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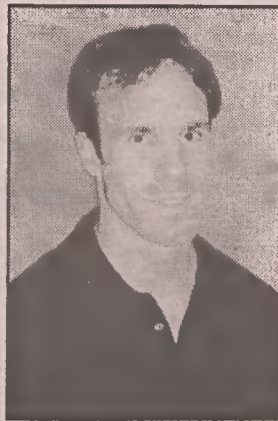
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**Group therapy: Issues to consider**

by Doug Detwiller  
Special to Q-Notes

Before considering some of the therapeutic benefits of group therapy, let's look at why this type of therapy still tends to raise a lot of eyebrows.



Doug Detwiller

I believe we need to unpack our bags before going on the trip. Clearing up some of these misconceptions involves examining some of our cultural beliefs. Much of this thinking stems from Americans generally being suspicious of

groups in general mixed in with the media stoking their wariness. Movies and television project skewed images of groups and therapy. *The Prince of Tides* compromised client/therapist boundaries for dramatic effect only to hurl individual and family therapy back to the Dark Ages. Even in Bob Newhart's benign 1970s' sitcom, my memory is still steeped in his travails as a psychologist. In his group, no one gets better and Bob regularly involves himself in the personal lives of his group members. Combined with the normal anxiety of most people when they join any group, it is understandable why we remain cautious.

Groups generally fall into two broad categories: task-oriented, diagnosis-specific groups and open-ended, diagnosis-nonspecific groups. Examples of the first category might include: agoraphobia, social phobia, eating disorders, alcoholism and drug abuse. Take Alcoholics Anonymous, it is still the most effective way to combat alcoholism and it is always conducted in a group format. The primary focus is abstinence from alcohol. Having the group's support and drawing upon the strength of recovery "in the room" increases self-esteem and helps restore one's sanity. Rent the film *Clean and Sober* starring Michael Keaton for a fascinating and moving portrayal of one man's struggle with alcohol and how his participation

in AA transforms his life.

The second category — open-ended, diagnosis-nonspecific groups — are generally less structured, less rigid and more devoted to exploring an array of issues. Usually, social and demographic features link the members more than a type of mental illness. Some examples might include cancer survivor support groups, chronic care for aging parents, and PFLAG (Parents, Friends of Lesbians And Gays) to name a few.

Why is group therapy beneficial for the GLBT community? Many reasons come to mind. Think about who you were before coming out. Many of us adopted different personas to blend in at home, school and work hoping to go unnoticed. Over time, by wearing this unauthentic veil and masking our true selves we miss out on key elements of interpersonal relating. Some of us were excluded or isolated ourselves from our peers. Oddly enough, when we do come out it is often in a sexually super-charged environment such as a gay or lesbian bar. This seems like a monumental leap developmentally.

This environment is very different than the one experienced by our straight peers in developing and honing relational skills. From their first crush on their neighborhood playmates, through accepted dating in high school, developing these skills are practiced often while growing up straight. Gays and lesbians are often delayed in developing these relational skills, waiting until they have grown up and experienced their first sexual encounter. Add a little alcohol (or substitute your drug of choice) and it becomes apparent how difficult having healthy relationships with ourselves and others can become. This deficit is a little like being thrown to the wolves.

Here is one example how group therapy might be applicable. Let's suppose you're a gay male who desires to be in a relationship, but you continually run into problems dating after the newness wears off. Forging on requires you to go deeper emotionally with yourself and your partner. This area of relating can be daunting and terrifying. Without the relating skills or being familiar with these uncomfortable feelings, the relationship stalls or ends abruptly.

So you decide to seek help and join a time-limited, weekly therapy group addressing these issues. Imagine being part of a group tailored to your specific goals and needs. This particular gay men's growth group is targeting interpersonal learning, relationships skills and creating intimacy. Surrounded by other like-minded group members and two experienced co-leaders, you embark on a journey of self-discovery.

The group process is part experiential, in that the co-leaders teach and model couples skills. Participants then practice those skills in pairs with assistance if necessary. Participants share their learning in the large group, which enhances and normalizes understanding of their partner and themselves in relationship. Throughout the 12 weeks of group, participants practice skills to: communicate clearly and effectively, reduce conflict and resolve power struggles, access and share deep feelings, express needs and negotiate change, and deepen their understanding of and commitment to each other. Now, imagine having these skills to navigate through your current or future relationship.

One of my most rewarding experiences as a therapist involved leading a group in San Francisco called Shy Guys. Participants included eight gay men ranging in age from twenty-something to fifty-something. The familiar phrase "painfully shy" fits their way of being in the world: a form of mental handicap as debilitating as a physical handicap with devastating consequences. Upon the group's completion, the experiences shared between participants led to profound change. It was something tangible shared between each of them to recognize and celebrate. Through their own good work they were less inhibited and able to expand their world beyond the comforts of group.

Why do I enjoy group therapy so much? One of my very favorite things to do in my personal life mirrors the group therapy environment. It involves casually sitting around with friends and having free flowing conversation. The situation is relaxed. Topics come and go and even return. Stories are told; experiences are shared. The feelings are similar to being in a human gold mine. Knowing in the moment the special appreciation we hold for one another as it collides with the recognition of how normal and unique we are. This brings long lasting balance and contentment. It also leaves the Bob Newhart out of my office and out of my groups. ▼

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