



What to do when someone in a group is crying or distressed: for group facilitators

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Allow the group to deal with the distress, if they can

If the group is able to express empathy and help the distressed person to express their feelings, there may be little for you to do but get out of the way. With a less experienced or confident group, on the other hand, you may need to give more of a lead on how to react. All the advice below should be read with this in mind.

Take time

Distress will take a little time to deal with, so let go of other objectives for the moment. Offer tissues if appropriate, and allow the person to talk and calm down. Many people will be further distressed or embarrassed at showing their distress.

Encourage expression in words, and acknowledge it

Gently encourage the distressed person to put what they feel into words. Acknowledge what is said, and encourage others to express their responses. Empathy in the room will help the distressed person feel more normal again.

Be aware of your own feelings

How does it make you feel to be with someone who is crying? Be aware of your own response.

How does the distress relate to what is happening in the group?

The distress may be relevant not only to the person who is crying, but also to others or to the group as a whole. What information does the crying carry? How could understanding it contribute to the work of the group?

What feeling underlies the tears?

Remember for example that some people cry when they are angry.

Protect the distressed person's right to their feelings

Sometimes distress is made worse for the distressed person by others. Through the empathic sensors of our implicit knowing, the distress of others puts us in touch with our own vulnerability. Some people as a result deny or dismiss the distress of others. If this happens, discourage it.

Encourage the group to learn

This is a learning opportunity for everyone on the group, to reflect on how they are affected by encountering the distress of another person. Encourage each person to reflect on their reactions and their behaviour. How do they behave when they are distressed? What would be a helpful response from others?

Protect the other goals of the group

If the distress does not abate in several minutes, ask the person what would help them recover their capacity to continue in the group; they may want to take a few minutes out of active work. If they can manage to stay in the room while doing so, it generally allows an easier re-integration.

Notice any manipulative patterns

If someone *regularly* cries in group meetings, you may be dealing with something quite different to ordinary distress: a bid for attention, an avoidance of a difficult discussion, or a plea for special treatment. Here your reactions and your curiosity will guide you. When does the distress arise? What feelings are evoked in other people? What does the person gain from the delay or diversion caused by the distress? What does the group gain from it? Is it always the same person – if yes, why doesn't anyone else seem to feel distress? Does the crying have any relation to demands made on the person by the group?