

The place where I touch base



Hania Porucznik describes how her university counselling service developed a therapeutic group for students

In 2009, a gap was identified in the therapeutic provision offered to students at Oxford Brookes University: there was no therapeutic group. Since then, the counselling service has offered a weekly therapeutic group for students. This article will describe how the therapeutic group was set up and how it has developed, highlighting the difficulties encountered within the particular context of a university environment.

Once we had decided that we wanted to provide a therapeutic group, which I volunteered to facilitate, the thinking and research process began. Coming from a psychodynamic background, I was interested in facilitating an analytically-informed group and approached a group analyst for supervision. As I am not a group analyst, from both an ethical and a personal point of view I needed (and continue to need) sound help and support. I had a series of supervision-cum-training sessions in which we thrashed out what kind of group this was going to be.

I had a number of anxieties about the group: Would students come? What if one person dominated and I felt powerless to stop it? Would I be able to think on my feet? These were some of the questions I raised in my preparatory supervision. I am always nervous before running a group. That has not changed but, with experience, I have become a little more relaxed and increasingly see my task as providing a 'therapeutic home' for the group. Once that is in place, the rest seems to come more easily. As well as anxious, I was also excited about the group and have found it an incredibly inspiring and moving experience.

As the group was to be run on group analytic lines, there were some basic building blocks: the group would have up to eight members; it would take place at the same time each week and run for one-and-a-half hours; it would require a time commitment from its members, who would all be assessed by me prior to joining the group; and we needed a room.

From the outset it was clear that the form this group took had to be congruent with students' needs within the institutional structure: in particular, semester dates and timetables. The group has altered over the years in response to outside realities. It started out as a semester-long group but has now become a slow, open group, with some students opting to stay on from one academic year to the next. Having a core group not only gives time for students to settle into the group but also means that it is easier to establish the group each academic year.

Why a therapeutic group?

Prior to 2009, Brookes Counselling Service had offered chiefly one-to-one counselling, plus some online counselling and psycho-educational workshops. There was recognition that a therapeutic group might capture a section of the student population that might not otherwise access counselling or for whom individual counselling might not be enough. Groups

can also provide a longer-term therapeutic option for those needing it. Group work is sometimes described as ego-training in action¹. We thought that working in a therapeutic group could provide a safe, versatile environment in which members could experiment with giving and receiving feedback from their peers and explore new behaviours and responses in a way that might not be possible in one-to-one work.

Patrick: 'I hate the way I look, I feel disgusted when I look in the mirror... What does the group think?'

Bob: 'You're, well... You're a bloke!'

This vignette highlights a pattern we did not anticipate and which other institutions also report: the group has proved to be an attractive therapeutic option for men.

Groups also make good economic sense: the average number of sessions each group member attended last year, including assessments, was 4.8.

The room

Inspector Clouseau: *'Tell me: do you have a reum?'*

Hotelier: *'A reum? I do not know what a reum is.'*

Inspector Clouseau: (Looking it up in a dictionary) *'A zimmer!'*

Hotelier: *'Ah! A room!'*

Inspector Clouseau: *'That is what I have been saying, you idiot! Reum!'*

It may sound obvious and simple, but a group needs a room. This can be difficult to achieve. The room needs to be big enough to seat up to nine people comfortably, with nine chairs arranged in a circle. It needs to be reasonably quiet and private and have a door that closes. Preferably, there will be a small table in the middle of the circle, with a box of tissues on it. The details matter.

The counselling service had no dedicated group room, so in the first year I had to find a suitable room somewhere in the institution. This meant that the group took place outside the physical confines of the counselling services premises. This sounds straightforward on paper yet, at various times, students have been locked out of the building where the room is; the room has been double-booked and – having set the room up for the group – I have arrived to find an immovable academic in situ, and the room I had booked for the year has been taken out of circulation with a week's notice! These obstacles, apart from

being disruptive for the group, have often left me feeling frustrated and disheartened but are all part of running a group.

Eventually, with the support of my manager and team, counselling services gained a group room that, although not dedicated, is within student services. I remain vigilant and am fiercely possessive of the space, often feeling like a snappy little terrier. The support from colleagues is vital to embedding the group in the culture of the counselling team so that groupwork is as much at the forefront as individual counselling.



Groups are not for people who need 'curing': in the group everyone is therapist and patient. The group needs resources, not just people with problems, so when a group is running well, people slip in and out of these roles and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between giving and taking



The room has its own atmosphere. The stage is set: it feels calm, a place in which the group can work. It has its own artwork: a series called 'Preparing the Ground' by Carrie Gibbons, then a Social Sculpture student. The group has found its home. One student's feedback read simply: 'The place where I touch base.'

Who is the group suitable for?

The basic rule of thumb is that anyone who is suitable for individual counselling

is also suitable for the group. They need to be psychologically-minded, with a capacity to enquire and reflect rather than think concretely; to have the ability to form a rapport; to be highly motivated and committed time-wise, and to be interested in what they can give as well as receive from the group. Particular indications for suitability for the group may be students who are having difficulties in relationships, or those finding it difficult to settle, or those who have social difficulties (though not if those difficulties would be aggravated by being in the group).

Who is the group not suitable for?

The group is not suitable for someone who is experiencing an overwhelming current crisis, has an active alcohol or drug addiction or eating disorder, is suffering from acute psychosis, or is actively suicidal or self-harming. In the context of the institution's time-frame and in the context of long breaks, these issues would place too much pressure on the other members of the group as well as not offering appropriate support to the student concerned.

Assessment

The importance of assessment for the group cannot be emphasised too strongly. Most students who join the group have already had some counselling in the service. Students for whom the group may be suitable (and I always think of it this way round rather than 'students who are suitable for the group') are given some basic information about the group and then meet with me for an assessment, which takes place over one or more sessions. Some may be ready to join straight away; others may need more preparation.

Groups are not for people who need 'curing': in the group everyone is therapist and patient. The group needs resources, not just people with problems, so when a group is running well, people slip in and out of these roles and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between giving and taking. For example, Anna took on a mummy role in the group. Her epiphany came when the group told her that it was obvious that she was highly anxious and that her mothering was a mask. She was shocked at this feedback, but it enabled her to take her anxiety seriously and to ask for help for herself.

While the original system is the family, the new system is the group. I try to find out in the assessment about the student's

family of origin, and we think together about the role they may hold in their family. We also explore how the student is in current and previous peer groups, and connect this to their family of origin.

I spend some time exploring the student's fantasies about the group. This is always enlightening, as it often reflects dynamics in the family.

Students often come to the group with the conviction that they do not 'fit in' and that everyone else does. One of the great moments in a group is when members realise that others share this belief.

Many of the fantasies about therapeutic groups are based on media representations of, for example, groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, the film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the Jeremy Kyle show. These often depict groups as confessional and confrontational, frightening places. It is helpful to think about these misconceptions with the student.

I also spend time telling the student about how the group is run. When I say that it is not psycho-educational, most students frown and say: 'Then what do we do?' I explain that the group creates its own agenda, that everyone comes to the group for different reasons and the group will work out its agenda. If this arouses the student's curiosity, I take that as an indication that they will be able to use the group.

Boundaries

I explain the ground rules in the assessment, although boundary maintenance is a dynamic process. Mobile phones are turned off during the session, food or drink should not be consumed. I explain that, for example, it is disruptive if someone is talking about something important and a phone goes off.

I also explain that group therapy is based on the premise of confidentiality, so that what is shared in the group remains in the group. Group members have translated this into their own language, and quote from the film *Fight Club*:

'The first rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club³.'

I spell out that confidentiality means not contacting other group members outside the group. The group has no physical contact either – no hugs! Facebook has proved to be an issue, and I now expressly

mention that contact outside the group includes Facebook contact. This puzzles some students and I explain that the group needs to be a place where people can freely explore issues without the limitations imposed by social conventions. While some group members have found this a difficult boundary to maintain, they also enjoy having the freedom and the feeling of being 'in' and part of the group:

'It's like being in a secret society, when you see someone from the group outside. You give each other the nod.'

The idea that members should not know each other can be difficult to achieve, even with a pool of 17,000 students. I try to find out at the assessment stage if students know each other and if this will be a problem in the group. If we do not find out that students know each other until arriving at the group, we check this out together in the group.



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The time commitment, to attend every week, is emphasised in the assessment and I explain that this is to ensure continuity and develop trust. I provide each member with a written timetable of all the sessions in the year. If the student is unable to come to a group, I ask them to inform the group or me in advance. A mammoth obstacle to continuity is the change in class timetabling at the beginning of each semester. Every year, I gather a group of

eight together, only to discover a few days before the beginning of the semester that half the group has had a timetable change, so can no longer come to the group. My working solution to this is that the group has become a slow, open group and there is a core group that continues from one academic year to the next.

As student counsellors, we are familiar with the tasks of studenthood – to explore who they are and where they belong, to find a home and explore and discover their identity. University or college symbolises that change and transition, providing students with an opportunity to contemplate the next stage of their life. This journey is most successful when a student feels settled and oriented, a fact understood implicitly in statements about the 'student experience'.

This sense of growth and burgeoning identity changes through the years. The groups I have facilitated so far have included students at the beginning of their academic careers, possibly leaving home for the first time, and at the end – maybe mature students with diverse life experiences and backgrounds. All are at different stages; all have to start and finish at the institution. This is mirrored in the life of the group through the academic year: there is a beginning, middle and an end. I feel deeply privileged to witness this process and am often humbled by the group's insight, bravery and resourcefulness.

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- 2 *The Pink Panther strikes again*. Director: Blake Edwards. Distributed by United Artists Corporation; 1976.
- 3 *Fight club*. Director: David Fincher. Distributed by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment; 1999.