

Richard has been running groups for over 20 years. Originally trained as a counselling psychologist, he subsequently trained in group work and psychodrama at the Australian College of Psychodrama in Melbourne. Richard came to realise that groups, far from being scary places for people, can be seen as safe havens. Places of sanity. Places where they can find their bearing in the world and places where they can be themselves. Places where they can say anything and be safe.

He works with clients from a variety of backgrounds: abused childhoods, drug addictions, mental illness, homelessness, families in crisis and isolation. He has found that some clients need one to one therapy but rarely only one to one. He has found that after a time his clients develop so that they will do well in a group. Sometimes he starts his clients off in a group and then has them do one on one at the same time. He has found that people who are able to do group psychotherapy as well as have one on one therapy do really, really well.

Richard you reckon that people can heal simply by virtue of being in a group. Why?

Well we all live in groups, don't we. Yet we often have had terrible experiences in these groups. As teenagers, in our families, in our schools, as adults and maybe in our current family, in our communities, our church groups. When people come to the group they begin to heal because they are in a safe environment and are having human group experiences that counteract their earlier ones. There is a very profound socialising process going on. People find out that there are others struggling in the world just like they are.

And why do you do this work?

When running a group – I feel the freest – I can go anywhere – I am an artist working with artists – I can go anywhere – I am able to create heaven or Hades, we can go forward in time, other dimensions and to the spiritual planes. It means I am assisting to give birth to things in the world – new things that have not existed – things that finish off earlier damaging experiences for people. It is very uplifting and it expands me. I love it.

And why a group though cannot a one to one therapist have the same experience?

When I work with a group and have other people available to work cooperatively with me and my client, then I am really able to function in a variety of ways that I can't when on my own.

I can set out a situation dramatically and step back with the client and really look at it. I can't do that so well on my own. In a group there are other people working with me and with each other. This creates a strong environment for safety, a greater supply of wisdom and allows me to expand the way I operate.

In a group people can have expanded experiences of life, such as: disagreements with people; trying new behaviour; learning new things; extending their imagination and these can really prepare them for the world. This makes the world a less scary place as well as preparing them if the scary stuff does come up.

Why else do you love group work?

Dealing with deep issues in a group creates a whole extra order of healing. Sometimes other things can be brought out in a group that won't arise in one on one therapy because of various issues – you can go places and do other things that come because the whole process is not focussed on one person's problems alone. Other ideas arise and people become to know that sometimes the problem is there because something unknown is missing or not occurring. Then when it comes to consciousness, maybe through someone else's statements or through someone else's responses it can be dealt with in an easy enough manner.

What are the advantages for you in working this way?

Usually most people could go into a group. The only thing would be if they are very fragile – it depends on the fragility of the person and their assessment. I spend time getting people ready if required. I am looking at the group I've got and the roles and relationships and I think through how a person might benefit.

Some people talk about ego strength – could they fragment quite a bit on a group. But then I've a client who finds it difficult to do individual therapy and does group work and only does individual sessions as required – and they are really developing – they tend to cope – they get sane or healed by being in the group because it is a healthy culture and a human one functioning in a normal enough manner.

The group is a more sane place than many of my clients have anywhere else and the group is also a reference group where they can bring out anything they want to bring out. The environment of a group is a sane place not a difficult place as people often think. More a life reference group like a sane family. People can be themselves here. They find themselves saying, "I can say anything."

A lot of people see a counsellor and then come here and get a new mother and a father. Some come here and then see a counsellor. People really, really do well if they are seeing a group therapist as well as a single therapist. There are times for one, both and then the other. It is complimentary. They get a double with the individual's therapy – they also get the normalising, socialising from the groups work. They get to redo some of the destructive things that occurred during adolescence. They get to try things again.

The only rule I have is that they don't have sex with anyone in the group. There are some people in the group – quite young – came along because he needed another male to send him into adulthood.

What's it like doing group work as against one on one work.

Not doing individual therapy when done in a group – they are having more a family experience with a lot more roles and relationship stimulations – and they have peers and some they like and some they don't and they get thrown into a lot more tests of how they are going to deal with issues and tests with each other. People bring out the difficulties with life and get some decent challenges more like the real thing, but again in a safe enough manner.

And what is this like for you?

For me?

Even in individual therapy – in group I feel expanded, because I think systemically – I feel expanded to see this real social work happening in a structured and valuable manner. When I sit with a person's feelings and depressions I want to create a bigger than life experience itself – so that what? I want to create a bigger than life experience so that people can learn to handle anything.

There are some things that you can't deal with in individual therapy that you can in a group: with the assistance of an auxiliary I am freed up to do all these other things, after individual work it prepares them for group life which is what we have to do all the time – it gets people ready for the other groups in their lives; people try out heaps of things.

Regarding the quality of the work I do – it means the folks have lots of different experiences, not all from me but from others, and experiences that they might never have anywhere else.

When you work at depth with others it is a big work.

It pays better and is better value for clients.

What are some of the things you can do in a group that you are unable to with one on one?

What I can do in a group with people is work with people with areas of functioning where they have taken on something from someone else – such as a symbiosis with their father or mother where they take on their depression. To be able to set that up dramatically and get it expressed and stand outside and have a look at it is so fantastic.

You can feel things and do things that you can't in individual therapy – physical things. Moving around, involve the body, involve spatial relationships, make more or less of things.

Where can someone go where they can really develop and be themselves and bring out anything? Well I have seen it often in groups and this is why I like working in groups.

Richard, Counsellor - 25 years