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No Joke: Group Therapy Offers Savings in Numbers

By [KEVIN HELLIKER](#)

Conventional psychotherapy was beyond the means of Matthew Chotkowski on any long-term basis. But a willingness to share the couch with others has made therapy affordable for him.

"Group therapy is at least 50% less expensive than individual therapy," says Mr. Chotkowski, an administrator at a child-nutrition program in Newton, Mass. The 50-year-old discovered that his fear of being judged -- a huge source of anxiety -- was overblown. He calls group therapy "a more realistic environment" than individual therapy for confronting one's fears of other people.

Finding a Group

Ask your physician, psychotherapist or health insurer for a referral to a group therapist, or check listings at www.agpa.org.

Decide whether to join a group discussing a single problem -- depression, for instance -- or whether you could benefit from a group analysis of a wider set of social and emotional issues.

Health Mailbox

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Group therapy has long been the Rodney Dangerfield of mental-health services. It is used mostly in institutions. In private practice, relatively few psychotherapists are trained in it. Group therapy accounts for less than 10% of the outpatient market, in part because classroom-style counseling has been portrayed either as a joke ("The Bob Newhart Show") or a horror ("One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"). "People are reluctant to believe that their problems aren't that different from others' or else they'll think that to share a therapist's attention would mean getting cheated," says Barney Straus, a certified group psychotherapist in Chicago.

Yet group therapy can be life altering, particularly for patients experiencing that deep sense of isolation that commonly accompanies depression, anxiety and chemical dependency. Bergin and Garfield's Handbook of Psychotherapy Research and Behavior Change, the widely accepted authority on psychotherapy research, cites "hundreds of group psychotherapy outcome-and-process studies" in declaring group therapy an effective, evidence-based treatment. Health insurers typically cover it, usually on the same terms as individual therapy. "Group therapy is an effective therapeutic tool [that] is largely underutilized," says a statement from health insurer Aetna Inc.

Now, recession-related anxiety, and the loss by millions of people of their jobs and health coverage, are heightening the appeal of low-cost treatments. A group-therapy session typically lasts 90 minutes -- twice as long as individual therapy -- and costs roughly half as much -- between \$35 and \$80 per person.

"Money figures into the decision-making of a fairly high percentage of those who are seeking group therapy," says Jeffrey D. Roth, a Chicago psychiatrist specializing in group therapy.

Group therapy's slow development outside of institutions has largely been due to logistics -- the therapist's challenge of finding six to eight patients capable of meeting at the same time every week, and the patient's challenge of finding a type of treatment that most counselors don't offer.

The Internet is helping resolve those problems. The American Group Psychotherapy Association (www.agpa.org) in recent years introduced a directory on its Web site with contact information for certified group psychotherapists across the country. Although demand for this treatment isn't tracked, one indication of growth is a tripling since 1994 of the number of certified group therapists in the U.S., to 3,655. Still, that's a small fraction of the number of individual therapists.

Therapy groups typically meet once a week. So-called open courses run indefinitely with revolving members. Closed courses start and end with the same members over a set period of time. The groups are generally not recommended for people with a psychosis, such as schizophrenia, or for someone who genuinely needs to do all the talking.

At times, conflict between group members can arise, though this can contribute to the healing process. "If I grew up in a family where I felt betrayed by my mom and I see women as a threat, that's going to become clear in group," says Malou Thein, a New York pain-clinic therapist who says two years of group therapy improved her skills in personal and professional relationships.

In groups, patients are unlikely to tolerate the abuses of power that sometimes occur in individual therapy. In fact, camaraderie in groups often develops in opposition to the therapist, reflecting either members' resentment toward authority (an issue worth examining) or his or her actual shortcomings.

All therapists strive to steer patients toward insights. In some ways, though, therapists wield less power in groups than in individual counseling, which can work to the patients' benefit. Instead of being the lone voice of wisdom, for instance, the group therapist encourages patients to help each other. "By the group we are wounded and by the group we are healed," says group therapist Gary M. Burlingame, a professor of psychology at Brigham Young University.

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