



# INTRODUCTION

The group experience is an ideal forum for psycho-educational learning. We are social beings, and a group situation allows opportunities to improve social skills, learn from others, practice skills with others, and develop confidence and improve self-esteem by mastering important life skills in a social context. Group activities provide the forum for skill building in a supportive environment to practice skills and get feedback and support. The group setting is not only an ideal forum for learning social skills and improving the ability to connect with others in a meaningful way, it is also a powerful backdrop for personal self-discovery and growth. Ironically, personal growth and self-discovery is so often best achieved not in isolation, but rather through relationships and support.

In this book you will find various tips and tools to use with your clients to help them master important therapeutic concepts that will help them in their everyday lives and empower them to gain control over their lives. Although all the tips and tools are presented as psycho-educational ideas to use in a group context, many of these tips can easily be applied to individual therapy. The self-help handouts and worksheets, and even many of the mini-lessons and exercises, can be easily used in the context of individual therapy, along with applications to adults and children.

Mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to help their clients not only with their support, empathetic listening and guidance, but actually serving as life skills educators, empowering clients to help themselves. It is important to note that teaching is not telling clients what to do! Rather, using psycho-education demonstrates a pro-active approach in which therapists teach skills so that clients can put them to use. Just as a piano teacher does not expect a student to learn how to play by figuring out how to read notes and play the corresponding keys by themselves, a therapist cannot expect clients to use skills they never learned or practiced. Much of the learning and progress is achieved by practicing between sessions. Likewise, in the psycho-educational group, assigning “homework” and practice between sessions are cornerstones of the psycho-educational approach. Providing information and various practice opportunities and creative ways to incorporate the teachings will help your clients be self-empowered with insight, knowledge and skills.

The role of a leader of psycho-educational groups can be a very exciting and rewarding one when you have the right tools. My goal is that *150 More Group Activities and TIPS* will provide you with a solid toolkit of ideas to use with your clients to educate and inspire.

Judith Belmont, MS, LPC

Author of bestselling: *103 Group Activities and TIPS*, *86 TIPS for the Therapeutic Toolbox*, and *127 More Amazing TIPS & Tools*





## *Using Psycho-Education as a Cornerstone of Your Groups*

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### **THEORY**

For clinicians, regardless of theoretical orientation, the goal of treatment is not just to support, it is not just to talk, it is not just to listen, it is to *educate*. Most popular psychological theories, including Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and all Third Wave orientations such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), rely heavily on teaching and educating as part of treatment. Many of our clients come into treatment having learned unhealthy life lessons, lacking healthy coping skills, while listening to their unhealthy self-talk. It is not uncommon for them to come in with judgments and labels about themselves that are more like fiction than fact.

**Psycho-education is not telling people what to do.** It is educating them to give them valuable insight and skills they have never learned.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

The following are some of the types of psycho-educational tools to use in groups. Using the topic of communication skills training, listed are examples of how to use psycho-educational techniques with your clients.

**Mini-lessons - Short teaching sessions in a group to offer new skills.**

*Example:* Explaining the difference between Assertive, Non-Assertive, and Aggressive Communication.

**Group Activities - Interactive activities that promote learning experientially.**

*Example:* Exercises such as practicing handshaking assertively, so that group members can learn the importance of non-verbal communication to express themselves assertively.

**Handouts - Written material that teaches life skills concepts and are for reading and reference.**

*Example:* A handout that highlights the three types of communication.

**Worksheets - Skill building material to reinforce life skills.**

*Example:* Providing a worksheet that individuals can practice changing aggressive "You" statements into assertive "I" statements.

**Visualizations - Mentally rehearsing and creating imagery to lower stress and emotional distress, as well as to create images of being successful and reaching positive goals.**

*Example:* Imagine being successful, confident and self-assured while speaking up in a meeting or to a coworker.

**Using Metaphors and Analogies - Using objects, images or symbols to represent life skills concepts, to make the learning more relevant and memorable.**

*Example:* Using a shaken unopened soda pop bottle as an example of tension rising from being non-assertive and keeping upsetting thoughts in rather than expressing them, letting things build until exploding aggressively once emotions are uncapped.

**Role Play - Having group members practice interpersonal skills while you and group members play significant people in their lives.**

*Example:* You (or others in the group) play the part of a difficult family member, providing practice for improving communication with the help of group feedback and support.

**Homework Assignments - Group members are given self-help assignments to work on improving skills between sessions.**

*Examples:* Reviewing communication handouts and filling out worksheets, as well as practicing assertive behavior skills with people in their lives outside of the group.

## **PROCESSING**

Giving and receiving feedback from peers in a safe and supportive environment is a major advantage of group therapy. Group therapy taps the power of universality, in helping members feel that they are not alone, while feeling supported in a safe social context. Group therapy taps the power of healing and learning in a group setting. The group milieu provides a wonderful backdrop for life skills education and practice, empowering clients to gain skills to help themselves.



# Group Beginnings

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## THEORY

Structuring a group with some common elements at the start of a session will help you organize your group sessions for maximum effectiveness. **Effective beginnings and endings are major determinants of the effectiveness of the group.** In this TIP, guidelines are offered in the way of a checklist to remember important elements of effective group beginnings.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Most effective group sessions will include most of the following common elements for effective group beginnings.

For each session, check off the items that you are including in the beginning of your session:

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Sharing Successes and Challenges:** Make time to allow members to share their successes and challenges during the week. See TIP #4 *Sharing Successes and Setting Agendas* for more detailed ideas on this topic.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Feedback from the Last Session:** It is often helpful to tie up loose ends from the last session, get feedback and clarify any issues from the previous session.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Do an Informal Mood Check:** Informal mood checks can be in the form of going around and asking group members how they feel today. A more formal way would be to use quick tests such as The Burns Mood Inventory (Burns, 1993, *Ten Days To Self Esteem*).
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Homework Review:** The importance of reviewing homework at the beginning of each session cannot be over emphasized. It reinforces the importance of taking the homework seriously and will encourage practice between sessions. You can do this at first with the entire group, which can be followed by some breaking into small groups or pairs to go over the homework in more detail.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Agenda Setting:** For each session, state your agenda for the session so members know the psycho-educational topic of the day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Establish Goals:** Within the context of the agenda, each member should consider at least one personal goal they have for the session. Setting goals can be simply done by asking for each member to go around and complete this sentence: For this topic, I would like to learn \_\_\_\_\_ or improve my skills to: \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Use Quick Self-Tests:** If you have quick self tests to help set the stage for the day's session, have members fill them out. For example, if the topic for the session is forgiveness, start with TIP #124, *What is Your Forgiveness IQ?*.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Take a Mindful Minute:** If you want to incorporate mindfulness in your group, the beginning of the session is a great way to remind members of the importance of practicing mindfulness as you lead a brief breathing exercise, guided imagery, or visualization.

## PROCESSING

Each of these elements will bring structure to the group and consistency throughout the group duration. Although each group might not have all the elements suggested above, effective groups will have most of them. Use this checklist as a way to ensure your group is structured for maximum success.



## *How is Your Emotional Wellness?*

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### **THEORY**

Quick quizzes can introduce the session topic and help members get a quick snapshot of where they stand on a given topic. Inventories for anxiety, depression and general mood, such as those having been made popular by Aaron Beck and David Burns, are easily accessible on the internet.

The following quick quiz on emotional wellness is an example of one that you can use over and over again regardless of the topic for the day and type of group, as the topic of emotional wellness is universal and relevant to any topic. The following **Emotional Wellness Quiz** serves as a good general overall gauge as to one's sense of well-being in general or even serves as a mood check for each session.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

This quick quiz can be given out periodically, and even at every session. By giving out this inventory, you are helping your group members gauge their own emotional wellness on that day, and this sets the stage for motivating them to increase their "Emotional Wellness IQ."

You might want to collect and keep the past quizzes, so that towards the end of the group you can give back the weekly quizzes so that group members can review their progress over time.

### **PROCESSING**

If this quiz is given out just once, it can serve as a great springboard for examining the main characteristics of the emotional healthy person. When used at each session as a mood screening, little discussion needs to be done each time after the first time it is filled out. If you do use them periodically and collect them, towards the end of the group, giving out a folder for each group member with their quizzes in chronological order will offer a snapshot of whether the group experience was able to help them improve their Emotional Wellness IQ!



## How is Your Emotional Wellness?

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Below are items that you may agree with or disagree with. On a scale of 1 to 7, rate your level of agreement with each item, being honest and open with yourself.

- 7 — Strongly Agree
- 6 — Moderately Agree
- 5 — Slightly Agree
- 4 — Neither Agree or Disagree
- 3 — Slightly Disagree
- 2 — Moderately Disagree
- 1 — Strongly Disagree

- \_\_\_\_\_ I feel satisfied with the person I am and practice self-compassion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I do not allow regrets and disappointments to interfere with "today."
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am very connected with others and do not feel isolated.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am generally a rational and optimistic thinker.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I refuse to hold grudges and am able to be forgiving.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I feel in control of my emotions, thoughts and feelings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I enjoy a healthy sense of humor and am able to laugh at life's shortcomings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am grateful for how my life is currently, without focusing on what is lacking.

**Total your score here:** \_\_\_\_\_

- 51-56 — Emotional Wellness is extraordinary!
- 46-50 — High Level of Emotional Wellness.
- 40-45 — Moderate Level of Emotional Wellness.
- 32-39 — Emotional Wellness needs some boosting!
- 24-31 — Emotional Wellness is posing problem for emotional health - needs attention!
- 16-23 — Needs improvement! Actively work on improving your Emotional Wellness.
- Below 15 — Danger Zone! It is critical to get professional help for emotional health



## *Sharing Successes and Setting Agendas*

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### **THEORY**

An excellent program called SMART Recovery, (Self Management And Recovery Training) provides structured sessions for facilitators and group members for those going through substance abuse recovery and their families. No matter what type of group you are leading, it is a great model for using step-by-step manuals for group leaders along with versions for group members and families. SMART Recovery's focus on cognitive therapy and life skills techniques can be applied to any group with a psycho-educational focus. This tip is borrowed from their Sharing Success portion of their program, where they use the beginning of each group **to help group members focus on their successes that week**, such as how they improved their coping skills in handling adversity.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Keep 5 minutes at the beginning of each session for success stories to help encourage improved problem solving, positive growth and increased motivation to change. As they say in the Smart Recovery program, "Success breeds success."

You can make the point that even when there is a setback in the week's events, we can always find a positive takeaway or learning lesson to experience success moving forward. Developing that resilient mindset itself can be a success! This is a good time to remind group members not to take their successes for granted, and celebrate each success, no matter how small it may seem.

It will be helpful in setting the agenda for the present session to also ask what did not work as well as they had hoped, and brainstorm how they could have handled it differently. Remind them that setbacks and even failures are necessary precursors for success.

You can make the point that success can not be measured in home runs, but in smaller hits and singles which add up to more than a couple home runs if they persist.

SMART Recovery also emphasizes the importance of talking about the agenda for the group at the beginning of the session. This sets the expectation of what the group will focus on and help provide clarity and structure to the group experience.

### **PROCESSING**

Providing time to share successes and learn from the successes of others is one of the most valuable aspects of group therapy. Encourage members to share a couple minutes of their personal situations, not being overly detailed, and make it a point to use each member's examples to ask if any one else has experienced this struggle or success. This type of questioning taps into the healing power of universality where people realize they are not alone, as they share common struggles on their personal road to success.





## *Give Us a Pearl and an Onion*

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### **THEORY**

Structured icebreakers to start off a group can offer valuable opportunities for sharing, building trust and establishing rapport in the group. The use of visual metaphors helps group members engage in the activity without feeling put on the spot or threatened. Even the quiet group members will find this metaphorical visualization a fun way to express themselves and self-disclose. As in many of the other activities in this book, **using metaphors makes it easier to share feelings and thoughts**, and encourages flexible and creative thinking that is necessary to find new solutions to old problems.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Introduce the activity by explaining the metaphors of an onion and a pearl. You might actually have a toy pearl necklace and an actual onion to make the metaphor realistic.

Explain to the group that the image of an onion represents something with a strong and pungent aroma. They represent very tough life lessons that need to be peeled away to find solutions.

The pearl is a metaphor for something that is a rare find, and is valuable. Pearls they share with the group can be pearls of wisdom they have gained, or something special they learned.

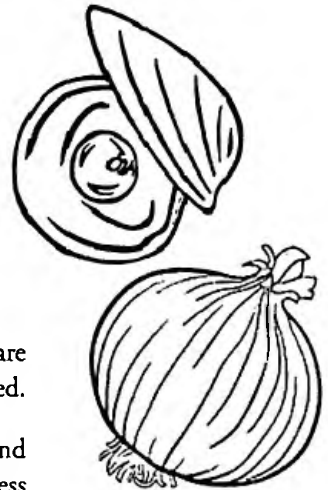
It will be interesting to note to your group that a pearl is actually a result of irritation and adversity. Pearls are made from sand irritation formed in a mollusk shell, and it is the roughness that creates the beautiful gem. You can make the point that, likewise, challenges and adversity in our life can make us deeper, more empathetic and develop more character.

**After explaining the metaphors, ask group members to share both a pearl and an onion with the group, i.e. share something special that happened in the week, and something that was a difficult or challenging experience.**

This can be a nice group activity to start off the group each session for both children and adults.

### **PROCESSING**

This activity is a nice “touch base” activity that promotes self-disclosure and group trust. Using it frequently as a session opener will help the group become more cohesive. Look for the common themes that group members share, tapping the power of universality which is so valuable in the group experience.





## Proverbs in a Jar

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### THEORY

Wise proverbial sayings and inspirational quotes can provide inspiration for group members when shared and discussed. Ancient proverbs, especially Roman and Chinese, provide many deep ideas that offer insight and therapeutic messages about life. Group members will enjoy this simple activity and be inspired along the way! It also **stimulates more creative abstract thinking** by encouraging group members to look at things in new ways, especially when they hear the perspective of others in the group.

### IMPLEMENTATION

Here are some examples that would be fitting for a life skills group:

- “The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”
- “A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.”
- “I hear & I forget. I see & I remember. I do & I understand.” —Confucius
- “Happiness depends upon ourselves.” —Aristotle
- “You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.” —Chinese Proverb
- “Every path has its puddle.” —English Proverb
- “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”
- “No man is an island.”
- “People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.”
- “Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.”
- “Better late than never.”
- “You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.”

Write the sayings on notecards, and place in a hat, box or some container. You might have it decorated with the word PROVERBS or with images of philosophers like Confucius or Aristotle.





## *My Favorite Things*

My favorite song is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite movie is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite hobby is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite sport is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite person is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite place is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite food is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favorite animal is: \_\_\_\_\_



# Group Story Telling

## THEORY

A great get-to-know-you activity entails telling a story as a group. Working together, **group members learn to bond and trust one another**. Telling a story together, with no one being judgmental of each other's contribution, increases trust and group cohesiveness. This stream of consciousness activity helps members also think on the spot without worrying if they are right or wrong. For the shy individual, exercises that promote self-expression in a relatively non-threatening and structured way can be very valuable in overcoming social anxiety.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Tell members that the group will put together a group story.

Let them know that every contribution is valuable in making up a group story. Emphasize that there are no right or wrong contributions, and everything is acceptable, as long as there is no rude, cursing or offensive language. All contributions are valued.

Tell them that you will start off the story with a simple phrase, and then will go around the room and each person will add to the story with a phrase or a sentence or two.

Examples to start off are:

"It was a dark and stormy night. . ."

"Two children were walking down the street. . ."

"When two friends walked unsuspectingly into a vacant building. . ."

Make as many go-arounds as you need until the story has a conclusion.

As each member shares their contribution, carefully listen to what they are expressing and the mood they are conveying, which might help with tailoring the rest of the group discussion or activities with those observations in mind.



## PROCESSING

Ask the group their impressions of the story, how they felt being put on the spot to share their contribution, and what they learned. Reflecting on the activity is as important as the activity itself and can provide a foundation for members to share their thoughts within the context of the group support. This activity is especially helpful for group members who need help to overcome social anxiety or are fearful of speaking up in groups.

Make the point that everyone has a valuable contribution not only in this activity, but in the group as a whole. Likewise, everyone has something to contribute to whatever situation they find themselves in the world outside.



# Name Games

## THEORY

In the initial group session, no matter what age, creative introductions set a light and fun tone, setting the stage for cohesiveness, creativity, and creating a safe place for self-disclosure and support.

Below are some examples of effective introductory exercises to help group members enjoy learning about one another and establishing rapport. Since most group members might understandably not want to disclose too much about themselves personally until trust is built, **these activities allow for light, non-threatening interaction.**

## IMPLEMENTATION

The following are some Name Game variations:

- Have group members go around taking turns saying their first names and describe something *about themselves*, using the first letter of their name.

For example, *"My name is Ellen, and I am energetic."*

- Have group members go around taking turns saying their first names and describe something they *like* that begins with the initial of their first name.

For example, *"My name is Lenny and I like licorice."*

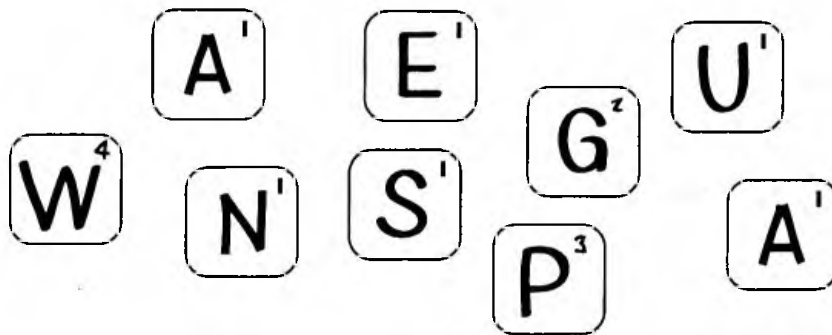
- Have group members go around taking turns saying their first names and describe a *feeling* they have using the first initial:

For example, *"My name is Evelyn and I feel enthusiastic about the group."*

- Have members write their names with crayons or colored pencils and with the letters draw images inside or hanging down that describes something about themselves, sharing one at a time with the group.
- To practice each other's names, have members go around and say their name and repeat all the names before them until everyone gets a turn.
- Using a bean bag or a ball, after everyone learns each other's name, throw the bean bag or ball randomly and ask a question to the person you are throwing it to using their name, such as *"Jean, what is your favorite color?"* After Jean answers, she throws the beanbag or ball to someone else saying their name and asking another question. Make sure everyone gets a turn at least once.
- Paired introductions - Break into pairs and give them a few minutes to interview one another, and then each pair introduces their partner to the group.



- Members go around and say their first name and one thing that few people know about them.
- Have members introduce themselves and say one thing that is true and one thing that is a lie, and the other members need to figure out which is the truth and which is the lie by asking questions.
- Pass around a package of M&Ms® or Skittles® and have members take two pieces of candy. Tell them to keep one for themselves and the other keep for the exercise. Then bring out a poster that asks a question for each color.  
For example, if they picked a brown M&M, they would first say their name and then answer the question like, *“What is the best thing you did this month?”*
- After learning everyone’s names, have the group members line up in the alphabetical order of their first names.
- Using Scrabble® letters or other word game letters, like Banagrams®, members introduce themselves by picking a letter and using that letter to describe something about them or what they like.



## PROCESSING

These introduction variations all offer groups to start out getting to know one another in a fun, interactive way, which is relatively non-threatening. Spending a little time to explain answers will be helpful to help group members get to know one another. These light activities set a positive and creative tone for the rest of the group.