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Open Sesame: An Investigation of the Effects of a Group Support System on a Men's Counseling Group.

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Introduction

A therapeutic group may take many forms including counseling groups, self-help groups, personal-growth groups and awareness groups [2]. Common to these groups is a focus on increasing individual self-awareness and awareness of others, helping participants to better understand the changes the participants want to make in their lives, and providing participants with new skills and resources to effect these desired changes. Group members are encouraged to discuss issues that are personally relevant and to share their inner thoughts regarding these issues. Self-disclosure and feedback by group members are part of the therapeutic process and successful counseling groups consist of members who are able to communicate their problems and who are open to personal growth [9].

Our primary research objective was to understand how a Group Support System [GSS; 1, 3, 4] could affect the communication processes in counseling groups. Based on previous research, we anticipated that a GSS providing anonymity might help individuals engage in meaningful discussion and reduce the fear of self-disclosure often exhibited by counseling group participants [5]. However, electronic discussion is less rich than verbal discussion [8] and given the highly emotional content often found in counseling groups [5], we were unsure whether electronic discussion could hinder successful communication.

We chose to study a six-member therapeutic men's counseling group that met once a week for two hours over a ten week period under the direction of two group facilitators. A doctoral candidate in MIS was the GSS facilitator, but was not considered part of the group and did not add input to the discussions except as discussed below. The group followed a semi-structured group counseling process suggested by [6]. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 52 years of age. The occupations of the participants included traditionally male occupations (e.g., farmer, scientist) and non-traditional occupations (e.g. nurse).

The GSS, GroupSystemsV [8], was used for four sessions: weeks two, four, six, and nine. Other weekly sessions were used by the group to process GSS session material and other immediate concerns. During the first GSS session, the GSS facilitator discussed the technology with the participants and then answered questions. Participants then brainstormed electronically using the Electronic Brainstorming tool on the issues that they thought were important, such as: intimacy with one's partner; societal expectations of being a man; intimacy with friends; distant relationship with one or both parents; fears related to marriage; and lack of spirituality.

The remaining GSS sessions used the GroupSystemsV Topic Commenter tool. This tool allowed all members to comment simultaneously under one or many different topics. The facilitators used the issues generated from the first GSS meeting to establish twelve broad topic areas. For example, one topic card was social expectations, which included the social expectations of being a husband, a man, a father, etc. The topic cards were displayed on a public screen and the members decided which topic they wanted to

discuss. The facilitators instructed the members to verbally comment on any idea, solution, or confrontation that concerned them. At the end of this session a printout of the comments was given to the members so they could give more thought to the comments generated. Subsequent meetings used the Topic Commenter tool to discuss other issues relevant to group members.

Two critical incidents highlight the impact that individuals can have on the use of a GSS and the impact the effective use of a GSS can have on individuals. During the third GSS session, group members became the subject of individual topic cards which allowed them to provide feedback to each other. Some members chose to leave messages anonymously while others signed their name because they did not want to remain anonymous anymore. The members specifically stated that they wanted to let other members know what they were feeling. Anonymity became a hindrance to be "worked-around," unlike the situation in the earlier sessions where anonymity facilitated self-disclosure.

However, the question of anonymity did not hinder the effectiveness of the technology. The ability to focus on feedback-to-self is evidenced by the following incident. While reading "his" card, one of the members became visibly shaken. He was crying and stopped typing. At this time one of the facilitators asked all the members to stop typing so the group could attend to this person. This person stated that one of the electronic comments hit him at the heart of one of his issues: "Sometimes I worry that you have bought into the cultural expectation of what a man should be. Get married young, house, dog, kids, etc. Is this what you really want or is society dictating to you and you are buying. When you're 40, will you look back and say, this isn't my beautiful wife, this is not by beautiful car, how did I get here? Unsigned."

In the verbal discussion that ensued the member stated that he "is engaged and is having problems talking to his fiancée." He stated that he is afraid to talk to her about his fears about the wedding (i.e., will it work out?). He said that he thought that she would not listen to him or even worse, think less of him because of his fears. The group started to ask him questions, give him advice, and confront him. He stated that everyone's advice and comments were helpful but that he could not absorb it all. It was coming too fast. The GSS facilitator suggested a topic card be set up, titled, "Things that Member Z might consider or talk about." The members spent the remainder of the session typing their thoughts and comments to Member Z. At the end of the session, a copy of the comments was given to Member Z. At the next session he stated that he used some of the group's advice and that he opened himself up to his fiancée. He said that they had a long talk that helped their relationship. The member stated that this group event was very powerful for him.

Another example involved a confrontation about a member's lack of participation. One group member left the following message on another member's card. "It makes me feel more comfortable when I feel the group is in balance. I mean each of us is honestly contributing, and saying what needs to be said. I know you have issues to be talked about. I can tell you it has been a great experience for me. Sort of like making compost for the garden, you turn the nasty s[tuff] over, get some air in it, then it rots and turns into something good. If you do not participate it is your loss. Member X (name given)." The following week, the confronted member wanted to start the session and he stated "That particular comment sparked me to open up to the group and pushed me to share my issues with the group."

Overall, it appears that by providing a means to structure the early stages of the group's development, the GSS helped overcome the obstacles that the facilitators had previously experienced with traditional men's groups. Anonymity, parallelism and a group memory improved the therapeutic effects of the counseling intervention. Self-disclosure and the giving of corrective feedback were enhanced. The ability of group members to "take the meeting home" was found to be a very powerful experience for all members. It is interesting to note that the traditional sessions used the printouts from the GSS sessions to focus discussions and to highlight areas for further work with the technology. The facilitators and the members found that GSS helped foster cohesion and build trusting relationships. The Electronic Brainstorming tool facilitated group members to feel cohesive and to build trusting relationships while the Topic Commenter tool helped the members to feel that their needs were being met (many people commenting on your issues). The use of names instead of topics provided a powerful experience for many of the group members. One member also felt that "Later in the sessions, the system hindered or made less personal the group experience."

The group expressed an overall satisfaction with the technology. The members stated that the greatest asset of GSS was the hard copy at the end of a session. They stated that it gave them an artifact of the session. This allowed them to think about their own, as well as other member's, issues over the course of the week. The members stated that they found themselves going back to the statements numerous times over the course of the week. Other positive comments included "The ability to comment in 12 areas in a short amount of time was helpful."; "The overall feeling was positive and light."; and "A great number of statements, questions, concerns, and feelings were generated." The facilitators noted, "Bonds were established more quickly in relation to both of the facilitator's prior experience."

As with any research study, there are limitations to this study. We studied only one men's group for a ten-week period. Nonetheless, several interesting ideas spring from this research. Many organizations are downsizing to remain competitive. Downsizing creates complex problems for organizations including the issue of how to help individuals who remain after the downsizing (survivors) cope with numerous changes and emotional issues [7]. Group counseling interventions, appropriately supported by GSS may help resolve many issues faced by survivors. Also, by facilitating self-disclosure, GSS provides a way for down-sized organizations to engage their members in the healing process and simultaneously receive honest feedback about the current organizational climate. This research indicates that a GSS can facilitate a rich communication between individuals. The GSS helped individual group members' emotional healing and growth. Additional research is needed to better understand how GSS impact counseling groups and how GSS might help organizations heal and grow as well.

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