

Knowledge Share – By Christine Schimmel & Ed Jacobs

The toughest kinds of groups



Creative strategies for reducing your anxiety and leading effective groups when your members just don't want to be there

It's 3 p.m. and you are anxious about going to the group you are leading because its members are being forced to attend by the court, the principal or some other authority figure. Being tasked with leading a group whose members don't actually want to be there is an assignment that many counselors dread.

The purpose of this article is to help reduce the anxiety that often accompanies leading these kinds of groups. We also want to provide an array of ideas to help make a mandatory group a positive experience for most, if not all, of its members, as well as for you, the group leader.

Many times, leaders worry about the topic or content of the group and fail to pay attention to the elephant in the room — *the members just don't want to be there*. Group leading is about the art of engagement, and this is especially true with involuntary members. When leading mandated groups, a primary consideration should be constant evaluation of the following question: How engaging is the group discussion or activity? You should frequently ask yourself whether what you are doing in group is interesting and appealing. The answer needs to be, "Yes, very appealing!"

Here is an example of how one counselor made the initial moments of the first session appealing when she was asked to go into a school and lead a group with students who had been caught smoking marijuana on school property. The students had been referred to the program as part of the "punishment" for getting caught. To make matters worse, the group met at 4 in the afternoon once a week. The counselor knew she needed to do something out of the ordinary to get the group off to a good start and to convince members to participate. This is what she did.

Counselor: "I know you are all very angry about having to be here, so let's get this group started by just getting all that anger and frustration out on the table." (*Counselor pulls up a large trash can and opens the lid.*)

"You have five minutes to gripe, complain or do whatever you need to do. Take five minutes and get it all out here. Ready? Go!" (*Allows five minutes for students to commiserate with one another.*)

Counselor: "OK, now we are going to name this group. What do you all want to call this group? Do you want to call it the drug group, or do you want to give it some new name that sounds better than the drug group?"

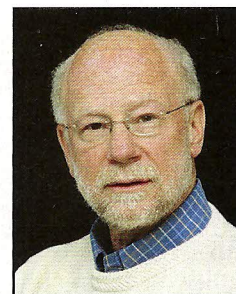
The members spent a few minutes naming their group. Following that, the leader focused on the purpose of the group, which was to discuss the members' use of marijuana at school.

Essential leadership skills with mandated group members

Our approach for leading nonvoluntary groups is one of active leadership. Those who subscribe to more of a facilitator model of group leading, where much of the responsibility for the flow of the session



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is given to the members, will likely find leading mandated groups to be frustrating, to say the least. We believe that “people don’t mind being led when they are led well.” We discuss this idea, as well as ways of working with reluctant members, in our book *Group Counseling: Strategies and Skills*, which we co-wrote with Robert Masson and Riley Harvill.

Leaders of nonvoluntary groups need more skills than those who lead voluntary groups. We think the following five skills are essential.

■ **Be creative:** Think outside the box. Many nonvoluntary members come to the group with the mindset that they will be bored and will not participate. Think of creative ways to engage these members.

■ **Be energetic:** Your energy may be the tipping point that gets members engaged. If you show little or no enthusiasm, members may well follow suit.

■ **Be positive:** Believe that the members can learn and change, and believe in the value of groups.

■ **Be patient:** Don’t get discouraged if it seems like members aren’t listening. Always realize that one or more members of the group are most likely benefiting from what you are doing.

■ **Be thick-skinned:** Know that some members are going to challenge you, ignore you and accuse you of a variety of injustices. Be prepared to deal with members who are resistant and defiant. Use a kind, confident voice, while always putting a positive spin on the value of the group you are leading.


Keys for dealing with negativity and hostility

Anytime you have mandated members, you must be prepared to deal with negativity and hostility. Here are some tips for doing just that.


■ **Refuse to give in to the negativity:** Instead, redirect it. The group process *will* be attacked. Stay positive and say that some members may find the group very helpful and even life changing.

Member: “This is all a bunch of b.s. How many times do I have to come?”

Leader (*looking at everyone and talking with a firm, inviting voice*): “I used to hate running this group because no one wanted to be here and no one talked, so I sought some help from people who had led these groups and from the members who were forced to be here. I asked them



Believe that the members of the group can learn and change, and believe in the value of groups.



what would make this group better, and they gave me all kinds of suggestions. The best stuff came from former members who had hated it. They told me all kinds of good things that I should do, so that’s what I have planned for this group. And you know what? Every time I finish with the six-session series, there are at least three members who say they want to continue meeting because it helped them so much.”

■ **Do not take attacks personally:** Accept that you will be verbally attacked because mandated group members are frustrated or angry with the authorities who are making them attend.

■ **Use inner circle-outer circle:** This technique has worked for mandatory groups after the second or third meeting, but we recommend its use only if the negative energy is so bad that you don’t feel you can turn it around.

Leader (*with a kind, caring voice*): “Everyone has to be in the room, but I realize some of you are more invested than others. So, each week I’m going to give you an opportunity to indicate your desired level of participation. For those of you willing or wanting to participate fully and actively, pull your chairs to the center. The others can be on the outside, sitting quietly and just listening.”

The use of the inner circle-outer circle technique allows those who want to gain something to be able to do so without those on the outside being given the opportunity to sabotage the group. At the same time, those in the outer circle can still benefit from observing the other members’ work. We have found that members on the outside sometimes pay more attention when they aren’t allowed

to speak. In some cases, they will even eventually ask to join the inner circle, which is certainly fine.

Do the unexpected

When leading groups with involuntary members, doing the unexpected eliminates some of the anticipated negativity that often occurs in these groups. One of the concepts we write about in our book *Impact Therapy: The Courage to Counsel* is the idea that the brain likes novelty. With the trash can example mentioned earlier in this article, the leader (a former student of ours) reported that the activity helped the members to release much of the negativity surrounding having to be in the group. She made sure she did not start the first session by immediately jumping into the group rules and providing some information about the “evils of marijuana.”

So often in involuntary groups, leaders focus on the rules and content and present “expected” information that turns off the members because they are still mad about having to be in the group. Doing unexpected, interesting things in an effort to “hook” the members’ interest is a much better way to approach the first session. Without an engaging opening, a leader will be battling lack of interest, negativity and disruptive behavior the whole way.

Think of times when you have attended a mandatory meeting and that meeting was somewhat boring. You probably got fidgety or sleepy, or even started talking or sending notes to the person next to you. Perhaps you simply retreated into your mind and started thinking about where to go on vacation, what to make for dinner or other things you could be accomplishing with your time. Unexpected activities help to engage nonvoluntary members, especially during the first couple of sessions when they are still warming up to the experience of being in the group.

It is important not to rely on the members of any mandatory group to carry the group. Leaders who do often are met with dead silence because the members don’t come eager to talk, even if the previous session was a good one. Keep in mind that their attendance is due to being mandated, not because they look forward to attending. Leaders

have told us, however, that members have reported to them that they do look forward to attending as a result of the first two sessions going well. Anytime you lead a mandated group, one of your main purposes is to get as many members as possible to recognize that the experience can be beneficial.

One mental health counselor who went into a school to lead an after-school suspension group told us that after his third session, the principal called him and said that some students were hearing such good things that they wanted to be suspended so they could be in the group as well. Good reports such as this are the result of counselors presenting unexpected, creative and engaging activities.

Use written exercises

One of the most engaging activities involves having members do various written exercises. Sentence completion, in which all members complete two to five sentences about something, works well for almost any population if the sentence stems are relevant and interesting. When

reviewing the answers, most members are curious to find out if others have answers that are similar to theirs. The key is to develop thought-provoking sentences, but not too many of them.

Here are some examples of various sentence stems:

- The thing I fear most about being in this group is _____ (for any group)
- If I give up drugs, it would mean _____ (for mandated drug offenders)
- I tend to hit those I love when _____ (for mandated batterers)
- The hardest thing about being on probation is _____ (for those mandated due to probation)

Other written activities that can be engaging include making lists and answering questions (or even simply circling answers). Often group leaders are asked to use prepared material, but those who created the material did not necessarily consider that the members

completing the material are doing so because they are mandated to participate in the program. We advise our students and workshop participants to carefully scrutinize prepared materials to determine how relevant and engaging these materials might be for mandated members.

Written exercises are extremely valuable for the leader because they make it easier to draw out members. The members now have something to say if called on; that is, they can read what they wrote. This helps immensely because mandated members are notorious for not volunteering to talk.

Use rounds

A round is an activity in which all group members are asked to participate by sharing a word, number, comment or phrase. The value of rounds is that everyone speaks, even if only to give a number for a rating (such as "Rate how the week was on a scale of 1 to 10").

One of the biggest obstacles with mandated members is their negative mindset and determination not to talk. By encouraging "controlled talking" through the use of a round, a leader

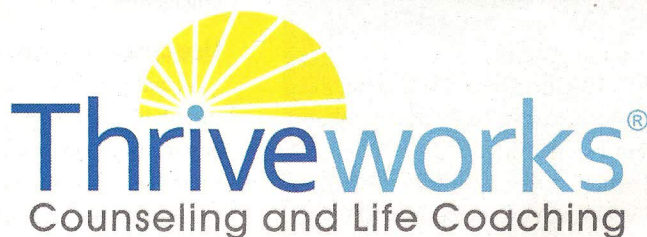


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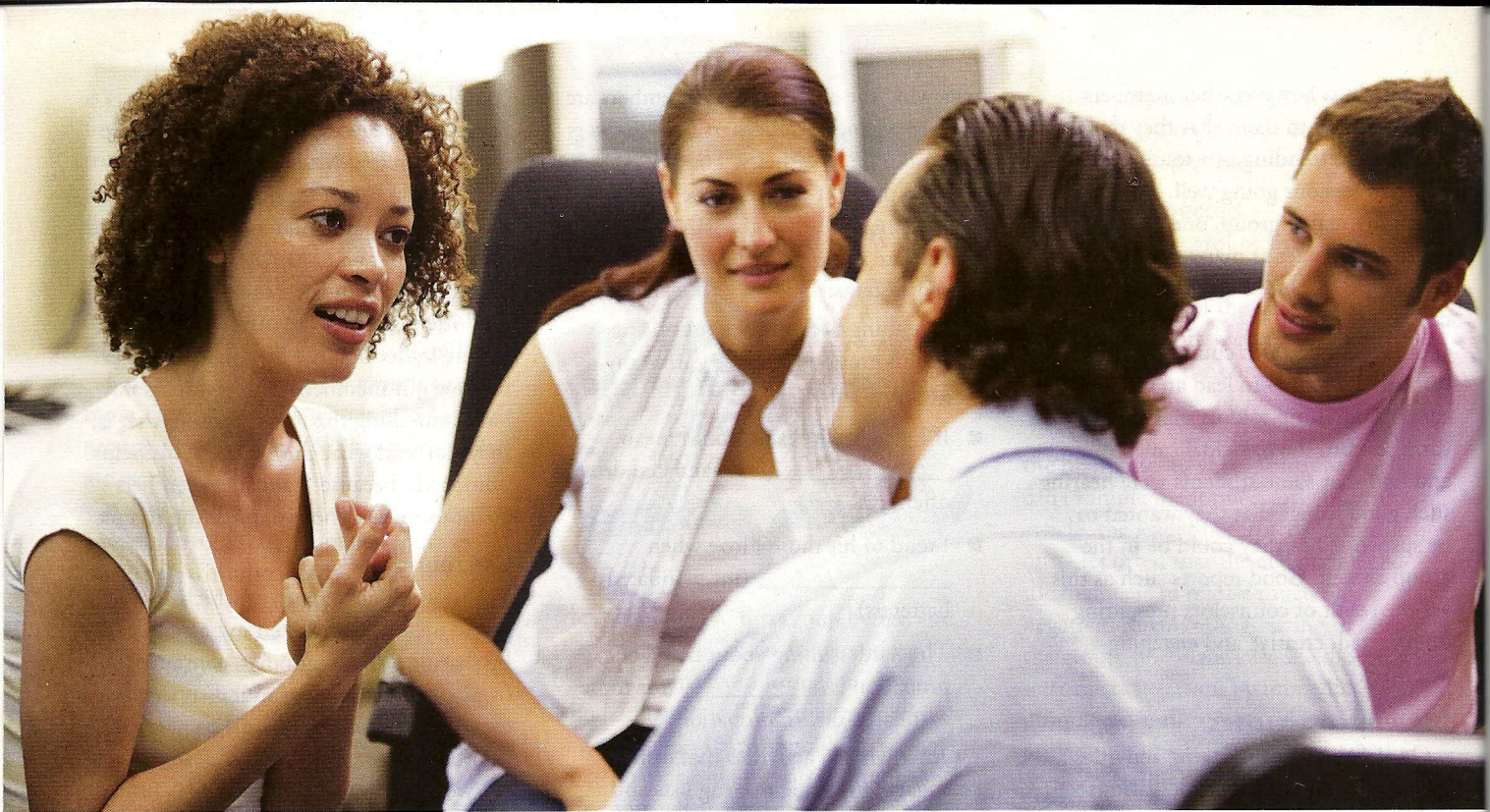
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can hear from everyone and also better manage any negativity by having the round be in the form of a word or phrase. For example, "In a word, or a phrase, or one sentence, describe your feeling about _____." By using the round, when the negative member starts to go on about something, the leader can say, "Just a word or a phrase." Yes/no rounds are also valuable in that they at least get members saying something. Here are some examples.

■ Leader: "I'm going to ask each of you to answer either yes or no regarding whether alcohol was involved in your arrest." (The leader can ask follow-up questions to those who answer yes.)

■ Leader: "Yes or no. Was the discussion we just had helpful?" (The leader can ask follow-up questions regarding why the members said yes or no.)

■ Leader: "Yes or no. Do you have something you'd like to talk about in today's group?" (Be prepared to hear only "no." Even so, this question lets members know you are open to them bringing things up in group.)

The 1-10 rating round is also helpful for getting a sense of how the members feel about something.

■ Leader: "On a 1-10 scale, with 1 being very uncomfortable and 10 being very comfortable, how comfortable are you in this group?"

■ Leader: "On a 1-10 scale, how strong is your desire to change? One represents no desire to change, and 10 represents a strong desire to change."

■ Leader: "Rate your week on a 1-10 scale, with 10 representing a very good week and 1 representing a very bad week."

Most members are usually willing to share in the round, which gives the leader a way to draw out the resistant, quiet members, while controlling the negative members. During the warm-up phase of the first session, a round that often works is: "Given that you have to be here, in a phrase or a sentence, what can I or we do to make this a somewhat worthwhile experience for you?"

Even if the members say impossible things, the round at least allows and encourages everyone to say something. This is a big plus because silence is one of the hardest things to overcome with mandated members. Rounds get members talking, which helps with engagement.

Use creative props

Visual props help to engage group members because props are novel and engage both sides of the brain. With members who are mandated to group due to anger issues, a shaken Coke bottle or a bunch of long, medium and short "fuses" will work to grab their attention.

Leader (*shaking a bottle filled with Coke*): "Can I get a volunteer to point this at themselves and open it?"

Members usually laugh or say they'll open it while pointing it at others. This leads to a discussion about their anger and the consequences of spewing it everywhere.

Leader: "How long is your anger fuse?" (*Throws pieces of string, measuring various lengths and representing fuses, in the center of the group.*)

Even reluctant members will usually at least pick a "fuse," which indicates they are thinking about what is being said. The leader can then ask members to comment on their anger fuse and whether they think it can be lengthened.

Many mandated groups center on addressing members' issues related to alcohol consumption. Members may have been caught drinking and driving or misusing alcohol at a school or university or in the community.

Leader: "I want all of you to stand and make a large circle. Now I want you to think about your personal goals. Think of them as being in the center of our circle." (*Leader puts a large piece of paper with the word "GOALS" in the center and allows members some time to stare at the sign and think about their goals.*) "Each of you has an empty box on the floor in front of you that once contained a case of beer. Step

into the box with both feet. Now try to move toward the goals you set for yourself in the middle of the circle.” (*Members struggle to move, nearly fall, etc.*)

This creative technique has a much greater chance of engaging the members regarding the consequences of their drinking in comparison with simply asking them about the consequences. The use of the box is a unique approach, and the brain likes novelty. Some members will get the point that drinking may interfere with successfully reaching their goals.

Use movement

Moving around instead of sitting often helps leaders to get and keep the attention of group members. A wonderful example of this is provided by the leader of a probation group who began each session with a “values continuum” (see below). The subsequent action created enough energy to allow the leader to spend the remainder of the group session simply processing the material that the continuum generated.

Leader: “Everyone stand up behind Carl.” (*Carl is in the center of the room at the front; members line up behind him.*) “This wall represents ‘I can change,’ and this wall represents ‘I can’t change — this is who I am.’ On the count of three, I’m going to have you move to where you see yourself. If you strongly believe that you can change, move way over there (*points to one wall*), and if you believe you can’t change, move over there (*points to the other wall*). Or put yourself somewhere in between that represents your belief about change.”

The value of this activity is that, unless members leave the room or refuse to move, they are participating. They are speaking with their feet as demonstrated by where they place themselves on the continuum. Additionally, moving around is more engaging for the members than just talking about how they feel about their ability to change.

In many mandated groups, one purpose is to get members to set new goals for themselves. This next activity may serve as an excellent movement exercise to focus on the idea of setting goals.

Leader: “Everyone stand and line up side by side.” (*Leader moves about 8 feet in front of the members and draws an imaginary line.*) “I want you to assume

that this line is you reaching the goals we talked about in the first and second sessions. This is now the fifth session.

I want you to move either forward or backward to indicate how close you feel you are to reaching the goals you set for yourself. On three I want everyone to move. One, two, three.”

Most members will move and talk about their progress or lack thereof. Even for those who don’t talk, the experience may have an impact because it helps them to visualize that they are not making progress.

Conclusion

One truth we have found in leading groups with involuntary members is that it is quite unpredictable what will engage them and get their interest flowing. Our overall message to anyone leading mandatory groups is:

- Continue trying a variety of unique and unexpected activities.
- Don’t give up.
- Don’t give in to the negative members.
- Believe in what you are doing and in the power of groups.
- Use rounds.
- Be creative — use props, written activities and movement exercises.
- Commit yourself to making the group powerful for those members who, once engaged, want to make progress.

A commitment to this list of ideas will make leading mandated groups a more interesting, exciting prospect. Additionally, that same commitment should make the anxiety and stress associated with that 3 p.m. group subside.



For additional creative leadership ideas, check out the following resources written by the authors of this article:

- *Group Counseling: Strategies and Skills*, seventh edition, by Ed Jacobs, Robert Masson, Riley Harvill and Christine Schimmel, 2012, Brooks/Cole
- *Impact Therapy: The Courage to Counsel* by Ed Jacobs and Christine Schimmel, 2013, Impact Therapy Associates ♦

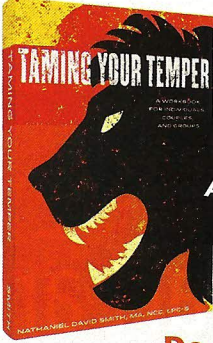
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