Group Therapy
with Sexual Abusers
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Group Therapy with Sexual Abusers: Engaging the Full Potential of the Group Experience
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Group Therapy
with Sexual Abusers

Engaging the Full Potential of the Group Experience

Steven Sawyer • Jerry L. Jennings

Brandon, Vermont
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Preface: Why This Book?

Our goal in writing this book was to blend current knowledge from the general group therapy literature and sexual offender-specific treatment into sound, practical principles and guidelines for conducting highly effective group-based therapy to treat individuals who have sexually abused. Even though the great majority of sexual offender-specific treatment is currently delivered in a group format, and even though this has been true since the beginning of the field more than 50 years ago, this is the first book to be dedicated specifically to group therapy with sexual abusers.

The purpose and timing of this book reflect, first, a long-standing need in the field for a clear understanding of, and appreciation for, the value of group therapy as a fundamental modality in itself. Second, we believe that this book is crucial because most of the sexual offender-specific treatment being delivered today is weakened and impoverished by its continuing failure to utilize the power of the group for therapeutic growth.

This is not the first time that we have challenged the field to reconsider how it can improve its application of group therapy. The authors first met after Steve (Sawyer) posted a challenge to the field in the ATSA Forum in 2000 (Sawyer, 2000). Steve was intrigued by how most sexual abuser treatment programs used group therapy, and yet very little attention had been paid to the rationale, techniques, and efficacy of the treatment group processes. In a review of 60 issues of Sexual Abuse, the official journal of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, we found that only 7 of 375 articles (1.8 percent) focused on group therapy in the years 1998 to 2013 (Sawyer & Jennings, 2014, p. 127).

Inspired by Steve’s question, Why do we believe group therapy is the preferred modality for treating sexual offenders, Jerry (Jennings) wrote to him and we shared our dissatisfaction with the field’s apparent lack of appreciation for the full potential of the group modality to make treatment more effective. We joined together to write “Principles and Techniques for Maximizing the Effectiveness of Group Therapy with Sex Offenders,” which was published in Sexual Abuse three years later (Jennings & Sawyer, 2003). Today,
a dozen years later, we are close friends, and the field has been evolving in ways that suggest that a paradigm shift has been happening. The field has gradually been moving away from a narrow cognitive-behavioral focus on offense behavior and relapse prevention toward more holistic, multi-modal treatment approaches (Bauman & Kopp, 2004; Longo, 2004; Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & Fernandez, 2006; Yates & Ward, 2008). For example, Marshall and his colleagues describe an integrated sexual offender program that is explicitly multi-modal and whose diverse targets of treatment include self-esteem, acceptance of responsibility, coping and social skills, offense pathways, and sexual interests (Marshall et al., 2006; Jennings & Deming, 2013). At the same time, we believe that these trends may signal a new openness to using proven principles of basic group therapy and group therapeutic process.

Our assertion is supported by the dramatic increase in the number of published studies that focus on group therapy. Our 2003 article relied almost entirely on an appeal to clinical practicality; we lacked empirical studies specific to sexual offender group treatment to support our assertion. But, as shown in the graph below, a veritable explosion of sexual abuse group articles occurred in the decade of 2000 to 2009, amounting to a total greater than the four previous decades combined.

In particular, 27 empirical studies have been published in the years since our article in 2003. There is now solid research within the sexual abuse treatment field—not just research from the general group therapy literature—that can further support the special importance of group therapy as a primary modality with this clinical population. Later, in chapter 2, we’ll review this new wave of empirical studies.
**Terms and Conventions Used in the Book**

Before beginning, it is important to provide a few points of clarification about the terms and conventions used in the book. First, we will reference sexual abusers and offenders as male and use the pronoun *he* throughout. We do this because the vast majority of sexual abusers are male. We recognize that some theories and concepts, such as chapter 7 on attachment theory, may not apply to females.

Second, we will use the terms *sexual offender* and *sexual abuser* interchangeably in the book. We do so to accommodate the language that is commonly used in the research literature in this field. We, of course, recognize that some clients are not adjudicated as “offenders” and are not involved in the criminal justice system. Moreover, the stigma of labeling someone as an offender or abuser is of even greater concern when talking about adolescents, persons with intellectual disabilities, and/or clients who have been victims of sexual abuse themselves. In this regard, we use the labels gently and need to acknowledge that this book is intended for the group treatment of young adult and adult male sexual abusers. Treating adolescents and persons with disabilities may call for alternative modifications of group practice and theory to accommodate their developmental differences.

Finally, the appearance of the following icon marks the beginning of a group therapy case example: