Overcoming Addictive Relationships

TI 033 - Thematic

By

Dianne Frost and Timothy M. Tavis

The Clearinghouse for Structured/Thematic Groups & Innovative Programs
Counseling & Mental Health Center
The University of Texas at Austin
100A W. Dean Keeton St.
1 University Station A3500
Austin, Texas 78712-0152
512-471-3515 Fax 512-471-8875
http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc
Overcoming Addictive Relationships

Dianne Frost, Timothy M. Tavis

Group is based on the notion that maladaptive relationship patterns, especially in intimate relationships, are largely rooted in family of origin dynamics. This group is designed to heighten members' awareness of the historical dimension of current behavior, and then to move from considerations of the past to recognition of their current responsibility and initiative for change.

GOALS: To assist clients who identify themselves as being too dependent, submissive, or passive in their intimate relationships; to explore the role which their internal dynamics play in these relationship patterns

TARGET: Graduate and undergraduate students; also suitable for the general public

STAFF: Two leaders with prior therapy and group experience

LENGTH: 8 sessions; first session is 3 hours, remaining sessions are 1.5 hours

SIZE: 7 to 10 participants

OTHER: Pre-group interviews should screen out those exhibiting serious pathology.

COST: $3.75 Make checks payable to: The University of Texas at Austin. Payment must accompany order. The University does not accept purchase orders for Clearinghouse materials.

ORDER ADDRESS: The Clearinghouse, The University of Texas, 100A West Dean Keeton St, Austin, TX 78712-5731.
General Notes

This group is based on the notion that maladaptive relationship patterns, especially in intimate relationships, are largely rooted in family of origin dynamics. Early experiences of poor boundaries, emotional unavailability or intrusiveness, and parental unpredictability (to name three examples) often lead to adult behaviors described in recent literature as codependent or addictive.

The group is designed to heighten members' awareness of the historical dimension of their current behavior, and then to move from considerations of past experiences to members' current responsibility and initiative for change. It is expected to affect members on two levels: cognitively, through the various exercises, and experientially, through participation in the intimate and dynamic group experience and activation of significant memories. The family sculpture exercise in particular often has a powerful effect on members. Leaders should be especially careful to build a facilitative, trusting atmosphere in the first two sessions to pave the way for the activities that follow, and to maintain firm boundaries on the group process during those activities.

This group begins as a tightly structured theme group, and moves increasingly toward a process orientation. Initially, most of the content is "there and then," focusing on family history; over the course of the sessions, emphasis shifts to "there and now"—in the present but still outside the group.

Leaders may want to be alert for opportunities to use the interactions within the group as material for reflection and learning as the group moves into its latter phase. In fact, termination issues may be especially important for a group such as this, and may provide opportunities for explicit reframing of members' emotional experiences.
ADDICTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

CONTENT GOALS

1. Teach participants what relationship addiction is, what the basis for it is, and how it differs from healthy love

2. Help participants understand why they maintain addictive relationship patterns, including the role of early history as their basis

3. Teach participants how to assess their relationships for addictive qualities

4. Bring participants to awareness of their responsibility in maintaining the addictive qualities in their relationships

5. Help participants decide on positive steps toward changing their relationships

PROCESS GOALS

1. Develop participants' trust thus facilitating self-disclosure

2. Provide opportunity for experiences of healthy intimacy within the group

3. Provide opportunity for experiences of healthy separation as the group comes to an end
SESSION ONE

3 HOURS

Content Goals: Introduce members to the model of addictive relationships upon which this group is based, and give them some tools to begin assessing their relationship patterns.

Process Goals: Begin to build group cohesion and promote self-disclosure in a safe, structured environment.

INTRODUCTIONS, STRUCTURAL MATTERS, KEY POINTS

Briefly introduce co-leaders and participants, then discuss the following items.
Confidentiality—emphasize safety, protection, freedom to talk or to not talk
Attendance—emphasize design of group as progression of exercises that deepen understanding. Participants will get more out of it if they attend all sessions. Also, emphasize the importance of individuals and their presence to the group as a whole.
Structural Matters—Fees and other agency regulations

GENERAL DISCLOSURE EXERCISE

Go around the group three times, starting with a leader each time. The first time, ask each person to state three objective facts about him/herself (name, year in school, occupation, age, rank, and so on). The second time, each person briefly describes an enjoyable experience. The third time, each gives brief reasons (a sentence or two) for their interest in this group. (Here, the leaders say why they are interested in leading this group).
NEWSPRINT EXERCISE: WORD ASSOCIATION

"What words come to mind when you think of addiction or addictive relationships?"

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ADDICTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Definition:
A compelling need to connect with and remain with a particular person. A compulsive drive which limits freedom to choose.

Indications of addiction:
1. Compulsion
2. Panic
3. Withdrawal symptoms
4. A sense of liberation after ending relationship
5. An underlying sense of emptiness, sadness, and fear of loss

Instill hope: Help to change
1. Identify barriers to changing
2. Clarify motives for remaining, including secondary gains
3. Self-images/beliefs about self which keep them in addictions
   • Known: those participants are aware of
   • Subtle: those unrecognized, often learned at deep level in family of origin

BREAK - TEN MINUTES (Should be 90-120 minutes into session)

INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE

Pass out Relationship Addiction Questionnaire. After participants fill it out individually, lead a group discussion of responses and reactions to the questions. This activity is meant to complement the somewhat formal overview, and get members involved in reflecting on their own experience in ways that provide a well-rounded view and increase emotional availability.
SUMMARY

Leaders review the ideas of the day, starting with the immediate experience of relationship addiction (drawing on the "indications of addiction" section of the overview). They then move to the broader issues addressed in the relationship addiction questionnaire, and to the requirements for change (again from the overview), ending with a preview of the issues to be addressed in this group.

"Next session, we will begin to address members' experiences in their families of origin. Later, we will return to the present with a deeper understanding of the roots of our behavior, and will use this deeper understanding to consider what changes we may want to make in our relationships."

HOMEWORK

Explain that personal reflection outside the group is an important part of the work, and ask members to keep a daily journal as an aid to this reflection. They should set aside at least 15-20 minutes each day for working on this journal, which, in general, should be used to consider feelings and thoughts rather than to record activities. Usually the leaders will ask members to think about something in particular during the week, and the journal is a good place to work on these topics.

Ask members to use their journals to record, some time during the coming week, their reactions to today's session. Also, ask them to consider and write about the following questions, as preparation for next session.

1. What were the five most remarkable events in my family? Why do I remember them?
2. What were the turning points for me in my family, the points when I started to relate to my family members differently?
3. What were the 2 biggest frustrations for me in my family?
4. What are 3 most important things I learned from being in my family?

Explain that these will be used as basis for discussion in group, but need not be explicitly shared should members choose not to do so.
SESSION TWO

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Begin directing members' attention to the influence of their familial past on their present experience and functioning.

Process Goals: Continue to build group cohesion, and accustom members to discussing family memories in a structured group setting, thus lowering resistance to the family sculpture exercises of the following two sessions.

ICEBREAKER EXERCISE

Go around the group, asking each member to share a particularly enjoyable experience of the past week.

PROCESSING HOMEWORK

Ask members to discuss their reactions to the previous session. They may be reluctant at first, and the leaders may choose to start off this discussion. Then ask if any members would like to talk about one or two memories which they entered in their journals during the week.

These two activities are helpful in re-integrating members into a group and linking the homework to the group work. Also, the second discussion accustoms members to discussing family of origin issues and sets a precedent of structure for such discussions.

MEMORY EXERCISE

Explain that today, to prepare for using memories in the next two sessions, we will spend most of the session on a memory exercise. Guide members through the exercise, using instructions similar to the following:
"Get comfortable in your seat, close your eyes, and let your breathing slow down. Feel your muscles relax as your breathing slows. First your feet relax, then the relaxation moves up your legs through calves, knees, thighs, buttocks, up your back and down your arms, up your stomach and chest, now your neck and shoulder, now your face, now your scalp. You are very relaxed, and your mind starts drifting back through your memories of growing up.

"As you browse among your memories, choose a special scene from childhood which captures the ways in which love was expressed in your family. What is the scene? Who is there? What are people doing and saying? What are you doing? How do you feel? When you have this memory well in mind, place it gently on a shelf where you can retrieve it easily.

"Now let your mind drift forward into adolescence and young adulthood. Is there a special memory here of an important relationship outside your family, perhaps your first real romantic relationship? One scene which captures the way love was expressed in that relationship? Again, remember the scene as clearly as you can. Who is there? What are they doing? Feeling? Place this memory on the shelf alongside the first, and slowly return to the present. Take a few moments to stretch or whatever, then open your eyes when you are ready."

PROCESSING THE RELATIONSHIP MEMORY

Explain that the group will talk about the childhood memories next session, but will discuss the adolescent/young adulthood memories today. Ask for volunteers to share their memories with the group, and use this exercise to foster group cohesion based on empathy or similarities of experience.

This exercise prepares the group for the family sculptures that begin next session, through sharing personal memories in a structured setting. In addition, the homework assignment is intended to lay a groundwork for explicit linking of family and relationship experience in later sessions.

HOMEWORK

Ask members to write in their journals, in as much detail as possible, the memories recalled in this session and to reflect on the emotional or thematic links between them: How are they similar? How different?

Remind them to use their journals daily for recording and exploring thoughts and feelings stirred up by these memories or by anything else during the week.
SESSION THREE

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Powerfully and vividly portray family relationship patterns, both for the individual who experienced them and for the other group members.

Process Goals: Help deepen trust and intimacy within the group, thus further developing its influence as a corrective interpersonal experience.

FAMILY SCULPTURE

Tell members that this and the following session will be spent on family sculptures, using group members to represent the people in our family memories as a way of sharing these memories with the group. Instructions should go something like this:

"We are trying to sculpt a still life, a sort of tableau that captures your remembered scene. Please choose members of the group to represent the people in your chosen memory.

"Ask whoever you want to play whatever role you like. Tell them how to stand or sit, and what expressions and postures to assume, so that they best portray the feelings, actions, and reactions of the scene.

"We'll limit ourselves to 15 minutes for setting up and talking about each sculpture, so that we can get through all members of the group in two sessions."

Ask members to take a few minutes to retrieve the first memory evoked last session, the memory of love expressed within the family of origin. Then ask four volunteers to set up their sculptures today.

After each sculpture is established, ask the sculptor to describe, briefly, the thoughts and feelings evoked by the scene; then ask each "actor" to speak, briefly, of his/her role, describing the thoughts and feelings evoked by that role. Be careful to structure the time so that members are able to stay within the limits; sculptures tend to absorb large amounts of time and stir up intense emotions.
CLOSING

Express appreciation to those who did sculptures today. Emphasize the possibility that strong emotions may have been aroused, and acknowledge the difficulty sometimes involved in looking back to childhood experiences. Ask people to use their journals to reflect on the ways in which today's sculptures affected them: what thoughts, feelings, memories, or insights have been “stirred up?”
SESSION FOUR

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Continue to bring alive family relationship patterns, both for the individual who experienced them and for other members of the group.

Process Goals: Continue to deepen trust and intimacy among members, thus increasing the group's influence as a corrective interpersonal experience.

PROCESS REACTIONS TO LAST SESSION

Ask members how they felt right after the last session, and how they feel about it today. Embarrassment, shyness, empathy, anxiety, or other emotions growing out of vicarious experience may be expected. Be careful to limit this part of the session to 15-20 minutes, telling members that the rest of the time is reserved for the remaining family sculptures.

FAMILY SCULPTURE

Review instructions from last week, and allow members a few moments to recall their chosen memories; then ask for volunteers. Carefully structure sculptures so that they stay within the 15 minute limits; sculptures tend to absorb very large amounts of time and stir up very intense emotions.

CLOSING

Express appreciation to those sharing their sculptures; emphasize the possibility that strong emotions may have been aroused, and acknowledge the difficulty of reliving childhood experiences. Ask people to use their journals to reflect on the ways in which today's sculptures have affected them: what thoughts, feelings, memories, or insights have been stirred up? Announce that next week the insights gained through their family sculptures will be brought back into their present situations, as they begin to work on the here and now.
SESSION FIVE

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Move the focus from past to present, helping members recognize and reclaim some covert dynamics in their current relationships, as preparation for taking responsibility and initiating change.

Process Goals: Help group members build on the trust and cohesion already developed in the group as they challenge and support each other. Instill hope that change is possible and determination to change.

PROCESS REACTIONS TO LAST TWO SESSIONS

Ask members how they felt right after the last session, and how they feel about it today. Expect embarrassment, shyness, empathy, anxiety, or other emotions growing out of vicarious experience. Tell members in advance that 20-30 minutes will be spent talking about the last two weeks, and then the group will move on to new business.

THEN-AND-NOW EXERCISE

This exercise consolidates the idea that family patterns and their underlying assumptions and emotions become the glasses through which we see ourselves and the world—especially our intimate relationships. (Extensions of this exercise will be used during the following two sessions to develop the themes of personal responsibility and initiative for change.)

Distribute the exercise sheet. Ask members to list the characteristics of their current or recent relationships in the left column, including traits typical of their partners, primary or recurrent emotions, and major interpersonal dynamics. (Some examples from the first session might help here. Also, it may help to remind members of the Relationship Addiction Questionnaire they filled out during the first session.) In the right column, members are to list the character
from the family sculptures (their own or anyone else's) who best represents each characteristic.

Process the results, with special attention to opportunities to help members see ways in which their old emotions and assumptions influence their perception of and their participation in the current situations.

CLOSING AND HOMEWORK: THEN-AND-NOW EXERCISE II

Pull together themes developed along the line just mentioned, and tell members that next session we will focus explicitly on what they bring to their relationships and, therefore, what they have the power to change.

To this end, pass out the homework sheet for this session ("Then-and-Now Exercise II") and ask members to fill it out thoughtfully and specifically, using their journals to explore their responses, before the next session.

This sheet is an extension of this session's exercise sheet, with an added column headed "My Part: What assumption or emotion from my familial past is active here?" Tell members that with this question the group is entering the final phase discussed in the first session, and that in the remaining 3 meetings we will use the deeper understanding gained thus far to consider what changes they may want to make in their relationships. (This statement should both lower resistance and start members thinking about termination.)
SESSION SIX

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Help members honestly address their responsibility for their perceptions and actions in their relationships. For some members, this may involve disentangling responsibilities which have been assumed and should be dropped from those which have been avoided and should be recognized.

Process Goals: Help group members become more immediate in their interactions and feedback with each other as they continue to move beyond exploration and support into supportive challenge. Continue to promote hope that change is possible and lies in the direction in which this group is headed.

DEBRIEFING EXERCISE

Begin by telling members that before talking about their homework, the leaders would like to take a moment to ask if anyone has had reactions to the last session which they want to share with the group.

PROCESSING HOMEWORK

The majority of the session will be spent processing members' responses and reactions to the homework assignment, answering the question: "What assumption or emotion from my familial past is active here?" regarding specific relationship patterns that they listed earlier. Some members are likely to express resistance, overt and covert, to this step toward accepting responsibility. They may well be able to work through some of their resistance with the help of other members—directly through other members' challenge and support of them, and indirectly through observing others' willingness to address similar issues and dynamics. The group's shift to a more process-oriented model, discussed at the beginning of this manual, is especially important for this and the remaining sessions. Leaders should take a more facilitative role,
encouraging interaction between members that may be much more effective in addressing members’ resistance.

**CLOSING AND HOMEWORK**

If time allows, this exercise may be done during the session. However, it is likely that processing "Then-and-Now Exercise II" will take nearly all of the session; in which case "Then-and-Now Exercise III" should be assigned as homework.

Pass out the sheets headed "Then-and-Now Exercise III." This is a copy of the "Then-and-Now Exercise II" sheet, with a new column headed “What Can I Do/Say/Think/Feel Differently?” Explain to members that the good news about taking responsibility for one’s part in relationship difficulties is that once we know what we are doing, we can change it. Emphasize that concrete ideas are usually the most helpful, and ask members to be as specific and "do-able" as possible in their responses. For example: "be nicer" is an awfully big job, but "make the morning coffee and bring him/her a cup" is do-able and may have big results. Similarly, "say what I want" may be a tall order, but "state my preference of where to eat when we go out" may be an important first step.

Remind members that the group has two more meetings, and anticipate some likely termination reactions, such as feeling sad or worried about what will happen next, missing a session, pulling back from the work of the group, or feeling some uncomfortableness or tension with the leaders or the other members.
SESSION SEVEN

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Help members see that change can be a matter of specific, incremental actions, the first of which is within their grasp. Help them use the insights they have gained to develop specific change steps.

Process Goals: Encourage members' sense of being responsible and capable, rather than guilty and helpless. Begin termination process.

PROCESSING HOMEWORK

This session is spent processing members' responses to "Then-and-Now Exercise III." As with the previous exercise, some members may be resistant or have other difficulties, and, in many cases, other members will be able to help them more easily than can the group leaders, through suggestions, support, and challenges. Leaders should facilitate this process, sharpening fuzzy ideas where appropriate and helping members develop a sense of autonomy from the group (and especially from the leaders) in their problem solving.

HOMEWORK AND CLOSING

Explain to members that the next step is to decide on a few concrete "first steps." These may be items from their list from "Then-and-Now Exercise III" or new ideas generated from this session's work. Hand out the sheet headed "Action Plan," and ask members to record on it their planned steps so that they can share them with the group at the next session. Remind them that next week is the last session, which will be spent reviewing their action plans and saying good-bye. Tell members about any evaluation procedures which will be used.

As with the previous session, leaders should be alert to members' reactions to the impending termination, and should help them recognize and deal with these feelings when appropriate.
SESSION EIGHT

1.5 HOURS

Content Goals: Support members in their plans for afterwork, and make appropriate recommendations regarding further therapy or self-help groups.

Process Goals: Support members' developing sense of their own capacities. Help them bring closure on the group relationships that make of them potentially corrective (or at least constructive) interpersonal experiences.

PROCESSING ACTION PLANS

Tell members that the first part of the session will be spent talking about action plans—also a way of starting to say good-bye; and the last part will be spent talking directly about their group experience and bringing it to a close.

Ideally, members will experience this discussion as confirmation of progress and hope (that they have come far enough to choose some specific steps toward change), and also as commitment to further work. It is important to support individual members in their current growth, allowing for wide variance from member to member. This is also an opportunity for the leaders to give members feedback on particular issues or key developments, and to make any recommendations about further therapy.

TERMINATION

Leaders might begin this phase by asking members to consider questions such as the following:

- As you continue the work you have begun in this group, what particular things which other members have said will stay with you?
- What has been especially helpful or thought-provoking for you here?
- What will you miss? What do you wish had been different?
- How will you take this group with you when you leave?
Relationship Addiction Questionnaire

People who find themselves in relationships that have many addictive qualities often answer the questions below differently than those who do not. Answer them as carefully and honestly as you can, and then we will discuss what each means in terms of relationship addiction.

1. When you were growing up were most of your emotional needs usually met?

2. When a person appears needy, do you try to help mostly because it makes you feel good?

3. Do you find yourself attracted to emotionally unavailable or unsuitable partners that you then try to change through your love?

4. When a partner seems likely to leave you, are you willing to do anything to keep the relationship from ending?

5. Are you willing to go to nearly any lengths, regardless of trouble, time or expense, in order to “help” a person with whom you are involved—even if that person doesn’t want the help or your attempts at help are consistently ineffectual?

6. Are you willing to take more than your share of the responsibility, guilt and blame for things that go wrong in an important relationship?

7. Do you have doubts about whether you have earned the right to enjoy life?

8. Do you sometimes find yourself being “helpful” because it allows you to control what happens in a relationship?

9. Do you concentrate more on what you’d like a relationship to be than on how it really is?

10. Do you have difficulty making commitments to your partner?

Adapted from Women Who Love Too Much, by R. Norwood.
## THEN-AND-NOW EXERCISE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Characteristics</th>
<th>Family Sculpture Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THEN-AND-NOW EXERCISE II

**My part**: What assumption or emotion from my familial past is active here?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.
### THEN-AND-NOW EXERCISE III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Part: What assumption or emotion from my familial past is active here?</th>
<th>What Can I Do/Say/Think/Feel Differently?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>8.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACTION PLAN

Based on what I have learned about myself and my relationships through the family sculptures and the Then-and-Now Exercises, I have decided to take the following specific, concrete, do-able steps during the next 30 days:

1.

2.

3.

4.