

Hoarding Group

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Abstract: This vignette presents a maintenance group for people with hoarding disorders where the facilitator manages challenging group dynamics that threaten the integrity of the group. The facilitator skillfully attends to (a) dynamics resulting from the blending of two previous groups (b) conflict between two group members vying for power and control and (c) extra group communications among the facilitator and group members and last (d) issues of transference between and among group members are also touched upon.

OVERVIEW OF GROUP AND CONTEXT

Description of Agency

The Northeast Community Center for Health (NCCH) is a large, community-based mental health not-for-profit agency that serves people from ages 18 months to seniors. NCCH is comprised of several mental health outpatient clinics, early intervention center, day treatment for adults and adolescents, clubhouses, a community trauma center, and a 24-hour crisis team. The clinic is located in a suburban community in the Northeast of the United States. Despite our agency being located in an affluent area of New England, many of the clients served at the clinic are living in poverty, surviving on disability checks, living in public housing, and have other barriers to accessing mental health care such transportation and medical problems. We have a large, mostly part-time staff at NCCH. I am a middle age white heterosexual female social worker.

Description of Group

The Maintenance Group for Hoarding Disorder (“Maintenance Group”) provides support for people who struggle with hoarding behaviors and to practice the skills and techniques learned in previous required 20-week CBT Group for Hoarding Disorder. (“20-week Group”). The Hoarding Maintenance group has 12 members and approximately eight members attend each group session. Group members are required to attend at least one group session per month in order to remain in the group. There is one facilitator. Eleven members of the group are white and one is biracial, and there are six men and six women ranging in age from 40 to 75 years old.

All group members have co-occurring diagnoses, such as major depressive disorder (MDD), obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, ADHD, or social anxiety. No members of the group are currently married or in intimate relationships. Several members are at risk of eviction due to the condition of the home.

There are two group members who are central to this issue explored in this case:

George is a 52-year old bi-racial heterosexual male who was adopted as a child and presents with comorbid MDD, moderate. His home is severely cluttered with items that he has acquired to sell. When he first joined the 20-week hoarding disorder group, he sat with his chair outside the table for the first seven sessions. He was quiet, appeared anxious, and guarded sharing information about himself. Over time he became more comfortable, opening up about himself and talking more to other group members. After two years of steady attendance George was told he and his ex-wife were being evicted, though no move out date had been given. George stopped sorting and discarding and did not do homework anymore. He continued attending group and remained in his active internal leader role.

Peter is a 72-year old gay, white male who has never been married, lives alone and works as a home health aid. He has comorbid Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Peter's mother died when he was young and his father raised him with help from his older sister and paternal grandmother. His father, who told him he wasn't "good enough or successful enough" verbally abused him through teenage years. This verbal aggression by his father led to a chronic sense of failure and a sensitivity to perceived criticism. He has a strong sense of responsibility to the environment, leading to a lot clutter of items that he feels "should not be put back into the planet". Peter was mostly quiet in the group and he seemed youthful and even "immature" in his requests for more help in remembering to complete his home commitment.

CASE STUDY

The Critical Incident, Challenge or Situation

The following describes the series of group sessions and outside group communication and explores challenging group dynamics.

As facilitator, I decided to blend two maintenance groups that had been running low on memberships. I notified both of the groups of the impending change and that I expected the blending to be slow. I assured the group that we will have discussion, as needed, to assess the progress in blending the groups. By group session six, I was noticing that some group members were remaining in their sub-groups. I felt tension in the group room that seemed to be gaining strength. As facilitator, I remarked on the tension and asked them for their thoughts. I said, "I'm sensing something in our group. Does anyone else feel it?" There was some silence, and then the group began to open up. Some members stated that they didn't know each other well and didn't even know everyone's name and expressed frustration that the group didn't meet every week and that this effected their engagement. I made non-verbal prompts and more direct verbal requests for thoughts and feelings, "What about the rest of you, any thoughts?" There was no response.

Individual communication (Peter)

After this meeting, Peter asked me for an individual meeting and I agreed. When we met, he stated that he was very uncomfortable with my "co-dependent" relationship with another group member, George. He seemed angry, tense, and rigid in the discussion. Peter complained, "It seems like you support him co-leading the group." He stated that this "special treatment" was inappropriate and unfair. Insightfully, he pointed out that this dynamic reminded him of the relationship between his father and sister after his mother died. I validated his feelings by saying, "it must be difficult to re-experience those feelings that were so hard when you were younger". How do you think the group can help you?" I also encouraged him to talk with his individual therapist. I wondered if there was a way I could help him express his discomfort with George's role in the group. Peter stated he would not talk about this in the group and he was frustrated at my response!

Three sessions later, the group returned to a somewhat heated discussion about how the group was going. I reminded the group of the guidelines and of our common purpose. Peter glared at George and said, “I don’t like it when you ask probing questions, it makes me feel uncomfortable”. George responded, “I think that is the reason we are here, to address the uncomfortable.” Peter responded that he did not like being pushed, and George said okay. I did not say anything at that point. Then the group ended somewhat abruptly due to time. I told the group members that I appreciated their courage in engaging in such an honest discussion and hoped that everyone would return to talk more about the dynamics and plans for the future of the group. As members were preparing to leave, I noticed that George and Peter were talking heatedly to one another and suddenly George left the group room appearing distressed.

Individual communication (George)

George called me the next day to tell me that Peter confronted him about arriving late and not wearing a nametag. George described Peter’s tone as hostile and that his exact words to him were, “Do you think you are better than us!?” I encouraged George to raise this in the group about this at the next session. Not surprisingly Peter also contacted me by email and said that if George remained in the group, he could no longer be a member. It was clear that he was asking me to choose between them!

Next Group Session 10

Only five members attended this session. One absence was clear: Peter had stated that he would not return until he had an opportunity “to share his side of the story” with my supervisor. (I had previously agreed to meet with Peter and my supervisor.) Despite the absence of these members, I decided to continue to explore the challenging group dynamics. I once again reminded members of the group guidelines and the problems related to blending the groups and we brainstormed solutions in an appropriate manner. For example, there were two members in the group who seemed to be the voice of the missing group members. One member stated, “It must have been a hard adjustment to join a group that was so connected.” All group members expressed a strong desire to continue to work towards developing cohesion. The members put forth an idea to request a renewal of individual commitment to the group, acknowledging and honoring those who may choose to leave the group (and join a different maintenance group at the

agency with the same purpose). They expressed the idea that we put a stronger effort towards cohesion – creating an environment that feels safe, supportive, and welcoming for all.

Individual communication – Peter decides to leave the group

Peter arrived for his appointment with my supervisor and me with his individual therapist. He was clear in his disappointment with the dynamics and roles in the group. I validated Peter's frustrations and thanked him for his courage in coming to share his thoughts about the situation. I told him that I wished we could move through this together and that he would stay in the group. Peter was calm throughout the meeting and stated that he planned to move to another group.

Session 11 – moving on:

The group met with eight members in attendance, including George. We started the group with a review of the session agenda. The group proceeded in its regular structure with the mindfulness and check in. I stated the purpose of the group and then invited group members to brainstorm guidelines. The guidelines were the same as previously stated with two additions: 1) The group discussed in depth the issue of confidentiality since some group members have contact outside of the group. It was noted that any issue related to the group should be discussed during the group session. The group members agreed.

I invited the group members who were present at the previous sessions to summarize those meetings. While somewhat reluctant, one group member shared her summary of those sessions and then asked the other members if they had anything to add to her report. The discussion of group dynamics ended with the acknowledgement that Peter had decided not to continue. Two group members noted that they weren't surprised because they had heard from him that day. I did not say much about him leaving because he told me not to say more than the fact that he would be joining another group. The discussion ended and moved on to the topic of procrastination. George said he wondered if Peter's lack of progress was less related to procrastination and more related to complacency or hopelessness. Other members contributed to

the discussion, but nothing more was said about Peter's departure from the group. The group ended on a positive note.

How was the incident, challenge or situation addressed?

It seems easier to assess what I didn't do than what I did do. I did reach out for supervision from the supervision group at the agency as well as individual consultation from my supervisor. The group supervision time was helpful in identifying the current challenging group dynamics and getting ideas of how to proceed. At the meeting we identified a few areas to explore but germane to this case were: Sub-group dynamics, transference amongst group members, facilitator countertransference and individual contact with facilitator

The feedback from the group supervision session was largely that Peter was a "disruptive" member and that he may need to leave the group to work with his individual therapist on this relational problem that was emerging in the group. Initially, my aim was that Peter could see how he was recreating/reliving past experiences in the group and that his acting out towards George and me was a part of that process. The question that emerged from the supervision group was: Does that goal land outside the purpose of the group? After all, this is a maintenance group for people with hoarding disorder, not a group to help people work with relational problems. This didn't settle well with me as a group worker. Group process is a part of the principles social work with groups and innately part of the healing process, no matter what type of group.

What was not discussed in the group supervision consultation was the issue of my outside contact with the group members. I believe that my stumble of having too much outside individual contact with group members interfered with the group process. I didn't trust the group to move through this challenging situation. I had never had a group completely fall apart before and it was certainly teetering on the ledge. I think I became too involved and I guess lacked trust that the group could move through it. Therein lies a major problem. The group will stay together because they trust each other (including me and all members, not just me). There was nothing I could say in an individual session with Peter that would help him build trust and safety

in the group. He needed to hear that from the group members. I forgot Steinberg's (2010) Key #4 advice for addressing conflict: "Don't 'Take Over' When Conflict Occurs" (p. 176).

While I didn't recognize this misstep during the challenging situation that was happening over several weeks, I did apply some of my group work skills such as reviewing guidelines and reaching for feedback from the group. I worked hard to bring forth the manifest content (non-verbal communication, tense communication, and absent group members). I reminded clients of the common purpose of the group and that conflict is an important part of all relationships and moving through this would make us stronger.

SUGGESTED AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

Reflection on the Incident and the Group

Was it the poor pre-group planning that led to the problem? Or could it have been the "outside group communication"? Lastly, how did Peter's transference and my reaction play a role in the challenging dynamics? Needless to say, I found myself in a complicated place and unsure of exactly how to help the group.

Outside Group Communication – an issue of trust

This was the first time in my group work experience where there was so much communication happening outside the hoarding group sessions that wasn't related to logistics, individual home visits, or consultation with individual therapists.

Group member contact outside group: I was aware of and even encouraged outside communication between the group members but I didn't ask about how this may be entering into the group. This should have been an explicit conversation that occurred during discussion and creation of guidelines. I am left wondering if there had been some discussions amongst the two sub-groups that strengthened each of them.

Individual contact with me (the facilitator): When the call from Peter came in to meet with me, I wasn't sure why and didn't ask more about it on the phone. Was communication with George and Peter outside the group a misstep? Should I have refused to meet individually with Peter? Would the group be able to help Peter and George move through the challenging dynamics had I set that boundary? As mentioned earlier, I think the answer to this is yes.

Peter's Transference – rest assured, transference is a critical part of the therapeutic process in groups too

Yalom (2005) points out that “therapists who ignore transference considerations may seriously misunderstand some of the transactions and confuse rather than guide the group members” (p. 205). George was intentionally pushing the group members into uncomfortable areas – asking questions about their clutter and the kind of attachment (instrumental, intrinsic, or sentimental). This probing reminded Peter of his father and sister's critical parenting and he was fighting off the feeling of being a teenager in his home. He perceived George's pointed questions as aggressive, critical and negative. This led to a seething rage by Peter that erupted in the confrontation at the end of group in Session 9. I failed to see the importance of one of Peter's primary therapeutic goals (below the mound of clutter in his home) related to addressing the early loss of his mother.

I wondered early on, “How do I tell Peter that I won't choose between him and George?” and “How do I help him understand how his transference of me and George is a re-enactment of the experiences of his sister and father and that the way to correct it is to stay in group and work through it?” Finally, do I and does the group, want to make that part of our work? Does it interfere with the purpose of the group to address the hoarding behaviors? I was getting resentful of the situation and it just kept getting worse. Peter's therapist contacted me to admonish me about my leadership missteps, specifically noting that it was inappropriate for internal leaders to exist. I now feel strongly that I should have trusted the group to help Peter with this treatment goal.

My counter-transference was building, leading me to feeling like a parent being asked to choose between two kids. I had strong feelings about being “pushed into a corner” to choose him or

George. This is a feeling I could relate all too well to as the mother of two teenagers who had recently been asking for the same. I was losing my ability to find empathy for Peter and noticed that I began to disengage. I kept asking myself, at what point do I give up? Do I really have the ability to fix the problem? *I didn't ask myself how could I help Peter stay in it.* I think I my own feelings of frustration with Peter and my lack of patience got in the way of helping him. Most importantly, I didn't trust the group to help.

Outside group communication and group norms

As noted above, the lack of group processing (and the establishment of a guideline) about outside group contact may have led to too much communication outside group and interfered with the group dynamic. In the effort to shape the group norms or culture, group facilitators should have a discussion about group guidelines, starting at the initial intake interviews and then during the first group (and possibly at different points during the development of the group). (Gitterman, A. & Shulman, L. 2005; IASWG Standards, 2015). Some group facilitators may use their authority and explicitly state that no outside group contact is allowed, explaining that it may interfere with the group process. Whether a pre-determined rule or one to be decided, a discussion about outside contact occurs during the first session.

I have always held a strong and fast rule that I would not have contact with group members outside of the group, unless of course there was an issue of safety in the group or a personal problem that was not related to the group. I broke my own principle, one that I taught to students and emphasized in supervision with other group facilitators. I will not make that mistake again.

Transference and countertransference

This is the first time that I experienced someone in group expressing anger at me due to transference. I was caught off guard and not prepared to respond to such a strong reaction, which I took personally. Big mistake. The lesson is to remember that there is a reason that one reacts a certain way to you or anyone else in the group. We all have experiences in life that enter into any relationship; and our role as facilitators is to keep that in mind. We are a part of the group -- a member of the group. If I were more mindful of the different theoretical concepts, I might not have shut down and may have been more equipped in the moment to help Peter.