

An Integrative Approach to Stress and Anxiety Management in Group Interventions

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In contemporary society, individuals are faced with more stressors than ever before. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2017), an estimated 31 percent of adults aged 18 or older in the United States experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. One adult population in particular that is largely affected by stress and anxiety is university students, with approximately 63 percent reporting overwhelming stress and anxiety (LeBlanc & Marques, 2019). Stress and anxiety can be managed through a variety of techniques, with some common therapeutic focuses including behavioral therapies (cognitive [CBT] and dialectical [DBT]), psychoanalytic therapies, and various experiential therapies, among others (Cuncic, 2020). The best way to harness the beneficial factors of each of these modalities is to utilize them all, with an integrative approach. The following is an integrative stress and anxiety management group therapy proposal. This proposal is focused on the University of Denver's Graduate School of Professional Psychology first-year Forensic Psychology students, but could additionally be focused on other university students or general populations as well, with adjustments.

Group Overview

The proposed group is focused on stress and anxiety management in a first-year graduate psychology student population, with a goal of helping participants create new and strengthen current coping skills that may assist them in times of stress and anxiety through integrative therapy techniques. University of Denver's graduate programs consist of three, ten-week quarters, and serve as the basis for group logistics.

This group would be a ten session series; mandatory for the first five sessions and voluntary for the remaining five sessions, with the final session open to all students in each respective program at the end of each quarter. First-year students would need to enroll in the

group in either their Fall, Winter, or Spring quarter. The number of group participants would range depending on cohort size, but to ensure that roughly one-third of the cohort was enrolled in the group each quarter, there would need to be a capped sign-up at the beginning of the year, with the capped number of enrollment positions each quarter dependent on the cohort size. For example, in a cohort of 30 students there would be ten students enrolled in the group each quarter. This group would ideally be held on campus, generally in a classroom, with potential for outdoor sessions and activities, weather permitting. This group can also be modified with unique circumstances in mind, such as factors that may create a telehealth-only situation, for example, and can be restructured to fit such unique needs as necessary.

Group Format and Leadership

This group would primarily be led by a PsyD or related level student. This group would also be largely group led during the voluntary sessions, with guidance and assistance from the group lead. Additionally, approximately four sessions would include the presence of an animal and handler, if available.

In terms of theoretical framework, this group and the exercises employed within would exist under an integrative approach, utilizing techniques from an informed, selective variety of therapies. This group has a strong base in behavioral theory and methods, with included elements of strengths-based focuses, humanistic approaches, as well as existential and acceptance-based exercises, and experiential techniques. A multitude of therapies across theoretical frames have been empirically supported in their efficacy of assisting with stress and anxiety management, and it is for this reason, as well as the author's personal theoretical orientation, that an integrative approach has been selected for use with this group. Behavioral and experiential therapy techniques are the most evident in this group given their particularly strong efficacy individually,

and are combined for this group in order to amplify that impact (Hoffman et al., 2012; Mullings, 2017; Watson et al., 2003). Additionally, strengths-based practices, use of guided imagery techniques as well as mindfulness and meditation practices, and experiential animal-assisted interventions each have shown to be particularly efficacious in stress and anxiety reduction among this specific population type of university level students and are also used (Beauchemin, 2017; House et. al., 2018; Kiley et. al. 2018; MacDonald et.al. 2019).

In considering the rationale for the use of this group therapy format rather than an individual therapy format, advantages to stress and anxiety management in groups have been shown to include opportunities to share and reduce feelings of loneliness, peer modeling and positive reinforcement, and opportunities for peer feedback and continuing support, each of which are not possible with individual therapy formatting (Powell & Enright, 2015). Additionally, the specified population of first-year graduate psychology students at the University of Denver is already mandated to seek individual therapy at this time.

Follow-up for this group is covered by the tenth and final session in each series being an open session, allowing previous participants to return as needed or desired. Individual work would not be available with the group lead, but contact information would be provided to address any concerns or needs throughout. Any other individual needs could be handled as appropriate by a referral to student mental health services on campus.

Session Format and Flow

With any responsible and effective therapy practice, considerations must be made for items such as informed consent, ground rules, and ethics, as well as stages throughout any series. Given the mixed methodology and mandatory/voluntary nature of this group, stages throughout

this group therapy series would be subject to each group, but specific goals, functions, and expectations for each session are laid out in the appendix. One special area of consideration to be discussed further, however, is the mandatory/voluntary formatting of each group therapy series. This format was selected with the author's experience and awareness that initially, first-year students may not be inclined to enroll in the group if offered on an entirely voluntary basis. Initial mandatory enrollment in the group therefore was chosen, given the observed reluctance alongside the potential and likely benefits of this group series. In consideration that the added task of attending group sessions in addition to workloads already in place may also conversely add additional stress and anxiety to student lives, the latter half of the group therapy series is voluntary. Ideally, the students will have perceived enough benefit from the initial half of the series to encourage them to participate in the latter half as well. Additionally, the added incentive of continued interactions with the animal in later sessions may also encourage students' continued participation.

Informed consent, ground rules, and ethics, otherwise the key feature of this section, are inextricably intertwined, and must be considered and revisited throughout the group therapy series. APA Ethic Code standard 10.03 on Group Therapy (2010) requires: "When psychologists provide services to several persons in a group setting, they describe at the outset the roles and responsibilities of all parties and the limits of confidentiality" (p. 14). In order to maintain this particularly applicable standard, among other ethical considerations, this group would include documentation of informed consent. The informed consent document would be provided to each participant to be signed before the first session in any group series, and would be outlined and discussed during the first session in particular, as well as at any time throughout the group series as needed. The informed consent document would address matters such as group process and

environment safety; confidentiality expectations and limitations; attendance, participation, and overall expectations, including the nature of the mandatory/voluntary session format; role clarifications for the lead, participants, and any outside elements, such as animals and handlers; and clarifications for communication and relationships outside of the group therapy series. Also, an addendum to the informed consent document would be available for any special situational considerations, such as may be necessary for telehealth service needs, for example. Additionally, during the first session the group lead and participants would discuss any added ground rules beyond those outlined in the informed consent documents that each individual group series might like to adopt as well.

Concluding Statements

Stress and anxiety can affect anyone, throughout life, and across different cultures. The added stress and anxiety-inducing factors that university life presents in particular, such as sleep disruption and deprivation, feelings of loneliness, and social, professional, and academic pressure, has led to an increase in recent years of stress and anxiety levels among university students, as well as a decrease in overall psychological well-being (LeBlanc & Marques, 2019). This population, however, may present the greatest opportunity to assist with these issues. Students are largely subject to university requirements, which creates a unique chance to assist students with the issues surrounding stress and anxiety management that many university students face. It is the author's hope that this group therapy proposal presents an appropriate and desirable solution to the issue at hand and beyond by assisting participants with stress and anxiety management throughout their schooling, careers, and lives.

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Appendix

Group Therapy Series Session Plan

Session	Focus	Body Basics	Exercises
1	What is stress and anxiety?	Cover disclosures. Discuss how the group will be structured. Definitions. Common triggers and manifestations. Get to know the group. AAI.	emotion-focused discussion exercise; TED Talk viewing; journaling
2	What triggers stress and anxiety?	Open discussion on triggers, examples, and situations. What signals do you notice in yourself?	progressive muscle relaxation exercise
3	How does stress and anxiety manifest?	Delve further into situations discussed in the previous session. How does your stress and anxiety show? How does it affect yourself and others?	strengths-based exercise
4	What can be done to manage stress and anxiety?	Brainstorm ideas. Do multiple exercises. AAI.	mindfulness-based guided imagery exercise with AAI
5	What does and does not work, individually?	Open discussion on the previous sessions' exercises on what has and has not worked and why.	group-favored exercise
6	Voluntary—Group Discussion	More group led than leader led.	group-favored exercises
7	Voluntary—Group Discussion	More group led than leader led. AAI	group-favored exercises
8	Voluntary—Group Discussion	More group led than leader led.	group-favored exercises
9	Voluntary—Group Discussion	More group led than leader led.	group-favored exercises
10	Wrapping up	Group members from previous sessions or who have not attended any yet have a discussion about all of the above—what has worked, what do you need a refresher on, what questions do you have for the experienced group members and what tips do they have to share? AAI.	group-favored exercises

Group Therapy Series Session and Activity Outline and Description

Session 1. What is stress and anxiety? This session will first cover disclosures. Then the group will get to know the group lead and one another; this session will also include animal-assisted intervention techniques, therefore the group will also get to know an animal and handler. Studies have shown that even the mere presence of animal can reduce stress and anxiety levels, and in this particular session mere presence and free roaming interaction will be the main animal-assisted intervention (House et. al., 2018). Next, the structure and outline of the group series will be reviewed, as well as commonplace terminology and definitions as related to the group. Following, common generalized triggers and manifestations will be discussed. Participants will then engage in an emotion-focused discussion exercise surrounding their feelings about stress and anxiety. Finally, the session will end with an exercise in viewing Psychologist Kelly McGonigal's TED Talk: *How to make stress your friend*, with a follow-up discussion linking the emotion-focused discussion exercise to the video content surrounding thought restructuring (2013). Participants will be encouraged to begin journaling between sessions.

Session 2. What triggers stress and anxiety? This session will begin with a check-in, allowing the participants to openly discuss. Following this, a deeper discussion on triggers for stress and anxiety will occur, from a generalized as well as individual perspective, including a few specific examples and situations. The group will analyze what signals they notice in themselves at the onset of their stress and anxiety, and as it amplifies. Finally, the session will end with a progressive muscle relaxation exercise wherein the participants will work from the feet up to tense and release their muscles, one step at a time (McCallie et. al., 2006). Participants will be encouraged to be mindful of their triggers and try this exercise between sessions.

Session 3. How does stress and anxiety manifest? This session will begin with a check-in.

Following this, the group will re-touch on and delve further into specific examples and situations similar to those discussed briefly in the previous session. Considering these examples and situations, the group will examine how their stress and anxiety shows; how it affects themselves; how it affects others. Finally, the group will work through a strengths-based exercise in identifying and discussing individual strengths they each possess (Beauchemin, 2017).

Participants will be encouraged to consider additional strengths they may also possess between sessions.

Session 4. What can be done to manage stress and anxiety? This session will begin with a check-in, allowing the participants to openly discuss, as well as reacclimate themselves to the presence of the animal and handler, which will be present in group once again for this session. The animal's presence will once again largely focus on mere existence amongst the group, but will also bring an element to the final exercise as well. Following this, the group will briefly revisit concepts discussed in the previous session. From there, the group will collaboratively brainstorm their own ideas on how to manage stress and anxiety, and discuss commonly used techniques, including ones utilized in previous session. The session will begin to come to a close by recapping the multiple exercises discussed during session, particularly including mindfulness- and meditation-based considerations as well (MacDonald et.al., 2019). Finally, the session will end with a mindfulness-based guided imagery exercise, with animal-assisted intervention-based elements added for grounding (Kiley et. al., 2018). Participants will be encouraged to try similar guided imagery exercises on their own or with guidance from various available sources, as well as other sensory-based exercises, between sessions.

Session 5. What does and does not work, individually? This session is the final mandatory session in the series. This session will begin with a check-in. Following, a more directed open discussion will focus on the previous session's exercises, examining what participants have tried outside of sessions and what has and has not worked for each individual, considering why or why not, with existential, action-focused, and acceptance based areas of note and in mind. Finally, the session will end with the group's overall favored exercise, as well as a debriefing on the remaining voluntary sessions available.

Session 6-9. Voluntary—Group Discussion These sessions are voluntary. Session seven will once again include the general presence of an animal and handler, with potential for additional animal elements in exercises. Participants are encouraged to attend all voluntary sessions in the series, but are not mandated to. These sessions will begin as previous sessions with a check-in. The main portion of these sessions will be largely group led, focusing on matters presented by the participants with guidance and assistance from the group lead. These sessions will end similar to previous sessions, with group-favored exercises.

Session 10. Wrapping up This session is the final session in the series. Participants from previous sessions throughout this individual series, any previous series, as well as those who have not attended any sessions as of yet are encouraged to attend. This session will begin with a check-in allowing participants to briefly get to know one another and openly discuss, as well as acclimate themselves to the general presence of the animal and handler, which will be in attendance once again for this final session. The main portion of this session will allow for guided, open discussion surrounding which exercises have worked for participants, any exercises or concepts that participants may need a refresher on, as well as any tips and questions amongst participants overall. Finally, the session and series will end with a group-favored exercise.