

Creative Arts in Group Work

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Introduction

I will be discussing creative arts as a useful tool in sexual assault support group activities; how it can be integrated in many ways using a variety of modalities. The use of creative arts can be effective in regulating group dynamics and creating a safe platform for group participation. I will explore how spoken language can be a filter that at times can hinder group inquiry. I will also look at the individual within the group, how the group holds the individual in working as a group, group structure and process and how participants might unfold and discover what they don't yet know. The engagement of the whole self in creative arts inquiry will also be explored. The use of creative arts as a valuable tool for participants with literacy or learning disabilities will also be considered.

Difference between an art therapy group and using creative arts in group work

An Art Therapy Group employs art making as an exploration and discovery tool in a therapeutic process. On the other hand by contrast, the use of creative arts in a support group is different; the use of materials and representations aids self awareness and understanding as well as relationship building and develops communication in relation to shared experiences while building support. It is also true that there is always therapeutic value.

The role of the facilitator

Over the life of the group, facilitators need to be flexible and responsive in assessing how and when the inclusion of a creative activity might support group inquiry. It requires an awareness of group dynamics and how a creative arts activity might support the group to establish safety and equity in the individual's experience of being a group participant. When considering themes to be explored, the facilitator needs to be mindful of what form of activity and what materials might best support that exploration, to have appropriate equipment available and to display materials in a way that invokes curiosity. The facilitator always needs to ask the question, "How is this activity going to facilitate the development of an inquisitive and supportive group dynamic?"

Adults are often anxious when they are asked to use creative material. They as children or in another setting they may have experienced a shaming or have been berated for "not getting it right" or using an incorrect technique. The use of creative materials could be introduced as almost stepping back to younger times, not with the formal art making and critiquing, but with the childlike free expression and exploration, when communication was on many levels and discovery of thoughts and feelings had permission to be experienced through different modalities. It is important to reassure participants that the use of creative materials isn't about the aesthetics of the final product, it is about the process and what is noticed.

Language as a filter

In conversation or verbal communication often what we share and how much we share is filtered. It is subject to how safe we feel, judgments we feel might be made e.g. "Am I

using the right words”, and “Do I sound like an idiot”. As we share information through language we also hold considerations such as how will I feel in sharing this, how will the other feel, and therefore we have already limited the possibility of a new exploration and understanding of thoughts and feelings. Using modalities other than written or spoken language in representing what we think, feel and understand offers greater possibilities for authentic knowing, because it removes or limits this filter.

Safety in exploration

For emotions that are too difficult to name or acknowledge the use of creative arts can provide a visual acknowledgment. This can then be viewed with a degree of separation. This separation allows the participant to give what then might be an editorial of what is being viewed, at times using description as stepping stones to safely name feelings, emotions or circumstance to the self and if desired with the group. For feelings that have not been named or recognized, this process allows for the measured consideration and sharing that is no less valuable yet at times more powerful because the visual stays with the group and the individual - and thoughts don't get lost in the next comment or reflection.

In support groups there is often discussion or brainstorming when participants share differing thoughts and ideas. This can be a fairly cognitive process with recognition or acknowledgment of feelings. In my experience, these encounters absolutely strengthen a groups' bond and there is a degree of 'norming' and 'forming'. This is essential as participants begin to relate to others and gauge a sense of how they place themselves within the group structure. This support group process or format creates an integral foundation for deeper considerations and awareness that can then be explored, acknowledged and validated through creative arts activities.

There are moments for participants when sharing verbally can create a fear of becoming overwhelmed with emotion and therefore they may choose to stay silent. The use of a creative arts response or expression enables the participant to present what they are feeling/noticing, they can experience emotions and thoughts safely, still acknowledging them but without the fear of public embarrassment or judgment.

The individual within the group

Creative arts allows for the individual to stay with what is being experienced, looking at it from different angles and distances, offering a framework for thoughts, feelings and new understandings to be expressed or/and represented as individual considerations before being immersed in the group. These thoughts and feelings come together through representation. The concrete expressions of these ideas and emotions are there to be witnessed, not getting lost through the fluidity and transition of conversation either by the group or the individual.

Victim/survivors of who experienced childhood sexually assault in their pre verbal phase, may not have language to describe the abuse or how they survived and the same could be argued for victim/survivors of ASA who also have images and truths stored. Using creative arts can give representation to what the right brain holds then give it language through description thus using and integrating left and right brain.

For the individual who experiences dissociative moments that might cause them to disconnect from the group or environment during conversation, the conciseness and

deliberate focusing on alternative modalities could support them to stay more present in the moment and in an optimal arousal state.

How the group holds the individual

The group has opportunity to respond to the individual, what they notice, reflecting on how materials, colours and textures have been placed or used, offering the individual the possibility of a different perspective. This is not an interpretation or advice giving process, it is more an opportunity for others in the group to speak of what they see using description and also to perhaps reflect on thoughts and feelings they had e.g. "Those stones looked so strong around your house, they actually made me feel strong".

This response by the group to the individual can also be done with a creative arts response, one way might be for participants to use 'post it' notes to place a word or a picture in the vicinity of the others work. For example they may have heard in the individual describe having felt isolated but now is back studying even though at times it is difficult, the word or picture placed next to that might state or reflect "courage" or "determination". Using creative arts in this process allows the response of the other participants to be experienced in different ways. It allows a consideration of how the response speaks to, adds depth to or fits with the original representation. The individual has the opportunity to notice the physical, emotional and cognitive responses they may be experiencing. For example, does it build on or offer new perspective? Again this integrated experience is not being lost in or limited to verbal language. It allows the support which is integral to being a support group to be offered in diverse modalities

Working as a group

Using an activity that brings the whole group together in creative process can:

- Create a sense of unity, building a corporate strength
- Allow for the process of reflection on and identification of shared experience.
- Assist in identification of diversity and similarity in coping and strengths

The creating, then stepping back to observe, can allow victim/survivors to see their uniqueness, but to also have the added value of noticing how their uniqueness/or unique experience sits with or differs from the uniqueness of others. There is powerful symbolic strength in seeing the self as part of that community, building on what the individual knew and celebrating what the group now knows and can share. For example as a group activity group members might be invited to use the life-size outline of a woman in which to place and identify abilities, attributes and strengths that can include all aspects of a women's life. The frame of a women's body might, through the work of all of the members, come to incorporate strengths they currently identify, hope to identify or have identified in others. The group can then step back and reflect on the visual representation of the combined strength and attributes of the group, noticing what is different to their own experience, experiencing each individual response that then flows and combines into group experience. In this way reflection can be had on the somatic, emotional and cognitive experiences.

Identifying what is not yet known

When language can't be found, colour, shape, and texture might offer a more accurate representation, at times without an understanding of why, it simply feels for the moment like it fits/connects. Often in counselling we are exploring with victim/survivors, helping them to recognize or give name to what they don't yet know or as yet haven't felt supported enough or safe enough to acknowledge. In using a multimodal form of inquiry,

members of a support group can consider a theme or question such as anger or intimacy, introduce themselves to texture, colour and shape, stay with what they feel in that moment before it has rational or cognitive understanding. It is this phenomenological moment that enables the deeper knowing. The use of creative modalities allows the individual and the group to stay with what is being experienced.

The whole self

The use of creative arts utilises the whole self in any inquiry into a thought or theme that a support group might be exploring.

I would identify several components to this:

- The tactile. What you feel drawn to touch and find out more about, "This wool feels soft/comforting" or "This stone feels hard/immovable".
- The visual. Feeling drawn to different colours and shapes, "I'm drawn to this red but it doesn't feel comfortable, I feel angry".
- Being aware of the body, its response to colour, shapes and texture, "This black wire, I notice my teeth clench" or "The sparkle in this bead makes me smile and feel warm". There is also value in moving through space and introducing oneself to the colours and objects in the act of exploration. The group can almost feel organic and naturally evolving in these moments.
- The doing. How things are placed and rearranged, trusting what feels right having choice and control in what is being considered and represented. An authentic positioning of colour and objects.

Group dynamics

An activity using aspects of creative medium, allows each individual participant to spend time with their personal focus and then if that is brought to the larger group, each already has a space that doesn't need to be negotiated, each representation already has a legitimate position whether it is spoken to or not, and the sharing is structured with a clear understanding of process, for example:

- At the beginning of the activity the participants might be invited to consider a question or comment.
- They would then be asked to sit with those thoughts for a moment.
- Be invited to move through the creative materials etc. noticing what they are drawn to.
- Then be asked to build/create using the creative materials, noticing what happens to body, thoughts etc.
- The facilitator will let them know when they have about five minutes left.
- Then, if they choose to, they can share what the process was like and what unfolded. They would be informed that the sharing would be done in turn and in that time there will be opportunity to respond to each other if desired.

The use of creative arts in different activities can be an equalizer for group dynamics. For example there are times in a support group where there can be a dominant vocal participant or participants. In removing verbal communication from the being present to what is felt or known in the beginning of an activity, we can find full measure of that experience can be had without the interruption of another.

The value of structure

Transparent structure managed by a facilitator enables individual participants to relax more into the activity. As stated in the discussion on safety a creative arts process

allows for clear understanding of how the activity will unfold, thus minimising anxiety and allowing participants to be fully engaged with the process. The structure is briefly outlined at the beginning and then greater detail is shared at each different stage of the activity, because they know the parameters and process they share the “control”.

This is not always how group participants explore discussions which may at times seem/or threaten to get out of control. Because language has no boundaries, or at least no visual or tactile boundaries, it can at times be more difficult to facilitate safe, supportive inquiry into a theme or question. Integrating creative process into some activities can help balance the lack of boundedness.

Literacy and learning difficulties

For victim/survivors who may be illiterate or have a learning disability they can participate fully, especially if the activity is introduced in a way that it is clearly understood that reading and writing isn't needed in order to participate fully in the process. Again to ensure there is equity in group process and to ensure an unstated right to participate fully, it is imperative that facilitators have where possible an understanding of the diversity of ability that might be present in the group membership and to structure activities accordingly.

Conclusion

I would like to suggest that a support group is like a small ideal community, growing and nurturing individuals and the common good. Using creative forms of inquiry and expression in a support group facilitates personal and collective growth and development by mirroring the integrative engagement people have in day to day living. We explore our world using touch, hearing, visual cues, taking time to consider and rearrange, noticing how situations and others influence our thoughts and how we perceive and experience our place in that world. The intricate ways we communicate and navigate are in fact our natural tendency. The use of creative arts as a form of exploration and inquiry in a facilitated support group is making our usual everyday processes more overt and considered in group process.