Adult Children of Divorce:
Surviving Your Parent's Past or Pending Break-Up
TI 063
A Structured, Thematic Psychotherapy Group

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Introduction

Theory and Purpose of the Group

The literature on children of divorce is increasingly finding evidence of long-term effects on the emotional and behavioral functioning of children from broken families. For example, a recently completed ten-year longitudinal study found more emotional difficulties in children of divorce (now aged 9-19) than the same study had seen in the same subjects at the five-year mark. Currently, nearly one child in three experiences parental divorce before reaching adulthood. Although the rate of divorce has leveled off in recent years, there is no evidence to suggest that it will decline in the foreseeable future; it appears that growing up divorced has become an alternative developmental path for a number of children in this country.

Recent evidence continues to suggest that parental divorce exerts a lasting negative impact on at least a sizeable minority of the offspring involved. A large national survey revealed that more than twice as many children of divorce, compared to youth from intact families, had seen a mental health professional. In another study, a representative national sample of men and women who were sixteen years of age or younger when their parents divorced reported significantly higher divorce rates, more work-related problems, and higher levels of emotional distress than did their counterparts who grew up in intact families.

In an attempt to respond to the needs of Adult Children of Divorce, this semi-structured group intervention has been designed to allow students an opportunity to share with each other their thoughts and feelings about this important area of their development.

The purpose of this manual is to describe in detail the design and function of a ten-session group whose objective is to explore the impact of parental divorce on college students. Due to the lack of empirical research on this subject population, our approach is necessarily exploratory and tentative. There is a minimum of lecture and education, with more attention placed on experiential exercises, group cohesion, and group process; accordingly, we
encourage high levels of trust and sharing in order to establish a supportive environment for whatever feelings may emerge. The leader’s role is seen as one of offering support and guidance, while attempting to normalize the wide variety of responses that young people have when their parents divorce.

Description and Format of the Group

This group intervention is designed across ten two-hour sessions. The first six sessions focus on a progressively deeper recapturing of the child’s (inner, as well as historic) experience of critical junctures in the parents’ divorce process. The seventh and eighth sessions focus on participants’ current lives and the ways in which their experience of their parents’ divorce influences current relationships, particularly with parents and romantic partners. As redefinition of any important relationship can be a profound and volatile experience for members of this population, the two final sessions are devoted exclusively to the group's pending termination and the issues it raises for individual participants and the group as a whole.

This group has been designed from an eclectic and developmental perspective. Group size can vary, but our experience with the prototypical group, on which this manual has been based, suggests that the ideal size would range between seven and ten members. Gender balance in composition is important, as there is evidence that males and females experience parental divorce differentially. Moreover, two leaders, one male and one female, are preferable, in order to facilitate the development and working-through of parental transference.

As the group process can trigger a great deal of material for each member, and some members will not be accustomed to asking for time for themselves in the group, it is recommended that each group session begin with a "check-in" period and conclude with a "check-out" period. During these times, each member is given the opportunity to take a few minutes to let the group know what is going on with him/her, to process reactions, etc.

The room should be large enough to comfortably accommodate an active group of this size. Adequate floor space should be available for the family sculpting (session five) and guided imagery (session six) exercises. Additionally, newsprint and crayons should be provided for the lifeline
(sessions one and two), sentence completion (session three), and messages to parents (session seven) exercises.

Pre-Group Interviews

Pre-group screening interviews are recommended for this group. In conducting these interviews, several aspects of the "fit" between the client and the group should be considered. Among these are: 1) the client's current level of functioning and readiness for a potentially intense group experience; 2) the client's previous experience with psychotherapy, particularly in the group modality; 3) the client's presenting concerns and their perceptions of how their lives may have been influenced by their parents' divorce; 4) the client's age and developmental state at the time of their parent's divorce and other important background information regarding the divorce (With whom did the client live after the divorce? What has been the quality and quantity of contact between the client and the non-custodial parent?), and 5) client characteristics, such as current age, sex, ethnicity, etc.

These interviews also present an opportunity to begin to orient individual members to the group experience. Clients should be encouraged to ask questions and share concerns related to their prospective entry into the group. The leaders can also present relevant information regarding expectations for attendance, maintaining confidentiality, and other "ground rules" relevant to the group process. Although individual members are not required to be in individual psychotherapy concurrently with their group experience, given the intensive nature of this group intervention, access to individual psychotherapy, on an "as needed" basis, is strongly encouraged. Group participants are asked to attend at least the first three sessions before making a decision to leave the group. They are also asked to take responsibility for informing the group of their decision to leave, so as to minimize "unfinished business" and reduce the potential for retraumatization that their sudden and unexplained departure might evoke.
Session One: Introduction and Lifelines

Goals:

-- To introduce participants to the purposes of the group and to each other

-- To begin to universalize the variety of reactions to parental divorce

-- To orient participants to the “ground rules” which will govern the group process (These might include attendance, confidentiality, participant-participant contact outside the group, participant-leader contact outside the group, etc.)

-- To begin to give participants an opportunity to tell their stories and identify ways in which their experience is similar to and different from others’

Process:

Lecture on Purposes of Group

The leaders introduce themselves and share with the participants the central purposes of the group. With the group, they review the “ground rules” which will govern group process. They invite participants to briefly introduce themselves (age, major, etc.).

Experiential Exercise: Lifelines

The leaders distribute newsprint and crayons and are asked to depict their lives through use of a lifeline drawing: a simple line along which they mark the most important events in their lives and the ages at which they occurred. (Allow about ten minutes.) They then use their lifeline drawing to present a brief autobiographical sketch to the rest of the group. They are asked to specifically include the period of their life in which the dissolution of their
parents’ marriage occurred. The leaders should highlight commonalities and contrasts among lifelines and encourage interaction among participants.

As it is not possible to adequately address every lifeline within a single two-hour session, this exercise is continued in Session Two. At the conclusion of Session One, the leaders initiate the “check-out” process, and help prepare the participants for the myriad of reactions to the session they might expect to experience during the coming week.
Session Two - Lifelines and ACOD Themes

Goals:

-- To continue to give participants the opportunity to introduce themselves to each other

-- To continue to universalize the variety of reactions to parental divorce

-- To begin to educate participants to the myriad of issues that parental divorce can raise for the individual child

-- To begin to set the stage for the depth work planned for subsequent sessions

Process:

Experiential Exercise: Lifelines

The leaders begin the group with the "check in" process, giving each participant a brief opportunity to inform the group of how they experienced the week, their reactions to the first session, etc. Then the leaders resume the lifelines exercise, and participants who have not yet had the opportunity to present their lifeline drawings are invited to do so.

Lecture on ACOD Themes

Using the material generated by the lifeline exercise as a springboard, the leaders present a brief lecture regarding the various issues that individuals who have experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriage may face. Although individuals react to parental divorce in ways which are unique to them, the literature and clinical experience document certain common themes, including feelings of abandonment, guilt or shame, anxiety, role reversal in the relationship with the parent, "parentification" of the child (particularly when younger siblings are present), and difficulty with
trust and intimacy in other significant relationships, even in adulthood. These issues and their relationships to participants' individual experiences of their parents' divorce will be explored in depth in subsequent sessions.

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Three: Abandonment and Misplaced Responsibility

Goals:

--To help participants get in touch with their own experience of their parents' divorce in greater depth than in previous sessions

--To help participants identify ways in which two major themes - the child's feelings of abandonment and his/her accepting of responsibility for the state and quality of the marital relationship - may relate to their individual experience of their parents' divorce

Process:

Lecture on Abandonment and Misplaced Responsibility

After the check-in process, and building on the lecture of the last session, the leaders present a brief lecture on these two major themes. Aspects to be covered should include:

1) That divorce can be traumatic for the child, as well as the parents;

2) That during this trauma (as opposed to others a child might encounter) the parents are typically less available to assist the child;

3) That the child has a tendency to accept responsibility for the state and quality of the marital relationship rather than to accept that the parents are not perfect and that their behavior is largely beyond his/her control.

Experiential Exercise: Sentence Completion

The leaders distribute newsprint and crayons, and introduce the sentence completion exercise. Participants are asked to get comfortable and let
Session Ten: An Ending and a Beginning

Goals:

--To assist participants in achieving a healthy sense of closure on their group experience

--To build on the separation process begun in session nine

--To assist participants in striking a healthy balance between grief over the termination of the group and hope for their future

Process:

The leaders initiate the check-in process and invite participants to include how they are feeling about this being the last session of the group. During the discussion which will evolve out of the check-in process, the leaders may ask participants to compare their feelings with those they had as a child, experiencing their parents divorce. Leaders may use this as an opportunity to underscore participants' growth and to help participants identify areas for future work. The leaders should encourage participants to address any "unfinished business" (self-disclosures they have been wanting to share, feedback they have been wanting to give or receive, etc.) before the session's conclusion. They should also invite participants to share their plans for the next several weeks or months, in order to facilitate a sense of hope for the future.

Leaders initiate the final check-out process.
their thoughts drift back to the time when they first started to realize that their parents were "breaking up." (The specific language used should be child-like and geared toward facilitating participants' journey back to this crucial juncture.) Participants are then asked to complete the following sentence stems as they are read aloud, with the first thought that comes to mind, using their non-dominant hand:

1) I felt abandoned when_____________________.

2) I felt responsible for_____________________

The use of the non-dominant hand discourages excess deliberation and thus allows for a more spontaneous response to arise. It also replicates the childhood experience of learning how to write and results in handwriting that resembles that of a young child's, thereby serving to emphasize the role of the inner child in these expressions.

When everyone has completed their sentences, participants are asked to share their experiences. Although this is a simple exercise, it can be very powerful, and adequate processing time should be available. The leaders may choose to guide the discussion in such a way so as to encourage support for individual participants for whom this has been a particularly moving experience. The leaders may also elect to underscore commonalities among participants' experiences of abandonment and responsibility-taking to further group cohesion.

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Four: Family Photographs and Childhood Toys

Goals:

--To provide participants with the opportunity to share their childhood experience of their family with the group through the use of old family photographs, childhood toys, etc.

--To encourage participants to stay in touch with their "inner child"

--To set the stage for the family sculpting exercise (session five)

Process:

Experimental Exercise

During the previous session, participants were encouraged to bring a few old family photographs, favorite toys, or other significant souvenirs to this session. (It does not matter if the photographs are of the intact family. Indeed, the participants' selection of certain photographs can provide important information about his/her experience of the family or of particular family members.) After the check-in process, participants are asked to share their items with the group, noting the significance of each, the story behind each, etc. Leaders should encourage participants to ask questions or provide feedback to each other about the objects, the stories which accompany them, or the ways in which the stories are told. At this point in the group's development, participants will begin to actively provide advice and support to each other in coming to terms with the ways in which their experience of their parents' divorce has been influencing their life, and this exercise can serve to recapture many valuable memories. However, the leaders may need to be assertive in keeping the group moving so that everyone has a chance to be heard.

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Five: Memories of the Family

Goals:

--To share with the group concepts of some specific dynamics of family relationships

--To encourage members to get in touch with their memories of family life around the time of parental divorce

--To have the group move to a deeper level of rapport with each other through the use of a "family sculpting exercise."

Process:

Lecture on Family Dynamics

Following the check-in process, the leaders share with the group various basic concepts of Family Systems Theory. This is not meant to be anything scientific, but rather just a few ideas to stimulate reflection and understanding. Some examples are:

--Triangulation: Triangles are the smallest stable relationship system in nature. Often, conflict between two members of the family (parents are a good example) is unexpressed directly for a period of time, until a third party (usually one of the children) is "triangulated" into the conflict. Ask the group members to think about triangles in their family. Sometimes there is one dominant triangle in a family, and there may also be overlapping, or interlocking triangles. What purpose(s) did they serve?
**Boundaries**: The concept of boundaries is a way of talking about the quality of relationships within the family. There are three general types:

- **Rigid**: Generally closed-off; characterized by disengagement

- **Clear**: Healthy, well-defined; characterized by mutual respect

- **Diffuse**: Unclear, variable; characterized by enmeshment or over-involvement

**Sub-systems**: A sub-system is a smaller unit within the overall family system. Examples include the marital sub-system (parents) and sibling sub-system. Encourage members to come up with examples in their own families.

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**Experiential Exercise**

The leaders explain the exercise known as **Family Sculpting**. It is described as a way of creating a snapshot of each person's family at a particular moment in time (in this case, immediately prior to the separation of the parents.) We also point out that each member of the family will have their own unique perspective. It works as follows: one member volunteers to "sculpt" his or her family. They then ask other group members to volunteer to represent each member of their family, (father, mother, and siblings) and then position that person in the room in a manner that expresses that individual's relationship to the family at that time. It is desirable to have as many family members as possible represented. Leaders should encourage the members to be as creative as they like, instructing their peers as to stance, facial expression, attitude, etc. The director should keep at it until every detail is just right. When the stage is set, so to speak, it is time for the person whose family is represented to tell the story about that time in their life. The leaders may want to prompt them with questions like, "Why does _____ have his back turned?," or, "Why does _____ look so sad?" It is also often helpful to ask what each family member would say if they could speak.
It will not be necessary for every member to sculpt their family, although we encourage all members who want to give it a try, to do so. In general, after the first "sculpting" is completed, the group will enter into a spontaneous discussion of the differences and similarities that they see in their own families. It is a good idea to process with the member whose family is "on display" what it feels like to expose their perceptions of their own family dynamics.

As the conclusion of the session approaches, the leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Six: The Child Within

Goals:

--To encourage members to explore and express the child-like feelings within themselves, as a means of accessing their reactions to their parent's divorce.

--By extension, to introduce members to a neglected part of themselves, one that can serve as a bridge to their present and past selves, and hopefully to do so in a way that they can make use of their "inner child" in the future.

Process:

The experiential exercise in Session Six is generally quite powerful (which we anticipated), but it engendered a much wider variety of responses than we had expected. The obvious intention is to reconnect with the tender feelings and powerlessness of childhood, in an attempt to create a healing and unifying experience. This imagery has had a deeply positive effect on the majority of group members we have presented it to, but there are some individuals for whom the dominant memories of childhood are fear, mistrust, and insecurity in a setting of parental conflict and uncertainty. Asking these people to re-experience their lives as young children can be frightening and painful. For this reason, it is advisable to inform members that if the imagery becomes unpleasant, they should feel free to move out of it and just listen. Similarly, these individuals may need extra time to process their experience after the imagery exercise is concluded.

Healing the Child Within: Imagery Exercise

After the check-in process, one of the leaders will read the following imagery exercise in order to facilitate contact with the inner child. Before beginning, instruct the members to get as comfortable as possible, preferably
lying on the floor. It is a good idea to dim the lights somewhat, but avoid making the room completely dark. Ask everyone to take a few deep breaths, and to relax as fully as possible. After a pause, read the following exercise aloud, slowly and deliberately, pausing for effect:

Close your eyes and I will close mine. And I won't peek. Imagine you are descending a staircase. It's dark and quiet. When you reach the bottom, you find yourself standing at the end of a hallway. At the other end is a light. Walk toward the light. When you reach it, you are standing in a doorway looking into a room. Walk into the room. It's your bedroom, the room you slept in and played in as a child around age five or six. If you moved often as a child, pick one room that is clear and vivid and stay with it. If you did not have a bedroom, pick the room or closet or place that you went to in order to be alone. Look around the room. Let it surround you. It's just as it was. Everything's the same: the color of the walls, the arrangement of the bed and furniture, even the smell of the room. Walk around the room. Touch everything. Run your fingers along the cracks in the walls. Remember the places you used to doodle or draw? Remember how you used to hide under the bed or under the covers or in the closet? Remember what it was like being a child in this room? Remember your favorite song or game? Look, there's your favorite toy. Pick it up and play with it. It's all here for you to remember.

Now lie down on the floor on your back and look up at the room surrounding you. Remember how huge everything was back then? How high the ceiling seemed? How tall the dresser was? Everything was huge, gigantic, and you were so small, tiny in such a big world. Remember the first day of school in first grade? Remember Sunday mornings? Remember your sixth birthday? Remember your favorite food?

Now stand up again and take a long look around the room. You are your adult self once more standing there in that room. You are grown up, looking in on your past through a window, a window you have created.

As you scan the room slowly one last time, suddenly you realize you are not alone. A small person is in the room with you. Look around. Off in the corner of the room someone is sitting on the floor. Walk over. As you approach, you can see who it is. It's a young child, about five or six years old, sitting looking away, with head bent and eyes downcast. It's the child you were back then. The child still inside of you is sitting on the floor beside you. Sit down next to your child and say hello. Recall an old photograph of yourself, and study it, in order to deepen the contact. Remember your favorite clothes? Remember the way your hair was combed? When you have a clear, vivid image of yourself as a child, ask your child to hold your hand. Be the older friend to your child that you always needed back then. Place an arm around your child's shoulder or pat your child's hair. Get to
know each other. Ask what your child is feeling deep inside. Ask what your child is needing from you right now, and freely give it.

Now relive an old shame scene. Ask your child to take you through it once more. Reexperience it as fully as you are able. Feel every feeling in the scene. When it concludes, imagine being the loving, compassionate mother or father to that child you needed back then. Say the things to your child now that you child needed to hear then. Hold your child on your lap for as long as your child needs. Be an ally to your child and change that old scene or simply continue it, creating a new scene.

Imagine taking your child outside to play. Go to the park together and run through the grass or bushes or simply sit quietly under a tree together. Or go to the beach and jump waves, splashing and laughing. Or sit on a bench in the backyard and just silently be with one another.

It's getting late now. Time to come in. Bring your child to a new, safe place that you are creating deep within you. Give your child a great big hug. Be the good, loving parent to that child you always needed. Now tuck your child into bed in that safe place deep inside you. Sit on the edge of the bed and sing a song to your child or tell a story. Gaze into each other's eyes for as long as you want to and say, "Child, I'm pleased and proud to have you. I will be with you always." One last hug, one last kiss good night. You'll be back whenever needed, whenever called. It's safe now. Tiptoe from your child, walk back down the hallway, and up the staircase. Whenever you are ready, open your eyes and return.

(adapted from Gershen Kaufman, The Psychology of Shame, pp. 177-179.)

When you have finished allow the members as much time as needed to regain their composure and return to their full, waking consciousness. After a period of silence, ask if anyone would like to share what their experience was like. As you might guess, it will not be difficult to get a discussion going.

As the session draws to a close, the leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Seven: Current Relationships with Parents

Goals:

--To encourage group members to clarify and begin to express feelings that they currently hold toward their parents.

--To generate new ideas and support for improving communication with parents, with the obvious goal of resolving "unfinished business."

Process:

Experiential Exercise: Messages to Parents

After check-in, the group leaders distribute large sheets of paper and crayons to the members, who are then asked to complete the following sentence stems as they are read aloud, with the first thought that comes to mind, using their non-dominant hand:

1. It's hard for me to talk to you because ____________________.

2. The thing I most want to tell you is ____________________.

3. You never hear me when I ____________________.

4. When I tried to tell you how I felt, I discovered that ________.

Processing of this experience consists largely of a lengthy discussion wherein members discover how much they have in common. It is also valuable to consider how feelings towards parents may have changed now that the group members have become adults.
Group leaders may choose to guide the discussion in such a way so as to generate support for particular members who are currently working on improving their relationship with their parents. It is also helpful to compare and contrast participant's feelings and attitudes toward parents and step-parents. In many cases, feelings of guilt emerge when a young person feels closer to a step-parent than they do to their own biological parent.

Another aspect worth exploring is gender differences in relationships with parents. Research shows clearly that both male and female children retain close ties to their mothers after divorce, and that the father-son relationship improves somewhat while the father-daughter relationship more often deteriorates. It is valuable for the members to compare their experiences with other members, as well as siblings and step-siblings.

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Eight: Current Romantic Relationships

The literature on Children of Divorce is unclear as to the long-term effects of parental divorce on the adult romantic relationships of the offspring involved, but there is a great deal of speculation about the attitudes of older children of divorce (18 to 23 year olds) concerning the viability of the institution of marriage in general. This session is designed primarily to be a discussion of feelings about relationships, and specifically the ways in which parental divorce may have affected those feelings, attitudes and behaviors in the areas of commitment and trust.

Goals:

--To encourage members to share their feelings about relationships, dating, marriage, commitment, trust, raising a family, etc.

--To gain insight about how expectations in relationships may be shaped in part by parental modeling

--To generate new ideas for ways of trying out new behaviors in relationships

Process:

At this point in the evolution of the group it is no longer necessary to use exercises to stimulate discussion. A more-than-sufficient level of rapport has been established, and discussions are easy to start. After check-in, one of the leaders may ask, of no one in particular, if the members feel that their parent's divorce has had any effect on their attitudes toward romantic relationships.

In the ensuing discussion, it will be worthwhile to challenge any negative thinking, especially feelings of hopelessness. As might be expected, many members will relate stories of failed relationships and will already have connected them with their own skewed expectations that relate to previous parental behavior.
A contrasting point of view that is likely to be represented by more than a few members is a surprising optimism about the idea of marriage. Some members may say they have learned something about relationships from their parent’s failure, and that they intend to avoid making the mistakes of the older generation. They talk with excitement about their hopes for a successful marriage and a family of their own.

It is important for the group leaders to normalize these two points of view and to help the participants see the common ground between them, so as to avoid the splitting of the group into two factions. It is worth reflecting on any new awarenesses of separation and individuation from the parents that members may have experienced since the group began.

Near the end of this session the leaders should remind everyone that only two more sessions remain, and that in the coming week people should consider their feelings about any unfinished business. If they are not getting what they need from the group, how should they behave differently?

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Session Nine: What if this were "The Last Session?"

Goals:

--To provide participants with an opportunity to begin to explore their feelings around issues of separation, particularly around the ending of the group.

--To universalize the heightened sensitivity to the dissolution or redefinition of significant relationships that many participants may experience.

--To provide participants with adequate opportunity to address "unfinished business" related to the group experience and to learn to say good-bye on their own terms

--To begin to prepare participants for life without the group

Process:

The leaders initiate the check-in process.

As noted in the outline of the previous session, the group has reached a stage where discussion naturally evolves without the use of structured exercises. Nevertheless, the leaders may wish to make brief comments regarding the increased sensitivity to changes in significant relationships that may result from the experience of parental divorce. To guide the discussion, they may ask participants to consider how they would be feeling if this were the last session, rather than the next-to-the last. This session is also an opportunity for the leaders to begin to help participants develop a realistic sense of what being without the group will mean and to formulate realistic plans for the period immediately following the group's termination.

The leaders initiate the check-out process.
Suggested Reading List

Bradshaw, John: Bradshaw On: The Family (Health Communications, 1988.)
Healing the Shame that Binds You (Health Communications, 1988.)

Clarke, Jean: Self-Esteem: A Family Affair (Harper and Row, 1978.)


Gordon, Thomas: Parent Effectiveness Training (New American Library, 1975.)


Lerner, Harriet: The Dance of Anger (Harper and Row, 1985.)
The Dance of Intimacy (Harper and Row, 1989.)

Miller, Alice: Pictures of Childhood (Collins Publishers.)
The Drama of the Gifted Child (Basic Books, 1981.)

Smith, Manuel: When I Say No, I Feel Guilty

Viorst, Judith: Necessary Losses (Ballantine Books, 1986.)

Wallerstein, Judith S. & Joan Berlin Kelly: Surviving the Breakup (Basic Books, 1980.)

Whitfield, Charles: Healing the Child Within (Health Communications.)