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RULES AND GUIDELINES FOR GROUP THERAPY

The task of group therapy is to achieve a group culture of intimacy, acceptance, introspection, understanding, and interpersonal honesty. We share honestly about our lives and about our here-and-now experience of what is happening in the group. In order to learn more rewarding ways of experiencing life and of relating to others, we sometimes have to unlearn ways in which we have become stuck and that cause distress. This can take time and effort. Most of us want very much to be understood and accepted.

1. **AGREEMENT.** To help you benefit most from your group experience, you will agree to:

- A) Talk about the issues and problems that prompted you to join the group
- B) Tell the emotionally meaningful stories of your life
- C) Verbally communicate your immediate thoughts and feelings about yourself, the group leader, and the group members
- D) Take an equal share of the total talking time
- E) Agree not to leave the group until you complete or resolve what you came to the group to address

2. **CONFIDENTIALITY.** Each member of the group agrees that they will not reveal the identity of any other member of the group either by name or identifying material. Group members would not feel free to be completely open with their most intimate feelings if they thought they would be talked about outside of the group.

3. **NO USE OF ALCOHOL OR OTHER DRUGS.** Because abstinence from the use of addictive substances is a prerequisite for recovery, membership in the group requires total abstinence from the use of alcohol and other drugs with the potential for addiction. If I am unable to make or keep this commitment, I will discuss other treatment options with Chip Abernathy.

4. **CONTACT BETWEEN GROUP MEMBERS OUTSIDE OF THE GROUP.** There is no rule prohibiting such contact; however, any contact should be shared within the group. This keeps cliques from forming, which, if they did, could damage the integrity of the group as a working unit. It is important to remember that it is more beneficial to keep the group relationships therapeutic rather than social.

5. **SUBGROUPING.** When a subgroup of two or more members gets together to talk about the group and how they feel about different members, they often keep this information to themselves. Consequently, important information that needs to be shared between group members is withheld. This eventually inhibits the potential for self-awareness and growth that can occur from this feedback when given directly within the group. In addition, subgroup members behave differently in group. Typically, they protect each other and do not give each other the feedback each needs. Therefore, it is imperative that talk outside of the group be brought back and talked about within the group.

6. **NO SEXUAL CONTACT BETWEEN GROUP MEMBERS.** The group members agree that during their membership in group no sexual liaisons will be formed. This freedom from sexual liaisons facilitates an intimacy between group members that, in turn, provides a basis for growth and change. Thus, the trust necessary for openness and problem-solving can develop.

7. **NO HITTING OR DAMAGE TO THE OFFICE.** Anger is to be expressed verbally rather than physically. As with any other emotions, anger, freely and openly expressed, can form the basis for insight and growth.

8. **GRADUATION VERSUS TERMINATION FROM THE GROUP.** When members begin thinking about discontinuing psychotherapy, they are expected to discuss this in group, prior to making their final decision, as freely as they have discussed other feelings. *Graduation* from group therapy is a time of joy and sharing, which has been thought out and shared within the group. On the other hand, group members may decide to *terminate* at a point in therapy when they are beginning to face some critical issues that they are attempting to avoid by leaving the group. The input of other group members is extremely valuable at this point. While no one

needs the permission of the group to discontinue psychotherapy, it is in the spirit of growth that leaving the group be discussed in the group.

Members are to give at least four weeks notice prior to graduation. Terminating group without notice has a detrimental effect on the group and is likely to represent the continuance of the same problem behavior for which you came to the group in the first place. This time also allows for good-byes and the resolution of any unfinished issues between members. Consequently, each group member agrees to allow other group members to participate in their decision to leave the group.

9. ATTENDANCE. Regular attendance and punctuality enhance the value of the group for each member. Such cohesiveness creates a climate of work, support, and success. In the event of a member's inability to or decision not to attend a session, a telephone call to this effect is expected. Group will begin and end promptly at the designated times. Group members will agree to be in group at the time it starts and stay until it finishes.

10. LEAVE OF ABSENCE. I may take a leave of absence from the group for up to six months and not be charged during my absence unless I want to guarantee my space being reserved for my return. During a leave of absence from the group, I will have at least one individual session per month with Chip Abernathy for continuity of care.

11. COMMITMENT. Members are allowed to join the group only if they are willing to make a six-month commitment. This agreement ensures that the group process will not be disrupted by members "dropping in" for one or two sessions and then dropping out of the group. This agreement also ensures that the person who joins the group will be making enough of a commitment to benefit from the group.

12. GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK. Fellow group members can help us see things about ourselves that we may not see. When you sense a need to offer feedback that may be difficult to hear, it is preferable to offer your feedback in the spirit of helping another member realize something they may not be aware of. It can be a scary and unfamiliar experience to share with someone that you notice a self-defeating, dangerous behavior pattern such as minimizing a serious problem, or a way of communicating that is concerning. Most people are quite sensitive, so consider how you would want to be approached in a similar situation and offer feedback in that way. It also may be helpful to share your own similar or concerning struggles. It is especially important to be respectful, and to avoid being judgmental. Please remember:

- Feedback in group is part of a process by which you attempt to 'hold up a mirror' to let a person know how he/she appears to others.
- It is most useful when spoken with empathy, concern, and caring in a respectful tone of voice.
- Feedback is descriptive of what you are seeing in the here-and-now of the group. It is not helpful to offer advice, guesses, explanations, interpretations, or criticisms about the person's behavior.
- Helpful feedback includes your concern about what you are seeing, and if possible, an example of your own similar behavior from your own experience.

12. CHARGES. The rate for group psychotherapy is on a per-session basis. The billing continues at the same rate even when members do not attend the group., i.e., when they are on vacation or are ill. The reasoning is that members are being charged for slots that are reserved for them. It is their responsibility as to whether and how they choose to use this time. *Each group member agrees to pay his or her bill for group at the end of each month.*

Revised and updated April 2025. Adapted from:

Flores, P.J. (2007). *Group psychotherapy with addicted populations*, 3rd edition. New York: Routledge; Yalom, I.D (1995). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*, 4th edition. New York: BasicBooks; Burns, D.D. (1999). *The feeling good handbook*, revised edition. New York: Plume; Washton, A.M. (1992). Structured outpatient group therapy for alcohol and substance abusers. In J. Lowinson, P. Ruiz, & R. Millman (Eds.), *Substance abuse: A comprehensive textbook*. Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins, 514. Created by Chip Abernathy. www.abernathytherapy.com (770) 862-7585.