

Older Adults' Experiences of Existential Group Treatment

1. Clinical treatment and interventions

Isak Erling¹, Carl Anton Waltersson¹, Anne Ingeborg Berg¹, Maria Tillfors², **Margda Waern**³

¹ Psychology Dept, Gothenburg University, Sweden

² Dept of Psychology, Karlstad University, Sweden

³ Section of Psychiatry and Neurochemistry, Gothenburg University, Sweden

Abstract text

Background: High suicide rates are seen in older adults. We developed an Existential group treatment for patients with distress in connection with aging-related issues.

Method: Older adults (75+) with symptoms of psychological distress are recruited from primary care to take part in an RCT to evaluate Existential Group Treatment. The manualized treatment involves 7 weekly psychologist-led group sessions that cover themes such as story of life, freedom, loneliness, and death. Participants in the control arm receive brief neutral telephone calls from a trained student. Thus far, 100 patients have taken part in the study. This abstract focuses on a preliminary analysis of individual qualitative interviews with the first 17 participants in the intervention group.

Results: Many participants reported ambiguous feelings in terms of their need for psychological help. While they were positive to the group treatment their expectations that it would bring about change were somewhat low. Some expressed a shift to a more committing attitude that inspired others; engagement increased. It was helpful to listen to other's perspectives on aging; by relating to others, participants felt less alone. Shared experiences led to more sharing in most but not all of the treatment groups. Friendships developed; members in 4 out of 5 groups continued contact after treatment. Helpful components included a) it catalyzed talk about difficult life issues including fear of death, b) it brought on a more accepting attitude towards aging and c) it stimulated participants to make more of life, despite aging-related difficulties.

Conclusion: Older adults' experiences of existential group treatment suggest some pathways to positive change. The RCT is ongoing, and it remains to be seen whether existential group treatment is associated with the hypothesized quantitative outcomes which include decrease in mental distress, improved quality of life and reduced avoidance of experience.