



What is group counseling?

Group counseling is one of several types of counseling offered at the University Counseling Service (UCS). In group counseling, approximately six to ten students meet with a trained group counselor, typically once a week for 1 1/2 hours. Group members talk about a variety of issues. Common goals include: exploring relationship issues, learning to feel better about oneself, and learning to cope more effectively with life. Group members share information about themselves and provide feedback to other group members while group leaders facilitate productive communication in the group. Currently, the UCS offers both theme oriented groups as well as support groups (see insert for current group listings and descriptions).

How do I know if being in a group is right for me?

Group therapy is the most beneficial form of therapy for many issues. Groups can be especially helpful for people who have concerns about their relationships. Groups are also useful for people who are wanting a place to experiment with new behaviors or communication styles. Groups can be good places to receive feedback on one's interpersonal behaviors. Group therapy seems to work best for people who are clear about the kind of things they want to work on and are willing to state their goals and needs to the group even when it may be scary or difficult. One way to decide whether or not group might be a good choice is to set up a meeting with a UCS counselor who can help you think about your options.

What can I expect from a group?

What you gain from being part of a group largely depends on what your goals are for yourself. We have found that the clearer people are about their goals for the group the more benefit they will receive. Some of the most common things that people get from being in a group are:

- Learning to communicate more comfortably and effectively.
- Identifying and exploring inner feelings.
- Getting feedback from others.
- Learning to express one's own wishes and act on one's own behalf.
- Being honest with others and oneself.
- Becoming more sensitive to the ways people communicate.
- Learning about closeness and intimacy.
- Experimenting with new ways of relating.

How does a group work?

The group is able to provide support, offer alternatives, or gently confront group members in such a way that difficulties can be resolved and new behaviors learned. Sometimes a group helps a person to develop new social skills or different ways of relating to people. Often people in a group begin to feel less alone in dealing with their problems. It can be very encouraging to hear that others have worked through similar problems.

What do I actually do in a group?

Letting the group know why you initially came to the UCS and sharing what you hope to gain from the group is a good place to start. If you need support, let the group know. If you think that you need to be challenged, let the group know that too. It is sometimes helpful to think of the group as a laboratory in which you can experiment with new ways of thinking, feeling, or relating to others.

You will probably be most helped if you talk about your feelings. Unexpressed feelings are a major reason why people experience difficulties. Group leaders and other group members can help you to be more honest with yourself and others as you explore your feelings. How much you choose to talk about yourself is up to you. However, we have found that the people who benefit most from group accept a sense of responsibility for making the group work by sharing their concerns and speaking up when they have reactions to issues or to other individuals in the group.

Will I have enough time to work on my issues in a group?

Each group usually finds its own way of negotiating how group time is used. Typically a group will begin with a "check-in" so that group members have an opportunity to request time during that session. We have found that group members who are able to request time as needed are most likely to benefit from group. Group members can also benefit from hearing other people work through and discuss their issues. Usually a meeting with a group leader can help you determine if the group would allow enough time for you to deal with your issues.

Aren't people too afraid to really talk in a group?

When you meet people for the first time, it is hard to know what to say and how much to trust them. Trust is a process that develops over time as group members take risks and share about themselves. It helps to remember that groups are usually small—six to ten people—and that other group members may be struggling with some of the same concerns as you. Letting the group know you are uncomfortable can be a first step. What is asked is that you make a commitment to being in the group and that you be willing to open up as you feel comfortable.

If I do share personal information with a group, how can I trust that it will be kept confidential?

The issue of confidentiality is an important one that is addressed in the first group session. Group members are asked to make a commitment to protect each other's confidentiality by agreeing not to divulge information that would identify other members outside of group. While we at the UCS cannot provide you with an absolute guarantee of confidentiality, our experience shows that group members respect each other's privacy just as they respect their own.

Some issues do not remain confidential whether you are being seen in group or individual counseling; decisions to break confidentiality are based on the issue of protection. If a member appears to be planning harm to self (suicide), harm to others (homicide), or if s/he reports that s/he has abused children or dependent adult individuals, the counselor is legally bound to break confidentiality in order to provide the individuals with the assistance they need.

What will be expected of me?

Each group may establish its own ground rules, but there are some general guidelines which we believe to be important:

- 1) If you are going to miss a session, please let the group leaders know.
- 2) We ask that you give the group a chance. If you decide the group isn't appropriate for you, please discuss your concerns with the group.
- 3) It is your responsibility to talk about your reasons for being in the group and to let the group know what you expect from them.
- 4) You are expected to respect the confidentiality of the group.

What is the role of the group leaders?

The role of the group leaders is to facilitate productive, respectful communication within the group. To do this, they will encourage group members to interact with one another. Group leaders may point out common themes, give feedback to individuals or the group as a whole, or offer support or challenge as needed. They also try to provide enough structure so the group doesn't get stuck, but enough freedom so the group accepts responsibility for itself. The leaders respect the confidentiality of the group and make every effort to create a safe group environment.

Will other group members be like me?

Within any group there are bound to be similarities and differences among people. The UCS has a strong commitment to meeting the needs of diverse people. In all individual, program, and group services, we strive to create an environment where all people feel welcome. As a staff we attempt to facilitate mutual respect and understanding among people of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds, sexual/affectional orientation, mental and physical abilities, language, religion/spiritual beliefs, as well as other types of diversity.

Individuals with disabilities are encouraged to attend all UI-sponsored events. If you are a person with a disability who requires an accommodation in order to participate, please contact the University Counseling Service at (319) 335-7294 to discuss your needs.

Group Counseling



What's it all about?

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