



Advantages to the Group Modality When Working with Anger/Abuse Issues

There is wide consensus that the most effective way to help people address their anger and abuse issues is in a group setting rather than just meeting with them individually. Virtually all state standards for abuse intervention programming require that services are offered in a group modality. Even highly seasoned and skilled professionals have limited impact on abusive partners when they are working with them individually. Why is that?

Listed below are some of the reasons why group intervention is far superior to attempting to do this work individually.

***Not reliant on the individual to generate material.** Abusive partners are often slow to self-disclose not only any abuse or control that they have done, but even what their struggles and challenges in life are. There are many reasons for this, including being guarded, unaware, and in denial. This means that there may be little personal material to focus on in individual sessions. In a group setting, material that any one member shares can be relevant to all. Even non-disclosive individuals can learn while sharing little, particularly early in their stay.

***Passive learning can occur.** In addition to limited self-disclosure, abusive partners often come in with limited motivation. They may be slow to identify or ask for assistance related to their abuse and control. This means they may have little to talk about in individual sessions. In a group setting, they don't need to say a thing to still learn about relevant concepts. In hearing the challenges and struggles that others bring up they may be able to relate without having to share themselves.

***Indirect confrontation is pervasive and more frequent.** Denial about their abuse and control is extremely common among abusive partners. As a result, challenging and breaking through this denial is an important part of the change process. In individual sessions, the only way to confront this denial is by directly challenging it. This limits the frequency and impact of confrontation. In the group, the significant majority of confrontation that group members experience is indirect. In a group, when one group member is directly confronted, all of the other group members are indirectly confronted. Witnessing another being challenged routinely triggers much lower levels of defensiveness and guardedness. As a result, it is often much easier to learn from watching someone else than being directly confronted yourself. This also allows for more frequent confrontations since most are being witnessed rather than being directly challenged.

***Immersive.** Stopping patterns of abuse and control requires not only stopping those behaviors, but also shifting one's pro-abuse belief system. More broadly, it requires developing a non-abusive lifestyle. This level of change has many facets including different ways of behaving,

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thinking, viewing the world, and living in the world. In individual sessions, this can only be conveyed a single point at a time through direct conversation or direct teaching. In a group, there can be larger and more elaborate conversations and discussions with multiple voices involved. It has been said that a picture can be worth a thousand words in the information it conveys. Likewise, a group session can be worth a thousand words compared to what is shared in an individual session.

***Decreased feelings of shame.** There is strong negative judgment about domestic violence in our culture. People who are abusive towards family members are viewed very negatively. It is highly unusual for people to talk with others in general about their abusive and controlling behavior out of fear of this judgment. All of this means that many people who are abusive and controlling can have high levels of shame which severely limit their ability to acknowledge, admit, or discuss their abuse and control. Even being with an individual therapist may still be quite difficult out of fear of being judged. In a group setting, the person can observe how it is normal for group members to talk about their abuse and control without being shamed or castigated. They may also have their own strong judgments about what domestic violence perpetrators look and act like. Being in a group with others that, in general, don't appear that different from themselves and don't fit the stereotypes they, themselves, hold of abusive partners, can help lower their levels of shame and increase their willingness to admit to, examine, and change these behaviors and beliefs. The group becomes the one (and perhaps only) place where they can openly admit to and discuss their abuse and control without strong negative judgment and ostracization.

***Creation of a positive peer culture.** There are both subtle and not so subtle ways that our culture supports and encourages people to be abusive and controlling, particularly men. There is also significant collusion in our culture since discussions of abusive and controlling behavior are very rare and pushed underground. Within a group setting it becomes normal and acceptable to talk about abuse and control with accountability but without shame. Part of this is talking about how to live in the world without being abusive and controlling. This includes willfully choosing not to be abusive and controlling, no matter what. Individual therapy cannot begin to replicate the power of being among peers who are actively practicing and supporting being non-abusive.

Monitoring the ability to be empathic and relational. A key aspect of becoming non-abusive is to be empathic to others and to be mindful of them. In a group setting this can be practiced and observed with other group members. Neither is possible in individual work.

Reduces a sense of isolation, emphasizing this is not an individual issue. In a group setting it is clear that the abusive person is not alone in their struggles and that many others are dealing with this same issue. It can reduce the sense of pathologizing and stigmatizing, reducing their shame and removing barriers and resistance to making changes. In individual work it can feel like they, alone, are walking this path which can make it more challenging. They may experience no support for doing this work beyond that of the individual therapist.

Positive role modeling. A common way to learn is through the example of others. This can include listening to others repeatedly talk about how they are navigating becoming non-abusive and non-controlling. None of this is possible in individual therapy.

A greater diversity of input/multiple examples. Different group members may offer input in different ways. They will provide multiple and variable examples. Some may be more impactful than others. Individual therapy lacks that diversity of voices and examples which may make it less impactful and relevant.

Greater natural repetition of the material. The change process is not necessarily quick or simple. Some concepts and skills may need to be heard and explained repeatedly before they are understood and internalized. In a group such conversations naturally happen multiple times as different group members may have the same questions and struggles over time. With an individual therapist there is much less repetition of material so it is less likely to be retained and understood.

May be more receptive to input and confrontation from peers. Many people who are abusive and controlling, as well as people in general, may struggle with authority, resisting that singular perspective. In a group setting, hearing the same information from peers may carry more weight, especially if multiple people are saying the same thing. It may also be easier to receive confrontation from peers who are clearly going through their own struggles and not “above” the other.

Group synergy. There is a power to a shared vision and struggle that cannot be replicated in individual therapy. It can be more motivating and energizing in facilitating change.

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