



JOHN BRESKIN, PhD: I ask my clients to call me Sparky, since I am among the last of the 1930s proletariats. I'm 76 years old and spent 20 years and 17 days in the USAF. I am a University Professor of Psychology and still have an active private practice. My sub-specialty is PTSD and I have been immersed in working with that population for more than 50 years.

Do I suffer from secondary PTSD? The answer is yes; even knowing that, I would not change it for a minute. When I became the first male teacher at my university to teach the Psychology of Gender course, the students voted to change my title from that of a "Dirty Old Man" to that of a "Sexy Senior Citizen."

My compelling passionate hobbies are three in number:

- I flirt shamelessly
  - I write poetry all the time (often in combination with #1)
  - I play intensely competitive duplicate bridge at the national level.
- The careful reader will note that two of my hobbies are testosterone driven while one is driven by estrogen. Please do not report me to the gender police. [johnbreeskin@comcast.net](mailto:johnbreeskin@comcast.net)

*In this article I want to tell the story of one young man's progress through a men's group. In so doing, I hope to show the reader my somewhat unusual style of conducting groups and illustrate how, in the right setting, troubled men—even those whom the courts order to participate in group therapy—can offer each other the strength to show their vulnerability and heal their wounds.*

JONATHAN RYAN IS SITTING IN MY OFFICE. He is a very good-looking young "Black Irishman," with white skin, very dark hair that almost curls, and a look of the "Devil" in his eyes. His demeanor and 'tude make it very clear that he is unhappy even to be in the building, let alone in my office. His body posture and his sighs leave no doubt as to his resentment. His attorney, who has helped him negotiate a plea bargain after he was convicted of assault, has referred him to me. This attorney, who is a good friend of mine, has gotten the judge to substitute 18 months of mandatory outpatient psychotherapy with me, around the issue of anger management, in lieu of incarceration. Jonathan has reluctantly agreed.

I explain to Jonathan that in addition to being a clinical psychologist I am also a sabermetrician, so I am going to explain the structure of my group therapy using a baseball analogy. Jonathan is not impressed. I tell him that he has three strikes, as follows:

1. If he misses his first scheduled therapy meeting (and he will), three letters will go out immediately: one to him, one to his attorney, and one to the judge, informing everyone that Jonathan has missed a scheduled appointment.
2. When he misses his second appointment (and he will), his mandatory 18 months of therapy will have been jacked up to two years, and I will thoroughly relish both the additional pleasure of his company, and the profits that I will derive from his payments.
3. If Jonathan misses a third appointment, I will fire his ass from therapy, and inform the necessary authorities.

At this point, Jonathan's gaze, which has been studiously maintained in mid-distance, now begins to focus upon me. In addition to his assault conviction, Jonathan proceeds to inform me, he has been thrown out of his outlaw motorcycle club because he is "too violent." I greet this information passively on the surface, but it has definitely caught my attention.

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I have been leading groups for many years, and the techniques I use come from many sources. My bible is Irvin Yalom's text on group therapy. My theoretical framework is characterized by a phenomenological, existential orientation. I am also heavily influenced by family systems theory, and my role models in that discipline include Virginia Satir, Milton Erickson and Murray Bowen. The influence of family systems thinking in my conduct of group therapy can be seen in the fact that it is routine for me to invite significant others to a group meeting where they become an important resource for an individual client. One man, for example, invited his father to attend one of our group meetings, and it is my conservative estimate that a year's worth of therapy was accomplished in that two-hour meeting.

I have refined my ground rules that govern contact in the group many times over the years. In addition to confidentiality agreements, I specify that violence and intimidation will not be tolerated, and that members under the influence of alcohol or other mind-altering drugs will be asked to leave the session. Members are expected to attend every group unless there is an emergency. I specify that gossip, secrets, and exclusive relationships—including those conducted online—are harmful to the group process. I emphasize that hazing and humiliation of any group member is forbidden, and spell out each member's right to privacy and dignity—as practiced in the "stop rule" which gives each participant the right to call a halt during group exploration. Members also agree to deal with termination and "good-byes" to the group in a responsible manner. In all, there are eleven numbered paragraphs to this contract, which I discuss in detail and to which I ask new members to agree. (For the exact wording of this "Procedures and Guidelines" document, see appendix.)

One reason it is important to have each member sign the guidelines for group boundaries is that I very much endorse external group meetings between and among the group members. Over the life of the groups we have held external meetings at Frank Lloyd Wright's Church, called Falling Waters, in Western Pennsylvania; at a folk song theater in Washington DC in order to hear a concert by Joan Baez; at the Lisner Auditorium, also in Washington DC, in order to attend a large audience participation meeting with Robert Bly; at many all-day meetings; and at three-day workshops in Ocean City. Usually, in these meetings, I invite a dear friend of mine who is an expert in psychodrama and she leads us through the experience.

I strongly believe that group exercises of the type that I have described provide a vital conceptual bridge between the rich environment of the therapy group

and the challenges of the outside world. The story of Jonathan provides some examples of this kind of bridging.

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It turns out that Jonathan is a very complex young man. He has a banged-up knee from the time that he was riding his hog late one moonlit night and decided to give himself the experience of flying. He stood up on the seat of the cycle, held out his arms, and that's when he hit the guardrail and flew through the air for 25 feet: hence the banged-up knee. To further add to the picture, when he is not acting out in an impulsive, destructive manner, Jonathan is a senior millwright. This delightful medieval term means that he designs, and builds from scratch, display cases made of quarter-inch steel. He works for a large international corporation, where his ability on the shop floor is legendary.

Jonathan attends weekly men's group therapy meetings as directed. He tends to remain relatively silent and observes everything that is going on around him. When he misses his first session, he calls me on the phone and says, "Call off your dogs." I answer, "Strike one, Jonathan." He misses a second session, and the additional six months of therapy is added to his probation. At this point, I turn to Jonathan and ask him, since he is following through in a reasonably acceptable manner in the group, if there is any assistance I can give him.

"Yes," says Jonathan, "get me back into the motorcycle club; I miss the guys." "Fine," I say; "who is the Master at Arms of the club?" "Matt," he says. "Please ask Matt to attend our next group session." The next Thursday at 7, Matt parks his chopper outside the clinic, and rolls into the waiting room. He is 5' 10", weighs a muscular 230 pounds, and is completely dressed in black leather, with large metal studs positioned on every one of his joints. The clients in the waiting room freak out. Matt walks into the group room, sits down, and says, "What's up, doc?" I thank him for his attendance and indicate that Jonathan has progressed sufficiently in group therapy, in my professional opinion, and is formally petitioning the club for reinstatement. Matt is visibly uncomfortable. "Well, doc," he says, "the guys in the club feel quite awkward around Jonathan, especially since he fired four bullets from a .357 magnum through the clubhouse door." "I understand," I say; "If anyone had been in the doorway, they'd be dead." "You got it, doc," says Matt. "Here is what I'd like to propose then," I continue smoothly. "Please take Jonathan back on an observational basis for two weeks, and let me know if you think he is dependable enough to be reinstated." Matt reservedly agrees.

I ask Matt if he has noticed any changes in Jonathan, and, from the glance that is quickly exchanged between them, I know that something heavy is going down. Matt proceeds to inform me that every Thursday evening at 10 p.m., right after our group meeting, Jonathan goes back to the group home where he lives, calls the residents in the house to order, and teaches them, step by step, just what he has learned in group that evening about group trust and loyalty. I roar with laughter at this wonderful news, and I thank Matt profusely for his candor.

Jonathan, who is now back in the biker club, is coming to the end of his two years of mandated therapy. There have been no further episodes of impulsive, destructive behavior. The group geek, a callow young man by the name of Arnie Samples, has been complaining about being unable to complete the refinishing of his basement. His wife is upset with him, and he asks for the group's help. I turn to Jonathan, and ask him to be the foreman for the basement-refinishing project. He agrees.

We meet, seven of us, on a Saturday morning at ten. Jonathan has a pick-up truck filled with various building materials and obscure tools. He sits in the middle of the basement with a large tape measure in his hands, which he rarely needs to use, and looks about him calmly. He begins to give us small, carefully structured tasks, which I realize have been carefully positioned in sequence. I end up, for the first—and perhaps only—time in my life, with a large powerful nail gun, and proceed to whack wallboard to framing. It is very satisfying work indeed. Jonathan puts together a mosaic of wallboard throughout the entire, very awkwardly configured, basement. He seems to do this just by eye. We all scurry about gluing, nailing, and painting, as well as hooking up the washer and dryer connections, until Jonathan says, "The job is done; it's time for pizza." Mrs. Samples comes down and practically faints at the finished product in front of her.

Arnie subsequently reports in later group sessions that his intimate life with his wife has significantly improved since the basement was finished. The group members respond to this information with a wide variety of ribald comments.

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I see Jonathan's progress over a two-year period as allowing him to show his gentle, caring side, without violating his macho image. He is learning that it is all right to show his empathic qualities without shame. At age twenty-nine, he is managing, finally, to get beyond his rebellious adolescence, characterized by highly self-destructive behavior and a strong element of an oppositionally driven conduct disorder.

I think of men like Jonathan as having a core vulnerability so tender that they have to build an outer shell of toughness which, in Jonathan's case, ultimately put his life at risk. The title poem from one of James Kavanaugh's best-selling books of poetry expresses my idea of such men—men who are too gentle to live among wolves.

...There are men too gentle to live among wolves  
Who anoint them for burial with greedy claws  
And murder them for a merchant's profit and gain.  
There are men too gentle for a corporate world  
Who dream instead of candied apples and ferris wheels  
And pause to hear the distant whistle of a train.

There are men too gentle to live among wolves  
Who devour them with eager appetite and search  
For other men to prey upon and suck their childhood dry.

... There are men too gentle to live among wolves  
Who toss them like a lost and wounded dove.  
Such gentle men are lonely in a merchant's world,  
Unless they have a gentle one to love.

## REFERENCES

- Kavanaugh, J. (1984) *There are Men too Gentle to Live Among Wolves*. (Chuluota, FL: Argonaut Publishing)
- Yalom, I.D. (1985) *Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc.)

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## APPENDIX

### Procedures and Guidelines for Group Therapy

#### 1. Confidentiality.

**Anything said between any two or more group members at any time is part of the group and is confidential.** I understand that everything said in group is confidential. I agree to keep secret the names of other members of the group and what is said in group. I agree to keep secret anything which occurs between or among group members. I understand that there is an exception to this confidentiality, which applies to the group leader. If the group leader believes that some one is in danger, the leader has a professional obligation to take direct action in order to keep everyone safe.

I agree not to keep secret from the group anything which occurs within the group. Anything which occurs between or among members is part of the group and is kept secret from anyone outside of the group but is not kept secret from the group. This also applies to any individual meetings you may have with a group leader. I understand that if I violate this confidentiality I could be removed from the group.

#### 2. Privacy (the Stop Rule)

No group member is ever required to answer any question, to participate in any activity, or to tell anything. If I am asked questions or asked to participate in an activity which makes me feel uncomfortable, I understand that I have the right to pass, that is, the right to refuse. I agree that I will never pressure other group members to participate in any discussion or activity after the member has passed or refused. I understand that the group leader is obliged to protect this right. I also understand that I will benefit more from group the more I am able to take risks in sharing and participating.

#### 3. Dignity

No group member is ever humiliated, hazed, or abused in any way. I agree to avoid this destructive behavior.

#### 4. Violence or intimidation

Violence or intimidation toward other group members is never tolerated. I understand that I must never be violent or intimidating toward other group members and that if I threaten to harm persons or property I will be asked to leave the group.

## **5. Alcohol and Other Drugs**

Group members cannot participate in the group under the influence of alcohol or other mind altering drugs. When under the influence of chemicals, persons do not have access to their emotions and have less control over their behavior. I understand that if the leader believes that I am under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, I will be asked to leave the group.

## **6. Exclusive relationships**

Dating and other exclusive relationships between or among group members are not a good idea. The relationships can make other group members feel left out. When a couple breaks up, for example, this can be most painful and may make it impossible for these people to continue in the group. Since anything which occurs between or among group members is part of the group, members who are dating or in very exclusive relationships may be embarrassed when their intimate moments are discussed in the group.

## **7. Gossip**

Gossip and secret grudges can be very destructive in a group. I agree that if I have something to say to another group member, I will try to say it to the member directly rather than talk about him/her behind his/her back.

## **8. Attendance**

I agree that I will attend every meeting unless an emergency arises. If an emergency should arise I will notify the group leader prior to the meeting to tell him or her that I will be unable to attend. I understand that the group leader will tell the group what has happened. I understand that if I have three unexcused absences, my continued group membership will be discussed.

## **9. Internet Connectivity**

I feel very strongly that the members of the group should form and participate in an online group limited to the group members. Of course, the same cautionary notes apply to the internet communications in terms of both confidentiality and inter-group sharing. I have used this model very successfully and it significantly enhances a healthy form of interconnection.

## **10. Responsibilities**

I understand that it is the group leader's responsibility to enforce these procedures and guidelines. The group may, when it wishes, propose other procedures and guidelines which will be up to the group to monitor.

## **11. Termination**

Usually, group members decide, within the group, with the leader, when it is time to leave the group. Sometimes it is necessary for a group member to leave the group unexpectedly. This can cause group members to wonder if they have harmed the leaving member. I promise that if I must leave the group unexpectedly, I will come to a last group meeting and tell the members that I am leaving and say goodbye. I agree to announce this at the beginning of the last meeting so that the group has time to ask questions and say goodbye. If I decide to leave the group the group members may express their concerns but also must respect the decision of the person wishing to leave.