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Exemplary Example: Reflections on Attending Two Support Groups

Your Name Here

The University of Tennessee at Martin

Reflections on Attending Two Support Groups

I attended two support groups that I will discuss in this paper: an infertility support group and an Al-Anon support group for friends of alcoholics and their families. Both groups have personal significance to me, and my experiences in these groups have been valuable for me to refer to as I learn more about becoming a group work facilitator.

The first set of meetings I attended was for a group of women who were experiencing infertility. I participated in this group as an active member and found it to be a very healing experience. This group, named XYZ, was formed by two nurse practitioners who work with infertile couples, and the group was led by a counseling psychologist who had experience counseling women who were infertile and also those who were going through fertility treatments. This counseling group's purpose was to provide support to women who were experiencing infertility as this process can often be very isolating and difficult to discuss with friends and family. The group consisted of 12 women who were currently experiencing infertility and had been for over one year, and all of the members had gone through varying degrees of fertility treatments at a local fertility clinic. The group met weekly for 12 weeks, and meetings were closed; however, there was one meeting where partners of participants were invited to join. Group members and their partners were also invited to participate in individual and couples' sessions with a counselor if they desired. I did not choose to attend additional therapy sessions.

The group was sponsored by a local medical center, and meetings were held in a meeting room on campus. Meetings were private and group members were allowed to share their stories, thoughts, and feelings as each person got to know each other. The group had some structure as we would start off each meeting with a check-in and near the end of each meeting we would have a wrap-up summary with each member. The group leader would be the last one to talk and

she would give us homework assignments to work on for material for the next meeting. One assignment was to write in a journal about how we experience certain events (i.e., baby showers, hearing that someone we know is pregnant, etc.). Participants would be invited to share their thoughts at the following session and it was very healing to hear that women were feeling the same way I felt. There is a lot of guilt that comes along with infertility. You go through a phase where you feel so guilty for being jealous of other people's good news or resenting them for having the ability to have children. It feels awful, and it was therapeutic to know that I was not alone in my feelings and that I wasn't a bad person for having those feelings of resentment toward others. I also bonded with several of the women in my group and felt so much empathy toward them. Several women had been through much more difficult experiences than I had during their fertility journey and it gave me much-needed perspective on the events in my life.

It was also beneficial for me to observe events like creating trust, people displaying resistance, and members trying to control the group through storytelling. The group leader did a nice job of gently bringing the focus back in the group, but it was difficult for her sometimes. I had an interesting experience of being a target in the group at one point. Thank goodness I understood what was going on or else I really would have gotten my feelings hurt! I was the youngest member of the group and had been through the least amount of fertility treatments, and some of the older women seemed to hold that against me. They thought that I had "time left" to have a biological child and that somehow the distress I was experiencing as a result of having fertility issues was not as severe as theirs. It was interesting how the women in their 30s and the women in their 40s seemed to group together during sessions. I think the younger women felt like scapegoats sometimes, as if we represented past hope in the older women's eyes. It was an eye-opening and valuable experience for me both personally and professionally.

I also attended an Al-Anon support group meeting with a close friend of mine whose husband had recently joined Alcoholics Anonymous. My family of origin has had issues of alcohol abuse, and I also wanted to support my friend as her family deals with this issue. This meeting for friends of those who abuse alcohol and their families was through Al-Anon and was called XYZ. This meeting is a weekly open meeting for anyone who considers themselves a friend of a person who abuses alcohol or who is a member of an abuser's family. This meeting was set up as a psychoeducational group and the leader provided information and invited attendees to share their stories as well. There was an informational part to the meeting on a topic of the week before participants shared their experiences and I was an observer in this meeting and did not speak. There were over 20 participants at the meeting and most were extended family members of a member of Al-Anon. This support group meeting was held in a church fellowship hall and the feel of the meeting was very informal. It was difficult to make personal connections with anyone because of how the meeting was organized, and my friend later told me that the Al-Anon break-out support group meetings have a much more personal feel to them. I can see where meetings like the one I attended would provide opportunities for friends to attend and support Al-Anon members though. This meeting provided useful information about a related Al-Anon topic, allowed group attendees to provide support for each other and share experience, and taught me about how larger psychoeducational and structured meetings are conducted.

Overall, both support group experiences proved to be very beneficial for me both personally and professionally. I truly believe that some valuable work can be done in groups, though it is sometimes very difficult work. I think my experiences in both meetings will allow me to be a better group leader and more understanding of group members' experiences.