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Group Exercises For Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem

SiriNam S. Khalsa



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This book evolved from many years of working with diverse groups of individuals who were striving to improve their chances for succeeding in the “real world.” As the exercises presented in this book developed, I was constantly rewarded by the pleasure of working with individuals who were striving to help both themselves and others relate in a more mature and caring fashion.

I cannot possibly acknowledge all of the group participants, mentors, and colleagues whose support helped make this book a reality; however, individual acknowledgements are due to those who most influenced my work and supported the creation of this work.

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FOREWORD

For the human service professional, there is perhaps no greater challenge than working with individuals who require enlargement and refinement of emotional adjustment and social skills as part of treatment. People deficient in self-esteem and social skills often confound traditional therapy because of their limitations in prerequisite verbal ability, capacity for insight, and the psychological mindedness required to translate complex internal processes into adequate behavior for intervention. They are also often vulnerable to or victimized by overwhelming social forces.

For these individuals, group process and peer support has been suggested as one avenue the clinician might explore. Self-advocacy and self-help movements such as Alcoholics Anonymous have been cited as examples of group processes that can effect positive growth and change. Problems rooted in low self-esteem such as addiction could, in theory, be better addressed by group advocacy because the problem behaviors and resistance would be more apparent to peers and hence more immediately confronted. The proliferation of self-help and support groups in our culture bears witness to this point of view.

Yet the popularity and power of group processes by themselves offers no guarantee that social skills and self-esteem can be enhanced. Positive client change through *guided group process* is the paramount interest of the clinician and educator, wherein lies the value of the current work before you.

For every self-help group that purports to address the needs of its membership, there are unregulated examples of group process that may lower self-esteem and put clients at risk. Cults and gangs are just the most publicized examples of group process gone wrong. Clinicians are acutely aware that clients who lack social skills and emotional stability are particularly susceptible to the appeal of disabling groups. Dependency and control within an unregulated group context - be it a dysfunctional family or street gang - is a difficulty the human service worker faces in both individual and group treatment.

For therapists and educators interested in harnessing the therapeutic power of guided group process, Mr. Khalsa's collection is a valuable resource. Geared to the needs of clients with self-esteem and social skill deficits, it provides protocols for unlocking and directing the energy potential in groups. To be effective, group work requires the judicious use of sound behavioral principles and carefully designed formats. SiriNam Khalsa has provided a diverse collection of group process exercises that clearly meet this requirement. Carefully thought-out goal statements and sequenced steps for implementation allow the group leader to provide guidance while letting group members take an active role in their own growth.

It is all the more remarkable that, drawing from sources as diverse as humanistic psychology, communication studies, social work, special education, and organizational development, SiriNam Khalsa has been able to format these exercises in a way that group leaders can apply them to participants with low self-esteem and social skill deficits. The

collection is eclectic to be sure, and is not meant to be a substitute for clinical training in group work. Yet its value lies in the variety of situations that can be profitably brought to bear on a wide range of group participants' needs, be it ordering food in a restaurant appropriately or identifying human values.

The potential of each exercise to be used as an "ice-breaker" in a therapeutic group or as an end in itself is another strong point of the collection. Mr. Khalsa has been careful to adapt the exercises to different levels of social and cognitive competence. He has also provided both verbal and nonverbal options. Written formats are also available, and the exercises could easily be modified for children.

Increasingly, in this age of managed care, there will be a need for greater availability of care with greater efficiency. *Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem* will prove to be a valuable resource for the mental health professional in the management of group process.

Joel Levine, EdD
Psychologist / Author
Amherst, Massachusetts
June 1996

PREFACE

I am delighted to write the “Preface” to *Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem* because I feel it is an important contribution and resource for people in the helping professions. SiriNam Khalsa has developed a diverse collection of group process exercises which enhance the important personal element of self-esteem. Based on his extensive experience as a special educator, counselor, and group leader, the author provides therapists and educators with clear, creative, and effective methods for helping people of all ages help themselves. Each exercise in this valuable book seeks to enhance personal growth through communication and insight in a safe and nonthreatening manner.

Working with groups of differently abled people in a therapeutic and educational modality can be a powerful agent for change, and SiriNam has provided us with an easy-to-follow and effective resource for the beginning as well as experienced group leader.

Helping people to become successful in the art of living as well as prepared for dealing with life’s pressures is an admirable and much-needed job. Enhancing self-esteem as well as supporting social skills awareness is the foundation for all self-growth and therapeutic work. I am aware of most of the published material available for enhancing self-esteem and social skills awareness, and I believe this book is a must for any professional who works with groups in any kind of setting.

Jack Canfield

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Chicken Soup for the Soul and

Self-Esteem in the Classroom

June 1996

INTRODUCTION

Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem is a collection of activities and therapeutic exercises to assist psychotherapists, occupational and recreational therapists, teachers, and other group leaders to be more creative and effective in their group work. These exercises are designed to help a wide range of individuals including those who display depression, hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder (ADD or ADHD), personality or adjustment disorders, developmental disabilities, and general social skills deficits to become aware of acceptable social behaviors and develop proficiencies in improving their social skills.

These exercises encourage the development of the types of prosocial skills that ultimately enhance feelings of well-being and positive self-esteem. These exercises are equally applicable for use in both inpatient and outpatient settings including mental health facilities, residential and day treatment programs, schools, vocational and life skill training programs, rehabilitation and chronic care facilities, and so on.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

All of the exercises in this book are designed to stimulate group members to think creatively, expand their minds, explore their values and beliefs, and safely consider change where change is needed for personal growth. The skills that group members can acquire through these exercises should serve them well in their real day-to-day social environment. These basic social skills are the foundation building blocks for healthy human interactions in all settings. The acquisition of these skills can also be very empowering and beneficial to the self-esteem of all group participants.

The exercises in this book will help group leaders accomplish several important tasks with the group participants:

1. Guide participants in *acquiring an awareness* of what is acceptable social behavior. Each exercise includes a discussion of the importance of the concepts presented and these active discussions will aid in helping participants increase their knowledge and understanding of appropriate behaviors in a prosocial fashion.
2. Provide participants with opportunities for hands-on *practice* of new social skills in a nonthreatening environment.

Based on many years experience leading social skills training groups, I have found that in order for individuals to actually consider changing their behaviors, they need both the *awareness* of appropriate social behaviors and opportunities to *practice* new behavioral alternatives. Only when both elements are present will they learn to *use* their new skills in a personally satisfying and socially appropriate manner. Intellectual understanding of appro-

appropriate behaviors is not sufficient; individuals must also practice performing the new behaviors until they find a behavioral style that is comfortable and rewarding (both personally and socially).

Therefore, one of the tasks for the group leader is the active and deliberate teaching of desirable behaviors on both cognitive and behavioral levels. The leader will also find that these exercises will help group members develop a sense of group connectedness and cooperation. Less verbally expressive members of the group will also be motivated to more actively participate in the group process and will begin to feel more competent and positive as a result of their participation.

ENHANCING SELF-ESTEEM

As will be described below, a primary goal for therapists, teachers, and group leaders is to increase the self-esteem of group participants. This book presents direct, uncomplicated, and nonthreatening exercises to advance that goal.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Before we can identify low self-esteem, we need to understand what self-esteem is. We hear the word a lot these days, but what is it really? How is self-esteem enhanced or eroded in school, at work, in a family system, and during social interactions in the community? What is the relationship between self-esteem and antisocial behavior? What is the role of self-esteem in assisting group members to become what Abraham Maslow called the “self-actualized person” and the “fully human person”? (Maslow, 1962).

Self-esteem affects virtually every facet of our life. Self-esteem refers to how highly we value ourselves. It comes from collective thoughts, feelings, and experiences we have had and continue to have about ourselves throughout life. Self-esteem has been defined by the National Association for Self-Esteem as follows: “*Self-esteem is the experience of being capable of managing life’s challenges and being worthy of happiness*” (1995). People who feel good about themselves usually express their feelings in their behavior as well as in an openness to learn and grow from life’s lessons. They are more able to meet and solve the problems, stresses, and responsibilities of life with confidence.

SIGNS OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

People can manifest low self-esteem in many ways. They may not even be aware that they do not feel good about themselves, though they know something is wrong.

A pioneer in self-esteem research, Nathaniel Branden (1969), explains it this way:

Consider that if an individual felt inadequate to face the challenges of life, if an individual lacked fundamental self-trust, confidence in his or her mind, we would recognize the presence of a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other assets he or she possessed. Or if an individual lacked a basic sense of self-respect, or felt undeserving of love, unentitled to happiness, fearful of asserting thoughts, feelings or needs - again we would recognize a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other positive attributes he or she exhibited. (p. 22)

Some common signs of low self-esteem are whining, needing to win, cheating in games, perfectionism, and exaggerated bragging; resorting to numerous attention-getting behaviors such as clowning, acting overly silly, teasing, complaining, and exhibiting both verbal and physical aggression; being self-critical, overpleasing, criticism avoidant, withdrawn, blaming,

always apologizing, and fearful of success and new experiences; over- and underreacting, being unable to make choices or solve problems; expressing a narrow range of emotions and feelings, demeaning one's own talents, avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, and exhibiting antisocial behaviors.

Dealing directly with group members' self-esteem to promote healthy, socially accepted behaviors as opposed to using external punishers and reinforcers is analogous to curing illness by treating the cause rather than providing temporary relief by treating the symptoms. The exercises in this book can assist the group leader as well as empower group participants to directly promote self-esteem and prosocial skills. In a controlled study in three school districts (Reasoner, 1992), the use of a self-esteem program based on systematic training was found to significantly reduce the incidence of antisocial behavior in schools.

When people exhibit poor social skills and low self-esteem, the process of regaining their self-confidence to change behaviors and attitudes takes time. With consistent focus, the group leader can create opportunities for all group members to get in touch with their own potency and feel comfortable in their group environment as well as in themselves. *Group Exercises for Enhancing Social Skills and Self-Esteem* can help people give up negative self-messages and develop positive ones.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

This book provides the group leader with a series of structured exercises that promote dynamic positive group interactions and learning experiences. Most exercises are accompanied by an activity sheet which will serve as the catalyst for group discussions and interactions. Step-by-step instructions for the group are also included with each exercise. This format enables the group leader to "teach to the objective" in a way that is not only easier and more efficient in terms of effort and time, but also fulfills prevailing clinical and educational needs for accountability.

The following suggestions should be considered when using these exercises:

1. Before beginning each group session, identify your goals for that session, select appropriate exercises to further those goals, and review the instructions for those exercises. Make sure you have sufficient quantities of all required materials to conduct the exercises; the necessary materials are listed at the beginning of each exercise.
2. State the purpose of each exercise before it begins. This will focus both the leader and the group on the goals for the session and will help participants understand the benefits of active participation. If group members regard an exercise as meaningful in their lives, they are far more likely to be active participants who learn from the experience.
3. The description of each exercise acts as a basic road map that will assist the leader in "teaching to the objective." Each group discussion description provides in-depth directions on how the leader can promote verbal interaction, skill enhancement, and group cooperation.
4. The leader may periodically want to modify an exercise to insure that it more effectively addresses the needs of group members. Many of the exercises include suggestions for possible variations and adaptations.
5. In my experience, understanding and acceptance of the concept of diversity can best be accomplished by forming groups in which group members represent a wide range of abilities, interests, aptitudes, and backgrounds. Such heterogeneous grouping is preferred while simultaneously attempting to form a homogeneous group with respect to shared social skill deficits.

6. Participants learn best when they have an emotional investment in what is being taught. For that reason, many of the exercises in this book are “open ended” in a way that permits the leader to encourage participants to attach personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions to them.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Dishon and Wilson O’Leary (1994) present a *cooperative learning* model that increases the effectiveness of the learning environment when teaching academic and social skills, as well as democratic values.

The therapeutic exercises presented in this book adhere to the basic principles of *cooperative learning models*:

1. *Heterogeneous Grouping*. The most effective groups are varied in terms of social background, cognitive skill levels, gender, and physical capabilities. The group is randomly formed or selected by the group leader to insure heterogeneity.
2. *Social Skills Acquisition*. Social skills or the ability to work cooperatively are learned skills that can be directly taught. As group participants practice the skill-building exercises, discuss the process, and observe the group interactions, they learn cooperative social skills.

Although group leaders can effectively use the exercises in this book without extensive training in group process or the concepts of cooperative learning, references are included for those readers who may want to learn more about the principles and implementation of cooperative group strategies.

YOUR ROLE AS GROUP LEADER

The group leader needs to:

1. Diagnose and understand the needs of group members including their social skill deficits and dimensions of their self-esteem.
2. Introduce exercises and facilitate meaningful group activities and discussion. It is essential that the leader be adequately prepared for each group session. This includes thoughtful consideration of the goals for the session, needs of group members, and how to teach to the objective, as well as preparation for leading the group in the specific exercises chosen for the session.
3. Know when to observe and when to guide the group process.
4. Facilitate discussion with both large and small groups.
5. Adapt the content and process of each session and each exercise to the specific needs of the group and the members of the group.
6. Introduce each exercise in a way that “sets the stage” for the participants and prepares them for the task that follows. It is critically important that all group members understand what they are being asked to do. If some members don’t understand, the leader might encourage other group members to help increase their understanding. Such mentoring by group members increases group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the group learning process.

7. Expect to see an increased awareness among group members of their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. The effective group leader learns to tap into this awareness to help group members increase their self-awareness, sense of self (including self-esteem), and positive behaviors.

Here are some additional thoughts and suggestions for the novice group leader:

1. Choose the setting for the group carefully. When participants are in a comfortable and relaxed environment, they will typically behave in a more relaxed fashion and will be more comfortable in expressing themselves. Consider having group members sit in a circle, because this arrangement promotes eye contact, interaction, and cohesiveness.
2. In general, restrain your urge to fill silence with questions or recounting of personal experiences. It sometimes takes time and a little silent support for group members to collect their thoughts, recall personal experiences, convey their feelings, and think about what they want to say. Be patient.
3. Encourage all group members to participate by making the group a safe and supportive place for all members to express themselves. Establish a climate within the group where all members always have the freedom to respond, or not respond, without fear of judgment, sanction, or pressure from others.
4. Trust is an essential ingredient for furthering human relationships. In order for the group to progress in pursuing the goals and reaching the objectives of these exercises, the group leader must foster the development of a climate of trust in which group members feel genuine caring and empathy.

USING THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS

The exercises in this book rely heavily upon the expressive mediums of writing, drawing, painting, sculpting, and role-playing to facilitate changes in social skills and self-concept. Although some of the exercises in this book incorporate elements of traditional symbolic teaching (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$), the emphasis in most of the exercises is on experiential learning using inexpensive mediums. Abraham Maslow identified “learning one’s identity” as an essential ingredient for personal change. He stressed that psychoeducation that incorporates the expressive arts “can be a glimpse into one’s ultimate values” (Maslow, 1962). In my experience, integrating the use of the expressive arts into social skills training provides nonthreatening modalities for helping group members discover their hidden abilities and increase their sense of self-worth.

The director of the New England Art Therapy Institute, Dale Schwartz, believes that using art as an expressive medium can provide people of all ages and learning styles with concrete images that help them reflect and find the power to change. She also stated that “the use of the expressive arts helps us express feelings and ideas for which we might not have words. It also gives us a safe way to express ourselves” (D. Schwartz, 1995, New England Art Therapy Institute).

When introducing these exercises, remind participants that artistic talent is not important; instead, stress that what is important is the willingness of all group members to freely express themselves. The group leader should also emphasize the noncompetitive and nonjudgmental nature of these exercises and insure compliance with that mandate. Edith Kramer emphasized that “when self-esteem is low, competition does not act as a stimulus; it leads to despair” (1971).

SELECTING EXERCISES

The listing below suggests exercises that might be most helpful for the various stages in the group process. It also includes the types and ages of participants that might benefit most from each exercise.

Exercises especially effective for groups in their early stages of development

Exercises 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, 25, 31, 36, 38

Exercises especially effective for groups in their later stages of development

Exercises 2, 6, 9, 12, 17, 18, 23, 27, 32, 34, 35, 37, 45, 51, 52, 55, 56.

Exercises especially effective for groups in any stage of development

Exercises 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29, 30, 33, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 57, 58, 59, 60

Exercises especially effective for groups with participants displaying hyperactivity or Attention Deficit Disorders (ADD or ADHD)

Exercises 7, 11, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 30, 39, 40, 49, 53, 54, 58, 59

Exercises especially effective for younger aged group participants

Exercises 2, 3, 7, 25, 43, 53

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**Group Exercises
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Social Skills and
Self-Esteem**

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EXERCISE 1

Connecting Circle

Purpose:

1. To facilitate group cohesiveness and relationship building.
2. To develop active listening skills.
3. To increase memory skills.

Materials:

None.

Description:

- A. The group members are asked to sit in a large circle. The group leader explains that one way to help remember someone's name is by associating it with something about them. An example is given: "My name is Phyllis Vita and I love to cook Italian food."
- B. The leader then introduces himself or herself and states a personal hobby or special interest in the preceding format. The participants are asked to take turns doing the same and then repeat the name and hobby of the group member who preceded them.
- C. This is continued until all group members have introduced themselves and stated a special interest.

Group Discussion:

- If a group participant cannot remember all the names and/or special interests of the preceding group members, he or she should be encouraged to ask each participant their name and special interest.
- This exercise can be a lot of fun but can also create some anxiety among participants with a short attention span or poor memory skills. The group leader should be aware of participants' disabilities and create a supportive atmosphere by explaining the option of asking each member their name and special interest.
- This exercise is especially effective as an icebreaker for the beginning of a group session.