**Support Groups and Therapy Groups: What Is the Difference?**

*By Gail C. Bardin, MA, LMFT*

Comfort can be found in others with shared concerns.

As a licensed marriage and family therapist, I have worked with many people on a one-on-one basis. I have also led many group therapy sessions and facilitated numerous support groups. Quite often I am asked: What is the difference between group therapy and support groups? Aren’t they pretty much the same? But if not, which would be right for me?

Although the two types of groups have many similarities, **there are several distinct differences**.

**The Type of Assessment**

The first step in joining either type of group is the interview/assessment. For a support group, the assessment is more about determining the appropriateness of the individual for a particular support group. For a therapy group, there’s a much more comprehensive assessment, as it’s important to know whether or not the individual is both wanting and able to handle more in-depth, psychotherapeutic issues and techniques.

**How Open the Group Is**

Typically, new members can enter or leave a support group quite readily, and the group simply continues with the members who are present (an “open group”). This is not so with a therapy group, which is much more focused and structured, and thus requires a more fixed membership (a “closed group”).

**Group Size**

Typically a therapy group has approximately six to ten participants, although this may vary. This is also typical for a support group, although these groups may be smaller or as large as 11 to 12 if they are very cohesive, and both space and time can be accommodated.

**The Role of the Facilitator**

In therapy groups, the facilitator functions as a therapist, directly leading the group, educating, and, just as in individual therapy, utilizing different psychotherapeutic interventions. In contrast, a support group facilitator is what I refer to as a “guide from the side.” He or she looks for underlying themes, and then may highlight some of those themes. This can facilitate further discussions, encouraging member-to-member interaction. The support group facilitator also ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak, and that members are sharing, not advising one another, thus ensuring a “safe” environment for all.

**The Purpose of Each Type of Group**

The general purpose of support groups is to help identify healthy, effective coping techniques, skills often geared to mitigating feelings of angst, fear, pain, and loss. The groups also provide a great support network—members in similar circumstances with similar feelings with whom they can share in an open and unedited fashion. For some people, this may be their only support network. The group allows people to be where they are and validates and normalizes what they’re feeling. It’s a place for encouragement, not only from the facilitator, but from other members.

A therapy group also helps with developing coping skills, but in a somewhat different manner. Its focus is more educational, therapeutic, and process-oriented. It provides a forum for change and growth, and there is often a theme presented for the entire group, with specific outcomes anticipated.

In general, I would characterize therapy groups as being more structured and didactic in nature, addressing issues on a deeper level, and having a specific goal or outcome in mind. On the other hand, support groups are less structured, with no curriculum per se—instead, many themes may enter a discussion by a fluid group of members, with the facilitator guiding from the side.

Not everyone will wish to participate in the more intense, focused, therapy-based experience of group therapy; however, nearly everyone can benefit from a support group. Each type of group offers a unique dynamic and the key is finding a group that meets your specific needs and association. For example, at Gilda’s Desert Cities there are groups for those recently diagnosed and currently in treatment for cancer, their caregivers, those in bereavement, and those no longer in treatment but dealing with post-treatment issues.

Both types of groups have a lot to offer, and I would encourage everyone faced with a new challenge to consider them both.

*Gail Bardin is Clinical Director at Gilda’s Desert Cities. For more information contact Gilda’s Club at (760) 770.5678 or visit*[*www.gildasclubdesertcities.org*](http://www.gildasclubdesertcities.org/)*.*