

Group Work: Benefits and Challenges

The following information sheet provides a brief overview about incorporating group work and is general in nature. Group work may not be appropriate or effective for all program types.

What is group work?

Group work is a form of intervention which places individuals with a similar set of circumstances into a group, which is then facilitated by a trained practitioner. This type of intervention is used to help individuals work through and cope with complex issues through group experiences. Group work can be carried out in a diverse range of settings for a wide variety of purposes, using different theoretical and conceptual tools and frameworks to inform the process and the outcome.

| Benefits | Challenges |
|--|---|
| Unique opportunity for peer learning – participation in groups helps individuals make sense of and reflect upon their own circumstances. | Complex group dynamics – requires skilful facilitation |
| Time efficient & cost effective – group work allows for fewer resources and a greater service capacity. | To date, limited evidence of effectiveness of group work format – requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation to capture outcomes |
| Social skill development and peer support – provides the opportunity for participants to practice social skills with their peers as well as build social support networks. | Formulaic delivery of content means decreased capacity to deal with client-specific issues – this is counteracted by supplementary individual support |

Why use group work?

Group work offers advantages that are not present in individual interventions. For example, groups allow for an environment in which individuals can learn vicariously from one another, while also developing social skills and interpersonal learning.¹ When like individuals are grouped together, individuals can normalise their experience and be comforted by the notion that others in the group share their difficulties, while providing a safe and constructive space to explore these difficulties with the group.² If one of a program's objectives is to reduce shame and stigma for the family or to increase social connections, group work might be a viable way to achieve this.

Group work also serves as a timely and cost-effective means of intervention due to conducting a replicable therapeutic program to various individuals at once.³ When a program's theory includes delivering psychoeducative content in order to bring about individual change, it can save time for practitioners to roll out this information to multiple people at the same time.

¹ Shechtman 2017.

² Gidron 2013.

³ Biggs et al. 2020.

What are the challenges and limitations of group work?

Programs delivering a 'curriculum' of content are delivered in a replicable, formulaic manner that does not account for individual circumstances. Compared to individual interventions, group interventions cannot tailor their approaches to be as effective at an individual level. In one particular study of young people with 'aggressive' behaviours, it was found that the group work intervention wasn't as beneficial as individual interventions due to complex group dynamics, which actually had an adverse effect for some individuals.⁴ To minimise the risk of adverse effects, having experienced facilitators who can carefully observe and intervene is crucial in order to achieve an optimal group dynamic.

Group work may not be suitable for every young person. Staff need to consider whether groups are appropriate for what their program is trying to achieve. When it comes to responding to young people's complex issues, the evidence of group work being an effective method of intervention is limited.⁵ This does not necessarily mean group work is ineffective; it suggests that so far there is not enough data to prove effectiveness.

Implications

Service providers looking to incorporate group work within their programs must consider both the benefits and limitations. Program teams should take steps to establish the program's **theory of change** and only incorporate group work if it is helpful as a means to achieve the program's objectives. Ongoing **monitoring and evaluation** will help to track progress of participants and ensure that the group is continuing to have a positive impact.

References

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⁴ Shechtman 2017

⁵ O'Beney, Salm, & Lavender 2019.