

Psychotherapy Guidebook

**ADLERIAN
GROUP
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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Adlerian Group Psychotherapy

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Adlerian Group Psychotherapy

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DEFINITION

Adlerian Group Psychotherapy endeavors to bring about a change of life-style (the pattern in a person's perceptions and behavior) by making the patient feel understood and accepted as he becomes aware of his need to relate to others socially. An increase in social feelings encourages the patient to try out new behavior, which receives social approval and reinforcement from the group.

HISTORY

Alfred Adler's concept of the social nature of man favors the use of group treatment. This was exemplified by the Child Guidance Clinics he established in Vienna. In these clinics, a social worker or teacher described a pupil's difficulties in front of an audience of educators, psychologists, and parents. Finally, the child, the presenting professionals, and the audience joined in a discussion concerned with the child's problems and possible remedies. This approach evolved from Adler's convictions that a person's problems can be best understood and treated in a social context, and that a

democratic group in a spirit of cooperation provides useful therapeutic leverage.

Adler recommended groups not only for the education of parents and teachers but also as a treatment method for the re-education of delinquents (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1964). His followers showed constant interest in group techniques; Walter Spiel (1950), for example, wrote a comprehensive paper on group psychotherapy. Beginning in 1928, Rudolf Dreikurs, first in Vienna and then in Chicago, practiced and wrote on the subject of group psychotherapy as have his coworkers and followers at the Alfred Adler Institute of Chicago. At the Alfred Adler Clinic and Institute in New York, under the direction of Alexandra Adler, Marvin Nelson and the late Danica Deutsch, group techniques have been taught and practiced for over twenty years. Recognizing the crucial importance of a therapeutic milieu, the Alfred Adler Clinic has for many years successfully rehabilitated psychiatric patients in its social club. Ernst Papanek, a student of Adler in Vienna, taught the technique necessary to create and maintain a therapeutic milieu in an institution for juvenile delinquents. The most notable example is the treatment approach he developed at the Wiltwyck School for Boys (1959).

TECHNIQUE

Group psychotherapy recognizes social interest, which is also a basic

proposition of Individual Psychology. In 1929, Adler wrote: “It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social feeling. ... The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others and is overcoming common instead of private feelings of inferiority.”

Neurotic and psychotic patients strive for security and superiority at the expense of others. To a greater or lesser degree, depending on the severity of the disturbance, they have, in the construction of their life goals, alienated themselves from their fellow man. Thus, they experience undue hardship in meeting life’s tasks of work, friendship, and intimacy. In the psychotherapy group, members develop social interest and become aware of how their attitudes of fear, distrust, jealousy, oversensibility for self, and undersensibility for others do not produce the desired result — respect, acceptance, and friendship.

This therapeutic group is based on equality of all members, with the therapist as a model demonstrating respect and understanding. In this setting group members, frequently for the first time, observe social interest in an authority figure. Either through the insight obtained by the interpretations of the therapist and group members or sometimes without clear awareness of what is going on, they discover that feeling at home in the group gives them a new security. Feeling secure, they dare to relate to others with mutual

empathy, and find satisfaction in productive cooperation.

To create a cooperative group out of isolated, discouraged, frequently ineffectual strangers is the task of the therapist and one in which his behavior and personality have the strongest impact. Fortunately, he is aided by the innate capacity of each human being for social interest and whatever degree of social interest already exists, no matter how distorted. In social participation, rudimentary and misdirected social feelings slowly evolve or suddenly burst forth into attitudes of mutual helpfulness, tolerance of differences, awareness of similarities through empathy, and ability for purposeful communication. All of this leads to understanding and shared feelings. It is within this context that the distortions and prejudices incorporated in the life-style during childhood are then examined.

The Adlerian therapist assumes that each individual in the group has a life-style, a cognitive framework that enables him to understand the world and select behavior that will advance him toward his goals of safety, security, self-esteem, and success, and that will protect him from insecurity, danger, and frustration. All of this is more or less erroneous, depending on whether the individual is more neurotic or more healthy. Understanding of his life-style is often facilitated by examining the individual's earliest recollections. Adlerians believe that those significant experiences the individual chooses to remember reflect his opinion of the world and himself. What he chooses to

remember also reflects the path of behavior he has selected for himself to cope with a complicated world. The distortions, that is, mistakes in his lifestyle, are interpreted to the individual and he is encouraged within the social context of the group to correct these mistakes by substituting private meanings and behavior with socially useful ones.

Increase in security and self-esteem results not only from corrections in lifestyle, but also from the experience of being useful to the members of the human community of which the therapeutic group is a microcosm.

APPLICATIONS

With a few exceptions, all types of patients profit from group psychotherapy. For many, it is best to add group psychotherapy to individual psychotherapy, for then individual psychotherapy becomes more supportive and group psychotherapy more interpretive. Group psychotherapy is inadvisable for very depressed patients and for psychopaths. Depressed patients are overly sensitive to attack by other group members and the danger of suicide is always present. Psychopaths often exploit people and may damage the other members of the group. For borderline cases, personality disorders, and neurotics, the group is a valuable tool for support, self-understanding, and new modes of behavior.