources to resolve internal conflicts and mobilize its resources. Empathy and empowerment are experienced in group members.

Termination

Members may display a tendency to want to continue the group. The leader must help the group by not denying its inevitable ending and by facilitating goodbyes. The leader can help members consolidate learning, explore future needs, and address disappointments. The history of how members have dealt with endings and feelings of abandonment are important since termination is likely to elicit those feelings again.
Gender Issues in Groups

A basic assumption of our work is that there is more than one way to be psychologically healthy. Acceptance of and respect for pluralism and diversity are integral to this assumption.

Most will agree that it is nearly impossible to formulate definitions of mental health that transcend one's cultural background and values, much less the social conditions of the time. We are recognizing that the more recent socio-cultural changes require flexibility and an openness to the reality of our diversities, such as that of gender differences. The media's attention to this need for flexibility, adaptiveness and diversity is apparent; numerous newspaper articles and series, talk shows, documentaries and dramatizations on television and radio, and entire sections of bookstores are devoted to the issue.

Traditional theories that bear directly on our work with clients, however, have not yet incorporated these notions; indeed, they may embody definitions and understandings that no longer exist or apply. The following are counterpoints to major aspects of the traditional theories of psychological development. These counterpoints may be more relevant to our understanding of many women's development and mental health issues of today.

Power and Empowerment

The traditional definitions or models of "power over" or "power for oneself" often leave women feeling unable to act, because such behavior is perceived as incompatible with being considerate of others or as an impediment to connection. Empowerment, on the other hand, does not imply competition or winning over others, but does imply that interaction is conducted within mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Jean Baker Miller's
proposed definition of "power" as the "capacity to move or to produce change" rather than "power over" is a healthy alternative. Empowerment may also be defined as the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with mobilization of the energy, resources, strengths, or power of each person through a mutual relational process (Surrey 1987). An empowering interaction results in increased zest, feelings of salience, knowledge, self-worth, and desire for more connection for all. The group leader can help the group learn direct and healthy ways to be powerful and to be empowering through effective awareness and expression of feelings, reactions and needs. The questions to ask are not "Is she being too passive? Too aggressive?" but "Is she being responsibly interactive? Has she established relationships where mutual power is encouraged and facilitated?"

Gilligan proposed a theory of development based on the tenet that both females and males have primary identification with the mother through the age of five. As a result of this, males must separate and differentiate from their chief attachment figure in order to develop masculinity, since masculine identity is based on separation and threatened by intimacy. Female development is based on attachment to this figure; feminine identity is based more on relationships to and connections with other people and is threatened by separation. The implications for group therapists are that a woman's development is impaired by her lack of awareness of her need to respond to herself and her needs, and that therapists need not devalue the connection and intimacy needs of the female group member.

Traditional theories base the development of self-esteem on independent action. To the traditionalist, identity development means answering such questions as "Who am I? Where am I going? How am I getting there?" "Self-in-relation" theorists suggest that relatedness can be enhancement of self and that self-esteem is based on one's relationships and competence in caring for others. Self-in-relation theory bases self-esteem and identity development in the context of relationships and answering such questions as "Who am I and who am I in relationship to others? Where am I going and how will that affect
others? How am I getting there and how will my getting there impact the other important people in my life?” (Lawler, 1988, Miller, 1984).

Women's identity is often based on connecting, yet genuine intimacy involves understanding the other person's viewpoint, though not necessarily agreeing with it. Women are sometimes threatened by conflict, or even by acknowledgement of differences. Group leaders can support and facilitate skill development in this area by working through conflicts as they occur, and by modeling appropriate conflict resolution behavior. They can validate and help members value their own capacity and desire for closeness within the mutual respect of boundaries.

Some theorists (Walters, 1988) caution us against the double bind promoted by many self-help books. They blame women who love too much, then punish us for being too independent. They tell us how to get a man and keep him, then berate us for being emotionally invested in the success of our relationships. As counselors and therapists, we need to rethink our responses to clients caught in these painful dilemmas. For example, rather than label a woman as dependent, unhealthy, or co-dependent because of her distress in a relationship and suggesting that she needs to be alone, we might consider validating her need for connection, then helping her become empowered in the context of that relationship. The issue is what skills (communication, assertion), attitudes (she is entitled to her needs and feelings), knowledge, and support are helpful for her to be empowered in that relationship.

Assertion philosophy is an example of an area in which alternative conceptualizations are emerging. Women's behavior, often perceived as "passive," may be more appropriately assessed as polite and respectful, especially when applied to Mexican-American, Asian, or Native American women. Assertion training must take into account the reality that women and men live in different social environments. For example, women are more likely to be interrupted and overridden in conversation, less likely to receive active listening and support for their contributions, and more likely to be targets for sexual harassment, sexual assault and battering. Assertion training that uses "cutting in line" as stimuli may not be helpful or appropriate for most women.
The assertive philosophy of "benevolent self-interest" may not be as relevant to women as the notion of mutual fulfillment, with a norm of a shared basis for negotiation.

Tasks for Group Leaders Working with Women Clients

Two essential concepts underlie the norms developed in the group, the culture created, and the general philosophy behind the goals and interventions of the leader: mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. The leader promotes interaction that builds connection and enhances everyone's personal power. An empowering interactive process results in increased zest, knowledge, self-worth, salience, and desire for more connection. The capacity to do so rests on the maintenance of "fluid" ego boundaries and the capacity to be responsive and "moved" by the thoughts, perceptions, and feeling states of others.

The group leader must recognize and reinforce the positive nature of the members' caring for others and also raise the possibility that group members may not be applying this same concept of care to themselves. The leader can promote self-nurturance as well as nurturance of others. The leader can help the members value themselves and each other as well as to value mutual support.

The group leader can support and challenge group members to develop awareness of themselves and their needs and to learn ways of responding to them on the basis of personal meaning rather than relying exclusively on meaning as defined by others.

Women are sometimes rewarded for behaviors that hold them back. As a group leader it is important to help group members differentiate what they have been taught and have accepted as socially appropriate from what might be more fulfilling and empowering.

The group leader may need to rethink frequently asked questions. Concepts such as "fear of owning one's power," "identification with the victim," and "fear of success" describe women as they deviate from the traditional models of power and action. Instead of asking: "Is she being too passive?" or
"Can she learn to be more active on her own behalf?" it may be more growth-enhancing and validating to ask: Is she being responsively interactive?" or
"Has she established a relational context where mutual power is encouraged and facilitated?"

Another task of the group leader is the enhancement of a sense of personal and relational power in women. It is useful to explore and validate experiences of relational empowerment. It is important to help members internalize this capacity and learn to establish new relational contexts in which strengths can be affirmed and new growth facilitated. A goal is to transform the negative effects of helplessness, confusion, and anger into positive movement. This empowerment also includes encouragement to experience greater self-confidence and directionality.

Due to women's values of connectedness and cooperation, and familial and societal reinforcement and messages, it is sometimes difficult for them to deal with feelings and behaviors related to anger, conflict, and competition. It becomes the task of the group leader to create norms that facilitate the exploration of these and the issues associated with them. For example, expressing anger is an important part of recognizing restrictiveness of role expectations as well as deepening authenticity in relationships.

As group leader, it is important to alter two maladaptive messages too frequently received and internalized by women: The superwoman phenomenon and the "male model of win/lose." These responses may be expressed by individuals or in the group process.

The leader and the group experience can provide validation of the female experience as the group members understand how their behavior has been shaped and that they are not abnormal or crazy. The leader can support and challenge the emphasis on change rather than adjustment at the individual, group, and societal levels.

The group leader/member relationship is viewed as egalitarian and the therapist is respectful of the group members' individual and group rights, powers, and responsibilities. The leader can further the development of group members by approaching them through both feeling and thinking modes.
Modeling by the therapist is very important. It can help broaden options and goals. It can establish the norms and culture of self-acceptance, risk-taking behavior, comfort, and confidence in one's personal power as well as empowering others. Also, self-disclosure can help validate a group member's experiences.

The group leader can enhance acceptance and self-esteem by valuing connectedness and not devaluing or pathologizing dependency needs of group members. The leader needs to demonstrate awareness and sensitivity to the personal and clinical misunderstandings that ensue when women's relational motivations are viewed as "dependency" needs and are not validated or fulfilled. It is imperative for the group leader to explore her or his own values and attitudes concerning women and to confront tendencies toward maintaining the status quo.

Selecting a Topic or Theme

As indicated earlier, the choice of whether to provide a general therapy group, a theme group, or some combination depends on several factors, including client needs and goals, and therapist interests and style. Methods of assessing needs of clients include: exploration of the professional literature about needs and concerns of women clients; surveys (formal canvassing of a random sample of the population, or informal brief or in-depth interviews with selected women); examination of case records, frequency counts of presenting problems or telephone tape requests, agency data, institutional data, and biographical and demographic information; and attending to the community indicators, such as programs, local newspaper and magazines for recurring topics of interest (Drum and Lawler, 1988).

Group leaders' interests are also a consideration, since developmental interventions can require investment of time, energy, and commitment. How much structure, activity and information are provided and how much group interactions and dynamics are processed often depend on the leaders' goals,
style and philosophy. The authors tend to enjoy developing activities to stimulate and evoke key issues for women. However, we also tend to prioritize group process over adherence to a scheduled list of activities. The issue of flexibility is an important one in working with women, because of our belief in not cutting off women's feelings. It is important not to force members into a structure, which could parallel what society expects of women: that we conform to expectations of those who hold power with us.

Nevertheless, identification of key issues and development of activities designed to evoke them can be a very valuable aspect of group therapy with women. A particular topic may be dealt with each session or may span several sessions. For example, one of the authors has developed an Hispanic women's group which addresses: family relationship issues (mother, father, siblings), confidence and empowerment, cultural and gender identity concerns, personal relationship and intimacy issues, among others. Some topics may span only one session; others may span two or three, depending on the needs and reactions of clients and the depth to which they seem able and willing to explore the issues. Given the style and philosophy of the group leader, the flexibility involved in "letting go" of some of the designed activities in order to prioritize group process has been important and valuable.

**Theme Group Topics for Women**

The following is a list of some key issues which could be developed into theme group topics for women. While the list is not exhaustive, it is representative of some of the most common issues presented as concerns by women.

1. Entitlement/Confidence/Self-Esteem
2. Power/Empowerment/Leadership
3. Intimacy and Conflict in Relationships
4. Family of Origin Issues, including mother, father, siblings
5. Parenting Concerns
6. Grief and Loss, including adjustment to divorce or death of spouse, loss of parent or child
7. Body Image
8. Sexuality, including Herpes, Herpes Warts, AIDS, safe sex issues
9. Health/Wellness, including PMS, Nutrition, Health Care
10. Diversity Issues, including Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, Alternative Lifestyles, Disabilities
11. Dual Career/Multiple Roles
12. Addictions, including Eating Disorders, Alcohol/Chemical, Sex, Co-dependency
13. Victimization/Survivor Issues, including Incest and Physical Abuse, Rape, Acquaintance Rape, Assault
14. Sexism and Discrimination, including Problems in the Workplace & Sexual Harassment
15. Identity Development
16. Decision-Making, including career, lifestyle, children choices
17. Skill Development as focus, for Assertiveness, Leadership, Conflict Resolution, Communication

Designing Theme Topic Activities: Some Models

The following are samples of themes for which the authors have designed activities. As indicated earlier, some themes can be developed into sequential subtopics, with several activities over a period of several sessions. For example, one of the authors developed and delivered a four-session co-dependency theme group for selected Hispanic women in the community. She has also presented a one-session topic on co-dependency for a university Hispanic group. What we present below are samples of activities which may be developed for each of several issues of concern for women.
Enhancing the Mother/Daughter Relationship

The mother-daughter relationship is viewed as the earliest model from which growth of women's identity is developed. Often, women are not quite as aware of their mothers’ impact (both positive and negative) on their development, identity, confidence, and patterns of relating. Some of the most important self messages come from mother, either directly or indirectly. Enhancing the mother-daughter relationship may involve experiencing anger and pain and grieving over any losses that are entailed. It also may involve acknowledging the positive aspects and benefits of that relationship.

Content Goals of Activity

- To promote awareness of the impact of the relationship with mother.
- To enhance the relationship with mother by helping clients come to terms with both the losses as well as the benefits of the relationship.

Process Goals of Session:

- To promote and enhance the safety, trust and acceptance in the group atmosphere.
- To establish a milieu in which enhancing the mother-daughter relationship is seen as valuable, desirable and possible.
- To explore any unaddressed, unacknowledged, and/or unexpressed feelings related to past experiences with mother.

Instructions

This activity may be used as an initial activity for a first session, or may be used at any point in a group. The leader(s) may wish to provide a brief overview of the value of exploring relationships with family of origin. We learn
patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving in the context of our families. Those patterns may have been positive and adaptive in the context of our families. Some may continue to be, but others may not. Awareness of how we think of ourselves and others, how we feel about ourselves and others, how we behave, and where those patterns come from can be helpful in the decision to change. Ask the following questions, and allow each group member to respond:

1. “How would your mother introduce you?”. Have the following person then respond to the previous person with a feeling response. “What were your feelings in reaction to what she (name of member) disclosed through the introduction of herself by her mother?” Then have that person introduce herself and continue until all group members have responded to one another and introduced themselves. Group leaders may choose to provide a lead: My name is (how mother would introduce self) This is my daughter (as mother would introduce her daughter) She... . (leaders may wish to model or allow for open-ended descriptions)

2. “What role did you play in your family?” You may suggest options, such as rebel, mediator, responsible, achiever, etc.

3. “How were feelings expressed in your family?” Encourage members to describe both positive (happiness, joy, affection, love) and negative ones (anger, jealousy, envy, sadness).

4. “If you had a daughter, what would you want for her that you have been unable or unwilling to do for yourself? What would you want her to emulate?”

5. Describe what you like most and least about being female.

Process Questions

The goal of processing is to help clients emotionally and cognitively integrate the experience of the activity. Therefore, questions are designed to elicit feelings and to enhance understanding. Group leaders may encourage
participants to express and share any feelings that come up as they go through the exercise. The task of the leaders is to facilitate a safe and trusting environment in which the feelings that emerged may be more fully experienced, expressed, shared, affirmed, and reevaluated. In addition, participants should be encouraged to talk to each other, to focus on feelings, and to ask questions of each other.

1. How did you feel in doing this exercise? Which questions were most difficult or disturbing for you? Most painful? Most validating?
2. What did you learn about yourself? About your mother? About the way the two of you interacted?
3. What do you most appreciate about your mother? What do you feel is unfinished or unresolved about your relationship with your mother?

Group leaders express appreciation to participants for taking risks in self-disclosure and for participating in creating a safe environment in which they may explore, address and enhance personal concerns.

**Identity Development and Self-Esteem**

One’s identity develops over time and from various sources. Self-esteem, our valuing of ourselves, is largely tied to our self-perceptions; thus, it is important that group members become increasingly aware of how they view themselves, and the sources of those perceptions. This awareness allows them to correct their erroneous and damaging perceptions and to enhance or add to their constructive ones. Messages about oneself come from two major sources: significant others in one’s life (parents, teachers, siblings, friends) and society’s messages about one’s primary reference groups (gender, ethnicity and so on). Over time, these messages are incorporated into one’s sense of self, affecting self-esteem.
Content Goals

- To promote awareness of messages participants have received about various dimensions of their identities
- To understand the relationship between messages received and the resultant level of self-esteem
- To provide opportunity for direct and vicarious (through group interaction) understanding of self and others in regard to identity and self-esteem development

Process Goals

- To allow expression of feelings about the sources of positive and negative messages
- To continue to promote a safe, trusting, supportive atmosphere, in which participants can support and validate one another

Instructions

Provide a brief overview of identity development and its ties to self-esteem. The messages received from key people in our lives may be positive, negative, or a combination, and they may vary across several aspects of our identities. For example, we may get largely positive messages about being cute and attractive, but largely negative messages about our abilities to achieve, be athletic, and so on. The individual message we receive over time have a large impact on our sense of self.

Another major source of identity development and self-esteem is societal messages about our primary reference groups. Reference groups are those with whom we identify, such as: gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation. Research tells us that gender is our primary and most salient reference group; it is the most important way in which we and others classify individuals. Unfortunately,
many subtle and pervasive messages about women are narrow, limiting, restricting and negative. Women do not become presidents—of universities, corporations, or these United States! Of course, other societal messages and expectations can have a positive effect on self-esteem, such as: Women are caring, nurturing, and warm. The degree to which we are aware of these influences—messages received about our worth as individuals and as women—the more we can monitor and change problematic aspects of self-esteem and identity.

Activity Identity

Group members stand in a circle and one leader stands outside the circle with a blackboard or flipchart. Identify one source of messages such as parents (or, if you wish to emphasize parental relationships, you might specify “father” or “mother”). Have each participant quickly articulate a message and proceed around the circle as often as needed to air all their important messages. (The leader writes as many as possible on board or chart.) Continue with messages from other sources, such as: teachers, friends, siblings, media. Encourage spontaneity and the inclusion of both positive and negative messages.

Process Questions

The goal of processing this activity is to help group members integrate any new awareness or feelings that surfaced for them during the activity. Often members will be vicariously stimulated by others’ expressions, so it is important to facilitate expression of that experience. Remember to model and encourage interactions among participants. The tone and atmosphere should promote openness and safety. A full range of feelings may be encouraged—fun and laughter as well as sadness and anger.

1. What were some themes that you noticed in these messages? (Also have the group leader who recorded the messages note her observations about general themes.)
2. What was this experience like for you? What have you learned today that
was new or especially influential?

3. Which messages were most damaging? Most important? Most helpful?
How do you feel about the sources of those messages?

4. Which messages do you want to change or eliminate? Which do you
want to emphasize? Which do you want to add for yourself? For others in
the group? (Especially encourage members to give feedback at this
point.)

5. Which gender messages do you like and want to emphasize for yourself?
Which for the group as a whole or other individuals?

Group leaders may wish to process general themes and reiterate the
power each individual has to change negative messages' influence.
Acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses in abilities is a valuable thing,
but one's worth should not depend on painful, negative or restrictive messages.
Express appreciation to participants who took risks. Emphasize the positive and
strengthening aspects associated with women's gender: nurturing, giving,
empathy, and so; but also emphasize that women are responsible for applying
these same standards of caring to themselves.

Identity Activity II

The goals of this activity are to explore the relationship between
developmental life stages and sex-linked attitudes and behaviors; and to
become more aware of the sex-role socialization processes that have
influenced group members. The leaders explain that the general purpose of
this activity is to explore one's personal history of sex-role socialization and to
compare those histories with group and social norms. They tell members to
think back and write down as best they can their thoughts and feelings about
what it meant to be a girl or woman at the following points in their lives:
prior to elementary school; elementary school; junior high school; high school; and
beyond high school. (Ages may be substituted for educational levels.) To do this
activity, members will need newsprint and felt-tipped markers. Allow approximately 15-20 minutes.

Process Questions

The leaders ask members to share their recollections. Leaders may want to clarify and have other members respond to one another’s experiences. After all members share their histories, discuss similarities and differences. Some general process questions include:

1. What were some of the messages you received about being female at these various points?
2. Who gave you these messages?
3. How did these messages enhance your feelings about yourself and your gender? How did they contribute to more restrictive behaviors and negative feelings about yourself and other women? How are these messages and experiences affecting you today?
4. What messages are you giving yourself today about being female? Which of these messages would you like to eliminate or change? Which messages would you like to emphasize? How might you do this?
5. How do these messages impact your relationship with other women in this group?

Identity Activity III

The general goals of this activity are to explore past and present events involving members of the same and other sex, and to share these histories and perspectives with other group members.

The leaders distribute newsprint and a marker to each member, then ask members to draw two parallel lifelines and to mark on each line when she was born, started school, graduated from high school, graduated from college, and each 5-year segment after high school or college graduation to the present. At each point, they are to list significant or important life experiences with members
of the same sex. On the second line, they indicate impactful or important life experiences with members of the opposite sex.

Process Questions

Each member shares her lifeline and talks about important experiences and what she became aware of as she did this activity. Group members are encouraged to interact and respond to one another. General process questions include:

1. How did you feel about yourself at these various points?
2. What feelings came up as you did this activity and listened to other members share their experiences?
3. How are your experiences with men and women similar? How are they different?
4. What positive things have you become aware of in your relationships with women? With men? What have you come to value or devalue about your relationships with women and men?
5. What would you like to change about these relationships today?
Diversity Among Women

Women who are ethnic (Asian, Black, Hispanic, American Indian), religious or cultural (Jewish) minorities, lesbian, disabled, or from poor backgrounds are often described as "double minorities." That is, we potentially experience adverse effects as a result of membership in two or more groups that are typically oppressed by society. Yet, those diversities are and can be powerful, strengthening assets to our identities as women. Since some or all participants may not be from such diverse backgrounds, an activity designed to promote understanding and empathy for that experience included. The second activity is designed to promote strong and positive identification with the participants' diverse characteristics.

Content Goals

- To promote understanding and awareness of the unfair "double whammy" effect diversity can create in society
- To promote realization that one's diversity can be a positive asset: something to enhance one's identity, as well as contribute to society through the enrichment of plurality

Process Goals

- To provide an environment in which biases, fears, and pain about differences may be discussed and experienced openly
- To provide the "inoculation" necessary to safeguard the healthy pride and affirmative identification of women of diversity
Instructions: Activity 1

To promote empathy and understanding of the experience of oppression, lead group members through the following imagery.

Get as comfortable as possible. Close your eyes and relax. Take deep breaths and let the relaxation move into your body as you let all your tensions drain out.

Now that you are relaxed and comfortable, visualize an incident or experience in which you feel that you were treated unfairly. This may be a recent incident, but preferably try to remember an incident when you were younger and had relatively little power. Think about that incident and how it happened. (Pause a few seconds after each of the following instructions) Notice what you thought; what you did; what you felt. Now imagine what it would feel like to experience an incident like that almost every day of your life. How would you feel about yourself? About others and the world?

I am going to count backwards from three to one, when I get to one, please open your eyes if you are ready to do so. Three. Two. One.

Process Questions

1. What was that experience like for you? What incident were you able to remember? How did you feel? Think? Behave?

2. What if you were treated that way regularly? What would it be like? Do any of you feel that you are treated unfairly on a regular basis now? What do you imagine it would be like not to be treated unfairly?

3. What do you imagine it is like for someone to experience unfair treatment simply because of diversity? Can you understand those feelings or reactions?

Since all participants are women, chances are that many will be able to identify readily with oppression, but group leaders may wish to ensure that all
understand the pain, anger, sadness, and helplessness that may surface for those with diverse backgrounds. They should also point out the compensatory behaviors often practiced by oppressed people. Some deny the very experience of prejudice or bias; others become angry in constructive (political activism, achievement) and in destructive (drugs, aggression ways; some are sad or depressed; some feel powerless, unable to change their position of disadvantage. Emphasize the importance of understanding such experience in order to contribute to society (and certainly to the group's norm and atmosphere) through lessening and eventually eradicating the pain of being different through acceptance and respect.

Diversity among Women 2

A pluralistic society is one that values and appreciates the various differences among its population. The ideal is not merely a 30's white male, married with 2.1 children, who is aggressively tough and competitive and shows little emotion. The ideal is not singular, but plural.

While far from being a truly pluralistic society, the corporate world is just beginning to appreciate what other cultures have to offer; it has become aware that women's management styles may be more effective with personnel; that older, younger, or disabled people have much to offer to the work force. On a personal level, we are beginning to realize how much we miss when we act on our initial reactions to difference (usually fear, dread, discomfort) by avoiding rather than engaging or attempting connection with those who are different. A first step in contributing to a pluralistic society is to identify aspects of ourselves that we have been taught are negative and to reinforce those aspects of our differences that are actually positive.
Content Goal

- To promote understanding of ingrained negative stereotypes of each participant's diversity and the positive aspects of those differences

Process Goals

- To encourage constructive anger about society's unfair, inappropriate and destructive attitudes and behaviors toward diversity
- To promote positive feelings about one's own and other members' diversity and differences

Instructions

Ask each participant to identify an aspect of themselves that is diverse. For the majority, this may be gender identity, but disabilities, ethnicity, lesbianism and/or cultural diversity may also be present. Give permission for disclosure, acknowledging any risk-taking that may entail.

Each person is to divide their paper into two columns. On the left side they are to list negative stereotypes that they have heard about or experienced because of their diversity; and on the right side, the positive influences that diversity has provided them. Each share/shows her list.

Process Questions

1. Which list is more extensive, the left (negative) or the right (positive)? Allow participants to add to each other's lists, especially to the right side. Encourage identification of positive qualities of each respective diversity.

2. What are your feeling about the negative descriptions? Facilitate the expression of sadness, anger, frustration. Note that many individuals go through and recycle anger as their awareness of unfairness surfaces, but
that anger can be dealt with constructively through political or interpersonal action. The importance of developing skills in assertiveness, communication, and conflict management may be emphasized.

3. What are your feelings about the positive descriptions? How can you substitute those for the negative messages that often become so ingrained? How can you develop confidence?

Encourage discussion about the valuing of oneself; daily reminders to say positive things to oneself and to others; accepting compliments; making constructive changes which enhance oneself; taking risks. Encourage positive action and have members share activities and experiences that have been important for them, such as political action, volunteer work, professional accomplishment, mentoring, and important relationships.

**Competition**

Competition is often difficult for women to respond to and to recognize in themselves. Frequently, it is associated with very negative images. Throughout history women have received from our environments and cultures some very obvious messages, some more subtle messages and almost always mixed messages about competition.

Karen Horney talks about the rivalry between women and explains that it emerges from a childhood in which a girl grows up in competition with her mother and sisters to be the favorite of the more powerful males. She further explains it as socially rather than instinctually based and that it emerges from a setting of male perogative and power and female subordination and sexualized identity.

Society expects that women will compete with each over this special position, and success has focused most frequently on the physical attributes of the women. Society further expects that whatever a woman does, it is done for
the impression it might make on others (particularly male others). This view of competition leaves women feeling devalued, objectified, and dependent upon others for self-esteem. Another aspect of competition that women frequently find distasteful is the stereotypical win-lose notion, generally associated with power over another and with aggression.

Clearly, societal, cultural, and familial messages as well as a lack of positive role models have made it difficult to develop healthy attitudes about competition. Perhaps more importantly, women are not permitted, do not feel entitled or aware of their competitive feelings. Traditionally, men have been rewarded for their competitive behaviors and uncompetitive men have often been punished or seen as less "manly," while competitive women have been viewed as less feminine.

**Content Goals**

- To promote awareness of messages members have received about competition
- To understand relationships among messages received, members' feelings about themselves, and behaviors or personal/professional goals that are enhanced or restricted due to these feelings and messages
- To explore the role that competition plays in their development

**Process Goals**

- To promote a safe, open, and trusting environment where members can explore this area and support each other
- To allow expression of feelings about competition and the messages received concerning it
- To help desensitize members to competition and emphasize or point out that it is not a taboo subject
Instructions

Provide a brief overview on competition and the messages received regarding it. Acknowledge that it is often a topic that evokes uncomfortable feelings which we frequently try to avoid or deny. Competition is an area of our having received conflicting messages and, for most of us, having few positive models. Competition in and of itself is neither positive or negative but must be evaluated in terms of how it impacts our behaviors, feelings, and attitudes about ourselves and others. It may be helpful to discriminate between goal competition vs. win/lose competition.

Activity

The purpose of this coin competition exercise is to promote exploration and awareness of the competitive sense in each of us and to begin to look at healthy and unhealthy aspects of competition and the messages received.

Group members are to put their chairs in a circle and are asked to place on the floor in front of them all the coins that they are willing to give up. When the leaders say "go", members have 60 seconds to move around the room and get from others as many coins as they can. When they hear "stop", they are to take all newly acquired money back to their chairs.

Process Questions

1. What was your reaction? Were you surprised in any way?
2. What did you notice?
3. What were the different ways you dealt with the instructions or messages?
   What internal messages about competition enhanced or restricted your behavior in this activity?
4. How was your behavior similar or different to how you cope with competitive situations elsewhere?
5. How does this group deal with competition?
6. How would you like to deal with competition?
7. What messages would you need to change, in order to cope more effectively with competition?
8. What are some of your fears of being competitive or being perceived by others as being competitive?

Activity II

The purpose of this activity is to provide a playful environment to explore attitudes, feelings, and approaches to competition. Each member is given a string and a balloon and told to blow up the balloon and tie it to her ankle. When the leader says "begin" members are to protect their own balloons while trying to break other's. When their balloons are broken, they sit down. The goal for the activity is to have one person left with her balloon intact.

Process Questions

1. What feelings did you have as you did this?
2. What did you notice about the way you and others protected yourselves?
3. What did you notice about how you approached breaking other's balloons? Any surprises?
4. How does this experience relate to other situations?
Entitlement

Many women do not believe or feel that they have the right to make choices, to set limits, or to have needs. In fact, many have been taught quite harshly that they do not have such basic rights as controlling their own bodies, deciding with whom they become intimately involved, and receiving a respectful hearing of their expressions of feelings and opinions. They often do not feel "entitled" to these things.

Factors impacting one’s sense of entitlement include: (1) messages one has received about her rights; (2) life experiences regarding these rights; (3) cultural, societal, systemic atmosphere, norms, values, and laws; (4) feelings of self-worth; (5) trusting self and others; (6) experience and support for pursuing these rights.

Content Goals

- To explore one’s sense of entitlement and belief about her rights
- To explore messages one has received from various sources about entitlement, rights, self-nurturance and responsibility
- To explore how one attempts to get her needs met
- To explore barriers in environment and in self that limit a woman’s sense of entitlement

Process Goals

- To provide an environment in which needs can be expressed directly and openly
- To provide an atmosphere in which women can explore and build skills and support essential to a life that is more congruent with needs
Activity

The purpose of this activity is to explore how members approach getting needs met. The leaders have a very large sheet of paper in the middle of the room and members are instructed to grab as much paper as they take time for self, needs, etc. in real life. They are told that they will then get that amount of time in group that day that is proportionate to the amount of paper taken. So in a 2-hour group, someone who grabbed 1/2 of the paper would get 60 minutes. After the activity, it is then processed.

Process Questions

1. What feelings do you have? Explore feelings from those who took nothing; from those who gave theirs away; and from those who took it all.
2. What did you notice about yourself and others?
3. What conflicts came up for you in this activity? How are these conflicts and your behavior similar to those experienced on the outside?
4. What stopped you from approaching it the way you would like?
5. Can you imagine how you might feel if you had taken more? If you had shared?
REFERENCES*

WOMEN'S IDENTITY


THE NEW WOMAN


THE DIFFERENT WOMAN


* Modified version of reference list developed by the Women's Committee, Counseling and Mental Health Center, The University of Texas at Austin.


**WE ARE WOMEN**


**ACADEMIC CHOICES**


**CONFIDENCE & FEAR OF SUCCESS**


**CAREER CHOICES**


**SOCIETY**


**PSYCHOTHERAPY ISSUES**


GROUP THERAPY


RELATIONSHIPS


BALANCING


**SEXUALITY**


**SELF EXPRESSION**


**VALUES AND BELIEFS**


**RELEVANT ARTICLES**


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