



Many people come out of themselves in therapy

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"You want me to do what? I just told you I can't stand to be around people and I freeze when I try to say anything around other people. You really want me to go to group therapy? I can't do that!"

I'm a group therapist, and I believe in the power of the group. Groups are healing in a way no other therapy can be for some. This often reminds me of "The Dog Whisper" with Cesar Millan. He works with dogs that have problems, and at times, he takes the most troublesome to live at his dog rescue center where the dogs themselves are part of the cure. People also need to have their "cure" with others like themselves. Individual therapy is fine for some problems, and many times someone with a trauma does quite well talking one-on-one with an individual.

Yet, I facilitate five different groups a month. I have several groups for individuals with bipolar disorder. This is a serious mental illness that can demolish people's lives through poor judgment, impulsiveness and distorted moods that result in failed relationships, unsuccessful business ventures and bad financial decisions. I also have a Keeping On Track group for people who have lost their way in the world and have given up trying. Most of these group members are exceedingly self-critical and perfectionistic to the point of feeling nothing they do will make any difference, so why try.

I also have one group for very anxious, worrisome people who are scared of being embarrassed and who

often are paralyzed with fear in social situations. Another group has some of the nicest people you would want to know who have problems with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and hoarding that make them prisoners of their stuff.

These all sound like very different problems. But, in the end, all the participants have the same desire: to get the help they need and to get well. The most important healing concept is that the group helps you see that you are not alone with your issue, and others have succeeded at managing the same problems and so can you. No longer are you your illness. You aren't bipolar, a hoarder, a social phobic or incompetent. You are just a person who has these problems. That distinction is very important. You can't change if you think you are the problem. You can however attack the problem if you see it as being separate from yourself.

I often say that if a group is right for a person, he or she will know it within the first 20 minutes. I prepare people with social phobia by telling them how hard it was for other people to come to their first group. I explain all the things that they might experience and give them permission to be anxious, because, they are going to be. But, I also tell them that a group that is right will make them feel understood and at home.

So, when people come to their first social phobia group session, they have already tried to talk themselves out of coming a hundred different ways, any excuse will do. Somehow they have persevered and decided they have to come, but they still aren't sure they will be able to stay. They show up red-faced, shaking and some times in the middle of a panic attack.

They try not to look at anyone and clearly feel self-conscious and miserable. They sit down as fast as they can locate the closest chair and are usually perched just on the edge of the seat so they can run right out the door if it gets too bad.

It is amazing to see how a new group member to the Social Phobia/ Generalized Anxiety group can settle down, sit back in his chair, sigh and start chiming in after a few minutes; he wouldn't do this anywhere else. Yet, as soon as he hears others describing how hard it was for them to be around people, the words ring true. Others, just like him, are talking about how they used to have these problems and how far they have come.

New members are anxious; but, they now know they are not the only one who has dealt with this problem. It is extremely comforting to know that others in the group are dealing with the same kinds of fears and have the same thoughts and behaviors. The way the older group members act toward the new members shows that they recognize how terrifying it has been for them to show up. And, they aren't going to make fun of them or put them down for it. They will reward their spunk for doing something outside their normal comfort zone and encourage them to keep on bossing back anxiety in other parts of their lives.

Group therapy truly can be a great treatment option for individuals with mental health or addiction disorders. Next week, we will talk more about group therapy and explore how an individual can find success in this type of treatment.