The Therapeutic Toolbox

103 Group Activities and Treatment Ideas & Practical Strategies

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PESI®

Eau Claire, Wisconsin
2006
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was inspired by the clients and workshop participants throughout the years who have let me into their lives and given me the opportunity to learn so much. I am particularly indebted to one of my very first jobs, the “Why Not” program in Worcester, MA, as this program sparked me to pursue my passion in promoting “hands-on” mental wellness education. Later, The Center for Humanistic Change in Bath, PA, furthered my knowledge and expertise in this area. Both settings laid the foundation and offered the creative tools and mindset that have served as a base and inspiration for my work. Thanks to Michael Olson from PESI who has spurred my interest in writing this therapeutic guide. Special thanks above all to my husband, Don, and three wonderful sons, Justin, Brian, and Adam, who have been the best supports, teachers, and guides of all!
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INTRODUCTION

This book is chock full of therapeutic ideas to use with all types of groups and is a compilation of the many tips and strategies I have gleaned in over 30 years of counseling experience. These activities and T.I.P.S. can be used in therapy groups for adolescents and adults, as well as in workplace wellness seminars and other group settings. It has been my longstanding belief that a therapist often needs to be prepared with tools to assume the role of life skills educator and trainer. This book offers ideas on how to incorporate life skills training into your work with groups. The focus on life skills is crucial for helping clients develop “hands-on” tools to progress successfully through therapy. Life skills training is not often a part of formal conventional education, and this workbook tries to help people learn coping strategies sorely lacking in formal education. This workbook helps the mental health professional assist group members in taking a proactive approach to the therapeutic process. Through experiential activities, exercises, self-help worksheets, and educational handouts, the individual can experience change—not just talk about it. For even the most treatment resistant client, these T.I.P.S. for your therapeutic toolbox can be life altering. These active T.I.P.S., tools, and techniques are especially helpful for those with characterological issues, where traditional “talking” treatment alone often proves inadequate.

As Confucius said, “Teach me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand.”

This book is designed to help those in the mental health field, including anyone promoting “mental fitness / mental wellness,” whether it be in the outpatient or inpatient setting, private office, or business world.

Within the T.I.P.S. approach, Therapeutic Ideas and Practical Strategies are broken down further into working TIPs for each activity, handout, or strategy. The TIP acronym contained within the various handouts and activities stands for Theory, Implementation, and Processing.

Any material in this book may be copied for your individual or group use with your own clients. If, however, there is interest in using any of these T.I.P.S. in any type of publication, it is required that permission be granted by the publisher.
QUOTES ON FLEXIBLE THINKING

“The bend in the road is not the end of the road unless you refuse to take the turn.”
—Unknown

* * *

“To the man who only has a hammer, everything he encounters begins to look like a nail.”
—Abraham H. Maslow

* * *

“Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it.”
—Lao Tzu

* * *

“There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.”
—Aldous Huxley

* * *

“All our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions.”
—Leonardo Da Vinci
Flexible Thinking

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THEORY: Introductions set a tone for the ongoing group process. First impressions often have long-lasting effects! Creative, fun ways to help members bond and disclose in a non-threatening manner tend to start a group off on the right foot. This creative method of introducing oneself to others encourages members to participate right off the bat.

T.I.P. #8 Name Association Activity

T.I.P. #9 Learning and Remembering Names

T.I.P. #10 Yet Another “Name Game” Activity

T.I.P. #8 IMPLEMENTATION: Begin the group session by explaining that you would like group members to
1. introduce themselves with first name only,
2. use the first letter of their first name to describe something about themselves, and
3. use the first letter of their last name to name something they like. For example, in the case of someone with the initials G.I., a response could be, “My name is Gina, and I am Gracious, and I like Ice Cream.” Once everyone has had a turn, use T.I.P. #9 to ensure that all names are remembered.

T.I.P. #9 IMPLEMENTATION: With so many names to remember, it is often difficult to keep names straight when embarking on a new group experience. This activity offers a very effective way to help group members remember names. Ask for a volunteer to try to go around and say as many names as possible, while encouraging group members to chime in to correct or help out. After the first volunteer, ask for another volunteer, repeating this exercise until all names are stated correctly at least a couple of times.

T.I.P. #10 IMPLEMENTATION: This is another variation of a “name game.” Using a large, soft ball, such as a beach ball, start the “ball rolling” by saying your name and the first thing that comes to mind to describe something about yourself. By asking for the “first thing,” participants are not likely to feel too put on the spot, as there is no expectation to have something prepared. Suggested topics participants can choose could be a like or dislike, thought, interest, occupation, or how they feel at the moment. Have all members take a turn at having the ball thrown to them. Once it goes back for a second round, say your name again and this time respond to something someone else had said. This 2nd version makes for an entertaining and interactive way to introduce oneself while listening to others.
THEORY: This is a fun and potentially intriguing activity for a newly formed group, and a way to get to know one another while getting a chance to play detective!

IMPLEMENTATION: In this activity, have all group members write down two things about themselves that are true and one or two “untruths.” Items can include something that seems plausible or something outlandish—that is up to each individual. Then go around and have each person say the two truths and one or two untruths, and ask group members to guess which are true and which are not. After a minute or so of guessing, the “real” answers are shared. Have them explain their deductive reasoning. Make sure all participants get a turn.

PROCESSING: Ask group members what they found out about each person from the “true” statements and what they found about each person by the “untruths.” This is a good activity for self-disclosure and for developing group cohesiveness.

I have been skydiving,
I’ve been to Alaska,
and I am a lawyer.
THEORY: This is a light-hearted, informal exercise in which members are given an opportunity to share about themselves with the group. This need not only be for introduction purposes. This activity also can be used in an ongoing group to give all members a chance to express.

IMPLEMENTATION: Using a beach ball or other large, soft ball, start the “ball rolling” by having members take turns throwing the ball to one another. Upon receiving the ball, each member makes a self-disclosure (such as something he/she did that week, something on his/her mind, etc.), and then throws the ball to someone else. After everyone gets a turn, the leader could have another topic for the next round, for instance, naming a favorite song and why; the next round could be another question such as, “What is the best (or worst) thing that happened to you this week?” Questions can be tailored to the type of group and what issues you would like addressed in the group.

PROCESSING: This informal activity encourages even the quietest member of the group to participate and can be a springboard for addressing issues relating to the leader’s questions. The playfulness symbolized by the ball can underlie very serious disclosure in a relatively non-threatening manner.
THEORY: This short activity gives creative license to each individual. This light-hearted exercise might tap some creative juices he/she did not even know he/she possessed!

IMPLEMENTATION: Although this can be done in individual treatment, particularly for a low functioning individual who has little confidence in creativity, a group format is ideal. Supply all group members with paper and a writing utensil. Ask them to write their initials and then make a picture from those initials. Allow about five to ten minutes. Caution them that this can be a very simple picture. At first, you might be met by groans and resistance, but many people surprise themselves by developing some whimsical, creative pictures. Then have group members share with one another; this often leads to laughter and lightness!

PROCESSING: This teaches participants that they might have more creative reserve than they give themselves credit for, and encourages them to tap their creativity and flexibility. Remind them that keeping an open mind allows for creative self-expression.
T.I.P. #15
ACTIVITY: HUMAN SCAVENGER HUNT

THEORY: This activity is a fun, interactive way of either getting to know people in a new group or establishing more connection in an already established group. The object of this activity is to find what participants have in common with one another. In a very short period of time, participants get to interact with all of the group members and find one of the universal truths of groups—that they are not alone!

T.I.P. #15 Handout: Human Scavenger Hunt

IMPLEMENTATION: On the next page is the “Human Scavenger Hunt” handout containing items for group members. For the first couple of minutes, have members circle or fill in whatever items they choose to. Then instruct them to go around and find others with the same answers, having others initial answers that they have in common. If it is an already established group, you can make the questions more complex, perhaps pertaining to the themes of the group’s needs.

PROCESSING: This activity is a great icebreaker and teambuilding activity, as well as a great way to connect with others more personally. This activity establishes a sense of group universality and camaraderie. Participants get to find out a lot of information about one another in a very short period of time. Expect a lot of laughter and smiles while participants do this exercise.
HUMAN SCAVENGER HUNT

INSTRUCTIONS: Fill in below any items that you wish to; then find others who have the same answers. Have them initial next to an item you have in common.

Find groups members who share your answers for the following answers:

1. Favorite color ______________________________________________________________
2. Marital status _______________________________________________________________
4. Furthest place to which you have traveled _______________________________________
5. Favorite type of exercise _____________________________________________________
6. Favorite movie ______________________________________________________________
7. Favorite book ______________________________________________________________
8. Favorite food ______________________________________________________________
9. If you won the lottery, what’s the first thing you would buy? _________________________
10. Car you drive ______________________________________________________________
11. One word to describe yourself ______________________________________________
12. Favorite type of nature scene _______________________________________________
13. Favorite winter sport ______________________________________________________
14. Favorite fair weather sport _________________________________________________
15. Favorite type of restaurant _________________________________________________
16. Number of siblings _________________________________________________________
17. Favorite type of music ______________________________________________________
18. Favorite day of the week ____________________________________________________
19. What’s the first thing you do when you get home? ________________________________
20. What did you eat for breakfast this morning? ____________________________________
21. What color is the front door of your house? ____________________________________
22. Last big purchase __________________________________________________________
24. Favorite hobby _____________________________________________________________
THEORY: It is ideal to begin a group experience with everyone involved. It sets an interactive tone for the group, and this fun activity is a great way for people to connect personally with others in a short period of time. This activity promotes group cohesiveness while offering the opportunity for non-threatening self-disclosure.

IMPLEMENTATION: In this exercise there needs to be at least ten people in the group, and it can accommodate up to about 40 if you are conducting a skills training seminar or an in-service teambuilding training. Have group members count off by twos. Have all the number ones form a circle, and then face outward. Have all the number twos face any of the number ones. Ask the group a question from the sample questions below, or make up your own, specific to the nature of the group. The larger the group, the more limited the time should be for each question. After about two to three minutes, ask for everyone’s attention and ask the outside circle to move one person to the right. Ask another question. Repeat this as much as time allows or approximately 15 minutes. This gives people a chance to meet as many people as possible. You might need a microphone when you go on to the next question, since it might be difficult to carry your voice over the talking.

The Circle Game Sample Questions

What would you be doing if you were not here?
What do you hope to learn today in this group?
What do you want to know about the other person? Ask one question.
Say one thing about yourself that you are happy about.
Say one thing about yourself that you need to work on.
Complete the sentence, “In the last year, I have learned . . .”
If you had a logo, what would it be?
Share something most people do not know about you.
Share something you are most proud of.
Name your favorite hobbies or interests.
Explain what you wish for the most.
If you were an animal, what would you be and why?
Name a favorite book or movie. Explain briefly.
Name one dream or wish you have.
Complete the sentence, “I would like to understand . . .”

**PROCESSING:** Be prepared for an animated experience as people often linger and have to be urged to move on. They often have not finished their conversations! This makes people eager to participate in the group experience, and already there is a sense of bonding, especially if this activity is used in the first session. A variation of this would be for a group closing, where you also want to give people an opportunity to share and touch base with one another.
THEORY: This “group survey” is one of my favorite ways to get everyone to participate and gain a lot of information, all without saying a word! This is a great exercise for all types of therapeutic groups as well as “workplace wellness” groups. All members give input without “putting themselves on the line.” This is also a very colorful, visual, and fun way to find out where the group is at any given time.

IMPLEMENTATION: Tape some pieces of newsprint on the wall and have questions written on each. The topic and theme of the therapeutic group or workshop will determine the type of questions that you will use (examples are on the following page). Have available self-adhesive colored dots from an office supply store, and you can decide if you want to have men take one color and women another to differentiate between how the two groups respond, or think of other ways to distinguish two or more types of subgroups, such as by age. Have the questions already up on newsprint, and ask people when they first come in to put a dot next to each item that they feel describes how they think or feel, with no more than one dot for each piece of newsprint. I use this activity in stress management workshops in particular to poll the habits of thinking, self-care, exercise, and so forth. This also has worked well in groups focusing on interpersonal communication and dealing with difficult people. By the time the group session begins, members will already have gleaned a lot of information about one another. Summarize the findings and brainstorm what they take from this “informal poll.”

PROCESSING: Be prepared to analyze and summarize the results for the whole group. To have a more interactive process, however, have participants assist you in drawing conclusions based on the survey results. Count the dots together and make observations about how people handle stress, relationships, and so on, based on survey findings. Through your choice of questions, you can introduce the importance of concepts you wish to explore in a particular group. This is certainly more colorful and creative than a formal agenda!
THEORY: A powerful insight we gain from group involvement is that we are not alone. Through the group experience, we recognize that there are common threads between ourselves and others. This exercise enlightens group members to the power of the sense of universality, encouraging group members to see themselves as part of a greater whole. It also encourages the ability to self-disclose in a non-threatening manner through this small group activity.

IMPLEMENTATION: Have group members break up into groups of four to five depending on the group size. Supply each group member with a piece of paper and pen and ask for one person to volunteer to be the secretary. Tell them they will have five to ten minutes to see how many things they can find in common among themselves. Encourage them to find at least ten. Once time is up, have each group share with the whole group the list they generated.

PROCESSING: This is a very fast-paced exercise that enables group members to find out about one another in a short period of time. It provides a relatively non-threatening way to get groups to self-disclose. After the groups share their findings, ask the whole group what impressions they have of the exercise in general. Did it cause them to feel more different or alike than others and why? Did they have more or less in common than they thought they would?
THEORY: To promote self-discovery, in this activity self-disclosure, as well as disclosure to others, helps individuals crystallize what really is important to them, clarifies values, and helps identify positive aspects about themselves. Being in “the news” can help define core values and self-perceptions.

T.I.P. #70 EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

T.I.P. #71 Activity: What’s New?

T.I.P. #70 IMPLEMENTATION: Instruct the group: Create a front page of a newspaper about yourself. What would the headlines be? What would be of interest about you to let others know? Provide for the group the “headlines” format on the next page or ask that they create their own. Supply colored markers or pencils for a “colorful” look.

T.I.P. #71 IMPLEMENTATION: A great variation of this activity is for the entire group to create group headlines. They might feature the “top ten insights” achieved in group, as well as positive group learning experiences. There might be a sentence for each person in the group, announcing something about him/her or something he/she wants to share!

PROCESSING: This activity can at first be daunting but extremely powerful in both group and individual therapy. It encourages clients to believe they are important enough to be “newsworthy” and that their story is worth knowing.
MY STORY

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My Mission

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Group Closings

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THEORY: The end of a group experience is an ideal time to reflect on what one has learned. Although the “Touching Base” exercise in T.I.P. #99 provides the opportunity for all participants to share what they have learned or gained from the group, some learning might be of a more personal nature or an individual might not want to share some very personal impressions out loud. This activity provides opportunity for self-reflection and self-expression.

**T.I.P. #101 Activity: Letter—To Yours Truly from Yours Truly**

**T.I.P. #102 Activity: Letter—You Made an Impression on Me . . .**

**T.I.P. #101 IMPLEMENTATION:** All participants are given some stationery and a pen and are asked to write a letter to themselves. Instruct them to share what they have learned or gained from the group experience, and inform them that this letter will be sent to them in two or three months. Have them address an envelope, put the letter in it, and seal it when they are finished. Allow about 20 minutes for this activity.

**T.I.P. #102 IMPLEMENTATION:** Another writing activity that allows for some privacy as it does not call for thoughts to be shared out loud is as follows: Dole out to each group member a stack of three by five index cards, each with a different group member’s name written at the top. Have group members take about 20 minutes or so to write in one or two sentences something they learned from or liked about each of the other group members, signing their name at the bottom of each card. You could include all the cards for each group member in the same envelope as the “Yours Truly” letter, or you might collect and disperse each individual’s cards to be taken home that very day. These cards often will be cherished by group members, who can refer to the cards any time they want to be reminded that others thought of something special about them.

**PROCESSING:** These activities are great ways to provide ongoing reminders for individuals leaving the therapeutic group experience. In a few months, how quickly one can forget important lessons, and the note cards and letter can provide opportunity to be reminded of healthy messages from the group experience. One might see this as a type of time capsule that gives individuals tangible evidence of a slice of their lives in crucial times when they’re needing a reminder of a more positive time. The feedback to them might be a source of strength, inspiration, and faith in their ability to connect with others, especially in tough times!