

Overview of Group Work in Social Work

Overview of Group Work in Social Work Practice

Key concepts, purposes, stages, roles, and ethical considerations

1. What Is Group Work?

Aspect	Definition
Group Work	A planned, purposeful interaction of two or more individuals who share a common goal, facilitated by a social worker or trained professional.
Primary Aim	To promote personal growth, social development, and problem-solving through mutual support, learning, and collective action.
Typical Settings	Community centers, schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, shelters, mental health clinics, and online platforms.

2. Core Theoretical Foundations

Theory	Contribution to Group Work
Systems Theory	Views the group as a mini-system with interdependent parts; changes in one member affect the whole.
Social Learning Theory	Members model and reinforce adaptive behaviors observed in peers.
Psychodynamic Theory	Explores transference, resistance, and unconscious processes that arise in group dynamics.
Empowerment & Strengths-Based Approaches	Focus on building capacities, fostering agency, and leveraging community assets.
Ecological Perspective	Considers how macro-level forces (policy, culture) shape group experiences.

3. Purposes & Benefits

Category	Specific Outcomes
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Therapeutic	Reduced isolation, increased self-esteem, coping skill development, symptom relief.
Educational	Knowledge acquisition, skill-building (e.g., parenting, job-search), information sharing.
Social/Community	Social integration, network formation, collective advocacy, community cohesion.
Preventive	Early identification of risk factors, fostering resilience, reducing relapse or recidivism.

Practice

4. Types of Groups in Social Work

Type	Typical Size	Main Focus	Example
Therapeutic/Support Groups	6-12	Emotional support, coping strategies	Grief support, substance-use recovery
Psycho-educational Groups	8-15	Skill development, information	Parenting skills, financial literacy
Task/Work Groups	5-10	Achieve a concrete objective	Housing-placement team, case management cohort
Self-Help/Mutual-Aid Groups	Variable	Peer-led problem solving	AA, peer-run LGBTQ+ support
Community-Development Groups	10-30+	Mobilize resources, advocacy	Neighborhood safety coalition

5. Group Development Stages (Tuckman Model & Adaptations)

Stage	Characteristics	Facilitator's Role
1. Forming	Members are polite, uncertain; establishing norms.	Clarify purpose, set ground rules, foster safety.

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Stage	Characteristics	Facilitator's Role
2. Storming	Conflicts emerge; power dynamics surface.	Mediate disputes, reinforce norms, encourage expression.
3. Norming	Cohesion builds; shared expectations develop.	Strengthen trust, promote collaboration, reinforce positive norms.
4. Performing	Group works efficiently toward goals.	Facilitate deep work, monitor progress, provide feedback.
5. Terminating/Adjourning	Group ends; members reflect on learning.	Guide closure, celebrate achievements, plan post-group support.

Note: Some models add a “**pre-forming**” (assessment & recruitment) and “**follow-up**” phase for after-care.
