

CHAPTER 5

Initial Sessions

Children and adolescents typically (like most of us) come to the first session of a psychoeducational group with conflicting emotions: some excitement and enthusiasm mixed with apprehension and anxiety. It is critical at this point for group leaders to use behaviors in the categories of Executive Functions and Caring to help students acclimate to what is expected of them in groups and identify specific behaviors to help them get the most out of the group experience. A little bit of anxiety is not a bad thing.

The analogy of test anxiety is useful in describing the power of groups and can be shared with beginning group members as a metaphor. If students are not anxious at all about a test, they may not study for the test and they might fail. On the other hand, students may study for a test but get so anxious when it is time to take the test because of the negative things that they tell themselves (e.g., I am dumb, stupid, I don't know the material) that their anxiety may interfere with recall of the material and they may also fail. In the case of student test-taking behavior, a moderate level of anxiety seems most helpful. There is enough anxiety to motivate the student to study but not enough anxiety to interfere with remembering what was studied. Effective group work is similar in that students need to have a little anxiety in order for them to be motivated to try out new behaviors and learn different skills, but the anxiety should not be so overwhelming that it prevents them from attending the group and/or participating.

In this chapter, activities will be described to help group members connect with each other, and to provide information to lessen the anxiety. It is helpful to note the parallels between group stages and relationship development. When people first meet, they are a little hesitant to share and tend to be polite. As the friendship develops, people begin to act a little more naturally, perhaps sharing more of their positive and negative emotions, behaviors, and reactions. Strong friendships develop when friends are able to be who they are, expressing both positive and negative emotions, making mistakes, and giving honest feedback. For group leaders, it is important to observe where group members have trouble with the tasks inherent in each group stage. This may predict where they may struggle in relationships as well.

Identification of these difficulties and interventions to teach specific skills is a major responsibility of the group leaders. Some children and adolescents easily connect to each other (a task of the initial stage) but have a harder time expressing negative emotions and giving honest feedback (the tasks in the middle stages). For others, the tasks of terminating, saying goodbye, and acknowledging how other group members have helped them are more difficult.

Regardless of the length of the group, the first session must be devoted to the establishment of ground rules and goals for the group, introduction of members to each other, and explanation of the purpose of the group. It is also helpful to include some review of important topics discussed in the first session as part of the opening and review in the second session. This chapter will discuss the initial stage of group, focusing on major tasks, therapeutic factors, and leadership behaviors. Possible pitfalls of initial sessions and examples of activities that may be used are also included.

Goals and Tasks

The first sessions are organized around getting group members to know each other and identifying of the focus of the group. It is recommended that at least two sessions be introductory sessions, although with a shorter group (fewer than 8 sessions), one session may be all that can be allotted. The major goals of initial sessions are described, followed by a general outline for a first group session.

Introduce Group Members to Each Other

Even though in a school setting potential group members may often know each other, it is still important to spend some time having them introduce themselves and self-disclose something that casual contact in school would not indicate. In addition, it is important to recognize that some students may have already developed interactional patterns with each other that are not positive or will not contribute to a safe and caring group environment. Thus, one of the goals in an initial session is to help students interact both positively, and potentially differently, from how they have typically acted toward each other outside of group. One way to do this is to emphasize unique aspects that each child or adolescent brings to group and how each will contribute in the group. From the very beginning, it should be emphasized that the rules of interaction within this group may be different from those in other places in which they normally interact, such as in the classroom (e.g., group members are not expected to raise their hand when they wish to talk) or on the playground (e.g., bullying and name calling are not allowed in this group).

An initial icebreaker should include each group member's name to make sure that everyone knows names (and how to pronounce them correctly). A number of activities ask group members to state their name and make some kind of self-disclosure. The self-disclosure may be rather superficial (e.g., something that makes me happy . . .), but it establishes the norm that in this group, self-disclosure is expected. For example, each student introduces himself or herself, and then repeats the names of those who have already introduced themselves (to reinforce their

names) and their disclosure. Such a system encourages students to disclose sooner rather than later simply so that they don't have to repeat as many names. It is often helpful for the group leader to go first to set the tone for the activity and model the kind of self-disclosure desired. In one icebreaker, group members are asked to state their name along with a feeling that begins with the same letter as their first name. I would say, "My name is Janice and I am a little jittery today about starting this group." Associating the feeling with the student may help to remember the name. Such an activity also reinforces the group norm of self-disclosure, particularly of feelings, and allows the group leader to link members together, emphasize universality, and also to address initial anxiety directly within the group. If I began this activity, I would disclose my first name, and because group leaders typically wouldn't do this in a group in the schools, I would acknowledge this discrepancy as part of how we may sometimes act differently in group than at other times and places in school. For adolescent groups particularly, if there is a strong need to connect with them, I might tell them it was OK for them to call me by my first name in the group, again emphasizing how we would interact differently within the group, and also the collegiality and importance of working together.

Introduce Group Members to the Purpose and Structure of the Group

Once group members have introduced themselves, it is important to talk about how the group works and what will make this group safe. The major topics include how groups work, ground rules, the role of the group leader, procedural information, and typical interventions and activities. Much of what group leaders discuss will have already been introduced to group members in previous contacts (screening or preparation sessions) verbally and sometimes in writing. The examples of handouts for the preparation sessions in Appendix K have been worded so that most children and adolescents should be able to understand what is being said and include a general explanation of how groups work and the role of the leader

Group members should be informed in the first session, as well as in screening interviews and preparation sessions, when the group will meet, for how long, and where. Specifics such as how they will get to the group (e.g., a pass will be sent, a teacher will bring them, the school counselor will pick them up, whether they should enter the counseling room or wait in a waiting area, etc.) should also be reiterated.

A brief summary of how group will work should focus on problem solving, role-playing, and giving feedback to each other as ways to learn and practice new behaviors, along with a description of specific activities related to group goals that will be used. The role of the group leader is best described as a facilitator of the group with the job of keeping members on task, introducing relevant topics and activities, and helping members to work together. Leaders should also emphasize that group members will be the experts on themselves and the ones who need to evaluate which interventions and skills work best for them. It is also sometimes useful to explain the structure of the group session—opening, working, processing, and closing—so that the group members are aware of and anticipate the transition between topics and activities. My favorite example of elementary students internalizing and anticipating

the structure of the group session is the second grader who said to me, “I think we need to move on to processing now. We only have 7 minutes left.” Providing the structure of a group session for students serves as a cognitive organizer; in some ways, you have given them the questions that will be asked on the test (during processing). They just need to find the answers in the working part of the session, so as part of that, group members may be consciously asking themselves, “What am I learning?” “What skills seem to work best for me?” “How am I feeling as I’m doing this new behavior?” All of these questions are good for students to consider.

There is a poem titled “Remember” that emphasizes how group members can listen to each other, not give advice, and help members to find the answers and their own solutions.

“Remember . . .

We are here to **listen . . .**
not to work miracles.

We are here to **help** people discover what they are **feeling . . .**
not to make feelings go away.

We are here to **help** a person **identify their options . . .**
not to decide for them what they should do.

We are here to **discuss steps** with a person . . .
not to take the steps for them.

We are here to **help** a person **discover** their own strength . . .
not to rescue them and leave them still vulnerable.

We are here to **help** a person **discover they can help themselves . . .**
not to take responsibility for them.

We are here to **help people learn to choose . . .**
not to make it unnecessary for them to make difficult choices.

We are here to provide support for change!!!”

—Anonymous

The initial session should also include a discussion of ground rules to ensure safety of the group members and help make the group productive. Discussion, rather than lecture, is to be emphasized. The goal here is for group members to create the guidelines for a successful group so that they take ownership of rules and so that the ground rules are stated in their own words. The analogy of the swimming pool and how pool rules are necessary for everyone to be safe often works well. Students could even begin by stating the rules posted for swimming pools and then translate them into the rules for their group. For example, one person at a time on the diving board could be translated into one person speaks at a time, and no roughhousing could be translated into everyone should be respectful. It is often helpful to write (or have group members write) the guidelines on a blackboard or notepad. The list of ground rules can be displayed each time the group meets as a concrete reminder. The group leaders can add or clarify any ground rules that are necessary that group members do not mention.

As a follow-up to the initial discussion of ground rules and to reinforce them, an activity that could be used in a later session is to have the group members create a banner with the name that they want to call their group on the top, the group

guidelines written by the members as the center, and each of the group members' names or symbols around the edges. The banner can then be displayed prominently during each group session and referred to as needed. Making decisions about the group name, how the rules should be worded, and how the banner should be created helps group members to begin to work together, communicate with each other, and decide how to handle disagreements.

Nonnegotiable ground rules such as confidentiality and how interactions will occur (only respectful comments, only one person talks at a time) should be discussed in the screening interviews and presented in writing to children, adolescents, and their parents whenever possible, and then emphasized again in the first session. Typically, students will bring up the topic of confidentiality, and the group leaders can add more details related to limits of confidentiality. These are typical group guidelines:

- Be on time
- Attendance
 - Everyone is expected to be here each session. Let the leaders know beforehand if you will miss or be late
 - Frame this as the group will miss you and worry about you if they don't know where you are. Sometimes, other group members worry that they might have offended a member in the previous session by something they said if that person doesn't show up for the next group session
- Confidentiality
 - What is said in group, stays in group
 - You can talk about what you learned but not how you learned it (e.g., "I realized that I do get angry but don't tell people," not "I realized I don't tell people how angry I am when Alisha told me in group that I wasn't talking to her that day")
 - Limits of confidentiality for the leader include when someone is going to be harmed (self or other) or as required by a court of law
- Be respectful of others
 - One person talks at a time
 - No name calling
 - It is OK to disagree and for others to express different opinions
 - Share reactions to what is happening to each other
 - Use "I" statements
- Take risks
 - Participate
 - Share your reactions and feelings
 - Try new behaviors in group
 - Try new behaviors outside of group

Another important issue that often comes up, and is related to confidentiality, is how group members will greet each other outside of group. This is an important topic to discuss because each member needs to decide what he or she wants to say

and whether he or she wants to be acknowledged by others. Sometimes, adolescents will say, "Don't say 'hi.' My friends will ask how I know you and I don't want to tell anyone I am in this group." It is important for them to say what they want to happen as an expression of their assertiveness; also, for group development, this is another task that requires communication, negotiation, and decision making. It is also important to discuss what Yalom calls "out of group socializing." Group members should be up front about whether they are friends with others in the group or socialize with them to some extent. People take risks in groups, and if one member suddenly sees two other group members eating lunch together, that member may wonder if they are talking about him or her. If group members are clear in the beginning about their relationships (e.g., we ride the bus together, swim together, eat lunch together), there may be less suspicion that confidentiality is being broken if everyone knows about the relationships. It is still wise for group leaders to remind members at critical times about the importance of confidentiality and even say to two friends, "It may be hard not to talk about what happened this week. If you have thoughts or feelings, bring them to group next week. Breaking confidentiality would be very harmful to the trust of this group."

There are two other ground rules that are optional but may be useful at different times. One is an invitation for group members to "try out the group," usually for at least three sessions. The first session is often not a good example of how groups work; group members' anxiety is high, and there is a very high level of structure because of the information that needs to be provided, so there is less group member interaction than in other sessions. Group members are asked to attend the first three sessions to get a sense of how groups operate and how they might participate.

Related to the first option is the second ground rule that asks group members to say goodbye to the group if they are going to leave for any reason before the group ends. This allows the group some closure but also sometimes allows the group leaders an opportunity to resolve a conflict in group. For instance, if a group member says to a group leader outside of group, "I'm not coming back anymore because Sue is always mean to me," the group leader now has the opportunity to help that group member bring the issue to the group and resolve it. If the group member is unwilling, he or she still has to come to group and say goodbye. Group members will ask about the reason, and again, this may provide a chance to resolve the conflict.

Identify Individual and Group Goals

Initial sessions should include a discussion of the goals of the group followed by a discussion of individual goals for each group member. Even young children can understand and participate in such discussions. They need to know that they will be focusing on identifying and discussing certain topics and themes. They can also identify specific issues for them (either on their own or through pregroup screening, assessment, and interviews) that they would like to work on or change during the course of the group. Typical goals for a children-of-divorce group might be, "I don't want to feel so caught in the middle between my Mom and Dad," "I don't want to feel guilty when I am with one parent," or "I want to feel less sad when I think about my parents splitting up." Typical goals for an adolescent self-esteem group might be,

“I want to be more realistic about my strengths and weaknesses,” “I want to feel better about my body,” or “I want to express my feelings more clearly to people.”

Goal setting in both individual and group work for children and adolescents is an area that has often been ignored or underutilized. Goal setting is a process of identifying goals based on the assumption that the more specific the goals, the more likely their attainment. It is most likely to improve task performance when the goals are specific and appropriately challenging, feedback is provided to indicate progress in relation to the goal, rewards are given for goal attainment, the manager or experimenter is supportive, and goals assigned are accepted by the individual. Locke and Latham's (1990) qualitative meta-analysis and O'Leary-Kelly, Martocchio, and Frink's (1994) quantitative meta-analysis both strongly supported the use of individual goal setting with task/performance groups. Goal setting was associated with enhanced performance because it mobilized effort, directed attention, motivated strategy development, and prolonged effort over time.

“Writing it [goals] down is about clearing your head, identifying what you want, and setting your intent. Writing things down helps people understand what they want and become proactive in achieving one's goals” (Klauser, 1997, p. 1). The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) has been applied extensively to counseling interventions (Heesacker, Conner, & Prichard, 1995). “Elaboration” is defined as the ability to think about an issue and is theorized to increase the chances of attitude change occurring. In turn, attitude change is assumed to influence behavior directly. Writing down goals facilitates thoughtful action, because the person must contemplate what he or she wants to achieve, thereby increasing the chances of realizing those goals. Attitude change is an important determinant of behavior change in and of itself; attitude also affects other variables that contribute to behavior such as motivation, perceptions of others' attitudes, feelings of self-efficacy, and actual competence. Findings from ELM research indicated that attitudes formed or changed as a result of effortful thinking are more predictive of both behavioral intentions and actions than are attitudes formed or changed with little thinking (Petty, Heesacker, & Hughes, 1997). Researchers have evaluated the use of ELM in the context of training assertive attitudes and behavior (Ernst & Heesacker, 1993), changing sexual aggression (Gilbert, Heesacker, & Gannon, 1991), changing men's traditional male gender role attitudes and enhancing attitudes toward seeking psychological help (Brooks-Harris, Heesacker, & Mejia-Millan, 1996), substance abuse prevention (Scott, 1996), and student achievement motivation (Kivlighan, Schuetz, & Kardash, 1998).

Flowers and Schwartz (1980) reported anecdotally that when group members write on a card two problems that they would like to work on, their participation in the group increases, thereby increasing the chances of making the session productive. Yalom (1985) suggested that these goals be realistic (an important area of personal concern that the client can work on in session), interpersonal (problem is described in relational terms), and here-and-now (relationship problem described in relation to other members of the group). Yalom contends that such agenda setting would help members ask explicitly for what they need and thus help them recognize their own responsibility within the therapeutic process. Dye's (2002) chapter on previewing suggests a way to invite each group member to make

a statement, but not a commitment, regarding what he or she might want to work on during a particular group session. In psychoeducational groups, previewing might occur as part of the opening of the group, where the group leaders introduce a topic and then ask group members how this relates to their group goals and what they might want to discuss during that session.

Thus, it seems essential to ask group members to identify their goals verbally and, if possible, in writing. There is something about stating a goal to a group of people that makes it more real and holds the person more accountable. Maybe even more important is the group commitment to help a group member change and achieve his or her goal. In contrast to just having a rather stagnant discussion where each member in a row states his or her goal with no group discussion, it is useful to frame the identification of goals as a discussion involving all members to identify several important points:

- Altruism and group commitment to help members work on each of their goals
- Universality among group members who have similar goals
- Modeling by group members who have strengths and can help certain members work on their goals
- Problem solving and brainstorming of specific ways that the group can help group members work on their goals inside and outside of group

Four questions are useful to help group members identify and clarify their goals:

- What is your goal?
- How will you know when you have achieved your goal?
- How will you work on your goal in group?
- What can the group do to help you work on your goal?

Additional questions are then asked of the other group members:

- What strengths, experience, or skills do you have that might help this group member attain his or her goal?
- How might this person work on his or her goal in group?
- What might the group do to help him or her?
- What can you do as an individual group member to help him or her?

After such a discussion of group and individual goals, it is important for the group leaders to connect members by emphasizing similarities in goals; instill hope and altruism by noting the strengths that group members have identified; and emphasize the importance of differences in perspectives that will be useful when solving problems, making decisions, and brainstorming. Hopefully, through the screening interviews and preparation sessions, group members have begun to identify individual goals related to the group goals. But in an effort to clearly connect individual and group goals and also to shape group members who may have goals that are somewhat inconsistent with the group goals, it is helpful to ask each group

member to clearly identify with which group goal his or her individual goal most closely aligns.

Goal setting as an activity is not limited to only the initial session. It is helpful to review goals at the midpoint of group to discuss what progress members have made, what they have learned and how they have learned it, and what they will continue to work on until the end of the group. As part of termination, it is again useful to review progress toward goals and specifically emphasize what members have learned and how they have learned it in order to generalize that learning to outside the group. An activity that is also helpful in the early stages of the group is to ask members to put their goal on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being no progress at all toward the goal and 10 being they have achieved their goal. Next, ask the group members to mark where they are on the scale now in terms of their progress toward their goal. To help identify steps to achieve the goal, group members then label each number after their marked number with a behavioral descriptor so that they will know when they have made progress toward the goal. For example, a student in a shyness group may indicate that he or she is currently a 3 on the scale with the goal of being able to socialize in a group. He or she then might label 4 as talk to one person at lunch, 5 as talk to two people at lunch, 6 as go to a party and stay for 15 minutes, 7 as talk to one person at a party, 8 as go to a party and stay for an hour, 9 as talk to two people at a party, and 10 as join a group of people who are already talking at a party. Figure 5.1 contains a sample form that students may use to write down their goals. Leaders may want to keep the goals in order to review them periodically.

Using the metaphor of tending to a garden is another helpful way to introduce the topic of goal setting. Arnold Anderson, in his column "Stories I Tell My Patients," which appears in each issue of *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*, describes brief stories that can be used as metaphors and analogies with clients. "Pulling Weeds and Planting Flowers" (Anderson, 1994) focuses on how, when you want to start a garden, you need to plant things that you want to grow and also weed out other plants. The story emphasizes both the elimination of behaviors that are not helpful and the cultivation of new, more positive behaviors: "It means planting flowers, not just pulling up weeds. The whole purpose of removing your self-defeating patterns of behavior, recognizing what hasn't worked well, is to start cultivating thoughts and behaviors that produce 'flowers'" (p. 184). A discussion of goals focusing on what new behaviors need to be learned and what self-defeating behaviors need to be unlearned could begin with the reading of the story about pulling weeds and planting flowers.

Reduce Initial Anxiety

Providing specific information about what will happen in the group sessions and the role of the leader will help to reduce group members' anxiety. Their anxiety will also be reduced by participating in the screening interviews and the first session. Disclosing about their situation and finding that others have similar situations and/or reasons for being in the group is particularly helpful in alleviating initial anxiety related to group participation. Instillation of hope occurs through connections, identification of how groups work, and the discussion of specific activities to

Name: _____ Date: _____

These are the general group goals. Please circle all that you would like to work on.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(Note to group leaders: Add the specific group goals here.)

What are your individual goals for this group? Be specific. What do you want to learn to do differently after these group sessions? Please list.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How will you know when you have reached your goal? How will you be different? Think differently? Feel differently? Behave differently?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Figure 5.1 Sample of Form to Identify and Evaluate Goals

develop new skills. Linking, connecting, and emphasizing strengths of group members who can help other members is also important in reducing anxiety.

Outline of a Typical Initial Session

What follows is an outline for a typical initial session of a psychoeducational group, assuming that such a session would last between 45 minutes and an hour. If you have the luxury of more time (1 hour to 1½ hours), more time can be spent on each topic. Sometimes, it is helpful to use more than one activity to address a major goal of this stage. How each intervention addresses the tasks and strives to create therapeutic factors is described briefly. An approximate amount of time for each intervention is also included. Note that much of the information has been provided to some extent during earlier interactions, but it is important to remind the group as a whole to help emphasize group norms.

Opening (8 to 10 minutes)

Welcome (1 to 2 minutes). Welcome the students to the group, reminding them of the topic of the group and who the leaders are. If the leaders are not people with whom the students would typically interact, it is helpful to explain their role in the school or agency, where their office is, when they are available, and how to contact them. This provides safety and structure for the group members.

Icebreaker Activity (7 to 9 minutes). Select an icebreaker activity that includes names and focuses on self-disclosure, cohesiveness, and universality. Include one or two processing questions to link group members and emphasize similarities. Thank the first person who shares for taking a risk. Comment on good communication and self-disclosure skills: “I” statements, feeling words, and acknowledging anxiety or uncertainty.

Working (25 to 35 minutes)

Discussion of Ground Rules (10 to 12 minutes). Begin by suggesting that each group needs some guidelines (norms, as they are sometimes called) to help group members feel safe and to guide how members work together to learn and practice new skills and behaviors. Ask members to suggest some guidelines to make the group safe and productive. Record (or have a group member record) the list of guidelines on a blackboard or notepad. Clarify or add any ground rules that you as leaders decided previously were essential for this group (e.g., confidentiality, attendance, respect, one person talks at a time). Perhaps use the analogy of swimming pool rules.

Brief Discussion of Goals of Group (3 to 5 minutes). Leaders should remind group members at this time of the two or three goals for the group that were discussed previously during the screening interview and possibly the preparation session.

Some group members may have received information about the goals of the group in writing. Talking about goals in terms of the major themes for the group is helpful, as well as indicating that each group member will have time to identify his or her specific goals of what he or she wants to learn from the group. It is often useful to begin by asking the group members what the goals are for the group, rather than assuming that they don't know or don't remember and telling them again. This helps to further reinforce and internalize group goals. It also gives group leaders insight into motivation and participation level of specific group members.

Brief Discussion of How Groups Work (5 to 8 minutes). It is helpful to emphasize that the goals of groups like this are preventive in nature. All people can learn new ways of interacting and improve their relationships with people. Communication skills, problem-solving skills, conflict-resolution skills, and decision-making skills are often part of psychoeducational groups. Typically, in each group, some new way of thinking or behaving will be taught, and then there will be a chance to practice the new skills. This is a good time to remind group members of how many sessions there will be, how often they will meet, where they will meet, and so on. It is also sometimes useful to explain the structure of the group session: opening, working, processing, and closing; the role of the group leaders; and some typical activities that may be used in this type of group. Much of this information can be taken from the handout given out for preparation sessions in Appendix K.

Goal-Setting Activity (10 to 15 minutes). This activity should help group members to connect their goals to the goals of this specific psychoeducational group, as well as emphasize similarities and make connections between the group members who may be able to help and support each other. It is helpful to not only identify the goals for each individual group member but also to discuss briefly how the group can help each group member to work on his or her goal.

Processing (6 to 8 minutes)

Two or three processing questions that focus on group members' connections to each other and make them feel more comfortable are appropriate. Focus on the positive and make connections and links at this time. Possible questions include the following:

- What helped you feel more comfortable in group today?
- With which group member(s) did you connect?
- What did you learn about how groups work today?
- What did you learn about yourself today?

Group leaders may comment on positive communication skills such as self-disclosure, risk taking, and modeling; connections and similarities between members; how members helped each other or may help each other based on self-disclosed strengths; and what group members did to help the group work effectively (stayed on task, took turns, talked about feelings and thoughts that are bothering them, disclosed goals, offered to help other members, etc.).

It is important for group leaders to set the precedent that they will compliment members, point out specific behaviors that were effective, and ask group members to comment on the process and effectiveness of the group. The norm must be established early that part of the process of groups is learning new skills, but another key component is evaluating for each individual group member what processes, activities, interventions, and skills work for him or her. This sets the stage so that when negative interactions occur between members or interventions don't work, group members are prepared to discuss what happens as a normal part of the group.

Closing (6 to 8 minutes)

Even in the first session, it is important to ask group members to at least think about group goals, if not specifically try to do something related to them. For a friendship group, the group leader might ask the group members to notice how others start a conversation. For a self-esteem group, the members might be asked to notice when they feel good about themselves. The group leader might describe briefly the topic and activities for the next group session so that group members understand why they are being asked to observe or try out behaviors. The goal is to ask group members to preview and begin, in a sense, to collect data about a topic in anticipation of future group sessions.

Group Leadership Skills

The goals of group leadership behavior in the initial stage are focused on the creation of cohesiveness and connection with the leader and trust in the leader, illumination of how the process of groups works, and the development of goals. Group leaders intervene in a variety of ways to make this happen. Much of their interventions (and preplanning time) should be focused on

- **Linking:** linking group members to each other in terms of similarities, strengths, how they can work together; linking individual group member goals and problems to the goals of the group to increase hope; and linking what group members will learn in the group to change and improve their life situations outside of group. Specifically, leader comments might include statements and questions such as
 - I've noticed that you two have similar goals. Do you think that you might be able to work together and coach each other when this issue comes up?
 - I've noticed that your goal is similar to a strength another member has mentioned. Do you think that you might be able to ask that member for help when you need it? (To the other member) Do you think that you would be able to suggest ideas when this person needs help?
 - I'm noticing that the group members are describing goals that are very clearly linked to the group goals. And there are several specific interventions throughout the group that will teach skills to help meet those goals.
 - We have talked about some of the skills that we're going to learn in this group. How do you think you can use them outside of group in your real life? When? With whom?

- Supporting: helping members look at their strengths and how they can help themselves and others in group, and encouraging them to take risks and try out new behaviors.
 - What strengths do you bring to group?
 - What do you do well in relating to people?
 - What do your friends like about you?
 - If a friend of yours were to introduce you to this group, what might he or she say about you?
 - How are you a good friend? What do you do specifically that makes you a good friend?
 - What is one unique aspect of yourself that you're going to bring to group?
 - How are you going to help others in this group?
 - What do you need to take risks and try out new behaviors?
 - How are you going to help others to take risks and try out new behaviors in this group?
 - What can others do to help you to learn and change and grow in this group?
 - What are three things you want us to know about you?
 - If you were to introduce yourself as the person you'd like to be, what would you tell us about you?

- Identifying Goals: helping group members to state in very clear behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective terms how they want to be different when the group ends.
 - How do you want to be different at the end of this group?
 - We have talked about the group goals. Now what do you want to work on specifically related to the group goals?
 - What would you most like to say you've learned or decided when you leave the group?

- Clarifying: group members' individual and group goals, strengths, how they want to think, feel, and behave differently (and what they need to learn to accomplish this), how groups work, and how to participate effectively.
 - How would you know when you have achieved your goal?
 - What will your goal look like in terms of different behaviors, feelings, and thoughts?
 - What do you already do well related to your goal?
 - What behaviors, thoughts, and feelings do you want to keep on doing?
 - What changes do you need to make? What new skills do you need to learn?
 - Are you here because you want to be? If not, what can you still get out of it?
 - What do you want to get from this group?
 - What are you willing to do to get what you say you want?
 - Are you willing to try out new things in here?
 - What do you know about groups?
 - With what expectations are you coming to this group?
 - What is it like for you to be here now?
 - What fears or doubts do you have about this group, if any?

- What do you imagine would happen if you were to say the most difficult thing?
- What do you fear most? What do you hope for most?
- Suggesting How Group Works: explaining and modeling positive and effective interventions, and instructing and coaching group members on how to participate, problem solve, brainstorm, communicate, and make decisions.
 - When we talk to each other, let's look directly at each other, use "I" statements, use feeling words when necessary, and try to be as specific as possible about behaviors.
 - I am feeling a little less anxious about the group now that everyone has introduced himself or herself and talked a little bit about what he or she wants out of group. How about others?
 - You have done a really nice job of stating the problem you would like to solve. Let's begin by talking about things that other people might have done about that problem. Then let's generate other ideas about what might work. Once we do that, then you need to identify one or two solutions that you think you want to try and we'll talk about them.
 - Realize that you'll take from this group what you are willing to put into it.
 - If you are feeling something in here persistently, express it.
- Identifying When Group Works: pointing out group process and asking questions to help group members identify when group is effective and helpful, what the specific things are that each group member contributed, and clearly stating what group members can do in the future to continue to have effective interactions.
 - We did a really nice job today of staying on task and following directions. Did anyone notice how we did that? Let's talk about it so we can make sure that we do it again next time.
 - Now that you have identified two possible solutions to your situation, let's talk about how that happened. What did we do as a group to help identify and evaluate solutions? What things did group members say that were particularly helpful? What ideas were particularly helpful? And why?

Possible Pitfalls

It is important at this stage to engage children and adolescents in groups. As mentioned previously for psychoeducational groups, the goal is more preventive, and so group members are not in such intense pain that they seek out interventions themselves. Thus, it is important from the beginning to interest adolescents in groups, to "hook" them so that they want to attend and participate. Part of this comes from their connection to the group leader, through initial interviews and supportive comments in the initial sessions, and part of this comes from the feelings of universality, altruism, cohesiveness, and instillation of hope derived from being in a group with other children or adolescents.

The delicate balance comes in providing enough entertainment and fun that students want to come to group and also enough structure that they feel safe and

know how to participate in a way that they get something out of the group sessions. For many students, getting out of class is motivation enough to come to group. The group leaders then need to provide further motivation to engage effectively in group so that it truly is a psychoeducational group and not just a “rap” session.

Part of the structure comes in the form of making sure that the group members do not self-disclose too much or inappropriately in the initial sessions. Group leaders must be quick to cut off group members if they have begun to reveal details of explicit sexual behavior, family dysfunction, or acting-out behaviors. Intervening by asking the group member to talk to a group leader further about this one-on-one acknowledges the self-disclosure (both to the group member and the other group members) but keeps the group focused on the task at hand. If the self-disclosure is too deep for the group during the beginning stage, group members may ignore it entirely and make the group member feel unheard. Or, group members may initially support the group member who self-disclosed but distance themselves after they have begun to think about the disclosure. Or, they may then decide that this group member is particularly needy and focus the group on that particular group member, basically saying this person needs help more than we do so we must use the group to help him or her.

Examples of Activities

Initial-stage activities focus on building trust, introducing members to the group and to each other, and developing goals related to the group theme. Icebreaker activities in psychoeducational groups need to be focused on two areas: (a) identification of the individual group members' goals within the context of the overall group goals, and (b) introduction of the norms of self-disclosure, self-exploration, and giving and receiving of feedback. From the beginning of the first group session, all group activities, processing of group activities, and group discussions should emphasize group goals and group norms. There should not be any activities that are done “just for fun.” This is not to say that activities shouldn't be fun or that group members shouldn't laugh in group, but that there should always be a purpose for an activity. Children and adolescents are very good at observing discrepancies and pointing them out. If a group leader allows the group to digress or focus on tangential topics for very long, it is harder to get them back on task and focused. There is a fine line between allowing students to chat and get to know each other, and allowing them to digress. With psychoeducational groups, time is of the essence, so an activity may allow members to get to know each other better but also should, in some way, be directed at group goals and norms.

For introductory activities, the purposes should be orienting to the group, building cohesiveness and connection among group members, and promoting the norms of self-disclosure and self-exploration. Group members need structure and guidance in the beginning stage to help figure out how to get the most out of their group experience. Beginning the process of self-disclosure and self-awareness, key elements in all groups, also needs to occur in the introductory group sessions. Any activity that asks members to tell a little about themselves includes self-disclosure.

Thus, if an activity is followed up with processing questions that focus on what it is like to self-disclose, the impact of self-disclosure on other members, and similarities and differences between members, then the process of self-awareness (and connections) has begun.

Common activities include those that get group members up and moving around by asking them to line up according to where they were born (from east to west) or based on how many siblings they have, all encourage some self-disclosure and connections. Other activities use movement to have group members define themselves, such as all the roses on the right side and all the tulips on the left side. Structured go-rounds where group members share relatively nonthreatening but important information that can be processed later are also useful, such as favorite movie and why, how would you spend a million dollars, or favorite holiday.

The “Autobiography” (Bridbord, 2002) and “Getting to Know You—Now and Then” activities (Conroy, 2002) encourage members to self-disclose and get to know other members while emphasizing safety. Another is the “Four Corners Card” (Rice, 1995), which asks group members to list one word in each corner that describes who they are as a person, when they are happy, when they are sad, and what they hope to gain from participation in the group. The “Coat of Arms” activity is also commonly used, with members drawing a symbol in the center to represent who they are (their crest), and then answering questions in each of the four corners to describe and tell about themselves.

Carrell (2000) suggests an activity called “Breaking the Ice” that uses a go-round technique where each group member answers a series of questions. She includes a list of 20 possible questions, such as

- What is the best movie you have ever seen?
- Who is the most important person to live during your lifetime?
- If you could be an animal other than a human, what would you be, and why?
- What was the best day of your life?

She begins with questions that ask members to self-disclose about who they are and what is important to them, and then moves on to what they want learn from this group and their connections with members as they have spoken about these different questions.

It is also sometimes useful to have group members begin by self-disclosing to one another in pairs or dyads. Then one person in the dyad introduces the other person to the rest of the group. This encourages self-disclosure and connections but lessens anxiety by limiting the interaction to one other person. Group leaders can also emphasize good listening skills, questions that were asked to clarify and gain more information, and what it was like to interview (and be interviewed by) another group member.

Using M&M candy is another way to invite self-disclosure in a structured and nonthreatening way. For each different color, choose a question that the student has to answer if they eat that color M&M. It is a fun activity for children and adolescents because they can eat the M&Ms as they do the activity, but they can also choose what they want to self-disclose to the group. Questions might be similar to

those suggested earlier in the “Breaking the Ice” activity (Carrell, 2000). The “Trust Walk” (Carrell, 2000) introduces some movement as an icebreaker activity that is done in dyads and asks group members to talk about what it is like to trust somebody, how you know when you trust somebody, and then how trust can be conveyed within the group. “Getting to Know One Another” (Guth, 2002) is another activity that encourages movement and at the same time emphasizes connections between group members, as well as identifies potential strengths and positive group member behaviors. Four concentric circles are taped to the floor, and group members move to the circle that best resembles their level of a particular characteristic (e.g., extrovert, introvert, planner, feelings oriented, thought oriented, calm, etc.).

Karp, Butler, and Bergstrom (1998) emphasize creativity by suggesting an activity called the “Self-Collage,” where group members create a collage using pictures, words, and phrases from magazines, newspapers, and other materials. Another variation of this is to have group members decorate the outside of a paper bag to illustrate what others typically know about them. The inside of the paper bag is then decorated to represent characteristics of themselves that group members do not typically share with other people. In a group session, members are asked to talk about the outside of the bag and how it represents them, and then are invited, but not required, to talk about one thing from the inside of the bag. If they do, group leaders then ask members to reflect on what it was like to share this information in the group. If group members do not share something from inside the bag, it is important for them to talk about what needs to happen in group in order for them to be able to share some of that inner part of themselves.

Goal setting may be introduced by the activity “Turning Over a New Leaf” (Dossick & Shea, 1990), which uses the metaphor of a new leaf as a way to describe behaviors, attitudes, or feelings that may be harmful to themselves or to others. On one side of the leaf, they write down the behavior, thought, or feeling to be changed; on the other side of the leaf, they write down an alternative, more adaptive behavior, thought, or feeling.

In a different approach, Wolfe et al. (1996) suggested using a panel of past group participants to talk about what they learned, what effect the group had on them, what they enjoyed most about the group, how they felt at their first session, and what feelings developed across the group sessions. Then, new group members could be allowed to ask former group members specific questions.

Dossick and Shea’s (1990) activity titled “The State Lottery” asks group members to self-disclose through fantasy about what they would do with the money if they won the lottery and then how it would change their lives, helping to identify potential goals for the group.

There are many good activities to illustrate group process. Using cooking as a metaphor, the group can be described in terms of spices, and each member can be asked to describe how he or she contributes to a recipe, like a spice. To make it concrete, each group member can be given an ingredient to make chili or a Chex[®]-mix-like creation so that group members can see (and taste) how each ingredient (like a member) contributes uniquely to the group. Musical chairs can be used as an analogy of what it is like to be left out, followed by a discussion of how to make sure that it does not happen in group. The hot potato game can be used as a

metaphor of what it is like to be put on the spot in group, and group members can then discuss how they can help each other learn and try out new behaviors by giving constructive feedback and making comments about what happens in group, but in a way that is respectful and that the group member can hear and use.

Summary

The initial session is critical to establishing trust and rapport between group members and creating a safe atmosphere that encourages students to examine and try out new behaviors. Group members' anxiety lessens when they begin to understand how groups work and the role of the leaders and members in this process. Group members begin to learn about the other group members and themselves in relation to the group goals, and begin to develop an individual plan of action. Group leader interventions emphasize caring and executive function leadership behaviors to provide structure and support with some meaning attribution to help group members understand how they will learn from participation in this group.

Suggested Training Activities

1. *Identify and Adapt Icebreaker Activities*

- Examine group literature in general and specific to one type of psychoeducational group for activities that may be used as part of the initial session. Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 and Appendix G contain some suggested resources.
- For each activity, identify the task(s) for the initial stage that this activity would accomplish.
- For each activity, identify therapeutic factors that this activity would promote.
- For each activity, write two or three processing questions directed at meaning attribution for this activity.

2. *Identify and Adapt Existing Initial Sessions*

- Examine group literature in general and specific to one type of psychoeducational group for existing sessions. Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 and Appendix G contain some suggested resources.
- For each session, identify the task(s) for the initial stage that this activity would meet.
- For each session, identify therapeutic factors that this activity would promote.
- For each session, write two or three processing questions directed at meaning attribution for the processing part of the session.

3. Observation of an Initial Session for a Psychoeducational Group

- View Part 1 of the Smead (1996) videotape.
- Identify the task(s) for the initial stage that was (were) addressed and how.
- Identify leadership behaviors in all four categories: Executive Function, Caring, Emotional Stimulation, and Meaning Attribution.
- Identify therapeutic factors that occurred.

4. Design and Implement a First Group Session

- Choose a specific type of psychoeducational group and a population.
- Choose goals for the group and make procedural decisions.
- Design a first group session that includes opening, working, processing, and closing parts.
- Make sure that all the major tasks of an initial session are addressed.
- Select an evaluation measure that includes goals for group and assesses progress toward the specific goals of the group at the beginning of the group and how group will help work on this goal.
- Complete the Group Planning Sheet in Appendix D, and include the information about each member based on screening interviews.
- Implement the session as a role-play, videotaping the session. (This could be an in-class role-play.)
- After the session is over, ask your members to talk about the following:
 - What was helpful in making them feel comfortable?
 - Interacting with other members?
 - Establishing a goal?
 - Wanting to come back to group again?
- Administer the evaluation measures.
- Evaluate the session using the tape, feedback from members, and one or more of the group leadership assessment forms discussed in Chapter 4.
- Complete the Group Processing Sheet in Appendix E for this session.
- Meet with your co-leader using the model of Reporting, Reflection, Integration, Planning, and Evaluation (DeLucia-Waack, 2001) and the CLINICKING section of the Co-Facilitating Inventory (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1975).
- Complete the planning sheet for the next session.

5. Processing of a First Class Session as a Parallel to a First Task Group Session (for Instructors)

- Conduct a first class session as you would typically. Perhaps include an icebreaker that emphasizes self-disclosure and setting of goals.
- Ten minutes before the class ends, ask the class to reflect on some or all of the following questions for themselves personally:
 - How are you feeling?
 - What made you anxious?

- What helped lessen your anxiety?
 - What did the instructor do specifically to help you feel more comfortable?
 - What did others do to lessen your anxiety?
 - What have you learned?
 - What do you need to think about and do before next week?
 - What are your goals for this class?
 - What do you need to do to make them happen?
 - How can others in the room help you achieve your goals?
- Then ask them to switch into the role of the potential group leader. Ask them to discuss the following based on their observations:
 - How will you provide safety and structure for your members?
 - How will you establish norms?
 - How will you help develop group and individual goals?
 - How will you address anxiety and help lessen it?
 - How will you promote interactions between members?
 - How will you promote connections between members?

6. *Design and Implementation of a Second Group Session*

- Design a second group session that includes the following:
 - Quick review of names
 - Quick review of ground rules
 - A goal-setting activity
 - Processing
 - Closing
- Complete a Group Planning Sheet, found in Appendix D.
- Implement the session as a role-play, videotaping the session. (This could be an in-class role-play.)
- After the session is over, ask your members to talk about the following:
 - What was helpful in making them feel comfortable?
 - Interacting with other members?
 - Establishing a goal?
 - Wanting to come back to group again?
- Administer the evaluation measures.
- Evaluate the session using the tape, feedback from members, and one or more of the group leadership assessment forms discussed in Chapter 4.
- Complete the Group Processing Sheet in Appendix E for this session.
- Meet with your co-leader using the model of Reporting, Reflection, Integration, Planning, and Evaluation (DeLucia-Waack, 2001) and the CLINICKING section of the Co-Facilitating Inventory (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1975).
- Complete the Group Planning Sheet in Appendix D for the next session.