

# Group counseling, support groups, and self-help groups essay examples

[Sociology](#), [Community](#)



There are many different kinds of counseling options available to people who need help dealing with the things that happen to them. Choosing the right therapeutic option can be very important for an individual's recovery; many people do not realize it, but like physical illness, mental illness is frequently something that cannot be cured by thought and hope alone. Overcoming the stigma of mental illness and seeking treatment for mental illness is very difficult for many people; it is important for mental health professionals to remind patients that if they were ill or had a broken bone, they would see a doctor to receive help, and that they should take their mental health just as seriously, because mental illness can be just as deadly.

There are two major subsets of therapy: individual therapy and group therapy. Each has different techniques that are utilized by the individual in charge of the therapy session, and there are strengths and weaknesses to each (Gilbert, 2005). This paper will discuss the different types of group therapies and the different strengths each offers the individual; it will also examine the different ways in which the individual him or herself can utilize group therapy to make positive changes in his or her life.

Self-help groups, support groups, and group counseling are all different types of group therapy. Group therapy is a blanket term that refers to the action of getting together with a group of individuals facing some kind of emotional or mental distress and working through that problematic issue as a group (Agpa. org, 2013). Many people who are suffering in their lives, the American Group Psychotherapy Association (2013) suggests, feel as though they are suffering alone; much of their mental anguish can be alleviated merely by including the individual in a group that is also suffering from

similar issues in their lives. The American Group Psychotherapy Association is a group of psychotherapists that focus on the use of group therapy to treat problems that their patients are having in their personal lives.

Group therapy, or group counseling, is a type of blanket term for all the different types of counseling and therapy that can go on in groups (Agpa. org, 2013). However, one distinction that should be made between group therapy and group psychotherapy is the presence of a license psychotherapist or other trained therapist (Agpa. org, 2013). Group therapy can take place without a license therapist, but the presence of one or more can make the difference between recovery and stagnation for many individuals (Agpa. org, 2013).

One place where it is common to see group psychotherapy is in inpatient living facilities. Inpatient living facilities are places that are designed for individuals who need to remove themselves from the world at large for some reason-- it could be because of a drug addiction issue, or depression, or even an organic mental illness; regardless, in inpatient living facilities, the patients live under strict supervision by their therapists, and often participate in group therapy (Slavson, 2009).

Therapists who specialize in group therapy will use a variety of different techniques to help their patients, but they will all encourage a few things from the group to ensure that the group sessions are productive and efficient (Slavson, 2009). First, the therapist or counselor will encourage “ universality,” which is the acknowledgment that feelings are shared throughout each individual in the group; this is often paired with “ altruism,” which is the idea that the group members are there to assist each other

(Slavson, 2009). In addition to universality and altruism, therapists will encourage hope, self-understanding, cohesiveness, and catharsis for the group members (Slavson, 2009). Because human beings and their interactions are so complex, the way in which a group leader will do this varies based on the group and their dynamics; however, creating a positive space is fundamentally important for the group leader (Slavson, 2009). Group therapists may use a variety of different techniques to create safe spaces for their clients. The most important thing to most clients is the issue of anonymity, especially because many people join support groups because of issues that are stigmatized or downright illegal in society (Slavson, 2007). For instance, a group dedicated to drug addiction may employ a very specific set of protocol to ensure anonymity for those participating in the group session.

Group therapy has been shown to be particularly effective for treating issues like depression. On the topic of group therapy for depression, Muñoz (1993) writes:

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- \*do not discuss personal things with people outside of the group.
- \*you can discuss what you are learning about depression with others.
- \*do not talk about other people who are in group with you.

## **TELL US IF YOU ARE UNHAPPY!!**

- \*bring concerns up in the group.
- \*we want to work with you.
- \*don't stay mad at the group without letting us know. (Muñoz, 1993)

These two issues are at the heart of group therapy: communication and confidentiality. When a trained counselor or therapist is running the cognitive-behavioral therapy session, he or she can enforce these rules; when the therapy session is being run by a layperson, they may not have the training to enforce these rules or guide the therapy as effectively. When these sessions are run by lay people, they are often known as support groups.

Support groups are therapy groups in which the individual members provide each other with different types of mental and emotional support (Www. Metanoia. Org, 1995). These groups are often formed independently without a trained leader to guide the therapy; they are generally held to the same standards of anonymity and support that group therapy sessions are, however (Www. Metanoia. Org, 1995). Support groups are frequently found for individuals who are struggling in the long term with an issue in their life like long-term addiction or critical illness (Gilbert, 2005). Many report that by joining support groups, they feel less alone and more able to face their addiction, depression, or illness on a day-to-day basis (Gilbert, 2005).

Cognitive-behavior therapy may be used in group therapy to help group members sort through their feelings with regards to depression (Muñoz, 1993). This means that the therapist will help the group members address the core issue that they are reacting emotionally to, and will help them find more productive ways of dealing with depressive thought processes (Muñoz, 1993). Cognitive-behavioral therapy is one of the most widely-used methods to treat depression; because depression is often characterized by a feeling of loneliness or being intensely alone, group cognitive-behavioral therapy has

been shown to be very productive for individuals suffering from depression, particularly when combined with individualized therapy as well (Muñoz, 1993). This type of therapy can be problematic, however, because it is very hard work. It requires every individual participating in the therapy to work hard; if one person slacks off on their homework, the whole group can easily suffer (Muñoz, 1993).

On the other hand, support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous do not use cognitive-behavioral therapies to encourage recovery in their members. These support groups instead offer their constituents a safe place to share their feelings and their struggles with addiction. The goal is similar to the goal of cognitive-behavioral therapy: to give the members coping mechanisms and a safe place to exist. However, the way support groups approach the issue is very different, and often, support groups utilize a “step program” to help their members succeed. This program lets their members move through the steps towards recovery, whereas cognitive-behavioral therapy is more free-form and oriented towards the coping mechanisms provided by the therapist overseeing the process.

## **References**

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