

The Experience of Belonging in the Mutual Help Group GROW

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Deprivation of a sense of belonging has been directly related to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996; Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, & Hoyle, 2002). This establishes low sense of belonging is an important target for intervention in mental health populations. Mutual help groups like GROW are argued to promote a sense of belonging in individuals suffering from mental health problems (Finn, Bishop and Sparrow, 2009; Hagerty et al., 1996; Sargent et al., 2002). GROW has a unique philosophy and particular group processes that may promote factors implicated in theories of sense of belonging formation, such as *valued involvement* (feeling needed or important within the group), *member-group fit* (perceived congruence with others in the group or environment through shared or complimentary characteristics) and by providing frequent and meaningful interpersonal connections (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky & Bouwsema, 1992; Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

This study investigated the experience of belonging in GROW through focus group discussions with three Sydney-based GROW groups. A total of twenty-five people participated in discussions about their general impressions of GROW, their experiences as newcomers, their responses to newcomers in the group and the effects of GROW on their lives. About two thirds of participants were female and the mean age of participants was 48.5 years, with a range of 22 to 66 years. The majority of participants were Australian-born, tertiary educated and employed. Most participants had received a psychiatric diagnosis, the most common being depression and anxiety, and most reported seeking professional assistance and taking medication for their mental health problems as well as attending GROW.

The focus group data was analysed using qualitative methods and the formation of sense of belonging appeared to include three stages. Each stage had an association with a particular type of GROW attendee, from newcomer to committed GROW member.

1. Sense of Safety

For *newcomers*, who tend to be passive observers of the group, a sense of safety appeared very important. People spoke about feeling welcomed, accepted, affirmed from their very first GROW meeting, which helped to dissolve the sense of isolation and stigma encountered in their daily lives. People spoke of feeling “at home” in the GROW group, a place where they could connect with others in a non-intimidating environment without fear of being judged. Factors contributing to people’s sense of safety within the group included the commonality of mental health issues and the structured format of meetings. This stage could be viewed as promoting *member-group fit* through the perception of similar mental health problems and *valued involvement* through the experience of non-judgemental acceptance and affirmation for simply being present at the group.

2. Authentic Expression

For *prospective GROW members* who are starting to disclose personal information within the group, authentic expression appeared most important. People spoke about the GROW ethos of openness and the sense of empathic understanding within the group. It was described as confronting to be completely open with relative strangers but also liberating to speak without fear of boring others, being misunderstood or stigmatised. Self-

disclosure was followed by the provision of authentic and supportive feedback from the group, which strengthened bonds and a sense of acceptance within the group. This stage appeared to facilitate the expression of mutual affective concern between GROW members, a quality of interpersonal connections theorised to be crucial for the formation a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

3. Friendship

For *committed GROW members* friendship appeared to be paramount. People spoke about having more friends as a result of attending GROW and frequently referred to the close and caring nature of friendships with other GROW members. People described friendship as a “special key to mental health”, which played a key role in their recovery (GROW, 2004). The positive psychosocial benefits associated with longer duration of GROW membership may be partially attributed to increased sense of belonging through friendship formation. The community ethos and group processes of GROW appear to foster the kind of frequent and meaningful interpersonal interactions theorised to form a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The regularity of GROW meetings combined with phone calls and extra social activities between meetings allow for frequent interactions between members. Furthermore the quality of these interactions may be enhanced by acts of mutual help between members over time. The reciprocity of help between members may also contribute to a sense of *valued involvement* in the group.

This study highlights the potential benefits of GROW, which can be viewed as having particular community and group processes that promote sense of belonging from the very first meeting. The findings of this paper are supportive of the view that professional and community based interventions for mental health such as GROW can supplement each other. As such, mental health professionals are encouraged to recommend that their clients attend mutual help groups such as GROW, especially where low sense of belonging or poor social support appears to be a maintaining factor for psychopathology.

References

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