ORIENTATION TO BEING IN A THERAPY GROUP

Group therapy provides a place for you to address the issues that are of concern to you, identify with others, offer and receive help and feedback from others, and examine patterns that are interfering with your personal growth.

If you're like most people, you have some **apprehensions** about going to a therapy group. Concerns such as, "What will the other people be like?" and "Am I capable of opening up to complete strangers?" are commonplace and are indicative of a very normal kind of anxiety. In fact, working through this very anxiety provides one of the many benefits that group has to offer.

Regardless of the emphasis, size, or makeup of your group it is safe to say that **the more you invest, the more you will benefit**. In most therapy groups, one or two therapists are there to help facilitate interaction, discussion, and attention to the interpersonal processes that occur. They are also there to help maintain an environment of safety and a focus on growth.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF A THERAPY GROUP

A good group therapy experience has much to offer to each person who participates. These are just a few suggestions to keep in mind as you begin your group experience:

- **Suspend judgment**: You may feel anxious about or impatient with your group as you start out. Just like individual therapy, group work takes time. Try to delay making judgments about the value of group; this adjustment period is very normal and part of the process. Commit to attending at least 4-6 group sessions before trying to determine the value of group for you.
- **Start from where you are**; not where you think others want you to be. This is your chance to be yourself, to share the things that you think and feel and experience that you often keep to yourself. Change begins with whatever you feel free to disclose.
- **Attend consistently**: Successful groups depend on a commitment from each member of the group, which means attending each session, arriving on time, and making an effort to participate in a meaningful way. Remember, in group therapy you're not only there for you.
- **Think out loud**: Try to put words to the reactions you have to people/topics in the group and share these thoughts out loud, rather than censoring and silencing as we often do in interpersonal interactions.
- **Focus on the "here and now"**: This is a phrase you may hear used by group facilitators or other members. It essentially means a focus on actual, lived experiences that you and the group are having in the session. It is appopriate to share your stories, but a group that just stays at the level of what is occurring/has occurred in the outside lives of its participants misses out on a very important, powerful dimension. Share what you are feeling and thinking about being in the group, reactions you are having, what you feel towards others. This may feel scary at times; that's okay. Try to push yourself to do it anyway.
- **Experiment with new behaviors**: Try new things out. Think of a therapy group as partly a social lab of sorts. If there are ideal ways you'd like to interact but rarely do, group is a great place to try them out and ask for feedback.
- **Offer support and understanding before advice**: You may often be tempted to give advice and help 'fix' the problems that others share. Often this comes from a place of empathy and compassion. In group, try to share that compassion and understanding first and foremost.
- **Give and receive feedback**: One of the best things group has to offer is the advantage of getting input from several people instead of just one therapist. Take advantage of this! When you receive feedback, try to remain open and non-defensive. When you offer feedback, try to be specific, direct, and honest. This aspect of group isn't always easy, but is one of its most powerful and growth-inducing features.