

# Ladies' Water Aerobics Swim Group

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**Abstract:** Over the course of the past year (2012-2013), the author has been swimming at his local YMCA (Y). Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday he observed a group of between 10-12 women participating in an aerobics swim group. It gradually dawned on him that this was a recreational, activity support group. What impressed him was the way the women interacted with one another; they were always talking, laughing and clearly enjoying one another's company. In June of this year, the author decided to approach one of the members of the group and see if she would be willing to share some of her experiences of attending the group. This resulted in her speaking and e-mailing all of the women, who in turn e-mailed and spoke to the author about their reasons for participating in and the benefits they derived from the group. The paper incorporates the narratives of the women regarding the reasons for joining and also the numerous, physical, psychological, emotional, mental health, and social benefits of the group. The author also provides the reader with a number of theoretical concepts from groupwork literature, which further reinforce the numerous benefits of the Ladies' Aerobic Swim Group.

**Keywords:** Water Aerobic Swim Group; physical/emotional/social benefits; groupwork; group work

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## Introduction

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'That's strange, I have tingling in my right hand and it feels numb. I will just go outside for a breath of air. Wait a minute, something is not right here. Damn, my whole right side has gone dead; nothing will move. Surely, this will pass; I will be alright in a few minutes. Paul, you have had a stroke, it's a good thing you came to the hospital as quickly as you did, we are going to give you a clot buster medication, and then transfer you to Maine Medical Center.'

This event had a profound impact upon me. It was my wake-up call. I thought that I was in pretty good shape; however, I realized that I needed to do more for my own personal health and well-being. Indeed, on August 17<sup>th</sup> 2012, I joined the local YMCA (Y) and started swimming. A number of friends teased me that I was a little late for the Olympics which was going on at that time in London.

At first, I could only swim for maybe twenty minutes, but gradually I was able to swim for thirty minutes, then forty-five, and now I can swim for an hour. During this time that I was doing my infamous breast stroke, I noticed that every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday there is a Ladies' Water Aerobics Swim Group. There were always 10-12 women and they all seemed to know one another and they were having a great time.

They were always talking; even during their class they would be chatting and laughing. Week after week I saw the same women. They would wave when they came into the pool and they would interact with one another. It even got to the point where I knew which women came early, who were friends with whom, and who was running late, and I even knew if someone was missing.

Slowly, it dawned on me that this wasn't just 10 or 12 women getting together for a swimming aerobics class three times a week; but this was a Recreation/Activity/Support Group.

## Relevant theories

Toseland and Rivas (2009) aptly note that:

As an end, recreation can be a desirable leisure time activity. As a means,

recreation can help a particular population become involved in an activity that has therapeutic benefits (p. 27).

This end and means process is certainly true of the Ladies' Aerobic Swim Class, a recreation group where members enjoy the health benefits of exercises for body and mind, as well as friendship and socialization. With respect to Recreational Groupwork in general, Toseland and Rivas (2009) note that the ideal situation is for every member to be involved and interested in the group activity (p. 111). Perhaps the most important benefit of a group, such as The Ladies' Aerobic Swim Group, is the unity shared by members who experience what Toseland and Rivas describe as a 'sense of belonging' (p. 29).

Toseland and Rivas (2009) also stated that the following core values were also significant to the life of a group: Empowerment: The power of the group to help members feel good about themselves and to enable them to use their abilities to help themselves and to make a difference in their communities. (p.8). Solidarity and Mutual Aid: Value the power of the group and promise of relationships to help members grow and develop, to help them heal, to satisfy their needs for human contact and connectedness, and to promote a sense of unity and community. Respect and Dignity: All group members had something to contribute to the group. Understanding and Respect: Members' respect and appreciation for each other grows as their relationships deepen over the life of the group. (pp.7-8).

If this was not confirmation enough of what I was observing, when I looked at additional literature on groups I found the following by Lang (2010):

The small group, in and of itself, is recognized as a powerful social unit, of such importance in human lives that none of us can survive long or well without such fundamental social belongings. (p.56).

What also struck me when observing the Ladies Aerobic Swim Class, was that this group of women was extremely motivated, organized, confident, and self-assured. While I had nothing tangible to back these observations and assertions, there were very positive feelings that seemed to emit from the group. Again, when I looked into the literature for explanations of what I was observing I came across Papell and

Rothman's (1980) work and their definition of a Mainstream Group.

*The mainstream group generating relationships capable of enduring beyond the group, and of the group being internalized as a reference group, a powerful influence group in the lives of its members (pp.8-9).*

In addition, Papell and Rothman went on to assert that the mainstream model is seen as:

Concerned with the needs of individuals to belong, to establish affiliative bonds with others, and to develop the capacities for empathy and identification. (Papell and Rothman, 1980, p.10).

Again, this made me reflect on the aerobic swim group. While this activity brought the women together there was something deeper and more significant going on here.

Frequently, in my social work classes, I talk about the concept of empathy. However, despite my efforts to provide numerous examples, I always feel that while people are very polite and say they understand the concept, I am not convinced. However, in the aerobic group there was a tangible feeling of empathy and identification. It seemed to exude from the group. As I continued to swim my laps, I wanted to bottle up this energy, concern, and candor. I would often leave the Y feeling happier, more relaxed, and reinvigorated.

Finally, Lang (2010) talked about the importance and significance of actional modalities.

The actional mode engages right brain competencies of the person (the creative, inventive, holistic) essential to the experiencing of effectance. At a more complex level, entering into actional modes with other individuals-doing with others-represents a progression, combining individual doing with social context and social engagement. Within actional forms that require social participation, individuals can learn, develop, and practise social skills essential to living in the social world. (p.174)

So, now I had some theory to back up my observations. In June of 2013, I decided it was time to find out more about the group. I eventually spoke to one of the women who always came early, and I informed her

that over the past ten months I had been observing the group from my lane and was so impressed with what I had observed.

'Why don't you join us?' she said. I admitted that I felt a little strange and awkward about just joining them. 'How about if I wrote down some questions, and if I heard back from several of them, then I would participate in the class.' I also began telling the 'early' member of the group, some of my impressions and observations of the group.

It was evident that she was impressed and that I had hit a positive cord. We agreed that I would write a number of questions and she would e-mail them to members of the group. What also came to light in the e-mail was that the women in the group were aware of me.

## **Background of the group**

At the beginning of the paper I discussed my own rationale for attending the Y and beginning to swim on a regular basis. One of the questions that I would often contemplate while I was swimming my laps was what had brought these women to the Y. Hence, one of the first questions I asked them: 'What was their reason or reasons for joining?' The following narratives are a sample of some of the responses I received.

*'My own journey to finding water aerobics started way back in 1996 when I joined this Y. I used to only swim laps, and I saw the class and decided to give it a try. I immediately liked it. Water aerobics helps work all your muscles in terms of flexibility and strength and I found it a great supplement to doing laps.*

*I moved to Maine in 2004 and joined this group...many members have changed for many reason to another group or are not active Y members. I have attended consistently since fall of 2004.*

*I joined the group a couple of years ago at the insistence of another member. I'm so glad I did as the ladies are an interesting bunch of folks. Most of us are older and retired coming from many backgrounds in the work area. I am a retired teacher, raised in Maine, taught in California where I caught the computer bug way back in the eighties.*

*I'm a widow; therefore look for the camaraderie of others. And discovered it is not*

*so easy to meet folks when there aren't children involved, and I moved here after my husband's death from out of state.*

*I started a year and a half ago (February 2012). I started attending to get some 'physical therapy' for two torn shoulders and I had had a hip replacement and rod inserted in my leg.'*

*I've been going to the group for seven or so years following knee surgery and a comment from the orthopedist that water aerobics was the very best exercise I could do.*

*I am a 'water bug', have grown up around water, and find the exercises vigorous, and particularly beneficial because the joints aren't stressed with pounding on a floor. Particularly true for me this past winter as I had a compression fracture and could barely stand on the floor. But the water allowed movement and ease, and it was about the only thing I did comfortably until surgery in May of 2013.'*

## **Psychological, emotional and mental health benefits**

As well as a number of physical therapeutic benefits to attending the aerobic swim class, there are also a number of psychological, emotional, and mental health benefits. Again, I asked the women to put into words some of the benefits they experienced. The following are examples of the responses I received.

### **Narratives from members of the group**

*'The group is very friendly and have a great camaraderie with each other, with several having worked in the medical profession prior to retiring.*

*The group is really friendly with each other and if one is missing for more than a day they all question if something is wrong and one or two will find a way to contact the missing one to check up on them and send cards.*

*In joining the group I met an interesting, wonderful, and diverse group of women. We have become good friends so of course we socialize and laugh a lot while exercising, and we do things together on the outside as well (movies, dinner, art exhibits, coffee, etc). Helping one another and keeping in touch when someone*

is ill is a given. I have learned a great deal from all, from landscaping, medical queries, computer issues, libraries, book clubs, recipes, artists, to business people, etc. Political persuasions are diverse as are the sports team affiliations. All of this leads to often spirited discussion. If you have a question, usually someone in the group can answer it or point you in the right direction.

It is nice to listen to the stories the other participants tell. They talk about their grandkids and where they live. They attend local sporting events where their grandkids are participating. It is really a good way to stay in touch with the local communities. It is fun to hear their struggles with today's technologies and how they overcame some obstacle or other. I am inspired by their ability to stay involved and informed.

I have slowly learned the backgrounds of some. One was a nurse in Saudi Arabia, one was in the Maine House, I believe, and others have done exciting things with their lives. We do get together for coffee and a dry chat. One outstanding characteristic of the group is their kindness and sympathy when something goes amiss.

I was thinking solely of physical health without considering the other positive aspects of joining the morning water aerobics class. I have gotten to know many wonderful people and developed new friendships. The group is eclectic with people from many varied backgrounds. One thing I notice that we all seem to share is a love of good books and good food. There is much discussion on the latest books we have read and restaurants we have tried.

While the social aspect is very significant for us, it may present a challenge to our instructors. Since we are such a compatible, friendly group there is much chatter and I sense our instructors sometime wish we would chat less and pay attention more.

I am quite sure that the camaraderie of the group has been instrumental in my staying with the program. It is a lot more fun to exercise when you do it with friends.'

## **Group work is all around us**

Several years ago, in *Groupwork*, there were a series of articles entitled 'Flash Groups' (Doel, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Manor, 2007). Two of the former editors of the journal engaged in this debate and I also added my two cents to the discussion. Firstly, I made the observation that both Mark Doel and Oded Manor were utilizing different conceptions of what one means by groups and groupwork. Mark appeared to be saying that there is a great deal of groupwork occurring which we do not recognize as groupwork. While Oded appeared to be looking at the issue more from a purist perspective, and arguing the case that just because one asserts that one is conducting a group does not necessarily mean one is carrying out groupwork. This polar opposite perspective indicated to me the varied and complex issue that is groupwork. We really do not have any firm conditions or hard and fast rules of exactly what we mean by groupwork.

I would assert that this is the case with the Ladies' Aerobic Swim Class. From a purist's perspective one could argue that one was not utilizing the theoretical concepts of groupwork. Yet, what I was observing was a group in action. They had gone through many of the stages of group development and were functioning at a very high level. It was very apparent that they all enjoyed one another's company and not only got a lot out of the physical exercise benefits of the group, but also the social aspects.

I was so impressed however, by the fact that over the course of the one year that I had been swimming at the Y, each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, come rain or shine, there were the women coming to their group. With that level of commitment there had to be something really powerful drawing the women to their group.

## **Conclusion /Thank you**

Unfortunately, I hear fewer and fewer of my students talking about undertaking groupwork. There seems to be a belief that doing groupwork is extremely difficult and time consuming and the negatives outweigh the benefits. Also, because of financial reimbursement issues which are being more determined by one on one interaction, agencies



are less likely to support or encourage this type of groupwork. However, as can be observed from the Ladies' Aerobic Swim Class, this is not an expensive or time consuming activity.

It is apparent that the women who participate in this group love it. They look forward to it, they love taking the class, they have developed strong friendships, they enjoy one another's company, they talk to one another, and they laugh with one another. It doesn't get any better than this!

The other benefit that the women are not aware of is the positive impact they have had upon me. As I stated at the beginning of this paper, just like many of the women, I joined the Y for physical health reasons. However, I have gained so many psychological benefits as well. As I swim my slow breaststroke laps, I look over and see the women laughing and talking, and it's as if this happiness floats over to me in my lane.

I feel more relaxed, calmer, and really enjoy swimming. I also began to notice that I was seeing the same people swimming when I was. One or two started saying good morning, a couple of us started talking, telling each other our names and what we did. Before I knew it, we were a group! I now had my own early morning swim group. Perhaps I should write a paper on them!!

## **Note**

1. The Editors note that from a feminist perspective the use of the term ladies is problematic and we would recommend the use of the term women when referring to adult females. However in some social contexts the use of the word ladies is seen as acceptable. The women at the heart of this article referred to themselves as ladies and their swim group was named the Ladies Aerobic Swim Group. We have preserved the name and have used the term ladies in direct quotes.

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