Groups at UW-River Falls Counseling Services

Why groups? Don’t students prefer being seen one-on-one? In fact, while it is natural to feel a little anxious about joining a group at first, group therapy has many advantages over individual therapy, and most participants ultimately find it a richly rewarding experience.

- Most students have relational issues: conflict with parents, a recent break-up, loneliness, social anxiety, issues of sexual identity. Group counseling gives students an opportunity to get feedback and practice new relational skills in a safe environment. In fact, group counseling can be more effective than individual counseling for many of our clients.
- Talking with peers helps us to know that others share similar concerns; it is very powerful to know you are not alone. We also learn that our peers can empathize, even with our most painful feelings, and this alone, can lead to a sense of relief, connection, and validation.
- Peer feedback is sometimes more relevant to a student and easier to hear than the same thing said by a therapist or parental figure. We find that students can be very caring, but also very direct in their feedback. In fact, learning to give feedback respectfully and compassionately is another benefit of group counseling.
- Giving to others, in the form of listening, caring, and feedback may be helpful in fostering a student’s own healing. We all know how wonderful it feels to help someone else.

Interpersonal Effectiveness Group

For many issues that bring people to counseling, group therapy is a more powerful path for change than individual therapy. The Interpersonal Effectiveness Group offers opportunities to:

- find out that you are not alone in your struggles;
- learn from the wisdom and experience of several others, not only the therapist;
- experience both giving and receiving acceptance, support, and genuine connection;
- interact with others in healthy ways; and,
- develop rich insights regarding your own patterns and styles which are valuable in creating the changes you desire.

The Interpersonal Effectiveness Group is composed of:
- 5–8 group members
- Two therapists co-facilitating

Students are asked to commit to attending the group through the end of the semester when they join, and can continue participation as long as it continues to be beneficial.

Ask your therapist whether the Interpersonal Effectiveness Group is a good match for you or call (715) 425-3884 to set up a group orientation meeting with the group leaders.

Social Anxiety Group
We have a group currently forming for those who experience and are negatively impacted by social anxiety. The group will provide opportunities to

- find out that you are not alone in your struggles;
- learn and practice social skills in a safe environment;
- interact with others who experience social anxiety.

The group for those struggling with social anxiety will be composed of 5-8 group members and two therapists co-facilitating the group. This will be a psycho-educational group which will run for 6 weeks.

Ask your therapist whether the Social Anxiety Group is a good match for you or call (715) 425-3884 to set up a group orientation meeting with the group leaders.

**What is Group Therapy?**

Many people have stereotypes about group therapy or wonder what really happens in a therapy group. Group therapy is a form of psychotherapy that usually involves 4-10 clients and 1 or 2 experienced group therapists. Most therapy groups meet every week at the same time for 1 1/2 hours. During that time, the members of the group discuss the issues that are concerning them and offer each other support and feedback. Interpersonal interaction is highly valued and encouraged.

**Why do people join groups?**

Most often, people join group because they are having some struggles with their relationships. Group is often the best place to get help with interpersonal concerns. If you have been referred to group it is because it is the most effective method for addressing your concerns. Here are some examples of the kinds of interpersonal issues that bring people to group:

- Loneliness or isolation
- Shyness
- Excessive dependence in relationships
- Superficial relationships
- Frequent arguments with people
- Discomfort in social situations
- Difficulty trusting others
- Being easily hurt or offended
- Needing a lot of reassurance from others
- Afraid of being left
- Lack of intimacy in relationships
Obviously, many of us experience these concerns at one time or another, but if you experience one or more of these to the extent that they are causing significant pain or distress for you, group therapy may be a solution.

How does group therapy work?

Group therapy is a unique experience for most people because the therapists and group members work hard to make it a safe and confidential place to explore relationships. Through the sharing process, members develop a level of trust that makes it possible for them to be honest and open with each other. They also learn to care for and accept each other. Ideally, the individuals who join group are committed to learning about themselves and their relationships, and often they find considerable support and encouragement in group therapy. Group therapy usually works because members behave in the group in ways that reflect how they behave outside of group. The difference is that the leaders and the other members can help the individual change unproductive patterns by giving feedback about how they perceive you and by offering alternative ways of interacting. Group can also be a safe place to try out or practice some of these new options with people who are caring and encouraging. Group also helps people see that they are not alone in their pain. Finally, members can get advice and guidance from each other. Even if it is difficult for you to interact in a group situation, you can still benefit from being in group.

What does group look like?

Groups can be organized in several different ways. Some groups have an overarching theme or are geared toward a specific type of concern. Some examples of this type of group are those designed for women with eating disorders, for survivors of interpersonal trauma, or for gay and bisexual men. Other groups are more open to anyone. These are usually called general therapy groups. Another way that groups are organized is in relation to time. Some groups are open-ended and may last for years. Still others are time-limited and conclude after a certain number of weeks—usually between 6 and 12 weeks. Also some groups have open membership, meaning that the members can come and go as they please; while others have closed membership, meaning that once the membership reaches a certain number, no new members are added. Finally, some groups are considered unstructured while others are considered structured which refers to whether or not there are planned activities during the group. If there are no structured activities, the group itself is free to decide how it will focus its time. If you have been referred to group therapy or are considering group therapy, you will want to ask questions about how the group is organized.

How can I get the most out of group?

Most people are apprehensive about joining a group and experience some anxiety about doing so. It is not uncommon for people to worry that they will talk too much or not say enough; or that they will not be accepted by others in the group. Most are concerned that the group will not help them. There are some things that you can do to maximize the chances that group will be a meaningful and healing experience for you.
• The more willing you are to participate and commit to the group, the more likely it is that you will benefit from it.
• Being as genuine as you can be will allow others to help you more directly.
• Think about what you would like to work on in group and work actively towards change. Ask the group for help.
• Respect your safety needs and don’t press yourself to reveal more than you are comfortable revealing. On the other hand, gently challenge yourself to take more risks with self-disclosure so that your other needs get met as well.
• Use group to talk about yourself and your concerns. Many people struggle with whether or not it is OK to use group time. They worry that their concerns are not important enough or they believe that others need the time more than they do. Group will be most helpful to you if you can find a way to talk about yourself.
• Express your thoughts and feelings. Notice if you are holding back from doing this and talk about your fears of sharing in the group.
• “Try on” new behaviors in the group and ask for feedback from others when you do so. Although this means taking risks, it is usually well worth it.
• Give others feedback. This allows you to practice being direct, honest and assertive, but it also helps the other members to know how they are perceived.
• Be patient with yourself and the group. It will take time for you to feel comfortable in group and it will take time for the group to develop trust. You are encouraged to commit to the group for a sufficient amount of time before deciding that it is not the right treatment for you.
• When you are not in group, think about group and what kinds of reactions you are having. When you return to group the next week, share as many of these thoughts and feelings as you feel comfortable sharing.

How do I join a group at Counseling Services?

If you are currently participating in therapy at Counseling Services, you may talk with your therapist about joining a group. If you are not a current client, you can call to schedule a group orientation meeting. The 30-minute Group Orientation Meeting is a chance to learn more about the group and for the group therapists to learn more about you and decide if the group seems to be a good match for your needs. Often, groups in Counseling Services close within the first month of the semester, usually because they have filled to capacity, while some continue to have openings throughout the semester. If you are interested in joining a group, it is best to contact Counseling Services upon the start of the semester or even at the end of the semester prior.

Counseling Groups are held in Counseling Services, which is located in 211 Hagestad Hall.

If you would like more information about group therapy, you may contact Counseling Services at 715-425-3884 or you may discuss your questions with your therapist.