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ABSTRACT

This document contains an experiential presentation for counselors dealing with the special needs and difficulties of adolescent female survivors of incest who participate in group therapy. It briefly describes a group therapy program for female adolescent survivors of incest offered by a counseling center in Ohio which meets once a week. It explores some of the issues, dynamics, and approaches regarding leadership of such a group. Included are discussions of the difficulties in building group cohesion due to poor social skills of group members, along with the need for universality to overcome feelings of isolation; the leader-directed versus group-directed format; and the benefits and drawbacks of structure in such a group. Six sample activities derived from the expressive arts therapies are presented and described. Each is discussed in terms of its purposes and possible material elicited for further processing in the group. (Author/NB)

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Expressive Group Therapy for Teen Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Adolescent female survivors of incest present special needs and difficulties as evidenced by their participation in group therapy. Some of the issues, dynamics, and approaches regarding leadership of such a group are explored. Included are the difficulties in building group cohesion due to poor social skills, along with the need for universality to overcome feelings of isolation; the leader-directed versus group-directed format; and the benefits and drawbacks of structure in such a group. Six sample activities derived from the expressive arts therapies are presented and described. Each is discussed in terms of its purposes and possible material elicited for further processing in the group.

Expressive Group Therapy for Teen Survivors of Sexual Abuse

Introduction

This presentation is primarily experiential in nature. By participating in the exercises and activities, it is hoped that you will understand the thoughts and feelings evoked by each and recognize the material that might emerge for further processing by a therapy group. First however, I will supply some background information regarding the group which I have been co-leading. I will also delineate some of the dynamics and issues of this population and the corresponding dilemmas for leadership.

This group of female adolescent survivors of incest meets once per week at our counseling center which is situated in an Appalachian area of southeast Ohio. Membership fluctuates from six to twelve with average attendance of about one and one-half years. Prospective members are screened by one of the two co-leaders prior to joining. About half of the girls concurrently attend individual counseling sessions.

When I first joined this ongoing group as a co-leader, it seemed that the group lacked cohesion, that the girls were not strongly bonded to one another. Further apparent were the poor social skills characteristic of most of the girls. Therefore traditional verbal approaches failed to lead the group to the sense of "universality", a necessary "curative factor" (Yalom, 1975) for a population often imprisoned by shame, secrecy, isolation, and feeling like "the only one" who has undergone such experience.

A second and related dilemma is whether to conduct the group in leader-directed or the generally preferred group-directed mode. Ideally group members relate to one another, take responsibility for bringing up material and responding to what is shared by other members. In this group, the members behave in some ways characteristic of much younger children in that each seeks the attention of the adult, the leader, begrudging others their moments in the spotlight or on the other extreme, withdrawing and hiding out in the shadows. Also problematical is the attempt to mingle the two styles. We attempt to move them toward a more democratic situation only to return to the one-on-one-therapy-with-audience format as the frequent need asserts itself. As this latter form occurs, the "audience" wiggles, rolls its eyes, sighs and grunts its boredom and disinterest. As certain members typically command all the attention, others could be lost in the shuffle.

From the above description another dichotomy presents itself: whether to lead a structured or a non-structured group. Again the temptation to merge the two approaches leads to unique problems, yet this synthesis seems most effective. To the extent that a structure is imposed upon the group there lies the danger that the leader is imposing her own and perhaps a less relevant agenda to the possible exclusion of pressing material of one or more members. However, not to structure the group runs the risk of several more powerful members interacting, often in manipulative or distracting ways, denying others the opportunities to express

themselves. One argument for providing some structure is the elements of predictability, consistency, and shared ritual; ingredients missing in many of their lives.

Our overall structure consists of snack time which is limited to the first half hour. As the goodies are munched the girls interact informally with one another and with the leaders. After this time if currently pressing material has emerged it can be further processed in the group. The processing at times occurs in a structured manner in the form of games, activities, exercises or projects to be described below. Sometimes an interaction during snack time leads to work on relationships within the group. At other times enough issues or material are present that a more traditional verbal group therapy session ensues.

The activities are largely derived from the expressive arts: visual, literary, dramatic, and musical. Expression in such modalities often precedes self-awareness: "I drew that!? I wonder where that came from or what it means . . ." Through such self-expression we come to appreciate the uniqueness of each one of us and at the same time a sense of belonging, bonding and group cohesion is built through such sharing. Some of the more mundane or even painful events of life are elevated to the realm of art or drama. At the same time a problem is addressed more discretely and indirectly, thus circumventing the resistance incurred by attacking it head on. Pride in one's creations, social skills, breaking through inhibitions, and

expanding empathy are all aspects of these experiences. These activities may be planned for a session succeeding one in which a certain issue was presented and left unresolved, or may be spontaneously suggested in the context of the immediate session. Such plans are always subject to be abandoned; flexibility is both a requirement and a by-product developed by participation in these activities. It is recommended that one cultivate a repertoire of games, projects, exercises, and approaches such as to be able to pull from up-the-sleeve as needed.

At this point those attending are strongly encouraged to participate in the examples to be presented. They are invited to notice their own feelings including unwillingness (resistance) and to extrapolate to how it may be for the clients.

Conversation Games

In order to deal with the tendency for subgroups to communicate in simultaneous and distracting ways, as well as for individuals each to attempt to converse with the leader(s) often at the same time rather than addressing the group as a whole, these "theater games" have been effective, frustrating, humorous, and enjoyable. In a sense they "prescribe the symptom."

First, all members are asked to think of a subject about which they would like to talk. When the signal is given everyone is to talk at once without being influenced by speakers around them. Another signal is given to cut through the roar.

The next version again calls for the conjuring of each one's

avored topic. We briefly discuss, model and rehearse good listening postures and body language for giving exaggeratedly full attention to a speaker. This time any one who wishes may begin to orate and expound. All are to listen with raptured interest. However at any point another participant may interrupt by beginning to expound on her topic. Again the object is not to be influenced or tempted to respond to a previous speaker's topic. A series of non-sequiturs ensues. For each speaker, the group shifts its focus of attention until the next respective interruption occurs. Leaders may take an active role modeling interruption and blatant disregard for other members interests.

A final version is offered. A leader may choose to demonstrate first by selecting two volunteers who sit on either side of her, each one soliciting her attention to their story or problem. The two have chosen independent, unrelated material. The person in the middle attempts to satisfy both simultaneously using active listening. Other triads are encouraged to experience this frustrating predicament.

Following the "games" processing may address such issues as: "How was that game like group a little while ago? How did it feel when you tried to get somebody to listen to you? How did it feel to be ignored? To interrupt? To abruptly change the subject? To have the subjects changed on you?"

"I Have Never" and "I Have"

This game facilitates physical contact, bonding, self-disclosure and laughter. We are seated in chairs in a circle.

Each member completes the sentence "I have never . . ." She then moves one position to her right as do all players who can likewise affirm that they also have never done, seen, experienced whatever the player whose turn it is has said. If a player moves to the next position and the one currently occupying that seat has not moved, she winds up in her lap. Sometimes a chair is "stacked" 4 or 5 deep with players on laps. The object being to move all around the circle and return to one's home position first, it behooves a player to attempt to relate a "never" that will be unique to her. An obvious variation is to complete the sentence "I have . . ." This form often yields the opportunity for boasting and/or disclosing material pertinent to the incest or related sexual issues. One expected component of the game is that some girls enjoy bringing up provocative material and using it both to elicit reactions as well as admissions from other members and especially staff. Played early in a session, pertinent material emerges for further processing. Universality is balanced with a sense of uniqueness and differences in this game.

The "Wall"

Everyone has a wall of one sort or another. Some walls keep us in, some keep others out. Some walls are so high, the person cannot see over it; some have peepholes, windows, secret entrances. A wall can be made of stone, glass, paper, bricks, steel or absolutely any possible material. In this exercise, derived from art therapy and effective with a great variety of

populations (Adelman & Castricone, 1986), the group members are provided with drawing materials and asked to draw their individual walls. Further they are encouraged to write the "graffitti" -- the slogans, mottos, self-impressions they believe characterizes them -- on their respective walls. In creating and sharing their renderings, a great deal of self-disclosure, self-expression, and insight usually occurs. Aside from visual and verbal processing, psychodramatic or Gestalt techniques may be used to concretize and personalize the walls. Only when we are aware of such barriers can we choose to deal with them.

"Where it Happened"

On one occasion, a member announced that she had driven past the trailer "where it used to happen" (referring to the abuse). She began to share the incense feelings that had been evoked but just as quickly she shut down. Upon questioning, other members shared that they too had strong reactions when they re-visited or even remembered their locations of abuse. In order to allow for fuller experiencing and expression of these memories and feelings, they were asked to break into dyads, find a corner of the room and take turns describing their place in detail. Their respective partners then drew the scene as they pictured it from the other's account. Afterward the group reconvened, sharing drawings, impressions, corrections, and a wealth of feelings.

"Sad Lisa", an Unraveling String Story

During a phase with more than average turnover, such that the group contained a greater proportion of new members the

following activity took place. We had discussed favorite rock songs that each girl found meaningful. Several brought in tapes and we listened and discussed them. We then played "Sad Lisa" by Cat Stevens and they were asked to consider in response to this haunting though ambiguous song, "What might have caused Lisa to be so sad and so unwilling to trust anyone with her secret?" In order to co-create Lisa's story a special ball of string was passed around the circle such that pre-cut lengths of string, approximately two feet each, had been wound into the ball. Each girl continued to tell her part of the story as she unwound her piece until she reached its end. At that point the ball was passed onto the next. The girls became absorbed enough in their story so that we went around a second time; this time rewinding the piece we had unraveled back onto the ball. It was helpful to have leaders spread out so as to help focus the story and deepen development of the protagonist.

Tag Team Cinderella

In a group such as ours, a multitude of techniques from drama therapy and psychodrama have been effective. Vignettes and exercises are frequently enacted in response to situations involving conflict, dread, or unfinished business. Though the girls roll their eyes and protest they are generally willing to participate in warm-ups or psychodramatic vignettes.

This exercise is one particular form borrowed from creative dramatics that the girls have especially relished. As a group we attempted to recall the tale of Cinderella. I then filled

in more details, paying particular attention to the characters of Cinderella and her two stepsisters; the latter who were "as ugly on the inside as they were on the outside . . ." Cinderella is submissive, acquiescent, timid, and totally devoted to pleasing these older stepsisters. The scene of their preparation for the ball is highlighted and soon the members are invited to choose a scene they think would be interesting to play. A. hoped they chose this preparaticn scene. Two chairs were placed in the "stage area"; two volunteer cruel, ugly stepsisters were selected, one being a co-leader. Cinderella was also chosen and set about the impossible task of attending to the two: fixing their hair, make-up, nails, clothing, etc. The two deride her as well as one another as they compete for her attention. They argue over who is the most beautiful and most likely to be fancied by the prince. At any point any group member can go up and replace any of the three players. That player then returns to the "audience". In addition, the director (myself) calls for role-reversals among the three players at any point so chosen. Players are instructed to continue right on from where they were prior to the role-reversal. As co-leaders assume the roles, we model respective characterizations, unleashing venom, sibling rivalry, feelings of entitlement, and bullying, or the submissive victim-like Cinderella.

Following this tag-team production, verbal processing took its . . . Members identified primarily with Cinderella feeling mis . . . valued, taken advantage of. Questions were raised about . . . : father allowed his daughter to be so treated by her

stepmother and sisters. Again personal feelings and experiences were shared regarding their own families. Some admitted to being bossy and controlling or teasing their siblings. This time they could experience the situation from the other's point of view. Overall a great deal of laughter as well as a release of angry, aggressive feelings had been released. This activity has been a favorite.

Concluding Remarks

A sampling of activities has been presented. Each one may be adapted, extended, or transformed to serve the needs of the group composition, population, and setting. No activity is suggested as an end in itself but rather a means to bring about group bonding and cohesiveness; increased participation, sharing, and self-expression; as well as a fresh and creative approach to ongoing problems. In our group we have observed that survivors of incest may be prone to some deficits in social skills making it more difficult for them to give and receive the kind of support and understanding they so need. These activities provide media for modeling and enhancing such skills. Derived from the various expressive arts approaches to therapy, I encourage you to find your own sources and resources in music, graphic art, clay, literature, poetry, creative dramatics and psychodrama. I regret that I cannot credit my sources as these activities have been collected over many years and in diverse circumstances. Therefore I offer some suggested sources which you may find helpful in your own expressive group therapy.

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