Engage the Group, Engage the Brain

100 Experiential Activities for Addiction Treatment

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Tested in Clinical Group Settings
INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Engage the Group, Engage the Brain*. We thank you for purchasing this workbook and hope you find the 100 group exercises to be stimulating and rewarding when you try them with your client population.

Substance abuse remains one of the most pervasive and challenging problems faced by society. Professionals who work in the recovery field have a strong desire to generate change. In many cases this passion comes from personal experience with the devastating effects substance abuse has on individuals, families and society. The belief of those who work in this area that it is possible to make a difference, is one of the greatest assets to the process. Persistently high relapse rates are as perplexing as they are discouraging. Problems arise with lack of consistency in evaluating successful outcomes. Most studies reveal estimates of relapse rates ranging from 40% - 60%.[1,2]

The vast majority of treatment programs in the United States today are based on a Twelve Step methodology and utilize cognitive behavioral approaches to facilitate change. The current understanding of brain neuroplasticity has opened opportunities for a broader look at the therapeutic process and for healing by engaging the mind and body in creative ways. We are now beginning to appreciate that incorporation of a broader base of experiential exercises into treatment may be one of the keys to enhancing success in this area.

The ideology we embrace here is that recovery can be fortified through engaging clients and nurturing neuroplasticity. New associations are generated through the stimulation of becoming involved in activities that offer decision-making, problem solving and choices in a nonthreatening supportive environment. Through healthy engagement and participation in activities that allow for expression of insight but do not require it, the individual has the opportunity to explore belonging, participation and success in a whole different manner.

While we, the authors, support a cognitive learning foundation as centrally important to recovery, our emphasis in this work is on experiential engagement. Our exercises are designed to augment and enhance existing program offerings, including those based on cognitive behavioral, Stages of Change[3], Motivational Interviewing[4], and Twelve Step approaches. This is not a stand-alone approach, but rather an enrichment. Not all participants are able to learn the same way or to express themselves in a traditional classroom didactic setting. Some are not able to develop insight that can be expressed verbally. Learning that is dependent upon verbal expression is limited in its reach and capacity for change.[5] We strive to go beyond the limitations of written or spoken language to reach into areas of learning that occur on an unconscious level, further than the reach of cognitive expressive learning. This workbook includes the application of activities that go past cognitive learning and stimulate self-reflective processes congruent with principles of brain plasticity.

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The philosophy and works of the psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson (1901-1980) provide a framework of self-awareness and self-responsibility integral to overall health and well-being. Erickson’s creative approaches to psychotherapy and speculation that his unique success may be in a tangible way related to neuroplasticity, piqued our interest in exploring neuroplasticity as a central avenue to brain health. We found the work of others who also support this concept. We share an admiration for the work of neurologist and prolific writer Oliver Sacks, whose many books have shown that deeper understanding of one’s uniqueness is integral to health. Another book that influenced our thinking is *The Brain that Changes Itself* [6] by physician Norman Doidge, in which Doidge emphasizes the personal triumph of overcoming limitations through challenging ingrained habitual patterns of perception and thinking.

We draw on the work of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as it was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., and the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.[7] Clinical research strongly supports the positive effects of MBSR and it is being integrated into other therapy protocols. We are also inspired by Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP), which uses empirically supported interventions developed by Alan Marlatt, Sarah Bowen, and Neeha Chawla, and others, at the University of Washington, Addictive Behaviors Research Center.[8]

The process of brain resiliency is supported by neuroscientist Michael Merzenich, whose research at the University of California shows that the brain has the capacity to change itself in both physical and functional ways.[9] Merzenich is a leading proponent of therapeutic approaches to overcome functional limitations. These ideas are supported by a 2006 study by Dr. Sherry Willis and colleagues with the National Institute on Aging that was the first to document long-term, positive effects of cognitive training on brain function in older adults. The study showed that at nearly any point in your life, you can strengthen your brain by doing tasks that are new and complex and that stimulate a balanced variety of areas within the brain.[10]

The work of Ernest Rossi, PhD, has provided a platform from which we have designed and implemented many of our exercises. Rossi posits that we can enhance neural networking, stimulate dendritic growth and promote a healthy rebalance of neurotransmitters through engaging in three areas: novelty, environmental enrichment and physical activity. Rossi states, “Novelty, exercise, and life enrichment facilitate gene expression and brain growth.”[11, p 384-91] He emphasizes that by pushing beyond boundaries of comfort, one can expand possibilities as well as accelerate the process of healing. Rossi has initiated supportive research, currently in progress, to document the effect of creative problem solving on genetic expression. In addition, “Gene expression and brain plasticity can consolidate the healing reconstruction of fear, stress and traumatic memories and other symptoms in everyday life.”[11, p 964-67]

Expression that is not limited by cognitive or verbal elements is a basic and fundamental construct of our approach. Another is being able to envision a positive future without the limitations of addictions. Elements of past, present and future behaviors are entwined in our activities. Acceptance of what is unchangeable, learning needed skills in the present and envisioning success in a future time are embedded lessons in nearly every single activity. In subtle ways, the exercises teach learning to relax, enjoying the moment, looking at how others have fun in sober ways, recognizing that all individuals have limitations, and making associations with current capabilities that will lead to a healthy and happy future.[12]
What makes our workbook distinct is that we tested each of these activities in groups, with actual clients in recovery. Feedback was obtained from participants and every exercise was refined and adjusted as needed. The process of compiling these works has been immeasurably rewarding for us. The clients are consistently appreciative and enthusiastic. Each session brings its own novelty and enrichment. The unexpected resourcefulness that seems to arise in nearly every session is exciting and gratifying.

It is our hope and expectation that our efforts will offer practical directions for other clinicians to feel the energy generated through this process. Science has not yet brought us to a place where we can state with certainty that these exercises actually lead to neuroplasticity that will help strengthen recovery; in the meantime, we offer these materials as our contribution to a promising new direction.

Kay Colbert, LCSW and Roxanna Erickson-Klein, PhD, LPC
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CITATIONS


Engage the Group, Engage the Brain

"Milton Erickson's influence radiates through this work from concept to implementation. There are few resources that so vividly demonstrate how Erickson's ideas can be applied in a healthcare setting. The authors have a clear understanding that addictions do not stand alone, but are a complex constellation of personal, family, social and environmental stressors. The exercises open the learning process to discovery of new lines of thought, coping and functioning. Colbert and Erickson-Klein have given us an invaluable text that can be used in working with clients in diverse healthcare settings, from those struggling with addictions, chronic illness or pain, to those with an array of psycho-social challenges. Engage the Group, Engage the Brain is a dynamic collection of ideas that focus on achieving change, success and progress for each individual."

Kristina Erickson, MS, MD
Fellow American Academy of Family Practice
Fellow American College Emergency Medicine

"Kay Colbert and Roxanna Erickson-Klein have put together an exceptional compendium of group exercises for helping people in recovery. It addresses one of recovery's most important needs, that of building the skills, resources, and identity maturation for supporting a sustained and soulful sobriety. The experiential processes not only allow a person to "say no" to their addiction but, perhaps more importantly, to "say yes" to a fulfilling life. I highly recommend the book!"

Stephen Gilligan, PhD
Psychotherapist, Author, International Workshops

"We have found that these exercises are a window into reaching clients who may be blocked or resistant to traditional talk therapy. Fun and engaging for all, these activities integrate easily into inpatient or outpatient programming. Our clients and staff look forward to doing this group each week. Thanks for this excellent treatment resource!"

Cindy Seamans, PhD
Director Adult Women Program
Nexus Recovery Center

"The authors have an easy-to-use format for each activity, providing the therapist with a holistic approach to supplement group materials. Each experiential is designed for enhancing individual personal growth as well as strengthening the spirit of the group as a whole. Engage the Group, Engage the Brain is a must have book for every mental health professional in private practice, intensive outpatient or inpatient settings."

Pennie Johnson, LPC, LCDC, CSAT, CMAT
International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals

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