



The power of group can do wonders

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This week we will continue our topic on group therapy and discuss how being successful in a treatment group can only be defined by each individual in that group. Success may mean one thing to a person and something entirely different to another.

For instance, someone in the Social Phobia/Generalized Anxiety Group may get to the point where they are comfortable talking about a success they had recently where they were able to read a poem in public, speak to their neighbors or confront a person they were angry with. Everyone in the group knows it wasn't easy because as they put themselves in the situation they know how anxious they would be standing up in front of others or looking at their neighbors, waving, smiling and saying "Hello." But you begin to hear the things that allowed it to happen: "I stopped listening to my critical thoughts," "I just decided it was something I wanted to do," or "If others could, why couldn't I?..."

Some individuals start timidly at first trying a few things outside their comfort zone and report in the next group how it went. Remember, it doesn't matter if it worked or not; it only matters what you learn from the experiment and what it challenges you to do next. At first, the progress may seem slow and tentative to the individual. They try a few things and go back into their old behavior. Yet, there is a tipping point where all of a sudden they are doing lots of things they never thought they would try and are sharing their successes with the group. Throughout the process, it is exciting to see how individuals accomplish things that they never would have expected to achieve when they first started the group. Often they have worked on this problem for years with little real movement until they come into group.

It is important to remember that the

problems one has to conquer are different from one group to another. Yet, everyone in that particular group is struggling with a similar theme.

In the Bipolar group, group members struggle with all the bad decisions, rude behavior and lost opportunities their unstable moods have brought on. It is hard for them to realize how much time this illness really takes to manage so that one can be stable. You have to be very strong to take on Bipolar Disorder. You have to have courage to face reality and learn to take extra good care of your basic needs: sleep, managing stress, relationships and health.

The Keeping on Track group has to set goals and then challenge themselves to meet them without being afraid or giving up. One thing individuals in this group have to overcome is to see how they are blocking their own progress by their negative thinking and expectations of failure. They see how others in the group did much more than they even planned and then labeled the results of their activity as a failure when they didn't get as far as they assumed they or others could have. These group members measure everything by heavy duty perfectionism. Eventually, individuals are able to come in and tell about a success they had, while not cutting themselves down as they are talking about it. They are so proud and surprised of what they are able to accomplish.

In the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)/Hoarding group the theme is having difficulties in decision making and being easily overwhelmed with decisions and activity. The focus in this group is to work hard to identify the individual's negative self-talk that says "It's too hard," "It's not worth it," and "What if I make a mistake." We must

find ways to boss this fear back and allow the individual to move forward with their treatment.

When it comes to hoarding, it is important to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day and if you are a hoarder your home isn't going to be de-cluttered in a month. Yet, when someone starts getting motivated to put stuff in its place, both mentally and physically, things begin to happen. Everyone knows what it means in the group when someone is proud of not ordering newspapers or comics or passes by yard sales. We applaud when someone clears off a table top, sofa or can find a part of the floor they haven't seen for years.

In each of these groups, we take a little bit of human kindness, respect for each other, and respect for the problem and add to that some strategies for change that are fairly simple. The hard work always is putting the ideas to work for ones self and stopping the mind from throwing up barriers, doubts and criticism. The group helps us see what we are struggling with because we see it in someone else. It is the best way I know to give a person hope that they don't have to be stuck this way forever.

In last week's column I referenced Cesar Millan, The Dog Whisperer, and how he takes the most troublesome dogs to live at his rescue center where the dogs themselves are part of the cure. A snapping, biting, out of control dog might go to Cesar's and learn how to be a calm, well-behaved dog with the power of the pack supporting this change. For me, it is rewarding to see how the many group members through the course of treatment get to reclaim their lives and become part of the community again. I believe it's the power of the group.