

CHAPTER 6

PROCEDURES AND PROCESSES FOR THE USE OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

This chapter presents the fundamental principles and assumptions that guide the use of creative and expressive activities, the general procedures for conducting the expressive exercises, and a process for guiding personal exploration and enhancement to facilitate an understanding of what emerges during the experience.

- Each member's personal experience is unique. How members respond to an activity is a combination of many factors such as past experiences, family of origin factors, personality, current physical and emotional states, and so on. Thus, each group member's experiencing will be unique and personally relevant for him or her.
- The meanings for what emerges lies within that person. Although group members have numerous past experiences, the expressive activities described in this book

tend to reflect the person's current inner world. Even past experiences are perceived from a current perspective.

- Elements of the product or outcome are reflective of the inner world of the person at that time. In addition to current experiencing, some of the past cognitive and emotional states for the person can be also reflected in parts of the product. What is helpful is when these can be explored to understand their continuing impact on current experiencing, such as the impact of past relationships on current ones.
- The products or outcomes provide clues to the person's current wishes, desires, and needs. The clues provided and their messages and meaning carry personal implications as to some below conscious awareness or even from the unconscious. These clues are best analyzed and interpreted by that person.
- Defensiveness is reduced with personal versus the group leader's interpretations. There can be a reduction in defensiveness when the interpretation of the product is done by the group member who created it. New pathways of understanding and insight can be opened because the energy goes into understanding rather than to fending off the material or the group leader's interpretation.
- Acceptance of what emerges during the activity is increased and tolerated when the group member provides meaning for the products. Group members can be more accepting of what emerged for them during the activity when they are allowed to derive the meaning. The threat or danger to the self from the material is managed better as the person him- or herself is in control.
- Developmental and existential issues can be tapped to provide guidance. These are issues and concerns that continue throughout life. Many group members may be unaware that this is to be expected and may not understand the impact these can and do have on their functioning. Expressive activities can activate them,

bring them to consciousness, and allow for expression. Finding others in the group who are struggling with the same or similar issues and concerns can be relieving and promote a sense of universality.

- Learning, understanding, and insight can continue after the exercise is completed. The expressive activities stimulate group members to continue to reflect on what they have experienced, and additional learning, understanding, and even repressed memories can emerge after the activity is completed, and between group sessions. The continued processing of the experience can contribute to their growth, development, and healing.
- Intense and unexpected emotions may arise during an exercise, and these must be contained and managed during the session. The group leader must be mentally and emotionally prepared to cope with members' intense emotions as these can be an outcome of an activity. In this event, it is necessary to ensure that the member(s) do not become mired or overwhelmed with the intensity of feeling, and that they do not leave the session while still experiencing more emotional intensity than they can tolerate.
- Ethical principles guide the use of expressive exercises. A variety of expressive activities are presented in the book and these were chosen as examples that do not require specialized training. However, it is suggested that readers do get some training before implementing these in the groups that they lead. It is not sufficient to have experienced these in their training or therapy and found them valuable; some more formal instruction is generally helpful. Workshops, conference institutes, and other means of training could be used.

General Guiding Assumptions

Six major general assumptions guide this presentation.

- The focus is on the group as a whole.
- Clinically focused groups are the target groups.
- The leader has tried to intervene without success.
- Members may vary in the reasons for the dilemma.
- The group leader can mirror and contain the dilemma.
- The dilemma reflects resistance, confusion, fear, or uncertainty.

Group as a Whole Focus

One or more members may be reflecting the dilemma and there is a tendency to focus on these members. Attending to the group as a whole allows the leader to address each member's concern, to be inclusive, lessens the potential for scapegoating, and demonstrates understanding and empathy at a deep level for all members.

Clinical Groups

Dilemmas can be reflections of deep seated issues, concerns, and problems that are usually the focus for clinical groups. Other types of groups, such as educational and task groups, have a more cognitive focus, and are usually of short term duration that will not have a sufficient number of sessions to adequately deal with the sensitive material that can emerge. Expressive processes could be used to relieve tension for these groups, but may not be as helpful as they would be for clinically focused groups.

Interventions Were Ineffective

Group leaders are likely to have tried several interventions that were not successful since the dilemmas continue to exist. Interventions may have focused on individual members, exploration of feelings, group process commentary, and other such usual interventions that worked for the leader in the past. Individual interventions don't work because the dilemma is a shared group

member concern, although it is usually expressed differently for each member. Exploration of feelings don't seem to be effective because no understanding occurs and venting alone isn't sufficient; or some members may be suppressing, repressing, or denying feelings and these are not being expressed; or members may be confused about their feelings and unable to sort through them.

Reasons Vary

Most often, members will have different reasons and sources for their reactions. For example, some could be experiencing transference, some are projecting, some fear destruction of the self, and others could be so fearful of what could emerge that they shut down. The group leader may not know or be aware of all of the individual reasons, and each may need a different intervention, but the entire group is still impacted and reacting.

The Leader Mirrors and Contains

The group leader's inner experiencing can be a rich source of information about what the group is experiencing. Leaders mirror and contain affect for the group, and this is what the leader's inner experiencing can be reflecting. The leader's level of personal development to reduce countertransference (Gelso & Hays, 2007), self-understanding to reduce projecting, and the ability to be aware of here-and-now experiencing, monitoring of his or her possible countertransference and projecting, permits the leader to judge the validity of his or her inner experiencing as mirroring and containing something for the group.

Reflects Resistance, Confusion, Fear, or Uncertainty

The group members' reactions will usually be resistance, confusion, fear, or uncertainty. Resistance to what can emerge about oneself, confusion about what is being felt but not understanding

one's feelings, confusion about the dissonance in the group and its source(s), fear of destruction or abandonment of the self, or uncertainty with all of its accompanying terror.

Guiding Assumptions about Group Members

Eight assumptions are made about the group members.

- Each group member has a unique contribution to the dilemma or difficult situation.
- Each member's history and personality is different.
- Members are unaware of the fantasies and fears that may be influencing their responses.
- Some group members may be or are at a crossroads, threshold, or boundary that produces fear and anxiety.
- Developmental tasks such as separation, individuation, and line of narcissistic development, may be incomplete.
- Existential concerns may be influential, acute, or dormant.
- Group members have (use) various means to make sense of their experiencing, and to understand and integrate external and internal forces.
- Dilemmas are introduced as defenses, and the mechanisms used can vary among members.

Members' Unique Contributions

All members contribute to the group's dilemma, and each member makes a unique contribution. Some members can opt for deflecting tactics; some withdraw and are not emotionally present; some may become more active but the activity lacks meaning or purpose; members may engage in conflict that does not get resolved; there can be sniping and unflattering remarks made to and about each other; refusal to explore feelings; and other actions that bring the group to the dilemma. No one person

institutes or maintains the dilemma and it is the group leader's responsibility to recognize each contribution to its maintenance.

Members' Histories and Personalities Differ

This may seem obvious, but it bears repeating. Each member brings a different personality and history to the group, and these too contribute to the dilemma and to their specific reactions. Selecting an intervention under these circumstances can be a challenging endeavor because what might be useful for one member could be so threatening for another member that he or she would retreat even further, or worse. Further, there are family of origin and other past experiences that are influential, but these may not have been revealed leaving the group leader in ignorance, or the member could have repressed them, but they still continue to exert influence.

Unawareness

Members may be unaware of their fears and fantasies that are influencing their reactions. Thus, when asked about their reactions, their responses are not meaningful or helpful. They are unaware and cannot articulate their inner experiencing in ways that others can understand. They resort to noncommittal responses, to telling stories, or not responding, none of which provide the leader with clues to their real concerns.

At a Crossroads

It would not be unusual for some or all group members to be at a psychological crossroads, threshold, or boundary that produces fear and anxiety. These members can dimly sense impending changes, or even be acutely aware that change is inevitable, but still be fearful and anxious about the uncertainty and unknown personal future. Members will also vary in how they accept and

use their inner resources to cope, and will display these in varying ways.

Incomplete Development

Members can display indices of incomplete development, such as separation, individuation, and narcissistic development. Since each member is unique and different, each will be at a different point for each of these lines of development. The expressive processes take these incomplete development statuses into account, and work with each member at his or her particular point of development.

Existential Concerns

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) propose that existential concerns are present in every group regardless of the group's focus, but that these concerns are not always addressed, and some may never be mentioned in some groups. However, there are also groups where some of these concerns, such as death and existential despair, are acute and prominent in the group's discussion. Even when existential concerns are not emphasized, they can still be influential on group members.

Varying Means of Making Sense

Group members will use varying means to try and make sense of their worlds. There are their internal forces that are not completely understood or fully integrated. In addition, there are external forces that impact them over which they have little or no control. For some members this seems chaotic and directionless, and they have trouble sorting through and making sense of them. Others can feel competent to handle one set of forces, but not both at the same time. Others can feel overwhelmed and just shut down. Each member responds in a unique way.

Dilemmas as Defenses

Think of the group's dilemma as a defense mechanism, but what it is defending against is unknown, may be different for each group member, and each uses a different defense mechanism although they collectively share in producing the dilemma. These variations can make it difficult for a group leader to zero in on the commonality because all he or she is presented with are the differences.

Basic Conditions

There are several basic group conditions that guide the use of creative activities; sufficient safety and trust has been developed, there are rules and guidelines for participation and for giving and receiving feedback, the group needs assistance to further its functioning, and a problem solving strategy is needed.

It is critical to develop sufficient safety and trust before conducting most of the described activity. The only exceptions may be when an activity is used to facilitate introduction of members where the activity is nonthreatening and does not call for disclosure of sensitive personal material; or using an activity to just play and have fun. Safety and trust will facilitate self-disclosure by members, and the level to which they are willing to reveal the real self.

Group leaders will usually have collaboratively established rules and guidelines for participation, reviewed these with members to get their commitment, and members will generally know what is expected for communication, disclosure, and providing feedback to each other. It is recommended that members be put in charge of their disclosure to decide when and how much to disclose, and that neither the leader nor other members push for a deeper level of disclosure. It is also helpful if members know that courtesy and civility are expected in their relations and communications with each other, but not to the extent where nothing significant is communicated. Labeling, calling names, being disrespectful, and similar behaviors are to be prohibited and blocked.

Relationships are enhanced when members can be open and direct with each other, but that also carries the responsibility of being tolerant, respectful, and mindful when giving and receiving feedback. It is helpful for the group leader to teach group members constructive ways to provide feedback, and to help members learn how to receive and accept feedback. These competencies will facilitate personal learning from the creative activities.

There are times when the group members need assistance to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings in appropriate ways. One of the reasons that some difficult situations or group dilemmas occur is that members are reluctant to express negative feelings because they fear the fantasized outcomes to be destructive, either to them, to the leader, or to the group. The leader's expertise and use of creative activities can facilitate expression and demonstrate how to do so appropriately. Most of all, members can learn that feedback need not be negative or destructive.

Group members can also learn problem solving through participation in creative activities, especially when things are complex, ambiguous, and uncertain because these occur in the group setting. Demonstrating that there are alternative perspectives, different means to approach a problem or dilemma, and even just the use of creativity can suggest to members that problems need not be overwhelming and frustrating to the point where nothing constructive is accomplished.

Other Assumptions

- The stage of the group is influential, especially when choosing an intervention.
- The group leader's inner experiencing and clinical judgment are critical to resolving difficult situations and dilemmas.
- The therapeutic relationship is also a critical component; the extent of development for the relationship, and the level of trust and safety established in the group.