

Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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Online Groups

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Online groups are a way of using the Internet to bring people together with a common purpose, including the provision of self-help, social support, and

psychoeducation. Depending on their format, they may be referred to as electronic groups, listservs, forums, and mail groups. Online groups can be standalone support options for people, or they can be a supplement to face-to-face groups or professional services (Kurtz & White, 2007). Many Web sites allow anybody to join an existing group or start a new one. The proliferation of these groups is likely to continue. They are available 24/7 and can be a boon for people with mobility problems, rare disorders, or without access to face-to-face groups or professional services. Besides motivation, the only requirements to participating are regular Internet access, and basic computer and Internet navigation skills.

The patterns of communication within online groups are the same as those used in face-to-face self-help groups (Beder, 2005; Finn, 1999; Perron, 2002; Salem, Bogat, & Reid, 1997). Online groups produce similar positive effects as their face-to-face counterparts, as participants can capitalize on the experience of people coping successfully with a variety of problems (Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004; Humphreys, 2004; Murray, Burns, Sec Tai, Lai, & Nazareth, 2005; Powell, Yeaton, Hill, & Silk, 2001). It should be noted that the vast range of health and behavioral problems addressed in online groups make it difficult to systematically compare the experience and outcomes of their participants. Systematic comparisons are further complicated by the wide variety of online group formats and participation. Thus, significant gaps in the knowledge regarding the effectiveness of online groups remain.

As previously described, online groups have many appeals and show promise for offering a wide range of support for a variety of issues. However, there are potential pitfalls with online groups that also need to be recognized. For example, they have a potential for malice that is different from that associated with face-to-face groups. Some professional organizations, such as the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (2007), have disbanded the use of online groups due to *trolls*—that is, persons posting intentionally controversial or malevolent messages. Legal liability is another serious issue of concern for organizations offering online groups.

From an individual standpoint, online groups may be a way for some people to resist participating in a more intensive face-to-face group. Since online group participants may be living in different communities, states, or countries, they may not have familiarity of local resources that might be available in face-to-face groups. Online groups may also be inaccessible to persons with certain disabilities, such as significant hand tremors, and those on the wrong side of the digital divide (Lieberman et al., 2005).

The challenges posed by online groups for social workers are substantial. In their own groups, social workers use concepts to intervene in the group to advance individual and group goals. With online groups they can help their clients understand what is going on but they cannot directly intervene. The consequences of this difference may be understood by reference to group cohesion, or the lack thereof, in online groups, which, typically, have members joining and dropping out on a regular basis. This impedes cohesion, and heightens the risk that a solid group identity stage will not be reached (Shulman, 2005). In such circumstances social workers must help their clients understand how online groups differ from

face-to-face groups, and especially from those that are professionally led. Other concepts such as member roles can also be useful to social workers with clients in online groups. Such groups are different from those facilitated by social workers where it is possible to address and indeed inhibit the development of a variety of roles such as the provocateur, the scapegoat, or the monopolizer (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Storm-Certifried, & Larsen, 2006). However, in an online group the social worker is limited to helping the client understand the phenomena and interpret it in a constructive non-demoralizing way. This is not entirely a disadvantage with the online group since the social worker does not have to be concerned about the possible tension between group and individual goals. In the online context the social worker can be solely oriented to helping the client attain his or her individual goals.

Given the proliferation and widespread use of online groups, social workers and other human service professionals should be aware of the potential positive and negative effects of online groups on their individual clients. From a practical standpoint, social workers might consider asking clients if they are currently participating in online groups, while recognizing that many might fear disapproval. If clients are online group participants, social workers could provide additional information on participating effectively and raising awareness of safety issues. Knowledge on these vast topic areas can be obtained from other resources, such as the *Self-Help Magazine*. Social workers might benefit from knowing the client's perspective on whether the online group enhances or detracts from the professional service. If clients have not had any exposure to self-help groups, they might be asked whether they think it might be useful to get the perspective of those who have had successful experience with similar issues.

The availability and accessibility of online groups continues to grow. With new software and hardware developments, it is impossible to know how they will be used and in what format. However, at present, the possibilities for integrating online groups with professional services seem endless. Social workers and research face a daunting task of trying to understand their effectiveness. It is a task that will become more pressing with a clientele that grows up in the information age.

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Telephone Groups

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Telephone groups are a relatively new modality for social group work practice. Advances in telephone technology during the 1980s and 1990s made it possible to have group meetings on the telephone with a number of participants. Teleconferencing or the conference call was first written about in a book by Kelleher and Cross (1990). Used widely in business and industry, through the pioneering efforts of some individuals during the 1990s, telephone groups have gradually begun to be used in the social services primarily to support chronically ill and disabled persons and their family caregivers. (Schopler, Abell, & Galinsky, 1998; Schopler, Galinsky, & Abell, 1997).

There are a number of advantages to the use of telephone groups as compared to face-to-face meetings. Telephone groups provide access to the homebound, those who cannot leave the person for whom they are caring, those who lack transportation, live in rural areas, or who want to avoid the time it takes to get to a face-to-face meetings. Telephone groups are also especially attractive for those with rare chronic illnesses, where there may not be enough members to form a face-to-face support group within a reasonable distance of a meeting place. Another advantage of telephone groups is that they appeal to those who are shy, or uncomfortable in engaging in face-to-face meetings (Galinsky, Schopler, & Abell, 1997; Glueckauf & Loomis, 2003).

It has been reported that members of telephone groups experience greater group identification and have more social influence on one another than in face-to-face groups (Galinsky, Schopler, & Abell, 1997; McKenna & Green, 2002). Because there are no visual cues, members tend to focus on their common situations and