Group Therapy

Group therapy is a form of psychotherapy in which one or more therapists treat a small group of clients together at the same time.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Summarize the clinical uses of group and family therapy.

KEY POINTS

- In the psychodynamic sense, "group therapy" specifically indicates a situation where the group context and group process is explicitly utilized as a mechanism of change by developing, exploring and examining interpersonal relationships within the group.

- Family therapy is a branch of psychotherapy that works with families and couples in intimate relationships to nurture change and development. It emphasizes family relationships as an important factor in psychological health.

- Dr. Irvin D. Yalom outlined key therapeutic principles, which are derived from reports from individuals who have undergone group therapy. These principles neatly summarize the benefits of group therapy.

- Group therapy has proven to be very effective for the treatment of depression and traumatic stress, such as PTSD and sexual abuse survivors. Family therapy, specifically, has proven effectiveness in treating schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anorexia and alcohol dependency.

TERM

- Psychodynamic
  An approach to psychology that emphasizes systematic study of the psychological forces that underlie human behavior, feelings, and emotions and how they might relate to early experience.

Group Therapy

Group therapy is a form of psychotherapy in which one or more therapists treat a small group of clients together at the same time. Receiving therapy in a group changes the therapist-client relationship dramatically, and therefore affects outcomes. While group therapy is sometimes used alone, it is more often used as part of a greater treatment plan that may include one-on-one therapy and/or medication.

The term "group therapy" is sometimes loosely defined to indicate any group of individuals that are experiencing and discussing distress (support groups, for instance). However, in the psychodynamic sense, it specifically indicates a situation where the group context and group process is explicitly utilized as a *mechanism of change* by developing, exploring, and examining interpersonal relationships within

the group. In short, the interpersonal dynamics that play out in the group are reflections of what happens in real life .

Group therapy is helpful in many contexts. One common form of group therapy is family therapy, which is a branch of psychotherapy that works with families and couples in intimate relationships to nurture change and development. It tends to view change in terms of the systems of interaction between family members, and emphasizes family relationships as an important factor in psychological health. Similar to group therapy, family therapy sees interactions during therapeutic sessions as direct reflections of real-life problems.

Therapeutic Principles

Dr. Irvin D. Yalom outlined key therapeutic principles, which are derived from reports from individuals who have undergone group therapy. These principles neatly summarize the benefits of group therapy:

- Altruism: Group members share their strengths and experiences in order to help others. The experience of being able to give something to another person can lift the member's self esteem and help develop more adaptive coping styles and interpersonal skills.

- Catharsis: Catharsis is the experience of relief from emotional distress through the free and uninhibited expression of emotion. When members tell their story to a supportive audience, they can obtain relief from chronic feelings of shame and guilt.

- Cohesiveness: It has been suggested that this is the primary therapeutic factor from which all others flow. Because all members share a common goal, there is a shared sense of belonging, acceptance, and validation.

- Corrective recapitulation of the primary family experience: Seeing the group as a family may help group members gain understanding of the impact of childhood experiences on their personality, and they may learn to avoid unconsciously repeating unhelpful past interactive patterns in present relationships.

- Development of socializing techniques: The group setting provides a safe and supportive environment for members to take risks by practicing interpersonal behavior and improving social skills.

- Existential factors: Group therapy helps members realize that they are responsible for their own lives, behaviors, and decisions.

- Imparting information: Group members report benefiting from sharing information about themselves and one another, such as personal experiences.

- Imitative behavior: One way in which group members can develop social skills is through a modeling process, observing and imitating the therapist and other group members.

- Instillation of hope: In a mixed group that has members at various stages of the treatment process, seeing members that are in later stages of coping or recovery may give hope to those at beginning stages.

- Interpersonal learning: Group members achieve a greater level of self-awareness through the process of interacting with others in the group, who give feedback on the member's behavior and impact on others.

- Universality: Sharing an experience with a group helps people see that they are not going through something alone. It also serves to remove a group member's sense of isolation, validate their experiences, and raise self-esteem.

Clinical Uses and Effectiveness

Group therapy has proven to be very effective for the treatment of depression and traumatic stress, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and sexual abuse survivors. Clinical cases have shown that the combination of both individual and group therapy is most beneficial for most clients.

Advocates of *family therapy* believe that, regardless of the origin of the problem, and regardless of whether the clients consider it an "individual" or "family" issue, involving families in solutions often benefits clients. This involvement of families is commonly accomplished by their direct participation in the therapy session. The skills of the family therapist thus include the ability to influence conversations in a way that catalyzes the strengths, wisdom, and support of the wider system. Family therapy has proven effective in treating schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anorexia, and alcohol dependency.