

Why Join An Interpersonal Therapy Group?

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Interpersonal group therapy is a powerful way to learn about ourselves and our relationships with others. Unfortunately, it is common for people to confuse interpersonal group therapy with support groups, in which people talk about shared experiences and offer one another encouragement. While support groups can be quite helpful, this model is not consistent with what occurs in a well-led interpersonal group.

If you are considering joining one of my groups, I believe reading this will help you with your decision.

What follows are frequently asked questions about interpersonal group therapy with thoughtful answers and examples, intended to (1) give you a sense of interactions that might occur in a well-functioning group and (2) provide you with an understanding of how such interactions can be beneficial to you.

What is an interpersonal therapy group?

An interpersonal therapy group is a group of people (usually 6 - 10 people) who meet together weekly with one or two therapists to work through relational issues that lead to psychological symptoms or dissatisfaction in relationships. Sometimes the groups are mixed gender and sometimes they are gender specific. Each group session lasts for 75 - 90 minutes.

Who joins an interpersonal therapy group?

People who join an interpersonal therapy group usually want to be able to relate better with others and to feel better about themselves.

People who join interpersonal therapy groups include:

- People who want to improve how they relate to others
- People who grew up in challenging family circumstances
- Adult children of alcoholics or emotionally immature parents
- People who would like to be more present
- People who want to address attachment challenges
- People who experienced childhood trauma
- People in recovery who want to address issues underlying addiction or co-dependency
- People in individual therapy who want to deepen their therapeutic work
- Psychotherapists interested in group therapy

Being in a group helps people to:

- Improve relationships
- Become more emotionally engaged
- Connect with others more easily

- Reduce social anxiety and isolation
- Experience and express the full range of emotions
- Give and receive honest feedback
- Feel more present and socially curious
- Resolve emotional blocks and childhood traumas that lead to difficulties in relationships
- Be more authentic

Reasons a person may join an interpersonal group include:

- Often feeling angry, frustrated, or dissatisfied in relationships
- Having difficulty trusting others
- Struggling to forge close (or meaningful) relationships
- Feeling that one often has to please others
- Relying on alcohol or drugs to socialize
- Struggling to communicate one's thoughts, feelings, and needs directly
- Being controlling (or easily controlled) in relationships
- Feeling that one's relationships are shallow
- Experiencing anxiety in social situations
- Frequently experiencing loneliness
- Manipulating others to get one's needs met
- Having trouble with self-esteem

While not exhaustive, this list is intended to capture the broad range of issues that might lead one to join an interpersonal group.

How does an interpersonal therapy group work?

Interpersonal therapy groups are unstructured groups in that there is no formal agenda for each group meeting. The leader does not begin the session with a question and group discussions are not topical in nature.

Instead members are asked at the beginning of each meeting (1) to mindfully pay attention to their thoughts, feelings, and reactions as they occur moment to moment as the group takes place and (2) to tell the emotionally significant story of their lives gradually over time and help others to do the same. While this seems very simple, people often have a difficult time with this task.

Most of us are so accustomed to acting on our thoughts and feelings that we seldom slow down to notice what is going on “behind the scenes” in our minds. Nevertheless, what goes on in the back of our minds has an impact on how we interact in our everyday lives.

What does paying attention to my thoughts, feelings, and reactions do?

By paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and reactions as they occur in group we:

- Notice more clearly the emotional patterns and thoughts (the mental scripts) that guide our behavior but often occur at the edge of our awareness.
- Learn about the relational patterns we are prone to creating with others and why we create these patterns.
- Develop greater flexibility in how we relate to ourselves and others.
- Deepen our empathy for others' experiences.

Importantly, we develop the ability to experience and understand what is going on in our minds and bodies without immediately acting upon what we experience.

Through our experience in the group we also come to understand that it is not only okay, but healthy, to experience the full range of our emotions without having to respond automatically to what we feel. We become more able to notice our emotions without acting upon them.

Over time we become free to choose how we respond in various situations, and this freedom helps us to create the outcomes we desire in relationships. We react (an unconscious process) less and respond (a conscious process) more.

Here are two examples.

Example 1. As a group session starts Joe notices himself feeling anxious about the silence in the group, a feeling he often experiences in everyday life when people are quiet. When this occurs in his life, he usually acts upon his worry by filling the silence with stories and jokes that end up boring people and pushing them away. In turn, Joe often feels lonely. The pattern that plays out in Joe's day-to-day life is alive within him in the group context. Being in group elicits Joe's pattern experientially (as opposed to intellectually). That is, he is living out his struggle versus talking about it.

By paying attention to his experience in group he is not only able to notice what he is feeling but he is reminded of how he felt pressure to fill silences at the dinner table during his youth—something he did in an attempt to keep his father from being angry (an emotion his father often expressed).

In group, with the help of the therapist and other members, he notices how he acts out his underlying fear of people being angry with him by telling stories and jokes. By talking about this awareness in group he not only develops greater awareness of the origins of the pattern but also has the opportunity to ask other group members if they feel pushed away by his excessive talking and to find out how the other group members would respond if he remained quiet. Furthermore, being in the safe confines of the group gives him the opportunity to experience what it is like to notice his anxiety when the group is quiet and not fill the air with unnecessary chatter. He also has the opportunity to ask others for feedback about how they experience him practicing this new skill as well as receive reinforcement for his hard work.

Thus, Joe learns about the origins of his feelings, benefits from being able to verbalize his emotional experience, and can practice a new way of connecting (being quiet even if he feels a little anxious) if he chooses to do so. Other members benefit not only by seeing Joe address this issue in his life, but by being authentic with him about how they experience him, a vital skill in any intimate relationship.

Example 2. Jane has been a member of a group for four months and has begun to make progress in her ability to be more vulnerable with others, one of her goals for joining the group. She decided to join the group after achieving six months of sobriety and after noticing how she struggled to connect in a way she found satisfying.

During a group session the leader says something that makes her feel sad and she finds herself wrestling with whether to say something about how she is feeling. She notices a tug inside to give voice to her experience (something she seldom did in the past), as she has seen other group members benefit from being open about their emotional responses. Being open about her feelings runs contrary to the mental scripts or rules she learned in her youth. It was uncommon in her family of origin for her to bring up feelings of sadness, as both her mother and her father struggled to be able to hear her express painful feelings.

Similar to the above example, the group context (in this case the group leader's comment that led Jane to feel sad) elicits Jane's pattern of dismissing her feelings and creates the opportunity for her to work with this issue in the moment.

Given Jane's desire to be more emotionally healthy, she decides to mention her feelings to the leader even though this is hard for her to do. In taking this risk, she not only finds that the leader is able to hear her talk about her experience but other members give her support and encouragement for being open about her reaction. This simple act stretches her interpersonally and begins to lay the foundation for her being willing to discuss her emotional experience in relationships which are important to her.

In the coming months, Jane finds it easier to give voice to her feelings without fear of being shut down or unheard. Other members, particularly those who have yet to develop the capacity to function in this way, also benefit by seeing Jane take these important steps.

Can you talk more specifically about how the above interactions are helpful to people?

In the above examples Jane and Joe were faced with addressing the "mental scripts" (rules or patterns) that typically play out in their lives. This is no surprise, as the unconscious scripts we live out in everyday life (e.g., that our feelings are not important, that people will get angry if we share how we feel, that men aren't supposed to have emotions, that people will leave if we are honest with them, that we need to make people feel one way or another, among many others) play out in the group.

In everyday life it can be difficult to slow down and understand why we are doing what we are doing. In group, however, the opportunity to slow down and consider our feelings and reactions is exactly why the group meets. By developing a greater sense of why we are doing what we are doing and the emotions that drive our actions (which are often rooted in our past), we become more flexible in how we relate to ourselves and others. We also learn new skills for getting our needs met in relationships.

To be a little scientific, modern neuroscience has demonstrated the important role that implicit memory plays in how we relate to our environment. In short, implicit memory is the memory about past events that unconsciously guides our behavior in the present moment. For each of us, our implicit memory is a culmination of all the emotionally charged experiences that have occurred over the course of our life that lead us to believe certain things about ourselves, the world, and how we should behave in it. We each have routes or neuropathways in our minds that have been laid down and reinforced through our experiences.

Good psychotherapy aims help us develop new pathways in our minds, and the best way to do this is by having new experiences.

This is exactly why group can be so powerful - it provides us with new relational experiences over and over and over again. Experiences (not interpretations or explanations) are how new neuropathways are laid down and lasting change is created.

Group therapy magnifies our opportunity to have new relational experiences given that we are relating with multiple people (opposed to only one therapist).

How will my relational patterns play out in the group?

It is important to see how group is a social microcosm of what happens in everyday life. People who avoid connection in life avoid connecting in group, people who consistently experience anger in life experience anger in group, people who avoid conflict in life avoid conflict in group, and people who have difficulty with trust in life struggle with trust in group. The unconscious relational patterns that govern our lives outside of group (which we have learned over the course of our life) govern our lives in group. The important difference between everyday life and group is that in group we are given the opportunity to become aware of how these patterns play out and why, which over time allows us to begin to make different choices about how we relate with ourselves and others. Quite simply, this process can be very freeing.

Do I need to be in individual therapy to be in an interpersonal group?

Not necessarily, but people can surely benefit from continuing to see their individual therapist while they participate in group. Being in a group can definitely be emotionally stirring and can stimulate things to work on in individual therapy. Some people choose to continue to see their individual therapist but do so on a less frequent basis.

Will I be forced to cry, share, or give feedback?

No. You will not have to do anything you do not want to do. Like a lot of things, though, the amount of effort you exert in group will be reflected in the outcome you obtain. Everyone is encouraged to be as present as possible and to become aware of the things that make it difficult to be engaged. By working in this way you not only help yourself but you also help other group members.

How do I know things will remain confidential?

Members in the group make an agreement to keep what is said in group completely confidential. In fact, everyone in group signs a group agreement that stipulates that they will keep the material discussed in group confidential. Members are allowed to talk about their own experience in group with whomever they like but agree to refrain from talking about other group members. The group therapist is required to keep everything said in group confidential as he or she would with things discussed in individual therapy.

How long do I need to be in the group?

This depends. As a general rule, I ask people to make an initial commitment to participate in my groups for three months. Most people want to continue for longer than that. Some interpersonal groups are time-limited which makes the ending of the group obvious. When a group is ongoing, members discuss openly with one another if they are thinking about leaving. Often this brings up important material for the group to process.

What if I decide I want to leave?

You can always leave the group. All I ask is that you let the other group members know about your intent to leave and give the group enough time (preferably a month) to process your departure. You can imagine how it has been when people have left groups (e.g., teams, families, schools, etc.) you have been part of and how it is preferable to have closure when people leave.

This whole process sounds interesting but different. Is getting accustomed to the group challenging?

Usually in the beginning, as a group is forming, there is a certain amount of discomfort among everyone as things can be a little formal and robotic. People are trying to get a sense of their place in the group. After a period of time, though, the group gets traction and collectively figures out how to make use of the opportunity they have together. Members become more open and honest about their moment-to-moment reactions and develop greater comfort with authentic engagement. As time rolls on, many people say that they look forward group each week.

Below are ten suggestions to help you make the most out of interpersonal group therapy should you decide to join such a group.

TEN SUGGESTIONS TO HELP YOU GET THE MOST OUT OF INTERPERSONAL GROUP THERAPY

1. Pay attention to your moment to moment experience.

Often we have thoughts and feelings that are outside our awareness yet guide our behavior. Taking care to notice what we are thinking and feeling in the context of the group provides the opportunity to better understand how these subtle aspects of our experience relate to events from our past and have an impact on our relationships.

2. Assume spontaneity and authenticity are valued and encouraged.

In group, we are encouraged to set aside everyday social filters in the interest of honest and direct communication. It would be well within the norms of an interpersonal group to say something like, “I noticed myself wanting to interrupt you when you were talking, but I’m not sure why.”

3. Observe how you communicate non-verbally.

Communication always takes place explicitly (the words we say and their associated meanings) and implicitly (the non-verbal aspects of communication such as our facial expressions and tone of voice). Noticing what we communicate non-verbally heightens our awareness of what we are feeling and the messages we are sending to others.

4. Maintain an attitude of curiosity about your behavior.

Curiosity about how we relate with other group members encourages exploration about the relationships we create with others and, in turn, opens our awareness to alternative ways of connecting that are more healthy.

5. Avoid asking questions and focus on making statements about your experience.

Questions certainly have a place in interpersonal therapy groups, but they can also be very disruptive to the group process. Making a statement such as, “I imagined you were angry when Jim came in late” as opposed to asking the question “Were you angry when Jim came late?” serves to keep one reporting on their own internal process which is vitally important to effective group work.

6. Be aware of what you avoid talking about in the group.

Noticing the things we avoid talking about in group (e.g., feelings of sadness, anger, happiness, frustration, appreciation, etc.) can be instructive as we learn more about ourselves. By talking about the things we typically do not bring up we are able to develop awareness of the things we have trouble discussing and to expand our ability to relate with others.

7. Ask for feedback and be willing to give feedback when requested from other members.

The opportunity to give and receive honest feedback, especially from non-therapists, is a hallmark of group work and is one of the main reasons group therapy can be so helpful.

Feedback helps us develop awareness of our blind-spots and gives us important information about the ways we affect others.

8. Notice and talk about the relational patterns you find yourself creating with others.

In group, we notice how the relational patterns we engage in with other group members mirror relationships with important people in our life such as our partners, parents, siblings, and friends. This awareness helps us better understand unhealthy and healthy dynamics we are prone to creating (e.g., protecting people from feeling sad, being attracted to people who need help, etc.) and creates opportunities to practice engaging in healthier ways.

9. Share the things you think are illogical or that make little sense to you.

It is typical for us to refrain from sharing our thoughts and feelings until they are well formed. In group, it can be helpful to share thoughts and feelings you are experiencing that are not quite clear. Exploration within the group facilitates understanding these not yet fully developed ideas.

10. Bring up any concerns you have about the group in the group.

It is very common for people in groups to have concerns or frustrations about different aspects of their group experience (e.g., one member talking too much, the leader not talking enough, not feeling accepted by some group members, etc.). Bringing up these concerns during the group, while anxiety provoking at times, can be very helpful to the overall group process.