

Why Group Therapy is Vital for the LGBTQQ Population

In the LGBTQQ mental health field, group therapy is at times overlooked as a viable modality, compared to the more popular individual and couples therapy. This article will explore salient issues, encouraging therapists to consider group therapy as a vibrant and vital option for their clients. Although the authors have worked primarily with gay men in group, we will outline common themes related to minority issues which apply (in differing degrees) across the spectrum of the LGBTQQ population.

Why is group so powerful? People who were fortunate enough to attend a "coming out" group of any kind usually walked away with a sense of arrival, validation, connection, and decreased isolation. In group, sitting with peers and feeling mirrored provides connection, validation and friendship, amongst other factors, especially when this experience has been lacking in family, school, community, and the culture at large.

Unique group benefits include:

A culturally relevant group allows individuals to feel their unique experiences. Needs and preferences can potentially be understood by others without lengthy explanations, defensiveness and questions of "legitimacy". Clients who interview for group often say they want to be in an environment where they won't have to explain sexual practices or the experience of homophobia, amongst other issues.

A welcoming environment to heal from societal homophobia can be a profound experience in group. Everyone, regardless of orientation, is aware of some degree of societal homophobia. A group may provide advocacy, clarity, and direction around topics of homophobia that may either be challenging to address or currently solidified in a person's psyche. A common example is dealing with family of origin interactions that subtly or overtly exclude or diminish a person's life. Other struggles include friendship, work environments, and public safety. (please note, as an issue of expediency, we are using "homophobia" to describe all aspects of difficulties experienced by the broader LGBTQQ communities in relation to mainstream culture.)

Validate experiences unique to being LGBTQQ. There are many experiences that are specific to being gay, some of which exist due to our marginalized status. The conception of [*heterosexual privilege*](#), adapted from Peggy McIntosh's address of "White Privilege," conveys the daily instances in which LGBTQQ folks' experiences go unacknowledged, ignored, or overly examined. In validating a positive, life-enhancing and healthy identity, we help people grow, affirm and change in numerous ways.

Encourage new adaptive behaviors, an experience which may actually occur in all groups, regardless of focus. Studies have shown we learn from our peers, and do so on any number of levels, including being supported, modeling options and behaviors, and accountability. For many of the gay men we have worked with, a long standing stuck pattern exists that is harder to hide or downplay in the face of group interactions. You might say that a kind of positive scrutiny can occur in group. Feeling "joined" (others identifying with an issue) in the struggle can be a source of powerful connection as well as motivation for change.

Improving and expanding intimacy. The experience of homophobia and other traumas clearly impact intimacy. By exploring the characteristics of intimacy, including attention to trust, safety, lack of judgment, and acceptance, clients are able to conceptualize how to thrive and progress. Groups offer a unique "here and now" experience that has a large impact on group members: outside issues surface through group interactions and allow members to see how and why their isolation, avoidance, judgment and other characteristics impact intimacy. Weekly group therapy offers consistency and regularity in exploring all facets of intimacy.

Build community through connectedness. One of the touching experiences we have as group leaders is witnessing a profound sense of growing community. Group members state they missed the group when absent, see their fellow members as the kind of people they would like to be close with, and develop fondness and appreciation for others. To quote our colleague Michael Quirke, another Gaylesta member, "Gay men have been hurt in groups and now they can heal in groups". It is our hope that our clients and colleagues experience first hand the multiple benefits of group, as we have.

Greg Millard, PhD, and Jamie Moran, LCSW, CGP, are both long time Gaylesta members. Both Jamie and Greg have worked extensively with gay men in a variety of settings. They are co-leading a new Psychotherapy group for Gay Men in the SF Financial District, due to start in July. For more information, please see www.gregorymillardphd.com and www.jamiemoran.com