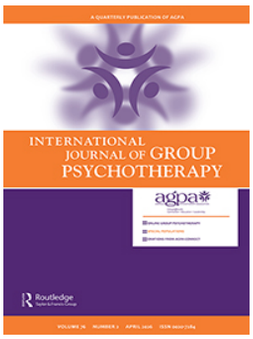

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The Virtual Group Therapy Circle: Advances in Online Group Theory and Practice

edited by Haim Weinberg, Arnon Rolnick, and Adam Leighton. Routledge, 2024. 375 pp.

Melissa Wallace & Tina Ali-Mohammad

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BOOK REVIEW

The Virtual Group Therapy Circle: Advances in Online Group Theory and Practice, edited by Haim Weinberg, Arnon Rolnick, and Adam Leighton. Routledge, 2024. 375 pp.

Reviewed by MELISSA WALLACE, M.D., AND TINA ALI-MOHAMMAD, M.D.

When first invited to review this book, we were intrigued. By that point, we had already grappled with—and largely solved—the problem of how to translate our group work into an online format. Yet none of our formal (pre-pandemic) training had ever encouraged, let alone taught, online therapy. We hoped the book would help close some of these knowledge gaps. At the same time, we were somewhat skeptical: would the authors be biased toward online work, attempting to persuade us that it is equivalent to—or even superior to—in-person treatment?

The first section largely allayed these concerns by examining the advantages, disadvantages, and inherent challenges of virtual groups. The opening chapter was a wise choice: a review of the research base for online groups, which demonstrates efficacy for more structured modalities (CBT, DBT, skills-based groups) but calls for further investigation regarding psychodynamically oriented process groups. Subsequent chapters in this section were particularly practical, offering guidance on fostering cohesion, attending to embodiment in the online setting, and managing hybrid groups. We especially appreciated Chapter 5, which explored how self-states are affected by online participation. This chapter exemplifies one of the book's strengths: the integration of psychotherapeutic concepts—familiar or novel—followed by their thoughtful application to virtual group work.

The second section focused on process-oriented groups, the type we conduct ourselves. Although this section was the most clinically

relevant to our work, the timing of our reading rendered it somewhat less engaging; by then, we had already developed our own experiential knowledge of adapting groups to the virtual environment. Still, there was much to stimulate reflection, including discussions of regression and containment in virtual space, modifications of boundary management, and techniques for maintaining analytic stance when nonverbal data are attenuated. Robi Friedman's chapter on the group analytic approach stood out for its candor about the limitations of virtual work and for offering concrete ways of working with these constraints. The final chapter of this section, addressing online large groups during times of pandemic and war, was particularly compelling, illustrating how virtual platforms can connect and democratize large groups in ways not possible for in-person gatherings.

Section III explored the use of online platforms in more creatively oriented therapies, including psychodrama, art therapy, and adventure-based counseling. Although art therapy was not a modality with which we were previously familiar, it was a pleasure to learn about its techniques and theoretical formulations, especially when accompanied by clinical examples and visual material. The chapter on psychodrama for children felt especially niche and innovative. Adventure-based counseling might reasonably have been omitted, given its specificity to a narrow clinical population, but its inclusion underscores the ingenuity and adaptability demonstrated by clinicians faced with the challenge of translating embodied group experiences into virtual formats.

Section IV turned to more manualized and skills-based approaches, such as CBT, ACT, somatic experiencing, and psychoeducational groups. These chapters were generally straightforward, describing core therapeutic principles and how they can be adapted to online group work. Chapter 19, which focused on fostering intimacy in virtual groups, was the strongest contribution in this section, although its content might have been better placed earlier in the volume.

Section V addressed online supervision, training, and T-groups. This section may reflect an overextension of the book's scope, particularly so late in the volume. Nonetheless, Haim Weinberg's chapter was a valuable contribution, weaving together themes from earlier chapters and lending cohesion that complemented the epilogue.

The book opens playfully with a poem written by AI. At the time of publication, this may have seemed merely whimsical; now

it carries more ominous resonance, as we consider the expanding role of AI in psychotherapy. Will it be used ethically and judiciously? Will it ultimately displace human clinicians? We look forward to future work by the authors addressing these questions. We would have welcomed a chapter on phone-only groups. Although not new technology, phone groups have become more common since the pandemic, particularly in underserved settings where patients lack consistent access to smartphones or computers. We have supervised phone-only groups in such contexts and would have appreciated guidance specific to this modality. Our desire for additional chapters on AI and phone groups may seem contradictory, given our simultaneous impression that the book attempts to cover too much ground.

While rich in practical guidance and theoretical insight, the book can at times feel fatiguing and redundant. Because each chapter was written independently, many begin with similar descriptions of the pandemic and the urgent shift to virtual work. For this reason, we would not recommend reading the volume straight through. Instead, readers are likely to benefit most by selecting chapters aligned with their interests or clinical needs.

Ultimately, this book offers something to every group therapist. The novice group therapist will gain broad exposure to multiple approaches while developing confidence in virtual work. Therapists who are less comfortable with technology will find concrete tools for using online platforms effectively. Seasoned clinicians will be invited to examine their own adaptations—and resistances—in response to a rapidly changing clinical landscape.

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