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GROUP WORK WITH OLDER ADULTS

*85 Therapeutic Exercises for
Reminiscence, Validation,
and Remotivation*

ANN L. LINK



Professional Resource Press
Sarasota, Florida

Published by Professional Resource Press
(An Imprint of Professional Resource Exchange, Inc.)
Post Office Box 3197
Sarasota, FL 34230-3197
www.prpress.com

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Printed in the United States of America

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E-mail: cs@prpress.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Link, Ann L., date.
Group work with older adults : 85 therapeutic exercises for reminiscence, validation, and remotivation / Ann L. Link.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-13: 978-1-56887-149-3
ISBN-10: 1-56887-149-X
1. Group psychotherapy for older people. 2. Occupational therapy for older people. 3. Social work with older people. I.
Title.
RC451.4.A5L556 2014
618.97'89152--dc23

2013031728

Let's Talk

I roam a landscape of the past,
I wander hallways looking for a friend.
I turn a corner, try a door,
I whisper secrets as I pace the floor.
I long for a familiar smile,
I hide my loneliness behind a yawn.
Come talk with me a little while,
Let's share some tales
Before the day is gone.

Ann Link

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Group Work With Older Adults offers 85 exercises to broaden group topics relevant to aging. Some of these exercises have been updated from those that appeared in Dr. Link's earlier publication, *Group Work With Elders*, published in 1997. Many are brand new. This book is designed to aid therapists and trained group facilitators who conduct discussion groups for geriatric clients. Exercises in the book combine important geriatric therapy techniques of Reminiscence, Validation, and Remotivation to energize group discussion and foster renewal of hope.

Group participation is a therapeutic tool which is widely supported by experts in the field of geriatrics (Haight & Gibson, 2005). Structured exercises and instructions for group leaders in this book focus on issues pertinent to the aging process such as coping with loss, physical illness, and decline in independence. Illustrated handouts increase opportunities for participation among group members who have varying levels of cognitive and physical functioning.

BENEFITS OF GROUP

Curative elements of group work described by Yalom and Molyn (1995) apply to elder populations. The benefits of catharsis, universality, guidance, instillation of hope, group cohesiveness, and interpersonal learning are especially valuable to older group members. Illness, loss of loved ones, and declines in independence increase the likelihood of depression, isolation, and diminished self-worth. Group therapy provides beneficial social interaction, support in coping with frustration, and validation of feelings (Husaini et al., 2004). In many cases, group participation helps to reduce isolation and lack of relatedness. The exercises are designed to increase feelings of belonging and community. Group members who have a reduced sense of identity and experience confusion may strengthen their reality focus and coping skills through group participation.

SPECIFIC THERAPEUTIC USES OF THE EXERCISES

VENTILATION AND VALIDATION OF FEELINGS

Group participation helps to validate and affirm feelings and experiences of older adults (Toseland, 1990). Interacting with peers who express similar concerns and emotional reactions encourages group members in their efforts to cope with adverse life experiences. Feeling heard, understood, and accepted are major building blocks to self-esteem in the elderly. Relating to the emotional tone of communication is often more important than focusing on content (Feil & Klerk-Rubin, 2002).

Many exercises encourage artistic expression which enhances communication and is therapeutic for emotional pain and suffering. Depending on their limitations, some members may be able to communicate more fully by using colors or drawing to express their feelings which can be a healing experience. There

is not a solution or cure for many challenges of old age, but healing can still continue on an emotional and spiritual level (Malchiodi, 2002).

REMINISCENCE

Many exercises in this book are designed to trigger reminiscence, which is a valuable tool in helping the elderly client review life events to gain perspective, derive meaning, and work toward resolution (Haight & Gibson, 2005). Erickson (1998) describes the tasks of later life as developing integrity and wisdom versus despair. Research has shown that group reminiscence therapy reduces depression and increases cognitive function (Wang, 2007). Relating to others in a meaningful way is important stimulation for the brain. Members share past accomplishments, explore disappointments, and arrive at new viewpoints.

REMOTIVATION AND INSTILLATION OF HOPE

The older adult in a residual setting often has difficulty investing interest in his or her present environment, which leads to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. During supportive group interaction, members become better acquainted with each other and increase their awareness of possible interests and activities available in their living situation. Positive group interaction can increase self-esteem, motivation, and a sense of hope (Dyer & Stotts, 2005).

INTERPERSONAL LEARNING

Coping with stress is a never-ending life task. Reviewing past coping skills encourages members in their efforts to deal with frustration and adapt to change (Toseland, 1990). Listening to others in a group describe coping skills and survival techniques promotes interpersonal learning. We now understand that the brain has a property called neuroplasticity, the ability to change its structure and patterns of activity in significant ways not only in childhood, but also in adulthood and throughout life (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Opportunities are presented in the exercises to learn coping behaviors in a supportive atmosphere. Members are encouraged to think of solutions to problems in a new way.

GROUP COHESION AND RELATEDNESS

Loss of loved ones and weakening of social ties often lead to feelings of worthlessness and isolation for the elderly. Making new connections with people is difficult; however, feelings of relatedness and belonging enhance self-esteem and increase motivation for living. Group provides the opportunity to offer altruistic support to others which increases feelings of self-worth (Agronin, 2009). The exercises presented in this book are designed to foster group cohesion and interaction in a nonthreatening, therapeutic format.

SUGGESTIONS AND PRECAUTIONS FOR GROUP LEADERS

INTRODUCTION TO THE GROUP

Many elders may not be open to the idea of a mental health therapy group, feeling that there is a stigma attached to participation. Members often prefer to call the group a "class" or simply a "discussion group." The purpose of the group might be explained as an opportunity to become better acquainted, share ideas, and learn from each other's experiences.

SELECTION OF MEMBERS

Although a structured group process can sustain varying levels of cognitive functioning and is beneficial for many elders, it is not appropriate for everyone. Group participation may be counterproductive for

highly disruptive individuals, persons who cannot allow others to have their turn at speaking, or members who wander off while the group is in session.

GROUP SETTING

Seating around a square or round table where members can see each other is recommended. A private or semiprivate atmosphere encourages disclosure. Some group leaders include a snack or beverage at the end of the session to encourage relatedness and a sense of belonging.

GROUP FORMAT

Structured group formats are often effective for geriatric populations because they generate interaction, provide focus, stimulate reminiscence, and promote inclusion. Flexibility should allow for unstructured discussion as well. Some leaders alternate structured groups with unstructured groups. Other leaders allow time at the beginning of each group session to deal with immediate concerns of group members, such as illness, situational events, natural disasters, and so forth. It is important to stay in touch with the needs of group members to ensure that the group experience is relevant and valuable.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Members are encouraged to respect each other's privacy and refrain from revealing information learned within the group to persons outside the group.

GROUP LEADER'S ROLE

Inclusion is very important in working with older adults in groups (Haight & Gibson, 2005). Each member should be welcomed at every session, and members' names should be used profusely throughout the sessions. The leader should be instrumental in preventing any individual from dominating the group. Each member should have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Group members should be encouraged, but not pressured, to participate in the exercises. Members need to feel in control of how much or how little they divulge. Each contribution should be acknowledged. Modeling a supportive, accepting attitude while maintaining appropriate boundaries and structure is a key element to successful group leadership and may help members to generalize these attitudes outside of the group.

MEMBERS WITH IMPAIRMENTS

Many groups for the elderly will include members who have some degree of impairment which impedes communication. The goal of the group leader is to enhance individual participation to maximize each member's potential for interaction. It may not be realistic that each member relate to every aspect of an exercise. A more realistic goal is to use techniques in leading the group that maximize each individual's potential for interaction. Some members will benefit from the entire scope of an exercise, while other members may relate only to a portion of the exercise, such as reminiscence connected to the illustration. It is imperative that the leader model an accepting attitude toward individual differences. This is accomplished by focusing on the member's contribution rather than directing attention to some part of the exercise the member has not been able to complete. For example, if a group member declines to complete most of an exercise, but colors some part of the illustration, the leader may encourage interaction by saying something like: "Mary, I notice that you have colored the roof of the well red. I'm wondering if this has some special meaning for you?" Mary, in turn, may respond with reminiscence of a red-roofed well in her past. The feeling tone of colors and drawings can be commented on in a supportive manner, making sure to always check out the validity of impressions with the group member. It is important to emphasize the importance of expression of feelings rather than artistic talent (Malchiodi, 2002). Drawing and color enhance communication, but each exercise can also be used effectively with verbal or written participation.

Some of the exercises have optional suggestions for songs to enhance reminiscence. Research has shown that music is an important stimulant for the brain that significantly improves recall (Larkin, 2001).

Members with memory problems can sometimes relate to a familiar tune or lyric more easily than to illustrations or printed material. Suggestions for accompanying songs are optional and each exercise can also be effectively used without music.

A main function of a therapeutic group is to foster meaningful interaction and a sense of belonging. Exercise sheets are to be used as a guide and stimulus for participation, not as mandatory assignments. Members may fill out as much or as little of an exercise sheet as they desire. Whether or not they read or write, each member is given an exercise sheet as a symbol of inclusion. Words are provided in the exercises for those who like to read and write. In some cases, members respond more fully by writing than by talking. It is important to describe pictures and read sentences aloud to include members who do not see well or cannot read or write. These individuals are included in the discussion as members are encouraged to share their ideas verbally.

Persons who are hard of hearing often appreciate visual and written guidelines included in the exercise sheets. These members may also be seated near the leader to facilitate hearing. It is always important for the leader to speak clearly and distinctly, repeating questions and directions as needed.

CONFUSED OR DELUSIONAL MEMBERS

Severely disturbed individuals who cannot focus and who interrupt others continually are not appropriate for inclusion in a group. Members who are able to focus to some extent and are moderately confused or delusional can benefit from a group if the leader provides appropriate structure and support. Most exercises feature a concrete, familiar topic to help strengthen a reality focus; thus, if a confused group member strays from the topic, bringing up unrelated or delusional ideas, the leader may gently redirect the discussion back to the topic. For example, the leader might respond, "Bob, you have described ideas about spacemen. Today our topic is food. Can you name some foods you like?"

If the delusional response refers to the topic, the leader can show understanding for the feeling tone of the response without directly confirming or disputing the content of the remark. For example, Alice may assert that her mother poisoned the family's bread when she baked. The leader might respond, "Alice, it sounds like you felt distrustful of eating bread your mother baked." The leader may also redirect toward a positive focus by asking questions, such as, "Was there any bread you felt comfortable eating?" or "When did you enjoy eating bread?" Directly disputing a delusional response may cause a member to feel misunderstood and defensive. Acknowledging the emotion behind a delusional statement provides support and encourages communication (Feil & Klerk-Rubin, 2002).

MEMORY PROBLEMS

It is important that the group leader deal with participants' memory problems in a supportive manner to lessen feelings of inadequacy. Several techniques are helpful in maintaining participation when a group member cannot recall something asked for in an exercise. The leader can ask for voluntary responses by asking, "Who would like to share a memory they have about baking bread?" Members who do not respond to this question may be asked related questions that do not require as much memory, such as, "Mary, do you like bread with your meals?" Asking questions in a multiple-choice format helps to trigger memories; for example, the leader may encourage a response by asking, "Bob, what do you like better, home-baked bread or store-bought bread?" (Feil & Klerk-Rubin, 2002).

Another technique that encourages responses is to involve the group. For example, if a member is asked to name a romantic person and responds, "I don't know" or "I don't remember," the leader may ask the group for help by saying, "Who can suggest people Alice may have found romantic?" Suggestions might include Alice's husband, Paul Newman, and so on. The leader then thanks the group for their suggestions and asks Alice if any of the suggestions match her idea of a romantic person. This is a variation on the multiple-choice format that often elicits a response. It is helpful to remember that the most important function of any exercise is to encourage expression and a feeling of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Leading groups for geriatrics is greatly enhanced by use of these exercises. Complex tasks of aging deserve the special emphasis featured in this book. Coming to terms with the meaning of life in its final stages can be lonely and overwhelming. Meeting with others to share feelings, experiences, and ideas for coping reduces isolation and despair. Group facilitators take on the rewarding challenge of inspiring older adults in their psychological struggle to attain integrity and preserve dignity.

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Exercise 1

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Purpose:

- Share memories about travel to increase feelings of belonging.
- Open up feelings about places and events of the past.

Materials:

A copy of the illustration for each group member; pencils, crayons, or fine-line colored felt pens.

Optional: A recording of the song "Sentimental Journey."

Procedure:

1. Materials are distributed and the sentence fragment is read aloud.
2. Members are asked to describe travel modes and locations in the picture.
3. Members who wish may color the picture or add other details.
4. If available, a recording of the song "Sentimental Journey" is played.

Group Discussion:

Group members are asked to share memories about the song and places they have lived or visited. The group leader encourages members to share about trips made for schooling, vacations, weddings, funerals, or other important life events. Sharing personal history increases group cohesion and reduces isolation.

The group leader asks members to share their pictures and sentences about where they would like to take a sentimental journey and why that trip would have special memories for them. Reminiscence and expression of feelings reduces depression and enhances cognitive functioning.

Sentimental Journey



5

5

If I took a sentimental journey, I would travel to: _____

Exercise 33

PLEASE MR. POSTMAN

Purpose:

- Share memories about important communications.
- Encourage communication to reduce feelings of isolation.

Materials:

One photocopy of the illustration for each group member; pencils, crayons, or fine-line colored felt pens. **Optional:** A recording of the song, "Please Mr. Postman."

Procedure:

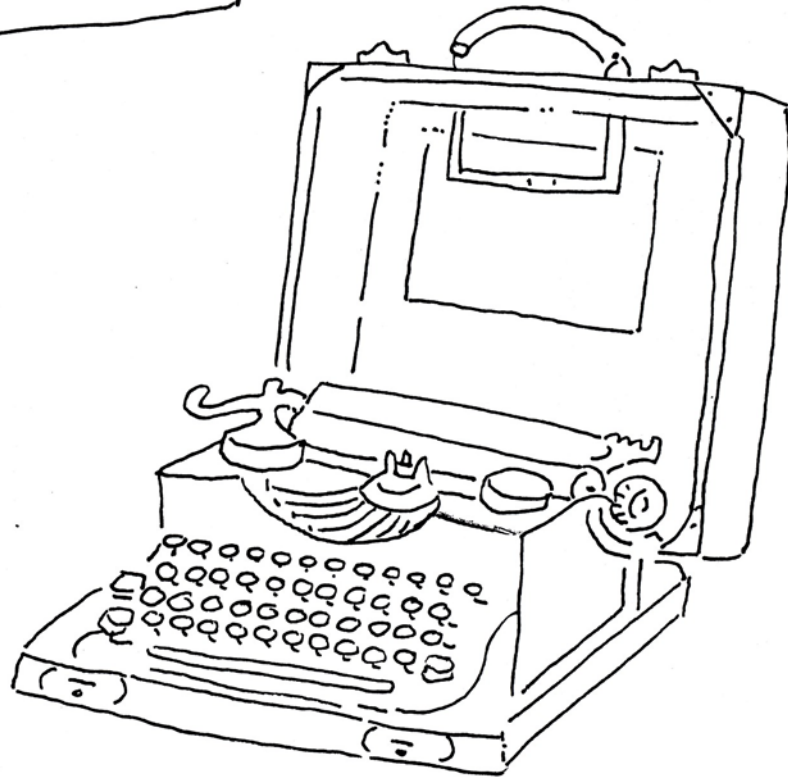
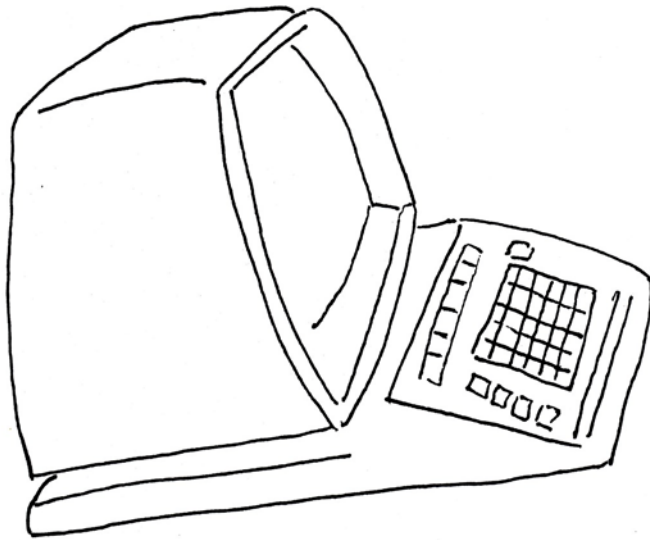
1. Materials are distributed and the caption is read aloud.
2. Members are asked to identify the pictures and think of memories about written communication.
3. The sentence fragments are read aloud and members are asked to fill in the blanks. Those who wish may add pictures associated with writing or color the picture.
4. The song, "Please Mr. Postman" may be played if available.

Group Discussion:

Members share their memories about the illustration of the manual typewriter and the early computer. Members may tell how they learned to type and share memories about the manual typewriter, such as dealing with keys sticking, mistakes, and changing the ribbon. Members who use computers may share their experience of writing on the computer or their frustrations using computers. Some members may share about their experiences with early computers, e-mail, or Facebook.

Members are asked if they recall the song, "Please Mr. Postman" about someone waiting for a letter. Members share their pictures and tell about letters they received and people they would write to. The leader reflects on the fact that people communicate less and less by letter as opposed to phone, text, and e-mail. Group members share feelings about these current trends. Some members may share stories about reconnecting with someone from the past. The leader encourages members to reach out to someone with whom they would like to connect. Ideas might include calling distant friends or family members or sending a thank-you card to someone who has been helpful. At a future group meeting, members share about their experiences of trying to contact someone and any replies they received. Encouraging communication reduces isolation and self-absorption.

Please Mr. Postman



An important letter I received: _____

If I wrote to someone, I would write to: _____

Exercise 34

WEARING DIFFERENT HATS

Purpose:

- Share personal history to strengthen identity and self-esteem.
- Practice listening to others to promote understanding and relatedness.

Materials:

One photocopy of the illustration for each group member; pencils, crayons, or fine-line colored felt pens.

Procedure:

1. Materials are passed out and the caption is read aloud.
2. Members are asked to tell what they think the saying, "Wearing different hats" could mean.
3. Members are asked to circle, color, or draw different hats they have worn.
4. The sentence fragment is read aloud and members who write are asked to fill in the blank with a hat they have worn or a different role they have played in life.

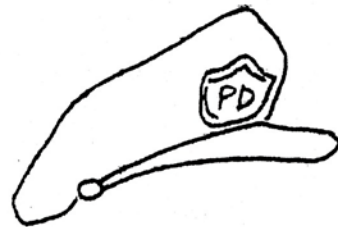
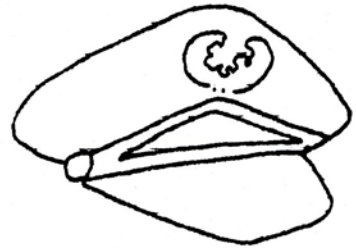
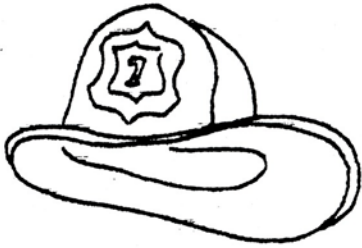
Group Discussion:

Members are asked to share their pictures and memories about the hats pictured in the illustration or one they have drawn. Group members may recall when hats were an important part of a person's wardrobe. The leader can ask members if they had a favorite hat, what color the hat was, and whether it had feathers or other special decorations.

The leader explains that wearing different hats can mean functioning in different roles. For example, a person might work as a teacher and also function as a wife and mother. Members are asked to share about different roles they have played in life.

Members are encouraged to ask each other questions about the information that has been shared to practice showing interest in other peoples' lives. Sharing information and listening to others increases feelings of belonging.

Wearing Different Hats



A different hat I've worn: _____