What is group counseling?

Group counseling involves 4-8 students meeting with 1-2 trained counselor(s), typically once a week for 1.5 hours. Group members talk about a variety of issues including exploring relationships, improving self-esteem, and enhancing coping skills. Group members share information about themselves and provide feedback to others while group leaders facilitate productive communication in the group.

How do I know if group counseling is right for me?

The consultant-on-duty will help you to decide whether group is appropriate for you. If so, you will be referred to the group leader for a group screening. This screening will allow you to get to know the group leader, hear about the group, and decide whether the group will be a good match for you.

What issues are groups effective in treating?

Groups can be especially helpful for people who have concerns about their relationships. Some common concerns of group members include loneliness or isolation, shyness, dependence in relationships, superficial relationships and/or a lack of intimacy, frequent disagreements with others, discomfort in social situations, difficulty trusting others, being easily hurt or offended, needing a lot of reassurance from others, and fear of being left or abandoned. Group therapy is the treatment of choice for several other concerns as well. There is evidence for the effectiveness of group treatment for the following issues:

- Anxiety and Panic
- Chronic Pain and Illness
- Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Social Anxiety and other Interpersonal Problems
- Substance Abuse
- Traumatic Experiences

What skills can I gain from group?

- Learning to communicate more comfortably and effectively.
- Identifying and exploring inner feelings.
- Getting feedback from others.
- Learning to express your own wishes and to act on your own behalf.
- Being honest with self and others.
- Becoming more sensitive to the ways people communicate.
- Learning about closeness and intimacy.
- Experimenting with new ways of relating to others.

How does group work?

One of the major ways that group can be helpful to you is that it can replicate the ways you interact in your everyday life. The other group members and leaders can also give feedback about how they perceive you and offer alternative ways of behaving in order to help you interact more productively. Groups are able to provide support, offer alternatives, or gently confront group members in such a way that difficulties can be resolved and new behaviors learned. Often people in a group begin to feel less alone in dealing with their problems. It can be very encouraging to hear that others have worked through similar problems.

What would I actually do in group?

Letting the group know why you initially came to the UCS and sharing what you hope to gain from the group is a good place to start. If you need support, let the group know. If you think that you need to be challenged, let the group know that too. It is sometimes helpful to think of the group as a laboratory in which you can experiment with new ways of thinking, feeling, or relating to others. You will probably be most helped if you talk about your feelings. Unexpressed feelings are a major reason that people experience difficulties. Group leaders and other group members can help you to be more honest with yourself and others as you explore your feelings. How much you choose to talk about yourself is up to you. However, we have found that people who benefit most from group take responsibility for making the group work by sharing their concerns and speaking up when they have reactions to issues or to other individuals in the group.

How can I make the most of my group experience?

- Participate actively.
- Be honest and genuine.
- Express your goals and ask for help working on them.
- Monitor how much you can disclose to challenge yourself yet still feel safe.
- Express your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the group.
- Experiment with new behaviors.
- Give and receive feedback.
- Be patient with the group, express frustrations, and stick with it.
- Find ways to work on your issues in between group sessions.

Will I have enough time to work on my issues in a group?

Each group usually finds its own way of negotiating how group time is used. Typically a group will begin with a “check-in” so that group members have an opportunity to summarize how they’re doing and/or request speaking time during that session. We have found that group members who are able to request time as needed are most likely to benefit from group. Group members can also benefit from hearing other people work through and discuss their issues.

Aren’t people too afraid to really talk in group?

When you meet people for the first time, it is hard to know what to say and how much to trust them. Trust is a process that develops over time as group members take risks and share about themselves. It helps to remember that groups are usually small (4-8 people) and that other group members may be struggling with some of the same concerns as you are. Letting the group know you are uncomfortable can be a first step. What is asked is that you make a commitment to being in the group and that you be willing to open up as you feel comfortable.

How can I trust that what I say will be kept confidential?

Group members are asked to make a commitment to protect each other’s confidentiality by agreeing not to divulge information that would identify other members outside of group. While we at the UCS cannot provide you with an absolute guarantee of confidentiality in group, our experience shows that group members respect each other’s
privacy just as they respect their own. To help ensure the safety of cli-
ients and others, some issues do not remain confidential. If a group mem-
ber appears to be planning harm to oneself (suicide), harm to oth-
ers (homicide), or reports abusing children or dependent adults, the
counselor is legally bound to break confidentiality in order to provide
the individuals with the assistance they need.

What will be expected of me?

Each group may establish its own ground rules, but there are some gen-
eral guidelines that we have found to be important:

- Please let the group leaders know if you are going to miss a ses-
sion.
- If you decide that group is not appropriate for you, please discuss
your concerns with the group rather than simply not attending ses-
sions.
- It is your responsibility to talk about your reasons for being in the
group and to let the group members know what you expect from them.
- You are expected to respect the confidentiality of the group.

What is the role of the group leaders?

Group leaders have expertise in group counseling and in the specific
focus of the group (e.g., social anxiety). The role of the group leaders is
to facilitate productive, respectful communication within the group. To
do this, they will encourage group members to interact with one an-
other. Group leaders may point out common themes, give feedback to
individuals or the group as a whole, or offer support or challenge as
needed. They also try to provide enough structure so that the group
doesn’t get stuck, but enough freedom so the group accepts responsi-
bility for itself. The leaders respect the confidentiality of the group and
make every effort to create a safe environment.

Will other group members be like
me?

Within any group, there are bound to be similarities and differences
among people, both of which can be helpful in making progress on your
goals. If a group has a particular theme (e.g., eating disorders), mem-
ers will likely be similar in certain ways. Other groups may be more
heterogeneous. The UCS has a strong commitment to meeting the
needs of diverse people. In all individual, program, and group services,
we strive to create an environment where all people feel welcome. As a
staff we attempt to facilitate mutual respect and understanding among
people of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds, sex-
ual/affectional orientation, mental and physical disabilities, language,
religion/spiritual beliefs, as well as other types of diversity.

How are groups organized?

Some groups are organized around a certain theme such as family of
origin concerns, GLBT support, dissertation support, or general therapy
issues. Groups also decide whether they are open and allow members to
come and go as they please or whether they require a commitment to
group and close after a certain number of members is reached. Some
groups specify a certain length of meeting time (e.g., 6-12 weeks), and
others can be ongoing for semesters or years. Finally, group leaders
may provide planned activities and educational materials, or they may
allow the group to decide how to use its time each week.

What are some groups offered out-
side of the UCS?

- AA, Al-Anon, Health Iowa (substance abusers and significant oth-
ers)
- Domestic Violence Intervention Program (battered and formerly
  battered women)
- Iowa City Hospice, Inc. (grief support)
- Rape Victim Advocacy Program (rape and incest survivors)
- Toastmasters (public speaking and leadership skills)
- UIHC Counseling and Health Promotion (stress reduction and
  weight management)
- UIHC Psychiatry Clinic (emotional intensity disorder)
- United Campus Ministry (religious fellowship groups)
- Women’s Resource and Action Center (relationships, coming out,
  body image, trauma survivors)

Be sure to see the listing of groups being offered currently at the
UCS!

Individuals with disabilities are encouraged to attend all UI-sponsored
events. If you are a person with a disability who requires an accommo-
dation in order to participate, please contact the University Counseling
Service in advance at (319) 335-7294 to discuss your needs.

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The University of Iowa
3223 Westlawn
Iowa City IA 52242-1100  (319) 335-7294
http://www.uiowa.edu/ucs/