

### **GROUP AS YOUR PRACTICE LABORATORY**

**“The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves; is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.”**

by Pema Chödrön

from *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*

Some group members share that before coming to group they had not had many opportunities in their lives where they were encouraged to speak honestly or openly about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. This is in large part because one of the results of painful childhood experiences – whether from abuse, neglect, illness, or trauma – is the need for us to discount our own feelings, wants, needs, desires, and experiences in order to survive.

It just doesn't make sense for a child to be in touch with feelings, thoughts, and needs that will not be met, seen, or respected and so we learn to turn them off, turn them toward others) in the hope that meeting their needs will indirectly meet some of our own), or find other ways of getting our needs met (usually in less than ideal ways). Indeed, for many of us who have experienced early difficulties with getting our needs met, we learned to focus our attention outward to that we could better manage unsafe people and circumstances in our lives. This was useful and necessary for us at some point in our early lives because it wasn't safe for us to feel our own feelings or to recognize just how much our own needs were not getting met.

Because of this early experience of turning off our feelings and rejecting our own needs in order to survive, some of us may not have had much practice focusing our attention inward on our own feelings and needs as adults. For this reason it is sometimes awkward or unfamiliar for us as group members to be in a situation, namely group, where we are being asked to check in with our feelings, talk about our needs, or express our desires openly.

The fact that it is challenging to communicate in this kind of open and clear way about our feelings and needs does not mean that it is bad. It just means that it is a skill we did not get a chance to develop very well as children and now it feels strange to be in a place where people really want to know what we are feeling, thinking, and needing. We may feel suspicious of other's true intentions, scared that they really don't care, embarrassed that we are taking up too much time, anxious that we aren't doing it perfectly, or many other feelings. These are all welcome, expected, and okay reactions to being in group and also to bring into group.

Groups then become a learning laboratory where we can practice using and strengthening foreign and unfamiliar interpersonal and awareness skills so that we can get better at using them in our relationships and experiences outside of groups. Our group is therefore a safe place for us to NOT KNOW how to use a skill very well and to get supportive feedback and safe opportunities to practice using and developing the skills we need in order to live more effective and satisfying lives.

In short a therapy or support group is a good place for us to practice using new skills, to make bold mistakes that can be repaired and reworked in group, and to be welcomed and encouraged to belong just because we are who we are – not who we think others want us to be or need us to be. Group is a place to practice being real, being authentic, and simply belonging.