

**Reflection Paper: Personal Experiences in a Group**

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Although I have not attended a meeting in almost a year, I have been a member of Weight Watchers (currently known as WW) since 1998. It is a weekly support group for losing weight. Since joining, it has been a life changing experience for me, and I cannot imagine life without my WW friends.

I would say WW is a mixed group: part psychoeducational group, part counseling group, and part task group (Gladding, 2020). The psychoeducational aspect is that there is a weekly topic about which the leader provides information. One week the leader may share important facts on sleep and its relationship to weight loss. Another week the leader may discuss eating out at a restaurant. The task group part of WW is that we are all there to lose weight and then keep that weight off. Members are weighed at every meeting and are celebrated if they lost weight that week. Finally, WW is also a counseling group. Members share their experiences and support each other throughout the weight loss process. The meetings would not be the same without the member interactions.

The group setting (or environment) at WW is very conducive to its purpose (Gladding, 2020). The leader is a paraprofessional who has previously been a member of WW. The weigh stations are private, and there is a meeting room for the actual meeting to take place. The physical structure of the meeting makes clear that the leader is in charge (which I think is a good thing for controlling the meeting). The leader stands in the front and the chairs are arranged in a semi-circle around her or him (symposium style). This allows the leader to dispense all of the information she/he is supposed to give as well as take charge of the meeting. The semi-circle also permits the members to ask the leader any questions they may have. Member interaction is

encouraged, and the members are still able to hear each other (and see most of each other) in order to interact and provide advice.

Group content is “the actual words, ideas, and information exchanged in a group as well as the purpose of the group” (Gladding, 2020, p. 26). While group process “is the interaction of group members with one another, often in some meaningful way” (Gladding, 2020, p. 27).

Process must be balanced with content for a group to be successful. I believe that WW does a wonderful job of balancing content and process. Although there is a program for losing weight, the meetings do not focus on the details of the program. Instead, the leader not only shares information on a topic relevant to weight loss, but also allows the members to discuss any thoughts or issues they may have. It would be easy for WW to become content focused and become more of a psychoeducational group but I believe that would diminish its success.

Yalom’s curative factors play a large role in WW meetings. The meetings are full of hope (Gladding, 2020). The leader instills hope in the members, and the members also instill hope in each other. Because the members are all on the same journey towards the same goal, they are able to support each other throughout their trials and tribulations (of which there are many in the weight loss process). This also plays into universality (Gladding, 2020). Members of WW are given an opportunity to share a great deal of information during the meetings, and they love to talk. It is comforting to know that you are not unique and that other members have similar experiences and feelings. The leaders often point out similarities between the issues members are having: “Betty is nervous about a wedding she is going to attend this weekend. Nancy just got back from a wedding. Nancy, how did you handle all the food at this special event?”

WW leaders impart a great deal of information during the meetings, another one of Yalom's curative factors (Gladding, 2020). They always provide scientific facts as to weight loss and relate them to the topic of the week. There is also direct advice from the leader as well as the other members. In all honesty, the leaders usually try to have the other members answer any questions by stating something similar to, "How would you guys help, Sidney? How would you answer her question?" WW taught me how to eat healthily while never forgetting to support me during the process.

Yalom also discusses the development of socializing techniques (Gladding, 2020). At WW, this revolves around food and how to handle eating in public. Never go to a restaurant hungry and always order first so you are not tempted by other people's orders. How do you handle the social pressure to eat when your grandmother made you a cake? Members discuss the problems they are having and different social events they are expected to attend. Advice flows freely, and it is much appreciated as social eating skills develop.

Yalom discusses group cohesion, and there is definitely strong group cohesiveness in a WW meeting (Gladding, 2020). The same people come every week, and it is one of the most important things on their calendar (ask any one of them). Strong relationships form between the leader and the members as well as between the members themselves. The whole group is definitely stronger than its parts.

Donigian and Malnati discuss conflicts in groups (Gladding, 2020). Conflicts definitely arise at WW meetings. Weight is a very personal topic, and people have strong (and different) feelings about it. Members of WW often disagree about how a particular situation should be handled. There are also people who want to dominate the meeting and talk the whole time about themselves. I believe that having a designated group leader helps the group maneuver through

any conflicts (process or content conflicts). Having a group facilitator facilitates the resolution of potential challenges that are bound to come up in a group. Linking and cutting off are essential skills of any WW leader. Of course, other members also play a facilitative role during these challenging times.

I definitely contributed to my WW group, but my contribution depended on the week. I had weeks when I spoke a lot during the meeting (maybe too much), and I had weeks when I did not speak at all. I also had weeks where tears flowed and Yalom's catharsis took place (Gladding, 2020). No matter what, I felt loved, seen, and supported.

I did not realize how much I needed WW until I stopped going. This past year my mom has been very sick, and I have not been able to attend meetings. Over time, as I have skipped meeting after meeting I have realized that when I had a bad week, I needed a meeting (and when I had a good week, the meeting needed me).

## References

Gladding, S. T. (2020). *Groups: A Counseling Specialty* (8<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Pearson Education.