ED 359 473   CG 024 937

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TITLE   A Self-Help Support Group for Undergraduate
              Psychology Majors.
PUB DATE   Dec 90
NOTE   19p.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Higher Education; *Majors (Students); *Psychology;
              *Self Help Programs; *Social Support Groups;
              *Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT
              This document notes that the academic and emotional
needs of undergraduates planning their futures in psychology are not
often addressed. It proposes self-help support groups as a means of
alleviating the tension and stress faced by psychology majors. The
model for the support group described in this paper is adapted from
Yalom's (1985) 11 therapeutic factors in group therapy (installation
of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective
recapitulation of the primary family group, development of
socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning,
group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors). The
formation and functioning of an 11-week self-help group consisting of
11 female undergraduate psychology majors who were in danger of
dropping out of the field of psychology is described. Areas discussed
include interviewing of potential group members, group rules, open
versus closed groups, the life span of the group, the duration of
group sessions, group size, and group members' rights. A section on
theoretical models notes that the support group was guided by
behavioral and person-centered models. Included in this paper are
suggestions for the formation of a group; a discussion of group
dynamics; and descriptions of specific interventions, processes, and
follow-up of participants. The paper concludes with recommendations
for future groups and possible research questions. (NB)

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A Self-Help Support Group for

Undergraduate Psychology Majors

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Abstract

The academic and emotional needs of undergraduates planning
their futures in psychology are not often addressed. This
article proposes self-help support groups for alleviating
the tension and stress psychology majors face. The model
for this support group is adapted from Yalom's (1985) 11
therapeutic factors in group therapy. This article presents
suggestions for the formation of a group, its dynamics,
specific interventions, processes, and follow-up of
participants; it also includes recommendations for future
groups and possible research questions.

A Self-Help Support Group for

Undergraduate Psychology Majors

Since the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930s, self-help support groups have given individuals the opportunity to share their experiences, frustrations, hopes, dreams, and feelings with similarly affected individuals (Gott, 1990). Self-help support grou,s have shown a considerable therapeutic benefit for many individuals, from those suffering from depression (Hodgson, 1981) to cancer patients (Gott, 1990). For example, a 10 year study at Stanford University indicated that "cancer patients who participated in weekly support group meetings in addition to receiving treatment lived nearly twice as long as those receiving only medical care" (Gott, 1990, p. 10).

Only a few researchers (Griff, 1987; Hill, 1990; Hodgson, 1981; and Orzek, 1986) have discussed the use of support groups for undergraduates. Orzek (1984) discussed the benefits of support groups for undergraduates with learning disabilities. She believed that such groups give undergraduates an opportunity to "help other students" (p. 404), "share experiences and to deal with difficult situations and areas of concern" (p.406), and "also produces valuable information on effective coping skills" (p. 407).

Griff (1987) and Hill (1990) indicated that support groups are extremely effective for nontraditional students facing life transitions and for meeting the career

development needs of nontraditional undergraduates respectively. However, the literature does not address the use of self-help support groups in accommodating the needs of undergraduate psychology majors.

Many undergraduate psychology majors experience stress and anxiety. These feelings are often brought about by pressures to succeed and to meet parental expectations, the seemingly overwhelming demands of their academic course load, deciding whether or not to attend graduate school, deciding about working full-time after graduation, conducting a job search, preparing for graduate school entrance exams, needing to complete the graduate school application process, struggling with the fact that only 10% of the applicants are accepted for graduate studies in psychology, and/or having to volunteer several hours each week to gain experience in research and field work.

In addition to the academic stressors, tension and pressure also come from the student's interpersonal relationships with parents, peers, and relatives. Added to the stresses and tensions are the burdens of work and financial obligations.

In an effort to alleviate some of these academic worries, many psychology departments provide a 2 hour workshop and/or a pamphlet that briefly addresses graduate school entrance requirements. Books by Fretz and Stang

(1988) and Woods (1987) guide students through their graduate school decisions.

Many students agree that books, workshops, lectures, and pamphlets contain useful and valuable information. However, some students feel the information is presented in a cold and impersonal manner. Didactic lectures or workshops that merely "tell" students what to do with their academic lives tend to raise not lower their anxiety. In addition, lectures provide limited opportunities for students to express their feelings and to bond with each other in a supportive environment.

Students often seek information about applying to graduate school too late in their academic careers. They may need to fulfill additional graduate school entrance requirements, but have little time to do so. These are the students who can benefit most from a support group. All undergraduate psychology majors can benefit from the emotional bonding, the opportunities to network, the sharing of information, and the experiences associated with personal growth that are facilitated by the support group's atmosphere.

The Group's Developmental Factors

With these student needs in mind, a support group of 11 female psychology majors was formed. These women, who were enrolled in a major university in the southwest, felt the opportunity to participate in a self-help group was their

last resort. They were unhappy with their educational experience, the choice of psychology as a major, their career direction and guidance, and their academic performance. The following will present information adapted from Yalom (1985) regarding this group's developmental factors.

Group Formation

As in most support groups, it was important to interview the prospective participants. First, the group members' behaviors actually determined the outcome of the group; thus, it was the group leader's responsibility to select group members who would benefit the group as a whole.

Second, homogeneity was an important factor in forming this support group. Students who are sophisticated in their knowledge of psychology tend to intimidate students who are not. Although more experienced students can be excellent role models for less experienced students, they sometimes create a competitive and intimidating atmosphere in the group, which defeats its entire purpose.

Finally, the interview was an ideal time for prospective participants to tell the group leader what they hoped to gain from the group experience. Also, the interview gave the group leader an opportunity to present the group's ground rules.

Group Rules

Yalom (1985) suggested the elements to consider when the group leader conveys the group's rules. "The group leader must secure an appropriate meeting place and establish policy about the life span of the group, admission of new members, frequency of meetings, duration of each session, and the size of the group" (p. 276).

Covering all ground rules provided the group members a sense of group stability. Also, it reduced anxieties that stemming from "the fear of the unknown," which are quite common among first-time group members.

Open Versus Closed Groups

The leader must decide whether the group will be open or closed. Both groups are effective under certain circumstances. For example, a closed group accepts no new members after its first session and usually meets a predetermined number of times. Closed groups are usually more effective for cognitive-behavioral types of groups, such as assertiveness training and smoking cessation.

An open group maintains a certain number of members by admitting a new one each time someone leaves the group (due to drop-out or graduation). Usually open groups do not set a predetermined number of sessions.

A closed group seemed most effective in fulfilling the needs of this psychology majors support group. Students felt more comfortable with a closed group because it

provided a sense of stability. They believed that there would be very little turnover within the group, and that they would be able to develop a rapport and establish a relationship with the original group members throughout the group's life span.

Group's Life Span

A group's life span depends on several factors: (a) the group's purpose, (b) the group's goals, (c) the size of the group, (d) the number of meetings the group has each week, and (e) the duration of the meetings. To be effective, support groups for undergraduate psychology majors should have a life span of 8 to 12 sessions. This particular group, met for eleven weeks.

Duration of Group Sessions

Yalom (1985) suggested therapy groups should last for at least 60 minutes but not more than 120 minutes. Time must be allowed for the group members to warm-up, work, and cool-down. The self-help group for undergraduate psychology majors met for ninety minutes for each group meeting.

Group's Size

Yalom (1985) suggested "the ideal size of an interactional therapy group is approximately seven or eight, with an acceptable range of five to ten members" (p.283). This is true for support groups for undergraduate psychology majors, as well. Groups that are too large tend to shut out some o. its members because everyone might not have an equal

opportunity to participate. On the other hand, when groups
are too small, there may be less interaction, and the group
leader may end up providing individual counseling within a
small group setting. Using Yalom's suggestions, eleven
female undergraduates (sophomores, juniors, and seniors)
were selected for this self-help support group.

Group Members' Rights

The rights of support group members are identical to
those that protect members of all other therapy groups.
These rights include: (a) informed consent; (b) voluntary
participation and freedom of exit; (c) freedom from coercion
and undue pressure; (d) experimentation and research; (e)
the use of group resources; and (f) the right to
confidentiality (Corey, 1990). These rights were discussed
with the self-help group members twice. First, these rights
were discussed individually prior to the group's beginning.
Second, the group leader conveyed these rights to the total
group at their first meeting.

Theoretical Models

The psychology majors support group was guided by two
major theoretical models; behavioral and person-centered.

Behavioral

Some of the reasons this support group used a
behavioral model were: (a) members learned self-management
skills (i.e., assertiveness training for job interviews) and
better study habits; (b) it presented a variety of

interventions for learning (i.e., modeling, coaching, behavioral rehearsal, and reinforcement; (c) it required members to complete homework assignments; and (d) it contained a fair amount of information giving.

Person-Centered

When a group emits feelings of warmth, caring and genuineness, it conveys to its members that they are accepted, understood, and valued. When the group fulfills the role of an understanding listener, it is giving its members an opportunity to grow as well as providing an emotional support system that can help them cope with their difficulties. The support group for undergraduate psychology majors encouraged and facilitated this type of atmosphere. Members of this group were students who experienced a variety of relationship and emotional difficulties that were affecting their performance at work and in school. A warm, caring, genuine, and empathic support group was effective in helping students cope with these difficulties.

Therapeutic Factors in the Support Group Process

Yalom (1985) described 11 primary therapeutic factors prevalent in all effective therapy groups. Yalom's factors affected the process of the undergraduate psychology majors support group in the following ways:

1.   Installation of Hope. The support group inculcated a hopeful feeling among its members that the

therapeutic experience would be effective in helping them to cope with their difficulties. If students could see the "light at the end of the tunnel," and if they believed the group would help them get there, then the first therapeutic factor was realized.

2. Universality. Group members usually expressed relief after they realized they were not the only person in the world (or the "universe") who was experiencing difficulties. They took comfort in knowing that other students were having similar problems. Usually focused on events that occur on the university campus, undergraduates rarely project their difficulties into a scale as grand as the universe. Therefore, the term university-ality was coined to describe an undergraduate's realization that she was not the only person enrolled at the university who was concerned about academic work, career exploration, or interpersonal relationships.

3. Imparting of Information. A large part of the support group for undergraduate psychology majors was giving advice and sharing information among group members. Group members exchanged information and ideas on topics such as career decisions, study habits, faculty contacts for internship experiences, volunteering in the community to gain work related experience, and graduate school selection. The group leader, who was once an undergraduate psychology major (this is not a necessary requirement for leaders of

these groups, however) and had experienced many of the situations the group members were experiencing, often was asked for guidance and advice as well.

4. Altruism. In the context of the group, altruism occurred when a group member puts her needs "off to the side" and worked on concerns that would benefit the group.

5. Corrective Recapitulation of the Primary Family Group. This factor was realized when a group member was working on or reliving past or present familial issues or concerns. These issues were important because they affected the way the student was living and thinking in the "here and now." Members of the support group usually worked on issues they had with their roommates, lovers, parents, siblings, employers, and professors; thus, the "primary family" was an extended one. Usually the issues were addressed using role playing and empty-chair exercises.

6. Development of Socializing Techniques. Used in the context of the group, the "socializing techniques" focused mainly on job, internship, and graduate school interviewing. For example, members learned how to dress appropriately for an interview, they learned how to ask specific and appropriate questions, and they learned how to behave during an interview

7. Imitative Behavior. Students seemed to be good vicarious learners, and their vicarious learning extended beyond the group sessions. For example, after a student

learned how one member was accepted to a prestigious graduate program, she would sometimes imitate that successful student's admirable qualities (to a certain extent, of course) and did some of the things that made the other student a success (such as work at similar internship sites, take the same GRE preparation course, or enroll in similar academic courses).

8. Interpersonal Learning. In the support group, interpersonal learning was similar to imitative behavior and vicarious learning. Interpersonal learning, however, relied heavily on one's self-reflection and feedback from other group members.

9. Group Cohesiveness. Emotional bonds tended to form between group members as the therapeutic relationship progressed. This "closeness" between group members was a result of the warm, caring, and empathic group atmosphere.

10. Catharsis. Simply stated, catharsis is the process of releasing pent-up emotions. In the support group, catharsis usually occurred when a member was working through the recapitulation of the primary family group.

11. Existential Factors. For members of the support group, this usually meant they realized they were the only people who could make a difference in overcoming their difficulties. They realized that other people can help, but they are ultimately responsible for making their lives happier.

Follow-up of Group Members

The success of any self-help support group can only be evidenced many months after the group has ended. Two years after the group's completion, the group leader contacted each group member for follow-up evaluation. A summary of the 11 female undergraduate psychology majors finds that: 1 is enrolled in a MSW program; 1 is enrolled in a masters of counseling program; 1 is applying to a masters of counseling program; 1 is working in a psychiatric hospital and pursuing a career in abnormal psychology; 2 are completing their undergraduate degrees, one has been accepted into graduate school and the other is full-time employed in her area of interest; 1 is employed as a research specialist and is in graduate school pursuing a masters degree; 1 has been accepted into a Ph.D. program; 3 have applied to several graduate schools, were not accepted by the school of their choice and are waiting to reapply.

The follow-up information seems to validate the importance of this self-help support group. Eight of the 11 women were accepted and/or enrolled in graduate psychology related programs. This number seems impressive since the participants at the group's beginning could be considered at-risk students leaving the field of psychology.

Suggestions for Future Groups

In order to increase the self-help groups effectiveness, the following suggestions are made.

The Leader

Group leaders should have extensive group therapy experience and fulfill a few other qualifications as well. The group leader should have some educational experience in the field of psychology, especially at the undergraduate level. Group leaders also should be active participants in their psychology departments because 70% of the support group's topics focus on graduate studies and career opportunities in psychology.

Future Groups

The importance of group homogeneity was mentioned earlier. Groups should be available to all students; conducting a group for beginning students (freshmen and sophomores) and one for juniors and seniors, as well, is very important.

Research Topics

The effectiveness of these support groups should be studied longitudinally. Researchers could address questions such as: "Can an experience with a support group at an early stage in one's education increase one's chances of attending a graduate program in psychology?" or "What are the 'success rates' of students who have participated in a support group, a didactic workshop, or nothing at all?" Studying a group's effectiveness on meeting the needs of ethnic minority students enrolled in large universities would be fruitful.

Summary

This article outlined an eleven week self-help support group the effectiveness of support groups for undergraduate psychology majors. The group included 11 female undergraduate psychology majors enrolled at a major university in the southwest who were in danger of dropping out of the field of psychology. A two-year follow-up showed a surprising number of these "at-risk" students were attending a psychology-related graduate program. Also, this article described how support groups for these students have been effective in the past, proposes suggestions for the group's formation, dynamics, specific interventions, and presents theoretical models and therapeutic factors adapted from Yalom (1985). Suggestions for future groups and research implications were also presented.

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