

# Person-Centered Approach to Group Work

Small Group Process for the Health Professional  
Fall 2016  
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## Key concepts and Assumptions of the Person-Centered Approach to Groups

- Clients are basically trustworthy and have the potential for self-direction. Because of this, there is a minimum of directions on the part of the leader. Too much direction would undermine respect for group members.
- Emphasizes personal qualities of group leader rather than techniques for leading the group. The leader creates a CLIMATE where healing can occur.

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## Key concepts and assumptions continued

- Genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding of members' subjective world are the core therapeutic conditions for growth.
- External measures such as diagnosis, testing, interpretation, advice giving are not useful for group work.
- Group members are the central focus of the group. Group members are as facilitative or more facilitative of the group process than the group leader.

(Corey, 2000)

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## Leader Functions

- Conveying Warmth and Empathy
- Attending to Others
- Understanding Meaning and Intentions
- Conveying Acceptance
- Linking

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- The Leader adopts what Rogers called "the therapist's hypothesis". This is the belief that the capacity for self-insight, problem-solving, and growth resides in the clients. This means that the central questions for the therapist are not "What can I do for the person or group members?" or even "How do I see these group members" but rather "How does these group members see themselves and their situation?"

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## Fundamental Components of Leader/therapist attributes

- Empathy
- Acceptance, Respect and Positive Regard
- Being Authentic and Congruent

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## EMPATHY

- Expressed verbally and nonverbally through messages such as "I follow you," "I'm with you" or "I understand," empathy is the Therapist's (listener's) effort to hear the other person deeply, accurately, and non-judgmentally. A person who sees that a therapist (listener) is really trying to understand his or her meanings will be willing to explore his or her problems and self more deeply.
- Empathy is surprisingly difficult to achieve. We all have a strong tendency to advise, tell, agree, or disagree from our own point of view.

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## Empathy in a group

- Is a shared responsibility and a resource for the group.
- Primary task of a group leader to model empathy and encourage members to be empathic. It contributes to the development of cohesion and for a group to be productive by building trust and safety, forging connections among members, making members feel included, encouraging emotional expression and promoting a willingness to engage in self-exploration.

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If a leader want to build therapeutic alliances, help members feel better, solve problems, improve relationships, and change behavior,

- the leader needs to demonstrate high levels of empathy for group members.

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## The capacity to be empathic requires:

- An openness to experience
- An awareness of here and now feelings.
- Emotional regulation and control
- Psychological boundary strength
- The skill of accurately expressing what you are experiencing and feeling
- Trust in self to differentiate experiences from own personal issues (projection, transference)
- Ability to recognize empathic failures and repair them.

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## Psychological Boundary

- Your psychological boundary is where you end and others begin.
- Group members may have poor psychological boundaries, it is important as a leader to work on your own boundaries

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## Leaders who have issues with psychological boundaries may:

- Push members for deeper disclosures than they are ready to share.
- Insist that members do what the leader tells them to do.
- Become enraged when attacked, criticized, or charged with an error.
- Do things that are intrusive to members.

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## How does a new leader/therapist develop empathy?

1. Be present-centered: Bring all attention to what is currently taking place in the group and with members.
2. Limit thoughts about the past or future
3. Limit trying to anticipate what you will need or want to say. Carefully consider what you say, but make your response a result of the present.
4. Be aware of your inner experience in the present so that you can use it to better understand the present: what is currently happening.

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## Developing Empathy

5. Work to consciously "sense" the inner world of different members. Don't jump from member to member, but stay focused on the person who is speaking or a member who is currently most focal to you. The more you practice, the more proficient you will become in listening to content and tuning in to the emotional piece of a person's message.
6. Sit patiently and allow others to organize their thoughts. Use active listening to help, but it is NOT empathic to interrupt a speaker, finish the sentences of others, or tell another what you believe that they are thinking.

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## Developing Empathy

Resist giving answers or advice including proposing solutions or alternatives, making decisions for another.

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## What might an empathic failure look like?

1. No responses were given to what a member said.
2. The topic was changed.
3. You became bored
4. Your mind drifted from the group and thought about about there and then concerns.
5. You reacted something as trivial and unimportant when another thought that it was important.

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## When there is an empathic failure, the leader & group needs to:

- Reflect
- Identify the empathic failure
- Act to repair the empathic failure

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## ACCEPTANCE

- Closely related to empathy. Acceptance means having respect for a person for simply being a person. Acceptance should be as *unconditional* as possible. This means that the listener should avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with what the other person says. This attitude encourages the other person to be less defensive and to explore aspects of self and the situation that they might otherwise keep hidden

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## CONGRUENCE

- Refers to openness, frankness, and genuineness on the part of the listener. The congruent listener is in touch with themselves. If angry or irritated, for example, the congruent person admits to having this feeling rather than pretending not to have it (perhaps because they are trying to be accepting). They communicate what they feel and know, rather than hiding behind a mask. Candor on the part of the listener tends to evoke candor in the speaker. When one person comes out from behind a facade, the other is more likely to as well.
- In some cases, the principle of congruence can be at odds with the principles of empathy and acceptance.

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## Rogers' definition of CONCRETENESS

- Refers to focusing on specifics rather than vague generalities. Often, a person who is has a problem will avoid painful feelings by being abstract or impersonal, using expressions like "sometimes there are situations that are difficult" (which is vague and abstract), or "most people want..." (which substitutes others for oneself). The listener can encourage concreteness by asking the speaker to be more specific. For example, instead of agreeing with a statement like "You just can't trust a manager. They care about themselves first and you second", you can ask what specific incident the speaker is referring to.

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## Active Listening is

- being able to hear and understand direct and indirect communication and conveying your understanding to the other person.

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## Active listening Advantages:

- Increases the listener's understanding of the other person
- Help the speaker clarify his/her thoughts
- Reassure the other that someone is willing to attend to his or her point of view and wants to help.

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## Active listening skills

- Reflection of feeling or content
- Paraphrasing
- Clarifying and questioning
- summarizing
- Support and encouraging

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## Reflection of Feeling or Content

- A key point is that perceived feelings should be clearly identified and labeled.
- Same purposes as paraphrasing.

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## Developing Reflecting Skills is critical

- Why: Because people do not always say what they mean and leaders don't always understand what they hear.

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## Guidelines for Reflecting

- Identify the underlying message and name the emotion that you hear
- Be tentative and paraphrase to check for accuracy
- Be alert to connections or links to other verbalizations

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## Paraphrasing

- Paraphrasing: restating what has been said without parroting.
- Provides a speaker the opportunity to clear up any misunderstanding.
- Helps with reflecting on content
- Reduces confusion and misunderstanding that can easily occur.

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## Using Paraphrasing when

- A speaker is overly general and more specificity is needed.
- A speaker's comments suggest examples of a topic to you. Examples can provide clarification.
- Complicated directions are given or complex ideas are shared.

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## Clarifying and Questioning

- Clarifying goes with reflecting.
- It illuminates intent and provides clearer direction

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## Developing Questioning Skills

- Learn when not to ask questions. In some situations, it is more helpful to make statements than to ask questions.
- Become aware of your habit or tendency related to asking questions is an important step in learning.

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## Questions: Don'ts and Do's

- Beware of asking too many questions. People can feel attacked and may not experience the questions as a display of interest but a hostile interrogation.
- Be conscious that many questions are statements that signal what the speaker wants to hear or feels is important.
- Questions are important and can be very constructive
  - Use questions for gathering facts and initiating clarifications

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## Summarizing

- Tying together key elements that were discussed.

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## Encouraging and supporting

- Being too supportive is counterproductive and promotes dependency.

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## Strategies for encouraging and support

- Focus on how members have made positive movements and developments on their problems or concerns
- Become aware of positive changes and shifts members make
- Demonstrate your faith in members' abilities and competencies by your words and actions
- Solicit and consider members' input
- Listen to ideas that may be off beat or different, don't discourage new ideas.
- Try to use a part of everyone's input

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## Some Common Mistakes when practicing active listening:

- *Stereotyped Reactions.* Constantly repeating a phrase like "you feel that ..." or "you're saying that ..."
- *Pretending Understanding.* If you get lost, say "sorry, I didn't get that. What are you saying?"
- *Overreaching.* Ascribing meanings that go far beyond what the other has expressed, such as by giving psychological explanations or by stating interpretations that the other considers to be exaggerated or otherwise inaccurate.
- *Under-reaching.* Repeatedly missing the feelings that the other conveys or making responses that understate them.
- *Long-windedness.* Giving very long or complex responses. These emphasize the listener's massive effort to understand more than they clarify the other person's point of view. Short, simple responses are more effective.

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- *Inattention to nonverbal cues.* Facing or leaning away from the other, not maintaining eye contact, looking tense, or presenting a "closed" posture by crossing the arms are only a few of the nonverbal cues a listener should avoid. "Correct" verbal responses are of little use when accompanied by nonverbal signals that contradict them
- *Violating the other person's expectations.* Giving reflective responses when they are clearly not appropriate to the situation. For example, if the other person asks a direct question and obviously expects an answer, simply answering the question is often best. In other words, if someone says: "what time is it?" you don't usually say "You're feeling concern about the time".

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## Other Skills:

### Reframing and Redirecting

- When you reframe, you repeat what someone said and giving it another perspective. Very useful when the speaker focuses on deficiencies, weaknesses or mistakes
- Redirecting is similar to reframing, but you are actively asking the person to go in another direction.

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### Another Skill for Group Leadership: Blocking

- Skill used to protect group members from attacks or proceeding in the wrong way. Could be interpreted as redirecting, but the term blocking is used when emotional intensity is high or displaced onto other members. Blocking is also useful when a group member rambles and tells long stories instead of being focused or getting to the point.
- Blocking must be done carefully.

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### Another Skill: Linking

- Helps especially when a discussion appears to be disjointed, fragmented or chaotic.
- It is bringing together underlying ideas, themes, concepts, understandings when the associations are not apparent on the surface.

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Questions to ponder about yourself as a leader using active listening in the beginning stage of a group

- Do you talk too much or too soon?
- Are you concerned with answers more than feelings?
- Are you quick to give advice?
- Do you ask many closed ended questions?
- Do you like being directive?
- Do you tend to listen subjectively to confirm your hunches about people?
- How much attention do you pay to subtle meanings behind content and words?

■ Corey 2000

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In the working stage, questions to ponder:

- Can you tolerate the expression of negative feelings within a group including accepting those feelings directed at you?
- Are you able and willing to share your own reactions in an appropriate manner with group members?
- Can you be yourself or is your professional role central to your identity within a group?
- Do you trust members with your feelings and tell them how they are affecting you?
- (Corey, 2000)

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In the final stages, questions to ponder:

- Are you able to facilitate rather than direct a group?
- Can you be supportive and confrontive?  
Can you be nurturing and challenging at the same time?

■ Corey, 2000

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- Corey, G. (2000). *Theory and Practice of Group Counseling 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Wadsworth.

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