



Reconstructive thinking for eating disorder recovery

BY OLA MAZZUCA

The thought of sharing your daily routine, emotions and pain with strangers can be an intimidating one. Acceptance, judgment and support are some words that come to mind when considering group therapy for the first time.

Who will be there? What will they think of me? Do I feel comfortable discussing my struggle?

"Everyone's got issues" is something we hear all the time. It's a phrase of reassurance, stating: you're not alone. This can be proven

right when one is in a group with others in similar situations.

It may seem strange to begin a group therapy session with meditation, at least that's what I thought last year, when I attended *(Re) Discovering Who You Are: Beyond the Disordered Eating Identity* with Amelia Perri. It turned out to be an enriching experience in my recovery of Anorexia nervosa. I was able to relate to others despite the fact that we had different careers, family situations and eating disorders. We shared

one thing: loss of identity. And it was in our fight to regain it, that we could relate.

Struggle can be a binding force in group therapy. When I attended, *Healing Emotional Eating*, facilitated by psychotherapist Marilyn Strauch, it reminded me of the first time I opened up about my eating disorder to strangers.

Strauch's method engages group members with Alfred Adler's memory theory. It is similar to the practice of cognitive behavioral technique, which alters maladaptive thinking for change in affect and behaviour. Adler's research included collecting early memories from individuals of specific events that happened before the age of ten. By analyzing them, he noticed variations in memory recollections as therapy progressed.

Strauch uses a reconstruction of negative scenarios to alter one's unhealthy thoughts or behaviors. This is done by collaborative written goal setting, verbal story telling and rewriting stories with negative unhealthy themes to positive healing ones.

"This is used to understand more than whether people are changing or not, but to promote change," Strauch says.


Changes in imagery and wording provide a positive change when one rehearses their memory reconstruction, Strauch says. Individual minds can "automatically adapt to this new created reality and follow naturally." The psychotherapist affirms Adler's belief that there are "millions of things people remember from childhood," yet hold on to specific memories that reflect their personalities today. By altering some of these unhealthy beliefs, one can create new

memories that change behaviors and perceptions.

The psychotherapist uses Adler's memory theory, as it is one of the most effective in the recovery of an eating disorder. Strauch feels that simply talking about issues in group therapy is "not enough to motivate change" as practicing memory reconstruction is a subtle way to change inner messages.

"Negative thoughts can naturally disappear when put into a story line," she says. "All you have to be willing to do is write out a new reconstructed memory, and practice it."

But the initial challenge with first time



PSYCHOLOGISTS'
ASSOCIATION *of* ALBERTA

*Understanding People
Working Together*

*Talk to someone who can help.
Psychologists are qualified licensed and regulated
professionals, who provide assessment, consultation
and treatment for people of all ages.*

REFERRAL SERVICE:
780-428-8255 in Edmonton
403-246-8255 in Calgary
1-888-424-0297
Toll free anywhere in Alberta

Hours: Monday - Friday 8:30 am - 4:00 pm

On-line Referral Service:
www.psychologistsassociation.ab.ca

understanding

attendees of group therapy lies in the motivation to recover, as the process is not a forced method. Strauch admits that group therapy can be intimidating for those who feel vulnerable, judged and anxious that their situation appears to be “not as bad as others.” She believes that group therapy is a way to gain insight in a non-judgmental setting where individuals face similar experiences. The first step is to face personal denial that an eating disorder exists.

“People need to be willing to move forward,” Strauch says. “If people are ready to share with others, this is a tool to help cope and recover.”

Some of the successes Strauch has seen in her clients range from quick changes of behaviour to realization of health risks.

“After rehearsing a reconstruction for two weeks she lost interest in extra food, and noticed a significant reduction in her binge-eating behaviors.”

One client, after years of nightly binge-behavior was able to compose a reconstruction that helped her mind process food as fuel with no emotional connection. After rehearsing a reconstruction for two weeks she lost interest in extra food, and noticed a significant reduction in her binge-eating behaviors. Another group member had been purging daily for years. The client had begun to throw up blood, and was having difficulty changing their behavior even though they were aware of internal damage. After discussing the dangers and underlying health

moods
MAGAZINE

success
stories 

If you have a personal story you would like to share regarding mental health, please visit:

www.moodsmag.com

Click on “Share Your Story In Moods”

issues of purging, the client quit cold turkey. After learning about the risks of eating disorders, the client was motivated to change their daily behaviours. The eating disorder had been terminated with a mental switch.

Those who have struggled with eating disorders for the greater part of their life will benefit from reconstructive exercises in group therapy. By dissecting the motive for eating to avoid emotion to the emotions that cause the use or refusal of food to cope, Strauch says individuals can rediscover identity by reconstructing their lives.

“People are able to change and let go of negative intrusive thoughts and behaviors so that their bodies and minds can heal.”

It is proven that this concept of Adler’s memory theory is beneficial in the recovery of eating disorders, as changes naturally evolve from negative to positive out of reconstructive therapy. This cognitive method put into practice can be done daily, paired with the potential of a group session. Individuals can recover as they rewrite a new, positive, bright future. ■

Ola Mazzuca is a writer, who volunteers with the Eating Disorders of York Region.