

## **A GUIDE TO GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Abridged from a publication of the Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation (1995)

### **•What is psychotherapy?**

Psychotherapy is a way to find solutions to life's emotional, personal and social difficulties by talking and reflecting with a skilled professional psychotherapist. Many people find that this kind of examination gives them a new way to look at their lives.

### **•What is group psychotherapy?**

Group psychotherapy involves a small group of people who share the same concerns or problems. The leader ( a group psychotherapist) encourages and guides discussion, fosters mutual support among the group's members, and helps them recognize, understand and resolve their difficulties.

The help members give one another is what sets group psychotherapy apart from other approaches to therapy.

### **•What kinds of group psychotherapy are there?**

One type of group psychotherapy is more effective for people who have distinct, well-defined problems -- such as eating disorders, drug dependence, or marriage trouble. The focus here is often educational and informative.

But sometimes our problems are not so clear, our feelings more difficult to untangle. We know we feel unhappy or become disabled, but don't know why -- and would have a tough time explaining our emotions to anyone else. In situations like these, there is a second type of group psychotherapy, which helps resolve the distress caused by these more general personal and social problems. Discussion in these groups is free-flowing: some groups act out life events to help people relate therapy to their real lives.

### **•How do I choose a group?**

It's important to find a group that targets your particular needs. Speaking to your family doctor, or another professional you trust (such as a social worker or minister) is a good way to start your search. He or she can recommend group psychotherapy services available in your area or suggest that you consult with a particular specialist or group psychotherapist.

If you develop a clear, unclouded idea of what your problem is, a short-term, problem-centred group would probably be best. If you're confused about your

feelings, a more general, longer-term group may be a better choice. Longer-term general groups come in two forms:

The support group is the best option for people who feel overwhelmed, whose lives seem overloaded with unmanageable change and pressure, or people who have been seriously ill or have become disabled. These groups tend to be informal: members are not expected to attend regularly, they attend the group when they feel the need. And members are encouraged to socialize outside the group and to look to other kinds of support groups for extra help.

The change group is kind of more disciplined therapy asks a little more of its members, who are expected to attend every session and to avoid socializing with one another away from therapy. Members are also asked not to take part in any other therapy groups. The focus is self-examination. The goal is to change self-defeating attitudes.

#### **•What about self-help groups?**

Recent years have witnessed an avalanche of self-help groups. These open and democratic organizations offer a forum for mutual support and guidance. But -- unlike group psychotherapy -- self-help group that deals with life problems are usually not led by a professional psychotherapist or held in a professional setting.

#### **•Where does group psychotherapy take place?**

The setting for group psychotherapy is usually a clinic, agency or a professional's office. Hospital patients, however, may join group psychotherapy as part of their overall treatment programme (in which case the turnover is often rapid as patients are discharged).

#### **•How long does each group psychotherapy session take? What about the long-term commitment?**

Most meetings last an hour or two. As for the overall time commitment, groups can last a couple of months to a couple of years. Some go on indefinitely with members graduating and new ones joining from time to time. Hospital patients may attend just a few meetings while they are in the hospital, though sometimes they are encouraged to continue after discharge.

#### **•Who conducts the group?**

When the setting is a clinic, agency or professional's office, the therapist must be properly qualified: a licensed member of a mental health discipline and trained in group psychotherapy.

However in-patient groups as part of an overall treatment program can be led by any member of the patient's professional team: a nurse, occupational therapist, social worker, psychologist or physician.

Unfortunately the title "psychotherapist", or "therapist", is not regulated by law. This means almost anyone can set up an office and market his or her services as a therapist.

You are entitled to have a therapist whose behaviour is ethical. If you ever have any questions or complaints about a therapist's honesty or integrity, contact the professional body that has licensed him or her.

### **•What about the cost of group psychotherapy?**

Research shows that group psychotherapy is both effective and economical. Its ultimate benefits outweigh the financial costs. Most provincial health plans cover group psychotherapy sessions when they take place in a medical setting. If you receive therapy in a non-medical setting you will be expected to pay a fee. However, some private insurance plans will help cover the cost. Be sure to have an open discussion and a clear agreement with your therapist about billing and payment.

Group psychotherapy is not magic and it's hard work. Though it may not be suitable for everyone, many people have found that it has brought peace to their lives.

This information is provided as a public service by the Canadian Group Psychotherapy Foundation. The Foundation is a non-profit organization that provides public education and supports training and research in the field of group psychotherapy. (Charitable registration No. 0905307-19)