CHAPTER 6

LEADING STRUCTURED GROUP SESSIONS

Just like a well-built vehicle, a properly designed structured exercise can take the group anywhere you want—except that you need the key to turn its engine on. This chapter hands you that key—a method of conducting and processing structured exercise—that starts the ignition, sending the group off down the road.

MANDATED GROUPS: HOW TO MAKE THEM WORK

Most group therapists, green or seasoned, dread at the thought of leading groups made up of mandated members. Yet, as Jacob and Schimmel (2013) state, "people don't mind being led if they are led well" (p. 8). Mandated members can be led well, if we have a firm grasp of the realities of mandated groups and, at the same time, a suitable method of working into the needs and hopes that they hold dear.

A Number of Challenging Populations, to Begin With

Mandated groups typically consist of the following populations:

- Students with behavioral or academic problems
- Employees with certain issues, such as anger management issues
- Partners facing an imminent end to a relationship: break-up or divorce
- Child abuse or domestic violence offenders
- People in substance abuse/addiction treatment programs with possible criminal offenses, such as DUIs or drug possession

Challenging, to begin with, the aforementioned often raise their resistance just as expected when forced to attend a group setting (Snyder and Anderson, 2009).

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On top of this, several factors, as depicted in the following sections, also play a part on their resistance.

Still in the Precontemplation Stage—Unaware and Unwilling

The first roadblock is that many group members deny having a problem or a need to change. Fitting them into the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992), these members are squarely in the precontemplation stage. Even those aware of the need for change are seldom willing to make any significant sacrifices for the change (Hagedorn, 2011; Hagedorn & Hirshhorn, 2009).

Distrust of the System—Reluctance to Open up

To the clients, a mandated group often represents the very institution—"the system"—that ordered them to attend. For example, mandated students may perceive the group as the school's "punishment" for whatever wrong they may have committed. Group leaders are pitted in conflicting roles (Kupers, 2005)—as therapists who champion confidentiality and trust; and conversely, as reporters of client "progress" to the school administration (Miller & Rollnick, 2012).

As a result, confidentiality—the bedrock of a trusting client-therapist relationship—is compromised (Meyer, Tangney, Stuewig, & Moore, 2014). It is no wonder that mandated clients generally feel suspicious, anxious, and defensive (Osborn, 1999). This inherent distrust leads to reluctance to open up.

In one study, a woman stated that opening up in her mandated group was uncommon (Cantora, Mellow, and Schlager, 2016). Another client in the same study stated "I could care less, to be honest. I'm just doing it because I have to. I'm not looking for help. And none of us really want to hear it neither. Like everybody in there really just wants to get it over with" (Cantora et al., 2016, p. 1025).

The Group Process Being Questioned

With this atmosphere of mistrust, the group process will undoubtedly be questioned (Osborn, 1999). The questioning may appear indirectly, in the form of *not* being present *mentally and emotionally* or directly, in the form of sulking, silence, complaining, or defensiveness.

Some will challenge your leadership by defying you, transferring their anger toward you or accusing you of conspiring with the authorities; others will view the group as a complete waste of time, a total interference to their daily life.

No wonder so many group leaders panic at the mere thought of leading mandated groups!

The Failure of the Confrontational Approach

One approach that has been previously used, but proved ineffective, is a confrontation. Confrontation is typically used to tear down a mandated client's resistance or denial, especially when blaming, minimization, or rationalization is involved (Taft & Murphy, 2007). For example, the widely adopted multidisciplinary Duluth Model, designed to address domestic violence, staunchly uses confrontation in the face of resistance in order to increase client accountability (Levesque, Velicer, Castle, & Greene, 2008; Pender, 2012).

This type of confrontation can come across to mandated clients as an attack, leading to even greater defensiveness and a damaged therapeutic alliance. Indeed, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) argues that a confrontational approach cannot help but fail in treating substance abusers (SAMHSA, 2005). Velasquez, Stephens, and Ingersoll (2006) agree that confrontation only serves to promote increased resistance of mandated clients.

Rays of Hope

Given the reputation of mandated groups, a majority of leaders have been advised to develop a thick skin and not take it personally when mandated members downpour them with negativity (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014). This, of course, is not a realistic expectation.

Kelly's field report providing a ray of hope—Interestingly enough, an interview by Enos (2006) with John F. Kelly, associate director of addiction research at Massachusetts General Hospital, shows that even for mandated clients, change is possible and may actually come sooner than expected. In the interview (Enos, 2006), Kelly surprises us with many of his field observations:

- Mandated clients can actually benefit from treatment *from the start*.
- Treatment doesn't have to be voluntary to be effective.

- Interaction among members in group treatment led to decreased *arrest rates* for mandated clients.
- The arrest rates remained at a low-level post treatment whereas *employment rates* increased.

Another positive field report—With the help of several grants, a group therapist in Chicago and his colleagues have been able to provide group services for court mandated clients. These clients have either been convicted of domestic abuse or a DUI and other substance abuse problems. The group therapist indicates that when skillfully led, *these groups are actually quite productive* because *members eagerly bond*, *openly* discuss their experiences, and wholeheartedly support and encourage one another. Indeed, most members are far from hostile or uncooperative (Petras, personal communication, 2016).

These field reports further prove the idea that "people don't mind being led if they are led well" (Jacob & Schimmel, 2013, p. 8). The key to success with these particular populations is to engage, establish rapport, and earn their trust (Cantora et al., 2016).

Member Preparation Through Motivational Interviewing

In order to lead well with mandated members, it is necessary to kick start the therapeutic relationship through a special kind of member preparation. Preparing members prior to beginning the group gives mandated clients the readiness they need for therapeutic work (Behroozi, 1992).

Enter motivational interviewing!

Motivational Interviewing (MI) was created by Miller and Rollnick (2012) as a client-centered approach to helping people with addiction problems who are *ambivalent about change*. The critical element of MI is to highlight what the client values in his or her life and contrast it with the client's behaviors.

Motivational interviewing can be used *during intake* (Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Pinsoff, 1994) to boost client readiness. After MI, leaders can apply structured communication activities to increase group interaction.

Though effective during intake, MI is *not suitable for group interaction* since it relies on *individual-focused techniques* to address a client's sense of ambivalence. If used in a group session, MI techniques can reduce group therapy into individual counseling, albeit with multiple clients together (Lundahl & Burke, 2009). Research finds that groups using motivational interviewing as the primary approach are less effective in achieving treatment goals (Lundahl & Burke, 2009).

Allow Venting, Avoid Lecturing

During the first quarter of the first session, providing mandated members an opportunity to vent their frustration and anger is often an effective way to take care of their negative feelings (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014). However, be prepared to practice detached engagement during venting, lest you react to the negativity. This initial stage often tests our patience but is a necessary step in allowing for more productive sessions.

In the first session, avoid going over the ground rules or lecturing on the dangers of whatever destructive behaviors that have brought to the group. Lecturing may deter and bore group members already frustrated and angry about being mandated to attend group (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014).

Be Active and Use Well-Designed Structured Activities

Prepare to use an active leadership style when leading mandated groups. If you are under the impression that the group will carry itself, you are in for a rude awakening: the session will fall apart, and you will end up frustrated and miserable. Echoing this sentiment, Schimmel and Jacobs (2014) warn that those who wishfully think that they can put the responsibility of the group session on mandated group members will be in dire straits.

To be an active leader for a mandated group is to carefully design certain *structured activities*—communication activities that provide you with a sense of control, that engage the members, and that draw something out of even the most resistant members. This highly structured environment can also prevent mandated clients from *playing out disruptive behaviors* in the group (Thylstrup & Hess, 2011).

Keep an Eye on the Phases

Not all structured exercises are made equal for all phases of the group. Using structured sessions with each group phase in mind allows the power of the group to do what individual counseling can only dream of achieving.

For the early phase, choose positive and meaningful topics. In the early phase of the group, it is wise to choose structured communication activities consisting of *positive and meaningful* topics. Positive-focused topics tend to relax members and decrease their defensiveness—the exact effect desired when needing *sufficient time to earn their trust*. When the first two sessions go well,

the group atmosphere will lighten up, members may even look forward to attending group (Enos, 2006).

As a reminder, positivity does not equate with superficiality. Don't let precious group time wear away on members' personal interests, hobbies, sports, movies, TV programs, and other recreations. Chatter amongst members, no matter how positive, contributes little to a productive atmosphere.

In the later phase, mix in more personal topics. When members are even more relaxed in the later stages of the group, it is an opportune time to slowly *mix more personal topics into the positive ones.*

At long last, focus on sensitive issues. When members are trusting enough, you then move on to *the most sensitive issues of all*—the issues that brought them to the mandated group. For example, at this phase, the communication topic for domestic abusers may be "I tend to hit those I love when _____ (fill in the blank)" while for mandated substance abusers, "If I give up drugs, it would mean _____ (fill in the blank)" (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014).

In conclusion: Mandated members can be led well, if we have a firm grasp of the realities of mandated groups and, at the same time, a rich knowledge of how to use *structured activities*—communication activities—to provide you with a sense of control, to engage the members, and to meet their needs and hopes.

The following sections demonstrate how structured exercises can maximize the effectiveness of three different group settings:

- Mandated groups
- Psychoeducational groups
- Counseling and therapy group

I. STRUCTURED EXERCISES FOR MANDATED GROUPS

Without a focus, conversations in mandated groups easily derail into storytelling and drunkalogues. With a well-design communication topic, the session becomes engaging and meaningful, providing members with the tools to learn about one another and alleviate boredom. Above all, a group with a communication focus will *meet the requirements of a functional group* expected by agencies or by the legal systems (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014).

The human brain yearns for novelty, and as leaders of the mandated group, there is no limit to the multitude of structured activities that can be created.

Structured Written Communication Exercises

When using structured communication exercises, the initial exercise can be written. Writing provides an alternative outlet for someone who doesn't want to talk. Further, while listening to what other members wrote, reluctant members may become interested in what others have to say. They may compare their own reactions to those of others, and may even read aloud their own, all without the pressure of thinking about what to say (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014).

Though many thought-provoking communication exercises should be in our toolbox, ready to put to use for any occasion, only one exercise should be used per session (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014). Avoid using multiple exercises just to fill up a session.

As previously discussed, structured exercises that evoke positive emotions are especially helpful in the initial sessions. An example of one is called the *List*. You can create many varieties with it:

"List things that you feel most proud of about yourself."

"List persons who are most supportive in your life."

"List some of your accomplishments."

"List things that you like about yourself."

"List three persons who have had the most positive influence on you."

"List some unforgettable moments in your life that you wish to go back to."

Tailored Fishbowl Activity

The fishbowl (detailed later in this chapter), also called the inner-outer circle (Schimmel & Jacobs, 2014) is a structured activity that can be tailored for mandated groups. In this structured activity, members slightly more willing to talk sit in the inside circle; while those reluctant to talk, outside the circle.

As members in the inner circle talk, those outside the circle observe. This partition eliminates the chance that negative energy from reluctant members may spoil the work of those inside the circle. When they are ready to open up, members outside the circle are encouraged to join those inside.

Experiential Exercises

When it comes time for mandated groups to discuss more sensitive issues, leaders can move it one notch up to include *experiential group activities* (Hagedorn, 2011)— activities that have the capacity to normalize the difficulties of change and, at the same time, continue to sidestep client resistance and ambivalence (Miller & Rollnick, 2012).

One such experiential activity is "Writing a Letter to My Substance/ Behavior" by Hagedorn (2011). In this exercise, Hagedorn gives members several prompts to which to respond. We have rephrased the prompts as follows:

- My relationship with my drug of choice
- How I feel about saying goodbye
- My reasons for saying goodbye
- The possible negative and positive things about saying goodbye
- The changes that need to occur after I say goodbye
- My level of confidence in making these changes

Members are given 15 minutes to write these letters and then 45 minutes for the group to share their letters aloud as well as to process their reactions and realizations.

Experiential exercises, such as letter writing, allow mandated members to share positive and negative aspects of their behaviors. When faced with their contrasting behaviors, members tend to feel motivated to change. In addition, being a right-brained activity, letter writing can evoke clients' deeply held emotions. In the private space of a letter, clients can express these deep emotions, without feeling pressured to answer questions posed by the group (Hagedorn, 2011).

II. STRUCTURED EXERCISES FOR PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL GROUPS

Psychoeducational groups are frequently the treatment of choice in substance abuse programs, schools, and community mental health agencies. This section discusses psychoeducational groups and how to use well-designed structured activities to increase your success with them.

The Characteristics of Psychoeducational Groups

The general purpose of psychoeducational groups is to

- enhance member knowledge about psychological issues,
- teach skills on how to deal with challenging situations or emotions, and
- provide extra community resources.

Groups in school settings often contain all of these components.

A drastic difference from counseling groups, psychoeducational groups focus neither on the underlying dynamics of members' behaviors (Champe & Rubel, 2012), nor on members' long-term transformations. Clients seeking to restore their interpersonal effectiveness in order to achieve long-term transformations shall be referred to a counseling /therapy group.

Structured Activities and Adolescent Psychoeducational Groups

When it comes to working with groups of adolescents, psychoeducational groups are the foremost treatment of choice (Rose, 2016; Shechtman, 2014). Using structured activities for group discussion, psychoeducational groups assist students in building the basics of specific skills and indirectly repairing certain deficiencies (Johannessen, 2003).

For example, a structured anger management group (Potter-Efron, 2005; Reilly & Shopshire, 2014) uses specially designed structured written exercises to help members build the skills necessary to identify what triggers their anger and how to deal with their anger without acting out.

In the same vein, groups for assertiveness training (Brown, 2011; Miltenberger 2012) use structured exercises to help member look into their faulty assumptions and replace them with correct methods and skills for assertiveness (Corey, 2017).

Due to the educational component, some psychoeducational groups use videotapes, audiocassettes, or lectures as a part of the session. It is acceptable if these educational activities are followed by *facilitated discussion* and *role-playing*—two keys to increasing member interaction and helping members internalize what they have just learned.

Role-Playing in Psychoeducational Group

Role-playing is an integral part of a psychoeducational group. One of the most effective ways for clients to develop skills is by trying out their learned skills in action (Brown, 2011; Hammond & Wyatt, 2005; Miltenberger, 2012). This can involve as little as two people or as many as the situation requires.

Role-playing involves two parts: first, leaders spell out the underlying mechanism of how a skill works (Zipora, 2014; Rose, 2016); second, members choose a specific problematic situation and put their learned skills into action. Combining these two parts ensures that members have the skills down pat.

After role-playing, leaders can request that the group members give each other *feedback* regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their skill execution. Knowing their own strengths and weaknesses in skill execution is imperative for adolescents because they gain understanding best through *practice and feedback*.

When guided well, most members should not have difficulty role-playing. Some members, however, might need extra help. For example, members who have *performance anxiety* or *attention deficit issues* may struggle to put skills into action on the spot. It is recommended that you ask these members to write down key phrases on *index cards* as personal reminders—a simple action that helps many members with special needs feel more relaxed about role-playing.

A Structured Exercise Carried Through in a Series of Sessions

Who says that a psychological group cannot go deep? One example that contests this typecast is a model called "Achieving Success Everyday" (Rose & Steen, 2014). Consisting of several components, this structured activity carries a psychoeducational group to a profound place.

In a beginning session, students develop a time line of powerful experiences from their lives. (This structured activity is also called Life Line and can be found in examples near the end of this chapter). In sharing their time line, the group members recognize a great deal of *universality* in their *shared struggles* and are able to demonstrate *increased empathy toward one another* as the group moves forward.

In a later session, members identify current stressors and the ways in which they are coping well and are resilient. In yet another session, the members project their time lines into the future, incorporating identified goals and newly developed life skills.

As a result of their interaction through the *series of structured activities*, members' self-reflection greatly increases and their resilience is fostered.

Brazilian-Mask-Making Structured Activity

A fun and engaging activity for psychoeducational groups is *Brazilian Mask Making* (Molina, Monteiro-Leitner, Garrett, & Gladding, 2005). Here members are instructed to *design a mask* from any available materials, such as clay, paper, or even an existing mask.

Once made, members *personify the masks* by telling their own stories *from the perspective of the mask*.

Mask making is fun and engaging *for young populations*. The mask gives them the opportunity to speak about things they might typically not be forthcoming about.

Colored Candy Go-Around

Another fun and meaningful structured activity for psychoeducational groups is Colored Candy Go Around (Lowenstein, 2011). It is perfectly suited for *young kids*.

In the activity, the leader distributes 10 to 15 candies to all members, instructing them to sort their candy by color. The leader makes sure that *each member receives at least one candy for every color*. Each color requires a specific description of the owner. For example, green calls for a few words describing yourself, purple for ways you have fun, orange for things you'd like to change about yourself, red for things you worry about, and yellow for good things about yourself.

The leader asks one member to pick a color (say, red) and has the rest of the members say how many red candies they have. Let's say that Maria has two red candies; she would then give two responses to the following question from the leader:

"What words would you use to describe the things you worry about?" [red color represents worry]

Other members then take turns responding to the same question. When finished, another color may be picked out, and the activity continues.

At the end, the group members process what they take home from the activity: what they learned, what surprised them, and how they would work toward

making changes or improvements (Lowenstein, 2011). Through processing, these young kids are able to identify areas of improvement that they want to address.

Seeing young kids at such a deep level of open communication and self-learning is something that truly moves us. If kids can do it, adults can, too. It's simply a matter of being well facilitated.

Common Mistakes to Avoid in Leading Psychoeducational Groups

Sad to say, psychoeducational groups in many mental health agencies and school settings often fail to tap into the groups' potential. This failure is caused by misusing psychoeducational groups as *classes* or *lectures*, devoid of member-to-member discussion (Brown, 2011; Corey, 2017; Lothstein, 2014).

Just like anyone else, members of psychoeducational groups have an innate desire for self-expression and engagement, as well as the need to feel heard, affirmed, included, and understood (Chen & Giblin, 2018; Graybar & Leonard, 2005; Maslow, 1943). These needs are even more pronounced when it comes to kids and youth.

When groups are misused as classes or lectures, these universal needs are negated. It is no wonder that kids and youth feel *checked-out* and *unable to sit through* these sessions.

III. STRUCTURED EXERCISES FOR COUNSELING GROUPS

Structured exercises benefit counseling groups as well. Bolstered by a few sessions of such devices in the beginning stage, a counseling group can speed up the pace of trust and connection. This gets the group ready for the upcoming *storming stage* and for its transition into the unstructured format (Berg, Landreth & Fall, 2013). Beyond this, many other benefits await our recognition.

Reducing Member Anxiety

In the beginning, the group experience can seem scary, unpredictable, and ambiguous. It's no surprise that new members of counseling groups are often plagued with anxiety (Fall, 2013; Page & Berkow, 2005; Rutan, Sonte, & Shay, 2014).

A couple of sessions with structured activities can settle nerves, decrease the anxiety of the unknown, and get members at ease with group interaction.

Fulfilling the Needs of Inclusion, Especially for the Introverts

Members' emotional connection to one another is what determines whether a group will gel or not. Members only connect when their need for inclusion is met. A key to fulfilling members' need for inclusion is to make sure that every member has an equal share of floor time; no one monopolizes, and no one gets left out (Mason, 2016).

An easy way to achieve this is by conducting structured communication exercises for a couple of sessions. In particular, these exercises are a big help for *introverts*, easing them into interacting *with those more extroverted and vocal.*

Improving Member Engagement

Increasing member engagement is the key to group success, and structured activities give you an excellent way to engage the entire group. As each person begins to talk, members are given the opportunity to feel more comfortable around each other and learn to trust each other. Trust is critical prior to the more intense encounters of later stages of a counseling group.

In addition, structured activities also lead to cognitive and reflective exploration (Leichtentritt & Shechtman, 2010). This paves the way for insight and cognitive examination that will come in later stages.

Preventing Second Session Letdown

Beyond the first session, the excitement of sharing may wane. Some members may become reticent about disclosing on a more personal level; while others may expect that the group can quickly bring resolution to their problems. Needless to say, the group cannot live up to these high expectations. This is why during the initial stage of a counseling group, members may experience a *second session letdown* (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002).

Neophyte leaders often find themselves stressed from this letdown because they mistakenly believe that the energy of the first session will carry on

through the life of the group. Unprepared, they feel distressed by this change of atmosphere.

Fortunately, using certain structured communication activities will guide the group toward more engaging and personal sharing through the early sessions. In so doing, you will lessen the impact of the letdown and allow the group members to immerse themselves into a deeper level of group work.

MISUSE OF STRUCTURED EXERCISES

The key to the success of a structured session is not the exercise itself but the processing that follows the exercise. Unfortunately, structured exercises are often misused in the field of group work. This section addresses pitfalls to steer clear of.

Mistake 1: Doing One Exercise Right After Another

Due to their anxiety or lack of training in group processing, new leaders tend to err by doing one exercise after another. This misuse will deter members or give them the wrong impression that group work is nothing more than gimmicks.

Communication exercises are best used to initiate communication and focus members on certain meaningful topics; they should not be used just to fill time. A false concept in our society is that group is a manufactured, thus phony, environment (Carter, Mitchell, & Krautheim, 2001). This notion is mostly caused and reinforced by those group leaders who overuse structured exercises, taking away members' sense of ownership, authenticity, and autonomy.

Mistake 2: Using Published Structured Activities Without Customization

Some group leaders rely heavily on published structured activities. They accept them wholeheartedly, thinking that if they are in print, they must be effective (Vannicelli, 2014). Those who created the materials could not have possibly considered the special needs and challenges of your particular group members. For example, materials prepared for team building groups usually don't measure up when applied to members of a highly resistant, mandated group.

Careful examination of published materials is critical in order to determine their usefulness for your members. If these materials are given to you by your agency, it is advisable to select certain ideas from them and then customize them to fit the specific needs of your members.

The Limitation of Structured Exercises

Before deciding to use structured activities, beware of potential setbacks.

No long-term change. Yalom has done extensive research on the effect of structured exercises on group outcomes. Results show that leaders who use multiple exercises are *popular* with their groups. Exercises create *immediate results*, leading members to perceive the leaders as more *competent*, more effective, and more perceptive than those without using many exercises (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

However, the long-term outcome shows quite the opposite. Groups that use the most exercises actually have much less positive outcomes and fewer behavior changes. Even when there are changes, they are less likely to be maintained over time.

Crippled group autonomy. Relying heavily on structured exercises inevitably stifles group dynamics, making a group less effective long term. Yalom's research shows that structured exercises quickly open the door on members' expressivity but bypass the anxiety and the difficult stages. This *immediate result* seems fantastic at the time, but it comes with a price. Like a child being rushed into adulthood, the group's autonomy and self-assertion can be crippled.

Stifled interpersonal styles. Structured exercises make it difficult for members' interpersonal styles to emerge and therefore delay the transition to the here-and-now of interpersonal learning. It is no surprise that in their study, Hetzel, Barton, and Davenport (1994) conclude that unstructured sessions are significantly more helpful than structured ones. A reflection by one of the members in their study best illustrates this point, "I feel like the group really took off once we stopped doing exercises" (p. 59).

Less intrinsic rewards for leaders. Many untrained paraprofessionals have a fondness for structured exercises and predesigned communication topics because these exercises spare them of challenge and anxiety. For a trained group leader, however, leading a structured group consistently provides *less intrinsic reward* because of a lack of depth in interpersonal learning.

The following table provides a visual display of the pros and cons of using structured activities in group sessions.

Table 6.1　The Pros and Cons of Using Structured Communication Exercises

	Pros	Cons
For Leaders	More control over group engagement	Illusion of control
	Greater ability to predict session outcome	Leader stagnation
	Perceived as more competent, more effective, and more perceptive	Seen as using gimmicks
	Less stressful, less challenging, less anxiety-provoking	Loss of leader personal growth; *less gratifying*
For Members	Bypassing the anxiety; no ambiguity in group interaction	Loss of spontaneity
	Having something to say. No struggles with initiating self-disclosure	Loss of autonomy
	Equal time to share. Less need to deal with someone who dominates	Boredom
For Group Dynamics	No complicated group dynamics to deal with	Interpersonal dynamics or patterns having no chance to emerge
	Group feedback tends to be more supportive	Group feedback tends to be more superficial, less insightful
For Group Outcomes	Group engagement immediately improved	Less depth of interpersonal learning
	Atmosphere change could be immediate	Changes tend to be short-lived

HOW TO CONDUCT STRUCTURED EXERCISES

The general consensus among group specialists is to use structured exercises as little as possible. However, as Hetzel et al. (1994) state, *a few* structured exercises, especially during the initial sessions, can provide the catalyst for group cohesion. If you decide to include a structured exercise in your early group sessions, consider the procedures detailed below.

Introduce the Exercises

The first step is to introduce the exercise and explain its purpose:

"In a minute, I am going to ask the group to do an exercise. This exercise will help all of us get in touch with our thoughts and feelings about people that have greatly impacted us."

"This exercise will help us gain some insight about our selves and about each other. We will take about 8 minutes to complete the writing portion of the exercise, and then we will spend the rest of the session sharing what we learned."

"Are there any questions before we begin?"

Conduct the Exercise One Step at a Time Without Preview

The second step is to guide the group in carrying out the activity. Don't go over every procedure at once, lest members become worried about missing out. On the contrary, when you guide them one step at a time, you *pique their curiosity* about what is to come.

"To begin this activity, I am going to pass out paper and pencils to everybody [wait]. Ok, now please draw a circle, not too big and not too small, on your paper [wait]."

"Now, on the inside of the circle, please write or draw the people in your life whom you get most emotional support from. You have about 3 minutes to do this." [wait until members are finished]

"Ok, it has been about 3 minutes. If you need more time, please let me know."

"Now on the outside of the circle, please write or draw the people in your life from whom you wish to get emotional support from but have had difficulty getting it. You also have about 3 minutes to do this." [wait until members are finished]

By and large, *leaders do not participate in an exercise* because it might ignite feelings, thoughts, or unfinished business that will inhibit the leader from giving their full attention to the group members.

HOW TO PROCESS AFTER STRUCTURED EXERCISES

The processing of the exercise can make or break your group session (Delucia-Waack, 2009; Jones & Robinson III, 2000; Skudrzyk et al., 2009). With this in mind, a leader should not leave it to chance but thoroughly work on processing what comes out in the structured exercise. How will the leader go about doing the process? To answer this question, the following section proposes a working model and its principles.

Avoid Dry Reports on the Content Level

The first principle of processing is to avoid dry reports on the content level. To process something means *to attend to* or *sort out* what has been brought forth by an experience. In a group, processing can extract insights, new perspectives, and meanings from an activity.

This action sounds abstract and may be subject to misunderstanding. For example, some group leaders mistake *content reporting* for *processing*. This misperception is exemplified by the reflection of a new group leader:

"I was pleased with the way I smoothly conducted the structured exercise. However, in terms of the processing portion, the group fell flat. I thought I was helping the group process, but perhaps I was mistaken. By having the group report their written content, they went into a story-telling mode, and I could not make a crack on it."

Here is a tip to avoid dry reports: Ask your members to *put their paper aside* or *under their seat* after they are done writing. This way, members will have neither the convenience nor the temptation to look down and read their writing.

Good Materials for Processing

The second principle of processing is to give members hints on materials for a productive processing portion. For example, the following are good materials for processing:

- Sensations stirred *inside of them* during the exercise
- *Feelings and thoughts triggered by the exercise*.

- *Realizations or discovery about themselves* through the exercise
- What about others' sharing that struck a chord with them

The Working Model: Playing With Common Themes

An effective working model of processing is to play with common themes. An effective group leader needs to take on the following responsibilities, much like a shepherd to his sheep:

- To tend, feed, and herd the group in the processing portion
- To allow the highest degree of autonomy for the group to discover meanings from their own experiences

Playing with common themes allows the leader to achieve the previous and following tasks:

- To provide enough structure for a new group to get orientated
- To afford opportunities for members to build a sense of connection
- To allow members maximum freedom for self-expression and self-discovery

This way of processing quite resembles the basic-level unstructured group (see Chapter 8), with one major difference: In the structured group, the leader uses a structured exercise to set up the stage for members to jump into processing immediately; while in the unstructured group, the leader uses none.

Initiate the Processing

The first step of the processing portion is simply to initiate it. If the group is new, a bit of instruction will go a long way:

"Now we are going to move on to the bulk of the session, which is the processing part. I would like each of you to please put your paper under your seat, let your hands go free. Now close your eyes for 2 minutes and think about what you realized, learned, or discovered about yourself, your belief system, your world view, your self-talk, your coping style, and your relationships, as a result of this exercise."

Next,

> "OK, if you are ready, please open your eyes and feel free to share. We are *neither taking turns nor focusing on one member at a time*. We are going to process whatever topics emerge along the way. Who would like to start?"

Pick up the First Member's Core Message and Spin It off

A member may take your offer and go first. When starting, he or she may be all over the place. The group might try to respond with understanding and reassurance. Let it be. Your job is to deeply listen to the core message the member is bringing to the table. When you get a grasp of the message, offer the core concern to the group:

> [To the whole group] "From what Dan shared, it seems that this exercise brings up feelings that he has struggled with for quite some time. Deep down, he feels like he is never good enough for anyone. I wonder how the feeling of "I am never good enough" strikes a chord with you?

Spin a Common Theme off to the Group and See How It Gains Traction

As the group chimes in to relate to the issue you just offered, they will discuss it back and forth, zigzagging here and there. From their collective sharing, you may pick up a common theme, such as "self-doubt," "disconnection," or something else. You will then spin it off to the group again.

> [To the group] "From what a few members have just shared, it seems like *feeling disconnected* [key phrase] is *a common experience* among them. I wonder if this *feeling of disconnect* [the key phrase] has come up in your life, too?"

This common thread may or may not gain traction. Play around with it, and don't become attached to the outcome. Continue to listen, and you will find another common theme—for example "feeling flawed." You spin it off to the group, just the same.

[To the group] "From some of your stories, it appears that many of us see ourselves as *flawed*; leading us to *hide our true self or compromise our standards*. I wonder, *what memories come up for you* surrounding the theme of *being flawed*?"

Some members may respond to this new common theme; others may connect it to the previous two themes; still, others may go astray to a completely different topic. Don't attempt to control this.

From there, you might pick up yet another common theme. Again, spin it off to the group:

[To the group] "A theme I am hearing from several members just now sounds like this, 'Damn it. I have worked on this for 25 years, and I cannot believe I am still so easily triggered by it.' I am wondering how this theme is striking a chord with you?"

Surprisingly, this common theme gained traction big time. The whole group perked up and became completely immersed in a deep and intimate discussion.

Allow Improvised Responses to Play at "the Edge of Chaos"

The processing part of a structured group is playful in a sense. Just like *an unrehearsed jazz ensemble*, as one tune emerges, other musicians join in on the beat. Another tune emerges, inviting another synchronization. Just when harmony dominates the melody, out of the blue comes something contradictory, causing a bit of disarray. Yet, born out of the disarray, something emerges that takes our breath away.

As such, group processing is never neat or linear but rather "ever messy and muddy" as so lamented by a new group leader. Underneath the muddiness may hibernate a creative force that can burst through the hard topsoil in due time, giving birth to a new plant. Long fascinated by chaos theory, I (Mei) am exhilarated to see its working principles take effect in group processing. According to chaos theory, "the edge of chaos" (Waldrop, 1992, p. 12) pulsates the most adaptive and creative force in a living system. This very working principle is alive and kicking in the group processing.

Common Themes Associated
With Reactive Emotions

A saying (originated from Shakespeare) goes like this, "There is a method to the madness." Upon careful examination, there is an amazing order to the seemingly disordered array of issues that members presented. Under this system, we can simplify members' presenting issues into two genres of common themes.

One type of common theme deals with certain universal emotions, reactive in nature. These *reactive emotions* are called *secondary emotions* (Greenburg & Pascual-Leone, 2006; Greenburg, 2008; Johnson, 2004). Among them, we often hear frustration, guilt, anger, discouragement, worry, anxiety, and so on.

Reactive emotions are typically elicited by certain *recurrent life struggles or themes and are* significant enough to warrant group processing. These themes may include the following:

- Isolation, disconnection
- Being unheard
- Being unappreciated
- Not fitting in, misplacement
- Not getting needs met in relationships
- Discrimination, oppression

When spun off to group discussion, these common themes can easily propel group discussion. Most members have much to talk about and feel a sense of relief when others can relate.

Common Themes Associated
With Primary Emotions

Another type of common theme deals with certain life experiences that are less reflected upon because they often illicit universal, vulnerable, deep-seated emotions. Referred to as *primary emotions* (Greenburg & Pascual-Leone, 2006; Greenburg, 2008; Johnson, 2004), they may include shame, unworthiness, loneliness, and so on.

Themes associated with these primary emotions can often be sourced back to a life experience associated with *deep-rooted and attachment-related deprivations or wounds.* They may include the following:

- Abandonment/rejection
- Being unwanted

- Aa sense of being flawed
- Broken trust
- Loss of self, emptiness
- Betrayal

The discussion among members may bounce back and forth between these two types of common themes, and this is precisely the way it works. There is no set way to have group members follow a neat sequence. From outside looking in, the processing seems to flow effortlessly. From inside looking out, only the therapist knows how much intuition and deep listening it takes to pick up the themes and how much concentration it takes to corral the group discussion around the themes.

Spin a Coping Strategy off and See Whether It Gains Traction

As members continue their discussion surrounding common themes in an intimate way, coping methods naturally emerge. Some are healthy, while others are quite maladaptive. The maladaptive style of coping eventually causes more suffering:

- Wearing a mask; hiding the true self
- Building walls
- Denying
- Escaping into social media, food, shopping, substances, sex, work, or so on
- Blaming
- Complaining
- Passive aggressiveness
- Being confrontational
- Overaccommodating
- Placating

If you want to steer the group toward reflecting on a coping style that you detect, you may say,

[to the whole group] "From the sharing of several members, I hear that many of us "build walls" as a way of coping with the pain of not being appreciated for who we are. Who else would like to share a similar coping style?"

Or

[to the whole group] "From some of your stories, it seems that some of us cope with a sense of *shame* or a sense of being *flawed,* by *hiding our true self* [the coping strategy]. I wonder, what other ways you cope with feelings of *shame* or *being flawed*?"

Collectively reflecting on one coping style has the power of *uniting the group in a profoundly honest place, which group members would not have done alone.*

Extract Meaning From Difficult Life Experiences

Upon discussing their coping styles, some members will start to talk about an alternative path they are taking. This presents an opportunity for the group to head in a new direction. If the group has not yet picked it up, you, as the leader, can bring it up to see what may happen:

[to the whole group] "When Amelia talked about her life-long pattern of being a caretaker and her way of overcoming it, she mentioned that she shifted her focus from the end product to the process—every minute of it. When she said that, I saw sparks glisten in the eyes of many members. Something new and meaningful seemed to awaken in you guys. Who would like to share what this new thing is?"

Or,

[to the whole group] "Jessa seemed to say that even though her parents' rejection still causes her pain and internal turmoil, it does not define her nor dictate her destiny. She is exactly where she needs to be on her journey. When she said that, I saw many of your faces light up. Would you care to share what awakened within you just now?"

As members take part in the discussion, and as they extricate meanings from their difficult life experiences, a sense of spirituality or transcendence often fills the room.

It may take one session of muddled processing to get members to arrive at the other side of the shore; it may take multiple. But when they do, you will know that your group has struck their therapeutic gold.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS DURING PROCESSING

Disclosing personal, emotional, or intimate aspects of themselves in a group can leave members feeling vulnerable and exposed. A safe environment must be secured in order for members to feel supported and validated when they disclose. When ineffective communication styles emerge during processing, the leader will need to intervene.

Know When to Give Space and When to Invite

If a member is slow to participate, give him or her space and time to observe. On the other hand, if a member is emotional or crying, attention should be given to him or her immediately. You may ask the group members if they will stop and stay with the person's emotions for a moment. If the member is willing, you may briefly process the emotions:

"Thank you for sharing your experiences with the group, Katie. I see that you are fighting back some emotions right now. From what you just shared, I am not sure what is triggering them for you. I wonder if we could stay with these emotions a bit and you can help us understand them if you are ready."

Deal With a Member's Excessive Questioning

A member, Jenny, is asking a series of questions centered on a third party, which leads to excessive storytelling. This is a good time to intervene:

"Jenny, thank you for asking questions about James's experience of being betrayed by his friend. I think it would be helpful for James if you shared your own personal experience surrounding this topic."

Handle a Member's Invalidating Comments

Another member, Apple, is trying to provide supportive comments. Yet, her comments have a problem-solving or rescuing tone to them and end up invalidating or discounting the other member's feelings or needs. You may intervene as follows:

"As Apple was making comments to Katie about how to communicate with her parents, I notice several facial expressions and body movements occurring within the group. I wonder what it was about Apple's comment that was causing this stir? Would anyone like to share your reactions or observations?"

When a Member Is Talking "About" Another Member

Tony responded to your invitation by talking "about" Apple indirectly, as if she was not in the room. To this, you may intervene as follows:

"Tony, since Apple is in this room, it would be more personable if you could address her directly, rather than talking about her. Would you mind repeating what you just said but this time say it directly to Apple, using an 'I-you' statement?"

When a Member Is Self-Referencing

Andre tries to validate James's experience by relating a story of his own, but he rambles on without relating to James's underlying needs, struggles, or feelings. To this, you may intervene:

"Andre, I appreciate your kindness in trying to help James feel less alone with your own story. Would you please narrow it down a bit by naming one or two feelings, needs, or thoughts through which James might be able to feel a connection with you?"

VARIOUS EXAMPLES OF STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION EXERCISES

This section presents structured communication exercises we have used in group settings over the years. These exercises work effectively in promoting group interaction. However, the level of depth which the group will reach is dependent on your methods of processing.

How to Choose Structured Exercises

When choosing a structured exercise, please make sure to match the intensity level of the exercise with that of your group. The emotional intensity of the group's interactions tends to directly increase with group development. Exercises that lack intensity may frustrate members who are ready for high-intensity interactions (Corey, Corey, Callahan, & Russell, 1992; Jones & Robinson III, 2000).

Also, please consider choosing structured activities that help the group *see the inner world of a member*. This is particularly important for introverts in the group.

Among all the structured communication exercises, written ones tend to be the most versatile, engaging, and useful. They are especially handy in the beginning stages of a group for members who feel nervous having to perform on the spot. They include sentence completions, lists, two-paper exercises (e.g., one-and-another, inside-and-outside), and expressiveness.

Team-Building Exercises not Included Here

Some team-building exercises can be effective in increasing group bonding. For example, *icebreakers* help members get to know one another in a non-threatening way. This is especially true in the first session as it can be quite intimidating for a lot of people.

Others, like *physically engaging exercises, team-oriented exercises,* and games, are useful for groups with *teens* because these exercises can nurture collaboration, trust, and respect. Others, like wilderness activities and trust-building games, may help members develop confidence in their peers and in themselves.

Due to space limitation, we are unable to present examples of team-building exercises.

26 Examples of Structured Communication Exercises

1. Sentence Completion

In this exercise, you make up a sentence stem and leave the rest of the sentence blank for group members to complete. Examples of sentence stems are as follows:

"When I enter a new group, I feel _____."

"In a group, I am most afraid of _____."

"When people first meet me, they _____."

"I trust those who _____."

"I regret _____."

"If I had to do it all over again, I would _____."

2. Mannequin Exercise

"I would like to have everybody think of an important person in your life that you *look up to or feel close to*. We will pass around a small wooden figure called a mannequin. When you hold the mannequin in your hand, please use it to connect to this particular person in your life. Then, have the mannequin face the group, and speak for the mannequin as to what this person would say <u>to the group</u> about you. Next, turn the mannequin toward you, and speak for the mannequin on what this person would say <u>to you</u> about you."

3. Letter of Gratitude

"Please answer the following question on a piece of paper: If you could write a letter of gratitude to someone in your life, to whom would that be, and what would you write about?"

4. Lists

In this exercise, you ask the group members to make a list. Examples of lists that focus on positive attributes may look like the following:

"List what you feel most proud of about yourself."

"List the most supportive people in your life."

"List three people who have influenced you greatly in your life."

"List some of your accomplishments."

"List three decisions that you have made that have changed your life."

"List things that you like about yourself."

"List some unforgettable moments in your life that you wish you could relive."

Examples of lists that describe life stressors may look like the following:

"List things that are stressful for you."

"List feelings that you have felt most often recently."

"List recent problems that concern you the most."

5. One-and-Another

Variation 1:

"On the first piece of paper, draw a picture of your face that reflects how you think <u>it appears to other people</u>. Please remember how you feel on the inside as you are drawing this picture. [wait until members complete] Now, on a separate piece of paper, please draw another picture of your face that reflects <u>how you actually feel</u> [give enough time for members to complete]."

Variation 2:

"On one piece of paper, draw a picture or write down key words to illustrate where you <u>actually are now</u>, that is, how you are feeling and what your current life situation is. Don't be concerned about being artistic. Just let your pen lead you! [Wait until members finish.] Now, on another piece of paper, draw or write how you <u>wish</u> to be in the future [give enough time for members to complete]."

Variation 3:

"On the front side of the paper, please write a sentence or draw a picture to describe <u>where you are</u> in your life. On the back side of the paper, please describe <u>where you want to be</u>. <u>Then describe what small changes</u> <u>you need to act upon</u> to help yourself arrive at that desired version of yourself." (This is a good exercise for the beginning sessions of an adolescent group.)

6. Inside-and-Outside

Inside-and-outside can help members discover who they are and what their lives are about.

Variation 1: Attachment figures

"Please draw a circle, not too big, nor too small on your sheet of paper. Inside the circle, please write or draw significant people in your life with whom you feel comfortable being your authentic self and with whom you feel comfortable turning to when you want to talk about things that on your mind. You have about 3 minutes to do so.

Now, on the outside of the circle, please write or draw significant people in your life with whom you wish you could be your authentic self but have difficulty doing so and people with whom you tend to hold back from when you really need to talk about the things on your mind. You have about 3 minutes."

(*Notes*: this exercise has been able to generate intense discussions filled with tears and laughter for three consecutive sessions, for a group of 10 adult members. One 90-minute session of processing does not typically complete the processing. Subsequent sessions are needed to finish processing. It can start with a one-by-one processing and organically shift to unstructured, spontaneous processing. From what I (Mei) have witnessed, *attachment-based* topics bring up some of the most powerful and charged emotions in our lives.

Variation 2: Pride/inadequacy

"On your sheet of paper, draw a big circle. Think of things in your life that you are proud of, and then write or draw these things inside the circle. [Wait for members to complete.] Now, think of things in your life that bring you a feeling of uneasiness and inadequacy, and then write or draw those things outside the circle."

Variation 3: Control

"On your sheet of paper, draw a circle, not too big, not too small. Within the circle, please draw or write things in your life that you feel are within your control. Now, on the outside of the circle, please draw or write things in your life that you do not appreciate and feel are out of your control."

During processing, it is important to ask members to define what control means to them and what events in their life have impacted their definition of control.

Variation 4: Safety/fear

"Within the circle, please draw or write things in your life that you feel safe and secure. On the outside of the circle, please draw or write the biggest fears you currently have in your life."

7. Three Columns Exercise

"Think of a specific memory from your childhood that you experienced that involved your family of origin. This moment should be one that you feel was not resolved.

Reflect on the items in the three columns (see Table 6.2), and write down your reflection.

If you have time, write on the back of the paper about what you have learned from this activity."

Table 6.2 Three Columns Exercise

Feelings I Could Express	Feelings I Couldn't Express	How These Relate to the Goal That I am Working on in this Group

8. Expressiveness

"On the sheet of paper, write down some of your hopes and fears surrounding being a part of this group."

"Maybe each of you can take a few minutes to think of an animal with which you identify. Then write a few sentences to describe how this animal deals with change and uncertainty."

Other expressive exercises involve storytelling, poetry, drawing, and music. They all have the capacity to act as catalysts for members to open up and express their inner experiences that might otherwise be kept hidden.

9. Fish Bowls

In Fish Bowl exercises (Hensley, 2002; Kane, 1995), the group forms two circles in the room: one is a tight <u>inner circle</u> in the middle of the room, and the other a loose <u>outer circle</u> that wraps around the inner circle.

First round

Doing the Exercise: You ask a few volunteers to sit in the inner circle and openly discuss an issue that either you or the group chooses. Members of the outer circle will quietly observe what is happening in the inner circle.

There can be many different ways to form the circles in the fish bowl exercise. You can design the inner and outer circles based on gender, race, presenting issues, or position on certain issues.

Processing: Once completed, ask the members of the inner circle to reflect on what they have learned about themselves through the open discussion. Most importantly, how they experienced being watched like a fish in a fishbowl.

Engaging the outer circle: Then ask members in the outer circle to provide feedback to the inner circle about what they have observed. Most importantly, ask the outside people to reflect on what they have learned about themselves as observers. Simply hearing what others have to say often helps increase the observers' awareness about their own perspectives.

Second round

Changing roles: If suitable, you can have the circles switch. Those in the inner circle will now sit on the outside as observers and vice versa. This new inner circle will discuss the same topics as did the first inner circle.

Processing: Reflection and feedback portions follow the completion of changing roles.

To conclude: Fishbowl exercises are particularly useful for groups where members are still *hesitant* to openly discuss sensitive issues. Sitting in the outer circle, members have the freedom to observe others in action while silently looking inward and contemplating their own issues. For example, in a mandated group, you could place the most resistant members in the outer circle first, so that they can slowly warm up to the idea of sharing with the group.

10. My family

Topics centering around family are usually sensitive for many people, so it's best to use this exercise when the group has already been with each other for at least two sessions. The introduction of this exercise is as follows:

"Please look at the sheet of paper that we have handed out. Printed on the paper are three questions we would like you to answer.

1. The family member I am most similar to is _____.

    And this is why _____.

2. The family member I am least like is _____.

    And this is why _____.

3. If I could openly and honestly speak with any family member without ANY chance of hurting his or her feelings, I would choose _____.

    And this is what I'd tell him or her _____.

We have 8 minutes to complete this exercise. After everyone has completed the activity, each group member will have the option to share with the group. Are there any questions before we begin?"

11. Four Relationships

"Here are 4 small pieces of paper with different colors. Each of you will take all four pieces of paper. First, think of four relationships in which you

would like <u>to be supported differently</u>. For example, it could be a relationship you have with a family member, friend, significant other, co-worker, supervisor, or so on. On the top of each piece of paper, write down one of your names, and underline it.

Second, under each name, please write down the kind of support that you would like to get from that specific relationship. For example, 'I would like to him or her to listen and understand me better.'"

12. Life Events and Confidence

"First, on a scale of 1 to 10, please rate how confident you feel about yourself. Then, please write down events in your life that have impacted your confidence level."

Variation: *Self-esteem*

"On a scale of 1 to 10, please indicate how you feel about yourself. Then, please write down the factors in your life that have shaped your self-esteem."

13. Life Line With Peaks and Valleys (Also Called Timeline)

"In this exercise, you will have an opportunity to chart the peaks and valleys in your life in terms of your confidence and sense of well-being.

I am giving everyone a piece of paper. Please position the paper horizontally. Draw a straight line down the middle of your paper to represent your life line.

Now, recall life events that made you feel happy, full of pride, or proud of yourself. These will be the peaks dotted <u>above</u> the line.

Then, recall any events that made you feel sad, depressed, or unhappy. These will be the valleys dotted <u>below</u> the line.

Remember, this is a time line of your peaks and valleys in your life up until this point, so try to go as far back as you can.

If you can, write down your age next to the dots on the peaks and valleys.

Finally, please connect the dots of the peaks and valleys."

14. Life Episodes Rating

"Recall four critical episodes that have occurred in your life. Rate these critical life episodes on a scale of one to 10, with one being helpless and 10 being in control."

15. Expectations

"On the top half of the paper, please describe your self-expectations. As you write, indicate which ones are realistic and which ones are not. On the bottom half, please write down others' expectations of you and whether they are explicitly or implicitly conveyed to you."

16. Caught by Surprise

"On a sheet of paper, please describe a life event that most caught you by surprise, either in a positive or negative way."

17. "Who am I?"

"On a sheet of paper, please answer this question: 'Who am I?'"

18. Fear in the Hat

This exercise touches on sensitive topics and is, therefore, better used when members have established trust with one another.

"I am going to give everyone a paper and pencil. Please don't write your name on the paper. Now, if you don't mind, please write down your answer to the following question:

'What do you fear the most in life?'

Remember that no one will know your answer. OK. I am going to pass around a hat, and you will fold your paper into a unique shape and throw it into the hat.

Now, I will pass the hat around again. Please draw a paper that is *not* yours.

Good, now each of you has another person's paper without knowing who this person is. I would like to have each of you read the fear written on that paper <u>and reflect on how this person might be feeling inside</u>."

Variation: *Secrets in the Hat*

"What's a secret that you have that you feel you cannot go to anyone with?"

Benefits of this exercise:

Putting one's problem in a hat and having someone else read it out loud and reflect on it could potentially afford the person the opportunity to detach from the problem and hear it afresh in someone else's voice. This gives the person a chance to look at himself or herself from the outside and possibly receive some new and helpful insights.

19. Inside and Outside Discrepancy Exercise

This exercise motivates members to reflect on a past experience in which they created a *false sense of self* by not expressing their true emotions. It also asks members to reflect on *how others responded to the false self*. This exercise has the power to inspire people to be more real and to focus on the heart of their issues.

Table 6.3 Inside and Outside Discrepancy Exercise

(1) Situation	(2) Inside feeling
(3) Outside appearance to others	(4) Discrepancy between box 2 and box 3, and the impact of this discrepancy on your life

"Write down a situation in which you experience stress and grief.

Now, name some inner feelings you have when you experience this situation. 'Inside I feel _____.'

Now, write how you appear to others during this situation. 'On the outside, I appear as if _____.' Please use feeling words as well as observable behaviors.

Now, think about the impact that the discrepancy between Box 2 and Box 3 has had on your physical self, your behavior, and your emotional self."

20. Four-Box Exercise

Variation 1: Hurtful and Grateful Events

Table 6.4 Hurtful and Grateful Events Exercise

(1) Hurtful event	(2) Your wish in this event
(3) Grateful event	(4) Why this event touched your heart

"To begin this activity, please use the paper and pencils we just passed out, and fold your paper once horizontally and once vertically to create 4 boxes (demonstrate the folding).

Now, please think of a time when someone in your life hurt you in some way. Think of a specific event and when and where it happened. In the top left box, please briefly write down what the other person said or did that was so hurtful.

Now, underneath your description, in the bottom left box, write down what that person could or should have said to make this memory less painful for you.

Next, think of a time when someone in your life did something that made you feel grateful, special, or appreciated. In the top right box, please briefly write down what the other person said or did that was so meaningful.

Next, in the bottom right box, write down what made this memory so meaningful to you at this point in your life and why this event touched your heart.

Remember that there are no events that are too big or too small to have an impact. Trust your instincts and go with the first memory that comes to mind."

Variation 2: Hurt and Moving on

Table 6.5 Hurt and Moving on Exercise

(1) The event that hurt me	(2) How has it impacted the way I am today?
(3) What would need to change inside of me to be able to move on?	(4) How does this relate to my group therapy goal?

"In Box 1, please write an event that hurt you.

In Box 2, please write how it impacted the way you are today.

We have about 3 minutes to work on these two boxes.

Now in Box 3, please write what would need to change inside of you to be able to move on.

In Box 4, please write how this relates to your group therapy goal.

We have about 3 minutes to work on these two boxes."

21. Letter Writing to a Person With Unfinished Business

"On the sheet of paper attached to the clipboard, please use the next 10 minutes to write a letter to someone in your past or present, to whom you have some unexpressed feelings and realizations toward.

These unexpressed feelings and realizations are usually related to some unfinished business that you have with that person. When there is only 1 minute left, I will give you a signal to wrap up. Any questions?"

22. Intimacy

"On the sheet of paper, please define intimacy in your own way. Then please answer the following questions:

'What intimacy issues are you currently struggling with?'

'What blocks your intimacy with others in your life?'

23. Internalized Oppression

This exercise may suit LGBQT members who have had difficulties in their coming-out process.

"First, on the top half of the paper please write down a list of negative things that you have heard *from others* regarding a member of the LGBQT community.

Now, on the bottom half of the paper write down what negative messages on the above list that *you have said about yourself*.

Finally, on the back of the paper write down how this internalized oppression has impacted and reinforced your sense of self-worth."

24. Ranked Position by Perceived Life Experience

"Before we do this, I ask that from this point forward, you are not to speak until I say otherwise. There should be no talking.

Now, I would like Tom and Tracy (the chosen two members) to <u>sit down</u> right where you are and close your eyes.

For the rest of the group, please stay in a standing position and form a single line over on the other side of the room.

I would like to ask Cassie, Lindsay, and Jack (another chosen three) to take the task of reorganizing the group into perceived age order. Please start with those who you perceive to be the youngest or with the least life experiences at this end of the line and those with the most life experience at that end of the line.

Now, please bring the two members (Tom and Tracy) who are sitting with their eyes closed, into the age order line. Cassie, Lindsay, and Jack, please position yourself in the line as well.

Again, please remember not to make any communication during the whole process."

When the exercise is complete, lead the group in processing their experience using the following questions:

"How does your participation in this exercise run parallel to that in the relationships of your day-to-day lives, outside of our group?"

25. Where I Am in the Group

"Please take a minute to review the words and statements in the box located at the bottom of the paper. Then, as honestly as you can, place the words or statements from the box into the appropriate column. Please feel free to include words or statements that do not appear in the box. Try to avoid spending too much time on the task because no one will be passing judgment."

Table 6.6   Where I Am in the Group Exercise

I feel like I have done the following	I feel like the group has done the following
I feel like I have not done the following	I feel like the group has not done the following

Table 6.7 Where I Am in the Group Exercise

Taking risks	Violating trust
Self-disclosure	Confronting others
Showing empathy	Being confronted
Respecting others	Disclosing thoughts/feelings
Disrespecting others	Feeling connected
Being honest in giving feedback	Feeling disconnected
Listening to the heart of the issue	Being sensitive to my feelings
Tuning into others' feelings and needs	Being open-minded
Being supportive	Taking responsibility and self-initiative
Allowing me time to share	

26. Eye-Gazing Exercise

"I would like everybody to stand up and walk around the room in silence for a few seconds. Now, stop. Please turn to the person nearest you. Now, the two of you will look into each other's eyes in silence for 2 minutes. Be present for this experience. [2 minutes pass].

OK, stop. Step away from each other, and walk around the room again in silence for a few seconds. OK, find the person nearest you, and form a dyad again. Look into each other's eyes in silence for 2 minutes. Again, be present for this experience. [2 minutes pass].

OK, return to your seat. Let's process how you experience this eye gazing exercise and what it has stirred inside of you. We are going to process this structured exercise in an unstructured fashion. Who wants to start?"

∞∞

In closing: Just like a well-built vehicle, a properly designed structured exercise can take the group anywhere you want—if you have the key to turn its engine on.

Knowing how to play with common themes and knowing how to sort out the reactions and self-realization coming out from the structured exercise, you

now have the key—the key that starts the ignition, sending the group off down the road.

With the numerous examples of structured communication exercises as your fuel, with the model of processing as your road map, you can take the group anywhere you want— regardless of whether you are leading a mandated group, a psychoeducational group, or a counseling/therapy group.

CASES IN POINT: PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS ON STRUCTURED EXERCISES

Case 1: Inside-and-Outside Exercise (Second Session)

Reflection by Tim

The Inside-and-Outside Exercise. Session 2 was a profound session for me. We did a structured activity where I was instructed to draw a circle on a sheet of paper. On the inside of the circle, I was *to write down the names of the people in my life with whom I could be the most authentic and vulnerable with. For those that I felt challenged to be authentic with, I was instructed to write their names on the outside of the circle.*

Fear of Vulnerability With Loved Ones. I was both surprised and horrified to see that I placed all of the people to whom I feel the closest on *the outside* of my circle. Someone in the group nailed down my experience saying that it is as if the people on the outside were the "high stakes" people—they are the ones with whom I have the most to lose and with whom I feel the most vulnerable. Consequentlyy, they are the ones I am the most afraid to expose myself to.

Strangers Are Safer. Throughout the years I have bared my soul to people I don't know as well. They are safe; they can't really hurt me or reject me. But the opposite is true about those that I love and care about the most.

Not Feeling Alone in the Group. As the group continued processing, others disclosed that they too struggled with intimacy with those that they love. It seems, and not surprisingly so, that many of my fellow group members struggle with the same fears of being vulnerable and feeling safe with those that they love . . . those with which the stakes are high.

I must say that there is a great deal of comfort in knowing that I am not alone. I knew cognitively that I wasn't alone in such feelings, but it is powerful to physically feel relieved and validated through experiencing the commonality firsthand. Suffice it to say, challenges with intimacy are a theme that is pretty universal.

I also felt a real sense of relief that others, such as Sabrina, were as emotionally expressive as I was. It made me feel not so "out on a limb by myself" when my emotions come out so strongly. Miquel also passionately expressed his frustration with not being heard by his family. I definitely was not the only one with strong feelings and visible emotions.

The Boundary Between Me and My Mother. I am glad that my open and honest sharing helps pave the way for others to do so as well, but I sometimes feel a little overexposed. I am feeling a real need for some self-preservation in order to lessen my feelings of overexposure. Perhaps, what I'm really speaking of is finding my boundaries. I'm not really speaking about boundaries in the group, but the boundary between me and my mother.

A Heartfelt Conversation With My Mother After the Session. I want to be able to move some of those on the outside circle into my inner circle. And, I can proudly say that my desire to get authentic with my loved one is outweighing my fears of intimacy now. As a result of the impact from Session 2, I had a very honest, heartfelt conversation with my mother a few days ago. It's been a long time coming, but I know it was necessary.

Two Adults Having an Honest Discussion. Perhaps there was even some Divine timing. This occurred after my group experience as opposed to my trying to force a conversation prematurely. In any case, I felt heard, validated and understood by my mother. More importantly, I didn't feel like I had to take care of her or manage her feelings like in the past. We were simply two adults having an honest and poignant discussion. That hadn't happened in a long, long, time.

An Honest Conversation With My Partner After the Session. I also had a similarly open, honest and vulnerable conversation with my partner. While that conversation felt a little more challenging, the end result is that we both felt closer to each other. It's definitely a nice starting place to explore where we want our relationship to go in light of the recent events that I've disclosed to the group.

Buttons Pushed by a Member. I have to say that my buttons are pushed when I hear Miquel giving anyone feedback. His feedback is always precipitated by his own stories. I sometimes feel lost and even impatient with what he is trying to say. I wonder what button is being pushed inside of me? It definitely gives me pause.

Perhaps my feeling of being lost by Miquel's stories is similar to how I have often felt lost in my mother's story. Back when I was a child and adolescent, the focus was always on my mother and what she needed rather than on me. In fact, my mother would report quite willingly and even proudly that "my son raised me." That idea almost elicits a sick feeling inside me.

The Theme of the Parentified Child. Another theme came into our group—children being the caretaker of their parents or being the parent for their siblings. For example, Sabrina caring for her family and not wanting to be another burden after her brother's suicide; Eleshia being the caretaker of her disabled brother as well as her depressed mother; Sala listening to her father's problems for hours on end.

The Theme of the Absent Father. I also never heard Eleshia mention or say much about her father. I wonder where the father is, in all the heaviness within Eleshia's home life. This is another theme that I suspect we will dig deeper into as the weeks go on. I've heard many people struggling with relationships with their fathers. This is a theme that I know is universal . . . the absent father.

I know I definitely have issues with this, and it indeed is the reason that I so readily recognize it in others. Perhaps a better way to name this theme is abandonment.

My Father's Abandonment of Me. My father's abandonment of me has had one of the greatest effects on my self-worth. It leaves me with a feeling and an internal message that says "I don't matter." That feeling of low self-worth molds everything. It affects every area of my life.

I found this group thing fascinating, and I am so glad that I am a part of it.

Case 2: Eye Gazing Exercise (Fourth Session)

Reflection by Mateo

The Eye Gazing Exercise. We did an "eye gazing" structured activity in Session 4. I was really surprised by my reaction to the activity; I found that sustained eye contact is deeply unsettling for me. It made me feel extremely vulnerable.

Obsession With Others' Perception of Me. My internal dialogue during the activity centered on my own concerns over how I was being perceived. For example, I kept telling myself to "use open posture" and "stand still.". My anxiety during this activity was heightened. If this were a social setting, I would have looked for the first available opportunity to escape.

Trapped in My Own Head and Insecurities. The processing following the structured activity provided me with some interesting insight. For instance, Kate spoke passionately about truly seeing the other person and enjoying the shared connectedness. Hearing her response that was other-centered really opened my eyes to a way of being I had not even considered. This led me to become conscious about how often I miss out on

being truly present with another person because I'm so often trapped in my own head and insecurities.

Observation of Others' Coping Patterns. I sense that Toby seems especially vulnerable when sharing personal feelings evoked by the structured activity. Other group members, such as Diego and Brooke, have accurately pointed out that Toby tends to joke when experiencing uncomfortable emotions. Toby acknowledges this pattern and that it extends back to childhood. It gives him a place to hide and feel safe, especially within group settings. I do want to acknowledge that he has greatly decreased the joking behaviors.

A That Family Rarely Showed Emotions. My goal is to remain emotionally open and present, especially in situations where I feel stressed or vulnerable. I think I have made several positive strides in the last few sessions. Earlier, I would become highly uncomfortable in situations where others were experiencing strong negative emotions. I realize that this reaction goes back to my childhood and was reinforced within my family where we rarely showed strong emotions, even within the home.

Open to a New Sense of Connection. This past week, when Brooke was sharing her experiences with her father, I was able to feel not only her emotions but my own emotional reaction as well. Historically, this would have been a very unsettling experience for me. However, in staying present in the moment I felt a sense of connectedness with Brooke that was extremely powerful.

My hope is that I become more aware of my own barriers to interpersonal intimacy. This means that I need to worry less about the ways in which I am perceived and instead focus on truly understanding (and honoring) the person who is in front of me. This also means a willingness to open not just my mind but heart and soul, too. I am actually very excited for this.

Case 3: Outward Persona and Inner Reactions (Fourth Session)—Leader Reflection

The Persona and the Inner Reaction Exercise. In group Session 4, I asked members to draw a picture or write words, on one side of the paper, about how they think their face appeared to other people during a recent stressful event—in other words, what are the personas that they project to the outside world? Then on another sheet of paper, group members were asked to draw or write key words about how they were really feeling and reacting during that event—what was really happening in their internal worlds.

A Processing Revealing Much. I was excited to see that this exercise became the impetus for a rich discussion and processing amongst the members.

Although it started with a structured exercise, the processing revealed many issues and themes amongst the group members.

Very quickly after the processing started, issues of identity, acceptance, wanting validation, and creating intimacy within relationships all rose to the surface.

Lost and Got Back on Track With the Help of My Co-Leader. The pace of the processing was fast! Very quickly, things were happening, and I was lost. Fortunately, my co-facilitator was able to get us back on track when she brought forward the theme of "self-worth." This is exactly the moment when the dynamics of the group shifted into poignant and even riveting dialogue amongst members.

Validation and Acceptance Especially Craved by Minority Members. The shift really deepened when Sabrina and Miquel entered into what proved to be an enthralling dialogue about their need for validation and acceptance because they are both *culturally a minority*. I could palpably feel how others in the group were relating to what was being said, even without a word being spoken. This really showed the power of the group and how when one examines his or her thoughts, feelings, and emotions . . . other members witness the courage taken to do so.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FLOW AND TIME FRAME OF A STRUCTURED SESSION

This section provides you with an overview of a productive structured session. Please remember, a table will not provide you with the richness of the flow of a live group session where multiple actions and circular interactions often occur simultaneously. Details of each step will subsequently be covered.

EXERCISES

Scenarios for Your Practice

1. In the first session of a substance-abuse mandated group, Richard expresses his extreme distrust for the leaders of the group. He advises the other members of the group to be distrustful, as well. As the group leader, how will you respond?

2. During a divorce group, Bobbie states that he feels like a failure; Tony says he feels like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders; Jack says he doesn't know how to feel about his impending divorce. As a leader, how might you link these statements?

Table 6.8 An Overview of the Flow and Time Frame of a Structured Session

A. Opening the session (10 minutes)

  -Relaxation exercise (optional)

  -Check-in: Members sharing lingering feelings and interpersonal skills

B. Conducting the structured activity (10 minutes)

  -Distributing materials

  -Guiding the activities one step at a time

C. Processing (60 minutes)

  -Members share what they have learned about themselves through the exercise

  -Extracting common themes from group sharing

  -Working on the common theme, guiding members to provide validation and feedback to one another

  -Going deeper by extracting meanings from the sharing experiences

(All along, the leader facilitates, intervenes, and participates, to maximize member engagement)

D. Closing the session (10 minutes)

  -Announcing the closing

  -Checking-out

  -Reminder

3. During Tricia's intake, her motivational interview revealed a desire to change from being self-critical to being self-accepting. Now in the third session of the group, Tricia states that she does not believe she needs to change in any way. She states, "Being self-critical keeps me out of trouble with other people." How will you respond?

4. It is the fourth session of a personal growth group, and Jason, a very outspoken and influential member of the group, is responding to everyone by critiquing their feelings and doling out advice. The group momentum is lost, and everyone becomes silent when this happens. As a leader, how will you address this situation?

5. During a mandated substance abuse group, Jamal is deflecting with humor. In response to the following "fill in the blank" statement he answered: "If I give up drugs it would mean <u>I am such a good boy and</u>

deserve a cookie." The group laughs at Jamal's joke. How do you respond?

6. In the third session during a structured activity, Greta becomes very upset and is inconsolable. She keeps apologizing for her tears and beats herself up saying, "I feel like I'm just doing this for attention. I don't deserve the time I take from this group." Many of the members reply with statements expressing the opposite, but Greta cannot accept their statements. As a leader, how do you respond?

7. In the second session of a school behavioral intervention group, Terrence refuses to participate saying, "Anthony is here, and he has bullied me since the 2nd grade. Why would I give him more reasons to bully me?" He is speaking directly to you, the leader. How will you respond?

8. In a mandated group for DUI offenders, Maria refuses to accept others' feedback since her blood alcohol level was just barely over the legal limit. As the leader, how do you respond?

9. In the session, Darrell rationalizes his battering behavior. Angela, another member, responds by further rationalizing his behavior with this statement, "Your wife should know what happens when she pushes your buttons, it is her own fault." How do you respond?

10. In a group, Jim has a lot of experience as he is much older than the rest of the members. As a result, Jim is taking every opportunity to police and govern the group with statements such as, "It feels like we are just trying to get someone to break down and cry by probing them about their childhood." Some members of the group are offended by that statement and cross their arms. How do you respond?

11. In the fifth session of the group, Sun-Kim has still not spoken other than answering direct questions with single-word responses. In the previous session, other group members expressed interest in her and frustration with her lack of participation. Sun responded by saying she'd try in Session 5. How do you respond?

12. In a group, Tanya's goal was to speak up for herself more often with others in the group. It is the sixth session, and Tanya is interrupting others and steering the group back to her. You see other group members shifting and rolling their eyes when this happens. How will you respond?

Self-Reflection

1. What have been your personal experiences with structured exercises?

2. Under what circumstances did you find them to be especially useful? Under what circumstances might such activities actually take something away from the group experience?

3. Think back to some of your most challenging encounters with others. What frame of mind helped or hindered you the most in the situation? What are some of the ways in which you are able to cultivate a resilience or a *thick skin* in these sort of encounters?

4. Imagine yourself as your opposite. What traits would be different? How would you behave differently? What would your opposite look like in a group therapy setting?

5. Examine your thoughts and feelings about the different types of mandated groups. What are your negative beliefs about each population? Positive? How might these beliefs help or hinder your abilities as a group leader?

6. Imagine yourself as a group leader. In the group, you see someone who strongly reminds you of yourself or of someone you know. How will you effectively work with this person? Do you foresee any certain reactions such as rejection or empathy?

7. Reflect on your levels of intimacy with the people in your life. Do you readily trust someone with your feelings and thoughts? How long does it take you to open up to someone? What factors influence your decision-making?

8. Think back to your experiences in groups (e.g., school, sports, hobbies). What reactions did you have to other members of the group, and why? Did you notice any patterns or certain personality traits that drew you in or pushed you away? Were you caught off guard by any aspect of group work? How did you function in a group, and what influence will that have on you as a group leader?