

Working with the stages of group development*

Groups, like human beings, grow and develop according to a predictable pattern. William Schutz⁵ described these phases of development, linking them to three basic interpersonal needs common to all individuals and groups: inclusion, control, and openness. By keeping in mind the interpersonal needs of the participants and of the group as a whole, you can help create a powerful environment for learning and personal change.

Inclusion

During the first stage of group development, participants are concerned with issues of inclusion, in other words, their sense of belonging to the group and their sense of membership. They need to feel interesting and important to other members of the group and accepted by them. Some participants also want to know that everyone is committed to the success of the group. The group as a whole needs conditions that promote feelings of safety and comfort: clear and realistic expectations, a sense of group identity and explicit structure and boundaries.

You will commonly see some of the following behaviours and feelings in members of the group:

- feeling unsure, nervous, or shy
- being *overly* talkative or polite, watchful, or confused
- feeling hopeful, overwhelmed, excited, or hesitant

*The following section was contributed by Dr. Rosemary Reilly, Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University.

You can meet participants' needs in this stage by:

- modelling "I" messages
- encouraging each individual to express his or her opinions and feelings, making sure each voice is heard
- highlighting commonalities and affirming differences
- emphasizing that this is a *shared* learning experience
- introducing activities that promote connection and reinforce member-to-member interactions
- clearly defining the group's focus
- proposing activities that spark curiosity about the topic
- outlining ground rules that promote safety, respect and acceptance
- being encouraging and engaging

Usually this phase of development will last for the first two to three sessions. If your group is open-ended, be aware that a new member will cause the group to revisit this stage.

Control

In the next phase, called "control," participants are concerned with issues of empowerment, authority, competence and responsibility. They need to feel that they have some influence with others, are competent (or can become more competent) parents, and are free to choose what is best for them and their families. Some participants also want to know that each person will conform to the norms of the group and will behave as a responsible member. As a whole, the group needs to evolve into a mutually influencing team.

You will commonly see some of the following behaviours and feelings:

- acting overly resistant or compliant
- dominating the discussion
- feeling threatened, forced, tense, apathetic, competitive or frustrated
- challenging other members or the facilitator
- engaging in power struggles

You can meet participants' needs in this stage by:

- promoting the building of skills
- bolstering a participant's self-confidence and sense of competency
- encouraging more self-disclosure in order to build a strong supportive network

- promoting the realization of the full potential of each member
- supporting members' positive leadership behaviour
- encouraging appropriate risk-taking for learning
- acting as a resource person
- being supportive, respecting differences and highlighting the underlying values in discussions
- encouraging the constructive expression of feelings and conflicts
- harnessing and re-channelling uncomfortable emotional energy in the service of the group goal
- fostering norms that support constructive conflict resolution

Usually this phase of development will last for four or five sessions and is perhaps one of the rockiest phases. However, with solid facilitation and leadership, this phase can be energetic and exciting to experience.

Openness

In the final phase, called "openness," participants are concerned with issues of honesty, member like-ability and closeness; they have a high commitment to the change process. They need to feel that they have authentically connected with other members, without feeling overwhelmed by them. Some participants also want to know that each one of them will provide honest and constructive feedback, offered within an ethic of care. In this stage, members are able to integrate their learnings into their self-concept. The group as a whole feels a shared sense of purpose, operates fairly autonomously and focusses on the goal. Collaboration is the norm.

You will commonly see some of the following behaviours and feelings:

- feeling open, warm, enthusiastic and satisfied with the group experience
- placing trust in group members so that it is easier to take risks
- unleashing of member creativity and spontaneity

You can meet participants' needs in this stage by:

- introducing challenging activities that encourage participants' potential to emerge
- being less directive in leadership and allowing the group to function more independently
- encouraging learning from other members
- structuring experiences to show that participants have mastered skills

- being open to emergent issues from the group
- encouraging diversity and constructive feedback

Usually this phase of development will last for two or three sessions, or until the group's termination.

Termination

Though not technically a stage of development within Schutz's model, termination is an important aspect of the group's development. The ending of the group must be acknowledged so that members may disengage in a healthy way and move on to new experiences. Participants need to make meaning of the group experience, achieve closure and undertake a realistic appraisal of the program.

You will commonly see some of the following behaviours and feelings:

- regret
- desire to continue
- emotional withdrawal
- early disengagement (individuals emotionally withdraw from the group before the end and may not come to the final meeting)

You can meet participants' needs and enhance the overall group experience in this stage by:

- giving participants who want to stay in touch the time to organize themselves
- spending time planning for continuing support in the community
- conducting a review of the learning experiences that had the greatest impact
- providing an opportunity for participants to evaluate the group process and program effectiveness
- giving participants a chance to express feelings of loss and sadness at the group's ending

Planning topics

The stages of group development influence both your choice of activities and interventions and the order in which you plan to introduce topics. You can plan to present each topic at the point in the development of the group when participants are most able to address it. For instance, an emotional topic like dealing with anger is best introduced when group members have built up mutual trust and are able to work together. The final meeting, when some participants are withdrawing emotionally from the group, is not a

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