How Can I Get the Most Out of Group Therapy?

• **Be yourself.** Start from where you are, not how you think others want you to be. Change begins with whatever you feel free to disclose.

• **Define goals.** Take time before each session to define your goals for that session. Being flexible about your goals is also important. You may be surprised to find that your goals continue to change throughout the group process.

• **Recognize and respect your pace for getting involved in the group.** Some group members will always be ready to disclose their thoughts and feelings; others need more time to gain feelings of trust and security. By respecting your needs you are learning self-acceptance. If you are having a difficult time with how to discuss your problems with the group, then ask the group to help you.

• **Avoid giving advice.** Sometimes we really want to offer advice to someone who is struggling, but often when we do, we fail to let that person feel heard. Most group members learn that giving advice, suggestions and solutions is seldom helpful. For advice-givers, it is helpful to learn how to express personal reactions, communicate understanding, give support, and listen attentively.

• **Take risks.** Experiment with different ways of behaving and expressing yourself. By taking risks, you can discover what works for you and what doesn’t. This may mean expressing difficult feelings, sharing information you usually keep secret, or confronting someone about something upsetting to you.

• **Ask questions.** If you are wondering about or confused about something that has just been said or has just occurred in the group, then seek clarification from group members or group leaders. It’s likely others may have the same questions that you have.

• **Give and receive feedback.** Giving and receiving feedback can be a major component of your experience in group therapy. The purpose of feedback is to help others identify patterns, personal presentations, unrecognized attitudes, and inconsistencies. Feedback can be one of the most effective ways to deepen any relationship.

  **Tips for giving feedback:**
  o Feedback needs to be concrete and specific, brief but to the point, and representative of both your feelings and thoughts.
  o Be specific about what you’re responding to (particular remark, gesture)
  o Share both positive and negative feedback
  o Give feedback as soon as possible

  **Tips for receiving feedback:**
  o Think of feedback as a gift from other members
  o Acknowledge feedback when given (e.g. “Thanks, I didn’t realize I was smiling just then…”)
  o Seek clarification from the member or verify with other members if the feedback you’ve received matches their perceptions as well
  o Beware of becoming defensive; if you feel yourself becoming defensive, it might be a good idea to share it.
  o A great way to get feedback is to request it from specific individuals, those whose impression means the most to you. Find out from others in the group how they perceive you. What role do they see you taking on in the group? What are your “blind spots”?
• **Take time for yourself.** You have the right to take group time to talk about yourself. Many people feel that others’ issues are more important, while some have a difficult time facing feelings, or have fears of appearing “weak”. By recognizing what the reluctance means, you begin the growth process.

• **Share with others what is going on in your mind, even if it isn't very pretty.** If you don’t know what is going on in your mind, tell the group that. It is ok to be “messy” and let others know about the things that you normally keep hidden from others. We follow “group rules” not “social rules” and these rules allow for greater self-disclosure.

• **Recognize and express reactions and feelings.** Pay close attention to what you are feeling as you are sharing or as others are sharing. If you are having difficulties recognizing and expressing your thoughts or feelings, ask the group to help.

• **Be aware of censored thoughts and feelings.** Learning to express thoughts and feelings, without censorship, enables exploration and resolution of interpersonal conflicts and self-affirmation and assertion. Try and take the risk to let yourself be emotionally available to and vulnerable with others.

• **Focus on the relationships you have with the group, other group members and the leader.** Put a priority on noticing what is happening inside the group. What is going on that makes you feel closer or more distant towards others? Try and explore with the group what you notice.

• **Become aware of distancing behaviors.** All of us have ways of behaving which prevent others from getting close to us. Some of these are: remaining silent and uninvolved, telling long involved stories, responding to others with intellectual statements, asking content questions, making hostile or indirect comments, and talking only about external events. Keep in mind that distancing behaviors have had a purpose in the past. The question you will face is whether the behavior is preventing you from getting what you want - close relationships with people.

• **Try to be as direct as possible and be open to the responses of others.** Telling a story is sometimes a way of being known, but it can also be a way of avoiding dialogue and intimacy. Aim for dialogue that fosters an understanding of your experiences rather than monologue.

• **Remember that how people talk is as important as what they say.** Pay attention to the non-verbal behaviors in the group—your own and those of other members. Talk about what you notice.

• **Work outside the group.** In order to get the most from the group experience, you will need to spend time between sessions thinking about yourself, trying out new behaviors, reflecting on what you are learning, reassessing your goals, and paying attention to your feelings and reactions.

• **Be patient with yourself.** Growth takes time, effort and patience. Changing what has become such an integral part of ourselves can be difficult and slow. By having patience with ourselves and accepting and understanding these blocks to growth, we set the foundation for growth and change.

• **Give the group time to develop.** It can take a number of sessions before members of a group begin to have sufficient trust and security to be open and honest and to disclose their concerns and feelings. If you are not getting what you want out of the group, then talk about that with the group members.