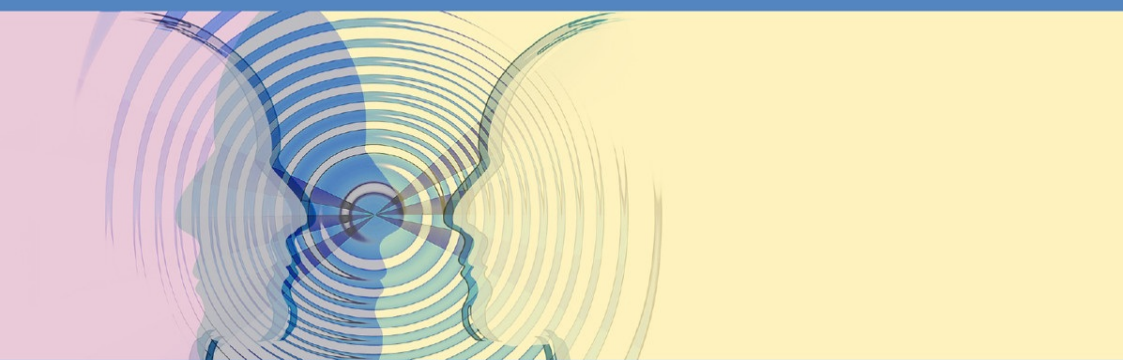


Psychotherapy Guidebook

SULLIVAN GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY



George D. Goldman

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Sullivan Group Psychotherapy

George D. Goldman

DEFINITION

Since Harry Stack Sullivan did not address himself to the problems of group psychotherapy, I am going to apply my personal understanding of Sullivanian principles to this therapeutic approach. For me, a therapeutic group consists of approximately ten persons of both sexes whose ultimate goal is to understand their interpersonal behavior in order to effect changes in it. Group treatment is an adjunct to individual treatment as I practice it. I adhere to a basic Sullivanian principle, which is: present-day interpersonal behavior that is persistently maladaptive and constantly repeated is probably a parataxic mode of operating. By parataxic is meant the carrying over intactly into the present of a mode of behavior that was learned earlier in life in order to cope with significant others (people who play important roles in the patient's life). It is roughly the equivalent of the Freudian concept of transference.

HISTORY

I see Sullivan as having been quite concerned with what psychiatric

problems are, and what they are not. While it surely is one's task to help people and, more specifically, to help people understand their behavior, there are many ways in which this can be done. One could give direct advice, or even be the warm, loving, giving parental substitute who would make up for all the deprivation the patient had suffered. Sullivan, however, felt that the most respectful role, as well as the most scientifically and empirically correct role, was that of an expert at understanding those events that would clarify for patients the processes that involve or go on between people. The patient, of course, was the expert on his specific history of significant interrelationships. Sullivan felt that the analyst could function most effectively by sampling those events that are characteristic of the patient's interactions with other people. What better laboratory to observe and document these dynamic events than in the therapy group, where the analyst is, in the fullest sense of Sullivan's usage of the term, a "participant observer" of human interaction?

TECHNIQUE

The method of this analytically oriented approach is initially to acquaint my patients with their present parataxic behavior, then to explore with them the origins of this parataxically repeated behavior, and finally to help them find alternative interpersonal behaviors that are not parataxically distorted. What group therapy seems to do best is to make patients aware — vividly,

intensely, and emotionally — of how they are behaving in ways that get them into difficulty, ways learned in childhood that are inappropriate to the present and their current adult status. The group therapy is, therefore, most effective in handling the initial phase of treatment as outlined above.

APPLICATIONS

The goal is basically to catch the person in the act of being himself in his interactions with other people in the group. Human beings tend, if they are not psychotic, to be fairly consistent in their behavior, and so patients are most likely to act out in the group setting their characteristic methods of handling other people or defending themselves against anxiety. As one group member detects such behavior and points it out to another, people see themselves as others see them. Hopefully, they become increasingly convinced of the difficulties that their maladaptive behavior creates for them. Such realization provides impetus to the wish to change oneself. A patient can then bring into individual treatment all the insights gained in group, and explore the historical antecedents of a particular piece of behavior. In the setting of individual therapy, an attempt is made to reexperience the origins of parataxic distortions. Then the patient is freed from the necessity of repeating parataxic behavior blindly and without choice. The next step for both patient and therapist is to work on creating better methods of meeting one's needs and of interacting more effectively in the present-day

interpersonal world.

In summary, the way I apply this technique of group psychotherapy is as an adjunct to individual analysis or individual psychotherapy. If the analytic process is designed to find out “What am I doing in my current life that is inappropriate?” “Why am I doing it?” and “What are the alternatives?” then the technique of group psychotherapy is best used to answer the first question. The “why” part of the process as well as the “alternatives” are worked out in individual treatment.