

Development, content and effective key elements of the psychosocial group rehabilitation and group leaders' education

This abstract is based on the following research reports and articles.

Research reports of The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged:

Pitkälä K, et al.. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation. Background and design of the project. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 1. The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2003. (In Finnish.)

Pitkälä K (ed.). Loneliness of older people: Development and education of group rehabilitation. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 4. The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2004. (In Finnish.)

Pitkälä K, Routasalo P, Blomqvist L (ed.). Loneliness of older people: Art and inspiring activities as psychosocial group rehabilitation. Research and policy development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 5. The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2004. (In Finnish.)

Routasalo P, Pitkälä K, Karvinen E (ed.). Loneliness of older people: Group exercise and health related discussions as psychosocial group rehabilitation. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 7. The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2004. (In Finnish.)

Marjovuuo A, Pitkälä K, Routasalo P (ed.). Loneliness of older people: Group therapy in Senioripysäkki as psychosocial group rehabilitation. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 8. The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2005. (In Finnish.)

International articles:

Pitkälä KH, Blomqvist L, Routasalo R, Karvinen E, Oikarinen U, Saarenheimo M, Mantyranta T. Leading groups of older people: Description and evaluation of education of professionals. *Educ Gerontol* 2004; 30: 821-34.

Blomqvist L, Pitkälä K, Routasalo P. Images of loneliness. Using art as an educational method in professional training. Accepted, *J Cont Educ Nursing*.

Background

Loneliness and its negative effects, like declining functional status, social isolation, depression and increased need for help, have been tried to prevent with intervention directed either on individual or groups. Of the previously studied interventions, those that allow participants actively influence the contents of intervention have been viewed as the most promising. We started to develop group rehabilitation with three different contents: art and inspiring activities, group exercise and health related discussions and therapeutic writing combined with group therapy, that have shown to

be promising in their efficacy. In previous studies, intervention or education of the persons, that has implemented it have not been described in detail.

Objective

The objective was to describe the development, content, problems and key elements of the psychosocial group rehabilitation for lonely older people. In addition, objective was to describe the evaluation of the intervention. We also describe the group leaders' education and results of their evaluations.

Data and methods

Scientific literature, expert seminars, group leaders' know-how as well as group participants' feedback were used in the development of the psychosocial group rehabilitation.

Feedback related to group leaders' education and mentoring was gathered from the group leaders. Feedback consisted of structured questionnaires in which the trainees evaluated the education using Likert-scale and also semi-structured feedback was used.

Group leaders' (N=14) diaries (N=108, about 400 pages) that they wrote after each group meeting and group observations were used in analysing the groups content, key elements and problems in the groups. The diaries were either descriptions of the happenings in the groups and objectives of the groups or reflective considerations of group leaders' own role and the group process. Qualitative methods were used to analyze the diaries. The diaries were read several times looking for the predetermined key elements of the group activity. In addition, we looked for expressions describing group phenomena. The notes of four researchers that visited the groups were also used. At least one of the four researchers was present all together in 32 group meetings and they made notes afterwards. The notes were used to compare the group leaders' diary descriptions and researchers' experiences of the key elements and group phenomena.

Feedback was also gathered from the group participants. In the middle of the intervention, a semi-structured questionnaire was used to get feedback of group participants wishes related to the group activities. After the intervention, a structured questionnaire was used to get feedback of their experiences and the achievement of the groups' objectives. In addition, some group members were interviewed. These interviews concerned their experiences of loneliness and what they had experienced in the groups. A postal questionnaire sent before the group rehabilitation was used to evaluate the participants' characteristics and to tailor the group contents according to the group members' preferences and interests. In these questionnaires, the respondents were asked about their demographic factors, morbidity, interests, hobbies and preferences concerning the group content.

Results and discussion

The development of the group rehabilitation

An expert seminar was arranged when forming the objectives, forms and contents of the intervention. The research team got familiar with the literature and diverseness of the concept of loneliness. Functional and effective interventions, problems appeared

in the interventions – like risk for non-adherence – as well as demands for the group leaders' expertise were examined from the previous literature.

Psychosocial group rehabilitation, in which group members could choose the content and have a possibility to influence on that, was formed as the main idea of the intervention. Group dynamics and normal maturation of the group was consciously used to support older participants' social activation, empowerment and mastery over their lives. Three different contents were selected so that as many individuals as possible could find a group of their own interest. However, it was not important *what* was done in the groups but *how* it was done.

The beneficial effects of art, exercise, writing and therapy on health and well-being were examined using the previous literature. Art was shown to have several characteristics that improved health and alleviated loneliness, but there was no randomized studies on it. Older people have their own everyday culture and different age cohorts have their own values that have to take into consideration when planning the groups. Exercise has proven its effect on prevention of morbidity, frailty and functional decline in several randomized, controlled trials. In addition, it improves psychological well-being, alleviates depression and socially activates people. Writing helps to analyze difficult life experiences, it gives words to emotions and experiences. Therapeutic writing has shown its effectiveness in several controlled studies. The effects of the group therapy have been more difficult to study with a rigorous randomized design. However, positive things, that happens in group therapy has been examined using qualitative research.

The development and evaluation of the group leaders' education

The development process of the group leaders' education is described in the report. It started with selecting the institutions and group leaders that were to implement the intervention and continued by clarifying the group leaders' needs for education. In expert groups the objectives, contents and activating methods for the education were formulated based on the needs of the group leaders. Different views on learning, evaluation of the education and its' different levels were analyzed.

The education was based on constructive learning theory and reflection as a booster for learning. Learning methods included the consideration of one's own experiences of loneliness with pictures of art, reflective writing during the whole learning process and feedback gained from those writings. In addition, role plays were used to promote interaction and abilities to lead a group. Feedback, discussions and participative planning were also used as learning methods. Learning process lasted for 1.3 years and it included several seminar days. At the end, those who were willing were trained to be group leader educators.

Feedback of the education was gathered from the participants. Trainees evaluated their own learning and from the diaries the expressions of learning, changes in the way of working and insights were analyzed using qualitative methods. In the light of these results, the education was successful in achieving its' objectives. In the report, the results of the evaluation are described. This report can be used when educating the group leaders' educators.

The key elements of the groups

* The predetermined key elements were 1) group members homogeneity (suffering from loneliness, common interests, same level of cognition and functional status), 2) group leaders ability to value older people and their common education (understanding of older people's loneliness, group dynamics and group leading, ability to support the adherence of the group members and expertise on the groups' content), 3) objective-oriented group meetings, 4) conscious use of group dynamics as well as 5) group leaders working as facilitators and in pairs.

* Group members' homogeneity worked well. All participants attended the group that they had selected as their primary interest or participants had a hobby that was related to the groups' content. Due to this, group members found their "soul mates" in their group. Older people with moderate or severe cognitive impairment were excluded and functional status was similar among the participants. However, loss of hearing and mild dementia impeded some group members' participation. There were both men and women in all groups.

* The groups identified themselves as groups for lonely older people. Loneliness was addressed in all groups. However, at first discussing about loneliness was not easy in several groups. Some participants denied suffering from loneliness and other wanted to make a joke of their suffering. After the difficulties in the beginning of the groups, all group members were able to talk about loneliness and their personal experiences.

* Group members adhered well to the groups. Only 3 % dropped out the intervention. The group leaders supported the participation e.g. by taking the participants actively involved in planning the group content and participants views and hopes were heard. The group members were transported to the group meetings and back home by a minibus that eased the threshold to participate.

* From the beginning, group members had an active role in group meetings. When the group process proceeded and groups become more settled the group leaders withdrew little by little to the background and the group members got even more active role in group meetings. However, the group leaders made sure that all meetings were objective-oriented and in line with the objectives of the intervention. They also ensured that every group member was heard and that the atmosphere in the groups was safe.

* Feeling of togetherness and sharing the loneliness were highlighted in the intervention. The group meetings brought meaningful content in the older lonely peoples' days. The meeting was a culmination of a week: it was waited for beforehand and remembered afterwards. The improved mood of the participants was visible in the change of their appearance as the meetings went on. Some started to improve their outfit and hair style or wear jewellery and lipstick.

* The group dynamics and the whole groups' life curve come true in all but one of the groups. However, the pace was different in different groups. There were also crises in the groups that were essential for maturation of the group. Participants had their own roles in the groups that in one way supported the maturation of the group. Groups had their own characteristics and in some groups there were problems that could not be solved.

* Group members worried for each other. To those group members, who happened to be sick, a post card was sent. Groups also adapted their pace to the participants' that moved the most slowly. Group leaders had to interfere when taking care of other group member impeded the other members' own participation to the group activity.

* Leading psychosocial rehabilitation groups for lonely older people as a pair was a new experience for the group leaders. Working in pairs turned out to be functional

and made it possible for the group leaders to individually notice each group member and to share responsibilities. One leader was able to concentrate more on the members that needed help while the other continued activities with the rest of the group. In addition, working in pairs made it possible for the group leaders to reflect with the other group leader the group meetings and -process as well as their own role and actions in the group. The group leaders saw this as empowering and educative.

Special elements of the group exercise and discussions -group:

- * Different ways of exercising, like gym, water aerobic, ball games and nordic stick walking, made it possible for the group members to do and experience together.
- * Group members were excited to try new forms of exercising and to test their own limits. Group members also started to actively exercise in their everyday life.
- * Although exercise was a tool in psychosocial group rehabilitation, it also increased participants' physical functioning. One started cycling again and the other purchased own nordic walking sticks to increase safety of the forthcoming walks.
- * Erotic charge arose between the participants of opposite sex. This was not shamed for but rather shown openly and encouraged by other participants. The existence of erotic atmosphere in the groups was a refreshing experience.
- * Competition, risk of failure or becoming embarrassed was related to some forms of exercise. Group leaders were aware of these risks and they were able to control it. Some times it was forgotten that the main objective of the groups was not to exercise and to increase physical functioning, but the alleviation of the loneliness.
- * In some groups, the participants were quite heterogeneous in relation to the physical functioning. Having two leaders in the groups it was possible to divide the participants into two groups with different physical functioning.

Special elements of the art and inspiring activities -group:

- * The art was understood broadly in the groups. It was related to e.g. high culture, like classic music and theatre and to folklore, like popular music and movies. What was common for all experiences, like seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting, was that it created an experience that could be shared with other participants. Having possibility to discuss and change opinions with each other in a group that was considered as safe, was related to sharing experiences. Art experiences were related to loneliness and friendship and those were used as a tool to open the discussion.
- * The word of art was unfamiliar to older people and they had difficulties to use that word. However, to experience art was not difficult and participants fully threw themselves into art experiences and activities.
- * The group members both followed professionals' performances and participated themselves into the activities. Various artists (writers, actors, musicians, dancers) visited the groups. The group members expressed their preferences to the visitors, who fulfilled those if possible. Doing together established common experiences that could be shared with other group members.
- * In several actions, the group members overcame their own limits. Everyone wrote a poem about the rock that they had picked from the courtyard. The poems were read in the groups and the message was discussed. Group members painted a shared picture and they collected memories of the trips with a camera. Men also participated in baking and fabric printing.

Special elements of the group therapy and therapeutic writing -group:

* Lived life in relation to our country's history with wars and the time of reconstruction were present in group members' writings. They wrote texts at home and brought those to the group meetings for the base of conversation. Not everyone was able to write but all participated to the discussions. The topics of discussions addressed the whole life span. The participants reminisced their childhood, adolescence and years that were filled by work. Some memories were happy and some sad. Participants did not necessarily want to share all their memories in the group discussions.

* The participants were not homogeneous even in relation to age, although all were 75 years or older. However, everyone had experienced war and fear and the Great Depression during 1930's. This experience was very strong and it was repeated in discussions. It was easy for the group members to reminisce and discuss the time of war, since this was a common experience.

* Life experience gave perspective to analyze the present. Group members followed the events in the country and in the world and they discussed those in the groups. They also had conversations about their relationship with their children and grandchildren. Abandonment was present in the discussions in every group.

* Keeping the discussions safe for the group members demanded special expertise from the group leaders. There is a risk in the group that is considered as confidential, that when becoming sensitive the participant reveals something that she/he would otherwise never share with other group members. Group leaders have to be familiar with the method of group therapy, so that they can predict when there is a risk and it can still be prevented.

* Common experiences and respect for the other participants' experiences created a ground for friendship in these groups.

Feedback from the group participants

* Group members felt that their loneliness was alleviated during and after the intervention. Large proportion had gained new friends from other group members, to whom they could contact and who contacted them. The experience was so positive that almost all were willing to participate in similar group activity and to recommend groups to their friends.

* 40 % of the groups continued meetings after official intervention.