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Coping with Young Self-Absorbed Group Members

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Abstract

The previous study by Kearns and Brown used 200 volunteer participants attending a community AA program to determine what variables could distinguish between newcomers to the program, chronic relapsers and endurers. The discriminant analysis produced a factor that accounted for 80% of the variance with the group deviancy score on the GSQ loading at 0.69 and age as -0.84. This factor was termed "young and self-absorbed". Presented here as a follow-up and guide for group leaders are the behavioral indicators and suggestions for coping with these behaviors to lessen their negative impact on the group, the members, the leader, and to prevent that member from being harmed in the group.

Keywords: Psychological; Behavioral; Literature; Cognitive

Introduction

The primary factors derived from a discriminant analysis in the study by Kearns and Brown that were found to distinguish between adults who were newcomers, chronic relapsers and endurers in a community AA program were age and negative demeanor and were titled young and self-absorption [1]. Newcomers were identified as attending their first 12-step program, chronic relapsers were defined as participating in two or more 12-step programs where sobriety was achieved and lost resulting in relapse and then returning to work again in a 12 step program. Endurers were defined as having 10 or more years of continuous sobriety and work in a 12 step program.

While caution should be taken in trying to interpret and apply the study results, there were some suggested implications that could be helpful to group leaders who work with this population. The discussion proposes that the young and self-absorbed group member can be conceptualized as a deviant group member as defined by Yalom and Lesczc [2]. In addition, the literature on ostracism is used to further describe the behaviors, the group's struggle to cope with the negative impact and behaviors and the threat to group cohesion that these present. These are difficult for the trained group leader to identify and manage, and can be more so for the untrained peer group leaders.

What follows is a definition of deviant group members, self-absorbed behaviors and attitudes, and suggestions for group leaders who work with self-absorbed group members of any age but especially those who are young and self-absorbed who may be exhibiting several of the negative demeanor behaviors [3]. The discussion uses three assumptions: the group leader is likely to have little or no training in group dynamics, process and other group factors; leaders' strengths and understandings lie in their life experiences and challenges; and that they have a deep commitment to helping themselves and others to achieve and maintain sobriety.

The concept of deviant group member

Deviant for this discussion refers to a group member who is deviant "because of their interpersonal behavior in the group sessions, not because of a deviant lifestyle or history" [2]. Other descriptions include "behavior or characteristics are unambiguously undesirable" [4]; disliked [5], have a demeanor that makes them unsuitable for the group [3]. These group members present threats to the group process [6], disagree with group norms so that the group experiences greater dissonance [7], are less likeable [8] and their behaviors can lead to decreased group cohesion [3]. The deviant group member is an outlier for the group's identity [4], its shared norms or values [7] and can exhibit self-absorbed behaviors and attitudes [9].

The young and self-absorbed group member can be conceptualized as a deviant in the sense that he/she may not fit in with the general makeup of the group except around a goal to become and remain sober. But, no matter what their primary or secondary goals may be, their behaviors and attitudes can be a disruptive influence for the group, frustrate the group leader and other group members, distract group members from doing the personal work they want and need to do, terminate prematurely which brings another set of challenges and they can fail to improve or to even become worse which is very harmful.

Destructive self-absorption

Self-absorption for this discussion refers to a pattern of behaviors and attitudes that are destructive to relationships as described in the "Destructive Narcissistic Pattern [10] and "Coping with Infuriating, Mean, Critical People" [11]. These behaviors and attitudes are not always visible to others at first but tend to emerge over time in interactions with them. They appear in patterns and clusters with varying levels of intensity across individuals which also makes them difficult to detect. In addition, there is another complication as some of these internal self-states can emerge unexpectedly in interactions. For example, the impoverished self coexists with the grandiose self and these can change places very rapidly as seen in an interaction where one is responding to the speaker's grandiose self, but that person comes back with an impoverished self-comment. This can be very confusing

to the receiver as the receiver does not realize that the self-states switched.

Following are brief description for some self-absorbed behaviors and attitudes. For more extensive descriptions and discussions, consult the books referenced above.

Grandiosity-Displayed by arrogance, contempt, and an inflated perception of oneself and abilities.

Impoverished self-coexists with grandiosity and is the deflated inadequate self that is seeking pity.

Attention-seeking-Behaves in a manner to get and keep the attention on oneself.

Admiration-hungry-Boasts, brags and can even distort and mislead so as to get compliments and praise from others.

Entitlement attitude-Expects to receive preferential treatment and sees him/herself as more deserving than others.

Lack of empathy-Is not able to sense and understand what others are feeling.

Shallow emotions-Experiences and expresses few emotions except for anger and fear. Can use the appropriate words but does not have the feeling associated with the word(s).

Exploitation-Manipulates and uses other for his/her personal benefit.

Envy-Thinks that others get what are rightfully his/hers and that they are not as deserving as she/he is.

Unique and special-deeply desires and even demands that others consider him/her as unique and special.

Extensions of self-Does not recognize others as distinct from him/herself, and considers others as extensions of him/herself and under his/her control.

Caution must be taken to perceive and identify self-absorption by a pattern of behaviors and attitudes observed over time and not by one or two behaviors. It is possible that almost everyone has one or two of the described behaviors and attitudes, can display these at times, but not in all situations as would be seen in someone termed as self-absorbed, or deviant, or as having a negative demeanor as identified by the GSQ [3].

Group leader interventions

While not all deviant group members can have a pattern of destructive narcissism, they too can have a negative impact on the group and, in addition, they can run the risk of becoming scapegoated. The interventions presented here are intended to focus on the self-absorbed group member attending an AA program as the results from the study seem to indicate that they have behaviors in common with the definition of deviant group members. The primary suggestions apply to the group leader's possible expectation that the self-absorbed group member is aware of his/her behaviors and attitudes and of the impact of these on others, and that when given feedback about the negative impact on others and the destructive nature of these on relationships, that the member will seek to change these behaviors and attitudes. This is a fallacy since the self-absorbed person cannot see the self-absorption, does not have the capacity for empathy that would enable him/her to see the impact on others, or to be able to judge the destructive nature of these on their relationships. This concept is

difficult to accept as being valid for adults but, if and when it is accepted, frustration, anger, feelings of inadequacy and other negative emotions can be reduced and/or eliminated. It is hard to realize and accept that no amount of empathic feedback will help the person to see this aspect of them, so it is not helpful for the relationship to continue to try and make them see the self-absorption and destruction. Group leaders will find it helpful to monitor their expectations and interventions that were designed to provide this feedback, and to block other group members who try to give it.

Because the self-absorbed group member cannot see or appreciate the destructive impact of his/her behavior on others, they run the risk of being scapegoated as the cause for others' dissatisfaction with their personal productivity, for the group's failure to become cohesive, conflict and the like. Their difficult behavior attracts blame and group leaders have the responsibility to protect that group member and to guide other group members to do their personal work in the group. This is where the group leader's skill at blocking scapegoating and redirecting the group's attention is needed and helpful.

Establishing group rules to include respectful listening and restraint for interrupting the speaker may also help for making behavior expectations clear. There will still be some interruptions and all of these cannot be prevented. However, if there is a group rule, that can be a reminder to all who have a tendency to interrupt the speaker to either agree or to offer another perspective or to disagree or to redirect the topic and so on. In addition, the rule can be used by the leader as a reminder to the person who is interrupting to let the speaker finish presenting his/her thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Another suggestion is for the group leader to use cognitive empathic responding rather than connected empathic responding [12]. Cognitive empathic responding occurs when the speaker's feelings are noted and reflected back to him/her without feeling those same feelings, just identifying them and reflecting. Using cognitive empathic responding is recommended because some self-absorbed people can be very powerful emotional senders and when their feelings are "caught" by others, these can be very difficult for the catcher to relinquish them. These "caught" feelings can then linger with the receiver for a very long time, especially if the receiver has insufficient psychological boundary strength. Cognitive empathic responding can be especially helpful to prevent catching intense negative emotions, such as fear and anger.

The final suggestion for group leaders trying to cope with one or more young and self-absorbed group members in the same group is to keep discussions on the thinking level and minimize the feeling level as much as possible. That means to keep the focus on facts, thoughts and ideas and less on feelings. Doing so can provide safety and reassurance for other group members, helps to contain some of the negative effects of the self-absorbed group members, and reduces the possibility of catching negative feelings.

Summary

It can be very challenging for the group leader to try and cope with the behaviors and attitudes of a young and self-absorbed group member, to protect the group and to be encouraging and supportive of this group member who is attending to try and address his/her problems. This group member's behaviors and attitudes can have a very negative effect on the group and on some group members, and group leaders can have difficulty coping with these especially when the usual interventions either do not work or do not work well. This discussion was intended to provide some suggestions for group leaders who have

one or more self-absorbed group members, especially those who resemble the newcomers described in the study by Kearns and Brown [3].

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