

Therapeutic Small Groups: Creating Genuine Connection between Persons with Advanced Dementia



Presented by:

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Part 1

What is a Therapeutic Small Group?

Some context...

Life Enrichment vs. Medical Model

- What is an **activity**?
- What is an **effective** activity?
- **Who** do we serve? Level 1 Level 2 Level 3
- **Social Connection Example:**

Sister Tony



Therapeutic Small Groups: Who may be served?

Therapeutic Small Groups can serve almost any person with dementia. Many organizations find that TSGs are especially beneficial for those residents who:

- Simply “fall through the cracks” of larger group activities,
- Experience fatigue so significant that they are unengaged or sleep during most interventions,
- Are challenging to engage during individualized dementia interventions,
- Experience behavioral symptoms such as hollering out, making repetitive sounds, or other symptoms that can be disruptive to other residents,

Therapeutic Small Groups: What is our working definition?



- Generally, 2-6 residents will participate in the session. 3-4 is a common size.
- The session typically lasts 10 – 30 minutes, depending on the energy level and responses from participants.
- Each session follows a basic beginning, middle, and end sequence.

Therapeutic Small Groups: What is our working definition?

- The session features authentic sensory props for a pre-determined theme, such as ‘Spring’ or ‘Weddings.’
- While the props are important – the props are merely the ‘tools’ for creating moments of genuine social connection.



Part 2

Logistics

Pre-Group: What happens before the session actually begins?

- **Lighting**
- **Props Ready** (Plan A, B, C)
- **Music** (uplifting or calming)
- **DVD/Video** (dementia appropriate)
- **Brief welcome** (get settled)
- **Prop in hand** (if needed)

Pre-Group: What happens before the session actually begins?



Set-Up & Seating Logistics to facilitate genuine social connection



- **Resident Seating**
Tight U, sight-lines & reach
- **Facilitator Position**
Down Below Eye Level
(stool or kneeling), in-close
- **Props close at hand:**
Plan A, Plan B, Plan C

Set-Up & Seating Logistics to ensure 'reach'



Part 3

Structure & Skills

Beginning – Part 1

Individually – work to increase alertness or decrease agitation



Some Skills:

- Simple Statements
- Vocal Quality
- Endorphin Boosts
- Sparkling Facial Exp.
- Verify Mood & Validate Emotional Reality

Make Determination:

- Is person too fatigued?
- Too agitated?

Beginning – Part 2

Create social connections

1. Getting everyone’s attention

Playful, good vocal quality, may include musicality

2. Irreverent Ice-Breaker Statements

- “Joan, you’re sitting next to a real firecracker!”
- “Helen, you’re sitting next to the 2nd best-looking guy in the place!”

3. Paraphrasing

Use good vocal quality to re-state or re-phrase what each person says (or what they communicate non-verbally)

4. Cue Handshake

Use Simple Statements, such as “Joe, let’s shake hands with George.”

Beginning – Part 2

Create social connections



Middle: Experience the Props

To cue deeply-stored long-term memories & pleasurable experiences



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To cue deeply-stored long-term memories & pleasurable experiences



Middle: Experience the Props

To create genuine social connection between participants



Middle: Experience the Props

To create genuine social connection between participants



Closing – Part 1

Individual validation for each participant



Closing – Part 2

Ritual Closing – usually a song (repeated)



Closing – Part 3

Farewells between Participants



Reflections on Genuine Social Connection

What do we see during the session and following the session?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Essential Verbal Skills

- Simple Statements (7 words or less)
- Avoid questions
- Pausing (Zip-It)
- Paraphrase everything – even non-verbal responses
- Irreverent, playful, unexpected comments
- Great vocal quality
- Use each person’s name FREQUENTLY

Essential Non-Verbal (Energy) Skills

Facial Expressions & Body Language to Convey Meaning (‘Exaggerated’ for Mirroring)

- Curious
- Irreverent – Playful – Teasing
- Delighted
- Overwhelmed or Burdened
- Peaceful – Content

Essential Non-Verbal Skills

- Below eye level
- Close-in
- Frequent movement
- Frequent touching to maintain social connection

Less is More



Part 4

Supplies & Organization

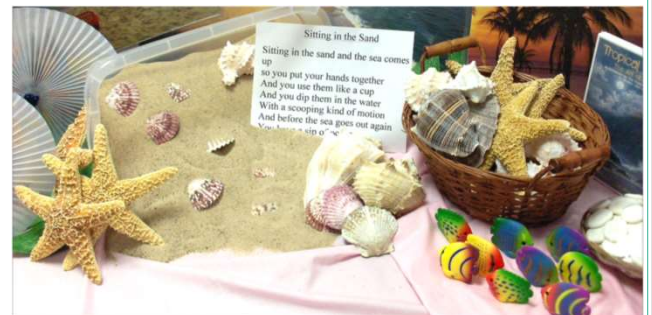
Supply Kits for Therapeutic Small Groups

Overview

- Each Therapeutic Small Group generally has a pre-selected theme – which requires well-stocked theme kits with ample, authentic, 3-dimensional, real-life props.
- These props are selected to cue different senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and sometimes taste.
- Often, these sensory props are not “talked about.” Rather, they are held, used, and most importantly – **experienced** – by all participants in the group.
- This is different from a Reminiscing Group.

Important Criteria

- Item quantities – enough of every single item that each participant can be experiencing their own props at the same time. (Rather than passing around 1 or 2 props).
- Variety – choices in each item. (different colors, different teams, etc.)
- Authenticity in look, feel, and ‘heft.’
- Color & contrast.
- Novelty!



A Complete Kit





Staying Organized

Theme Kit Ideas

Theme Kit	Possible Theme Variations
Spring	Rain & Umbrellas, Spring Flowers, Gardening & Planting
Winter	Snowmen & Snowballs, Warming-Up
Birds	Backyard Birds, Finding Worms, Bird Songs
Farming	Grain & Crops, Livestock & Animals
Kitchen & Cooking	Familiar Old Gadgets, Frying Bacon & Onions, Aprons
Weddings	The Dress, Exchanging Rings & Vows, Bouquets
Babies	Changing Diapers, Baby Clothes, Lullabies
Baseball	Playing Childhood Baseball, Going to the Game
Seashore & Lakes	Beach Bag & Swim Suits, Sand & Sun,

Scheduling Ideas

Discussion

- Prime-time scheduling
- TSG blocks for efficiency
- Determining clusters

THERAPEUTIC SM. GROUP BLOCK	
9:15	SUNSHINE LADIES (5-6)
10:00	
10:45	COWBOYS (4-5)
11:15	
11:45	MIXERS (4-6)
11:45	
	DEW DROPS (3)

Wrap-Up

About the Presenter. As the Founder and Lead Coach of Gemini Consulting, Erin Bonitto provides hands-on dementia communication coaching at partner communities across the nation, including skilled nursing homes, assisted living centers and memory care providers. Using the ‘Buddies Forever Dementia Communication Coaching System,’ Erin’s partner communities learn how to provide persons with dementia the gifts of pleasure, purpose and peace – while making measurable impacts on clinical and operational goals related to psychotropic use, behavioral outcomes, fall rates, team member morale and family satisfaction. These projects have been grant-funded in several states and described by providers as their ‘missing link’ to culture transformation. Her educational background includes an M.S. in Gerontology and an Activity Director Certification – but her true education began with jobs in dietary and caregiving, throughout her high school and college years. When Erin is not providing coaching, she can be found as a popular featured speaker at aging services conferences. She has been described as a speaker who “can bring tears to your eyes and make you laugh out loud,” all while delivering real-world, nuts and bolts tools that participants can put to use immediately.

Contact Info

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