Creating Change
One Group at a Time

I n the chapters that follow, your thoughts about how and why we do group counseling may shift. It takes a fair amount of time and planning to set up groups, and you may find yourself wondering if they are worth the extra effort. Why not just see students individually? Wouldn't that be faster in the long run? The pivotal question here is, *Faster for whom?* If the change we seek is more likely to occur in a group setting, then group counseling should be the treatment of choice—anything less is a Band-Aid.

FACILITATING CHANGE

Why start a book on group counseling with a discussion of the theory of change? Change is the quintessence of counseling. It is the raison d'être for being a mental health provider. Our purpose is not mysterious, yet the path for achieving our goal is often elusive. If we can get clear about how we think change occurs, we have a much better chance of making it happen.

How Do You Think Change Occurs?

Whether we realize it or not, our personal theory of change is the driving force behind the actions we take with students. Take a quick inventory of the most common strategies used in the school setting

to effect change. We correct misbehavior on the playground with time on the bench and tell kids who cut in line go to the end. When homework is missing, we make calls home and expect parents to "have a word." We ask students if they would like it if someone did that terrible thing to them. Sometimes we give advice to the broken-hearted or console the person always picked last for teams. Some teachers use a classroom "agenda" for grievances and have weekly discussions to repair damages.

Our theory of change in these scenarios involves a simple redirect or punishment. In each case, it is assumed that students will see the merits of our position and, with this new understanding, will make better decisions in the future. Each time we implement one of the above strategies, we have the expectation that the student will see the light, mend their ways, and transform. Well, maybe we just hope they'll *stop it*! But deep down, it is change we are after. Sometimes these strategies work, but often they do not.

If we do the same thing over and over again and expect different results, we are a sure candidate for professional burnout. If we intervene with students and little change occurs, we cease to feel we are contributing to positive change in their lives—the very reason we chose this profession. To avoid this unfortunate cycle and the burnout that will undoubtedly follow, one question is a clear standout. Your answer to this question will rightfully be the underpinning for all the actions you take with students. The question is simple and warrants an informed and deliberate answer: *How do you really think change occurs?*

Take a Look at Your Own Life

In our own lives, we may want to lose ten pounds, have a better relationship with a sibling, or quit a bad habit. Most of us have logged some failed attempts at solving these kinds of recurring problems. From these experiences, we probably know a fair amount about how change does *not* occur. Our response to uninvited lectures and a barrage of "you shoulds" seldom includes a flight into action. More commonly, we become immobilized—even when we know that taking action would be good for us.

We know from our own experience that there is a very low percentage return on lecturing, threatening, withholding, cajoling, persuading, and sharing the dreaded "facts." These tactics do not build relationship

or rapport. A casual observation of the typical traffic in and out of the vice principal's office confirms that this approach is ineffective with students as well; students do not respond to lectures, threats, or withholding any better than we do.

Why Groups Help Create Change in Young People

So what does work with students? We know from research and training that group counseling is the treatment of choice for many adolescents; for this demographic, anything a peer says is far more interesting and influential than anything we could say on our best day. Teenagers hang on each others' words, even when they feign indifference. Feedback among teens is usually the fast track to change.

At the elementary level, many of the issues for which students are referred for counseling are social or behavioral in nature. Group counseling is an ideal way to work on the skills necessary to be successful in these areas. We can meet individually with a fifth grader for multiple sessions and practice "not interrupting," but until that behavior is demonstrated repeatedly in a peer group, we cannot say the problem is solved. Group counseling may be a better fit.

Working Within a School System

Take a moment to think about daily life as a practitioner. Many of us who work in schools have had the experience of becoming hypnotized by the school routine. We slog our way down a hefty to-do list and suddenly realize we have forgotten to ask the essential question: *Has anything really changed as a result of my interaction with this student?* Students may be removed from our to-do list once we have seen them individually, but if the issue that brought them to the office would have been better addressed in group counseling, our contribution to a solution may be negligible; our dutiful "checkoff" may be meaningless.

The routine of a school—the way things have always been done—is a force all its own, and it can overcome our good judgment. Too often we are in situations where the fast pace of the environment, the enormous student and family needs, and the time pressure for competing obligations makes group counseling seem like an arduous task and our goal of positively impacting the lives of students with the

most effective intervention falls by the wayside. Dedicated professionals are faced with a dilemma: How do we work quickly and efficiently in this fast-paced environment to create situations where genuine change can occur?

As we consider group counseling—and how, when, and why this approach can facilitate change—the starting point is a clear understanding of how change occurs.

AN EQUATION FOR CHANGE

From Asay and Lambert's (1999) research on change, we know that four critical factors combine to promote successful outcomes in counseling. While their research focused on individuals, we can extrapolate as we consider working in groups. If we focus on these interrelated factors, we will maximize our work with students. The four known ingredients of successful and lasting change are discussed below. A fifth ingredient specific to groups is proposed.

Client Factors

Client factors account for 40 percent of change. Client factors are the strengths, talents, resources, gifts, social supports, and values that a student brings with her or him to a group meeting. These assets are the petri dish of change. They may be subtle, embryonic, unevenly developed, or completely unrealized, but they are the strengths that the interactions of the group will nurture. Our goal as group leaders is to make every student's strengths take center stage.

Relationship Factors

Relationship factors account for 30 percent of change. In individual therapy, this is the alliance and perceived support between the practitioner and the participant, and it includes variables such as respect, acceptance, and warmth. In the group setting, relationships are far more complex. The leader has a relationship with each member of the group and with the group as a whole; likewise, each member has the same complex series of relationships with the leader, the other members, and the group. In the group setting, there is a clear need for respect, acceptance, and warmth between the

leader and the participants. Because a successful group experience is predicated on members feeling safe and accepted, the challenge for the leader is to develop those same qualities in the group as a whole. Careful planning by the leader (see Chapter 6) is an essential strategy for promoting the kinds of relationships that foster safety, acceptance, and validation; the existence of this kind of environment promotes change. Additional ways to foster positive relationships are discussed in the chapters that follow.

Hope or Expectancy

Hope or expectancy accounts for 15 percent of change. When participants enter counseling, the ability to anticipate that their lives can be different in a desired way is a springboard for change. The fact that hopefulness is not a larger percentage of the change equation, while somewhat unexpected, is perhaps a relief for those of us working in schools. Since students are often referred for counseling services that they might not have chosen, students may lack the qualities of hope or expectancy. However, counselors and group leaders are in a unique position to ignite hope in students who do not yet see in themselves the strengths that others can see in them. When we hold firmly to the expectation that a student can and will step into a more satisfying life, that belief is contagious. When we see the best in students, they can see it in themselves. What we focus on expands.

Model or Theoretical Orientation

The psychological model accounts for 15 percent of change. Of all the findings in the research on change in counseling, the small contribution of the model of therapy and the related techniques is perhaps the most surprising. While the model or theoretical orientation is a relatively small contributor to change, the model directly impacts the way the practitioner harnesses the participant and relationship factors. Furthermore, a model that inherently promotes hope or expectancy supports the creation of meaningful change in participants. Therefore, it is essential that the group leader chooses a model or theoretical orientation that amplifies the other three factors, fits well within a school setting, and is a good match for both student expectations and for the group leader's personal style.

A Fifth Change Agent: The Group

The four factors noted above are based on individual counseling. Group counseling is related, but it presents some additional possibilities for change. The group itself is a source of influence and change. The interactions and feedback provided by the group can be quite compelling to its members. There exists less documented research on group counseling than comparable work with individuals, but it is likely that research will ultimately validate that the group is a significant contributor to change—maybe even the most significant contributor. Until research clarifies the factors effecting change in groups, a prudent course of action is to do all we can to maximize the known factors from research on individual counseling and to make counseling groups a safe, organized, and productive situation for students.

The Importance of a Theoretical Model

While theoretical orientation accounts for only 15 percent of change, it is a vital percentage because it has strong potential for amplifying the other known factors for creating change; it is also the factor over which we have the most control. As school practitioners, it is possible to plan activities without thinking about the underlying theory that supports them. In the extensive literature on counseling groups, there is a ready supply of group activities but very few of them are based on a theoretical orientation. Most curricula are based on topics such as divorce, friendship, or bullying. By combining print material and online resources, practitioners can develop a hefty personal library for groups. This library of activities can then be used as a base for planning a group when the principal approaches us and says, for example, that the fifth-grade girls are not getting along.

There is a danger in this piecemeal approach. An assortment of group activities, even if thematically connected, does not necessarily make a good group plan. Picking activities without a common theory as a base can make for a fragmented experience for students. A foundation for our choices is important; this often means modifying activities to fit within our theoretical model or orientation. Some authors have developed material using a theoretical orientation (e.g., Vernon, 2006), but most group activity collections lack this unifying force.

Running a counseling group without a theoretical orientation as a foundation is akin to an artist incorporating a variety of painting styles in the same painting; combining elements of classicism, baroque, cubism, impressionism, romanticism, and surrealism is untenable. Each of these schools of thought is unique, with important distinguishing characteristics. While separate works of art from all these schools of thought make an interesting collection in a museum, a combination of these schools in one painting is likely to create a fractured visual experience. The same is true for group counseling. When the counseling groups we lead are grounded in a theoretical orientation that is appropriate for the group needs and the setting, we are providing students with an integrated experience. When the activities we choose and the discussions we promote are consistent with that orientation, we are in an excellent position to effect change.

Approaching Change Strategically

Sometimes change happens serendipitously. We have all had that experience. One day we simply let go of an old habit that we did not want in the first place. Psychologist Martin Seligman (Seligman & Czikszentmihalyi, 2000) tells a great story about his five-year-old daughter who reminded him that she had decided to give up whining and then asked him to change . . . to stop being so grouchy! It turned his life around. His changes in thinking and behavior spawned the movement now called positive psychology. Serendipity is a wonderful thing. Without diminishing the potential for this lively force in all our lives, it is also true that we can approach change strategically. That is what we do when we plan a group counseling curriculum that is solidly anchored in a theoretical orientation.

The leader's theoretical orientation or theory of change underscores what she or he believes about how change occurs. Students are referred for group counseling because they, or someone else, believe something needs to change. This is an essential point. Change is the goal. The goal of all groups, no matter what the orientation, is to create situations and experiences that foster change. A successful group experience can be measured by the students' changes in thinking and behavior subsequent to the group experience.

How a Theoretical Orientation Directly Affects Students

Our theoretical orientation becomes the framework around which we understand a student and the group. It also influences which behaviors and student statements we ignore and which ones we amplify in the group exchanges. A theory of change provides a certain continuity of experience for the students and a road map for the leader. Without this guiding orientation, it is easy to lose our bearing as leaders; it is like sailing without a rudder. Without a theoretical orientation, we are like Dixie cups in the ocean.

If Theoretical Models Are So Important, Why Aren't They More Widely Used?

Given the importance of a theory of change, it is unfortunate that in a recent survey of 802 school counselors (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007), the vast majority of counselors did not base their counseling groups on a theoretical orientation. In terms of strategy or technique, the least used group practice was establishing client goals. Without an orientation as a rudder or a goal as a destination, group counseling seems doomed to flounder.

We can only speculate about the reasons that most counseling groups are either atheoretical or only loosely based on theory. Potential reasons include insufficient training, lack of research on effective practices, and an undervaluing of the importance of a model by practitioners. Counselors may unwittingly use the approach that is most comfortable without attending to approaches supported by research. Whatever the cause, the outcome for students appears to be that they are more routinely involved in group counseling that is less likely to produce change in an effective manner.

Is the Problem Really Insufficient Time?

It has been argued by several researchers that time is the main impediment to offering counseling groups. There is no doubt that this is an issue. It is also the case that offering a counseling group that is ill conceived will likely be unproductive and unlikely to lead to change in students. For the practitioner, it may be easier to avoid repeating a negative experience: If nothing changed, why do it again?

A more thoughtful approach would be to dig in and figure out what did work, what did not work, and eliminate the problem. This kind of assessment is easier to make when there is a framework or model as a reference point. It is easier to see why a specific activity or discussion in a group was poorly received when we consider it within the context of our model. But in the whirling blur that often is the school environment, it takes determination to be a reflective group leader. A theoretical orientation is an excellent starting point.

CHOOSING A FOUNDATION: AN EXPLORATION OF MODELS

There are many models to choose from when considering a theoretical orientation for group counseling. As noted earlier, there is no single right model, but some may be a better fit than others for the school environment. For this reason, practitioners may consider using one model as a first choice and switching to another when it becomes clear that the needs of the group dictate a change in approach.

Psychodynamic

Most "psychotherapists" on television or in the movies are portrayed getting clients to talk about their feelings. Movies such as *What About Bob?, Good Will Hunting,* or *The Sixth Sense* or the TV series *The Sopranos* fall into this category. This is what the general public and novice graduate students expect from a counselor. In this model, problems are caused by unconscious, internal conflicts. It is assumed that talking about one's feelings will lead to insight. This insight will then help the person resolve the angst that brought him or her to therapy. This approach to solving problems is called a psychodynamic orientation. A leader running a group with students from this perspective would be oriented toward expression of feelings. While this orientation is used less frequently in schools today, most parents assume this is the orientation used by practitioners when asked to give permission for group counseling. We can correct this impression by writing clear letters of permission to parents. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Cognitive-Behavioral

A leader who believes that change is most likely to occur when students change their irrational thoughts and the related negative feelings (as well as their behaviors) is likely working from a cognitive-behavioral orientation. It is assumed that the way we think affects the way we feel. Faulty thinking leads to negative emotions, and problem behavior may be the result. The goal of treatment is to help people with the way they think so they can change the way they act. This approach tends to be action-oriented, problem-solving, and focused on present thinking and behavior.

In a group setting, activities and discussions are consistent with this model or approach to change. For example, Vernon (2006) recommends an activity with fifth and sixth graders designed to help them recognize that their feelings change when their thoughts change. Scenarios are presented and students individually respond by writing their feelings and thoughts. In one situation, students are asked to imagine, "You have just been selected for the All Stars Baseball Team. The game begins in a few minutes" (p. 223). Individual differences become apparent as members share their reactions to the same situation. Some students may find this to be a thrilling prospect, while others may find it terrifying. Differences in feelings lead to differences in thinking. Some students may think "This is the best day of my life," while others may think it is one of the worst. The discussion that follows focuses on questions such as, *Have you ever changed your feelings because you changed your thoughts?* This model can be used effectively in schools.

Behavioral

This model is based on the principles of basic learning and behavior modification. The goal is to shape observable maladaptive behavior and substitute new positive responses based on consequences, reinforcement, extinction, and negative reinforcement. Change occurs as the practitioner reinforces acceptable behaviors and takes active steps to suppress undesirable behaviors. Desirable behaviors can also be modeled. This orientation is particularly helpful when the primary goals for group counseling are behaviorally oriented, such as helping students with impulse control issues.

Solution Focused

From a solution-focused perspective, the goal is to help students by constructing solutions rather than dwelling on problems. The key assumption is that problems do not happen all the time; there are times when the problem does not exist or is less intense. Therefore, elements of the solution already exist. The therapeutic task is to shift the focus away from the problem and highlight instead the exceptions to the problem. Students are encouraged to do more of what is already working in their lives and build on small successes. This is the essence of a strength-based model of counseling where the students' strengths and resources become pivotal. Success breeds success.

Solution-focused brief counseling is future focused and goal oriented. The student's goals are framed in positive terms so that what becomes clear is what the student does want, rather than what the student does not want. A comment from the famous ice hockey player Wayne Gretsky captures this future orientation: "I skate to where the puck is going, not to where it's been." This model will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. A review of the research to date (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000) suggests that solution-focused brief counseling is an effective model for use in schools.

Which Model?

The decision on which theoretical model to use as a basis for our counseling groups is dependent on several factors: the goals and theme of the group, the developmental needs of the members, the setting, and the leader's training and experience. The list of models provided here is not exhaustive; the point is that there are choices to be made, and these choices affect student outcomes. Our objective as thoughtful group leaders is to make an informed choice about the model we use when leading counseling groups.

The theoretical orientation we choose should be a good match for the issues of the group. For example, a group of third-grade boys with ADHD is probably a better match for a behavioral or cognitive-behavioral approach than a psychodynamic approach. In addition, the orientation we work from informs our planning and the way we modify an activity to be consistent with that model of change. If we are working from a psychodynamic orientation, we might end an activity

by talking about how the activity made students feel—something we are much less likely to do from a solution-focused approach.

The model we use provides guidance at difficult decision points when leading a group. For example, imagine a leader mired in conversations with fifth-grade girls that are problem saturated and circular (lots of complaining about who did what to whom). From a solution-focused perspective, once the girls feel heard, these endless complaints are probably not useful. Working from this model, the leader would shift the conversation away from the problem-dominated discourse and ask instead about times when the problems do not exist.

Why Not Simply Use the Best Parts of Each Model?

Can you blend models? Take the best parts of each? The answer to this is both yes and no. There are aspects of some models that make good sense no matter what model the practitioner is using. For example, the focus on student strengths and resources might work well regardless of the model. However, the assumptions about how change occurs are quite different—and in some ways contradictory—in each of the models briefly described. In a solution-focused group, talking about feelings may be appropriate for developing group cohesion and establishing commonality, but it is not assumed that change occurs as a result of the conversation. The conversation serves a useful purpose, but it is not an end point. In contrast, for a psychodynamic leader who is less oriented toward goals and more focused on process, the conversation about feelings might be an end point without ever arriving at a concrete solution or idea about what to do next.

A Single Perfect Theoretical Model Doesn't Exist

The essential question to ask ourselves is not which model is best, but rather which model is best for this specific situation. Recent research on various theoretical models over a forty year span indicates that there is no one perfect theoretical model (Asay & Lambert, 1999). No single approach has proven to be more effective than others. Therapists foster change by maximizing relationships, developing hope and expectancy, and building on client strengths. The model or theoretical orientation the therapist chooses to promote

change accounts for only 15 percent of effective change. After years of scholarly competition about which model is best, it turns out that everyone wins. It is the commonalities rather than the differences in the various theoretical orientations that are significant. Extending this research to group counseling suggests that there are choices to be made.

Why Solution-Focused Principles Are a Great Match for School Groups

Solution-focused brief counseling is not the only way to work effectively with students to produce change, but it is a practical and intuitively sensible approach for working with students in a school setting. In an era of accountability, it is a model with an explicit focus on goals and change. In this way, it is a school-friendly approach. It is also a model that teachers, administrators, and parents can readily understand. When it comes to granting permission for group counseling, parents are more amenable when there is a stated goal that makes intuitive sense. Many authors have applied the solution-focused model to individual counseling (e.g., Murphy, 2008; Sklare, 2005), but less has been written about applying solution-focused ideas to school counseling groups. The next chapter is devoted to what it looks like when school counseling groups are based on the principles and assumptions of solution-focused brief counseling.

PRACTITIONER TRAINING

As practitioners, we work with students because we want to help, to contribute. But without the training to provide that help, we can become well-intentioned do-gooders with a low probability of being able to actually make a difference.

When courses in group counseling are offered in graduate schools, it is common for the instructor to have the class become a "group" and the instructor to become a group leader. In these situations, the class becomes a quasi group-therapy situation. Regardless of the merits or disadvantages of this approach to training, one thing is certain: Graduate students do *not* learn how to run groups in elementary and secondary schools by talking about their fear of failure

or even their successes with classmates. Thus, it is not surprising that many educators enter the school environment unprepared to organize and run groups.

The purpose of this book is to give the practitioner whose training was thin and the graduate student who is new to the field an equal opportunity to learn how to lead successful school counseling groups. We all want to make a difference. This book will help you do just that.

SUMMARY

As mental health practitioners working in schools, we have a unique opportunity to support students by offering group counseling. Advances in our field mean we now know a great deal more about what creates change: client factors, relationship factors, hope, and the model or theoretical orientation. We can use this information to our advantage. Our informed choices may take us on a journey from the way we have always done it into unfamiliar territory. The challenges inherent in learning something new will be rewarded by seeing the difference we can make.

Momentum in the field has shifted from a spotlight on the *process* to a focus on the *outcome*. The advent of data-based decision making and research-based programs has helped shift the focus to outcome. What we do in our student contact is important, but whether it actually produces results is equally so. Researchers have a heightened interest in change and how to create it. The model of change used by the practitioner in group counseling becomes the platform for creating and supporting changes in the lives of our students. There is no one best model or theoretical orientation, but some models of counseling may be a better fit in a school environment. Given the importance of the model of change, it merits careful consideration.