

# Using relationship connections in group programs to significantly change life experiences

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**groupwork**  
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What will make you happy? Wealth? Fame? Power? According to Bernard Salt, one of Australia's leading demographers, happiness involves the "ability to make the right choices – in cultivating strong relationships, having the ability to manage debt, building strong friendships and maintaining a balanced approach to exercise and weight control".

Groupwork is at an important set of crossroads. Over the next decade, the dominant forces that shape group work will either forge a future that is primarily structured, with the main purpose of group work being the efficient delivery of content – "why tell one person when you can instruct twenty?" However, if this is our foundation, group work will be threatened by the greater utilisation of technology. Today, we live in an information saturated culture. People can Google an answer to a question within 1.5 microseconds – why invest hours in going to a group?

Alternatively, the group experience is a tool that aids better decision making. It is built upon a strong foundation of group work history and social science. It is a set of relational connections that involves conscious and unconscious learning. It involves a body and relational processes that regulate the flow of energy, information, experience and action. It utilises combinations of thought, perception, memory, feeling, will, imagination, action and includes all unconscious cognitive processes. With this perspective, group work values its historical roots and also is very compatible with the latest developments in mindfulness and positive psychology.

It is because of these crossroads that group work needs to be imbedded within the traditional framework from which it emerged. As group leaders, we need to build our organisational group work programs on platforms that are greater than the organisation in which they sit, or the companions of group work who are employed within that context.

The endorsed program structure within IGL provides an external context to validate and support group work programs make a difference. Being at the IGL conference is also another connection that supports your group work practice beyond the immediate context of your workplace. If these structures are not used, group work will continue to have less strength and recognition than other practice approaches.

All groups (including work/task and psychoeducational groups) have the advantage of being (Jacobs, Harvil, Masson, 2008):

- Effective – A community welfare/health professional may work more effectively through using groups than by working individually with clients. Some target groups, like adolescents and men, can resist the perspective of a counsellor, but they might

consider and adopt the same viewpoint, if a peer in a group expressed this point of view.

- Greater variety of resources and viewpoints – Group participants often value the perspective of other participants as the most helpful thing they gained from the group. Groups can quickly generate a variety of different ideas and responses to particular problems.
- Experience of commonality - When participants share their own similar experiences in a group, the process of normalization occurs. This is where a person no longer views their problem in isolation and challenges the belief that they alone experience this problem. They start to see that other people have similar problems or concerns and this reduces their sense of isolation (Jacobs, Harvil, Masson, 2008).
- Sense of belonging – A common problem can be the sense of aloneness that people experience in society or even within their family. Groups allow people to experience a sense of belonging with the other participants.
- Skills practice – Participants can practice skills they wish to master or they can learn through watching others use these skills. The group experience can be a microcosm of life that provides a stage for a variety of issues to be explored and practiced.
- Feedback – Groups provide participants an opportunity to receive initial and ongoing feedback from other people. Everyone makes assumptions about how other people perceive and react towards them. The group environment allows people to test out these assumptions and receive accurate feedback about how others respond towards them.
- Continuous learning – Groups provide an opportunity for people to learn continuously. Some people prefer to learn by watching other people interact. Groups allow this to occur with everyone playing different roles that permit different ways of learning.
- Real-life approximation – Groups often replicate real life experiences as they generate a full range of feelings and human reactions. Groups are microcosms, reflections of society or mini-societies. “While interacting with others, people experience fear, anger, doubt, worry and jealousy” (Jacobs, Harvil, and Masson, 2008, p.5). The group experience allows them to find new responses to old/familiar life experiences.
- Contracts, purpose and commitments – A group is made up of a number of individuals who have their own goals and interests. They each develop by recognising what they want to gain from the group and by supporting others in pursuing their own achievements. Often incidental learning occurs where they gain something that they never initially recognised as important from the other participants.

One of the strongest ways that group work can capture the opportunities list above is to firstly, take most psychoeducational group work programs and halve the amount of content expected to be delivered per session. Claire Bunday, a cornerstone for group work's development in Australia, said many years ago, 'most psychoeducational group work programs are over structured'. With the time gained, develop a more effective 'check-in processes' at the start of each session.

**When you maximise the 'check-in process' what difference does it make?**

Many group sessions, use a 10 minute check-in process. This is not the process I am referring to. The 'check-in process' I am focusing on is best described as an 'open discussion' session. It can last half of the length of the group and involves the effective development of the group member's purpose for being in the group that maximises learning from other participants and responds to the challenges experienced in applying the learning materials.

The above process was used when I facilitated, along with other group leaders, a series of intensive parenting groups from February 2002 to June 2006 for UnitingCare Burnside. This data was collected, along with data from all other parenting programs by the Western Sydney Family Worker Program. This data was analysed by an external assessor using participant data collection forms and end of group evaluation forms involving 1379 participants who attended 117 groups. I took this analysed data and compared the groups that used a standard 10 minute check-in process to the groups that used a 75 minute open discussion group. All groups were focused on parenting, child protection issues.

There are limitations to this analysis as it only uses end of group evaluation results and involves only psychoeducational groups conducted within one agency and was not formally set up to assess the above differences. Also the open discussion-educational groups were solely conducted with fathers (130 men across 16 groups that were provided in two disadvantaged areas of Sydney). However it does provide initial results that explore the possible differences between psychoeducational and open discussion-educational groups.

**Accessibility of groups (Tung, 2007)**

		<b>Standard Psychoeducational groups</b>	<b>Open discussion-educational group</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Aboriginality	No. who are Aboriginal?	5%	13%	8%
Centrelink Payments	No. on Centrelink payment?	56%	68%	12%

In summary, the venues for open discussion-educational groups expected to be easier to access as they are based in the local areas where the men lived. The higher level of Aboriginal attendance is explained by open discussion-educational groups being based in the strong indigenous community of Mt Druitt.

### Attendance patterns (Tung, 2007)

		Standard Psychoeducational groups	Open discussion-educational group	Difference
Attendance at each sessions	Session 1	87%	79%	-8%
	Session 2	84%	75%	-9%
	Session 3	75%	82%	7%
	Session 4	71%	78%	7%
	Session 5	70%	75%	5%
	Session 6		82%	
	Session 7		72%	
	Session 8		75%	
	Session 9		73%	
	% attends 50% or more of gp.	81%	85%	4%
	% attends 80% or more of gp.	63%	77%	14%

In summary, attendance patterns are similar with psychoeducational groups having a length of 4-5 weeks. Open discussion-educational groups were for duration of 9 weeks using a 3 hour session with a ½ hour break in the middle. The commencement of open discussion-educational groups is always slower with many members only commencing by week 2 or 3. The overall attendance to the group (regardless of length) was slightly higher with 14% more people attending at least 80% of the program.

### Feedback outcomes 1 (Tung, 2007)

		Standard Psychoeducational groups	Open discussion-educational group	Difference
Evaluation Sheets	No complete Evaluate.	72%	82%	10%
Feedback Ratings	Two ideas grasped	83%	95%	12%
	Benefit from attending	89%	99%	10%
Feedback Statement	1. Worker respectful	83%	93%	10%
	2. Worker listened	80%	91%	11%
	3. Service worthwhile	83%	93%	10%
	4. Covered what I expected	80%	86%	6%
	5. I understood all material	79%	91%	12%

	6. I am better at communicating	70%	89%	19%
	7. I am more positive about family relationships	75%	88%	13%
	8. I feel more confident in my parenting	78%	89%	11%
	9. Learnt at least 2 new ways	86%	88%	2%

**Feedback outcomes 2 (Tung, 2007)**

		Standard Psychoeducational groups	Open discussion-educational group	Difference
Situation	My situation (worse)	2%	0%	-2%
	My situation (the same)	12%	12%	0%
	My situation (better)	70%	88%	18%

While many participants said that the length of the psychoeducational groups was too short, many more participants were pleased in the length of the open discussion-educational groups. Having the open-discussion group process consistently achieved more positive responses across all the data collected.

The indicators for change in interactive group work require that the experience of the group is inspiring, supportive; informative, confidence building, relevant to my family, enjoyable, practical and encouraging. All these characteristics featured more strongly in the feedback from the open discussion-educational groups.

**The force of change!**

In defensive driving and learning to ride a motor bike courses, the key principle is *'if you are about to crash, you do not look at the tree or telegraph pole you are likely to hit, but you look at clear space to the side'*. It is more likely that this will be where you end up.

Group work provides a similar direction for relationship and parenting education. The direction that we want people to experience is towards stronger and more enriching relationships and connections. This is the hallmark of strengths based practice. Look to where you want people to move towards and then explore the tensions and challenges that exist around this position.

Thomas French, in 1952, hypothesised that conflict exists in individuals as they grow through life (King, 2007). As individuals, we have *desires, hopes and dreams* that he called the *disturbing motive*. However, as life's disappointments occur, we learn not all our needs are met, a *fear or anxiety* arises that he called the *reactive fear*. As life is lived, individuals respond to these forces through their actions and decision making (these are called *solutions*). If you over focus on your fears and anxiety and treat them as a truth that governs, who you are, then you are more likely to live a more restrictive life. In 1985, Whitaker &

Lieberman applied this model to group work and called it the *Group Focal Conflict Model*. These themes are common in many contexts. In advertising, it is widely acknowledged in the media that the two ways to change behaviour is to focus on people's hopes and fears.

*A Native American Elder was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "a fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.*

*The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."*

*"This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too", he added. The grandchildren thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"*

*The old Cherokee simply replied... "The one you feed."*

*Ambrose Redmoon would have agreed when he said 'Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgement that there is something more important than fear.'*

There are two types of solutions. They are either **Restrictive Solutions** or **Enabling Solutions**. **Restrictive Solutions** occur when a person is over focused on their fears and anxieties so they ignore any information they can learn from their hopes and dreams because they over focus on reducing their fears and anxieties.

**Enabling Solutions** occur when a person acts to achieve their hope, dream or wish (motivating force) **and** they learn from their fear or anxiety. Hugh Mackay (2010), in a book called 'What makes us tick? - Ten desires that drive us' outlines the core desires that stood out in his research throughout Australia. These desires are very similar to the concept of the disturbing motives in people lives, and include the desire:

1. to be taken seriously, which can be both in positive and negative ways as to be noticed and heard is to be valued.
2. to find my place in the world, as without it we feel restless.
3. to have something to believe in as it helps us make sense of things.
4. to connect with each other, ourselves and nature in order to find out whom we are.
5. to be useful.
6. to belong. People have a need to connect and belong to groups of other people, which he refers to as "herds" of 5 to 8 people – herds are within "tribes" which are larger e.g. a religion.
7. for more.
8. for control. We often look for it where it is impossible to have – realising this can be beneficial!
9. for something to happen. This makes life interesting – humans thrive on uncertainty as it keeps you young, as does interaction with other people. Activity adds to the much-needed security of our emotional life.
10. for love and to be loved. Love gives individuals self-respect, increases the capacity for empathy with others and enhances personal serenity.

**Table 1. Phases of group development, emotional responses and group resolutions**

<b>PHASE</b>	<b>BOUNDARY OR RELATIONSHIP ISSUE</b>	<b>PRIMARY EMOTION</b>	<b>HOPES/DREAMS</b>	<b>FEARS</b>	<b>SOLUTIONS/ MODES OF RESOLUTION</b>
<b>Group Formation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forming the psychological group</li> <li>Being in or out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anxiety</li> <li>Discomfort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be in</li> <li>To be autonomous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be out</li> <li>To be overwhelmed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staying out selectively</li> <li>Partial inclusion</li> <li>Total immersion</li> </ul>
<b>Influence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generating negative emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anger</li> <li>Frustration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be influential</li> <li>To be dependent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To hurt</li> <li>To be hurt</li> <li>To accept influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remaining quiet</li> <li>Competing</li> <li>Carving out own role (turf)</li> </ul>
<b>Intimacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Giving and receiving positive feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tenderness</li> <li>Love</li> <li>Affection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be close</li> <li>To receive affection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be vulnerable</li> <li>To be unworthy of affection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staying away</li> <li>Stepping close</li> <li>Slowly disclosing more fully</li> </ul>
<b>Termination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Completion of group and eliminating the group boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grief</li> <li>Sadness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be harmonious</li> <li>To be complete</li> <li>To be free from group pressures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To be incomplete</li> <li>To be splintered and fragmented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fantasizing</li> <li>Slowing down</li> <li>Working through</li> </ul>

Gillette & McCollom (1990)

All individual behaviour in a group is linked or associated with the behaviours (solutions) used by the other group members. Usually the group solutions are not in the conscious awareness of the group members, and the solutions are spontaneous responses that are not necessarily pre-planned. Table 1 outlines the common emotional experiences and the difference behaviours (solutions) people have at different stages of the group.

### **The enabling solutions we seek**

Enabling solutions are the actions we take that move towards the achievement of our hopes and dreams in our life while learning from the fears/ anxiety. The Dala Lama recommends these solutions to respond to life's challenges:

1. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk
2. When you lose, don't lose the lesson
3. Follow the three Rs:
  - Respect for self
  - Respect for others
  - Responsibility for all our actions
4. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck
5. Don't let a little dispute injure a great relationship
6. When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it
7. Spend some time alone every day
8. Open arms to change, but don't let go of your values
9. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer

Yalom (2005), the most significant group work researcher in the last 40 years, has found that groups develop a variety of therapeutic factors for change. These therapeutic factors are a guide to living enabling solutions in your life. Mindfulness has developed practical exercises that maximise these solutions below:

1. Instillation of hope (via faith in the treatment mode and feedback from others).  
HOPE stands for *Helping Other Possibilities to Emerge*.
2. Universality/normalisation (other people share the same problem)
3. Altruism (receiving help by giving it to others)
4. Interpersonal learning (learning from others and the development of social skills.  
Views the group as a social microcosm of the group members' wider social system)
5. Group cohesiveness (experiencing a sense of belonging, 'we-ness')

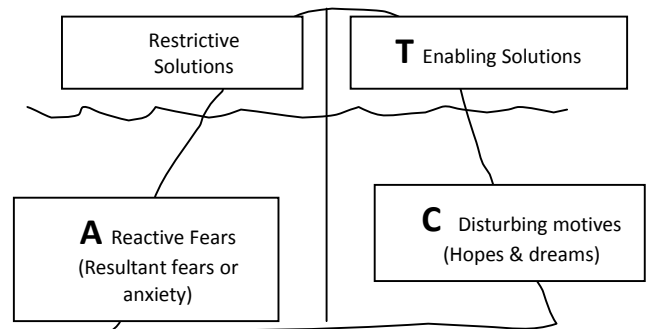
"Yalom (2005) emphasised the critical importance of processing in fostering the effectiveness of the group experience. He refers to two tiers that work together to make the group effective. The first tier involves the experiencing of group events. However this experiencing by itself is not enough to facilitate change. The second tier, or processing, provides a framework for retaining, integrating and generalising the experiences of the first tier. An in-depth examination of what has just occurred is incorporated at the second tier and encompasses the dynamics of processing. Together, these two tiers create a self-reflective loop in which the group is constantly examining and learning from its own experience" (Stockton, Morran, Nitza, 2000, P344).

## The Focal Conflict Model and ACT

Mindfulness has a strong expression summarised by the ACT Acronym. ACT increases psychological flexibility in participants by using the following core processes – contacting the present moment, defusion, acceptance, self-as-context, values and committed action (Harris, 2009).

ACT stands for:

- A** Accept your thoughts and feelings, and be present
- C** Choose a valued direction
- T** Take action



Using the above Iceberg for the Focal Conflict Model, the steps of ACT have strong connections:

**A** Group work involves the recognition of challenges and normalised fears/ anxieties by accepting their existence but not treating them as truth. This involves the acceptance and learning from the reactive fears.

**C** Group leaders then identified a greater vision of possibilities and values that are larger and stronger than the one individual. This involves the significance and power of the disturbing motivations in our lives. They are strong enough to get us to maintaining the homeostasis of not changing.

**T** Enabling solutions are the direction that the group members move. Solutions are supported that enable participants to take action that changes their life and relationships. Over the course of a group the leader learns more about the forces below the water by observing the solutions that the group chooses.

Restrictive solutions are the mindless, fused, avoidant and ineffective actions that are chosen in life. ACT uses the concept of 'workability' as the concept that describes the shift from restrictive to enabling solutions (Harris, 2009). Harris states that workability is our best friend. We can look at our life, our current behaviour and its long-term consequences and ask 'does this help me to live the life I really want. "There are many ways to communicate the concept of mindful, valued living. We can talk of vitality, a life worth living, a life that grabs you, a better life, being the person you want to be, doing what's important/meaningful, doing what matters to you, doing what you care about, enhancing or enriching life, thriving, flourishing and so on" (Harris, 2009, p.226).

Psychoeducational groups are best when they:

1. Use the idea of motivational forces (balancing the expression of hopes/dreams and fears and anxiety) to improve promotion of the program and talk to these motivations and experiences in the pre-group interviews.
2. Review the selected program to ensure it is not over structured and too full with content. This may involve reducing the content in each session by half and increasing the length of the group.

3. Allow time in the first session for the participants to express a significant purpose for being part of the group. Record these and regularly review their achievement. The articulation of a secondary purpose by the group members is critical determinant for what they will gain from the program. The primary purpose of the group is the advertised purpose of the program.
4. Start each session with an open discussion group that reviews some of the participant's purposes, how their implementation of the learning is going and enable feedback to occur between the group members and the group leader. This 'extended check-in process' can take half the group session!
5. Integrate every week, mindfulness exercises into the learning and experience of being in the group, where group members notice more about their experience of life, accept the fullness of feelings, value the significance of who they are and what are the 'disturbing motivations' that drive them and take steps to move towards them.
6. Link the weekly educational group content to the open-group discussion.

### **Conclusion**

There is an important role for open discussion-educational group work, especially when participants have limited educational experience. This is supported by an incidental comparison of evaluation data. Group work today is often over structured and too full of content. This has a long-term detrimental impact on people's motivation to attend groups, as they associate it with poor schooling experiences.

The blend of these two styles of group work allow for structured learning to occur, accompanied by enough opportunity to focus on the immediate issues happening in a participant's life. Through addressing these issues in tandem, the group is likely to have a greater relevance to the participants.

Open discussion-educational groups enable participants to move from learning retrospectively to 'learning in the moment'. This involves moving from a 'waking sleep' to being 'fully awake' where participants are more aware of the role of noticing their and other people's current experiences and intervening through reflection in this process. Group programs can easily use relationship connections in to significantly change life experiences.

As the facilitator notices the secondary purposes that participants have when entering the group, they can ensure that the group centres on these issues. As the issues will be displayed in the actions and behaviours of the participants in the group, the facilitator will have the opportunity to link this learning to the participant's wider life experience and to other people's life experience in the group. The participant will have an opportunity to act out an adequate solution to the difficult issue and investigate how this can be integrated into their wider life.

'Learning in the moment' is difficult but easy to achieve. It is intense but also playful and light. Mastering the use of these paradoxes allows a facilitator to move easily between 'retrospective learning' and 'learning in the moment'. As a participant, the experience of this learning process is demanding but delightful, and they would never wish to miss the opportunity to be involved.

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