

A practitioners' mutual aid group: Connection and leadership during the pandemic

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Abstract: This article focuses on group leadership during times of crisis, using an example of a social work practitioners' mutual aid group formed during the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States. As the group learned, external crises change over time and this can impact group formation and the development of mutual aid, as well as leadership. We observed that group leadership supported group participants to and through Bolsinger's (2020) adaptive phase of development during the pandemic and its associated personal stressors. This occurred during the storming – and into the norming – stages of the group (Tuckman, 1965; Bonebright, 2010). Ongoing participant reflection and group meta-reflection yielded broader understanding of interactions between stages of group development, and phases of crisis. In addition, it highlighted an associated need for flexible leadership that is sensitive to the changing external stressors during times of social or environmental crisis. Such leadership can also undergird the development of mutual aid among group participants, an important consideration at any time.

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States of America (United States) social isolation and loneliness increased by as much as 30% and people found themselves looking for ways to establish or re-establish interpersonal connections, socially and professionally (Bolsinger, 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Nooraie et al., 2021). Social groupwork practitioners were among those trying, sometimes literally, to re-group. In the acute phase of the pandemic, a midwestern chapter of the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG) began sponsoring virtual mutual aid groups for social work educators to address the immediate need for online teaching techniques. Following the success of this 2020 initiative (Bergart et al., 2021; Saldanha et al., 2021), a virtual mutual aid group for groupwork practitioners was launched in the fall of 2021. Here we examine the development and unexpected results of that endeavor for a diverse group of social workers during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Group development reflects the importance of mutual aid to mental and social well-being during the global pandemic, a time of societal crisis and social change (Beno, Casstevens, Godfrey-Kaplan, Karroumi, Letendre, Meir, Tevik, & Weliky, 2022). Group development also demonstrates how a mutual aid group can rapidly adapt to the needs and priorities of its members. In this instance, the group transitioned into one able to address deeper and more pressing needs of members experiencing varying degrees of professional isolation and personal loneliness.

As the pandemic shifted over time across the United States, individuals learned to cope (albeit imperfectly) with some of the pandemic's initial challenges. From the initial group for educators to the subsequent group for practitioners, individuals' needs had reprioritized, and this posed challenges for both group cohesion and leadership during the practitioner group due to pre-existing expectations. This article aims to highlight the importance during sustained crises for group leaders to both (a) support the development of mutual aid within the group, and (b) understand the broader context in which the group takes place. The presence of mutual aid can help maintain the flexibility needed to prioritize – and reprioritize – group and individual goals during a sustained crisis.

The demands placed by environmental stress on group members during times of crisis can be extraordinary and leaders need to be particularly sensitive to shifts in the larger external environment under such circumstances.

Here we describe how group members and leader collaborated in the writing of this paper and move on to explore relevant literature. We then present the IASWG practitioner group as an example of group development, mutual aid and leadership during largescale environmental crisis. The article concludes with a discussion of 'lessons learned' and how these contribute to facilitating and promoting groupwork in times of crisis.

The writing of this paper

This paper's preparation began after the group (i.e., members and leader) presented at the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) annual symposium, held virtually (Beno et al., 2022). At our debriefing post-symposium, we verbally agreed to develop a paper that addressed additional aspects of the group. Based on time and resource availability two group members volunteered to serve as lead authors; everyone agreed to draft written material and/or provide input based on group member or leader experiences. The meeting notes compiled during the group contributed additional material. These notes had been written by either a group member or the group leader during the group, as individuals volunteered for the task.

After all material was obtained and an initial literature search conducted, the lead authors collaboratively developed and revised a manuscript. This draft was submitted to the group for input. Post-feedback, lead authors again worked together on a series of revisions, submitting another draft to the group for input and editing. Finally, after receiving emailed approval from all authors, the paper was submitted. Subsequent revisions, made based on reviewer feedback, used the same procedure.

Group leadership, mutual aid, and the pandemic

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic in March 2020 (National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, 2024) and in May 2023 ‘advised that it is time to transition to long-term management of the COVID-19 pandemic’ (WHO, 2023, p. 1). As previously mentioned, social isolation and loneliness became significant concerns during the pandemic (Holt-Lunstad, 2021; Nooraie et al., 2021), and mutual aid emerged as a topic of interest. Littman et al. (2022) observed that ‘mutual aid has proliferated as a care practice when traditional systems have consistently fallen short’ (p. 94) and conducted semi-structured interviews with mutual aid group members and facilitators, as well as communities. They aimed to understand the values and beliefs undergirding mutual aid during the pandemic, while acknowledging that ‘values alone are insufficient’ for mutual aid to develop. Four specific practices that support the actualization of mutual aid were identified: ‘collaboration, creativity, cooperation, and connection’ (Littman et al., p. 107).

Leadership during crisis was another topic that rapidly became a focus for research during this global event (e.g. Chisholm-Burns et al., 2021; Haslam et al., 2021), although research in this area remains fragmented (Wu et al., 2021). Haslam et al., (2021) noted that lessons learned in the context of this global pandemic can be relevant more broadly to crisis management and leadership. Chisholm-Burns et al. (2021) explored leadership during the pandemic in an academic setting, using focus groups. Main themes emerged overall: (a) open and ongoing communication; (b) staying connected; (c) being adaptable/flexible; (d) finding ways to stay productive; and (e) turning crisis into opportunity (Chisholm-Burns et al., *Table 1*, p. 1308).

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) addressed leadership during crisis in the context of the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 and identified two phases of leadership during a sustained crisis, the emergency phase and the adaptive phase. During the first, the ‘task is to stabilize the situation and buy time’ (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 1). During the second, ‘you tackle the underlying causes of the crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality’ (Heifetz et al. 2009, p. 1). Bolsinger (2020) applied this framework in the context of the

COVID-19 pandemic to clarify the role of church leaders during this global crisis, observing that the goal of the emergency or Acute Phase is survival:

Calm down. Stabilize the situation. Protect the organization, the team, the leader. Rest. Sleep. Breathe. This is the phase that many of us experienced when the pandemic first started. In the Acute Phase everyone pulls together so that we will make it through (Bolsinger, 2020, p. 1).

Bolsinger (2020) believes that a subsequent Adaptive Phase is optional and will follow the Acute Phase only if a leader chooses to enter it when the emergency period has passed. The Adaptive Phase, if entered, is an opportunity to use 'the shock of the crisis to ... look deeply at the underlying issues that people have not had the will to confront before the crisis. It's the opportunity to bring *real, deep change* [*italics in original*]' (Bolsinger, 2020, p. 1).

In exploring faith formation, Roberto (n.d.) suggested this twofold process is 'a predictable path through the Adaptive Phase toward the emergence of new patterns and stability, *if we choose to follow it* [*italics in original*]' (p. 2). Roberto (n.d.) identified four overlapping steps in the emergence of new patterns towards a new post-pandemic normal: (a) the *Old Order* – prior to March 2020; (b) *Disruption* – March 2020 onwards; (c) *Liminality* – 2020 to 2022; and (d) emergence of a *New Order* – 2021 onwards. Liminality is 'a time of ambiguity or disorientation' as well as 'the time when the greatest change is possible. This is a time for innovation—discovering new approaches and practices...in new conditions' (Roberto, n.d., p. 2). This model can be applied to groupwork leadership in the context of crisis.

In the context of business and leadership, Kerrissey and Edmondson (2023) also emphasized the importance of identifying transition points during crises. They distinguished between a sudden crisis and a sustained crisis, and described the latter as 'a period of ongoing intense difficulty and uncertainty' that 'arrives with ambiguous signals and no clear start date' (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023, p. 2). In addition, they identified 'the ability to recognize and shift between a sudden and sustained crisis' as 'a core leadership competency' (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023, p. 7). While both speed and centralization are critical in responding to a sudden crisis, during a sustained crisis 'what's needed is wide-scale experimentation and

local decision-making to engage people' in an energizing process of creating solutions (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023, p. 5). Kerrissey and Edmondson (2023) proposed that leaders act to: (a) draw attention to the shift from sudden to sustained crisis, as it is hard for everyone – including leaders – to spot; (b) avoid rewarding sudden or urgent responses during a sustained crisis, instead inviting more curiosity and experimentation; and (c) 'build structures and processes for experimentation and improvement that invite a wider array of voices' (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023, p. 6).

A mutual aid approach to groupwork elicits the needs of a group as a whole, as well as individual needs of group members. It can also adapt to rapidly shifting needs of both groups and communities (Zhang, 2021), making it particularly helpful during times of crisis. From a group leader's perspective, mutual aid within a group can be seen as 'multiple helping relationships so that members can help one another to achieve individual goals and pursue group goals' (IASWG, 2015, p. 4). In the words of Steinberg (2003), 'catalyzing mutual aid is the heart and soul of social work practice with groups' (p. 36). That said, as Bergart and colleagues (2021) noted, emergence of mutual aid 'is not a foregone conclusion' (p. 32), and a group leader needs to be aware of obstacles to mutual aid, so as to bring these to the group for discussion.

In addition, the leader of a mutual aid group can promote development of member co-facilitation. If member co-facilitation develops, as group members begin to assume or share co-leader roles, the group leader can move increasingly into a leader/participant role. The 'stress and mess' this process engenders can be viewed as part of the storming stage first identified by Tuckman's classic 1965 model of group development (Bonebright, 2010; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). It can also be viewed as one result of the healthy process of mutual aid development within a group. At this point, flexibility on the part of the group leader becomes extraordinarily important – more so even than during non-crisis situations in less stressful environments. In the context of the larger environment of the pandemic, choosing to use this as an Adaptive Phase opportunity for 'real, deep change' (Bolsinger, 2020, p. 1) could arguably require a more collaborative approach to leadership than might have been possible during the Acute Phase.

The virtual mutual aid group for practitioners described below took place during Roberto's (n.d.) Liminality stage of the pandemic. In the fall of 2021, these groupwork practitioners were experiencing feelings of ambiguity and a need to discover new approaches and practices during a time of environmental stress and societal change. The willingness of the group's experienced leader to embrace flexibility and collaboration was key to its survival.

Group beginnings: Forming

Experiences with the initial virtual educator group sponsored by the International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG) during the first year of the pandemic showed group leaders and participants how powerful mutual aid could be for social work educators transitioning from traditional to virtual modes of teaching (Bergart et al., 2021; Saldanha et al., 2021). The IASWG chapter representative Ann Bergart thought that offering this experience to practitioners could also be helpful and began the brainstorming process that launched group formation. In September 2021, Joan Letendre, IASWG chapter member and experienced groupworker, volunteered to assume the group leader role.

A recruitment email was sent to IASWG members about the formation of an online 'mutual aid group for practitioners of virtual groups...where we can share our successes and challenges in this new method of working with persons who need our services in the time of the pandemic' (Joan Letendre, email communication, September 15, 2021). Letendre sent a follow-up email communication to those responding, regarding the group's purpose:

When we launched this project our thinking was that practitioners might like to support each other in a group that discusses facilitation of virtual groups but we have learned that not all agencies are doing virtual at this time so we have broadened our purpose to learn about virtual methods but also to discuss other group issues during this continuing pandemic. (September 28, 2021).

The purpose of the group had already shifted.

Including the group leader, ten attended the orientation meeting. All

were social workers that hoped to lead or were leading groups. There was an array of difference present, including (listed alphabetically): age, ethnicity, gender, geographic location within the United States, religion, and social work practice type and experience. Consent forms were sent electronically from IASWG chapter leadership to the group leader for distribution. The group contracted to meet weekly for eight weeks and then decide whether to continue. Meeting dates and times were generated for the hour-long group. As leader, Letendre asked group members to think about what an ideal group might look like, how to achieve this, and what they wanted to get from the experience, before the next meeting. Some individuals, including the leader, already knew weeks they would not be able to attend. The group addressed this directly; everyone expressed comfort with having a group member step into the role of leader on the two occasions the leader would be absent. This would be a group that could accommodate the schedule and lifestyle of groupworkers!

From forming to storming

The group leader shared at the start of the first group meeting that one orientation attendee emailed her they could not continue due to other commitments, and another attendee did not return. Seven individuals continued as group participants. The leader had them break into virtual pairs or trios to discuss thoughts on what an ideal group might look like, how to achieve this, and what they wanted from the experience. Participants then re-grouped to share. The meeting note (October 14, 2021) reports:

Members defined an ideal group as one where all voices could be heard, where the space was safe, where difference was celebrated and learned from, where there was harmony even when differences were apparent, where there was a sense of connection, fun and laughter, where one could be them self without fear of judgement, where members could learn from one another. And an informal structure (conversational) was suggested.

Further, in expressing what they wanted from the group experience Members shared that they wanted connection, a place to learn from others, social support, a safe place where they can step out of the role that they normally inhabit (experienced group practitioner or one who is new to

group work practice) and feel comfortable sharing with and learning from others. Again, the need for a less formal structure where members can share and feel supported was mentioned (Meeting note, October 14, 2021).

Group members did not mention learning about virtual techniques or methods, although this had been a large focus of IASWG-sponsored educator groups (Bergart et al., 2021; Saldanha et al., 2021) started during the emergency or Acute Phase of the global pandemic (Bolsinger, 2020).

Participants had received the initial email from the group leader that mentioned learning about virtual methods, yet what they said they wanted from the group focused heavily on connection, support, safety, sharing, and learning. In addition, they looked forward to a change from their usual leadership roles, and a feeling of comfort within a less formal group structure. This was a time when connection, fun, laughter and informal conversational structure were valued highly enough to be mentioned as parameters of an ideal group.

At this time, the idea that the pandemic had shifted from an Acute to an Adaptive phase (Bolsinger, 2020; Roberto, n.d.), or from a sudden to a sustained crisis situation (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023), and that individual needs might have re-prioritized as a result did not arise. One participant recalls the leader asking group members what their goal was in joining the group and/or what they would like to get out of it, and remembers thinking that they just wanted to connect with other virtual group facilitators – even if it meant focusing on virtual groupwork techniques. Had they verbalized this during the group, it might have prompted a broader discussion among group members about goals and the group's purpose. This would occur during the group, but later.

Three participants were unable to attend the second group meeting. Shortly into this meeting, before the leader was able to initiate her plan to discuss differences she had noticed in goals, electricity went out where she was located. This caused her to unexpectedly drop the virtual link. The group continued in the leader's absence. Participants expressed confusion over what had occurred and discussed what might have transpired. The meeting note (October 21, 2021) reports: 'Typical of group workers, members carried on and had an interesting discussion about virtual groups and facilitating with various challenges.' Eventually, the group leader was able to reconnect by

phone and update the group about what had happened.

The group summarized its experience for the leader, omitting a portion of the discussion that expressed dissatisfaction. The leader would later share she had noticed the sudden silence in the group as she re-entered. Due to time constraints, the leader did not bring this up with the group or address her planned agenda, and instead used remaining time to remind the group of her scheduled absence at the next meeting and explain how members could access it.

In the midst of storming

Dissatisfaction and reflection

The third group meeting was the designated group leader's first scheduled absence. Five participants attended; one had missed the previous meeting. After summarizing what transpired during the previous meeting, the group focused on feelings of dissatisfaction. Things were not headed in a direction participants wanted: One participant expressed curiosity about why, as groupwork practitioners, they had failed to mention dissatisfaction about the group purpose either when goals were discussed, or when the leader reconnected by phone during the previous meeting. Another participant expressed curiosity about why the group gave leadership back to the returning leader without discussion, as though no role shift had transpired during the electrical power outage. The meeting note (October 28, 2021) reports that participants considered: (a) what we are trying to accomplish as a group; (b) how we can be more effective as group leaders; and (c) how a group functions with or without a designated leader. These questions moved discussion into a wide range of topics broadly relating to group leadership, aims and cohesiveness.

The group identified the importance of definitions in creating an understanding of what a group is doing, and added that not having definitions felt destabilizing. Participants explored how a group regains stability when its process seems chaotic. Relating to this group specifically, participants wondered if they had contributed to their

own overall dissatisfaction with group goals and/or leadership by not speaking up more directly about goal preferences when the group was forming. The group moved on to explore ways they could create inclusion and cohesiveness.

With this shift in focus, the group transitioned from complaints that could have devolved into backbiting, to interaction that applied members' professional training and language skills to personal experiences within the group. Participants made observations about these experiences, sparked questions to be pondered, and generated mutual learning. Thoughtful reflection had developed. This was a group for which members had energy – on that there was consensus.

No single group member led this meeting – it might be said that the group co-facilitated itself. As the meeting wound down, one participant expressed a wish that the groups they led might have an experience such as this group had had that evening. Another member volunteered to write the note with sensitivity, knowing the group itself had shifted, and being aware of the impact this might have on those not in attendance, including the designated leader.

Confrontation

When sending out the meeting link for the fourth group, the leader thanked the members for sending out the summary. The leader observed in her email that 'there is some confusion, a bit of dissatisfaction (?) about the group and its purpose. This sometimes happens and is a good way for us to reflect on how to clarify and how to do this in a virtual group where attendance is not always constant' (Joan Letendre, email communication, November 1, 2021). The sensitivity of the note from the third group meeting was mirrored in the email from the group leader.

The leader initiated open discussion of what had transpired in the group while she was absent. She observed that the purpose of the group as originally envisioned did not seem to be a primary goal for participants at this time and requested more clarification about the dissatisfaction felt by participants. Those members present commented on these feelings, and explained that participants had reeled in projections and become more curious about their own complicity in not speaking up at the time. Participants also expressed that during

the meeting when the leader experienced an electrical power outage, a shift had taken place that no one had mentioned to the leader upon her return. Instead, the group had stopped its discussion and turned the meeting back over to the leader. The leader shared she was aware on returning from the outage, that the group had been in the midst of lively discussion and quite possibly change had occurred. That the leader, too, had not mentioned this at the time was due to time constraints.

After some discussion and clarification, the leader then asked if participants preferred to continue or shift topics. Focus shifted to group expectations and work – was this a process group or a task group? One participant recognized that the group leader’s goals had never been expressed, and asked about these. The leader responded that she had hoped the group could experience some of what the educator’s group had, earlier during the pandemic. The leader described the excitement generated as the members of that group shared their challenges and successes and the virtual techniques. Later the leader reported that having revealed her personal goal, she felt a bit more a member of the current group. She also expressed appreciation for the group’s honesty. The leader, after the group ended, reported feeling somewhat intimidated by the power of the group after returning to the group post-absences (one due to technology, one planned), and ‘stepped back’ a bit after the fourth group (Joan Letendre, personal communication, June 18, 2024).

A participant active in musical groups for many years, in-person and virtually, suggested the group embrace a Brazilian song for group healing to help it move beyond storming and into norming (Partners for Youth Empowerment, 2014; Tuckman, 1965). In learning and understanding one another’s preferences, the group moved into what might be considered its norming stage.

Norming and performing

The group had successfully navigated the transition to a safe container and a clearer process, and group life deepened over the next several meetings. Members shared deeply across differences with one another, reflected on their process, and supported one another. Losses from the pandemic, including death and illness, were shared. Humor found its

way into group. Tears were shed. Faith traditions were shared, as were experiences of oppression. Group participants became more aware of themselves within groups, whether in groups they facilitated or groups where they were members.

Participants were able to identify feeling 'jumpy, nervous energy, feeling fragility, being overwhelmed by school or life, family and work responsibilities, being excited but still anxious about workload' (Meeting note, November 11, 2021). Participants explored situations contributing to those feelings and 'all in the same boat' feelings arose. Some participants found it easier to give support to others than to self, and the 'different developmental stages of the members were acknowledged and appreciated as we can all learn so much from each other' (Meeting note, November 11, 2021). The leader observed that the group seemed to be fulfilling goals set in the beginning, that is, 'connection, a place to learn from others, a place to step out of the role you usually inhabit...comfort in sharing with others. A member reminded the group about feeling safe enough to share in the space. Leaving room for sharing...'. (Meeting note, November 11, 2021). Participants expressed that after a long day, they might not feel like tuning into another Zoom group, 'but this group is a priority' (Meeting note, November 11, 2021).

The practitioner mutual aid group was developing into a process group: The group ventured into new, unexplored territory as it processed group content and then moved on to process its own process. The leader recognized the energy the group had around this format and it became the basis for the evolving group. Group members adopted and embraced meta-reflection. As groupwork practitioners, participants had their own experiences upon which to reflect and learn (McLeod, 2024), as well as their social work training and clinical experience as groupworkers, and the ability to link all of these experiences during group discussion. By reflecting on their own process in this developing group, participants became better able to connect on many levels with what their clients might be experiencing in this later stage of the pandemic.

Social and professional connection was important for participants during this Adaptive Phase (Bolsinger, 2020; Roberto, n.d.), or sustained crisis (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023), of the pandemic. Isolation from the ordinary day-to-day personal and professional in

person interactions during the Acute Phase (Bolsinger, 2020; Roberto, n.d.), or sudden crisis onset (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023), of the pandemic had taken a heavy toll. Individual needs and priorities had shifted during this later stage of the pandemic.

Adjourning

Approaching termination, the group picked up one of the goals that had been tabled early on – that of research – and elected to present about this group as a group at the annual IASWG Symposium. The group was curious as to whether they could share their online experience effectively. As with any good termination, the group also noticed a revisiting of some earlier difficult spots and feelings. Once again, the feelings around transitioning from task group to process group were addressed. With taking on the symposium presentation, an upcoming transition from process group to task group was anticipated as part of re-contracting. At the point of the 8-week session termination, everyone elected to continue to meet after taking several weeks break in December. Post-break, all but one person felt able to continue to meet regularly. That said, everyone was involved in the presentation at the Symposium.

Strengths and weaknesses

A strength of this particular group was that it was comprised of groupworkers with active, learned, skill sets. Helping professionals across a number of disciplines learn such skill sets (e.g., active listening and reflection). This strength was in some respects also a weakness, as group members worked to minimize discord even during the so-called ‘storming stage’ of the group. Had group members been more willing to engage in open reflection and embrace possible controversy earlier, the group might not have been at-risk of dissolving halfway through its contracted eight weeks. Reflection could have occurred earlier in this group had someone, either participant or leader, observed and stated aloud the mismatch between the overt, initial purpose of the group and goals identified by members during the early goal-setting exercise. If time did not allow immediate discussion of this within the group, verbalizing the identified mismatch could have happened

immediately, with discussion taking place during the following group session.

Discussion and implications

In the midst of a sustained crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical for group leaders to both support mutual aid development with groups, and understand the ongoing changes happening in the environmental contexts external to the group. Moreover, it is important that group leaders recognize high levels of mutual aid can indeed develop within virtual groups, in spite of occasional technical difficulties. In addition, group leader flexibility and willingness to accept shifts in individual and/or group goals, can contribute to mutual aid development and group cohesion.

According to Kerrissey and Edmondson (2023), 'the ability to recognize and shift between a sudden and a sustained crisis is a core leadership competency' (p. 7). Groupworkers would benefit from learning about and developing this competency, particularly because the transition tends to be ambiguous rather than clearly marked (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023) and has the potential to derail a group. If a group leader is aware such a shift is likely, they may find it easier to identify the transition as it arrives and discuss it as part of the group process. And if a group leader misses the shift, or needs to prioritize other content, they can remain curious and flexible with interpretations and interventions.

The leader of a group during any sustained crisis is faced with a multiple-priority situation, as the task at hand and the socioemotional impacts of the crisis potentially impact functioning of both group members and group leader. Ideally, group leaders during the Acute Phase of a crisis will thoughtfully consider how to optimally process socioemotional stress; this would be particularly important in a task group, as target dates may be externally established and possibly non-negotiable. Maintaining the functional level of the group members is important – ignoring it entirely can have detrimental consequences. Bergart, et al. (2021) refers to a group's 'fluidity of purpose' (p. 11) in this context.

It is important to recognize that in a large-scale crisis, group leaders

will likely be experiencing many of the same stressors that their group members are experiencing. Additional self-care is needed in this context. Professional organizations, employers, and crisis response organizers, can facilitate the formation of such groups. When group members are also group workers, these groups have an added benefit for the group leader, in that with time the leader can more easily move into a leader/participant role. Indeed, the group members described previously viewed participation in this virtual mutual-aid group as self-care, and the professional organization IASWG proposed, recruited and supported the group itself.

There was the awakening awareness in the group that the role interactions of leader and participants all lie on a continuum. In addition, the group became aware that honest expression in combination with no praise/no blame, compassion and respect moves the group forward. Participants expressed feeling truly included. Experiential learning during the group process over the remaining sessions produced 'eureka moments' that were beneficial both in process and in content. Finally, the group 'call to work' was heard – but just under the level of stress – for example, one member volunteered as time keeper for the group; another would volunteer to write the weekly note; and so forth.

As with any experiential learning experience, continued reflection can bring about new questions and new learnings (McLeod, 2024). It was this ongoing reflection that led the group (which re-contracted through fall 2023) to reflectively identify shifts in group members' needs and priorities; and to wonder about the interaction between the stage of the pandemic and the changing needs and/or priorities of those affected by it. In addition, the group reflected on how these shifts and transitions can present challenges for group leaders, which were made more complex by the group's virtual status. Fortunately, the group had an experienced, competent and flexible group leader who understood groupwork and was able to respond appropriately within a virtual milieu. This was an excellent example of not wasting a crisis, but rather choosing to take a path through the Adaptive Phase of a global crisis towards emerging new patterns and stability in groupwork.

Conclusion

'Leading through a sustained crisis requires a different approach' (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2023). A shift will occur when the crisis advances from the sudden emergency or Acute Phase to the sustained crisis or Adaptive Phase which calls for different leadership skills and for the leader/facilitator to be particularly attuned to a group's shift in needs and priorities. This shift is temporally ill-defined and may be confusion-laden, not fitting well into standard group types or group development schema. The sustained crisis, therefore demands flexibility and judicious discernment on the part of group organizers and leader/facilitators within and between groups held during a sustained crisis. During the sudden, Acute Phase of a crisis, the primary priority may be task-oriented to address the emergency, while the secondary may be attending to losses within the group, maintaining group member functioning. During the sustained, Adaptive Phase, the primary priority may shift more toward processing accumulated losses, addressing previously unaddressed pre-crisis needs exacerbated by the crisis, while the secondary may be addressing tasks that seemed so prominent at the start of the Acute Phase. This shift can become especially difficult to ascertain when there are multiple, co-occurring crises of variable duration at play. The wise group leader/facilitator will do well to remain attuned and flexible.

The person-in-environment roots of social work and mutual aid apply to groupwork in that the clients' shared environment during a crisis **MUST** be taken into consideration during any group. This is what makes the lessons learned transferrable from the experiences of this group to other situations of sustained crisis and the interaction of environment, participants and leadership, in such larger settings. At the very least, the learnings will be valuable as the climate crisis unfolds as a globally shared crisis. Finally, mutual aid can be seen as a particularly constructive groupwork approach during times of crisis: One aspect of any crisis is to reduce or remove feelings of self-agency, and mutual aid groups emphasize its development.

Note

This article expands on the Beno, et al. (2022) workshop 'A practitioners' mutual aid group: The experience of connection, meta-reflection, and skill-building during the pandemic' that the authors presented at the International Association of Social Work with Groups Virtual Symposium of June 2022.

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