



THE IMPACT OF GROUP THERAPY ON SOCIAL RECOVERY IN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

Mariia Mykhailichenko

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8576-4507>

Master's Degree in Psychology, National Academy of Internal Affairs

Director, 910 Rosery RD NW, Largo, Florida, 33770

Abstract. *The article explores the impact of group therapy on the social recovery of patients with depression and anxiety disorders. The aim of the study is to demonstrate how group therapy facilitates social rehabilitation and improves social functioning in the context of mental health disorders. The research employed general scientific methods of cognition, including analysis, synthesis, systematization, generalization, and comparison. The findings indicate that group therapy is a cost-effective treatment for mental health disorders, particularly given the growing demand for psychiatric services and limited resources. Its effectiveness lies in the inclusion of therapeutic factors such as hope, altruism, socialization, modeling, behavioral correction, interpersonal learning, and group cohesion. These elements enable participants to effectively address their issues within a collective environment. Additional benefits of group therapy include reducing isolation, combating stigma, fostering a sense of community, and creating an atmosphere of mutual support among participants. The method ensures long-term reduction of depression and anxiety symptoms while improving patients' social adaptation, making it particularly effective for individuals with chronic disorders or those who have experienced prolonged stress and trauma. The study also highlights limitations of the method. Group therapy may be less effective for individuals unprepared for group dynamics, those reluctant to share their problems, or those requiring a highly individualized approach. Moreover, in crisis situations, in the absence of clear goals or proper interaction among participants, the therapy's effectiveness decreases. Under such conditions, difficulties in establishing a safe and supportive environment may negatively affect motivation and progress in treatment. The practical significance of the study lies in refining psychotherapy approaches through the active use of group methods in the rehabilitation of patients with mental health disorders.*

Keywords: *group therapy, depression, anxiety disorders, social recovery, psychotherapy.*

Introduction

Depression and anxiety disorders remain significant public health challenges in the United States, profoundly affecting the social functioning and quality of life of millions. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression impacts approximately 17 million Americans annually, while anxiety disorders are the most prevalent form of mental illness in the country. This situation necessitates effective treatment strategies that can be scaled and adapted to meet the needs of diverse populations, particularly in contexts where traditional one-on-one therapy sessions may be unavailable or ineffective for certain groups.

Against this backdrop, group therapy emerges as a promising alternative offered in both public and private healthcare settings nationwide. Private clinics, in particular, have adapted various formats of group therapy, including structured therapeutic



programs incorporating elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, and other evidence-based approaches. These adaptations provide more flexible and accessible services, addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by different subpopulations.

Group therapy has demonstrated its effectiveness in clinical studies, highlighting its potential to enhance social recovery in individuals with depression and anxiety disorders. Its impact on social interaction and the strengthening of support networks helps patients not only reduce symptoms but also achieve personal growth and mutual understanding. This form of therapy has become an integral part of treatment strategies aimed at alleviating the psychological and emotional burden often associated with individual sessions, offering patients a sense of community and shared purpose.

Literature Review

The impact of group therapy on social recovery in depression and anxiety disorders has been extensively studied in both international and domestic scientific literature. The available sources indicate that group therapy is widely recognized as an effective approach for improving social skills, reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms, and facilitating social adaptation. However, most of the research is authored by international scholars, highlighting a lack of comprehensive coverage of this topic in domestic literature. Significant contributions to the study of group therapy's effectiveness have been made by authors such as S. Barkowski, D. Schwartz, B. Strauss, G. M. Burlingame, and others [1; 2]. Their systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that group therapy is an effective treatment for anxiety disorders, including social anxiety, showing significant positive outcomes among patients who participate in group settings.

Research by H. Colhoun and colleagues [3] confirms the effectiveness of cognitive therapy in group formats for patients with social anxiety in routine practice. These authors emphasize the practical application of this method in clinical settings, enhancing its accessibility. Similarly, C. Fogarty, D. Hevey, and O. McCarthy [5] explored the long-term effects of cognitive-behavioral therapy, demonstrating lasting improvements even after completing therapy.



Particular attention should be given to the work of E. Nakimuli-Mpungu and colleagues [8], which highlights the impact of group counseling on reducing depression, post-traumatic symptoms, and improving functional outcomes among patients in post-conflict regions. This study is unique due to its context, involving work with vulnerable populations. Research by J. Mejías and colleagues [7] focuses on university students, showing that group therapy not only improves mental health but also enhances social adaptation, which is particularly critical in educational settings.

Additionally, expert literature presented in modern online publications, such as articles from Edgewood Health Network [4] and F. Robinson [11], offers a practical perspective on how group therapy activates social interaction systems and fosters a sense of community among participants.

Despite the considerable body of literature on this topic, there remains a shortage of systematic material that comprehensively examines the impact of group therapy on social recovery across different cultural and clinical contexts. To address this gap, various methods of scientific cognition were utilized to analyze, categorize, and systematize the information for further exploration within the framework of this topic.

Purpose of the article

The aim of the article is to demonstrate how group therapy influences social recovery in depression and anxiety disorders.

Research results

The prevalence of social anxiety disorder in the United States ranges from 7% to 13%. Typically, the initial manifestations of this disorder emerge during adolescence and, without treatment, can develop into a chronic condition. This disorder is associated with a higher incidence of depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol abuse, reduced quality of life, and disruptions in social and occupational functioning. Anxiety disorders also result in significant economic losses due to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and greater reliance on social and medical services [5].

Depression and anxiety disorders are pressing issues in the United States, as evidenced by substantial federal budget allocations for mental health support. For instance, the 2023 budget allocated \$7.5 billion to mental health services through



SAMHSA, representing a \$1 billion increase from the previous year [9]. Several strategies are employed to reduce depression and anxiety levels:

- pharmacological treatment;
- individual therapy;
- group therapy.

Group therapy is considered the most cost-effective method for treating mental disorders from an economic perspective, as it requires fewer resources per participant compared to individual therapy while serving a larger number of patients simultaneously. This makes it a critical avenue for the utilization of public funds in mental health, particularly in the context of growing demand for psychiatric services and limited resources.

Current clinical institutions commonly recommend individual cognitive-behavioral therapy as an effective and cost-efficient treatment for depression and anxiety disorders [5]. The American Psychological Association has developed a policy on evidence-based psychotherapy, emphasizing the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patients' culture, individual characteristics, and personal preferences, noting that the effectiveness of any psychotherapy is influenced by the unique traits of each patient [7].

Nevertheless, according to a meta-analysis conducted by Barkowski, S., Schwartze, D., Strauss, B., Burlingame, G. M., and Rosendahl, J. in 2020, group psychotherapy shows strong efficacy in treating anxiety disorders. The findings indicate that group psychotherapy significantly reduces specific anxiety disorder symptoms compared to control groups with no treatment or interventions that offer general, nonspecific therapeutic factors. Interestingly, according to researchers such as Fogarty, C., Hevey, D., & McCarthy, O., and Barkowski et al., group therapy does not demonstrate significant differences in effectiveness compared to individual psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy. The data also suggest that diagnosis-specific groups are just as effective as mixed-diagnosis groups, although further research is required to confirm these results [1; 5].

The effectiveness of group therapy for social recovery is supported by E.



Nakimuli-Mpungu and colleagues. The progress of each participant and the overall effectiveness of group psychotherapy rely on therapeutic factors, which include:

- instilling hope;
- imparting and receiving information;
- altruism;
- development of socialization techniques;
- imitative behavior;
- corrective recapitulation of the primary family group;
- interpersonal learning;
- group cohesiveness [8].

It is crucial to implement group approaches in a variety of pathological situations with specific goals. Group therapy is particularly beneficial for individuals with marginalized identities, as it offers support and solidarity from others with similar experiences. For instance, a meta-analysis of group interventions for trauma and depression among refugee adults and children found a reduction in post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression. Additionally, group therapy has been shown to help LGBTQ+ patients cope with universal stressors and stress related to navigating biases and other challenges associated with their minority status [10].

Issues such as shame, stigma, or feelings of isolation are often addressed more effectively through group therapy rather than individual therapy [10]. Research by Nakimuli-Mpungu, E., Okello, J., Kinyanda, E., Alderman, S., Nakku, J., Alderman, J. S., Pavia, A., Adaku, A., Allden, K., and Musisi, S. focuses on group counseling models for individuals with mental illnesses, particularly HIV-positive women. The studies demonstrated improvements in disclosure of HIV status and reductions in depressive symptoms. Participants included individuals with comorbid diagnoses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, epilepsy, and substance use disorders. The program's core components aimed to enhance participants' ability to process past traumatic events and develop positive coping skills to improve mood and functioning [8].

The effectiveness of group therapy stems from relationships formed within the



group, which influence the overall dynamics and the value of participation for each member. While some aspects may appear less relevant to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) groups, researchers have integrated them into CBT principles. For example, group settings can help break harmful interaction patterns as members observe others and experiment with new ways of interacting [5].

In effective CBT groups, two essential elements are present:

1. group cohesion;
2. task focus.

Mechanisms influencing change in group CBT include:

- Cognitive restructuring through behavioral experiments: groups provide a setting where members challenge automatic thoughts and core beliefs. For instance, a belief such as "If I speak with an accent or misuse a word, others will mock me" can be tested in a safe environment.
- Normalization through identification with others: seeing that others share similar struggles helps participants understand their thoughts and behaviors are not unique, reducing stigma and shame.
- Collaboration in therapeutic relationships: feedback from peers may be taken more seriously than advice from a therapist, as group members are perceived as unbiased.
- Progressive socialization: fears, such as public speaking, can be addressed within the group, allowing members to gradually confront and adapt to their anxieties.
- Positive reinforcement and vicarious learning: observing others successfully complete tasks encourages members to try them as well, bolstered by group support and encouragement [5].

A less commonly discussed mechanism is the social engagement system, or the ventral vagal response, which fosters feelings of safety, calmness, and connection. This approach is particularly effective for individuals stuck in "fight or flight" responses or immobilization, which are evolutionary stress reactions [11]. Group therapy can reactivate this system by creating a safe environment for authentic interaction. Within



this setting, participants can process past pain and trauma, exploring and releasing what is held within the body-mind system [11].

Evidence of effectiveness is collected through various measures of depression and anxiety. For instance, the SASS scale assesses how psychotherapy improves participants' social functioning, addressing anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem that affect personal and social efficacy across different environments [7].

The Clark and Wells model for social anxiety disorder (SAD) is one prominent framework in psychotherapeutic practice. It focuses on three key components that perpetuate anxiety:

- physiological symptoms visible to others;
- negative automatic thoughts;
- avoidance of social situations.

These components reinforce one another, creating a cycle that maintains anxiety. The therapeutic process involves developing new cognitive strategies and behavioral skills to reduce negative self-perceptions and social anxiety while minimizing avoidance behaviors. This approach helps individuals with SAD reevaluate their interactions and achieve reduced anxiety levels [3].

However, group therapy without clear goals may be less effective, particularly for non-psychotic patients [8]. Studies in post-conflict regions such as northern Uganda—where decades of civil wars from 1987 to 2008 left a high prevalence of depression and PTSD—demonstrated limited effectiveness of group interpersonal therapy for selected children and adults without medication. However, combined group therapy and medication showed better outcomes than medication alone [8].

Patients unprepared for group therapy may require orientation and preparation. Therapists must address common misconceptions, such as fears of being forced to disclose personal information or concerns about having to "fix" others' problems when they are already overwhelmed [10].

Long-term group therapy shows more sustainable results. One study measuring depression, stress, and coping difficulties found that patients often experienced an initial "worsening" phase during therapy. Symptom improvements became evident



only with long-term participation [8]. Positive outcomes were observed up to five years post-treatment, although the lack of standardized social anxiety measures in some studies limits generalizability [5].

Research also highlights the effectiveness of post-treatment group support programs in reducing anxiety and depression symptoms, especially for individuals discharged from hospitals. These programs enhance long-term outcomes and provide an economically efficient way to manage service demand while maintaining patients' progress [5].

Studies by Mejías, J., Jurado, M., Tafoya, S., Romo-Nava, F., Sandoval, J., and Beltrán-Hernández, L. suggest that long-term interactive therapy offers advantages in treating personality and complex mental disorders compared to short-term therapies [7].

Online group therapy is also highly effective. While relatively new, strong evidence suggests it is as effective—or even more effective—than in-person therapy. A study published in the *Journal of Effective Disorders* found that online depression interventions are as beneficial as traditional face-to-face therapy. The online format demonstrated prolonged effectiveness, with continued symptom reduction three months post-treatment. Smartphone-based apps, such as Wagon, have also gained traction among medical researchers [4]. Online therapy is particularly valuable for individuals in rural areas, those with family or career obligations, and anyone unable to commit to in-person sessions [4].

Conclusions

The significance of group therapy lies in its ability to treat mental disorders in a more cost-effective manner compared to individual therapy, particularly in the context of limited resources and increasing demand for psychiatric services. Group therapy incorporates therapeutic factors such as hope, altruism, socialization, modeling, behavior correction, interpersonal learning, and group cohesion, enabling participants to address their issues effectively in a collective environment.

Its advantages extend beyond economic considerations to include psychological and social benefits, such as mutual support, reduced isolation and stigma, and a



strengthened sense of community. Group therapy is especially effective for individuals needing socialization, mutual support, and shared understanding. It delivers sustainable symptom reduction and improved social functioning, making it particularly valuable for individuals with chronic conditions or those who have experienced prolonged stress or trauma.

However, group therapy may be less suitable for individuals unprepared for group dynamics or those with a high degree of privacy about their issues, where individual therapy might be more appropriate. In crises or environments lacking clear goals or mutual support, group therapy's effectiveness may diminish, leading to reduced motivation and limited treatment progress.

References

1. Barkowski, S., Schwartze, D., Strauss, B., Burlingame, G. M., & Rosendahl, J. (2020). Efficacy of group psychotherapy for anxiety disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychotherapy Research*, 30(8), 965–982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2020.1729440>
2. Butler, A. C., Chapman, J. E., Forman, E. M. and Beck, A. T. (2006). The empirical status of cognitive-behavioural therapy: a review of meta-analyses. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26, 17–31. doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2005.07.003
3. Colhoun, H., Kannis-Dymand, L., Rudge, M., et al. (2021). Effectiveness of Group Cognitive Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder in Routine Care. *Behaviour Change*, 38(2), 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/bec.2020.19>
4. Edgewood Health Network. 5 reasons why group therapy is so effective. Retrieved from <https://www.edgewoodhealthnetwork.com/resources/blog/hello-im-group-therapy-and-im-an-effective-form-of-treatment/>
5. Fogarty, C., Hevey, D., & McCarthy, O. (2019). Effectiveness of cognitive behavioural group therapy for social anxiety disorder: Long-term benefits and aftercare. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 47, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1352465819000079>
6. Klein, A., Liber, J. M., van Lang, N. D. J., et al. (2021). The role of social skills



in predicting treatment-recovery in children with a social anxiety disorder. *Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*, 49, 1461–1472. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-021-00824-x>

7. Mejías, J., Jurado, M., Tafoya, S., Romo-Nava, F., Sandoval, J., & Beltrán-Hernández, L. (2019). Effects of group psychotherapy on depressive and anxious symptoms, self-esteem, and social adaptation in college students. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12254>

8. Nakimuli-Mpungu, E., Okello, J., Kinyanda, E., Alderman, S., Nakku, J., Alderman, J. S., Pavia, A., Adaku, A., Allden, K., & Musisi, S. (2013). The impact of group counseling on depression, post-traumatic stress, and functional outcomes: A prospective comparison study in the Peter C. Alderman trauma clinics in northern Uganda. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 151(1), 78–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.05.055>

9. NAMI (2023). Summary of Mental Health Provisions in FY 2023 Spending Package. URL: <https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/PDFs/2022-12-22-Statement-Summary-on-FY-23-Omnibus.pdf>

10. Pappas, S. (2023). Group therapy is as effective as individual therapy, and more efficient. Here's how to do it successfully. *Monitor on Psychology*, 54(2). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/03/continuing-education-group-therapy>

11. Robinson, F. (2021). Therapy activates your social engagement system. Retrieved from <https://www.ferobinsonpsychotherapy.co.uk/post/therapy-activates-your-social-engagement-system>