

Group Proposal Assignment

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Abstract

As part of my group counseling class, I was required to write a group proposal I would like to lead in a mental health setting. This proposed group would involve working with a group of sex offenders, who have been mandated to attend group counseling. I chose this particular population because it will be likely I will be working with groups of sex offenders during my practicum and internship starting in the Spring Semester, 2023.

The purpose of group counseling will be to treat offenders with both cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy in order to identify and change faulty thought processes, reduce recidivism and ensure offenders become more useful and productive members of society. Treatment for offenders will be self-paced with an open group, which allows members to join the group at any time, as well as other members leave the group as treatment is completed. It is anticipated the group will meet weekly for at least 90 minutes, with a group of six to eight male clients participating in the group. It will be expected group members will be from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, which the group leader must make accommodations for when working with the group.

The group leader will make the group a safe, non-threatening environment where clients can discuss and work through their problems which caused them to offend. The group will be a remedial group, but will also provide opportunities for clients to develop social, life, and communication skills often lacking in such clients. It is hoped by working with this population of clients the group leader will be able to confront and treat the thought patterns which led to the offenses and ensure such offending does not reoccur.

Introduction

The purpose of this proposal is to create a counseling group in a mental health setting. The proposed group will consist of sex offenders, who have been mandated by the courts to attend group therapy in order to reduce or eliminate their risk of recidivism. The proposed group will consist of 6-8 members, each of whom will have their own individualized treatment plan, as well as coming together in a weekly group therapy session in order to develop the communication and social skills necessary to reduce their risk of re-offending. For this group proposal, there will be less emphasis on the therapeutic relationship and more emphasis on confrontation in order to achieve treatment goals.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Dialectical Behavior Therapy will be used as the theoretical framework for treating clients who are sex offenders. Such therapies will identify faulty thinking and behavior and will seek to change such thinking and behavior. Group members will be expected to admit to the harm they have done and will develop healthy ways of expressing their needs. Group members will be expected to come to group therapy with the intention of discussing their issues and being an active member of the group. Members will not be expected to resist group therapy treatment and such behaviors will be reported to their probation officer as a failure to comply with treatment. It is hoped by attending therapy in a group setting the clients can overcome what caused them to offend and reduce the chances of re-offending in the future, so they may become productive and law-abiding citizens.

Overview

The proposed group will be long-term and consist of sex offenders, who have been mandated by the courts to attend therapy. The group will be open-ended with offenders remaining in the group until treatment is completed. On average treatment for each sex offender will be at least 28 weeks, but will be self-paced so group members will complete treatment in their own time. Within the group, each member will be at a different stage of treatment although all members of the group will be expected to share their experiences as they move through treatment. The group will be a remedial group, as it will be designed to help clients develop basic social and communication skills, which are often lacking in this population.

Structure & Goals

For this group, the goals will consist of having each client admit they harmed their victim and they are expected to take responsibility for their offence. “Getting the sex offender to accept responsibility for his behavior is a major issue for those working with sex offenders” (Palermo & Farkas, 2013, p. 191) as most offenders are prone to refusing to accept their offense as a “defense against rejection, disapproval, shame, guilt, and responsibility for their behavior” (Palermo & Farkas, 2013, p. 191). Therefore, “denial is a psychological defense mechanism, which means it is a way of avoiding realities that are obvious to others” (Levenson & Morin, 2021, p. 18). Denial is a method of avoiding things we do not want to accept.

It is also expected clients will show increased empathy for victims as treatment progresses. “A lack of victim empathy can be related to thinking errors about victimization, relationships, gender roles, and entitlement” (Levenson & Morin, 2021, p.

174). A major goal of treatment will be for the client(s) to recognize the behaviors and lack of empathy that led them to offend, and to develop healthy alternative behaviors and a plan in order to prevent relapse. This will be done via cognitive restructuring. Clients existing thought patterns and behaviors will be challenged with the goal of changing distorted and negative thought and behavior patterns, and replacing them with healthy thoughts and behaviors.

The structure of the group will consist of up to eight individuals, who are court-mandated to attend group therapy. The group can be further divided, if necessary into two groups of four to work on or discuss topics relevant to treatment and therapy, but might not be as effective in a larger group. At all times, the leader of the group will maintain control and will ensure the group(s) remain on topic and relevant to the treatment plan.

Group Rationale

The rationale for the group is for individuals to develop basic social and communication skills in a group setting more effectively than they would if they received individual counseling. The group will also explore healthy relationships and how such relationships develop with the effective use of communication and social skills. During the course of therapy, the group will meet once a week for two hours in the main conference room of Open Door Counseling in Gering, Nebraska. The group will help clients recognize and accept their offence and allow them to develop new skills to help them avoid re-offending.

Evaluation

Evaluation of clients will be based on their treatment plans and contract they agree to and sign before the start of treatment. It will be also important to assess how well

group therapy is working for each client. This assessment and evaluation will be done based on the journals each client is required to keep, ongoing feedback, formal observations of clients in the group, and how the client is responding to treatment, and whether group and individual goals are being met.

Then, measuring the clients, “there are many difficulties inherent in measuring anything as complex as therapeutic change.” (Cabeen & Coleman, 1961, p. 126). However, evaluation will be a weekly and a continuous process to meet the needs and goals of the client and any court-mandated reporting required of the group leader. The variables to be evaluated include, development of social and communication skills, behavior change, and symptom resolution. It is hoped through regular evaluation, clients will see the progress they are making while in treatment.

Membership

Membership of the group will be mandatory and decided by the courts. Screening of potential members will still be carried out even though each group member will be required to attend group therapy and progress will be reported to each member's probation/parole officer and the courts. However, some screening of the group members will be necessary in order to measure their level and specific type of offending and, ultimately, who is allowed to join the group will be determined by the group leader with permission of the courts. Each potential group member will be screened individually by the group leader to determine overall suitability for the group.

While membership of the group is mandatory, it is still useful to screen potential members in order to determine such things as suitability for the group, level of mental functioning, and will this group be beneficial to the potential member. Screening

procedures will answer questions such as, “how motivated is this person to change” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 157), and does the individual understand the purpose of the group? Ultimately, the target population for the group will be largely male and at least 18 years of age. The target population will come from a wide-ranging demographic and cultural backgrounds. Despite the fact membership of the group is involuntary, the group leader will show each member how their participation in the group could be voluntary. This can be achieved by demonstrating how they can personally benefit from being a part of the group. The group leader can explain to individual group members that, participation in the group, can lead to the development of social and communication skills as well as taking ownership of the harm they have caused.

Multicultural Considerations

When it comes to multicultural considerations, it must be remembered different cultures will exist within the group. While the group will most likely be European-American, it is also expected individuals of Hispanic/Latino and Native-American cultures will be present. When working in a group, it is important for the group leader to be aware of their own cultural biases and be aware of their limitations in reference their knowledge of other cultures. One way to facilitate an awareness of cultural differences is to “initiate open discussions with the members of your groups about issues concerning cultural differences” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 21). It is important to understand cultural differences both between individual group members and the group leader so certain behaviors within the group are not interpreted in the wrong way, such as being hostile or refusing to participate in the group. For example, a Native American’s reluctance to make eye contact or talk with the group may be misconstrued as hostility or

refusing to participate in the group. A discussion about cultural differences at the formation stage of the group and when new members join the group will help deal with many cultural issues which may develop during group therapy. By discussing cultural differences, it will be possible to make each group member aware of their own cultural bias and the differences of others within the group.

Ethical & Legal Issues

Working in a group setting with sex offenders presents unique legal and ethical issues. Participation in the group will not be voluntary and “much effort needs to be directed toward clearly and fully informing members of the nature and goals of the group” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 63). This will mean outlining the limitations of confidentiality, listing procedures, techniques, and theoretical approaches that will be used, “and ways that active participation in the group may affect their life outside the group” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 63). In addition, it is the responsibility of the group leader to ensure clients understand the requirements for participation and completion of treatment and of the consequences they may face if they do not comply which will include the possibility of court sanction.

When working with a group of sex offenders, it is pertinent to consider legal issues. The leader of the group will need to be fully trained and prepared to work with this population. This means attending workshops and classes specifically designed to work with this population. It will be important to be able to treat and work with members effectively while not making promises about treatment and their own “degree of effort and commitment are the key factors in determining the outcome of the group experience” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 93). The group leader must take all measures necessary

in order to protect themselves from legal consequences, such as a malpractice lawsuit. As such, the group leader will possess liability insurance either individually or as part of a counseling organization, such as the American Counseling Association (ACA).

Leadership

Group Leadership

Leadership is key if the group is to be successful and meet its goals. The group leader must be a qualified clinical mental health counselor or social worker who has experience in working with groups. Working in group therapy can be challenging even with voluntary members, although “it is critical that leaders not start out with the assumption that a mandatory group will automatically be composed of unmotivated clients” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 64). The leader must come to the group with an open mind and be hopeful the members of the group are open to the idea of treatment and therapy.

When leading the group, the group leader will work as a solo leader when working with sex offenders. Because the group is mandatory, group members will have no input or member involvement in the leadership of the group. The group leader will be open to ideas the group members have concerning what is to be discussed in the group, but the overall direction of the group and treatment goals will be decided by the group leader.

Theoretical Framework

When working with sex offenders, the most likely theoretical framework to employ would be Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). “The ultimate goal of CBT is to teach clients to think about how they think so that they can correct faulty reasoning

(Nelson-Jones, 2000, as cited in Halbur & Halbur, 2019, p. 79). When working with sex offenders the purpose of CBT will be to change faulty reasoning and thinking, and develop healthy thinking and reasoning habits.

When using CBT, a variety of techniques may be used when working with sex offenders. Such techniques will include social skills and assertiveness training, training in life skills, relaxation techniques, and cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring will help to correct faulty thinking in the minds of the clients and restructure their thinking so as to reduce the likelihood of recidivism and to develop healthy thought patterns. CBT is a dynamic and directive therapy that will “help clients identify automatic thoughts and then to change those that are maladaptive” (Halbur & Halbur, 2019, p. 80).

CBT is considered to be one of the most effective treatments when working with sex offenders. In many cases, the client needs to change their faulty and maladaptive thought processes and develop new thought process what will reduce their offending and potential harm to others. In the group setting, CBT may be used to help change the maladaptive thought processes of several clients over time and allow them to work together to identify those faulty and maladaptive thoughts.

Follow-Up

Follow-up is a vital part of the therapy experience. In this case, follow-up is necessary to monitor both the progress of the clients during the therapy process and after therapy and treatment has been completed. During the course of the group therapy, group members can "come together to evaluate their progress toward their stated goals" (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 333). Because the group members will evaluate each other, it is

hoped they will be more motivated to engage in treatment and therapy and “take steps to make changes” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 333).

In addition, the counselor will schedule follow-up appointments with each client where they will be able to express their successes and setbacks since completing group therapy and treatment. Follow-up counseling sessions will also allow clients to show their continued commitment to change and express any thoughts they have on the group therapy process and how it has impacted their lives. Finally, follow-up sessions allow the clients to demonstrate what they have learned in the group therapy and treatment process, and show their commitment to change. When working with each client, the use of follow-up sessions to assess each client's progress toward their goals demonstrate and ensure they are making progress to meet the legal requirements of their probation or parole.

Individual Consultation

When working with this population, individual meetings with the client will be limited. When screening the clients, it will be necessary to have an initial individual meeting to check suitability for joining a particular group and making sure of their eligibility for joining the group. Since their participation and involvement is mandatory, group members will be required to join a group. Individual counseling may be done with the client, but will most likely involve other counselors. The group counselor will work specifically within the group setting and therefore any issues or concerns a group member has will have to be raised in group counseling. The only other time the counselor may see the client individually is after group therapy has ended during the follow-up stage,

Making referrals for groups involving sex offenders will be difficult. This is because they will be required to attend counseling by the courts and will have been referred to the group by a judge and the court system. When a client is new to the group, it may be necessary to refer them for individual counseling. This may be done by the group counselor, who may recommend a suitable individual counselor to the client for one-on-one counseling. This form of counseling may be voluntary or mandatory, depending on decisions made by the court.

Session Format

Informed Consent

Even in an involuntary group setting, the issue of informed consent is important. Informed consent is something that be stressed at the beginning of the group process, but "informed consent is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event" (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 63). It is important to secure informed consent at the beginning of the counseling process, but the "consent process may need to be revisited at different phases of the group" (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 63).

At the beginning of the group process, the group leader will outline informed consent, including outlining the group leader's qualifications, theoretical framework, and techniques they will use during group counseling. The importance of confidentiality at the beginning of group counseling needs to be continually stressed throughout the group counseling process. However, because this is group counseling, the issue of confidentiality can only be guaranteed by the group leader. The group leader cannot prevent a sharing of information outside of the group by individual group members. The group leader can remind group members of confidentiality and encourage them not to

share information outside of the group. The group leader may also say sharing information may be damaging to the group process for all group members.

Even though a sex offender group is an involuntary group, there is still a certain level of informed consent involved. If group members do not agree to certain aspects of the group, they may object to the group leader or even their parole or probation officers if they have a legitimate issue. The group leader will listen to legitimate concerns and works to address those concerns. It must be remembered that members of the group have "autonomous authorization" (Hammond, 2016, p. 6) and may choose to reject or accept aspects of informed consent that apply to them personally. Therefore, the group leader ensures every group member is satisfied and comfortable with the informed consent procedures before beginning the group process and to remind clients of the issues of informed consent during the group process.

Ground Rules

In any group counseling setting, ground rules must be set for the benefit of all group members, but to also help the group leader to be able to maintain authority within the group. Such rules may be communicated in one of two ways. The first is to inform group members orally. The second way is to write down the ground rules so each client has a copy they can follow. The group leader will establish certain rules while other rules may be discussed and considered for implementation by the group as a whole.

Ground rules to be put in place by the group leader include, group members must show up at the assigned place and time. Group members should be allowed to talk and discuss their issues without interruption, group members be respectful of all points of view, what goes on and is discussed in the group stays in the group, and all members will

be respectful to the group leader and will allow the group leader to enforce all policies and rules within the group.

Lesson Plans

The use of weekly lesson plans will be important because they will bring a degree of structure and cohesion to each group session. By planning each session, the counselor will establish topics and activities all members can participate in and ensure each member is an active participant of the group. Such activities may include weekly check-in by each member of the group where they may share a positive and negative from their lives each week, warm-up activities which will prepare each group member for that week's topic to be covered, think, pair, share where group members will be partnered with another group member to discuss topics and issues being covered in that week's session, and closure activities which will bring each session to a close.

Each week, the group leader will design and develop topics and activities that will encourage group members to participate in and reduce their ability to choose not to participate. This level of participation will be particularly important in an involuntary group since all group members will be expected to be involved and participate in the group. By designing and implementing weekly plans, it is expected the weekly group sessions will be more structured and provide more meaning and purpose to each group session.

Group Stages

Each stage of the group is expected to have its own characteristics. In the initial stage, it is expected the group leader and the clients will establish trust in the group leader and with each other. In addition, "the initial stage of a group is orientation and

exploration” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 176), group members get acquainted, learn and develop, and understand the rules and expected behaviors of the group, and will learn to understand the purpose and function of the group and their role within the group. In the initial stage a lot of hesitancy and fear is expected among group members due to the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed and unfamiliarity among group members or the group leader. Towards the end of their initial stage, it is expected group cohesion will have started to develop, and individual members will show more of their private selves, and any early conflicts within the group will be resolved.

At the initial stage, it will be the responsibility of the group leader to help overcome fear and hesitancy in the group and help group members get to know one another as well as the group leader. The group leader will also help the group members understand their duties and responsibilities within the group as well as understanding and developing group norms. The group leader also needs to consider “the degree of structuring that is optimal for the group” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 212). A certain level of structure is to be expected from the group leader not only to foster group cohesion but to ensure each group member achieves their individual and court- mandated goals. Structuring will also reduce an “unnecessary floundering and maximize full participation” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 213) by group members. Once the group has worked through the initial stage, the group will move to the transition stage.

As the group establishes a level of trust and cohesion, group members will consider whether the group is a place where they can feel safe in discussing their problems. This may lead to a level of defensiveness and reluctant behavior on the part of group members. There may also be a level of resistance from some group members who

do not want to be part of the group. In these cases, it is the role and function of the group leader to overcome these problems and remind group members that participation is mandated, but that also the group is a safe and secure place where they can deal with the issues affecting them. At the transition stage of the group, the group leader will continue building trust and cohesion so group members feel comfortable in discussing their personal issues in the group setting.

During the working stage, the group will progress to a deeper level of work. This is the stage where group members can “explore significant problems they bring to the sessions” (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 276) and make a commitment to working through their problems with the support of the group. At the working stage, group leaders can employ a variety of therapeutic interventions designed to help clients explore their problems and issues in depth. Such therapeutic interventions will also allow for the development of new thought patterns, which will make it much less likely the group members will re-offend. During the working stage, group and individual goals are concrete and specific, and there is a willingness among group members to help each other to achieving their individual and collective goals. The group leader should ensure group members remain on task and are working toward their goals. It may be necessary to keep building trust and acceptance among group members and ensure all members continue to feel safe and secure in the group environment. Conflict and distrust should be at a minimum and confrontation among group members should be caring and done with the aim of helping each member to resolve their problems.

In the final stage of the group, group members should “consolidate their learning and develop strategies for transferring what they learned in the group to daily life”

(Corey, Corey & Corey, 2018, p. 317). For this group, an open group, the termination stage will be more difficult as the group consists of members who are at different stages in the group experience and treatment. Group members can explore their thoughts and feelings as members leave the group and new members join the group. At some point, the group will reach an overall end stage and group members must deal with any issues of separation and any unfinished business.

During the final stage, the group leader begins the termination process prior to the last session. This allows group members to prepare for the end and help resolve or wrap up any unresolved issues the group has been working on. It cannot be expected all issues the group has been working on have been resolved by the last session. Group members have time to work through as many issues as possible and group members can be made aware of any issues they need to focus on once the group has ended. If possible, it will be useful for the group leader to hold follow-up sessions with individual group members to see how they are dealing with separation from the group and also to check how they continue to progress after group counseling and treatment. Such follow-ups help resolve any issues that have not been resolved and will also help the individual group members to apply what they have learned to daily life to help reduce their chances of recidivism.

Conclusions

Counseling sex offenders in group counseling is challenging due to the sensitive nature of the problem being dealt with and the fact that clients will be attending mandatory group sessions. In such circumstances, an emphasis will be placed on the importance of informed consent to all those involved and stress the importance of confidentiality among group members. The group leader will be responsible for stressing

the importance of informed consent as well as being responsible for planning and delivering content to the group sessions that will help the clients to change their thinking and develop new patterns of behavior. The group leader will also be responsible for building group cohesion and trust among group members so each member feels comfortable discussing their problems in front of the group.

At each stage of the group, for the group leader will identify the characteristics, driving the group dynamic and continue to ensure there is still cohesion and trust within the group. The group leader must be prepared to deal with any confrontation and conflict among group members but do so in a caring and understanding manner. It will be important for group members to work through and resolve any conflicts to ensure the healthy functioning of the group.

As the group moves toward termination or as group members leave and are replaced with new members, the group leader needs to prepare all members for the eventual separation of members and the arrival of new members into the group. When a member completes treatment and therapy, they will begin applying what they have learned in group counseling to their daily lives. This will reduce their chances recidivism and increase their chances of leading normal productive lives.

Following separation from the group or termination of the group, it will be essential the group leader follows up with the group members to see how they are dealing with issues of leaving the group and also to deal with and work through any unfinished business individuals may have from the counseling process. Group members should achieve and meet all the goals for counseling as there is a strong likelihood such information will have to be reported to parole/probation officer and also the courts. The

group leader will have an important role to play in the recovery process of clients to ensure they do not re-offend while being active participants in group counseling.

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