

REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE ON EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY

REVISIÓN DE LA EVIDENCIA SOBRE LA EFECTIVIDAD DE LA PSICOTERAPIA DE GRUPO

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Extended Summary

During the last thirty years, numerous investigations have demonstrated the growing benefits of group psychotherapy in different areas of life to face the challenges they pose (Fuhriman & Burlingame, 1994; Lorentzen, 2000; McRoberts et al., 1998; Tschuschke et al., 1999).

Thanks to therapy groups, people find a forum of support from their peers and an environment that facilitates the recovery of their psychological strength. Throughout the therapeutic process in the group, people develop a support network thanks to the interaction with each of its members, ceasing to feel isolated due to their psychological state and achieving a greater sense of normality. In people who are in certain medical conditions, group psychotherapy can contribute to a general improvement of their psychological and social functioning. Also, research has shown that, in some cases and with adequate psychotherapy, the survival rates of patients are significantly increased.

Furthermore, research has shown that various forms of group psychotherapy are equally beneficial with positive results being found in very different varieties of both mild and acute psychological disorders. Furthermore, various studies have shown the equivalence of the efficacy of group psychotherapy and individual psychotherapy (Leichsenring, 2009; McRoberts et al., 1998) as well as the efficacy

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of psychodynamic psychotherapy (Connolly Gibbons et al., 2008; Shedler, 2010). Shedler summarizes the research evidence stating that empirical results demonstrate the efficacy of psychodynamic psychotherapy, its effect being as great as that of other therapeutic approaches recognized as evidence-based. Additionally, the available evidence indicates that patients who have been treated with psychodynamic psychotherapy maintain their therapeutic gains over time and seem to have the ability to improve once they have finished their treatment. On the other hand, Shedler points out that other therapies, which are not considered psychodynamic, may be effective because more skilled psychotherapists use techniques and interventions that have always been essential elements of psychodynamic theory and practice. Therefore, it is concluded that the idea that psychodynamic psychotherapy lacks empirical support does not correspond to the available scientific evidence (Shedler, 2010).

Research has shown its remarkable effectiveness in six areas where psychotherapy is especially needed: personality disorders, depression and grief, eating disorders, youth violence, cancer or AIDS patients, and addictions.

Personality Disorders

In-depth group psychotherapy sessions produce significantly positive results for patients with personality disorders. As patients improve their interpersonal skills, their control of moods and their self-esteem, their levels of inadequate functioning in social and family situations tend to decrease together with the severity of their alterations, which leads to a general improvement of the satisfaction with your life. Group psychotherapy, in some types of personality disorder, has contributed to reducing states of depression and suicidal tendencies. Such improvement has been shown in different types of groups and different situations, providing patients with the opportunity to work with a large number of colleagues and professionals. In such circumstances, patients have shown improvement exclusively from group therapy, without simultaneous individual treatment. Furthermore, once patients are involved in therapy they may be more likely to experience a reduction in the specific symptoms associated with their disorder (Burlingame et al., 1991; Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004, 2005, 2009). Group therapy has also been shown to be effective for patients with borderline personality disorder (Munroe-Blum, & Marziali, 1995), with post-traumatic stress (Levi et al., 2017; Schwartze et al., 2019) and with social phobia disorders (Knijnik et al., 2004).

Depression and Grief

Group psychotherapy is commonly used successfully to treat people with depression (Murphy, 1997; Piper, 2006; Piper et al., 2009; Steuer et al., 1984; Yalom, 1995) including the psychodynamic approach of group psychotherapy (Driessen et al., 2010).

Likewise, the efficacy of group psychodynamic psychotherapy for the treatment of geriatric depression (Steuer et. Al., 1984) and therapeutic work in general with

older patients (Lynch et al., 2012; Payne & Marcus, 2008).

Reviews of the evidence on the efficacy of group psychotherapy have shown that group intervention is both effective in the short and long term and that results are sustained over time after successful group therapy (Vandervoort & Fuhriman, 1991).

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are also commonly treated in groups. In the case of bulimia, some participants in group therapy have been able to reduce the amount of excessive eating and vomiting provoked with even greater benefits than with other previous interventions and intensive individual therapy. In general terms, the improvement is associated with long-term treatments (McKisak & Waller, 1997; O'Neil, 2007) and improves eating behaviors while reducing anxiety and depression (Burlingame et al., 2003, 2004).

Youth Violence

Through the implementation of variations of group therapy in classes, students are taught how to avoid aggressive behavior and its consequences. In research in which young people who had previously been involved in acts of violence participated in group therapy, a significant reduction in their aggressiveness and a decrease in the number of subsequent arrests was observed, along with an improvement in their academic performance. Through early intervention and active participation in the dialogue about violence, many students can learn how to curb violent tendencies and interact in more appropriate ways with other people (Aronson & Schames, 1999).

Cancer or AIDS Patients

Many cancer patients have experienced the positive results that group psychotherapy achieves for themselves. Group therapy helps patients in the early stages of the disease cope with their illness in multiple ways. Decreasing your emotional distress increases your social activity, your and the ability to cope with problems, and also improves your self-esteem. Patients in advanced stages of the disease not only achieve a greater sense of life goals but also feel pain and fatigue as less problematic. When people who do not recognize or deny their disease participate in therapy, their deterioration decreases while the improvement of those who are aware of their situation increases.

AIDS/HIV patients who participate in group therapy have shown lower levels of stress and exhaustion as well as marked improvements in their physical condition and a greater sense of effectiveness, efficiency and endurance. In adolescents, group therapy increases their self-esteem while reducing behavior problems, discomfort, and stressful situations with their families. Patients who participated in cognitive-behavioral stress management groups decreased their depression, anxiety, and visits to doctors (Leszcz & Goodwin, 1998; Sherman et al., 1995, 2004; Simonton & Sherman, 2000; Spiegel et al., 1989).

Addictions

Over the past twenty years, a general consensus has emerged that group treatment provides addicted individuals with a wealth of opportunities to learn about themselves and change their addiction.

The most obvious advantages of group psychotherapy, in the case of addictions, are:

- Mutual identification and acceptance between group members who face similar problems while realizing that they are not isolated and their problem. It is unique in that all the members of the group are facing their compulsive use of alcohol or drugs.
- Positive support from peers in the group regarding abstinence or addiction reduction.
- The accentuation of the establishment of roles that serve as models of abstinence or reduction of the use of alcohol and drugs because the addict has the opportunity to better understand their own attitudes about the use of drugs and alcohol, as well as their defenses against quitting or reducing addiction by confronting other people's similar defenses and attitudes.
- Group affiliation, group cohesion, and social support.
- The possibility of learning to identify and communicate one's own feelings in a more direct way.
- The structuring of the group, the discipline and the establishment of limits in the group.
- The possibility of learning through experience.
- The exchange of factual information on recovery from addiction and the misuse of alcohol and drugs, and the infusion of hope and encouragement for the future, as well as the search for shared goals and ideas.

The confirmation of group psychotherapy as an essential element of addiction treatment by research is unequivocal and overwhelming, such that it is rare to find a treatment program that does not use group therapy. Both expert clinical practice guidelines and the best research evidence indicate that it is vital that group therapy be a basic ingredient in addiction treatments (Brook, 2008; Brook & Spitz, 2002; Flores, 2007; Roth, 2004; Sandahl et al., 1998; Washton 2004; Weiss et al., 2004; White, 2008).

Obtaining evidence about the efficacy of group psychodynamic psychotherapy (sometimes called Group Analysis –Group Analysis–) or Analytical Psychotherapy –Analytic Psychotherapy– or Dynamic Psychotherapy –Dynamic Psychotherapy–) is especially difficult. However, there are recent global reviews of the research carried out in recent decades on the efficacy of psychodynamic psychotherapy and on the factors that influence it (Blackmore et al., 2009, 2012; Rosendahl et al., 2021).

On the other hand, all group psychotherapy approaches are more effective than no treatment (Blay et al., 2002; Piper et al., 2001; Lanza et al., 2002; Lau et al., 2007; Tasca et al., 2006).

Age, sex, self-concept, analytical and self-analytical capacity of patients, as well as the quality of the pattern of interpersonal relationships throughout life are determining factors for the success of group psychotherapy. Patients with a high quality of interpersonal relationship pattern throughout life seem to benefit more from 'interpretive' group psychotherapies, while patients with low quality of interpersonal relationships throughout life appear to benefit more from group psychotherapies. "non-interpretive" or supportive psychotherapies.

The meta-analysis meta-analyzes carried out on the basis of a very relevant number of investigations carried out during the last 30 years very significantly support the use of group psychotherapy, the results of which are comparable to those of individual psychotherapy. Additionally, the efficacy of groups also depends on the ability to provide feedback to patients, the degree of group cohesion and the quality of the therapeutic alliance between patients and psychotherapists (Rosendahl et al., 2021).