

SOCIAL WORKERS in practice today deal with profoundly vulnerable and disempowered populations. People with such life conditions and circumstances as dealing with the impact of AIDS, homelessness, sexual abuse, community and family violence, etc., are overwhelmed by oppressive lives, circumstances, and events they are powerless to control. Their life stressors often appear intractable because they are chronic and persistent or acute and unexpected. Their overwhelming stressors often overwhelm them. When they lack community and family supports, they are often at risk of physical, psychological, and social deterioration. Moreover, when their internal resources are impaired as well, they become extremely vulnerable to social and emotional isolation. Yet, in spite of numerous risk factors and overwhelming odds, a surprisingly large number of people somehow—miraculously at times—manage their adversities. They adapt, cope, overcome, meet the challenges of physical and mental conditions, severe losses and traumas, chronic discrimination and oppression.

In preparing the third edition of this volume, we have focused on mutual aid with vulnerable and resilient populations over the life cycle. With the help of our talented contributors, we conceptualize, describe, and illustrate how the group modality offers a powerful counter-force to vulnerability and risk by providing protective forces that help people become more resilient in dealing with life's challenges.

When people can support, help, and influence each other in a reciprocal manner, the inherent potential exists to provide group members with a sense of greater personal, interpersonal, and environmental control over their lives and to negotiate high-risk situations. Mutual engagement and mutual aid provide essential ingredients for effective protection and coping, including a sense of physical and emotional well-being and personal as well as collective identity.

In this edition we have rewritten the three introductory conceptual chapters and the historical chapter. We have updated ten and eliminated seven of the

original practice chapters and added six practice chapters. The new chapters illustrate the power of mutual aid processes with a number of different populations dealing with a wide range of issues. For example, work with children grieving the loss of a loved one and children dealing with the trauma of 9/11 are illustrated. Mutual aid processes are also poignantly described with adult survivors of sexual abuse, parents with developmentally challenged children, addictive mothers, persons with AIDS in substance recovery and mentally ill older adults. We have also added a new chapter on major issues confronting contemporary group work practice. We hope that social work students and professionals will become excited by the healing power of group practice and will increasingly incorporate the group modality into their agencies' and their own practice.

Part 1 of this book contains three chapters that set out the theoretical model guiding the practice. In chapter 1 Gitterman and Shulman introduce five major sets of ideas: the life model as an approach to understanding and helping people, an oppression psychology, vulnerability and risk factors and resilience protective factors, a mutual aid approach to working with groups, and a theory of practice that views the role of the worker as mediating the individual-group-environment engagement. In chapter 2 Shulman elaborates on the practice theory by describing and illustrating the specific core skills used by the social worker as she or he puts the social worker's function into action. The dynamics and skills involved are illustrated with detailed excerpts of practice drawn from the chapters that follow. In chapter 3 Gitterman examines the tasks, methods, and skills involved in the critical group formation process. The steps between a worker's conceptualization of the need for a group and a successful first meeting require careful consideration if the group is to be effectively launched.

The focus in part 2 is on vulnerable and resilient children. Chapter 4 by Knight describes a group of children who have lost a parent or close relative. The author's sensitive practice excerpts and discussion demonstrate some of the unique ways in which children express their ambivalence about discussing painful feelings and her skillful efforts to normalize their experiences and reactions. In chapter 5 Lynn and Nisivoccia examine the profound traumatic impact 9/11 had on the lives of New York City's children. Through the support of the leader and their peers, and creative uses of program, the children express their fears and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. One youngster's statement about his drawing captures the depth of their despair, "Just thinking about the explosion and body parts freaked me out and I can't quit drawing it."

Part 3 of the book examines mutual aid groups with vulnerable and resilient adolescents. In chapter 6 Irizzari and Appel illustrate creative and skillful practice with a community-based preadolescent group. They provide a sensitive description of the normative tasks facing this population with special attention to ethnic/racial and class factors. Since these youngsters are poor and members of minority groups (black and Puerto Rican), they experience a "double marginality."

In chapter 7 Levinsky and McAlear describe the stress experienced by young adolescents of color in inner-city schools. They illuminate, in a moving account of mutual aid, these youngsters' capacity to help each other with such complex problems as coping with racism and racial diversity, sexuality, and family, community and school violence. In chapter 8 Nadelman shares her practice with adolescents placed in a residential setting. These youngsters, who have lost contact with meaningful adults in their lives, must learn how to have peers meet their needs for support and intimacy. Nadelman demonstrates how apparently tough and hardened teens can be helped to discover their ability to help each other.

Part 4 includes nine chapters, poignantly demonstrating skillful practice with vulnerable and resilient adult populations. In chapter 9 Getzel's discussion and illustration of the suffering of gay men who have contacted the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is both heart wrenching and inspiring. These adults confront continuous crisis situations, prompted by health reverses and social rejection and isolation. Getzel dramatically depicts the way in which the mutual aid group provides a lifeline to adults affected by the pandemic. In chapter 10 Shulman describes how people suffering from AIDS and struggling to recover from substance abuse movingly help each other. Members uncover the trauma of childhood and adolescent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, its impact on their interpersonal relationships and recovery efforts. One member captures the magic of mutual aid, "I didn't realize when I started this group there were people who have lived lives just like me, who had feelings just like me, who had struggles just like me . . . you've helped me see that I'm just not the only one going through this."

In chapter 11 Schiller and Zimmer bring us the powerful adult voices of survivors of child sexual abuse. As children these adults were oppressively exploited for the sexual satisfaction of an adult. For many years they internalized the oppression and the oppressor and turned the rage against themselves. Schiller and Zimmer poignantly help group members to bear witness and to lend each other unforgettable support (as a member stated, "Both hearing and telling knocked me out"). Through the workers' love and skill, group members help each other to work through the experience, come to terms with it, and begin the process of healing. In Chapter 12 Knight breaks new ground by leading a group of men and women survivors of sexual abuse. She vividly illustrates men and women listening to each other's pain, lending care and support, helping healing, and mobilizing coping efforts. Members help each other to confront the past in order to move forward and deal with the present and future. In chapter 13 Trimble focuses on work with men who batter their wives or women with whom they live. If there is any hope of reaching past the deviant behavior and beginning to help the offender as a client, Trimble insightfully discusses the worker's need to be in touch with his or her own anger. Groups such as this have often failed because of the inability of the group leader to understand the artificial dichotomy between

being supportive and confrontation. Trimble demonstrates the necessity of using authority and confronting the group members to assume personal responsibility for their abusive behavior, while simultaneously synthesizing the demand with caring.

In chapter 14 Lee tackles a chronic and pressing social issue: the problem of homeless women with “no place to go.” In an exciting mixture of direct practice skills with clients and social action activity around the problem, we see the social worker’s dual function of helping group members to cope with the realities of today while simultaneously trying to organize to change those realities. Her work also richly illustrates some of the beginning-stage problems in engaging a difficult, often mistrusting population. In chapter 15 Bloch, Weinstein, and Seitz examine the painful issues confronted by parents of children with developmental disability. The parents sorrowfully share the devastation, despair, terror, shame, and family turbulence caused by the birth of a developmentally disabled child. In sharing their pain (“Friends don’t understand . . . they want to reassure me that everything is OK,” “I will go to the next park to avoid my neighbors,” “I can’t stand the accusatory eyes of others or to hear others talking about him”), members grieve together and subsequently feel less alone and less distressed. From mutual support and problem solving they gain new perspectives and coping strategies.

In Chapter 16 Plasse describes a parenting skills group that attempts to break the intergenerational cycle of child neglect and substance abuse. Before members could work on improving their parenting skills, they had to work on their own deprivations. One member captured the importance of personalizing a skills curriculum: “How can you ask me to give them all this praise and encouragement when that is something that I never got myself? . . . I remember waiting for her . . . to tell me she loved me. My mother died last year and I’m still waiting for those hugs and kisses.” Finally, in this part of the book on practice with adults, in chapter 17, Shulman examines a short-term group experience for single parents. The group life lasted one evening and the following full day, and yet the depth of the concerns discussed raises interesting issues about the impact of time on group process. The discussion also highlights the capacity of group members to respond to a group leader’s “demand for work” much more rapidly than many of us would have expected.

In part 5 of the book, work with vulnerable and resilient elderly completes the journey through the life cycle. In chapter 18 Orr describes her work with the visually impaired elderly living in the community. For these group members the mutual aid group is an important substitute for other support systems (such as friends and relatives) that are not always available to them. In a dramatic meeting the worker presses the group members to deal with the death of a valued and loved group member. The internal dialogue of each member, in which part of them wants to face the hurt and part of them wants to deny it, is acted out in the

group discussion as different members voice the two sides of the ambivalence. With the gentle, caring, yet firm support of the leader, the members enter the taboo area of discussion about death and face the loss of this member, their sense of loss of others close to them, and their own impending deaths.

In chapter 19 Berman-Rossi examines the plight of the institutionalized aged who must fight against feelings of hopelessness and despair. In a powerful illustration of the social worker's mediating, or third force, function, Berman-Rossi demonstrate how support combined with demand can help group members to experience strength in numbers as they tackle the institution's dietary practices. As Berman-Rossi helps group members find strength to tackle the institution, an effort that really symbolizes the choice of life over resignation, she also reaches for their life transitional concerns such as the grief associated with physical and personal loss. In chapter 20 Kelly describes the simultaneous challenges of coping with mental illness and issues of aging. For the group members social isolation and limited control over one's life are major life stressors. The power of mutual aid is most evident in an exchange between members about taking their medication: Ella—"Amelia, did you stop taking your medication again? You remember what happened to me when I quit taking my medicine . . . I ended up in the hospital." Amelia—"(*Crying*) I hate those damn pills." Martha—"Oh, honey, I hate mine too, but I do crazy things when I don't take them." The combination of peer support and peer demand has a profound impact on members' lives.

In part 6 we examine important historical and contemporary group work themes. In chapter 21 Lee and Swenson reach back into our history for a scholarly examination of the mutual aid theory, reminding us of the roots of group work and social work practice. We think this historical view of mutual aid will have more meaning to the reader after vivid illustrations of its modern-day implementation. In Chapter 22 Pandya explores contemporary group work issues and trends. In examining vulnerable and resilient populations, she reviews current group work practice with persons with HIV/AIDS, persons with alternative sexual orientation, the older elderly population, caregivers, and persons affected by war, terror, and ethnic strife. The author provides an informative discussion of mutual aid groups with a social change and community-rebuilding focus. The author also examines the uses of technology to facilitate mutual aid through telephone groups and computer-aided groups as well as the future of small group research.

Mutual Aid Groups,
Vulnerable and Resilient Populations,
and the Life Cycle

