



Therapy with Others: The Ins and Outs of Group Therapy

■ Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

What's the difference between individual and group therapy?

How do I know what type of therapy I need?

Why would group therapy be helpful to me?

Therapy is an invitation. It invites you to heal, cope, recover, and grow in any area causing emotional, spiritual, and behavioral hardship. For some people, there comes a time when the need for outside help is great, and current resources and supports are not enough. God knows we are not meant to do life on our own. In Proverbs 11:14, we read, "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." Sitting with a therapist intentionally brings the focus to what you are struggling with and can help you plan a course for change, guiding and supporting you along the way.

What's the Difference Between Individual and Group Therapy?

The biggest difference between group and individual therapy is that individual therapy is exclusively focused on you, while group therapy allows you to address your issues in the context and presence of others, with added encouragement and support from those in your group. In the group setting, you hear from others who may be struggling with similar issues, or perhaps they have overcome hardships you are only beginning to enter into. This is not something that happens with individual therapy. Both individual and group therapy offer the benefit of working with a professional counselor, trained to help identify and treat mental and behavioral health issues. Both have their benefits.

Sometimes a person finds it hard to open up in individual therapy or it seems like there is not much progress. This does not mean therapy isn't right for you. Group therapy may be an alternative way to approach growth, change, and healing by allowing you to listen as others share. As you listen, you may find similarities and begin to relate. **It's amazing how one person can tell your story without ever having met you.** In turn, relating may help you open up and talk about yourself. Sometimes, what you really needed was someone to show you how it's done. Many people find the therapeutic value of one suffering person helping another is without parallel.

How Does It Work?

Every therapy group has a focus. Some are centered around a specific topic, such as grief, boundaries, or depression. Other groups may lean more towards processing general issues with people who may or may not share their struggles. Process groups are less structured and allow individuals to share whatever they are struggling with that week, often with feedback from others. Sometimes you learn new things about yourself as you allow others to know you, and you listen to them share how they perceive you and your situation. This type of direct feedback about yourself can add a beneficial layer of introspection and insight.

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Many times, therapeutic growth is expedited in groups simply because you have input from multiple sources, not just the therapist. **Listening to others share their stories may touch on things you had not thought about or examined from your own life.** The therapist remains active in the group by helping create a safe and open space for people to share, sometimes helping to draw out information from others, guiding the group to look at different perspectives, or facilitating exercises that foster growth, insight, and healing.

Made for Community

It takes courage and vulnerability to be in therapy, regardless of whether it is individual or group therapy. It takes a *special* type of courage and vulnerability to engage in therapy in a group setting, often with several people who are strangers. There is always a risk when sharing yourself with another person. But we are not meant to live in isolation.

Many of us have friends and family who love and support us, but we don't always find space to talk about what is really bothering us without being judged, fixed, or having the topic shift to them. Being in a group with others who desire healing allows you to be seen and heard, perhaps in ways you have never experienced before. Many people find that they begin to realize they are not alone, and shame can lessen. Group participants often provide affirmation and compassion, helping you see you are worthwhile, loved, important, and worth taking care of.

Jesus knew the value of a group. He called His church a body, which consists of many parts. He called His followers from different walks of life, and together they accomplished something great. One of the greatest values of group therapy is realizing you are not alone and that you are one of many in need of healing, help, and hope. God uses us to show love to one another.

It is easy to compare our insides to other people's outsides. In group therapy, you are invited to show your internal reality of struggle and hardship. When you are met with compassion and understanding, somehow you feel less alone and not so different from others. We are all on different paths in life, and yet we are not so different after all. ■

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