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Girl Power: Group Prospectus

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Introduction

Female adolescents are bombarded daily with a myriad of images of what is the "perfect" woman. These messages arrive through the media, via movies, television and print. Female adolescence is also a time developmentally marked by peer pressure, changes in family relationships, emerging physical and emotional maturity and the process of feminization. The "cultural wallpaper" the media presents coupled with this perilous time in development has led to the decline of self-concept and self-worth and the increase of isolation, loneliness and depression of girls. These themes are not unique to this generation of adolescents. However, these themes did not manifest themselves 20 years ago with behaviors such as self-mutilation, eating disorders and suicide in the numbers we see today.

It is for these reasons our high school group has chosen to focus our attention on the importance of building positive body images. In today's society, a group for adolescent females with poor body image is more than relevant; it is essential. During this time in girls' development during which they have a tendency to shutdown, to lose confidence and to become self-conscious, a group in which it is safe for self-expression can help them to find their voice. Through group work focusing on harmful body image and ways to become more positive about body image, we hope to combat the stereotypes harming girls today and serve as a preventative solution to self-harming behaviors.

Research has shown that thematic groups allow counselors to make effective use of their time and skills and that group counseling with at-risk adolescent girls is effective (Zinck & Littrell, 2000). Through a group approach to body image, the females who participate will be awakened to the fact that they are not alone. Coming to know this fact is a very powerful and an anticipated part of group work. The female participants will also have the opportunity to form

bonds with other women who struggle with the same body issues and together will begin to understand the forces in play that affect their self-concept and self-esteem, be able to combat the messages they hear, and begin to appreciate themselves for who they really are. Finally, implementing a group approach for the purpose of body image is to reach as many female adolescents as possible. Many girls feel isolated, being fed false information about what they should look like to be loved and well regarded. Through a group approach, adolescent girls are educated about the myths and then with their new knowledge can begin to dispel the myths for others.

Nature of the Human Condition

"In reflecting on childhood, most people recall stories of learning and growth, joy and sadness, challenge and triumph. And in reflecting on adolescence, most women recall stories of survival (O'Hara & Lanoux, 1999)." The messages female adolescents receive each day regarding their feminism and the goal to be the "perfect" woman are woven into the tapestry of our culture through the media.   They are flooded with messages about the "advantages" of being thinner, blonder, and prettier. They are told, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly by actors and models that are chosen for display, that goodness, success, power, approval, popularity, admiration, intelligence, friends and romantic relationships all require a general physical beauty. The corollary is also promoted. People who are not thin and beautiful are represented as failures, morally lax, weak, out of control, stupid, laughable, lonely, disapproved of and rejected (www.edap.org).

Some Basic Facts About the Media's Influence in Adolescent Girls Lives:

1. According to a recent survey of adolescent girls, the media is their main source of information about women's health issues (Commonwealth Fund, 1997).

2. A study of mass media magazines discovered that women's magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines did (as cited in Guillen & Barr, 1994).

3. A study of one teen adolescent magazine over the course of 20 years found that: (a) all of the articles contained in these magazines included statements highlighting that weight loss would improve appearance, and (b) in articles about fitness or exercise plans, 74% cited "to become more attractive" as a reason to start exercising and 51% noted the need to lose weight or burn calories. (Guillen & Barr, 1994)

4. A study of 4,294 network television commercials revealed that 1 out of every 3.8 commercials send some sort of "attractiveness message," telling viewers what is or is not attractive (as cited in Myers et al., 1992). These researchers estimate that the average adolescent sees over 5,260 "attractiveness messages" per year.

These messages are then perpetuated, whether consciously or unconsciously through friends, family, co-workers and even strangers who comment on physical appearance or how much one is eating. They compare women's looks, make passing comments, or judge a person based on their looks alone. Girls and women are disproportionately affected by eating disorders and cultural demands for thinness. Never before in recorded history have females been exhorted to be as thin as is currently fashionable (www.edap.org). Our society thrives on the concepts such as looks-ism and idealized feminine beauty where woman are measured not by who they are, but how they measure up to the amalgam of unreal, unattainable and often unhealthy physical characteristics popularized by the media and stereotypes (O'Hara & Lanoux, 1999). Women are sacrificing themselves, physical and emotionally, in order to try to conform to an impossible "ideal".

This subversive culture embedded in our daily lives isolates women by eating away at their self worth and making them self-conscious.   Group work as a treatment choice allows women to see that they are not alone in their doubts, irrational thoughts and imperfections. This realization alone is a powerful precursor in changing the negative attitudes and beliefs these women hold.   Moreover, to fight a battle as large as this one, it is essential to reach as many women as possible. Since all women in one way, shape, or form fight this battle daily, the hope is that the power of the group will set the domino effect in motion, and group members will go out to educate other groups of women.   Changing the negative thoughts, feeling and beliefs women have of themselves is the crux in changing society's view of women.

Theoretical Rationale

When considering the issues of self-esteem, body image, conformity & eating disorders, one must recognize that these issues are all inexplicably tied to the profound influence that societal gender role expectations have on <u>female identity</u>.   Therefore, addressing these issues in the Girl Power group seemed most appropriately approached from the Feminist perspective, in which the issues and concepts could be addressed simultaneously with their societal roots.

According to Corey (2001), Feminist theory is based on the following principles:

1. The personal is political – You must change the status quo to improve the status and well being of all women. The aim is not only for individual change, but also for social change.

2. Women's experiences are honored – Experience is considered central in understanding distress. Women are encouraged to express emotion and intuition, and use personal experiences as a touchstone for determining what is reality.

3. Self-in-Relation – A woman's identity and self-concept develops within the context of relationships. Feminists recognize that women are searching for a connectedness with others. Mutual and empathic relationships will enhance the development, empowerment and self-knowledge of the parties involved.

The first principle speaks directly to a body image group where the focus is not only on the topics of self-esteem, media pressures, and peer and family influence, but also the over-arching themes of societal expectations and gender roles.   The last two principles support group work as the preferred modality for these types of issues. The group breaks down the isolation women feel regarding their own experiences and helps them gain a sense of unity and commonality with other women (Corey, 2001).   Knowing that women seek support and connectedness through their relationships, group work offers a natural give and take, where women can provide nurturance and support, as well as receive it.   Socialization of women inevitably affects their identity development, self-concept, goals and aspirations and emotional well being (Corey, 2001).

The main therapeutic goal is *transformation* of negative thoughts, attitudes and beliefs on an individual level and ultimately a societal level.   By helping women recognize and claim their personal power, they then have the tool to effect change by helping themselves and others. This group assists women in the process of rethinking their relationship with their body. By examining the effects of unrealistic societal expectations women can focus more on pleasing themselves rather than conforming to "ideals". The goal truly is transformation rather than adjustment. We do not want women to adjust to a sexist society and perpetuate the status quo, but to exercise their newly discovered power to help others.

A Feminist group lends itself to techniques such as group discussion, expressive arts and journaling where all members of the group can share their thoughts and feelings openly through various media, and then process those pieces with the other members or individually. Reframing, gender-role analysis and disputing irrational beliefs are also used and are effective techniques when looking at the bigger picture of society's influence on the expectations of women.

<div align="center">**Selection and Member Criteria**</div>

The Girl Power group will have a minimum of five and maximum of eight members. Once the group commences, no new members will be allowed, as this tends to upset the dynamics of the group and stall the progress. Having only ten sessions to cover the information, we cannot allow for disruptions, which could hinder the flow of the group. The maximum number of eight is an ideal number for a group. It allows for good discussions, but ensures that all members have an opportunity to speak. For young ladies who are dealing with issues regarding body image, a group of eight is not too intimidating and hopefully trust and support can be established rather quickly. This information will be discussed with each potential member during her interview.

Due to the critical nature of body image, it is imperative that as many adolescent females as is possible receive information about this group and how she goes about joining. Potential group members can express interest in the group through several different avenues. These are: (a) self-referral, (b) parent referral, (c) counselor referral, (d) teacher referral, and (e) peer referral. Others may acquire knowledge of the group through the advertisement that will be done throughout the school. This will consist of flyers being placed around school announcing the formation of Girl Power. Also, homeroom teachers will be asked to announce the group and who

to contact regarding joining. Some ladies, by virtue of their relationship with the school counselor may hear of the group and express and interest to join. All interested ladies will be contacted to schedule a time for an interview with one or both of the co-facilitators. For a list of the questions that will be used, please refer to Appendix A.

During the interview, all girls will have to agree to the following conditions for membership. If for any reason a member is not able to commit to these conditions of membership, their name will be eliminated from the process. The conditions for membership are: (a) commitment to ten weeks, plus one follow up session, (b) commitment to completing outside assignments, (c) following the agreed upon ground rules for the group, (d) agreeing to make-up any missed assignments from their classes; and (e) obtaining permission from their parents or guardian. Following the explanation of these guidelines, each girl will be asked, "Do you agree to adhere to the conditions for membership if you are accepted to the group?" If a member fails to meet their obligation to the group, it will be addressed initially with the co-facilitators, in the event the reason is sensitive in nature. However, with the guidance and support of the co-facilitators, the issue will need to be addressed with the entire group.

After interviewing all potential members, the co-facilitators will make the final determination of which eight ladies will be accepted into the group. Steps will be taken to reassure those who do not gain admittance into the group that another body image group will be offered at a later date, and if they are interested they will be contacted at that time.

When determining membership, the co-facilitators will attempt to ensure a culturally diverse group of ladies. Because no group is truly homogeneous due to the differences brought to the group by its members, we will focus our search on female adolescents who have questions and concerns regarding their personal body image.

Length and Duration of the Group

The body image group is set in a high school, which participates in block scheduling. Block scheduling provides for longer increments of time spent in classes. Block scheduling therefore provides our group the opportunity to utilize one-hour sessions. Having one-hour sessions eliminates the "rushed" feeling that so often occurs in school settings. By the time the students arrive and the facilitator checks in with each member, you have often spent 10-15 minutes of the session. One-hour sessions will allow for check-in with each member, discussion, an activity, processing of content, and closure.

Variation of sessions will naturally occur should a professional school counselor implement this group in a school that does not participate in block scheduling. Under those circumstances, one would have to modify the suggested session outline to meet the needs for a shorter session that would be approximately fifty minutes. Within the school setting there are always factors, which may affect the length of a session. Fire drills immediately come to mind as an example of interruptions.

To allow participants the greatest opportunity to glean information regarding the topic of body image, the group will meet together for ten (10) sessions, plus one follow-up session, which will occur four weeks after the termination of the group. The sessions include: (a) introduction, (b) likes/dislikes about self, (c) self-respect, (d) gender stereotypes, (e) messages from media/family, (f) conformity, (g) eating disorders, (h) healthy eating, (i) rational thinking, and (j) closing session. After much thought and discussion, we feel that to most appropriately disseminate information on body image to our group of adolescent females, it would take no less the ten weeks. In order to evaluate the appropriateness of this time frame, it will take actually implementing the program and evaluating the process.

The follow up session will allow for the group members and facilitators to meet together again after termination has occurred. According to Gazda, Ginter, and Horne (2001, p. 184) the purpose of the follow up session is to review and discuss achievements group members have accomplished and to give positive affirmation of continued change. The follow up session provides group members with a refocusing of goals and helps them remain of track, in this instance, toward a positive body image. To help the co-facilitators determine the continued success of the group, members of Girl Power will be asked to complete a third Likert evaluation tool (see Appendix B). This tool will be the same as previously administered to group members.

Conducting groups in the school setting calls for the professional school counselor to use creative methods of scheduling. Therefore, once students are accepted as members of the group, a thorough examination of individual schedules will have to be conducted. Information gleaned from this examination will determine what classes a student cannot miss and which faculty members are open to the group process and would work with the students to make up any missed assignments. However, as a basic scaffold, our group will meet on a weekly rotating basis. For an example of a suggested rotating schedule, (see Appendix C). Again, this will need to be hammered out once the members have been chosen for the group.

Role of the Leader

The role of the group leader is important for a variety of reasons. Since the goal of the group is to build girls' self-esteem through an understanding of body image, certainly the leader should be a caring, compassionate person who empowers others. However, the leader's role will involve more than caring smiles and encouraging statements. The leader of the "Girl Power" group will provide the focus and the framework for a successful ten-week process of self-growth.

Some of the characteristics that a leader should have are qualities that most counselors possess. Many writers agree that effective counselors must be caring, open, flexible, warm, objective, trustworthy, honest, strong, patient and sensitive. Having these qualities will help the leader function more effectively as the facilitator of the Girl Power group because they will more likely be able to provide such things as praise, acceptance and feelings of protection.

Ideally, the body image group will have co-leaders, one male and one female group counselor. By having a male and female co-lead the group, the members are exposed to positive role models of both genders. Moreover, male-female teams are valuable because the style of leadership models respect and equity, trust and cooperative leadership, shared problem solving and contrasting perspectives. This is essential because many girls report having limited experience with respectful male-female relationships (Littrell, 2000).

Having co-leaders will make the group easier to manage while also providing a caring, supportive environment. The leaders will encourage and prompt discussion as well as provide necessary information and materials. The co-leaders should meet before and after each session to plan and to process together. These meetings will be important for developing a strong, cohesive team as well as providing an opportunity to discuss different perspectives, brainstorm interventions, and learn from each other (Litrell, 2000). Most importantly, the leaders will be responsible for setting limits, enforcing the ground rules of the group and managing the time the group spends together.

It will be the leaders' role to establish the structure of the group. They will need to set appropriate goals and encourage members in developing the group rules. They will also be responsible for developing a group-centered group that puts an emphasis on the members themselves. Group-centered groups facilitate self-reflection and disclosure while building

interpersonal relationships. This approach will provide each member with the best opportunity at positive personal growth as well as opportunities to build strong relationships with peers.

The leaders' style should be based more solidly in a "democratic" style of leadership. As democratic leaders they can help foster the relationships of all of the members of the group while facilitating the group process.

Leaders of the Girl Power group must also address the content and process functions of the group throughout all ten sessions. Since both the purpose of the group and the relationships of the group members are both vitally important, the leaders will need to balance the focus of the group between content and process. Focusing primarily on one function could certainly eliminate important material from the other as well as detract from the group's overall success.

Media and Setting

A variety of media are utilized during facilitation of the Girl Power module.   Written information will be disseminated and an overhead projector will be used. Many lessons employ worksheets to encourage participant involvement. These provide a useful format for eliciting and recording personal statements during group time in response to the current topic.

Expressive arts activities will be conducted predominately using construction paper and markers or pastels. These should initially generate interest because high school students generally do not have access to these materials as often as younger students.   Many students benefit from use of expressive media but it can be especially helpful with those who are cognitively well defended.

Journaling activities will be used both in reaction to the previous topic and to record any other pertinent cognitions, emotions, or actions centered around body image in general. This

technique can be a powerful tool for the Girl Power setting and is applicable in other life situations as well.

The ideal environment for the Girl Power experience is located within the counseling suite's small group counseling facility. It is imperative that confidentiality requirements are met. This would include staging in an enclosed room with a door that can be shut, a reasonable measure of soundproofing and blinds over existing windows. The room should have good lighting, be climate controlled and equipped with electrical outlets. There should be a table on one side of the room large enough for the participants and facilitator to sit around during writing and expressive arts activities. Additionally, the ideal setting would be large enough to accommodate the entire group in chairs, if so desired, on the other side of the room without the central barrier of the table. This greatly enhances group sharing.

The setting and media employed should work concurrently to generate interest and provide a comfortable environment conducive to real sharing about sensitive and personal issues. However, a situation that suits one might not completely suit all. Some may be more or less comfortable in a small, confined room with nine other people. There will be varying levels of enthusiasm towards activities of sharing, viewing overheads, drawing, and generating written responses. Group cohesion will help alleviate many potential complaints about environment and media. Additionally, attentive counselors will pay attention to the reactions of the group and will have the opportunity to make physical adjustments to the setting or modify the media to enhance participation when difficulties are noticed. The end result of this thoughtful attitude toward setting and media could be a successful group experience.

Ethics Statement

Group work, as with any professional counseling activity, requires that school counselors adhere to the ethical and professional standards of their practice.   Group counseling within a school context requires practitioners to be responsive to ethical obligations on several levels. It demands that we develop programs that act according to, and in the best interests of our student clients, parents of minors, school policies, state and local guidelines, and professional guidelines.

At the most fundamental level, it is expected that appropriately trained school counselors functioning as facilitators of the Girl Power group will be familiar with and will adhere to the Standards of Practice and the Code of Ethics established by appropriate professional organizations to which they belong. These organizations may include, but are not limited to, the American Counseling Association, the American School Counseling Association, and the Association for Specialists in Group Work. Adherence to these professional codes of conduct is essential to working in professional capacities within schools. The core ethical values that bind school counselors, and counselors in general, include a commitment to the following in our practice: nonmaleficence, autonomy, beneficence, justice, fidelity, dignity, compassion, professional performance, and accountability (Gazda et al., 2001).

In planning the Girl Power group counseling module, we have specifically built-in a number of components that address ethical responsibilities at the client, parent, and professional levels. To address the group screening process we have included a group selection checklist that will be used during the intake interview with all potential candidates for the group (see Appendix A). This interview and the selection checklist function in several ethical capacities as they: (a) allow the counselor(s) to identify students most appropriate for participation in a group on body issues and self-esteem, (b) explain the purpose, scope, and goals of the group to potential group

members, (c) provide an overview of member rights, group expectations, and participation requirements, (d) explain mandatory reporting obligations in cases of suspected abuse or neglect, (e) introduce potential group members to the expectation of group confidentiality, and (f) inform group members of student and parental (when working with minors) consent requirements. Group termination is another ethical issue that we must be responsive to in planning or implementing a group. In the Girl Power group, we devote the final group session to closure activities.   This provides group members with an opportunity to process the group experience and develop a positive sense of closure with group members and the group process. A follow-up session has also been incorporated into this group module to assess individual student needs once the group ends and to measure the lasting effects of the intervention. In order to determine the effectiveness of the Girl Power group and address professional issues related to evaluation and quality of services, we have included two evaluation tools: (a) an open-ended evaluation survey and (b) a likert scale that will be used for pre, post, and follow-up evaluation (see Appendix B). Evaluation is a professional obligation of the facilitator to ensure that the group benefits from the intervention, but also to demonstrate professional accountability.

Additionally, it is important as group leaders that we are aware of our own assumptions related to implementing a group intervention. It is an ethical responsibility that every facilitator analyze his/her values, beliefs, and/or personal issues to recognize how they may color the group process and members' experiences (Gazda et al., 2001). In the context of the Girl Power group, leaders have an ethical obligation to examine their own comfort or issues with body image and self-esteem prior to beginning the group in order to create a healthy learning environment for group members.

Finally, facilitators of the Girl Power group must be aware of local school, community, and state guidelines that inform their professional practice, as ethical considerations may vary between states and school systems. Although measures have been taken to design this group counseling module as one that is transferable from high school to high school, it is not possible to address the ethical considerations of every school, state, and professional organization. Thus, we encourage facilitators using this module to identify and follow the standards of ethical practice that most appropriately guide professional school counselors in their region and/or their schools.

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