

Multifamily peer support group intervention

Building bridges between the family members

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The multifamily support group: Participants & group leaders

- The mentally ill parent (mainly affectively ill)
- 6-8 child/children, age difference not more than 2-3 years
- 2 group leaders in both the children and parent group
 - Multi-professional teamwork: Adult psychiatry, child psychiatry, social service, school teams, nursery school ect.– no right or wrong

The multifamily support group: From the beginning to end

- Two Family based dialogues to get started
 1. Parent / parents: Let's talk about the children-intervention
 2. The child & parent together: How to help the child to join the group
- 10 group sessions: Parent & child groups work in parallel processes with shared sessions in-between
 - Theme based, structured, activity based
- Family based evaluation of the participation & feedback

The intervention in process

- Starting point: Parental motivation, commitment & understanding of the focus & approach
- Objective: Strengthening protective factors inside & outside family
- Focus: Child experience of the parental illness & its reflections on everyday life
- Approach: Dialogue-based psycho education, activity orientation, emotional support, healing processes in peer support processes

To build bridges & self understanding

In the child group

- The child is encouraged to express thoughts & to ask questions
 - Reflections within the peer group
 - All questions about the parental illness **are** "passed on" to the parents group
- The parental capacity is a **prerequisite?** in making the illness a possible family narrative
 - To build a family understanding

In the parent group

- The child is kept "present" in the discussions
 - Parents are encouraged to look at the situation **with** the eyes of the child
 - Themes in a parental & child perspective
 - Illness talk in a child focused manner: **ability**
 - Sensitivity to the experiences & needs of the child

11 children's thoughts about the support group intervention

Although the children didn't expect the intervention to be but boring

They mainly enjoyed participating very much... But why?

What made the group intervention a positive experience ?

- The activity-based working method (tasks & exercises), the repetitive rituals and routines and the small snack
- The possibility to learn more about the parental illness **and the help** to develop self understanding
- The possibility to meet peers, to **discuss** experiences in the peer group, the interaction with the peers and the group leaders

The significance/meaning of the peer group in the **intervention**

- An experience that you are not the only one, that there are other families in the same situation
- Easy to talk about own experiences
 - The others understood the child's distress, needs and feelings
 - No need to hide/secret **one's** own situation, **nor** any need to be ashamed
 - Easy to trust the group and the other children

Something to recommend to peer?

Yes...

But why?

- A possibility to build understanding
 - "... because its good to learn to understand why the parent is so tired and why the **mother** can behave in a strange way..."
- To get relief
 - "... because it was a nice group and it helped... ...its now much easier to be & live right now"
- Help to talk & speak
 - "... because I got help... It helped ... You know how to speak with the mother about the illness and things... It may be difficult also for the mother."
 - "... because you get help... And when you have been talking to **somebody** it will be easier also later... And you may **find** some **new** friends as well."
- The parental worth
 - "...because perhaps the parent will get better!"

Thoughts six week post- intervention

- “Now life is more easy-going... This peer group... It’s much easier for me right now”
- “Yeh... I got help... In speaking... Talking... Its possible to speak about your feelings and all that kind of stuff...”
- “It was value in some way, you **learned more** about the illness ... That was probably **worth the while.**”
- “Yes... It was helpful... You haven't got as much pressure on you anymore...”
- “Valuable...my mother **does** not shout THAT much anymore”
- “I’m relieved, my mother speaks much more about the illness and life is much easier for me as well as I now know much more about it... The depression...”

11 children's thoughts about the impact of intervention

- Relief/help by the possibility to speak about the family situation and own experiences (therapeutic impact)
- New understanding built up by information and shared communication: less self-blame, understanding the parent **not mean**, courage to leave parent alone
- A new openness/willingness to speak about the illness in the family → less worries
- A better ability to **evidence** and declare own thoughts & assertiveness
- A change in parental behaviour: more talkative & seems to be much happier

Own small thoughts about the intervention

- A positive intervention focusing on **recourses** & protective processes
- Brings understanding of parental mental illness into a family process and **breaks** the silence outside the family
- The parallel groups make it possible to build resiliency as an ongoing process
- 10 sessions can't make any miracle
 - Though good enough for many families to get started
 - Early identification of families needing more support
- **Multi-professional** teamwork
 - Useful for the families & the professionals