

Presentation of the work shop about a narrative and systemic group approach for people facing a family crisis.

By Lena Kristiansen and Toril Reitan, Family Counselling office in Sør-Trøndelag, Norway - October 2009

We opened with “Song of Joy”

## INTRODUCTION

Presenters & group therapists:

- Lena Kristiansen: Specialist in Clinical Psychology and Family therapist. Specialist degree in Adult Psychology. Working at the family counselling office, with couples therapy, family therapy and mediation, in addition to the work with the groups
- Toril Reitan: Specialist in Clinical Psychology and Family therapist. Specialist degree in Child and adolescent Psychology. Working at the family counselling office, with couples therapy, family therapy and mediation, in addition to the work with the groups

If you take a look at Google Earth on your computer you will see that Trondheim lies in the middle of Norway, and our office is situated in the city centre. There are 20 Family counselling Agencies in Norway, and they are spread all over the country. We are the largest Agency in Norway, employing a total of 22 family therapists.

The crisis groups we run, have existed since February 2002. This work was initiated by Anthony Hawke (from South Africa) and his colleague Magnhild Fiskvik.

People from other parts of the world may find it strange that we have a need for crisis groups in Norway. Our country is

rated one of the safest and most pleasant countries to live in, in the world. Yet we can tell, we have very significant challenges relating to different social problems and to the huge wealth that is found in our country. According to this, we can mention some of the problems people in the group have struggled with; Difficult breakups, large cooperation-problems, unfaithfulness, violence, drug addiction and gambling. In our work we focus on family related crises. We like to use Fay`s definition of crisis, (appendix) which very shortly spoken, is when a critical event challenges individuals understanding of their world - and their place in the world. A problematic story develops out of the traumatic encounter.

At the workshop we presented a glimpse from our group meetings, starting with a song (as the one referred to above). We gave the audience, as we give the five group members every week, the opportunity to relax while listening to music. This is how we begin every two hour session of group therapy, on a weekly basis. We shared a summary of our work and experience during the workshop. We presented the introduction which we give to all groups members attending the group for the first time. We presented what a typical group constellation looks like, with a picture. Then we gave a summary of some reflections given by two former participants, about the outcome of joining the group; what joining the group meant to them. Finally, we presented some short sequences related to our theoretical grounding. We finally played another song, one of those we use to start our weekly meetings with ordinary men and women experiencing a family crisis.

#### THE GROUP-INTRODUCTION:

##### ***"Welcome, with music***

Welcome to the crisis group. We have now played some music, something we always do. We play the music so that you can adjust to the here and now, find your place here. Maybe you`ve come from a very busy day, and maybe you had to rush to get here on time. We play music so that also your inner self can have time to adjust too. When we choose music, we try to find music that either has a relevant text, or a beautiful tune.

##### ***Welcome, with your crisis***

Our experience tells us that when one is in a crisis, there is no place where one can find peace. Finding oneself in a position one hasn't chosen, doesn't know how to handle, or how to get out of. We know that being here with us, is not just a pleasant experience. But we hope even though it sometimes is difficult to be here, you will benefit from sharing stories and time with us. We cannot take away your experience, but we want to walk with you through this crisis.

### ***Welcome, in this safe atmosphere***

We try to create a pleasant atmosphere here by lighting candles, putting on music, preparing coffee and tea, and some biscuits. When people come here and opens to talk with the others in the group about such personal matters, it is terribly important that one can feel safe.

### ***How make it safe***

As leaders of this group we are bound by a strict ethical code of confidence. You, do not have this legal obligation to keep silent. That is why we ask you to sign our contract regarding strict confidence. This means that when it comes to your own story, you can talk about it to who ever you want. But the stories you hear from the others in the group, must be kept in this room. Be careful about what you write on internet and even though you don't mention names, watch out for what details you might choose to write or talk about. Trondheim is small. Norway is a tiny country. The world has become a small place. Someone might recognize the story.

### ***Welcome to this first meeting, and how does it feel***

There are many different reasons for why one experiences a crisis, and it depends on each individual and the situation how long this crisis will last. That's why people take part in our group for different lengths of time. Whether this is helpful for you or not is difficult to predict, until you yourself have given it a try. At the end of this meeting, we will ask you if this is something you think might help you. If so, we ask if you would like to come back again.

### ***Welcome to the group***

We are quite strict about you committing yourself to come to the following meetings when you have decided to continue. We want you to give this group high priority. This is important for the stability of the group. In a crisis, a lot of things are happening. For example, in a divorce situation one might have meetings with lawyers, with the bank manager, or

important meetings with the local welfare office. We understand this, but it is important that you tell us on beforehand. When we are with you in your crisis, we care about you, and it really worries us if you don't pitch up and we have heard nothing from you. Others in the group might also worry. We understand that you have a lot to think about and that you might forget to contact us. We usually phone you straight away to find out what happened.

### ***How are you now, how to exit the group***

After you have attended 5 sessions we will ask you what you think of the group and how it helps you, and evaluate your need to continue. If you want to continue, we will again have a similar chat with you after 4 sessions. When you feel that you don't need the group anymore, we expect you to let us know

### ***How, when new members in the group***

This is an open group. Some of you have been here for a while, and others are quite new. And you are here for the first time. When new people join us, we have these few rituals that we follow.

At first we present the group's story, then Lena and I present ourselves, and finally individual members of the group will give a short story of who they are and what caused them to join the group. After this, we give you as a new member of the group, the chance to talk. You choose if you want to say anything, how much you want to say, and what you want to say. This might depend on how safe you feel. Participants have told us that they intended not to say anything during the first meeting, and they tried hard not to cry. Usually, the opposite happens in both cases, and that is absolutely OK. Your tears and your story are welcome here.

We often say: in this group, no one takes up space". Everyone is given space. If you talk a lot at one meeting, it is because the others have allowed you to do so. It is the responsibility of us as group leaders to make sure that everyone is taken enough care of. It's also important to remember that crises don't compete, they feel as difficult as they are experienced.

### ***How this started, and became as it is***

This group was started by Anthony Hawke and Magnhild Fiskvik in 2002. The office was trying to provide a group of people with professional help at the same time. They quickly realized that the group was a very effective way in which to

help persons in deep crisis. The founders of this group tried organizing the group in different ways. They created a starter group and an advanced group. They tried out closed groups, and groups where the clients controlled what was happening. They found out eventually, that the present model seems the best way in which to organize the group. We have two equal and open groups a week. It is our group and another group like this on Thursdays. Five places in each group. We think it is beneficial to have the group open. Those who have taken part in the group for some time are then able to give hope and help to those who have just experienced a crisis.

When both parts in a couple experienced crisis, they sometimes attend to one group each.

Toril joined this group as a leader when I started working at this office in 2005. Magnhild completed her period as group leader at the same time. Then Tony moved to The Hague. In the autumn of 2006 Lena arrived. Lena and I have lead the group for three years, and this is something we really get inspired by."

#### INTERVIEW WITH TWO PARTICIPANTS OF ONE FORMER GROUP:

A picture of a typical group constellation was shown; five persons and to therapist sitting around a table. The five people presented different kinds of crises, and they had attended different amounts of group meetings. Two of the persons in the illustration, were interviewed by Ottar Ness, and the video of this was presented at the work shop. They were asked, what the group meant to them. Some of the reflections they had was as follows:

- \* Good to meet others with similar problems
- \* Good to meet someone in the other position
- \* Getting help to reachieve the belief in oneself, to think clearly
- \* A place to open up, show ones feelings without taking the risk of hurting anyone

- \* Getting help to move out, get on, accept that life became as it did
- \* It gave hope to view someone in a worse situation getting on, out of crisis
- \* The group felt like a safety net

## THEORY

### **A NARRATIVE AND SYSTEMIC GROUP APPROACH TO HANDLING FAMILY CRISIS**

#### **Help to get in touch with yourself as an active “I”.**

As one of the family-therapists at our office once said: When I meet a couple and one of them says; “I need help now”, I recommend the crisis group because I believe in the group system. He/she is able to access additional help and understanding in a group setting, and I see this opens for further development, change and movement in their personal narratives. From us as leaders, and from the different group members, each person is honoured for who they are, and we as a group confirm them and nurture them. We witness their stories and we remember what they have said. Group participants can continue in couple therapy in another context with another therapist while taking part in the crisis group. Our work is systemic, in the sense that we can provide a person that has been betrayed by his/her partner, the possibility to listen to, and ask questions from other person that have betrayed. At the same time this person can meet others who have experienced the same as them. Also, the grief following a huge loss of something unmentionable at home can be talked about in the group.

#### **Help to see the indirect client system and the implicit absent**

The constellation of the group opens up for us as leaders to mention and clarify “how come” the partner/parent/child could

“cause” a crisis, or at least contribute substantially to the crisis. We as group leaders have a clear ethical and therapeutic view of the narratives told in the group. We are working to help persons away from demonizing others, and from positioning themselves as the victim. If everyone in the group presented a victim story about themselves, while others became defensive, the group members would be locked into a destructive position, dragging each other down and cementing their crises. We always introduce the notion of the indirect client system and we open up for listening to members of the group who choose to be in that position. Helping persons to move out of the victim position, often involves us as group leaders introducing the theme of the implicit absent, based in the narrative approach. The feeling of betrayal, humiliation, hurt, and the lack of understanding from others tends to override everything in a victim narrative. People in this position sometimes say “I thought we had a good life together”. As group leaders we can introduce the following sequence: “He may possibly have done it because he cared for you. He was so full of shame and disgrace, he broke up with you in this manner”.

**Honouring individuals through sharing and understanding in the group, accelerate the healing process after grief. It repairs and strengthens one’s self image and self worth.**

Moving and developing into more constructive and balanced reflections takes time. We experience that when persons expand their own narrative and introduce new elements to the story, they are able to understand what happened, and what role they choose for themselves. This opens for a process of self care and nurturing, and helps members hold onto their values and self esteem and self image.

**Sharing narratives, the whole way through, and acceptance of being in the liminal phase**

Sharing narratives means that we try to follow a client’s story the whole way through from beginning to end the first time they tell the group what has happened. Remember, there are six witnesses who are present and who are listening and participating emotionally in the telling of the story and the resulting crisis reactions. We tend to identify and emphasize that the person is now entering a liminal phase: We refer to the phases of shock, reaction, working through and reorientation.

We use the expressions: life before the crisis, the liminal phase, and life after the crisis. The liminal phase is the place you are when you realise that the old story is over, and the new one has not begun. A phase characterized by a lot of pain and chaos, a phase where there exists a feeling of eternity: "I will always feel like this. It will always be like this". We often use metaphors when we talk with the group about this: Mentioning natural catastrophes, like the Tsunami in Asia helps instil a feeling of hope and a possible future from the present chaos and grief. We think this is an essential theme in group therapy. We acknowledge the liminal phase, and take a meta perspective towards the crisis. We accept chaos as a necessary part of the solution, and of healing and reaching hope.

### **I, as an active agent in the story**

We focus on how the person presents himself/herself, the "me" in my story. This is about the representation of one's self as an active agent in the story. Focusing on the active agent in a narrative helps improve the person's self image, and this is often something they really need help with. Just as when they retell *the other's* story of the battle, again we talk in metaphors, this time involving fighting. We ask if it is possible to duck when the verbal punches hits you, duck meaning that one is not hit or hurt. A feeling of lack of control in choosing one's path is something we focus on when evaluating with the client how things are going after five sessions, four sessions and so on. What we are looking for is something that suggests that the group member feels he/she is moving forward, out and away from the liminal phase. We are not looking for a number or a cut off point the therapist has chosen as statistically correct. The group member share and exchange narratives. We see the effect of honouring and recognition of one's own development by how the telling and retelling of the narrative changes. The ability to exchange other's views through participating in the group and the capacity to compare ones experience with that of others are also important factors here. It is interesting that many group members are wary and afraid of opening up in front of strangers when they arrive, because this really changes. Later, the same persons say that the experience of sharing with strangers who are not involved in the problem-story, receiving their advice and reflections that they could accept or discard gave a crucial meaning and influenced the outcome of healing after having joined the group.

## **and, don't blame yourself, you know the thick story**

We often say to the group members: people have normal expectations towards themselves in an extremely difficult situation, and therefore judge themselves far too harshly. We witness these same people involved in impressive acts of survival. We honour their struggle, their strength and their courage, and we remind them about the importance of honouring and taking care of one's self in different ways. We say, don't give yourself such a hard time, if you do, you will criticise yourself for the difficult choices you have had to make. You will be filled with self criticism and overrun by negative and destructive feelings. We usually make the choices we think best, at the moment they are made, and with the knowledge we have at the moment the choices were made. We want to help the group members remember that they can hold onto their feelings and values still, and not the other way around - just because the crisis and chaos makes everything unsafe and out of focus. Telling the thick story in the group, and listening to others' variations around the same theme, can help group members from acting out based on the thin story built on arguing and blaming. We refer to the instructions given by air-hostesses and air stewards on aeroplanes. When there is an emergency on the plane, and the air pressure falls, put the oxygen-mask on your own mouth first, after which you can help your child or others around you who need your help.

At the end we played "Gabriellas song".

## APPENDIX

### Facing Family Crisis: A Group Approach from a Narrative and Systemic Stance

Narrative Therapy Conference, South Africa, October 13th 2009

**Toril Reitan**, Psychologist, Specialist in Clinical Psychology, Family Therapist, and Mediator;  
**Lena Kristiansen**, Psychologist, Specialist in Clinical Psychology, Family Therapist, and Mediator;  
**Trondheim Family Counseling Office, Norway**

#### **WHAT HAPPENS:**

- People in family related crisis receive group therapy at Trondheim Family Counseling Office.
- There are two groups with five clients in each group.
- There is a "slow open" group for both men and women.
- The clients can participate in the groups as long as they feel a need to.
- These group therapies have been arranged at Trondheim Family Counseling Office since February 2002.
- The groups are led by two psychologists who also are specialists in clinical psychology and family therapists.

#### **DEFINITION OF CRISIS :**

- Critical events are events that challenge individuals understanding of their world and their place in the world. This understanding is referred to as a worldview. As a result of their traumatic encounter a person may have difficulty integrating their worldview as they wish it would be, and their worldview according to their experience. Sometimes, in part because of this divergence between belief and experience, a problematic story develops which often fails to account for non-problematic aspects of their critical incident involvement (Fay, 2002, p. 1).
- A sub-critical incident can be defined as an event that may not be perceived as traumatic by a witness, but which has emotional impact on an individual due to the meaning a person ascribes to that event (Fay, 2000, p. 1).

#### **OUR EXPERIENCES AS THERAPISTS**

Even though crisis may have different causes, emotions are recognizable.

Crises don't compete; they are exactly as difficult as they feel.

The story of one client expands the story of another client; From thin to thick stories.

It helps the clients to listen to the oppositional story (e.g., betrayer position listens to the betrayed position).

The group help and support that clients don't get overwhelmed by emotions.

#### **PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES:**

"You don't feel so alone, you're not the only one in crisis. It feels good to hear that things can work out for others, that gives hope for one self. The others help you to get the energy to deal with the problems"

"When I first was offered group therapy my initial thought was that it was not for me. But after thinking about it I decided it was worth a try. I have not regretted the decision"

"That the group meetings always start with music creates a good transition to what we talk about and give composure"

"My participation in the group makes me think more constructively between the sessions. I don't get stuck in the problems, but rather think about what I'll talk about in the next meeting"

"The good thing about group therapy is that you feel equal. You receive help and you give help. You are allowed to be who you are, you are heard, believed and not criticized"

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## LYRICS

### **Song of Joy**

by **Sigvart Dagsland**

You who beg for days without sorrow,  
You who gather desire and joy, to ease the pain,  
You who chase the wind

You who think you can grow without loss,  
You who never take a chance,  
But must hold every border,  
While your lust for live dries out

Everything that can give happiness,  
Has a sprout for longing  
Let the sun sail across the sky,  
In tow, the night always follows  
If happiness soon must yield to sorrow,  
Both are fruits of the same big tree.

You who wants closeness without longing,  
You who close every door,  
When a sharp edge touches your yearnings sore skin  
Happiness can only be harvested where pain grows

Let the sun sail across .....,

Let the sun sail across the sky,  
In tow, the night always follows.  
If happiness then must give it's space to sorrow,  
Both are fruits of the same great corp.

You who think heaven is made in your own fragile heart,  
Without crying and pain of labour,  
Must have forgotten what happiness is.

### **The song of Gabriella**

by **Helen Sjøholm**

It's now that life is mine,  
I have been given a moment here on earth,  
And my longing has lead me here,  
What I've longed for,  
And what I've been given.

Anyway, this is the road I've chosen,  
A comfort far beyond words,  
Witch has shown a glimpse,  
Of the Heaven I've never reached.

I want to feel that I live  
All the time I've got,

I shall live out as I decide.

I want to feel that I live

To know that I am good enough.

I've never forgotten who I was

I just put it to rest

Maybe I had no choice

Only the will to still exist.

I want to live joyful, just because I'm me,

Able to be strong and free,

Watch the night become day

I'm here, and my life is only mine.

And the heaven I believed was there,

I will find it,

Out there, somewhere.

I want to feel that I've lived my life.