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Perceptions of persons who stutter before and after attending support group meetings

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Abstract

The authors surveyed members of a stuttering support group to assess the perceptions of persons who stutter (PWS) before and after attending support group meetings as well as factors that may be involved in sustainability of support groups for PWS. The group leadership incorporated into meetings, principles that would be most salient to helping PWS in a support group environment. The group integrated many of the 11 key therapeutic principles proposed by Yalom (1995) for effective group counselling and group therapy. Preliminary data indicate that involvement in the support group resulted in more positive feelings about being called a PWS and being a PWS and lessened the impact that stuttering has on a member's life. Participants reported that they gained hope, confidence, self-esteem, and a positive outlook as a result of attending support group meetings. Overall, it appears that the views of the respondents were consistent with several of Yalom's principles. The members believed that their involvement in meetings led them to positively change their views about stuttering and their own acceptance of their stuttering.

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Keywords: Stuttering; Support Group; Self-help; Yalom

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1. Introduction

Attending support group meetings for many persons who stutter (PWS) is very important because these groups address the affective and cognitive components of stuttering that may not be part of traditional therapy approaches (Bradberry, 1997; Cooper, 1987; Ramig, 1993). Many researchers have indicated that PWS are very satisfied with their experiences with support groups (Krauss-Lehrman & Reeves, 1989; Ramig, 1993; Yaruss et al., 2002). For example, Krauss-Lehrman and Reeves (1989) surveyed National Stuttering Association (NSA) members to find out the benefits of attending support group meetings. Respondents believed that support groups were beneficial because participants could share thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a non-threatening environment. Ramig (1993) found that attendance at support group meetings improved PWS overall self-concept, comfort in their personal lives, and competence in their work environment. Yaruss, Quesal, and Murphy (2002) surveyed NSA members and found that improvements in self-image and acceptance of their fluency disorder were the result of participation in support groups.

The literature indicates that there are numerous benefits of attending stuttering support group meetings; however, in fluency research, no known models have been specifically applied or used to run stuttering support groups. One model that has been successfully applied to group therapy in many fields including aural rehabilitation (Erdman, 2009), psychotherapy (Garcia-Cabeza, Ducaju, Chapela, & Gonzalez de Chavez, 2011), and criminal rehabilitation (Morgan, Winterowd, & Fuqua, 1999) is Yalom's (1995) 11 key therapeutic principles for effective group counselling and group therapy.

These 11 principles include (1) instillation of hope, (2) universality, (3) imparting information, (4) altruism, (5) the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, (6) development of socialization techniques, (7) imitative behaviour, (8) interpersonal learning, (9) group cohesiveness, (10) catharsis, and (11) existential factors. Yalom (1995) elaborated that instillation of hope means that participants gain hope through their interactions with others going through the same condition. Universality implies that the life effects of the disorder (e.g., stuttering) are shared by a majority with that disorder. Imparting information is the sharing of factual information relevant to the disorder (e.g., stuttering) for those who attend group meetings. Altruism occurs when individuals share their strengths with others which could help boost self-esteem and confidence. The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group occurs because the support group and its members become a pseudofamily where individuals can discuss personal matters and cope with familial issues. The interactions among support group members allow the development of socialization techniques such as practicing introductions, developing topics for discussion, and participating in turn-taking activities. Imitative behaviour occurs when group members have the ability to imitate target behaviours. For example, in a stuttering support group, a member could request that another member model a stuttering technique and that person can imitate the model. Interpersonal learning occurs when group members learn about themselves through hearing how others deal and cope with a disorder. Group cohesiveness occurs when a group and its members share a common bond strengthened by their interactions. Catharsis occurs when the sharing of feelings and experiences with the group helps to relieve pain, guilt, or stress. Existential factors are addressed by viewing the successes and struggles of others—which help members identify and deal with the realities of their own life situations.

When the Misericordia University Stuttering Support Group was established, it was decided that several of the 11 key therapeutic principles for effective group counselling and group therapy proposed by Yalom (1995) would be incorporated. These principles were selected through careful planning by the leadership. For example, universality was addressed by providing an environment where individuals who stutter could meet and discuss their struggles. Imparting information was introduced to the group by having stuttering literature and resources accessible to members at every meeting. Altruism, catharsis, the instillation of hope, and group

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