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## Stop Avoiding Challenging Situations in Group Counseling

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*Challenging situations that arise in group counseling are a positive source of therapeutic energy—potentially rich moments that are commonly avoided. Presented are multifaceted ways to observe, understand, and approach challenging situations. Six well-established perspectives from which to view and assess challenges are summarized: (a) member selection, (b) systems theory, (c) group dynamics, (d) individual members' functioning in group, (e) themes implicit within specific members' issues, and (f) leader introspection. These six perspectives are described as ways for group leaders to conceptualize and approach rather than avoid challenging situations in groups.*

Challenges and conflicts in groups are natural phenomena (Gladding, 1999; Horne & Campbell, 1997; Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 1998; Kottler, 1994; Yalom, 1995). Challenges often are viewed as negative forces and good reason for counselors to be reluctant to conduct groups. Paradoxically, challenge and conflict also can be viewed as a source of positive therapeutic energy in a group. Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of group leadership is the ability of the group leader to respond to conflict or challenging incidents in the group. Donigian and Malnati (1987) and Donigian and Hulse-Killacky (1999) suggested that critical incidents in a group are "potential opportunities" (p. 1) for group growth when they are managed appropriately.

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The authors of this article view challenge and conflict in counseling groups as opportunities to harness such positive therapeutic energy and present multifaceted ways to observe, understand, and respond to challenging situations. A vignette of a challenging situation from a counseling group is presented with descriptions of possible responses from each of six perspectives: group member selection, systems theory, group dynamics, understanding the individual members' functioning in group, addressing themes implicit within members' issues, and group leader introspection. Rather than avoiding leading groups altogether or avoiding challenges that arise during groups, this article offers leaders a schema for considering beneficial methods for approaching challenges as rich opportunities for member (and leader) growth.

### A MODEL FOR APPROACHING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Challenges take on different meaning for different leaders. Some leaders will experience the emergence of anger, sadness, disregard, disengagement, fear, or blame from members as challenging. For some, the member who confronts the leader (e.g., competence, authority, and caring) will be viewed as challenging. Yet for others, challenging situations occur without warning—events that emerge that leaders may feel hindered by. The organizing process advocated in this article is to neither blame nor equate leader perception of challenging situations as reason to avoid such events in the group. If the therapeutic energy that emerges from a challenging moment is to benefit the group, meaning must emerge from it. The method proposed here encourages leaders to approach the situation by first attending to and valuing their reaction to it. The leader must internally process challenges in part by asking themselves supervision-like questions before effective intervention can follow. The six perspectives incorporated here are by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive; other theoretical postures or technical interventions may become part of a leader's self-supervision questions, depending on their personal and professional beliefs and preferences.

One might envision these questions as a menu for the leader. This analogy enables leaders to select an entree that will aid in making meaning of the challenge in the moment. The menu reminds leaders that multiple selections are possible. Such schema is intended to inhibit the leader from relying on rote response and avoidance. To extend this analogy one step further, there are six cuisines (i.e., member selection, systems theory, group dynamics/stages, individual members' group

issues, emerging themes, and leader introspection) on the menu, each followed by unique entrees. Selecting from the menu provides a schema to guide the group leader in responding to challenges as they arise in the group.

#### The Menu

1. Were group members appropriately selected?
  - Does each member of the group present a concern that is related to the purpose of the group?
  - Is the member safe in the group and the group safe with the member?
  - Is each member at an appropriate level of functioning for this group (cognitive and psychological)?
2. Is the challenging incident related to the group system?
  - How are all members contributing to this moment?
  - What does this incident tell me about the functioning of the group?
  - How is this incident affecting the group? Its members? The whole group? The subgroups?
3. Is the incident a function of the stage or of the dynamics of this group?
  - How much of this is a function of normal group development?
  - How can I facilitate a process with the group so those members can try new behaviors?
  - To which therapeutic forces do I need to attend to help the group in this stage of group development?
4. Is this incident a symptom of an individual member's style of functioning?
  - How does this exemplify this individual member's presenting problem?
  - How can I intervene to promote insight?
  - How can I respond in a way that keeps all members invested in the group?
5. How can I include other group members?
  - Is this incident related to issues raised in the group?
  - How does this incident exemplify underlying core issues?
  - How can I intervene to facilitate insight related to the content and themes of this group?
  - How can I help members make intra- and interpersonal meaning of this incident?
6. Is this incident an artifact of my own responses to the group or to individual members?
  - How am I responding personally to this incident?
  - How is my response related to my own personal style?
  - What does my intuition tell me about what is happening in the group?

#### A COUNSELING GROUP VIGNETTE

To explicate how each of these six perspectives might be used to harness the potential therapeutic energy produced during challenging situ-

ations, a brief vignette is provided. The following excerpt is a transcribed portion from the fourth group counseling session at a college counseling center. Six college students comprise the membership. The leader was a counselor in training, an intern from a nearby counselor education program. This situation was identified by the leader as challenging. In the leader's own words, "I felt like avoiding the whole situation."<sup>1</sup>

1. Leader: Seems that, Chris, you're struggling with belonging in the group?
2. Chris: It's that I'm not sure I belong in this group, you know.
3. Dale: You belong.
4. Carol: [to Chris] What's that mean, not sure you belong?
5. Deloris: [to Chris] You really are good here, you know, it seems to me.
6. Carl: [to Deloris, with a sarcastic tone] And it seems to me . . . that you would say anything to make members of this group feel "good."
7. [Carol audible sigh]
8. Leader: [to Chris] I wonder if you could tell us more about being unsure about belonging.
9. Chris: Ah . . . I don't know, you know, maybe my problems are different than everyone else's? Maybe, I'd be better going to counseling, you know one-on-one.
10. Carl: [cut and obviously not listening to Chris] Carol, why do you always ask for "clarification?" I swear, I wish just once you could "get it" the first time without asking. "What's that mean?" Cry'n out loud, don't you get sick of always asking?
11. Deloris: [agitated and somewhat out of character] You know, I keep wondering how come you are so critical. You offer nothing to this group except to tell everyone what they are doing wrong. Are you a hypocrite outside group too?
12. Carl: [to Deloris] Probably 'cause . . .
13. Leader: [cutting off Carl's reaction and reply] I notice several members of the group really struggling right now. Struggling, I think in some really important ways. [pause] It seems to me there is lots of energy around "belonging."
14. [Reflective pause]
15. Leader: Would you like, Chris, to tell us more about what you were saying before—not being sure you belong in this group?
16. Chris: I don't know, I feel weird. I'm no good at talking about the way I feel.
17. Dale: Maybe you could try. Try to tell us what you feel—I know I am interested because I feel really weird here too sometimes, I don't know if I belong in here either.
18. Chris: Um . . . sort of sick, I get a really sick feeling in here sometimes. It's the feeling I get when my parents would snip at each other . . . snip—like be sarcastic—too little to be a fight but just enough to make me mad.
19. Amy: Mad?
20. Chris: [continues] Mad, like when Carl started in on Carol, like he usually does . . . and then Deloris, she starts . . .

21. Deloris: Yeah, I know that feeling. I was pissed off every time my father would just ignore the constant fact that my mother was half drunk all the time. Oh, but no, he wouldn't say a word. Needed to keep everything smooth. God forbid he'd tell her how he felt, what her drinking did to our family. [hears]
22. [an uncomfortable silence]
23. Carol: Are you okay, Deloris?
24. [Deloris nods, okay, but remains tearful and quiet]
25. Leader: Let's back up a minute. Amy, you were asking Chris a question about her feeling "mad."
26. Carl: [barely audible, directed toward the leader] It [a sound of disgust one can make with the tip of the tongue against the front teeth]
27. Amy: Yeah . . . I just was surprised Chris is mad. I would feel different if my parents treated everyone like that . . . I'd be . . .
28. Deloris: Be what?
29. Amy: Be . . . I'd be scared.
30. Dale: [nodding and sitting up at the edge of the chair] Um hmm.
31. Amy: I'd be scared that eventually the top would blow off and I would be divorced, I mean, they would be divorced. That's it. Um, scared.
32. Leader: [nodding to Amy and then turning to Dale] So Dale, you certainly are connecting with Amy right now—when you see people "snip" in here, what is it you feel?
33. Dale: Yeah, scared . . . like Amy.

## DISCUSSION OF THE VIGNETTE

### Issues Related to Member Selection

The following section carefully examines various aspects of the challenges presented in this vignette. The six menu cuisines are addressed in turn.

Effective group counseling begins with effective member selection (Yalom, 1995). Challenges and conflict that emerge during group are beneficial providing all members are appropriate for the group. "Screening is essential because not everyone is appropriate for every group" (Jacobs et al., 1998, p. 60). Any time group counseling is used, the leader has an ethical obligation to conduct some form of screening (Association for Specialists in Group Work, 1991). The screening serves as the source of the contract between the individual group members and from the leader outlining expectations for the group. When a challenging situation occurs in a counseling group, the contracted purpose for the member to be in the group and the contracted purpose for the leader's creating the group become critical factors in responding to the situation. The challenging situation often can be linked to the member's purpose for being in the group or to the main theme for conducting the group. As one or

more members engage in disruptive or otherwise challenging behavior, linking the challenging situation to the member's initial goal for participating in the group (disclosed during a screening interview) can be a facilitative way for the leader to intervene in the situation. Thus, the challenging situation can be viewed from the perspective of the member's unique purpose for being in the group.

Assume for the purpose of illustrating this point that the group members in our vignette are in fact well screened and appropriate to this particular group's functions and goals. Consider that Carl's stated purpose for being in the group was his desire to improve his relationship skills with women. In the screening interview, he stated that, "girls get upset with me" because he becomes quite critical of their emotional sensitivity. Carl's reaction to Carol could be an incident where the leader could respond to Carl's critical response to Carol and how this might be representative of his concerns that brought him to the group. Another example is illustrated by Dale's comments during pregroup screening that he is not feeling accepted by peers. When he reacts to Chris (17), the leader could respond to his feeling "weird" at this very moment in the group and how this might relate to his feelings of lack of acceptance outside of the group.

The important aspect of this issue is to screen candidates for a counseling group with the purpose of establishing a therapeutic compatibility among members, members' concerns about joining the group, and attention to the member's purpose for being in the group. These issues, however, do not lose importance once the group is under way. These same screening issues will occur and recur as the group develops and functions in the here and now.

### Issues Related to Group Systems

When observing a group, one of the ways to perceive the patterns of members' behaviors is through systems theory. Systems theory views members' behaviors in relation to the whole of the group's functioning versus viewing the challenge by the isolated patterns of behaviors of the group's members. Agazarian (1997) stressed systems-centered therapy (SCT) for observing groups. SCT shifts the central focus of observing a group from individual member behaviors to the group as a whole, the system. When observing a challenging member in a group, the leader is not only sensitive to the unique behavior of the member but also observes the member within the context of the group as a system. Donigian and Malnati (1997) referred to the work of von Bertalanffy's general systems theory (GST), which proposes that to understand seemingly unrelated events is not to isolate their parts but is, rather, to place

them in a context where they are viewed as parts of a larger system. In both SCT and GST, the premise is that a system is more than the sum of its parts.

Donigian and Malnati (1997) summarized systems thinking for group leaders as "systematically thinking leaders do not observe events that occur within the group in isolation, but rather in terms of their interdependence and the subsequent patterned responses these events evoke in each of the subsystems over time" (p. 3). They suggested it is short-sighted to perceive a challenging member's behavior in isolation of others. Donigian and Malnati reminded us to think about the three basic elements present in a group: the member, the leader, and the group itself. This concept can be expanded to four elements when adding the existence of subgroups as another natural phenomenon in a group (Yalom, 1995). Thus, the group can be viewed as a function of these four elements and that each element affects the other, a reciprocal causality. For instance, when a member of the group presents a challenge, that event also affects the total group, subsystems of members within the group, and the group leader. Likewise, when the leader responds to the challenge, it affects the member, the subsystems within the group, and the group. Thus, from a systems perspective, when an incident involves a challenging member or challenging situation, the leader can view it from the perspective of the member, the subgroup of the member, the group, and the effect of the situation on self as the leader.

Systems thinking can also be summarized in this way: The behaviors of each member are related to the behavior of all other members in a group (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). When a group member begins to behave in a manner that is disruptive to the group, it not only affects the functioning of the group in that moment, but the disruptive member is likely reacting to, perhaps even inspired by, the way the group is functioning at that moment. The challenging member could be responding to the situation in group with some transferred perception rooted in an aspect of their lives outside of the group, perhaps rooted in their family of origin. The group's functioning at that point reminds them of issues unique to aspects of their lives outside of the group. The challenging members could be reacting in some way to a subgroup, the group in general, or the leader. This concept is illustrated in the preceding vignette.

A critical factor is for the group leader to observe and be sensitive to how the member is affected by the group as a whole, by specific members in the group, and by one's self as the group leader. When experiencing a challenging situation in a group and viewing it from a systems perspective, the leader can address the group as a whole and focus on the interactive patterns of the members with one another and with self as the leader. This is illustrated by the leader's intervention in statement 13 in

the vignette. Too frequently, the challenging pattern of behavior is viewed from a micro-diagnostic perspective versus the macro-diagnostic perspective (Kotler, 1994), from the individual member's perspective versus the whole of the group. Also, the leader should be sensitive to his or her presence as a critical part of the group system. The leader affects the system and is affected by the system; again, a reciprocal causality.

Deloris's emotional reaction seems to be evoked as Chris struggles to label feeling "mad." She states, "I know that feeling. I was pissed off every time my father . . ." (21). Group members react with some surprise (awkward silence [22]) at her uncharacteristic energy and emotion. Perhaps because as Deloris connects what is happening in the group to memories of her personal experience with her family of origin, she recalls and sees how she relies on her father's resulting silence and peacekeeping. Prior to this moment, we see Deloris attempt to rescue Chris from feelings of not belonging to the group (5) and lashing out at Carl as he rebukes Carol (11). We also witness how her tears and ultimate silence are perhaps the only way she knows to respond to other group members' challenging behaviors. In fact, the tears might be of realization.

Had the leader chosen to take a slightly alternate intervention, attention could have been directed at further eliciting Deloris's feelings that were emerging at the moment, affording Deloris an opportunity to connect how her experience in the group reenacts family-of-origin patterns. As well, the experience of other members in the group at that moment may have been reminiscent of their own out-of-group personal experiences. By the leader focusing members' attention to the whole group or perhaps the subgroup of Carl, Carol, Chris, and to Deloris's pattern of interacting, each would benefit from new clarity and heightened awareness of the intra- as well as interpersonal relationships in the group and out.

### Issues Related to Group Dynamics

Authors of group dynamics theory, including Bennis and Shepard (1956) and Tuckman (1965), in identifying stages of group dynamics, cited the second stage of linear theory as counterdependent or storming. This concept is widely used to understand the process of how a group functions. Challenging situations and conflicts often occur in a group during the storming phase; it is quite common to have an increased frequency of challenges in the storming stage of a group. Allowing this stage to occur and respecting it has been noted as crucial for the group to move toward a phase of productivity (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Korman, 1999; Tuckman, 1965).

Gladling (1999) stated that it is critical that the group leader allows the members to learn how to work through the less productive ways of relating when the group is in the storming stage. This allows members to create more productive and creative ways to view conflict and helps members establish their unique place in the group. Korman (1999) stated that conflict is necessary for change and suggested that understanding the characteristics of the storming stage and facilitating the group through this stage are critical functions of the group leader. In short, the key to resolving conflict is to help members learn to respect it and to manage it, and except in extenuating circumstances, the leader should not ignore, circumvent, or try to eliminate the conflict in the group.

The group literature has helpful suggestions on how to respond to the challenges that occur in the storming stage (Gladling, 1999; Jacobs et al., 1998; Korman, 1999; Yalom, 1995). Some of these strategies include (a) help members to recognize and express anxieties, (b) help members to understand the value of recognizing and dealing openly with conflict, (c) be sensitive to the perceptions of the members, (d) help the members become more independent in responding to challenging situations, and (e) serve as a model for the members by dealing directly and honestly with the challenges to the leader. Similarly, Kline (1990) recommended that once it is determined that it is the member's behavior that is indeed what is causing "problems" to: (a) consider the effect of the intervention strategies selected, (b) model effective communication for any strategy selected and reinforce effective communication in response to the strategy, (c) present feedback on the effect of the behavior, (d) help the member(s) acknowledge some responsibility for the pattern of the conflictual behavior, (e) involve other members in the processing of the responses to the challenging situation, and (f) try to use the incident as a source of learning and growth for all group members.

Being cognizant of the normal tendency for a group to experience the storming stage provides the group leader with insight to the way a challenging situation is occurring. How the group leader responds to this stage is a crucial step in facilitating the group into the next phase, the working stages of a group. Rybak and Brown (1997) proposed that the conflict that is often a part of the storming stage of group development represents a level of relationship development, especially when viewed from a systems perspective. The leader, however, must be cautious about being too apt to view challenges as only being related to the storming stage. As noted previously, the challenging event could be related to the systems thinking concepts, to an evolving stage of group dynamics, or to other therapeutic group phenomena.



Staying present as a leader is challenging when the group is in conflict. In fact, it is no easy task for group members either. We see in the following excerpt how both group members and the leader often assuage challenge—directly and indirectly. Consider two examples where attention to group dynamics offers interesting insights. “You offer nothing to this group except to tell everyone what they are doing wrong,” Deloris says to Carl (11). In the example, the leader chooses to divert the group from Carl’s reply—functionally, one might imagine, to disarm a potentially confrontational encounter (in a following section, see the leader’s thoughts about this intervention). The escape from the risk of conflict now potentially becomes a norm: The leader will save us from any real conflict. Had the leader remained patient and withheld redirection from this intermember conflict, Deloris and Carl might have experienced and grown from more productive ways of being in and working through conflict. Other group members might have had the chance to offer corrective feedback to Deloris and Carl, making the conflict a learning and empowering process for all members.

Chris later connects and voices his “feeling mad” (20) with a previous moment in the group when “Carl started in on Carol.” The leader’s earlier action (10) lessened the chance that Chris could or would express his feelings to Carl as they arose. Despite the fact that the leader refocused the group back to Chris (15, 16), by then, although only seconds had passed, the feelings in that moment—the potential positive energy—had been lost.

### Issues Related to Individual Members

When a member of a group presents a challenging behavior, the group leader might consider that the behavior is related to the unique psychology of that member and his or her pattern of behaviors. It is widely accepted that members have their unique reasons for acting out that might go beyond the explanations of group dynamics, systems types of conflict with the group or specific members in the group, or with the leader (Gladding, 1999; Horne & Campbell, 1997; Jacobs et al., 1998; Kottler, 1992). For example, Horne and Campbell (1997) suggested that in some cases, group members who challenge the system are doing so to be heard and to be recognized. In this conceptualization, acting-out behaviors may be a reaction to the member’s perception of the social system that denies them recognition or participation. Thus, the acting out can be a response to the member’s perception of not having a meaningful place in the group or not being heard or understood by the group.

Another helpful concept for viewing a challenging situation in a group can be explained by understanding that in any group of people it is

common to have some members who are counterdependents (Bennis & Shepard, 1956). *Counterdependents* are defined as group members who balk at authoritative structures such as conforming to the norms of a group even though established by the group. With this concept of counterdependent behavior in mind, the leader can also view the challenge as a rather normal condition within a group setting; that is, in many groups, there are likely to be counterdependent members just as there are independent and dependent members. Using this concept, the group leader can reframe the situation from a negatively viewed experience to a source of creative energy. In this conceptualization, independent members tend to be more objective and rational in their involvement and often serve as a source of energy to work toward conflict resolution. Dependent members tend to do what they think is the right thing to do and will not be as apt to become involved in the controversy. Counterdependent members serve as the catalyst to attend to underlying issues that are occurring and limiting the group’s productivity and growth. Thus, each individual has an important role in the group. This perspective allows the focus and energy of the group to shift from a negative perspective to a theoretically supported positive perspective (Bennis & Shepard, 1956). By viewing the challenge as a source of positive energy, the leader is able to shift the focus from the negative aspects of the challenge to the potential for an increased relationship development in the group.

Another perspective presented by Kottler (1992) is that a group leader may react to a challenging member as the member’s failure to meet the leader’s expectations. It is important to recognize that how the leader identifies a challenging member of a group is as much a function of the perception of the leader as it is a function of the behavior of the member (Horne & Campbell, 1997). Is the resistance in the challenging situation a natural condition of a group, or is it viewed as counterproductive? A therapeutic perspective of a challenging situation is to view conflict as a natural source for change and growth and to respond to the challenge in a way that facilitates growth. This is more easily accomplished when the leader can trust the process and be present with the process. Forester-Miller and Gressard (1997) stated that to work through a conflict in the group the leader must trust the process of the group and allow the conflict to flourish. By allowing the challenging situation to be present and staying with the process of it in the group, it often will evolve into a source for moving the group into a more cohesive unit. The leader might ask herself or himself, “Is this challenge by the member a reaction to what is occurring in the group, a result of the evolving group dynamics, or in fact, my expectations of how I believe the member ‘should’ behave?”

Carol (4, 23) seems able and willing to offer her empathic support to others. Despite a critical and accusatory tone, Carl (10) attempts to amplify his awareness of this pattern as he observes it. One might view this example through a dependent, independent, and counterdependent lens. In fact, Carol may well be doing what she believes is her appropriate role in the group (and elsewhere, dependent); whereas, Carl's counter-dependent position—reframed from argumentative and cantankerous—draws Carol's and other members' attention to something of immense value.

Another example: Focus on Carl's barely audible "4!" (26) following the leader's redirect to Amy (25) concerning her reaction to Chris. At this moment, the leader might have chosen to shift the focus of members' attention to Carl's "4!" rather than missing this opportunity. Whether his "4!" was a sound of frustration or perhaps even anger, the group could have dealt more openly and honestly with his challenge, especially as Carl's comment seems directed to the leader. By so doing, both Carl and the other members of the group would have a concrete—in the moment—example of members' challenging the leader, amplifying how such a challenge might be reenactment or recapitulation of various dynamics (e.g., family or authority) that members inevitably bring to the group.

### Issues Related to the Group Focus

Another means of viewing a conflict in a group is to consider how the content of member statements or behaviors fits into larger themes existent in the group. This concept of universality was purported by Yalom (1995). As each member of the group has an increased sense of identification with others, the content of the challenging member's issue is more easily understood and serves as a potential source of positive therapeutic energy in the group.

In practice, then, the leader would respond to challenges in the group by linking the themes implicit in the content of the challenge to the related universal themes common to other group members' issues. Donigian and Malhati (1997) supported the concept of shifting the focus from the issue presented by the challenging member to themes, thus allowing all members to become more personally involved in the matter. Thus, an opportunity for the group leader to consider when facing a challenging situation is to think more divergently in terms of themes or universal aspects of the issue to which other members can relate. This form of thinking is also of value when responding to the increased tension or anxiety that often surrounds a challenging situation. By listening for the themes within the issue of the challenge and sharing this with more

members of the group, the negative aspects of the challenge are more apt to be reduced as each member is more able to relate to the issue of the challenging member. The more a member can relate to what is occurring, the greater the chance the other members will take more responsibility to assist in facilitating positive group movement (Donigian & Hulse-Killacky, 1999; Donigian & Malhati, 1997; Yalom, 1995). Anxiety often exists in a group when a challenging situation occurs. When the anxiety generated by a challenging situation is spread among the other members of the group, anxiety for the one or two members at the source of the challenge tends to be reduced (Donigian & Malhati, 1997). Viewing the challenging behavior from the perspective of relating issues to themes among the group members can be a trait pervading all of the previously cited perspectives.

We witness an example of this means by viewing and responding to conflict as the leader redirects members' awareness from individuals' issues toward a more universal theme. For example, the leader wonders, "I notice several members of the group really struggling. . . . It seems to me there is lots of energy around 'belonging'" (13). By shifting focus, all members, rather than only members of this vocal subgroup, are afforded the opportunity to become personally involved in the crucial issue of belonging. Notice the way Dale, in fact, uses the word *belong* following the leader's attending to the emerging theme (17). This also exemplifies the reduction in the tension and anxiety that conflict within the subgroup seemed to create. Sharing the feelings of belonging and the responsibility for belonging among all group members has a welcomed and beneficial effect.

### Issues Related to the Group Leader

When a group leader is confronted with a challenging situation, an initial means of understanding the event is to introspect. Immediately on experiencing the challenging situation, it is helpful for the leader to become aware of inner feelings and thoughts to gain insight to the reason for the difficulty and to identify what the leader might be doing to create or exacerbate the situation. Using the previously mentioned cues to view a challenging situation, the group leader's perception of the event could be affected by (a) the perception of the system of the group or the member, (b) engagement in control issues, (c) incorrect interpretation of group dynamics, or (d) countertransference. Whatever the scenario, the group leader has the responsibility to attend to the situation in an expedient, effective, and facilitative manner. The following questions may be used to guide the leader's awareness of how he or she may be affecting the group (Kottler, 1992; Ohlson, 1977):

- What am I doing to exacerbate the situation?
- Why does this particular situation make me uncomfortable?
- What personal issues of mine are being triggered?
- What is the member's effect on me?
- Of whom does this member remind me?
- How am I acting out my impatience or frustration with this member?
- What is this member's effect on the other members?
- What expectations am I demanding of the member or of the situation?
- What needs of mine are not being met related to this situation?
- What is unique about this member?
- What might I do to sensitize the other members to the acting-out member's needs?
- What feeling does the member have in common with other members?
- How might I respond to these common feelings and facilitate universal feelings among the other members?

The role of the leader is complex and often difficult. To listen to ourselves as leaders and to actively attend to the happening in the group is indeed often a balancing act. The following is a paraphrased excerpt from a supervision session with the group leader following the session presented. Constructed here as thoughts of internal dialogue is a process of self-supervision that took place in the mind of the leader during this exchange.

When Carl spoke [6, 10], [the leader] bristled—here we go again—more of his critical, other-directed verbiage. I am aware that he brings out in me similar feelings that Deloris took the risk to share [11]. I should admit when I redirected, no, when I cut off Carl [12] as he was gearing up to let Deloris have it, I took quick action to protect her and I suppose to silence him. I felt it in the moment but . . . I recognize now, clearer than in that moment, how I was acting out my own frustration with Carl as a really challenging member of this group.

Another place worth commenting on is my awareness of how uncomfortable I became when Deloris was brought to tears [21, 24]. My reaction seemed very much to parallel the members. So I wondered there for an instant—"Geez, what am I doing? How caught up am I? What's triggering this for me? Is there something here that I am clueless about—is Deloris reminding me of someone else?"

And last, something about Amy. I find her to be amazingly challenging, maybe the most challenging member of this group for me! I found myself returning to her both with the direction that I suggested for the group as well as my own focus or attention. It's like I wanted Amy to make some progress here. Almost like if she would progress I'd be doing a good job—like a litmus test, I suppose. I must admit that I connected with these feelings too late—I guess I wish I would have paid closer attention to them [my feelings] in the moment. . . . Funny isn't it, it's the same thing I want from them [the members] in a way.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

When approaching rather than avoiding a challenging situation or moment in group counseling, the leader must first recognize the incident is occurring. The leader must be able to identify microdiagnostically the uniqueness and breadth of the situation and the effect it has on the member, the other group members, and one's self as the leader (Kotler, 1994). By leaders carefully considering which perspective—which cuisine—may offer the best opportunity to harness the positive energy present in the group at that moment, an appropriate approach will follow. Once the situation is recognized and understood, the leader can better formulate a plan to attend to the situation.

Avoidance, with all of its variations, is often a defensive pattern of behavior that emerges in challenging situations. When avoidance-evoking situations are sensed, do not panic. Use the challenging situation as an avenue to increase self- and other-awareness in the group. Use empathy to understand how a member's challenge in fact poses a challenge to the whole group and allow the accompanying feelings to be perceived by the other members. Possibly reframe the challenge as a handle to grasp rather than as a barrier to the progress of the group. Leaders must work not to become defensive about the challenging moments in groups. When defensiveness is experienced, use self-dialogue and questions to help clarify the identification or countertransference issues. The earlier the challenging situation is recognized and attended to, the easier it is to explore and understand it. Attending to it earlier also reduces the negative therapeutic energy that could be inherent in the challenging event.

The immediate experiencing of a challenging situation by a leader is a critical decision-making moment. The authors contend that in such moments many group leaders search the group for what is happening "out there" rather than practicing becoming more acutely aware of their own feelings and thoughts to make better sense of what might be the reason(s) or meaning(s) for the challenging occurrence. We believe that many leaders react to challenging situations as merely external events as opposed to looking within. Gaining insight as to what the leader might be doing to create or exacerbate the event is too often avoided. By focusing leader attention inward, the leader will be better poised to intervene in a meaningful manner.

Challenging members and moments represent common phenomena in many groups. To experience them fully—respecting that they indeed offer growth-producing opportunities for both members and the leader—is the overarching goal of this article. Our menu provides



leaders a cognitive schema with which they may better conceive, understand, and act on what challenges are happening in the moment. By approaching such phenomena willingly, group leaders can learn to celebrate challenges in counseling groups rather than to allow our fear and discomfort to conjure up reasons to minimize, fix, or avoid them. We can stop avoiding challenging situations in our counseling groups.

#### NOTE

1. All identifying information has been sufficiently altered to ensure anonymity.

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