

Introducing a Shy Person into a New Group by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

You are introducing a new person into your ongoing group. You know the person to be shy. Describe two ways to sociometrically orient the person during their first meeting with the group.

A shy person will not ordinarily choose to join a group until they have reached a position of curiosity about their shyness and have a willingness to experiment a bit with trusting others and themselves in this challenging situation. The condition of shyness is one of momentary retreat in the face of an abhorrent social event. Shyness has become a chosen way to handle anticipated stressful, critical and demanding life events. For many, shyness has become a way of life, and one which the person would gladly give up, once their trust in others is rebuilt and they have a success experience or two in being their more courageous self.

Your ongoing group, whether it is a therapy group or a psychodrama-oriented group, is one in which each person eventually reveals the personal story which is connected to their beliefs and behavior. The shy person believes that their very shyness reveals more about themselves than they want revealed and can't seem to help this paradoxical situation. Acknowledging this fact in your plans for ways to orient the person to the group (and the group to the new member) will help to provide a straightforward approach. Also, you acknowledge that the addition of a new member changes the group, and that the prior connections people have to one another will shift to accommodate the change. The task for the group leader is to return to group building activities providing opportunities for all group members to connect. This diffuses the attention on one person, the shy new member, and opens the process to each group member. The effect lessens the performance demand on a person ill equipped for that task.

Sociometrically oriented way to incorporate new members

(1) Sweatshirt messages - Give each person in the group two sheets of paper. On the first sheet they write what could be printed on the front of a sweatshirt which reveals what they "lead" with when meeting people for the first time. On the second sheet they write what is really going on, the back of their sweatshirt, "should the truth be known". An example:

Front: "I'm a real cool guy"

Back: "Yeah, if I have a few drinks in me."

or

Front: "People tell me I'm pretty."

Back: "Can you imagine what it is like to have people hitting on you all the time?"

Have enough safety pins for each person to pin the messages to their clothes. Have people mill around and spend a moment with each person.

Open the topic for discussion in the group. The new member will have a chance to interact one on one without having the whole group focus at one time.

(2) Advantages and disadvantages 2 - This is a paired exercise. Normally I would have group members chose a partner; however, this puts too much pressure on a new person so I will use a "pick a partner from the hat" method. (Half of the group members names go in a hat, and the other half choose their partner from the hat. If the group has uneven numbers, I join in to make the numbers even.) I usually demonstrate this exercise first: Two people sit side my side, not facing, but looking out in the same direction, similar to the "doubling" position. One person begins by stating an attribute of theirs. It can be one he/she feels good about, or one they don't like. Example: "I am a truthful person." The partner immediately begins to speak aloud, as if they are the person, musing aloud what they imagine to be the advantages and the disadvantages of having this attribute. Allow about two minutes. Then, they turn to the person with that attribute and get corroboration or correction. Next, the exercise repeats with the "double" now being the focus and stating an attribute of theirs to their partner.

This exercise helps each person realize they are able to contribute, as well as to be known. It brings with it the realization that people are able to intuit a great deal without explanation. And, it gives a person an opportunity to immediate interact with correction in a non-threatening and non-public way. Everyone is doing this at the same time and so the full impact of group focus is lessened. The shy person is helped to get to know one other person and thereby enlarging their social atom by one.

¹ This exercise was introduced to me in the late 1970's by Allen Wickersty, Ph.D., TEP of Wickersty Associates in Maryland. He is greatly missed by our psychodrama collective.

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