

Therapy Groups in College Counseling:
How they work, and what to expect
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College is an exciting and challenging time for all students, whether they are freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, or graduate students. Students often find that one of the most rewarding and difficult parts of the college or graduate school experience is finding ways to connect to and relate to others. People often find themselves uncertain in social situations, not knowing exactly what to do or say, wondering what others think about them, or worrying that they will not be able to find lasting, meaningful relationships. Participating in group is one way to learn more about who you are in relation to others, how others perceive you, and how you can change or modify your behavior in order to be more effective interpersonally.

We all have varied experiences in groups, and every time we are in a group situation, we bring those experiences with us. This process is both natural and inevitable. Early in our development, we learn ways of being close to others, getting our needs met, as well as strategies for solving problems and protecting ourselves emotionally. Depending on the nature of our childhood experiences, it is often the case that these ways of relating don't work well when applied to adult relationships and situations. In group therapy, you will be given the opportunity to explore how you came to be who you are, and the things you have learned about what you can expect from others and the world. Sometimes this can mean revisiting painful experiences from childhood, and sometimes it can mean replicating conflicts or interpersonal struggles you have had with friends and/or significant others.

As a group member, it is your task to put your thoughts and feelings into words, and not to act out your thoughts and feelings (ex: touching someone's arm when you want to comfort them, or throwing something when you get angry). While this can be challenging, learning to do this often helps group members become clear about what they think and feel and why, as well as helps them learn to express those thoughts and feelings in a way that fosters relationships.

Each therapy group is led by a group therapist, whose job is to facilitate group cohesion and emotional safety. It is also the group leader's job to help you negotiate difficult interpersonal interactions in group. The safety of a therapy group gives you the opportunity to really figure out why you relate to others the way you do, helps you better understand how other people experience you, provides a space to express your feelings both about your history and your current relationships with other group members, and gives you the opportunity to test out new and different ways of relating to others. Doing so often results in feeling more grounded in who you are and more confident in your ability to engage in authentic, meaningful relationships.

In addition to giving us the opportunity to work through some painful experiences that have shaped how we behave in the interpersonal world, group can help members realize that they are not so different from others and that their internal and external experiences can be shared and understood. Ultimately, group can be thought of as a forum for interpersonal learning as it creates a secure space within which to risk change and growth. Group therapy works best when all of the members of the group feel safe enough to share their feelings and experiences in an open, direct, and genuine manner.

Creating that sort of emotional safety takes both trust and time, and so we ask that you keep the names of other group members and the content of the group conversation confidential. Just as you would not like it if others were talking about you outside of group, we ask that you respect others' privacy. Of course you are welcome to share your own experience of group with your friends and

family, but we ask that when talking about group you make sure to only reveal your experience, not the experience of others.

Because it takes time for group members to get to know each other and to feel comfortable in the group therapy setting, we ask that you commit to a minimum of six group therapy sessions. If, at the end of the six sessions, you decide to discontinue your participation in group, we ask that you have a one-on-one conversation with the group leader and that you return for one more session to say goodbye to the other group members. We realize that college is a busy time, but we ask that you make attending group (and being on time to group) a priority. If you are unable to attend and know that ahead of time, we ask that you tell the group that you will not be present the next week. If something comes up at the last minute and you cannot come to group, please let your group leader know. We find that, over time, group members come to care about each other, and so when members are missing, others tend to wonder and worry about them. Finally, we ask that you refrain from socializing with other group members outside of group (as this can often create alliances in group and can then leave others feeling left out or rejected). We understand that Nazareth is a small campus, so if you know someone in group, we ask that you share that information with the group when it begins so that we can figure out the best course of action. We also ask that if you have outside contact with other group members during the duration of the group, you share that information with the group at the next session.

If you have questions or concerns about group therapy, please do not hesitate to talk to your therapist.