

Balint Group Work

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On Tuesdays, whatever the weather, a group of clinicians gathers at the Lake House in Takapuna for their fortnightly Balint Group meeting led by Louise de Lambert and Jennifer Howarth. We have been encouraged to offer an account of this in response to interest expressed and for those who may be considering joining a consistent, committed group of colleagues to talk about their work in a reflective, open way. Louise will offer an introduction to Balint group work in part one, and Claudia will follow this with reflections on her experience in part two.

Part One

A Balint Group is a form of small group learning in which clinical cases are presented informally and spontaneously. The invitation to the group is to respond to the material offered in a way which draws on feelings evoked, associations and imaginative speculation. The intended focus of the group's attention is the experience and feelings of patient and clinician and a speculative exploration of the relationship between them, be it a first encounter or an established long-standing one. There is, quite specifically, not a pursuit of diagnosis, treatment plans or problem solving but rather an enquiry into 'what is going on here?' based on the clinician's account and the responses within, and of, the group.

There is a crucial, special device, when the presenter is asked to push back their chair and sit quietly outside the circle while the group picks up and responds to the story told. Any reference to the presenter is in the third person, for example

'the presenter' 'our colleague', 'the therapist'. There are to be no questions, criticism or advice offered (or implied!). At a moment chosen by the leader the presenter is invited to rejoin the circle and may participate in the discussion or, unusually, remain silent.

This group method works well with a mix of professions and with senior and relative newcomers to clinical practice. The co-leaders' task is to introduce the way of work and to guide and hold the process within the framework of time and task and in a spirit of enquiry.

The work is named in recognition of its initial development by Michael Balint, a psychoanalyst, and his wife Enid Balint, a social worker who ran a study and research into the doctor-patient relationship with a group of general practitioners. This particular form of enquiry and reflection began in London in the 1950s and since then its method and influence have developed and spread through many parts of the world.

The Balint Society of Australia and New Zealand has been established for nearly ten years and offers an annual Intensive Workshop in different locations in Australia and New Zealand. This workshop offers Balint group experience as participants as well as opportunities for learning and practising leadership skills. Enquiries about Society membership, future events and current groups around New Zealand may be addressed to Dr Di Nash (check on this). In Auckland there are several groups running, some with all members from the same profession, others are mixed. Interest and enquiries are welcomed and there is scope for new members in some of the groups.

Part Two

When we discussed how to convey a sense of our Balint Group experience, someone suggested making available a link to an online video recording. So much on clinical psychotherapy work has been published, and I set out

optimistically to search the internet and teaching institution libraries but failed. On reflection, this makes perfect sense. A recording of a Balint Group session would violate the trust, privacy and subjectivity of the collective moment that the group-in-session creates. Privacy, confidentiality, subjectivity are all part of the frame for group meetings which the group leader(s) hold, and they are fundamental to my experience.

Trying to write about my experience presents difficulties because of this frame, and because each session constitutes a particular moment in the life of the group which is deliberately left behind when it is finished. Nevertheless, I try to say something about the process without compromising the group's or my privacy. I am offering some metaphors and notions by which I have come to think about what my experience is like.

Thinking about the effect that presenting a case to the group may have on me, these metaphors come to mind: something settles in me; a space of calm opens up in which I can think more freely and lightly; my inner state in relation to the work I presented feels more loose; I feel more separate but connected to the person and work I had brought; I may feel like I have deposited something in the group and the group has returned some of it to me; as a result I feel less alone, mentally and emotionally nourished, and more capable.

I usually have a beginning when I decide to present a piece of work, but while putting my story together, I often find myself associating and voicing aspects of the work which had not been particularly in the foreground. Sometimes this may raise anxiety about whether I am talking about irrelevant matters or leaving essential things out, but experience has taught me that seemingly strange things that come to mind will, more often than not, become material the group can work with. Often the group does so in ways that help me understand something in a new light or grasp a lingering sense of which I was only partly aware. At other times, the experience and material I formulate feels raw, confusing and full on.

Bringing it to the group and experience the others working with it brings relief and comfort, the kind of holding we all, I believe, long for at times in our work. The group's processing transforms my mental state of being caught up in a cauldron of thoughts and emotions, and reactivates my own creative thinking process.

After presenting, when sitting back and listening to the group working their associations, I sometimes see a dynamic assemblage or montage being played out in which different group members bring into focus different aspects of the relationship with the patient, of different self-states in me, or different relational constellations. At other times a blind spot, ideas and dynamics that I had not consciously considered but which have been part of the work nevertheless come clearly into view—because a group member gives voice to them by conveying a mental image, a personal memory, a body sensation, a word play or by noticing a curious detail in the story I told.

And finally, when I am listening to a group member's story, I learnt to approach what is happening to me with a sense of trust — even when what comes to my mind seems outlandish or trivial or dull or nonsensical. I trust that I might have a contribution to make to something that I and the group do not understand. It is trust in the spirit of curiosity. We voice our contributions lightly, as one part in a process of exploration which has the potential to become relevant as a piece in the whole that the group creates while members openly share their minds. This montage or assemblage is created simply for the presenter to make use of as they wish.

My Balint Group experience is of a truly non-judgmental and creative group space in which we explore unconscious processes within and amongst us to the benefit of our individual work. The group leaders' exquisite skill and warmth plays a big part in this, as well as the spirit of the group work which is not to find "the truth" but to explore possibilities, to contribute what we each can in support of a colleague, and to do so by contributing with our differences. Overall the idea of

the group as a dispersed mind often comes to me when I reflect on what is going on among us. I enjoy the experience of how our minds flow in and out of each other, and I enjoy the very diversity of profession, background and inclination in which we all contribute and come together.

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