

Group Therapy: Susan Chernin & John Gross

We are a therapy group founded on psychodynamic principles—that much of what governs our actions and thinking is unconscious and that much of it got there ‘relationally’, i.e. in interaction with the significant people in our lives. Group members have a rare opportunity to practice and experiment with others in sharing what they think and in expressing what they feel.

There is no specific ‘diagnostic’ or issue focus. Participants are diverse, no more than a dozen in number, aged 30’s to 70’s, some with traumatic life histories, most with degrees of social anxiety and relationship challenges and/or longings.

Our approach is to help people see how they affect others and how they themselves are affected by others and to discover therein what is theirs and what belongs to the other. We are psychoanalytically-informed, thus we try to foster in the group a sense of curiosity about repeated thoughts and actions that nonetheless remain out of awareness. We endeavour to help members recognize and value their strengths but also to see the way in which problems can be traced to overused strengths, unfounded beliefs and unquestioned assumptions.

As therapists we maintain a ‘safe-enough’ space while observing and commenting on what we see. With its psychoanalytic orientation our group does challenge people to see their own participation in what is getting in the way. It is important that members have some basic insight and capacity for self-reflection about the affect they experience and that they may arouse in others. In this regard it helps that the members have had previous and ongoing therapy experience; previous group experience is a plus but is not required. Members from the previous year or years form a critical mass in our groups that, in addition to the facilitation of the leaders, helps to regulate group process.

We allow conflict to emerge for what it might reveal but are attentive to the importance of risk toleration and the need for safety. In conflict situations we try to orient attention to the emotions and memories that are activated by the content.

People tend to be supportive of one another—a tone that is set by our own handling of difficult, sometimes shame-inducing material—but ours is not a support group. We hope that participants will come away with some sense that it is good for others when they take care of themselves. We encourage them to do so by getting in touch with their own feelings and respecting their own boundaries as well as the perceived limitations of others.

Because bonding and reliability are critical in a group therapy we ask participants to commit for the duration of the group year commencing in September and ending in mid-June. We meet 1.5 hours weekly and 3 times during the year for extended sessions.

All members must be in their own individual psychotherapy during the time they are in the group in order that there be a place to take any issues that may arise and that cannot be resolved or addressed in the group session. The group experience inevitably generates new material that can be usefully explored in the member’s individual therapy sessions.

We invite those interested to meet with us for a free 45-60 minute consultation to assess fitness for group work and to learn more about the group process.