

A MUTUAL-AID MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

Third Edition

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

EARLY GROUP GOALS AND NORMS

In This Chapter

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Commitment
Human Connection
Interaction
Mutual Aid in Motion
Purposeful Use of Self
Safety
Self-Reference/Self-Reflection
Structure
Work Connection

Chapter Materials

Exercise 5.1: *Prioritizing Goals in a New Mutual-Aid System*
Exercise 5.2: *Establishing Norms of Mutual Aid*

We are pressed to attend to many things with the new group (especially in the first session), such as putting members at ease, encouraging them to return for the next session, helping them to begin seeing their commonalities, and helping them begin to get to know one another. We cannot do everything at once, however; thus we need to develop priorities, and the goals and norms we choose to prioritize at this early time in the group's life will set the tone for its future (Glassman 2009; Lowy 1976; Newstetter 1935). For example, if we hope to set the stage for mutual aid, members must leave the first session with a sense of their human connection, which will help them open up to one another as resources. If we want them to begin to see the commonalities of their needs, desires, and goals, then we also want them to leave the first session with a sense of their connection to the group's purpose.

The hope that members will find the group trustworthy at this early point is unreasonable, of course. Nevertheless, we want them to leave the first session feeling that the group has at least the potential to provide safety and support as they work toward their goals, because this will encourage them to come to the next session. In fact, if we are completely honest, we would admit that their not showing up at the second session after having attended the first is an even greater fear! And even if we usually articulate this goal tongue-in-cheek, it does reflect in a nutshell our hope that group members' interest will be piqued enough in the first session to make them want to return to the second one—that they will, in effect, have begun to see what's "in it" for them (Glassman 2009; Lowy 1976; Papell and Rothman 1980). Finally, we want group members to leave the first session having experienced at least some taste of mutual aid—having had an opportunity to glimpse some of the ways in which they might help one another.

In addition to prioritizing certain group goals, we also need to pay close attention at this point to the norms we wish to see develop, since norms have such make-or-break power over mutual aid (Glassman 2009). In fact, norms are so strong in their capacity to dictate ways of being and doing that once they are put into play and adopted, they are "undone" only with great difficulty, even when they are acknowledged by the group itself as counterproductive.

In the first session, therefore, we need to explicitly encourage norms that will set the stage for mutual aid (such as the expression of real feelings and opinions, working cooperatively, and the giving of help), and discourage norms that are counterproductive (such as giving advice, being competitive, or relying on the worker as the central helper). If we want it to be normal to express real feelings, if we want it to be normal for people to think before they speak, and if we want it to be normal for people to speak in ways that demonstrate respect and sensitivity, then in the first session we need to model these ways of being and encourage members to follow suit, either through explicit statements or through invitations to behave in certain ways. From the start we need to do everything we can to establish norms that will catalyze mutual aid and prevent those that will impede it from taking root (Glassman 2009; Konopka 1983; Northen 1988; Papell and Rothman 1980; Schwartz and Zalba 1971; Shulman 2011). Only through our purposeful attention to working toward certain goals and establishing certain norms can we begin to provide a basic operating structure for the new group, help it to understand the framework within which it may function, and help it to shape its mutual-aid process. The next two sections discuss each group goal and norm in greater detail.

Goals to Emphasize in the First Session

Since the greatest priority of the mutual-aid model is that people discover their common ground as quickly as possible, *group building* (Papell and Rothman 1980) is the logical frame of reference for deciding which goals to prioritize with the new group. These goals are for group members to (1) begin to establish a human connection with one another, (2) begin to sense a common purpose, (3) begin to feel a sense of commitment to the group, (4) begin to see the group as a safe place for real talk, and finally, (5) to have a taste of mutual aid.

The Human Connection

Since it is through their relationships that mutual aid will develop, it is important that new members begin to connect with one another on a human level as quickly as possible. Without such a connection, it will be difficult for them to become open to and respond to

one another as resources. We need to devote some attention in the first session, therefore, to simply helping members get to know one another (Lowy 1976; Papell and Rothman 1980). If we had to choose, for example, we would postpone a discussion of "rules and regs," since it is better for people to leave the first session without a firm understanding of the group's structural details than it is for them to leave without a sense of the other people.

How do we help group members begin to connect on a purely human level? We use *introductions* to help them begin to share who they are. We *help them discuss their feelings* about being in this group. We *encourage them to share the nature of any previous group-membership experiences*. We *ask them to talk about what they hope to achieve in the group*. We *take every occasion*—both formal (through introductions and contracting, for example) and informal (through pre-group or post-group moments of chitchat, for example) *to help group members get to know one another*. As we do these things, group members begin to experience their commonalities, form personal attachments, and feel their human bond.

A Sense of Purpose

Although mutual aid depends to a great extent on the quality of the human connection among group members, it also depends on their work connection—on their connecting with one another regarding the group's *raison d'être*, or purpose.

How do we help people connect around work? Again, we use the *introduction process*. We *ask them to talk about the issues* that have brought them to the group. We *ask them to share with the others what they hope to get out of participating*. We *help them begin to identify and articulate the commonalities* between their own goals and those of others. Furthermore, we *encourage them to identify the threads* that seem to bind their individual goals to the group's overall purpose.

When we first meet with the group, we will already have discussed with prospective members both the concept of group purpose and the reality of this group's purpose. Nevertheless, the concept of purpose will not take on its full meaning or become truly accessible as a reference point for either shaping process or assessing progress until members have the opportunity to reach a consensus *en groupe* with regard to its meaning. Only when they have had the opportunity to do that will the group's *raison d'être* truly belong to them. Only then will they begin to feel connected at the work level. Even if a consensus about the group's purpose is not reached by the end of the first session, which is very likely since there are so many competing goals, it is still essential to group building that some degree of dialogue around the work connection begin now.

Commitment

If we want group members to want to return for the next session, then they must leave the first session with some degree of commitment to the group. Even when we work with a so-called captive audience (i.e., people in mandated groups), we want them to want to return to the next session, for a group's process will be always more useful if members become engaged in and committed to its work. We want, therefore, to make the group's early process as relevant as possible, targeting our actions to the potential of mutual aid if members commit to active and honest participation.

We help members in many ways to become committed to the group. At the most fundamental level we *model commitment*, for example, by being on time, by assigning more impor-

tance to the group than to other activities that beg our attention, and by showing respect for content. In other words, by taking the group seriously we help members take it seriously as well.

We do more than model commitment, however. We *also talk about the importance of the group* as we see it (e.g., "You've all talked some at this point about the needs and desires that have brought you to this group, and I really believe that in this group we'll be able to do much to help you meet those needs and desires."). We *make statements that help us share our vision of mutual aid* for this group (e.g., "Let me tell you some of the ways that I already see, even at this early point, in which I think you could all help one another."). And we use every opportunity to *identify the potential for mutual aid* when we do see it (e.g., "So, Frank, you feel like Estelle, then, right?").

Finally, we help new members become committed to the group by being inclusive. We *make statements and gestures* that include everyone in the group (e.g., "In this group, we will decide on things together."). Being inclusive helps people begin to see themselves as a community, and even if that self-image is one of a community in the making, it still helps them begin to feel invested in what happens in and to the group. To some extent, of course, it is the nature of their differences that will help them entertain new ways of thinking or doing, but at this early point we are more concerned with helping people see their association as members and "in it together" than we are with pointing out their differences (Falck 1989).

Safety

Another major goal of the first session is that group members will begin to think of the group as a safe place to express what they really think and feel, a goal that requires two types of interventions: generic and stylistic.

Generic interventions refer to behaviors that practitioners routinely assume to help new members become comfortable. *Taking risks* and *admitting our own mistakes*, for example, are generic interventions intended to model the desirability of taking risks and the acceptability of making mistakes. *Helping new members understand that in this group, not knowing will be just as acceptable as knowing* (either by explicit statements to that fact or by admitting when we ourselves do not have an answer) is also a generic intervention.

Many generic interventions can be used to help put new members at ease, all of which acknowledge the newness of the group and aim to help members express and explore whatever ambivalence they may feel about being in the group. We help the group *attend to issues of confidentiality* and *set in motion the norm of cooperation* while discouraging competition. We *adopt a trusting posture ourselves* and *respond sensitively* to individual concerns. We are *thoughtful before we speak*. We are *reflective as we listen*. And we guard the new group against premature intimacy by structuring discussion so that people do not disclose highly personal information because of anxiety, for example, before the group is able to tolerate it and respond appropriately in kind and meaningfully.

Stylistic interventions, on the other hand, refer to those ways of being and doing that in addition to generic interventions we personally believe are effective for helping new group members begin to feel safe. These might consist of using *specific words or deeds* we think reflect a friendly, genuine, and caring manner and that we would normally use to put people at ease regardless of the context, such as smiling, the purposeful use of humor, or engaging in informal chitchat or some form of nonverbal communication like a nod of support or even providing refreshments.

Whichever interventions feel right to us, our overriding goal is essentially the same: that group members leave the first session with a sense that we have shown concern for and sensitivity to them—that we have “been there” for each of them. We cannot provide instant safety, of course (see Chapter 6), but we *can* help the group begin to build a self-image as a place where people can give of themselves without fear of ridicule or attack.

Mutual Aid in Motion

Finally, we want group members to experience a taste of mutual aid in the first session. Clearly, its intensity will increase as time goes by, as members come to know and trust one another and as they come to see how they can help one another (see Chapter 6). Still, just as we can help them begin to feel a sense of safety, we can help new members experience at least some manner of mutual aid as well.

How can we help them do that at such an early point? First, we can set the stage by *taking the time to help group members understand how we define mutual aid* (e.g., “Here is how I see it . . .”) and *how we anticipate it as a group process* (e.g., “Here are some of the ways in which I see it being played out in this group . . .”). Not only will this process help the group develop a common set of expectations, it conveys our faith that the group can develop into a system of mutual aid while helping people new to the process become more alert to moments in which it is or is not taking place.

Next, we help members begin to imagine how they might engage in mutual aid by using bridging techniques to draw out their commonalities. We *encourage the dynamic of data sharing* (e.g., “Does anyone know where we might get that information?”) and through that process help group members begin to see their potential as an information network. We *encourage them to identify with feelings* that are being expressed so that they begin to experience *mutual support* (e.g., “So, Brian, you feel pretty nervous about being here, right? I bet you’re not the only one. . .”). And we *use whatever threads of commonality we perceive* as they begin to talk about their needs, desires, and hopes to help them identify their “all in the same boat” dimension (e.g., “It seems to me that you are all saying, in one way or another, that you have some real trouble controlling your anger and would like to change that.”).

In essence, by creating or making use of existing occasions to help group members begin to see the ways in which they might help one another, we can give them an early taste of mutual aid. Then, by noting every time we see it in action, we can help the new group begin to develop its ability to recognize and repeat it as well.

Norms to Emphasize in the First Session

Because of their ability to make or break the mutual-aid process, norms play a major role in social work with groups (Galinsky and Schopler 1977, Glassman 2009, Hartford 1971, Konopka 1983, Northen and Kurland 2001, Papell and Rothman 1980, Schwartz and Zalba 1971).

Norms are often confused with rules and regulations. Contrary to norms, however, rules and regulations are formalized and usually static sanctions on behavior. They tend to be discussed and developed in a new group as a part of its contract and generally refer to expectations regarding attendance, punctuality, confidentiality, and other structural issues such as meeting times, size of group, or whether it is to be open or closed. Rules and regulations might also refer to expectations regarding process issues such as whether or not members

should raise their hands in order to speak or which type of communication format (see Chapter 1) will take place. Rules may be developed to address any aspect of membership, then, but regardless of their direction or substance, we generally think of them as formalized and proactive directives regarding appropriate behavior.

Although groups may and often do discuss norms, norms generally tend to evolve on their own, out of actual process. That is, they tend to become established reactively rather than proactively. Therefore, rules and norms both speak to behavior, but there is a key difference between them. Rules *dictate* behavior. Norms *are* behavior. Norms are ways of being and doing that, unless directed otherwise, evolve into standards of acceptable behavior and ultimately reflect a group’s usual way of doing things.

Norms often evolve discreetly, but they set strong precedents for behavior and once in motion are extraordinarily difficult to challenge, let alone change. For example, a poster on the wall may state that no food is permitted in the meeting room, but a group norm may be to bring and eat a snack anyway. In spite of the admonition against eating, if the norm of snacking is challenged later in the group’s life, we can be sure that members will cry, “But why now? After we’ve been doing it all along!!” Once a precedent for any norm has been set, a proposal to change it and often just the mere idea of examining it feels very threatening. Changing an established norm feels like a loss, as if something is to be taken away. It is important, therefore, to immediately encourage ways of being and doing that will promote mutual aid and discourage those that are likely to impede it so that we do not find ourselves in the unhappy position of norm busting!

Which norms are those, specifically? There are many norms that advance mutual aid, but those that are crucial to it are (1) collaboration, (2) authenticity, (3) use of self, (4) seeing co-members as helpers, (5) decentralized authority, and (6) free-form interaction.

Collaboration

If a group is to build a sense of community, its members will need to work together rather than compete for the limelight or special status. However, placing a high value on collaboration does not mean that individuality will not be valued. Quite the contrary; individuality plays a great role in actualizing some of the dynamics of mutual aid, such as *mutual demand* and *problem solving*. Neither does it mean that individual leadership skills, comic-relief skills, nurturing skills, work skills, or other skills and strengths will remain unrecognized and unappreciated. Clearly, one member will assume leadership of process at some points, while another will do so in accordance with his or her particular strengths and skills at another. Still, if mutual aid is to take place, a spirit of communal achievement (e.g., “All for one and one for all.”) rather than individual achievement (e.g., “I’m in this for me.”) needs to prevail. If not, it will be difficult for members to identify their self-interest with that of others (Shulman 2011), to group build, and to do anything but remain preoccupied with their own needs.

Many skills encourage a norm of collaboration. We begin to set it in motion by *sharing our expectations* of the group as a collaborative venture. We *purposefully use words* such as *our*, *us*, and *we* to help give the group a sense of community. We *invite everyone to participate* in all of the group’s activities all the time to give each member the message that his or her contribution is always valued. We *encourage members to engage in collaborative efforts* while we discourage competitive endeavors. We *ask members to reflect on the results* of collaboration, and we *encourage them to talk about the impact of collaboration on group climate*. All of these

skills give members the message that, in this group, it will be normal for people to think and act as members of a community.

Authenticity

Eventually, the group matures. It progresses beyond its “getting to know you” stage, and members feel increasingly safe to express their real ideas and feelings. When that happens, the group’s capacity for mutual aid also increases and, therefore, helping the group to establish a norm of authenticity or “real talk about real things” is essential to helping it develop its potential.

How do we help this norm become established in the group? We begin to set it in play simply by *being authentic*, by *taking risks*, and by *sharing our own reactions* to what is being said or done in the group. We *encourage, accept, and praise the expression of real feelings and ideas* even when we disagree with the substance of what is being expressed. We *amplify* overly subtle messages and *tone down* overly loud messages so that everyone in the group can hear everyone else. The common message of this skill set is this: In this group it will be *normal* for real feelings and real positions to be expressed, and it will be *normal* for differences to see the light of day.

Purposeful Use of Self

As stated in Chapter 1, and as will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 7, the purposeful use of self by group members is crucial to mutual aid. Purposeful use of self consists of two processes: *self-reflection*, which refers to the process of thinking about personal experiences; and *self-reference*, which refers to the process of sharing those experiences. Use of self is a crucial norm of mutual aid for two reasons. First, it forces people to think about their own lives and experiences instead of focusing on those of others as a way of escaping the tasks of introspection and self-analysis. That is, it prevents the helping process from being purely intellectual or abstract and “other” directed. Second, through its story-sharing aspect, use of self helps the group discover its common ground and through that common ground expand its capacity for insight and empathy.

Several group-specific skills help us help people engage in use of self. We *ask each member to think about his or her own life and experiences* as they listen to those of others. And we *ask them to share stories* about their own experiences instead of offering advice. We *encourage them to always speak only for themselves and only about themselves* instead of speaking for or about others—in other words, to express their points of view rather than attack those of others. We *ask them to reach for experiential links* so that their common ground stays in view. And when their experiential common ground is shaky, we *help them reach for feeling links* so that the group remains connected at an affective level. These and other such skills help new members understand that, in this group, it will be normal for participants to make *personal* rather than *intellectual* contributions to the helping process.

Seeing Co-members as Helpers

Since mutual aid springs from the capacity of people to help one another, the norm of seeing (and thus using) co-members as potential resources also needs to be quickly established. How do we set this norm into play? First, from the group’s beginning, we *turn back to the*

group all problems and issues as they arise, even when we (or the members) think we have the “right” solution (Middleman and Wood 1990b). That is, we call on members to respond to one another rather than assume the problem-solving responsibility ourselves. That is not to suggest that we never respond to questions. Of course we do so if we are in the only logical position to respond. At the same time, it is important that we help the group learn to look to its own resources rather than automatically turn to us as the expert. Thus, we also *scan the group* visually, while we both talk and listen, to identify possible contributions to the group’s work process. We *use every opportunity to help members feel their commonality* so that they can become open to one another as potential resources. *At every opportunity we note members’ personal strengths and skills* to help them identify ways in which they might make use of one another’s experiences. Turning issues back to the group and redirecting communication encourages members to think of one another as resources. Scanning lets them know that it will be normal for their reactions to be sought, noted, and expressed. And helping them to identify their common ground and individual strengths helps them to actually use one another as resources.

Decentralized Authority

Although we take an active and direct leadership role with a new group, if it is to eventually develop its full potential for mutual aid, members need the freedom to identify, cultivate, and use all of their resources, including whatever internal leadership potential exists among them (see Chapter 8). Whatever leadership skills people bring to the new group, therefore, need to be identified and exploited, and the norm of shared authority over group affairs must be established.

How can we help a group share authority? To begin with, we *explicitly acknowledge our expectation that decision making will be a whole-group process* (e.g., “Let’s work on this together.”). Then we *help the group understand its parameters* (see Chapter 1) and keep decision making real and relevant (e.g., “I see where we’re headed, but I think we need to keep a couple of things in mind . . .”). We *periodically check for consensus* to help the group exercise its authority along humanistic (Glassman 2009) as well as democratic lines (e.g., “All right, let’s see where we all stand at this point; what do we feel and think about what’s been said so far?”). We *remain open to the emergence of leadership* from within the group and *enlist internal leadership as an ally* in the group-building process rather than perceive it as an affront to our own authority (e.g., “That’s a great idea, Anthony! I hadn’t thought of that. Tell us more about your thinking.”). We harness the group’s internal leadership potential by *encouraging members to take responsibility* for some pieces of process (e.g., “Okay, should we talk about the issue of confidentiality? I have a sense it’s probably on everyone’s mind at this point. What are your thoughts and feelings?”). And we *encourage members to reflect on process* (e.g., “Okay, we’re coming to the end of the session. Let’s talk about how we spent our time together . . .”). In this group, this set of skills suggests, it will be normal for all participants to share responsibility for what happens. Decentralized authority will not merely be an ideal. It will be a reality.

Free-Form Interaction

Not only does a mutual-aid system need to hear from all of its members for process to be meaningful and relevant, it also needs to hear from them as and when they have

something to say (see Chapter 1). It is vital, therefore, that a norm of free-form interaction be established.

New groups may experience some difficulty establishing a free-form rhythm, if only because groups to which we often belong prefer greater structure, such as hand raising. Furthermore, children or people who have difficulty controlling their impulses, expressing themselves, or taking their fair share of space, for example, may find it especially difficult to establish such a norm; and people's capacity to engage in free-form interaction needs to be taken into account. Still, exceptions notwithstanding, most groups have at least some capacity to work toward (if not establish right away) a norm of free-form process, and although any group should have the freedom to do so, a mutual-aid system *must* have the freedom to do so.

How do we help establish such a norm? To begin with, we *make explicit our desire that members participate in process* whenever they feel that they have a contribution to make (e.g., "I hope you'll all speak up."). We *actively help them enter the discussion* when they are reluctant to express difference to let them know that all contributions to the group's process are welcome (e.g., "Barry, you look as if you might have something to say . . ."). We *encourage and help members communicate directly* with one another rather than through us (e.g., "Talk to the group, Fran."). We *encourage them to build on one another's contributions* (e.g., "I'm not sure I understand, Philip. How does that relate to what Inez was just saying?"). And we *use our scanning skills* to make sure that everyone who wants to contribute has the chance to do so and to help those who have trouble speaking up (e.g., "Come on in, Joyce!"). In this group, this skill set implies, not only will it be normal for members to contribute to the process but also to do so if, as, and when they believe they have something to contribute.

Key Points of This Chapter

1. Many group goals vie for our early attention, and the way in which we prioritize them will set the tone for the group's future.
2. The goals we most need to emphasize in the earliest sessions are that new members will leave the first session feeling (a) some connection on a human level, (b) some connection to the group's overall purpose, (c) a beginning sense of commitment, (d) some trust in the group, and (e) having experienced some manner of mutual aid.
3. Once in play, norms set strong precedents and are not easily undone, even when the group recognizes them as counterproductive to mutual aid. It is important, therefore, to immediately encourage the establishment of some group norms and to discourage others.
4. Those norms that most help a group catalyze its mutual-aid potential are (a) collaboration, (b) authenticity, (c) use of self, (d) decentralized authority, and (e) free-form interaction.

Chapter Exercises

5.1: Prioritizing Goals in a New Mutual-Aid System

Purpose

To help participants learn to set priority group goals for a new mutual-aid system.

Learning Value

Opportunities to identify goals that set the stage for mutual aid in a first meeting and to practice what should be said or done in a first meeting to work toward those goals.

Duration

About 60 minutes

What's Required

Blackboard or its equivalent (large writing surface)

Instructor Directions

Participants:

1. Develop goals for a first meeting, listing them on the board.
2. Briefly discuss the ability of each goal to promote mutual aid.
3. Identify at least one strategy to work toward each goal noted.
4. Practice statements (or engage in role-play behavior) intended to help a group to work toward each goal.

Outcome

At the end of this exercise participants are better able to identify and articulate why and how goals to be prioritized in early group sessions catalyze mutual aid in the new system.

5.2: Establishing Norms of Mutual Aid

Purpose

To help participants establish desirable norms for mutual aid.

Learning Value

Opportunities to identify group norms that promote mutual aid and to practice what might be said or done in a first meeting to promote those norms.

Duration

About 60 minutes

What's Required

Blackboard or its equivalent (large writing surface)

Instructor Directions

Participants:

1. Identify which norms are important to mutual-aid process, listing them on the board.
2. Briefly discuss the relationship of each norm to mutual aid.

3. Identify at least one strategy to establish each norm noted.
4. Practice statements (or engage in role-play behavior) intended to set in motion the norms identified.

Outcome

At the end of this exercise participants are better able to identify the norms of value to mutual aid and to describe their relationship to developing and maintaining mutual-aid process.

Recommended Further Reading

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