

## Menhely Foundation: Group Activities

### - **Group work prior to getting into supported housing**

“Before moving-in” group sessions for applicants during preparation period. The most important characteristic of the preparation period is to make applicants get used to the situation that may seem unnatural for most of them: we sit down in a circle and **talk about ourselves**. In this period we get to know each-other and the program. This period can be characterized by an effect, some kind of belief that this would work. It is essential not only for the group members to keep up with the work, but the belief in the method itself can also have positive effects. This factor have been applied during selection process and sharing information, thus strengthening positive expectations and emphasizing the importance of participation at group activities. Main group themes of the preparation period are the formation of and awareness-raising on group norms, rules and frames. Further important topics are cooperation, creating an environment based on mutual respect and acceptance.

- introduction, being introduced, getting to know techniques, laying down rules
- presenting individual status quo, presenting system of relations
- dramatically presenting and drawing up aims and wishes
- depicting intra-group (in our case intra-house) relations using sociometria
- presenting obstacles and barriers (e. g. in the field of employment)
- dramatically “treat” arising conflicts
- facilitating the establishment, keeping and making rules of community life kept.
- creating, strengthening group cohesion by using confrontative, encounter techniques.

Group sessions providing a safe emotional environment are a main forum of giving confrontative feedback, describing common experiences and creating a common language. Sooner or later during the process everyone will talk about how they see themselves and others.

Group meetings which focus on rather emotional/cohesional elements of being together are also important.

In the program common participation in renovating the building provided the basic experience that we strive for the same goal, we proceed together and everyone puts their work into the ‘common’ according to their abilities. As renovation works ended, it was an important factor that participants themselves could furnish their own living space thus experiencing the creative power that everyone can decide on their own fate.

### - **Group work during being housed**

In the first period there were daily group sessions. Main topics: **sharing and evaluating impacts of the new situation** (“I am not homeless anymore”) with each-other. “What have I gain and what have I lost with housing?”

Daily group session contained operative elements as well, since they provided ground for learning and creating a conscious lifestyle. Practical questions: what is your plan for today? How will you realize it?

It is important to evaluate these plans and especially their realization within a very short time (within 24 hours), because later these will be the basis of plans of looking for a job, going to work, creating new routines.

During the first two weeks after moving in, **establishment of and raising awareness on house rules** are of outstanding importance. The first conflicts can arise at these group sessions. These issues are still articulated in a difficult way, but it is important to make participants aware that we only deal with issues at group sessions that they bring up.

Besides group work individual case work is essential. During case work the professional support worker can have the chance to facilitate their service users to bring issues up at group sessions.

Group members also **gain by giving** only. Giving itself is a deed – as many arrive to the group demoralizing and convinced that there is nothing inside them that could be valuable for others. An experience that shows that they can be important for others has a great impact on self-esteem. And indeed, group members help each-other a lot: they can give support, encouragement, advice, share views and similar difficulties they face. Many times they accept perception and feedback from others much more than from group leaders. People have to feel that they are needed and useful. Group members do not appreciate this effect in the beginning. “How can blind people lead those who cannot see?” This type of resistance can be broken most efficiently by unfolding negative self-esteem of the service user. Those who underestimate opportunities given by similar people in fact say that “there are no values inside me that I could offer to others.”

In the next stage of housing, the number of group sessions can be reduced. Topics now process **practical issues of co-residence**: conformation, respecting others and ourselves, cooperation and further strengthening of self-presentation. Making people tell stories is a useful technique: “Tell us a story that happened to you!” In these storytelling groups people get closer to each-other so, their ability to connect strengthens.

The awareness-raising on rules, community building group work aims to set a basis for further development in group work, to enable opportunities, conflicts and resistance given by co-residence to manifest themselves, and previous, less adaptive coping strategies to be replaced by cooperative solutions.

The directive role of group leaders weakens as the process progresses, their role is to keep things within the frames.

- **Skills development groups**

The main topics are **processing experiences of service users regarding employment or looking for a job**: getting over failure or sharing success and joy. Social learning, that is the development of basic social skills is a therapeutic factor that works in every group. Development of social skills has a strong emphasis in a group of homeless people. Dramatic elements, role play can be included: group members should have a discussion with the future employer, arrange official issues or ask someone for a date.

According to our experience, resistance is quite strong in this field, but along the resistance hidden problems can come to the surface, and solution can be supported by the group to a great extent. Open feedback makes situations lifelike.

Time for group sessions has to be created in a way that it motivates job search and working of service users as much as possible.

With the road taken so far, group routine, atmosphere of acceptance and understanding have been created and **“deeper topics”** can be integrated into the group work.

Here main topics are **processing loss, relation to addiction and evoking primary family group**. Most service users do not have too positive experiences of the first and most important group: their family of origin. The group is similar to family in many respect: there are figures of authority, equal siblings, strong emotions, heart-to-heart intimacy, but also hostility and rivalry are present. So family relationships are replicated in the group. Not only it is important that group members re-live their early family conflicts, but also that it should become a corrective experience. Rigid roles have to be unfolded and questioned, main rules of unfolding/exploring relations and trying new behaviors have to be encouraged. It is a complex and sensitive task, we have to be careful and reflective in a sense how articulate and effective dealing with the past should be.

Majority of homeless people suffers from some kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome. In order to make the trauma processed, the past and loss, too, has to be evoked and faced. At this stage, again we have to focus on the main principle of support and primary aim of the group: preparation for independent living and social reintegration.

In the last stage of the program main topics of the group are **separation and getting independent**.

**Additional groups and trainings**

- **Projective experience processing group**

They are based on some kind of arts and crafts activity. They aim to evoke verbally especially hard-to-tell stories using nonverbal techniques. During drawing, painting or

making a montage we can get into the world of emotions and feelings. Paralleling colors and shapes with emotions can help to perceive feelings in a multi-sided way, let them get into the acceptable and livable things. During performing common tasks requiring cooperation the ability to pay attention to others, connect to others and the world of others evolves. There is an opportunity to deal with and talk about feelings and happenings drawn with experiencing less anxiety: *“I don’t deal with my own problem, but with the situation and figures drawn on the picture.”*

- **Household management training**

The direct aim of the training is to rebuild household management awareness of homeless people who have spent years sleeping rough.

Further aims: independent household maintenance, financial housekeeping, managing official issues. Transmitting that an ordered environment helps making order in our minds, the community is also more orderly in an orderly environment.

The first part of training sessions is theoretical, the second part is practical. Topics: discussing and prioritizing chores, techniques to keep the flat clean, analysis of financial household management of service users, keeping and weekly review of a household diary, shopping habits, filtering offers of advertisement magazines, storing and preparing food, cooking techniques, “leftover management”, handling household waste. Getting to know loans and financial offers, choosing the suitable service provider. Managing issues in offices, post office, opening a bank account, analysis of bank account letters.