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CREATIVE THERAPY: 52 EXERCISES FOR GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

WHO SHOULD USE THIS BOOK?

Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups was designed as a practical guide to assist psychotherapists, group leaders, and specially trained teachers in mental health facilities, nursing homes, day programs, inpatient psychiatric units, special education programs, and support groups. It may be used as an adjunct to the psychotherapeutic treatment of such varied problems as Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, mental retardation, and depression.

This how-to book contains 52 therapeutic exercises complete with illustrations that may be photocopied for group members. For both new and experienced group leaders, this book explains methods of energizing a group, and takes the reader through the stages for effective implementation of these structured exercises. We have been successfully using these original materials for many years in a major New York City long-term care hospital. We find that these exercises can help group members develop interactive skills, motivate less verbal individuals to contribute to group discussions, and encourage group cohesiveness. The exercise serves as an avenue to therapeutic discussions of important issues that might not be reached through other techniques.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK?

Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups is presented in an uncomplicated fashion so that the exercises will be nonthreatening to group members. The format allows the leader to refer to directions for each group meeting, and photocopy the accompanying illustration, which becomes each members' worksheet. In each exercise members complete a picture that focuses on a particular theme. A discussion follows in which the members discuss what their completed pictures reveal about themselves. The illustrations are intentionally simple to encourage participants to express themselves as freely as possible.

HOW DO YOU USE THIS BOOK?

Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups takes structured exercises for groups beyond the usual verbal techniques. The worksheet provided with each exercise serves as a springboard to discussion for group members. Each exercise is accompanied by a step-by-step set of instructions for the group leader.

Group members sit at a table, preferably in a circle. The leader hands out photocopies of the chosen exercise to members at the beginning of the session. The leader should seek to involve members immediately by asking about the picture.

The group leader introduces the theme, describes the exercise according to the instructions that accompany each drawing, and asks for feedback and comments from the group members. This initial discussion should be used to prepare the members for the task that follows.

Next, group members are given a time frame and directed to "fill in" or complete the exercise with their responses. Additional supplies such as crayons, markers, or pencils may be handed out at this time.

It is important to be certain everyone has a clear understanding of the task. If questions are asked, it is recommended that members be encouraged to ask each other to paraphrase the instructions. In this way members are kept actively involved and can be helpful to one another.

Setting up a time frame is an important aspect of the structured exercise. These projects work best if the group members understand how much time is set aside for drawing, and how much time is for discussion. For example, in a 1 hour group, 20 minutes might be used for explanation and drawing, and 40 minutes for discussion.

These exercises should be nonthreatening. To reduce anxiety, group leaders should explain that content is more important than artistic talent. The drawings are used to promote discussion. Some members may be resistant to drawing because of self-consciousness or physical limitations. Encouragement is helpful, but too much encouragement may become stressful. An alternative is to avoid adding extra pressure by allowing anxious members to write rather than draw their interpretations.

Group discussion immediately follows the drawing period. The leader should state a few minutes ahead of time when this will take place. Once group discussion begins, all members' comments should then be directed to the group as a whole.

Members are asked to volunteer to discuss their interpretations. The leader becomes a catalyst to promote and encourage verbal interaction, and to help focus the discussion. As members see one another present and receive feedback, more may volunteer to discuss their work.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Projective art tasks introduce ideas that provide encouragement to groups searching for a common theme (Dalley, 1984). In addition, these structured exercises have a variety of other uses: to initiate members into a group process; as a warm-up technique; to help a group work through a particular stage in its development; to enhance group members' abilities to interact and share freely; to focus on a specific group need; and to help reduce group members' anxiety and uncertainty. It must be understood however, that they are intended as a tool - as one part of a total approach to meet the goals of a particular group.

Structured exercises are a way of accelerating group interaction. Getting in touch with suppressed emotions helps the group as a whole as well as the individual members. Specific exercises may be chosen to help the group work through a particular problem (Hansen, Warner, & Smith, 1980).

Yalom (1983) describes the use of structured exercises with lower-level, inpatient psychotherapy groups. These groups often consist of members with a limited attention span, fearfulness, and confusion. Structured exercises may help such members express themselves. The use of art or drawing exercises is especially helpful in fostering self-expression. These exercises may also stimulate group interest and provide variety. We believe the exercises in *Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups* are very effective with this type of group.

Structured exercises also help insure that no one dominates, that everyone has an opportunity to speak. A balance of verbal input is created. Monopolistic members must develop self-control to allow other members to have their turns. Shy or nonverbal members profit from the required participation, such as described by Levin and Kurtz (1974). The authors studied the effects of structured exercises in human relations groups and concluded that the inactive person benefits from a change in behavioral expectations. Greater opportunity for participation generates more ego-involvement, self-perceived personality changes, and increased group unity.

How does group therapy help group members? Feedback from one's peers, if properly channeled, can be a potent therapeutic force, promoting qualitative changes in self-expression, growth toward self-actualization, and changes in interpersonal behavior.

In his classic work on group psychotherapy, Yalom identifies key curative factors associated with the group process. We believe that many of the exercises included in this book facilitate the curative process. Generally, the exercises encourage sharing and development of trust among group members. The drawings illustrate common fears and anxieties and allow group members to see how each of them share many of the same concerns. Through the use of the illustrations, members are encouraged to support each other's needs and find solutions to problems. Skilled therapists will strategically use the exercises to support the development of other curative factors within the group.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THESE EXERCISES?

Through experience, we have found these exercises and materials to be of value. It is important, however, to realize the limitations of their use as well. As we have said, these exercises are to be used as a springboard to discussion; as an adjunct to other therapies.

Yalom (1985) describes possible negative effects structured exercises can have on groups. He suggests, for example, that they can create an atmosphere where critical stages of group interaction may be passed over. Structured exercises may also plunge the group members into sharing significant negative and positive feelings too quickly. In addition, the group leader may be too heavily relied upon by the members. This dissipates the group's potential effectiveness as a therapeutic agent.

The Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles encounter group project (1973) studied how structured exercises influence groups. The leaders who used relatively large numbers of structured exercises with their groups were often more popular with group members. These same group members were found to have a significantly lower outcome level than members participating in groups using fewer structured exercises.

There must be a balance to the use of structured exercises. The degree to which they should be used must be carefully weighed by the group leader, otherwise the leader runs the risk of reducing the group's potential, and infantilizing the members. Some factors that determine the amount and type of structuring to be employed are the type of group, member characteristics, and the leader's theoretical orientation (M.S. Corey & G. Corey, 1987).

Additionally, the group leader should keep in mind three of the considerations noted by Pfeiffer and Jones (1983). First, structured exercises should address the specific goals and purposes of the group. The leader should choose exercises directed at interest, concerns, or problems of individual members or of the group as a whole. Second, a more than casual understanding of the members is important, because revelation and exploration of fantasy can be threatening and anxiety-provoking. Less threatening exercises are recommended for groups with anxious or guarded members to promote openness rather than defensiveness. Third, different issues surface at various stages of group development. Groups will function best when the level of feedback expected corresponds to the developmental stage of the group. In early stages of group development, exercises that focus on openness and building trust are more appropriate. Exercises that focus on critical feedback and appraisal will be more successful in the later stages of group development.

CONCLUSION

Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups is rewarding to both the group leader and the group members. The structured exercises in this book make it easier for group members to focus ideas, feelings, and experiences related to the topic of discussion. Members further benefit from revealing themselves, exchanging feedback, and supporting one another emotionally.

The purpose of this book, however, is first and foremost to help group leaders, therapists, and teachers conduct their groups by providing a framework for successful group experiences.

Through the use of specific suggestions, we describe the procedures necessary for group leaders to handle the widest variety of group therapy applications. In addition, the use of these exercises may also help to alert group leaders to issues for further exploration in individual counseling or other group therapies.

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Exercise 1

THE PATH

Purpose:

1. To provide the opportunity for self-disclosure.
2. To share fantasies in order to promote heightened awareness of self and others.

Materials:

One photocopy of the illustration for each member; crayons or markers.

Description:

- A. The group leader asks members to explore the reasons different places appeal to different people.
- B. While handing out the materials, the leader describes this exercise as an opportunity for members to show the group a place they've been to or would like to visit.
- C. Each member is told to draw himself or herself on the path.
- D. Members draw in a traveling companion (this other person may be someone from the past or the present).

Group Discussion:

Members are encouraged to reveal themselves by describing their drawing. The group is engaged in a discussion of what the choice of destination and companion reveal about each member. Some members may describe an imagined destination.

Often, this exercise evolves into a reminiscence group, as members tell about an actual place they have visited or lived in. The leader encourages members to question and comment about related events and feelings.

It is interesting to explore the personal qualities of the chosen traveling companion. Is it someone the group member is close to, or would like to be close to?

The self-revelation involved in this exercise is relatively nonthreatening. This makes it appropriate for groups in the early stages of development.

Exercise 2

TIME MACHINE

Purpose:

1. To share memories and compare experiences.
2. To promote empathy.
3. To incorporate group feedback into self-evaluation.

Materials:

One photocopy of the illustration for each member; crayons or markers.

Description:

- A. The leader asks the group to talk about the fantasy of living life over and doing things differently.
- B. While handing out the materials, the leader tells members to imagine returning to a time in their lives that they would like to change.
- C. The group is told to draw the event not as it really happened, but how it might have been if things were different.
- D. Members include what they should have done to achieve this altered past.

Group Discussion:

First, each member shares the actual past event or experience. Then they reveal how they changed the past. Empathy is promoted by encouraging others to understand why each person would have preferred the changed event or experience. Members are encouraged to give advice on other ways they could have changed the past.

This exercise is most effective with groups that are well integrated, and able to benefit from critical feedback.

Variation:

Members choose a positive period in their life that they would like to relive. Group discussion and feedback focuses on understanding the significance of those events.

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Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups

TIME
MACHINE

