

New Paradigm Counseling

New Ideas - New Actions - New Results

GROUPS: BASIC INFORMATION AND SUGGESTIONS

If you are new to therapy and support groups, welcome. Joining a group can be a big step for some people. This can bring up several different and/or conflicting feelings, this is normal. Bring these feelings up in group, your group facilitator, or your individual therapist when you feel ready. All of these people will understand your feelings and will be happy to talk with you about some ways to make your group experience work best for you.

In addition, here are some pointers and suggestions that other group members have benefited from throughout the years. Because each new group member is in a different place in her or his healing process, not all of the following ideas may be applicable, so please feel free to use the ones that work for you:

Plan on coming to group at least three or four times in a row after you start. The first meeting is often anxiety provoking or overwhelming to new group members. This can be because they have never been in a group before, because they don't know the group structure, because it is the first time they have publicly acknowledged a painful part of their lives, or because there are awkward or difficult group dynamics happening for a variety of reasons. By coming back a few times in a row you will become more comfortable with the group and the group will become more comfortable with you. Thus you will be able to make a better decision about whether the group is right for you or not.

Be honest about what you are feeling or thinking when you are talking during the group. This is your time to really share what you are feeling and thinking. If you are scared, nervous, uncomfortable, excited, or anything else you can share these feelings and thoughts with your group. Chances are high that other group members have felt or thought whatever it is you are feeling or thinking and will appreciate you for sharing.

Consider getting an individual therapist. Your group experience is a great way to support you in your healing, but it can also stir things up. This is a healthy and normal experience for many group members because the group topics often deal with things that group members have pushed away for a long time. When this happens it is good to have extra support readily available with your individual therapist so you can continue working with the difficult material rather than having to push it down or avoid it.

Be gentle with yourself. Remember that everyone else in the group was new at some point and probably had similar feelings.

Get to group early so that you have time to do things like park, go to the bathroom, and settle in. Being early also helps many people feel more comfortable because they have a seat and don't have to disrupt the group by looking for a seat after group has started.

Remember, you don't have to talk. You can always choose to pass and you can also choose to simply listen to others for a while until you feel more comfortable.

Feel free to ask questions about how the group does things. Knowing the expectations and structure of the group can increase your comfort with the group.

GROUP AS YOUR PRACTICE LABORATORY

Some group members share that before coming to group they had not had many opportunities in their lives where they were encouraged to speak honestly or openly about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. This is in large part because one of the results of painful childhood experiences – whether from abuse, neglect, illness, or trauma – is the need for us to discount our own feelings, wants, needs, desires, and experiences in order to survive.

It just doesn't make sense for a child to be in touch with feelings, thoughts, and needs that will not be met, seen, or respected and so we learn to turn them off, turn them toward others (in the hope that meeting their needs will indirectly meet some of our own), or find other ways of getting our needs met (usually in less than ideal ways). Indeed, for many of us who have experienced early difficulties with getting our needs met, we learned to focus our attention outward so that we could better manage unsafe people and circumstances in our lives. This was useful and necessary for us at some point in our early lives because it wasn't safe for us to feel our own feelings or to recognize just how much our own needs were not getting met.

Because of this early experience of turning off our feelings and rejecting our own needs in order to survive, some of us may not have not had much practice focusing our attention inward on our own feelings and needs as adults. For this reason it is sometimes awkward or unfamiliar for us as group members to be in a situation, namely group, where we are being asked to check in with our feelings, talk about our needs, or express our desires openly.

The fact that it is challenging to communicate in this kind of open and clear way about our feelings and needs does not mean that it is bad. It just means that it is a skill we did not get a chance to develop very well as children and now it feels strange to be in a place where people really want to know what we are feeling, thinking, and needing. We may feel suspicious of other's true intentions, scared that they really don't care, embarrassed that we are taking up too much time, anxious that we aren't doing it perfectly, or many other feelings. These are all welcome, expected, and ok reactions to being in group and also to bring into group.

Groups then become a learning laboratory where we can practice using and strengthening foreign and unfamiliar interpersonal and awareness skills so that we can get better at using them in our relationships and experiences outside of groups. Our group is therefore a safe place for us to NOT KNOW how to use a skill very well and to get supportive feedback and safe opportunities to practice using and developing the skills we need in order to live more effective and satisfying lives.

In short, a therapy or support group is a good place for us to practice using new skills, to make bold mistakes that can be repaired and reworked in group, and to be welcomed and encouraged to belong just because we are who we are – not who we think others want us to be or need us to be. Group is a place to practice being real, being authentic, and simply belonging.