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Group Therapy to Build Strong Relationships for Same-Sex Couples

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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The Bible, in Mark 12:31 (New International Version), suggests one of the greatest commandments is to love one another. Some people expend a great effort in looking for the person with whom they can share their lives and love more than anyone else. Once they find that person, they begin building a life together, sharing their hopes, dreams, and plans. For heterosexual couples, they receive advice from friends, parents, books, the media, and films; they learn by modeling the relational skills they see from successful couples around them. However, when same-sex couples establish a life together, the limited availability of information and the absence of real role models hinder the development of the necessary skills to develop a satisfying, happy, and loving relationship as noted by Safren and Rogers (2001). Spitalnick and McNair (2005) found that the lack of role models and ability to seek advice will likely cause same-sex couples to develop normative relationship dynamics which may or may not be healthy.

The need for psychoeducational group therapy for same-sex couples exists to teach couples how to develop successful and healthy relationships by using PAIRS (Practical Applications of Intimate Relationship Skills) to introduce tools and techniques for healthy communication. The authors justify the group in that same-sex couples lack role models or social norms desirable for learning necessary positive relational skills essential to navigate establishing a healthy and loving relationship. Iasenza (2005) found that same-sex couples contain more egalitarian qualities and do not need to overcome traditional heterosexual gender roles to develop supporting relationships. After an analysis of how same-sex couples could benefit from a group teaching relational skills, how the group will be formed and structured, the selection of participants, the rules of the group, and a functional explanation, the authors hope to garner support for the proposed group.

Rationale of the Group

Recent research done by Burckell and Goldfried (2006) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals utilize mental health services at rates higher than the general population. They noted that lesbians and gay men indicated seeing an average of 4.32 therapists over their lives in contrast to heterosexual respondents who reported an

average of 3.08 therapists. Spitalnick and McNair (2005) noted same-sex couples struggle with developing long-term fulfilling relationships, cohabitating, and monogamy. The absence of role models, as stated by Spitalnick and McNair, stifles the development of loving long term relationships and, as observed by Safren and Rogers (2001), the deficiency of resources to teach relational skills supports the need to provide services for LGB individuals.

Theoretical Orientation and Intervention

The proposed group is rooted in the theory of Murray Bowen. The curriculum encourages communication and acceptance for couples to become differentiated and overcome emotional reactivity (PAIRS, 2007). A major component of Bowenian theory includes differentiation, the degree to which one is emotionally and intellectually separate from a system or relationship. Another component includes fusion, or the inability to maintain a divergent opinion in the presence of another, demonstrated by strong compliance (Brown & Spencer, 2007).

The group also draws parallels to cognitive-behavioral theory and therapy (PAIRS, 2007). In the implications of the process, the challenging of dysfunctional cognitive and behavioral patterns implicit in these approaches provide use for same-sex clients, who often must over come a substantial amount of societal induced homophobia (Fassinger, 2000). The tools and techniques deal with external factors that induce anxiety as well as internal stressors. The group leader assigns homework with the use of tools taught in class, which draw from the cognitive-behavioral perspective as well.

As stated previously, this will be a psychoeducational group that uses a cognitive-behavioral theoretical orientation. Using the PAIRS curriculum, the facilitators will give the members of the group specific interventions and techniques to assist them in effective coping with the stressors of a relationship. Some of these techniques include: The Daily Temperature Reading (DTR), Discovering the Relationship Roadmap (Bonding, Connecting), Shared Meaning and Empathetic Listening, Talking Tips, Fair Fight for Change, Emptying the Emotional Jug, Caring Behaviors, Hidden Expectations, Emotional Allergies and the Emotional Infinity Loop, and Powergram. As previously stated, these techniques directly relate with the main goals of the PAIRS curriculum.

Structure and Goals of the Group

Ideally, the group would be composed of six couples and two facilitators who meet once a week for 3 hours. The lifespan of the group would consist of five sessions, to include a pre-session to introduce the group for one hour and begin establishing group norms and fully introduce the purpose of the group. The last session includes a post-session to facilitate termination, re-take the evaluation scales, provide resources for support, and develop strategies for utilizing the techniques outside of the group process. The last session may also include a pot luck dinner to commemorate the termination of group. This is a practice of different workshops and allows the members a chance to

collect phone numbers, spend time with one another, and end the group with positive regard.

The Center, a LGBT community center, provides space to teach workshops for the couples. The Center provides a safe environment and confidentiality for all members. Couples pay a flat rate of $250 for the workshop. This includes all sessions and materials.

The duration of each session is approximately 3 hours. A break exists near the middle of the session in order to give participants a chance to recharge. The members may experience the normal stages of group development; for example, the initial stage is a time when the couples get to know the other members and learn to trust the facilitators of the group. As members begin to confide in their partners and the group, the members will move into the transition stage with the establishment of trust and cohesion. The working stage will consist of couples beginning to discover important feelings and thoughts toward their partner and sharing becomes a normal curative factor. It will end with the termination phase, which consists of anxiety and fear, as well as joy and appreciation for the group (Corey & Corey, 2006).

Each session will begin with the DTR in which couples discuss appreciations, new information, puzzles, concerns with request for change, and wishes for the future (PAIRS, 2007). This serves as a unique opening to the group and allows the members to share their experiences outside of the group. Facilitators encourage group members to practice the DTR throughout the week when it is convenient for both parties. After the DTR, facilitators introduce and encourage practice of a specific tool and technique in the session. As the group closes, facilitators encourage participants to practice the tools outside of the group. The goals of the group are as follows: promoting effective communication, strengthening connecting and confiding, effective decision-making and conflict resolution, and strengthening trust and commitment (PAIRS, 2007). Goals are assessed throughout the duration of sessions and evaluated consistently.

After the pre-session, facilitators teach the Relationship Roadmap (Bonding, Connecting) in the first session. During session two and three, facilitators focus on Shared Meaning and Empathetic Listening, since they require thorough comprehension. In session four, facilitators review previously learned tools and teach Talking Tips. In sessions five and six, members learn Fair Fight for Change. During session seven, members learn the concept Emptying the Emotional Jug. In session eight, members learn Caring Behaviors. During session nine, facilitators review Hidden Expectations and the components of this concept. In session ten, members learn the concepts of Emotional Allergies and the Emotional Infinity Loop. In session eleven, facilitators teach the final tool of the Powergram. Finally, session twelve and thirteen serve to review all material learned throughout the course. In the last session, number fourteen, members create a dish for the pot luck and spend time with one another.

Screening and Selection

The proposed group will not have a stringent selection process, as it is meant for all couples that would like to foster healthier happier same-sex relationships regardless of their race, religious beliefs or economic backgrounds. There will however be a screening-

out process for couples with domestic violence. This will be done with both partners separately and confidentially. We will use a standardized form provided by Harbor House of Orlando and if domestic violence exists, we will provide the individual a card with the telephone number for Harbor House so they have an available option for dealing with the occurring domestic violence. Couples that do not pass the domestic violence screening will be "screened out" and ineligible for the group. The supporting rationale for the support of this group focuses on the ability to create vulnerability in the partnership which requires safety to accomplish. According to Atkinson (2005), if domestic violence occurs in the relationship, at least one of the partners will feel unsafe sharing.

Ground Rules

PAIRS curriculum specifically developed ground rules for facilitators when running a group. These ground rules help keep the group feeling safe and comfortable sharing. The rules, referred to as "The Basics" include: (a) we must respect each other's privacy; anything discussed in this group is confidential; confidential means not sharing or discussing any information learned about others in the group with anyone other than your partner; (b) sharing with others in the group is voluntary; when doing activities you can choose to say and express whatever feelings you have, you can also choose to remain silent; your silence will be respected; (c) speak only for yourself, not your partner; one way to remember this is to make "I" statements rather than "we" statements; (d) when sharing about your couples relationship, check it out with your partner first; checking it out with your partner before sharing something personal about your relationship demonstrates respect for your partner, just in case they feel uncomfortable about having the information shared in the group; (e) a goal of the group is to feel safe, to learn, and to have fun; this group experience is unique and is designed so that each individual experiences with their partner a sense of community that will be shared with others in the group; through this experience of community relationships strengthen; and (f) be respectful and considerate of others; please turn off cell phones during the group; at times of need it may be necessary that you be reached via your cell phone, please, at these times, put the cell phone on vibrate and kindly take the call outside the room (PAIRS, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Important to remember when facilitating a group are the ethical considerations that the group requires to run both smoothly and effectively. Along with ground rules, ethical considerations are guidelines the group adheres to ensuring both the safety of its members and allowing the facilitators to evaluate the overall effectiveness. The two ways of accomplishing those goals are informed consent and specific evaluation procedures, both discussed in more detail below.

Informed Consent Procedure

During the initial workshop, an informed consent is provided for each participant/group member which includes the following: possible risks of the workshops/group meetings, the ability for each person to withdraw/quit at any time, the right to complete confidentiality, an explanation of the leader/facilitators role, and the leader/facilitators responsibilities. Each participant signs and dates the document which will establish responsibility of the participant and their decision to participate in the workshops. Each participant that signs the informed consent receives a copy and the originals are kept in locked storage cabinets. Informed consents protect the safety of each member involved and in the situation where a person refuses to sign the informed consent, that person may not participate in the group/workshop because the facilitator cannot guarantee their safety or other member's confidentiality if a person does not sign the document.

Evaluation Process

The group effectiveness is based on the outcomes of two measurement scales. The first scale, the Relationship Pleasure Scale (Adams, 1992), which asks the participants to rate their relationship in five critical areas including sexuality/sensuality (i.e., touch, passion, lust), intellectuality (i.e., conversation, sharing ideas, interests), emotionality (i.e., ease of confiding and sharing feelings), friendship (i.e., shared interests, having fun together), and what has been built together (i.e., children, friends, family, property) on a scale of 0-4 with 0 being very dissatisfied and 4 very satisfied. The scale is scored by adding the scores of the 5 scales up and then multiplying the total by 5 allowing the highest possible score to be 100. The breakdowns of the final scores are as follows: 0-20 starved, 21-40 enduring, 41-60 muddling through, 61-80 satisfied, and 81-100 thrilled (Adams, 1992).

The second scale, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1989) a 32-item self-report measure that assesses the quality of the relationship between mates. The instrument asks mates to indicate the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement in 15 areas (e.g., family finances, household tasks). They are asked to indicate how often they engage in behavior in seven areas (e.g., confiding in mate, quarreling with mate), how often they do things together, how recently were they too tired for sex, the happiness of the relationship, and how they feel about the future of the relationship. The DAS is used in many research studies with a wide variety of couples (e.g., married, cohabiting, homosexual, and divorced). The total scores being calculated on a scale of 0-80 with 0 being the lowest satisfaction and 80 being the highest (Spanier, 1989).

The facilitators of the group will administer both of these scales during the first session/group meeting. Scores are calculated and then kept in locked storage cabinets. During the fourteenth and final session each member is asked to re-take both evaluation scales and their results are compared with their initial results. We hope to see significant improvement on both scales with scores rising from 10-20 points on each scale.

Conclusion

There exists a lack of substantial empirical research indicating the number or percentage of gay Americans due to privacy and acceptance issues (Iasenza, 2005). However, generally estimated, the number lies between 5% and 10% of the total population. According to the 2000 United States census, the greater Orlando area has 1,645,000 residents. Using the conservative estimate of gays in the greater Orlando area would produce a group of 82,250 gay men and lesbians. According to the same census, 2,508 unmarried male-male partnered households exist in the area. This number, in reality, may be several times larger and substantially underreported for privacy and safety issues. This group proposal supports the need for psychoeducational support to this special population.

Same-sex couples are sufficiently capable of finding partners and establishing relationships, however, the issue of sustaining those relationships long term arises. From the research uncovered and practical experience, the authors suggest the lack of available information and more importantly the nearly negligible quality role models for same-sex couples underscores the necessity in providing assistance for developing relational skills. For these reasons, the authors recommend a psychoeducational group designed to teach the same-sex couples how to develop successful and healthy relationships by using PAIRS. The proposal suggests using LGB affirming facilitators, establishing structure and goals for the group, utilizing techniques based on the PAIRS curriculum, screening for qualified participants, obtaining informed consent and maintaining ethical standards for the group. Based on the information presented, the authors hope that this group be given consideration as a viable and functional group worthy of additional support and exploration.

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