

Anecdotal Tips and Lessons Learned While Working with Men in a Group Counseling Milieu

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the experience of the authors working with men in the Midwest who were dealing with issues of anger, grief, loss of status, loss due to job elimination, forced unemployment, or notice of termination. The investigators offer anecdotal tips about working with men in a practical setting, having facilitated a men's group over the span of several years.

Background

From 2001 through 2009, six million manufacturing jobs were eliminated in the United States (Wial, 2012). Some religious organizations were quick to pick up on this situation. They created job networks and began to offer job loss support services through what they referred to as career ministry services (Caprara, 2009). These career ministry services included tips on

networking, resume writing, and interviewing skills. Presentations from counselors, career counselors, and human resource experts supported these efforts. Many religious institutions throughout the Midwest offered services to support the massive number of auto industry employees and others who were losing or had lost their jobs.

Two of the authors of this article volunteered their services as counselors to a career ministry organization. It was during these volunteer activities that a reoccurring theme of anger became noticeable in some of the men encountered. The observer theorized that, until these men were able to deal with the root causes of their negative emotions, movement through the job search process would be difficult, and securing gainful employment might be impossible. Was this anger sabotaging their future work possibilities? A sincere desire to help these men deal with their negative feelings associated with job loss led to contacting the Chairperson of the Department of Counseling at a medium sized public university in the Midwest. The primary researcher was next introduced to a doctoral student interested in men's issues. Together they decided to co-facilitate a support group at a University Counseling Center focused on men and male issues related to job loss brought about by downsizing and related activities in the auto and trade industries.

Anecdotal Tips and Lessons Learned

Presented in this section are anecdotal tips including lessons learned. This is far from an exhaustive list, which could contain many more entries. This article may inspire counselors to become group workers and provide an impetus for group workers to form men's groups. The authors are convinced that males need more men's support groups than are currently available.

One

We believe that men as a whole have a hard time making a commitment to join a support group. Adherence to social scripts makes it difficult for men to ask for help (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003). Calling the meeting a support group with counseling goals rather than a counseling group seemed to make it easier for men to make a commitment. We believe many men do not feel that they need counseling, therapy, or any other emotional support or formal assistance. However, some men recognize the need for practical support and assistance.

Two

Anecdotally, it seems that a group member encouraging other men to attend sessions was a successful recruitment strategy.

Three

Not all men are the same, but our sense was that men we worked with in general tended to be more cognitive and linear in their learning styles and more comfortable problem solving than dealing with their emotions. The simple mention of a feeling (especially when attaching values and judgments to that emotion) can be overwhelming for some men (Mahalik, Good, &

Englar-Carlson, 2003). The alternating format of using structured exercises to help men gain movement and momentum and then using non-structured discussion to allow the group members to decide what direction to go in was a very effective format for the men's group discussed in this article.

Four

Discussion material such as the video *A Gathering of Men* (Moyers, Bly, Ewing, & McCarthy, 1990), the books *Iron John* (Bly, 1990) and *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* by Moore and Gillette (1991), journal/research articles, and current newspaper and magazine stories provided a safe and effective avenue for men to explore their deeper concerns and inner emotions. Helping men to externalize emotions that are difficult to handle internally through the discussion of materials like journal articles seemed to provide a more comfortable path to reach and process emotions. Pushing for inner feelings too early in the group process with men can be a serious mistake.

Five

Trust the group process. Working with men can be painfully slow and at times seem like stagnant work. It may look as though the group is not progressing; however it usually is. It is important to trust that if you attend to the member process, the members will take the group where it needs to be.

Six

We noticed that the stages of group interaction and development may not be linear. They are more cyclical in nature with men moving back and forth between stages based on risk and comfort level. This process was acceptable because as we saw in this group that growth is not always linear, with men taking one step forward and sometimes two steps backward. It is a time-consuming process.

Seven

Group counselors need to be prepared to model openness and intentional self-disclosure. Men looked to see if the facilitators/leaders were willing to take the first risk.

Eight

Participants need to hear from the facilitators/leaders during the group process. Self disclosure in group work can be hard for men and requires commitment. Members need to understand that just showing up for the screening process and every time thereafter is a testament to their personal courage as men. Positive reinforcement from the leader (and co-leader) that you are glad they are here needs to be repeated often. While this is consistent with basic counseling skills (Young, 2013), it is worth mentioning.

Nine

Another word about courage! It is important to recognize the inner strength needed to take the first step to come to a group meeting. Participating in self disclosing activities is a mature action. Because we frequently acknowledged the courage each man exhibited (without being patronizing), their feelings, fears, and triumphs were validated in a masculine way in the presence of other men. This acknowledgement of persistence assisted in establishing a support system within the group that was then modeled by the members. Often times a group member remarked the validation they did not receive from a father, brother, partner, son, or other male figure in their life had been offset by positive comments and validation they received in the group from a member or one of the facilitators. Receiving encouragement while talking about and working through their feelings amplified their strength, allowing them to progress to the deeper issues they wished to focus on.

Ten

Men in a group can become very competitive and push other members of the group very hard to dig into their own issues. It is especially important for group facilitators when working with men to restate when needed that it is always appropriate to say "No, I am not ready to talk about that yet or to go there yet!" It is useful to remind members that it can take as much courage to say "No I am not ready to talk about that issue yet" as it does to talk about the issue and in group; a "No" should always be respected. Finally, as acknowledged by Corey (2012), if the group members understand that it is the responsibility of the facilitators to make sure each member is safe and has a right to say "no," a norm which is always respected, then each member may take greater risk in pushing himself and others to work through their concerns and life issues.

In closing, perhaps the most important lesson learned was to keep an open mind, a caring heart, and respect for the intestinal fortitude it takes for a man to attend and then fully participate in a group counseling session.

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