

Group therapy: Not what you see on TV

The [National Institute of Mental Health](#) says in 2021, around one in five U.S. adults suffered from a mental illness. Among those, around half received a mental health service.

One-on-one sessions with a counselor are one form of care that's valuable, even critical, to many. But group therapy is an additional tool that can offer benefits that individual therapy cannot, says Jill Schreiber, PhD, an OSF HealthCare psychotherapist.

"You can learn how to talk with a therapist, but learning how to talk to a peer doesn't happen in [individual] sessions. You don't see other people who are dealing with similar issues," Dr. Schreiber says. "So it's really helpful in a group to realize you're not the only one who's struggling."

That's very useful for children and adolescents, she says. Those kids often see others having fun on social media, compare that to their own gloomy life and it adds to the sadness.

Group therapy participants can also share coping skills with others in the circle, leading to a sense of altruism, Dr. Schreiber adds.

How it works

Dr. Schreiber explains that group therapy cohorts are typically grouped by age. In other words, 12 year olds wouldn't be paired with 21 year olds because those age groups have different issues and needs. Some groups are ongoing and can take members anytime. But some groups try not to have people – especially kids – join a group in the middle of a run of sessions so they don't interrupt rapport building.

Adult group sessions can have a specific purpose, like helping people who are grieving, those who have neurological issues like stroke or dementia or people struggling with alcohol use.

After the pre-session chit chat, the facilitator typically goes over rules, which are designed to help people feel safe. What happens in the group stays in the group. You shouldn't tell others how to live their life, but you can talk about what's worked for you. On the flip side, you don't have to be talkative if you don't want to.

"Often there's a check-in with each person to see how their week has been, how they're doing or what they were working on since last week," Dr. Schreiber says.

"There's always an educational component at some point where we're teaching a skill," like deep breathing, managing negative thoughts or role-playing social situations.

And hopefully – after about an hour – participants leave feeling better and want to continue the help.

Is it right for me?

Dr. Schreiber says in some areas, you can call your local health care provider (a hospital or clinic, for example) and self-refer for group therapy. In other instances, you'll need to start with your primary care provider. Either way, each patient should have a thorough talk with a professional to see if group therapy is the best option.

"Some clients are dealing with so much social anxiety that it takes a lot of individual work before they can even go to a group," Dr. Schreiber says.

But when they get over the hump, the success stories are fulfilling.

“People can share their stories. Then others respond, and they realize ‘Oh, this thing I thought was so terrible, people are compassionate about. They’re not judging me,’” Dr. Schreiber says. “And then they feel less judgmental of themselves.”

Learn about mental and behavioral health resources on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).