



BUILDING BRAVE SPACES

An experiential
approach
to fostering
community
in group
counselling

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The rationale for facilitators to take an intentional and experiential approach to building community within group counselling settings is well supported.

In 2013, Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens presented the idea of “brave spaces” with the intention of supporting positive, effective, and respectful dialogue around complex and challenging issues related to diversity and social justice.¹ Farther back, in 1986, William Glasser offered empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of teaching and learning using an experiential approach.² Additionally, leaders in the group counselling field have identified cohesion as being central to a group’s ability to endure and process conflict in a way that leads to growth and learning for participants.^{3,4}

Here are some of the experiential activities and strategies I use during the initial stages of group counselling to foster community and build “brave spaces.”

INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING AND BEING

As a non-Indigenous person, part of my personal journey with reconciliation involves actively seeking to embed the ways of knowing and being of the First Peoples into both my clinical and teaching practices. For example, I always arrange the group in a circle. According to Jalissa Schmidt of Acho Dene Koe First Nations, learning and sharing in a circle is central to the practices of the First Peoples.⁵ Further, the circle helps to promote safety and equality, as this structure is non-hierarchical in nature and allows all group members to be visible to one another.

INTERSECTIONAL EXPLORATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

The next step is to have everyone introduce themselves with the intention of broadening the scope of diversity beyond a First Peoples perspective and towards a more intersectional approach. I begin by inviting participants to share their names, pronouns, and cultural background or heritage. This activity is designed to highlight awareness and insight around how the diverse cultural backgrounds of the group members might influence the overall group experience. This practice offers not only a means for members to introduce themselves, but it also invites deeper reflection and important conversation related to positionality.

This approach also provides a foundation for the next part of the activity, which seeks to create awareness and foster understanding around the implicit biases we each might hold given our unique socio-cultural backgrounds. For this activity, I provide each participant with a small translucent square lens that is either blue, yellow, or red. Participants are asked to hold their lens up to one eye, look through it, and communicate what they see. Those holding the blue square see blue, those holding the red square see red, and those holding the yellow square see yellow.

These initial observations are used to highlight how folks of different socio-cultural backgrounds see the world.

Next, participants are invited to consider — and try to

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understand — the experience of someone with a different socio-cultural lens from theirs. At first, individuals are quick to just call out the colour of the lens that another group member is holding. This is when I remind them that they are not free of their own socio-cultural lens. To truly experience this in the way it happens in the real world, they would also be looking through their own coloured lens. For example, a person looking through a blue lens and looking at someone with a red lens would not see red but rather purple. Similarly, someone looking through a yellow lens and trying to understand the experience of someone with a blue lens would see green and not blue.

The obvious conclusion from this activity is that we can never fully understand another person’s experience without



asking them about it directly. The explicit statement of this intention provides the initial foundation for building community by highlighting the importance of interpersonal communication amongst group members.

REFLECTION AND SHARING OF INDIVIDUAL DIVERSITY

Next, group members are invited to participate in an “inner circle” activity designed to highlight individual factors that might influence their experience in the group setting. Each group member is given a recipe card and a marker. Group members are then invited to take a moment to reflect on and visualize their “best selves.”

Following this, members are instructed to write down three distinct characteristics that might be used to describe themselves when they are in that “best selves” state. For example, when I complete this exercise, being fully present, patient, and actively listening are characteristics I feel are consistently part of my best self. As

facilitator, I typically share this example with participants to model expected behaviours.

Next, participants are asked to flip their recipe cards over and write down three

things they would appreciate receiving from other members to help them to be their best selves throughout the group counselling process.

Finally, group members are invited to share what they have written down with other members then place their card on the floor inside the circle. Once again, I begin by sharing what I have written on both sides of my card and place my card in the circle to model the practice.

As this is the first session, I ask permission from the group to proceed in order around the circle then invite the group member beside me to share next. Group members are always given the option to pass if they do not feel like sharing. As each member shares their card and places it on the floor inside the circle, the recipe cards come together to form a smaller inner circle.

CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Lastly, group members are invited to consider and discuss the purpose and impact of this activity within their group and, in general, within a group counselling setting. Moving forward with an increased understanding of the unique differences and needs of group members, participants are invited to work collaboratively to create group agreements. These agreements reflect the collective expectations and intentions for how members will show up to the group, as well as how any conflicts or challenges will be approached within the group setting.

Group members are invited to end the first session with a check out, where they share something that was helpful for them, something they are still unsure about, and something they are looking forward to throughout our time together in group. This closing is

designed to reinforce the intentions of the session; that is, to begin to develop and foster a community where everyone feels comfortable sharing and being who they are and to recognize the diverse needs and experiences of different group members so everyone might benefit from the collective experience.

As everyone in our profession knows, fostering community in group counselling settings is central to the effectiveness and success of the group counselling process. In closing, I hope this article has provided you with some insights and ideas that might be helpful to you in your practice. ■

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