

# Chapter X

## SPGP Procedures:

### The Instrument

*“When we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt, and needed rather than on diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth of our own compassion.”*

*- Marshall Rosenberg (American psychologist)*

This chapter focuses on the procedures and guidelines for conducting the group. It is important to point out that the Supportive Person Group Process (SPGP) groups are not psychotherapy groups, nor are they a treatment for any type of mental disorder. They are designed to be led by non-professionals. The purpose of SPGP groups is self-help, or enrichment for depleted souls. The SPGP groups can enhance an individual's personal growth, sort of like weight lifting to help develop the mind. The SPGP can be very useful in teaching group process and can be helpful as a participant's or lay leader's first group experience.

The group may meet weekly or biweekly, or at some other interval as selected by the participants. The sessions generally last about an hour. The group can choose to meet for a specific number of sessions or indefinitely.

In the group meetings, the participants' chairs are typically placed in a circle so that participants can see one another. Half of the participants are seated in the inner circle, and the other half are seated behind them in the outer circle, just behind their right shoulders.

Again, we must stress that the scope of the SPGP is limited to personal growth, which might include improving communication skills, changing one's perceptions, and learning to connect better with others. The process can be used by non-professionals, and the group is appropriate for any educational level. The Twelve Steps would not be applicable for the SPGP, as the steps are intended to help people overcome a specific malady (addiction). The SPGP is not designed to diagnose or treat any psychiatric condition.

As previously explained in other chapters, when I was an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Florida, I came to believe

that it was important to provide group psychotherapy as a part of the inpatient experience. I initially used a large single circle, but I found that the medical students had a tendency to put the patients in an awkward position of having to defend themselves in the group. So I put the staff members and students in an outer circle behind the patients, and the patients had the inner circle with the group leader, generally myself. This helped to balance the power differential between the medical students and the psychiatric patients. It helped the medical students learn the delicate process of being supportive instead of meddling in the patients' business or otherwise putting the patients on the defensive. It also helped the students develop the ability to accept, validate, and be supportive of the patients in the manner that the patients understood themselves. The development of rapport, communication, and social intimacy within the pairs facilitates the mutually supportive role.

In the beginning, some or all of the members of a group may be complete strangers to one another. Being in dyads helps the participants get to know each other. In some cases, before rapport has developed among members, it may be necessary for the group leader or director to

moderate the process at first, otherwise participants may sit in embarrassed and anxious silence.

The group session begins with a quiet conversation, lasting about ten minutes, between the inner circle participants and their respective supportive persons. It may be difficult to break off the conversation, because it's generally more comfortable to talk in a one-to-one relationship than it is to speak to a group. The shifting of the perspective from the dyads to the entire group and then back to the one-on-one conversations is crucial to the uniqueness of the SPGP. The group leader should remind participants that the group will be returning to the one-to-one discussions throughout the session in order to infuse new energy into the process and allow participants to breathe easily for a while.

While the session is in progress, the supportive person does not speak without the approval of their inner circle counterpart, or at least without tacit permission to speak on the other person's behalf when the group is meeting as a whole. The individual in the inner circle can evaluate whether or not what the supportive person says is true or

helpful. So a great deal has to be worked out between the supportive person and the inner circle participant during the dyadic interactions.

Metaphorically speaking, one can see the inner circle as the engine and the outer circle as a supercharger of the engine. The main goal of the supercharger is to move the group in a more effective and intense manner than one would typically see in a regular self-help group. The outer circle provides energy and coaches the group toward increased engagement, cohesiveness, and self-disclosure.

The next step in the SPGP is to reverse the circles so that the outer circle participants are in the inner circle, and the others move to the outer circle to support or just listen to whatever inner circle members wish to share. They generally talk about the process of coming to understand what the other individual is like and how to be supportive of him or her. Participants become aware of how easy it is to be intrusive or just meddle in the other person's business rather than being supportive. It may be helpful, upon returning to the original configuration of the group, to reflect on participants' impressions of what happened within the periods of one-to-one interaction. Group members generally become

aware of the importance of empathic support for their partner, in contrast to conducting an examination of the person's life.

Over time, group members can be encouraged not only to get to know each other better, but also to help others present problems in the group sessions that they may initially feel are too personal to voice. Participants can be role models to fellow group members by sharing their own personal experiences as well. During their turn as the supportive person, participants can often help their partner find a way to present an issue with both clarity and ease. The individual in the inner circle can express what they expect in a supportive person as well.

### **Group Introduction**

The following is an introduction that can be used at the beginning of a Double Circle group meeting. It can be read at the start of each meeting for newcomers as well as those who are still trying to decide how the group should continue to be conducted: *“This group process method is not intended as therapy but as a way to achieve emotional and spiritual growth. The essence of this group is in the configuration of a single circle re-forming into a double circle and variations on the theme*

*of the double circle. There is no diagnosis, malady, or addiction required to be a member of this group. The only requirement is a desire to gain insight into yourself as well as understanding and compassion for members of the group and other people in your life.”*

The single circle formation at the beginning of a group meeting can be used as a time for focusing or a short meditation as well as dealing with any unfinished business or concerns from previous meetings. This should be relatively brief in order to devote most of the session to the *double circle mystery*. The simplest way to move into the double circle formation is simply to count off “one, two, one, two” and each person is assigned either the odd or even number. By convention, the “ones” become the inner circle and the “twos” become the outer circle.

By consensus, the individuals in the inner and outer circles will reverse positions periodically throughout the session. If the group has an odd number of participants, the extra person can be designated as the director or facilitator. This individual should pay attention the group’s

interactions, taking note of the duration of the dyads' conversations and when the circles should reverse positions.

Due to the decades of success brought to us by the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, it is suggested that the group might incorporate them into the introduction process or opening words. According to the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, everyone can benefit from the wisdom of the AA philosophy (recovering alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike). It can help people learn to acknowledge their mistakes when they happen, repair any damage they may have done, learn humility, become less angry and resentful, and improve their relationships with others. Psychologist Jerry Hirschfield wrote that the Twelve Steps are helpful for anyone who is seeking a practical path to spiritual growth and emotional freedom.

### **Check-in Procedure**

Sometimes it may work well to have an open-ended discussion within the group, but at other times it may be necessary for the leader to provide a discussion topic in order to help the group focus and generate

meaningful exchanges. The group leader or facilitator can use the check-in process at the beginning of the group meeting to accomplish this. In this process, the leader gives a brief introduction or description of the selected topic to help the entire group get centered, and then asks a guiding question or gives some simple instructions for sharing, including a sense of time. Two minutes per person is usually adequate for a check-in.

Check-in is not a time for casual conversation. It is a time for connecting. If a member hears something during check-in that they wish to talk to a fellow group member about, provide time at a break or the end of the meeting for that. The leader should keep in mind a polite but clear reminder to participants who go on a little bit too long.

A guided check-in can be a great way to break the ice, stimulate focused discussion, and help people to feel comfortable with each other. The group leader should invite participants to share briefly anything going on in their lives that they might wish to acknowledge in order to be more fully present in the group and in the moment. When starting the group with a check-in, participants in the group share in sequence (prior

to teaming up in dyads), without questions or comments from other members. The facilitator generally goes first.

Check-in can be especially effective because it introduces a specific focus rather than a vague “how are you?” that may not help people engage effectively with one another. A focused check-in process can also provide subsequent content for group discussions.

The use of a guiding or intentional check-in question at the beginning of a session can help the group go deeper by inviting creative interchange and encouraging connections between the work of the group and the personal growth of individual members. The leader should allow a brief period of silence for participants to reflect on the question and then give each person a minute or two to share his or her response. Following the silent reflection, invite group sharing, and then share any insights with the entire group as well as within the dyads.

### **Check-out Procedure**

Doing a brief check-out at the end of group sessions gives participants a chance to wrap up any loose ends and get closure on the group discussion so that important things are not left unsaid. It can also

be a time to briefly express appreciations for the sharing and connections that have occurred during the group session.

## **The FIRO**

According to the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) theory, which seeks to explain the interpersonal underworld of a small group, when people get together in a group setting they are looking to fulfill three main interpersonal needs: inclusion, affection, and control. Psychologist William Schutz (whose 1967 book *Joy: Expanding Human Awareness* made encounter groups famous) developed the FIRO theory to measure how group members feel when it comes to personality traits such as their wanted or expressed need for control, level of sociability, rebelliousness, inhibition, flexibility, openness, warmth, and cautiousness. Groups provide an environment where participants can receive valuable, constructive feedback about others' perceptions of them, allowing individuals to see themselves through the eyes of their peers and gain new insights about their own personalities. It is hoped that the time needed to reach this stage will be

remarkably shortened and improved in quality through the use of dyads in the SPGP method.

## **References**

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