# A Tutorial for Novice Counselors: How Does A Group Leader Use Group Activities Effectively?

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this tutorial is to provide information about how to use group exercises in group sessions and what an effective group leader should do when he/she is implementing group exercises for novice counselors. Suggestions for the implementation of effective group exercises are also made.*

**Keywords:** *Group Counseling, Group Exercises, Group Leader, Novice Counselors.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Previous research has revealed that a considerable amount of people suffering self-esteem problems (Şahin, Barut, & Ersanlı, 2013a; Şahin, Barut, Ersanlı, & Kumcağız, 2014) and many others suffering from different mental health problems. Although humans are motivated to find meaning in life, build meaningful relationships, and achieve satisfaction from the life, many of them experiences difficulties related to interpersonal relationships (Şahin, Ersanlı, Kumcağız, Barut, & AK, 2014).

Growing responsibilities that arise throughout the course of life can cause humans, who are biopsychosocial entities, to have health problems as well as social and psychological problems (e.g.: Şahin, 2012; Şahin, Barut, & Ersanlı, 2013b). If an individual can overcome these problems through his or her already existing coping and problem solving skills, they do not cause any apparent changes in this individual's emotions, notions, or behaviors and the individual continues to have healthy, balanced, and unspoiled relationships. However, in some cases where a person cannot overcome such problems with his or her present coping and problem solving skills, distinctive changes occur in that individual's emotions, notions, and behaviors. Thus, certain deteriorations in interpersonal relations and social adaptation can arise, one's psychological health may impair, and in the end, individuals may need psychological help.

When psychological help is necessary, people can often get individual help or in-group psychological counseling. In the literature, group counseling is described as a therapeutic process whose goal is the improvement of interpersonal relationships, increased awareness, and self-confidence. It focuses on values, manners, and the struggles to meet distinctive behavioral objectives, and it is carried out by a psychological counselor trained in this field (Voltan-Acar, 1993). In fact, there are many advantages to group counseling as opposed to individual counseling. It enables individuals to meet people who have similar or the same problems making them feel that they are not alone (realizing that other people may have the same problem); individuals can see how other members of the group may react; it creates opportunities to see people's behaviors in group as a reflection of social macrocosms with different perspectives; it increases awareness of how the feelings of group members related to their own (e.g. how he or she reacted to situations, and how he or she overcame problems); it enables individuals to practice the new behaviors they have learned in group sessions; it enables individuals to help each other; and it is also more economical as opposed to individual counseling (Yalom, 1995). However, these advantages have led to many different ideas about how a group leader should act as an individual and as a professional.

Voltan-Acar (2005) describes a group leader as the individual who conducts the activities of group psychological counseling and has specialized knowledge in counseling and helping skills. According to Voltan-Acar (2003), a group leader must be an individual who has the therapeutic skills of being closely involved, encouraging people to speak openly, supporting, reflecting emotions and context, personalization, and summarizing. Corey (2012) also describes these skills of a group leader as

effective listening, restatement, explanation, summarizing, questioning, interpreting, confrontation, expressing one's feelings, supporting, developing empathy, simplification, starting, setting goals, evaluating, giving feedback, making suggestions, protection, revealing, being a model, making connections, preventing, and terminating counseling. Corey (2005) describes the qualities of an effective group leader as having self-respect and being happy with himself/herself, content in life, living with a contemporary perspective, interested in others' happiness, can put healthy limits in relationships, and has a dry sense of humor.

Jackson and Thompson (1971) state that when effective counselors are compared to less effective counselors, effective counselors are individuals with more positive responses to themselves, clients, and to counseling. Moreover, Jacobs, Masson, Harvill, and Schimmel (2012) stated that effective group leaders should be knowledgeable about counseling theories, should have an understanding of basic human dilemmas and conflicts, have in depth knowledge of the group activities he or she is conducting, have excellent planning and organization skills, know different types of people, and be experienced in group management. As can be seen in all these descriptions, a psychological counselor who wants to be an effective group leader must have an awareness about himself/herself in relation to others and also must be aware of himself/herself as an individual (Ülker-Tümlü & Voltan-Acar, 2012).

In the literature, there is a lot of research related to the roles and functions of a group leader as a member of the profession (Arıcı & Voltan-Acar, 2011; Jackson & Thompson, 1971; Türküm & Akdoğan, 2007; Ülker-Tümlü & Voltan-Acar, 2012); however, there is a paucity of research on how a group leader uses group activities. As our best knowledge, Delucia (1997)'s study is the only one related to this subject. For this reason, the purpose of this literature review is to contribute to the limited number of studies in this field by giving information about how group leaders can use activities effectively during group processes. Thus, this study will be helpful for the more effective use of group activities by group leaders as well as other mental health workers interested in this subject.

A group leader has responsibilities such as familiarization of himself/herself with his/her own personal characteristics and those of other group members as well as organizing various activities for overcoming the fears and anxieties of group participants at the beginning and during the transitional, action, and end periods; building up trust among group participants; overcoming transference and counter-transference; making it easier for group participants to reach their behavioral objectives; and enabling group participants to practice new behaviors they have learned in the group process.The terminology for these activities is diverse, including group exercises (M. S. Corey & Corey, 2008; Jacobs, Masson, Harvill, & Schimmel, 2012; Voltan-Acar, 2007), structured group exercises (Yalom, 1995), and communication activities (Trotzer, 1999) in the counseling literature. The term 'group exercises' has been used to describe the activities done among group leaders for a set purpose (Jacobs et al., 2012).

## 1.1. Use and Purpose of the Activities of Group Leaders in the Group Counseling Process

A group leader uses activities for many different purposes in the group counseling process. Jones and Robinson (2000) identified these purposes as revealing anxiety among group participants, inviting group participants to self-disclosure, increasing their awareness, ensuring that they focus on their emotions and the concept of the here and now, focusing on issues that may be threatening, such as attacking, grouping, and enmity. (Jacobs et al., 2012) stated that a group leader has at least seven reasons to use group activities: increasing group participants' peace levels, providing useful information to the group leader, creating a discussion group and focusing on the group, changing the subject in the group, examining the subject in the group in greater depth, creating opportunities for experiential learning, and providing entertainment and relief in the group. Thus, although the aims of the activities are classified in different ways by researchers, they support the improvement of the group counseling process and the aim of guiding the group in a set direction.

Group activities serve difference purposes at different stages of group counseling. For example, at first session activities aim for group participants to know each other, learn group rules, reduce anxieties related to the group environment, and express themselves more easily. In preliminary sessions, another purpose of using activities is helping group members embody their behavioral objectives. If group participants have no previous experience in group counseling, they have difficult determining if counseling will achieve its target. In such cases, a group leader may ask group

participants to write down what behaviors of their own they want to change and what they would do in or outside the group to modify these behaviors and if they are ready for these changes (Çakır, 2011). Therefore, group participants embody their purposes, and with group interactions, counselors determine the most suitable behavioral objectives for them. At the transitional stage of the group, factors such as anxieties of whether a group participant will be accepted or rejected by other group participants in that group, conflicts that have occurred or may occur with other group participants, transference developed by group participants towards group leader or other members of the group, dilemmas experienced by group participants, and resistance can direct activities used in this process. The purpose of these activities is to help group participants realize and express their emotions, overcome conflicts, improve group trust and rapport, reveal the factors that may threaten group members, and build interest in group members taking the risk of self-disclosure (G. Corey, 2012).

As an example of the activities conducted for this purpose, Jones and Robinson (2000) organized an activity to use in group study for abused children to express their anger towards their abusers. In this activity, group participants were asked to write down the reason for their anger towards their abuser on a big piece of paper and hang it on the wall, and afterwards, to rip those papers to symbolically show their anger. In the action stage, which is the next stage in the group, the confidence in the group environment has increased, group culture and norms have been built, self-disclosure behaviors have increased as a result of increasing trust in others in the group, the problems of the counselors have started to be solved and decided, and the participants have also put into practice the new behaviors they have learned in the group; in other words, they have started to take concrete steps to achieve their goals. At the closing stage of the group counseling  process, group participants start to review the meaning of experiences they had in group, strengthen the achievements they gained from the group, clarify the decision of continuity of behaviors they learned from the group outside the group as well (Kağnıcı, 2011). For group participants, the closing stage makes more sense than ending the group counseling. Group participants review the new behaviors they learned and experienced in the group process; evaluate feelings about the process, incomplete duties, and the group counseling process; and get feedback from other group participants. In addition, they get ready to say goodbye to the other participants. At this stage, one of the activities that can be used is asking participants to write short letters saying 'goodbye.' Later, these letters are given to corresponding group members and group participants read these letters out loud. Similarly, group leaders can write short letters to group participants to give positive feedback about the group process and the progress that they achieved (Jones & Robinson, 2000).

## 1.2. Activity Types in Group Psychological Counseling

Group activity types are also classified in different ways by researchers. While Voltan-Acar (1993) classifies these activities under four main groups as becoming familiar with one's self and others, group stages, group processes, and communication skills of group participants, Çakır (2011) classifies these activities as written activities, physical activities, activities based on imagination, creative and expressional activities, and verbal activities. Jacobs et al. (2012) also classified these activities under 14 different headings. Even though these classifications were different, they were generally established by using criteria such as group stages, processes, individual or group activities, and written or verbal activities. Written activities include exercises such as sentence completion, surveys, keeping a diary, and writing about personal properties I would like to improve, my hopes, and my fears. The most important advantage of written activities is that group participants focus on completing written works and afterwards they can share their answers and thoughts in the presence of the other group members (Jacobs et al., 2012).  Thus, some group participants can more freely express the thoughts and emotions that they have difficulty expressing verbally, and then get the reactions and thoughts of other group participants.

Physical activities are the ones that allow group participants to move in the group counseling room. Changing chairs, walking in the room randomly are examples of these activities. Jacobs et al. (2012) stated that using physical activities in group counseling enables individuals to experience something other than argumentation. Since all members participate, it enables all the members to be active as oppose to group discussions in which some participants may not speak. As it is necessary to sit for a long period, these activities allow group participants to move, which prevents boredom and tiredness. When physical activities are being used by group leader, the health conditions of group participants, physical conditions of the counseling room, and the social and cultural values of the participants must be taken into consideration. In some cultures(e.g. Turkish culture), some activities requiring girls to

hold boys' hands or holding each other's shoulders or waists (e.g. making group sculpture) may not be proper. Likewise, some group members may not like being touched.

Activities based on imagination are activities that are most commonly used to help group participants to realize their fears, doubts, wishes, hopes, and emotions hidden within themselves. Flying balloon is an example of these activities. In the flying balloon activity, group participants are told to close their eyes and imagine that they are on a balloon, and that some loads (responsibilities) in their lives are hampering this balloon from moving easily. They are told to think about what these hampering loads (burdens or responsibilities) might be, and later a member shares with other group participants what these loads are and how these are affecting his or her life. This and other similar imagination activities eventually help group members gain a conscious self-awareness of themselves. Creative and expressional activities are the activities than can be employed effectively for children and youth who are resistant and for sensitive group participants to express themselves more freely (Çakır, 2011). These activities include tasks such as painting walls, making music, and drawing pictures. The strongest effect of these activities is that an individual can reflect the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of his or her inner world. In addition, these activities are a type of non-verbal communication, and they enable group participants to express themselves better in the group where communication may be difficult.

Verbal activities provide awkward (tough, problem causing) members with an environment in which they can realize the effects of these behaviors on other group participants and the leader and change the way they express themselves. Since the goal of these activities is to provide feedback, the readiness of the group member to end counseling who received the feedback can be evaluated carefully by the group leader.

### 1.3. Points that Must Be Considered when Using Activities in Group Psychological Counseling

Even though activities are effective tools in group psychological counseling practices, there are some points that must considered when using these activities:

- Activities in group psychological counseling are tools, and they must be used to achieve a set goal.
- The first principle when applying these activities in group psychological counseling is 'Do no harm.' Group leaders must not use activities that may negatively affect group participants' emotional, intellectual, and behavioral well-being. Also, they should not use activities with which they are not familiar.
- Before using activities, their purpose, at what stage of the group process they will be applicable, the necessary materials, in which group environment they can be used, presumptive timing required to use these activities, and which instructions will be used must be determined by the group leader and explained to the group participants(Delucia, 1997).
- When using activities, the background of the participants must be taken into account; group participants must not be forced to participate in certain activities(M. S. Corey & Corey, 2008).
- Without achieving the set goal of an activity, other activities must not be employed subsequently.
- When a group leader is practicing an activity, he or she must be careful to consider the group's structure and his or her own qualifications (Çakır, 2011).

### 2. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This brief literature review is an attempt to familiarize psychologists and counselors about group activities. Activities have a function that completes the group counseling process and makes it easier to perform for group leaders. It is only possible to benefit from these activities when group leaders use these activities effectively.

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