

It Gets Better: A Group Experience for LGBTQ Youth

Group Curriculum Outline

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The following curriculum has been designed as a part of a dissertation study entitled: *The Impact of a Group Counseling Intervention on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents' Levels of Hope, Coping, and Life Attitudes*. The eight-session counseling intervention consists of interactive and psychoeducational sessions with the aim of encouraging constructive behaviors and healthy ways of coping while providing a supportive environment. Content has been selected based on empirical support for the efficacy of the activities.

The group intervention is intended to take place over eight consecutive weeks, one session per week, with each session lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The ideal size would be 5-8 group members. In addition to this standardized curriculum, facilitators may also receive additional training by the author by request.

Each session is briefly described in this document. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact the author Catherine Griffith at (310)903-0898 or via email at cagriffith@umass.edu.

Group Session 1 - Introductions

Purpose:

To introduce the intervention to group members, introductions of leader/members, discuss group procedures (e.g. length of the group, duration, etc.), and to complete pre-assessments. The group will also discuss the importance of confidentiality, establish group rules, and complete an ice-breaker activity.

Objectives:

1. Group leaders and members will be able to introduce themselves to each other.
2. The group will be able to establish group rules
3. Group members will be able to begin the discussion of hope's role in their own life through an ice-breaker activity

Supplies:

Pre-assessment packets (provided by the principal investigator [PI]), and large sheet of paper or whiteboard to write group guidelines on.

Procedure:

1. Group participants will begin by filling out the pre-assessments, which is anticipated to take approximately 15-20 minutes. Instruct group members not to write their name on the packets, but to come up with their own code word or number that they can remember for eight weeks.
2. Group leaders should say their name and gender pronouns they use (e.g., he/him, she/her, ze/zir, they/them, etc.), introduce themselves (e.g. background, experience, etc.) and talk about the purpose of the group which is to discuss and increase hope, promote positive coping skills, and improve peer-connectedness. Participants will then share their name, gender pronouns they use, and anything else they'd like to share about their background.
3. Some students may be unfamiliar with counseling groups so it may be helpful to briefly explain how groups function, for example, "The group is a time where we can share our thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental environment. Many emotions may be expressed that cause comfort or discomfort, which is normal." Discuss confidentiality at this time (and exceptions thereof), length of the group (45-60 minutes), and duration of the group (8 weeks).
4. Activity #1: Have the group brainstorm how to create a safe space, group rules, and ways to hold the group accountable to each rule (e.g., showing respect for others, allowing one speaker at a time, participate to the fullest of your ability, etc.). Write group rules on a dry erase board or poster board paper for everyone to see.
5. Activity #2: Have participants get into groups of two. They will conduct short interviews of each other, and then present what they learned about their partner to the rest of the group. One key question that should be asked is, "What are you hoping to learn from/get out of this group?" (If there are an odd number of group members, one group can have three members).
6. Thank each group member for sharing, and let them know when you will be meeting next week.

Group 2 – Building Peer Connections & Introduction to Coping Skills

Purpose:

Group members will build comfort with one another and begin to create a sense of universality. To facilitate the activity “Hopes in a Hat,” allow enough “air time” for each group member to self-disclose, and for other members to share their thoughts as well. Members will also begin to explore how they currently cope with stress in their life. For the “Wellness Wheel,” students will need the handouts and a variety of colored markers.

Objectives:

1. Group members will be able to identify and share their hopes for the future.
2. Group members will be able to hear different perspectives of hope from other group members.
3. Group members will be able to identify and discuss their coping skills (e.g., ways they handle stress and adversity).

Supplies:

Scraps of paper (enough for each member), pens/pencils, and a hat or similar item; Wellness Wheel worksheets; colored markers.

Procedure:

1. Group leader welcomes group members back and asks a group member to summarize last week’s session.
2. Activity #1: Introduce the “Hopes in a Hat” activity by asking how group members define the word hope (e.g., optimism, setting goals, faith, relief, etc.), and that you will be exploring one another’s hopes in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Tell members that they will each be completing the following sentence on a piece of paper: “I am most hopeful that…” or “As an LGBTQ+ individual, the thing I hope for most is…” Collect the pieces of paper, mix them around, then invite each person to a piece of paper and read about someone’s hopeful statement. One by one, each group member reads out the hope of another group member and elaborates on what the statement may also mean to them personally. When all the hopes have been read out and elaborated on, then discuss what people felt and noticed. Focus especially on what members had in common.
3. Activity #2: Members will create a “Wellness Wheel” by coloring in the percentage of wellness they feel they have in a circle with six categories: Mental, Physical, Family/Environmental, Social, Emotional, and Spiritual (see Appendix A). Once completed, members will have the opportunity to share their wellness wheels with the group. Members should also discuss the main things that they do to cope with stress in their life (positive or negative). If not already addressed, make sure to ask what unique challenges they face by identifying as LGBTQ.
4. At the end of the activity, the group leader facilitates ending process questions by asking group members:
 - a. What was it like hearing about each other’s lives?
 - b. What kinds of feelings came up for you?
 - c. How do you think the ways you cope influences your life?
5. Thank each of the group members for sharing, and let them know when you will be meeting next week.

Group Session 3 – River of Life

Purpose: This activity allows each person to be seen and heard, thus strengthening the group's trust, understanding, and appreciation for the gifts and struggles of each group member.

Objectives:

1. Group members will build trust and a sense of peer connectedness.
2. Group members will increase their knowledge of experiences that inform different perspectives.

Supplies:

Paper (at least 11 X 14 inches) for each participant and markers/colored pencils.

Procedure:

1. Group leaders should follow-up with group members regarding last week's "Hopes in a Hat" and "Wellness Wheel" activity and process more if needed.
2. Discuss how every person has a rich life story that reflects both hard places and great celebrations. Taking the time to hear those stories increases appreciation for different experiences and the perspectives that arise from these experiences. We can all learn from one another's struggles, successes, and hopes for the future.
3. Activity #1: Tell the group, "We're going to create a picture that reflects the river of your life. Like a river, your life has a certain flow. There are times when a river is rushing and flowing over the banks. At other times, the river goes over rapids and rocks or moves slowly and peacefully. Take a few minutes to consider where you have been and what has been significant in shaping the direction of your life. Lastly, where do you see your river flowing from here?" Ask participants to use the markers and paper to create a picture that describes their life journey and hopes for the future. Allow approximately 15 minutes for participants to create their pictures.
4. Ask for volunteers to share their pictures. Have them tell the group about their journey and what the images they drew represent in their life, as well as their hopes for where their river will flow in the future.
5. When everyone has finished sharing, ask a series of questions to prompt group discussion:
 - a. What was it like for you to tell your story to this group?
 - b. What was it like for you to hear all of these stories?
 - c. What does the group have in common?
 - d. What insights have you gained about our group?
6. Thank each of the group members for sharing, and let them know that next week you will begin exploring different ways to cope with stress.

Group Session 4 – Learning New Ways to Cope, Part One

Purpose: To teach members new ways of coping with stress that they may not have previously considered.

Objectives:

1. Group members will learn deep breathing techniques to let out intense emotions.
2. Group members will learn free writing techniques to calm intense emotions.
3. Group members will have the opportunity to share and learn from one another.

Supplies:

Paper to write on; breathing activity script; mid-assessment packets (provided by the PI)

Procedure:

1. Group leaders should follow-up with group members regarding last week's "River of Life" activity and process more if needed.
2. Begin a discussion on what coping skills are (e.g. how we deal with stress) and explore what strategies members currently use. Inform them that they'll be learning two new way of coping: one to help let emotions out and one to help calm themselves. Explain how both strategies are sometimes important. At the end of the session, they will fill out mid-test assessments.
3. Activity #1: Ask members to think of a recent time in which they were upset. Tell them that the goal of the "Free Writing" activity will help them to express their emotions about this event in a healthy way. Each member needs to have a piece of paper and something to write with (if the space allows for it, it's best if they can spread out to find their own private space as well). The goal of this exercise is to write anything and everything that comes to mind over the next 5 minutes. Try not to over-think it and just write what's on your mind, even if it's gibberish. Members who are less comfortable with writing may consider drawing instead. When the 5 minutes is up, have members share what the experience was like for them.
4. Activity #2: Inform members that they will now learn how to calm emotions through a breathing activity. Explain how deep breathing can be used to reduce stress and as a skill to cope with future stressors. Have each member find their own private space in the room, and sit in a chair with both feet on the ground and arms at their sides. Complete the breathing activity by reading the script provided in Appendix B. It is recommended that members close their eyes, but if uncomfortable doing so they can look at the ground. When finished, similarly process the activity by asking members what the experience was like for them.
5. Process both activities by exploring whether they felt one or both was helpful, and in what specific instances they could see themselves using these coping strategies. Could these activities replace any negative ways of coping that they currently engage in?
6. Thank each of the group members for sharing. Ask participants to try out one or both of the coping strategies this coming week as an experiment.
7. Group participants will fill out the mid-assessment, which is anticipated to take approximately 15-20 minutes. Make sure each member gets the packet with the code word or number they came up with on the first week, and that they don't write their names on any of the instruments.

Group Session 5 – Learning New Ways to Cope, Part Two

Purpose:

To continue the discussion and experience of positive coping strategies. Members will learn techniques to develop resilient thoughts in response to stressful situations and adversity.

Objectives:

1. Group members will discuss how using new coping strategies has impacted their lives.
2. Group members will learn about positive reframing as a coping strategy.

Supplies:

Flipping the Coin worksheets

Procedure:

1. Welcome group members back and ask if anyone got a chance to try out one of the coping strategies (free writing or deep breathing) this past week. Process if necessary.
2. Discuss how we can sometimes cope with stress and adversity more effectively by changing the way we label the situation. Explain to members that the words we use have enormous influence. If, for example, I call a new situation a “problem,” then my attitude about it is likely to be negative. If, however, I was to call it a “challenge,” then you might deal with the new situation in a different way. Explain to members that “Flipping the Coin” in this way – that is, changing the words we use to help ourselves look on the positive, or ‘brighter’ side, rather than on the negative, or ‘darker’ side – is one way of helping ourselves to respond in a more positive way when faced with difficult feelings, people or situations.
3. Activity #1: Challenge students to try some “Flipping the coin!” exercises (see Appendix C for the worksheet). Can they find a positive way of reframing a negative word or phrase?
4. Activity #2: Working together in pairs, encourage members to support each other in attempting to “Flip the Coin” with a current real life challenge. Explain what they should do as follows:
 - Step 1: Think of a situation that you are facing right now that is making you feel very negative. Write down everything that you are thinking and feeling on one side of the coin – the ‘negative side’, including how it makes you want to behave – or how you are behaving. Share your thoughts with your partner if you wish.
 - Step 2: Now look again at the way you have described the situation and work with a friend (or alone if you wish) to see if you can find any words that seem rather negative or exaggerated. Can you change your perspective from ‘the glass being half empty to it being half full? Can you try to describe the situation again in a more positive light? If you can, write down this new description on the ‘positive side’ of the coin. Looking at the situation in a positive way may help you to think of a more positive, creative way of responding.
5. Invite members to share their experiences. Encourage them to reflect on the reasons for their success or why they find it difficult. (Please note, it’s okay if they aren’t a fan of this coping strategy—not everyone is)
6. Thank members for coming. Ask participants to try out this coping strategy this coming week as an experiment. Remind participants that there are three sessions left.

Group Session 6 – Hope as a Coping Skill

Purpose:

To continue discuss the importance of hope as a coping skill, just like the others we've learned so far. Members will learn how hope can be an active process that helps with stress and adversity.

Objectives:

1. Group members will discuss the relationship between hope and coping.
2. Group members will actively foster hope by writing a letter to themselves from the future.

Supplies:

Paper and pens to write letters.

Procedure:

1. Welcome group members back and ask if anyone got a chance to try out any of the coping strategies they've learned so far (free writing, deep breathing, or flipping the coin). Process if necessary.
2. Ask participants to close their eyes (if they are comfortable doing so) and think of the future. What image first comes to their mind? How long did it take them to see something? How many of them imagined something that you want to have happen? Lead this into a discussion on hope: Is it a choice? Does it depend entirely on rational reasons to have hope? Explain how hope can be a coping skill, just like the other coping skills they have already learned.
3. Ask members if they are familiar with Harvey Milk. If not explain that he was one of the first openly gay elected politicians, and is known for being an influential advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. Read the following famous quote by Milk: *“You have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right.”* Open to discussion about why they think Harvey Milk thought hope was so vital to the LGBTQ+ community.
4. Activity #1: Explain to participants that they will be writing a letter to themselves from the future. Otherwise known as an “Older, Wiser Self Letter,” they need to imagine themselves at some point in the future (could be just a few years, or even decades) at a time in which things have gotten much better: for themselves personally and society as a whole. Imagine your future selves as strong, competent, and in possession of resources and support. From the perspective of their future selves, they are to write a letter of advice and encouragement from their future selves. What advice would your future self give the present you as you manage this phase of your life? What would be said to comfort you? How would a future version of yourself suggest you take care of yourself at this moment?
5. Have members share their letters, as time allows (you will have time next week to share more letters). Ask members what they may have gained from this activity. What common themes have you noticed between members' letters?
6. Thank members for coming. Remind participants that there are two sessions left.

Group Session 7 – Hopes for Family, Peers, and Society

Purpose:

To allow group members to discuss their hopes for the future and experience and inspirational documentary regarding one family's journey to becoming accepting of their child. Additionally, groups will begin to bring closure to the counseling groups and the group members' experience.

Objectives:

1. Group members will be able to share any letters from the future left over from last week.
2. Group members will be able see how one family grew to become more accepting of their child.
3. Group members will be able to discuss their feelings about group soon coming to a close.

Supplies:

A form of media to play the video, "Always My Son" (e.g., projection screen, laptop, tablet, etc.)

Procedure:

1. Welcome group members back and ask if there is anyone else who would like to share their letter from last week. Process if necessary. Remind group members there is one session left.
2. Activity #1: Inform members that you will be watching a short documentary (15 min) entitled "Always My Son," the story of how one family with deeply held religious and personal values eventually came to integrate their love for their gay son. A laptop/tablet or similar technology will be needed for this activity. The video can be found on the Family Acceptance Project website at: <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/family-videos>. Processing questions after the video could include:
 - a. What are your impressions from this video? Did any specific statements stand out to you?
 - b. Can you personally identify with the people or the situations in the video?
 - c. What were some of the negative ways Edward (the son) coped with his situation? What else could he have done?
 - d. What other places did the family find support? Do you have similar options?
 - e. What was it like for you to see a family change so much out of love for their child?
 - f. What about this video gives you hope for yourself or others?
3. Inform members that next week will be the last time the group meets. What are their thoughts and feelings about group coming to a close? How can they continue what they've learned outside of group?
4. Thank group members for coming.

Group Session 8 – Closure

Purpose:

The purpose of this final session is to synthesize what has been learned and gained by the group members throughout this experience. Members will also get a chance to share positive feelings and hopes for the future with fellow members. Additionally, the purpose is to bring closure to the counseling group and the group members' experience. Lastly, group members will fill out post-assessments.

Objectives:

1. Group members will be able to reflect on the group experience and influence in their lives.
2. Group members will be able to apply this knowledge in the form of advice for others.
3. Group members will be able to share positive thoughts and hopes for fellow group members.

Supplies:

Dear Group activity letter; post-assessment packets (provided by the PI).

Procedure:

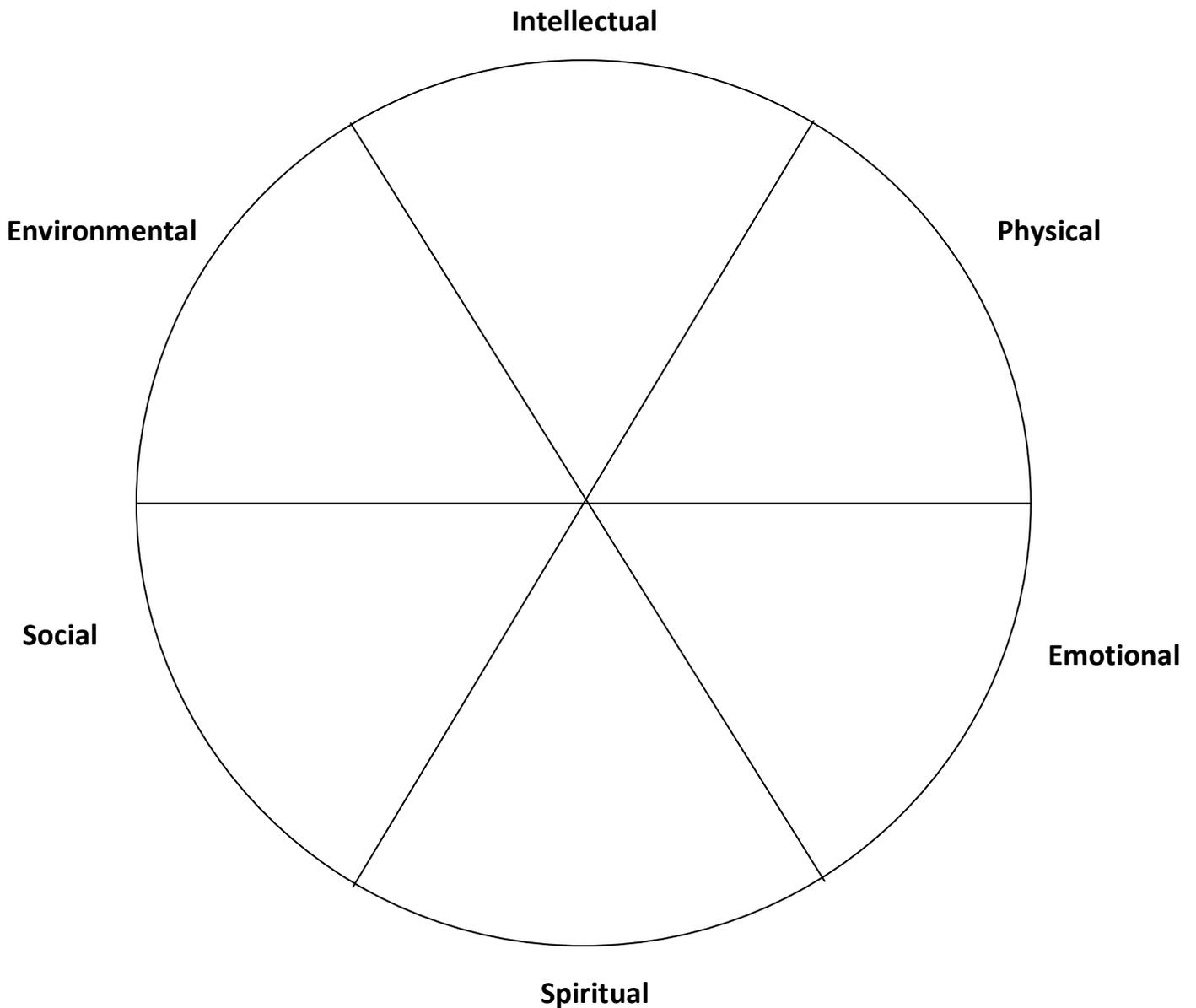
1. Welcome group members back and ask if there is any unfinished business from last week. Process if necessary. Remind group members that this is the last session, and that they will be filling out post-assessments at the end.
2. Ask group members to summarize the past several weeks.
3. Use the following processing questions to help members bring closure to their group experience:
 - a. What are your thoughts and feelings about this being the last session?
 - b. What have you learned about yourself through this process?
 - c. How can you take what you have learned about yourself beyond this group?
 - d. How will you handle future challenges based on the skills you've learned in group?
4. Activity #1: Ask members if they have ever heard of or read advice columns like "Dear Abby." Inform members that since they have gained some expertise in coping by participating in group, they will now apply what they've learned by answering a letter asking for advice. After reading the letter (Appendix D), ask members what their suggestions are. Each member should get a turn to respond.
5. Activity #2: Explain to group members that one helpful way to bring a sense of closure to an experience is to share with everyone how the group has impacted you. Think of a metaphorical gift that you have received from the group (which could include specific individuals or the group as a whole). These can be things like hope, courage, laughter, an understanding of another's particular perspective etc. Share with the group the gifts you feel like you have been given. Taking turns, each member gets an opportunity to share.
6. Thank members for sharing, and commend them for all their hard work in group these last eight sessions. Express confidence that they will be able to continue to use the tools they've learned outside of group.
7. The last step is to fill out the post-test assessments. This should take approximately 15-20 minutes. Make sure each member gets the packet with the code word or number they came up with on the first week, and that they don't write their names on any of the instruments.

Group Curriculum Appendix A: Wellness Wheel Worksheet

My Wellness Wheel

INSTRUCTIONS: Each segment of the Wellness Wheel symbolizes an aspect of who you are and how you cope with the stressors in your life. For each segment, color in the percentage that you feel best represents the quality of your wellness in that area.

If necessary you can split categories to add in something that is missing for you. You can also re-label an area so that it is more meaningful for you.



Group Curriculum Appendix B: Breathing Activity Script

Let's relax right now. First, let your body relax a bit. Reach up, high above your head, stretching your arms... stretching your body very tall. Now let your arms relax. Place them at your sides, loosely.

Do the same thing again, but this time, breathe in as you reach up. Stretch.... and now breathe out as you relax and place your arms at your sides.

Just sit now, letting your arms rest at your sides. Close your eyes and relax.

See how your breathing can relax you by taking slow, deep breaths. Breathe in.... hold your breath.... and now breathe out, slowly. Breathe in.... and out.

Keep breathing deeply and slowly.

Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach. Feel both of your hands moving up and out as you breathe in... and down as you breathe out. Feel your hands moving with your chest and stomach, gently moving in and out with each breath.

You can keep your hands there or rest them at your sides, but just keep noticing the calm, slow way you're breathing.

Imagine that there is a candle in front of you. As you breathe out, blow the air out through your mouth very slowly. Imagine that you are blowing enough air to make the flame of the candle flicker, but not enough to blow it out. You will need to blow very softly.

When you breathe in, imagine that the flame of the candle flickers and leans toward you. As you breathe out, the flame flickers and leans away.

Imagine the flame of the candle moving in and out with each breath you take.

Just relax now for a moment, feeling your body relax. Your arms and legs are very loose and relaxed.

Now you can imagine that your body is like a balloon filling up as you breathe in, and emptying as you breathe out. Let your ribs expand out to the sides, like a balloon, expanding... and then let the air out, like a balloon that is emptying. The balloon expands.... and then the air goes out.

And now, see how slowly you can breathe out. First breathe in.... and now breathe out very slowly... out... out.... out. When you can't breathe out any more air, breathe in again, and then very slowly breathe out. Breathe in energy, breathe out calm. Breathe in energy, breathe out calm.

For the next few moments, just relax, resting. Enjoy this calm feeling.

Open your eyes. Stretch your muscles if you want to, and let your body wake up. When you are totally awake, you can get back to the rest of your day.

Group Curriculum Appendix C: Flipping the Coin Worksheet

Can you change the way you think by changing the words you use?

Look at these words...can you 'flip the coin'?

	—		+	
	obstacle	→	challenge	
	impatient	→	keen	
	cry-baby	→		
	aggressive	→		
	busy-body	→		
	coward	→		
	pushy	→		
	timid	→		
	boring	→		

Group Curriculum Appendix D: “Dear Group” Advice Activity

Dear Group:

I am an 18-year-old high school senior and have recently come out of the closet as gay to my family. My mother asked me if I saw a future with a woman, and that’s when I told her that I did not. She let me know that she and my father will always love me and never give up on me, but that they will never accept this. She kept asking me, "How do you know? You have never been with a girl. Maybe you're confused." I don’t know how to make them understand.

Since coming out I’ve also had a much harder time at school. I’ve always been called names and harassed a bit, but now it’s much worse. I just don't know how to cope with all this. I have no one to talk to, and I am sad all the time but I have to hide it. Please tell me what I should do and how I could make the situation better.