

BRIDGING REALITIES IN ANOMALOUS SUPPORT GROUPS

By June Steiner, PhD, CHT.....

Anomalous experiences of all kinds, positive and negative, have deep and lasting effects on our life and consciousness. How we deal with those experiences can make the difference between a growing sense of purpose and belonging, a feeling of being somehow special and better than, or shutting down and living a fear-based life.

Having the privilege of being a life-long experiencer, a Clinical Hypnotherapist, a Transpersonal Psychotherapist and President of O.P.U.S. (Organization for Paranormal Understanding and Support) and Vice-President of A.C.C.E.T. (Academy of Clinical Close Encounter Therapists), I have received assistance from all of those worlds in helping me explore, understand and integrate what I've experienced and given me the tools and compassion to help others bridge their experiences into everyday reality.

Guided/mentored Support Groups offer a place for experiencers to safely share with others what has happened to them, how they feel about it, and to discover that others have had similar and perhaps identical events. From that perspective, they realize their experiences do not make them crazy, bad, different or special. One may never fully “understand” what happened or be able to say it will never happen again, but knowing that others have gone through a similar or identical experience, perhaps many times, helps them to come to terms with something they cannot erase, forget, or change no matter how much they may want that to happen.

Instead, they discover they are a member of a vast community of people experiencing realities that differ from their daily life for, often, unknown reasons. Just as you might join a book club or photography club to be around people with your gifts and interests, support groups offer the Anomalous Community a place to help you feel “at home” with what is happening to you that your families, partners, children or friends might not accept, understand or be willing to talk about.

When a person experiences things that are beyond his or her normal reality and understanding, that may not be accepted by society as “real” or appropriate, or may create fear or a feeling of lack of control over their own life, it is important they have a safe place to go. Support group contact for consensual validation of events and common (shared) emotional responses is

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very helpful to break down alienation and personal detachment on the part of the experiencer.

There is a special nurturing quality necessary to the meetings that helps people move through their fear or bliss and eventually allows conversation to move into the “meaning” and responsibility (the ability to respond) of having these encounters in one’s life. Then we can explore how these events affect our levels of consciousness and how to bridge worlds and realities.

There are several different kinds of Support Groups:

1. In-person groups:

Those led by a professional that offer a safe place to share and, if wanted, a place to work through one’s emotions around their experiences.

Those led by a professional or experiencer who have the skills to create a safe, healthy and compassionate container and who guide the members to share without offering therapy. These groups are for those who don’t have or have dealt with any crippling fears or issues around their events.

They have scheduled meeting times throughout the year.

Members must be experiencers and are interviewed by the leader and invited into the group. All information shared in the group is confidential and not shared outside the group.

2. Email groups:

Those led by a professional or experiencer that sets guidelines on subject matter and respectful communication, but offers no therapy.

These groups are especially helpful for experiencers who live in areas where there aren’t professionals or support groups available. These groups bring people together from all over the world. When you share, every member gets your email and who-ever responds sends their email back to the whole group.

The Email Group is available 24/7 and allows those who need immediate access to someone to write at any time of the day or night, though they may not get a reply until someone goes online.

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Emails must be monitored on a regular basis to see that guidelines are being followed and to see if anyone is needing help with his process.

Members must be experiencers and are interviewed by the leader and invited into the group. All information shared in the group is confidential and not shared outside the group.

3. Conference Call groups: Led by a professional or experiencer for experiencers who have no computers, but do have access to a phone. Set up with same guidelines as the In-Person group, and there is a moderator on the call. The conference calls can be set on a regular basis for the needs of the group.

Members must be experiencers and are interviewed by the leader and invited into the group. All information shared in the group is confidential and not shared outside the group.

4. There are other possible forms of support groups depending on the needs and circumstances of the individuals.

THE CONTAINER

The first and most important piece of the Support Group is the container in which it functions. It must be safe, respectful, kind and compassionate and be lead or guided by someone with the ability to keep the container in that condition at all times. It takes a strong, open-minded and open-hearted leader who does not carry any fear of anomalous experiences and who has the experience, training and wisdom to hold the energy of the container and the members of the group.

The leader must have excellent listening, witnessing, feedback and clarity in communication and an understanding of and ability to work with member's emotional states. She should have training/experience in working in these areas or if there is no-one available who is trained, the new leader can have mentoring from an experienced leader who is located elsewhere. There are guidelines that all members read and agree to before joining. (see example at end of article)

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Experiencers are in need of recalling, exploring, processing, understanding and integrating their experiences and learnings into their everyday lives. Learning to bridge the worlds of anomalous and of day to day consciousness is a must so that the experiencer does not go through life and relationships feeling separate, "different" or damaged in any way.

Below are guidelines for healthy support group containers that allow experiencers to come to their own conclusions about what happened to them and why, rather than what other's think happened to them and why.....

The art of Deep Listening, with no thoughts of how you will respond or judge is the most important gift you can give the experiencer. This is about his/her experience, not yours and not what you might think it means. After you have listened well, then help the speaker go even deeper.

The second gift is that of asking appropriate questions that will help them deepen into their experience with no outside information given to them until it is asked for. And when asked, give short, well-thought-out and wise replies. Less is better as the experiencer can easily lose his own experience in all the information others give him. Often new members aren't ready to share their events and just want to get to know other members and find out if the group is safe and appropriate for him, so no-one is urged to tell their experience prematurely.

It is the leaders job to see that members get a chance to fully express themselves or ask their questions before others come in. Cross-talk before a member is finished can feel confusing, disrespectful and/or unsafe.

The leader must be able to deal with emotional issues and preferably have training in psychology. He must be willing to refer members to professionals if he finds he is not qualified to work with a particular issue.

Conflict resolution is an important skill needed in a support group. The leader must be comfortable working with anger, fear, difficult behavior and leadership issues and be willing to say what he sees, when he sees it.

A support group is only as safe as the leader is competent and compassionate.

Members learn to "hold" the energy so that everyone feels safe and important

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in the circle. No-one leaves in the middle of someone's telling of their experience or when anyone is dealing with strong emotions.

Most people who have had their lives touched by the trauma and/or exquisite resonance of unusual experiences develop open hearts and high empathy for others undergoing similar events and there is a special nurturing quality to the meetings that help others acknowledge, trust and deepen exploration of their encounters.

Set a time for the meeting and see that everyone has had a chance to speak if they desire. Plan talks on interesting and relevant subjects.

It is helpful to go around the circle in an in-person support group meeting and have each member say their name and what brought them to the group so that new members become familiar with everyone.

Always introduce new members and give them the option of sharing a piece of their reason for coming or giving them permission to just listen and come forward at a later time or meeting.

With in-person meetings, members often bring snacks for the group and pictures, objects or other artifacts to share.

All support groups are formed for the purpose of healing and growth.

Below is an example of the extra guidelines necessary for an email group. They also apply to all support groups if you use “statements” instead of posts.

GUIDELINES FOR ALL MEMBERS OF THE OPUS ON-LINE SUPPORT GROUP

Please read and agree to the following guidelines before joining our group. Read the Mission of OPUS and be clear you can support it's values and purposes. Visit www.opus501.org and read Clinical Corner.

The mission of OPUS is to develop a network of people dedicated to a better understanding of the overall nature of unusual/anomalous personal experiences and to support those who have them. Such experiences may include extraordinary

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states of consciousness, fortean, spiritual, or parapsychological phenomenon, close encounters with non-human entities, and/or UFO activity. OPUS, through it's educational services and position of neutrality, provides a meeting ground for people and groups of opposing and often controversial views in the hope that in working together we can further

our overall knowledge in these areas and promote scientific research with the ultimate goal of helping humankind.

1. Please offer posts having to do with extraordinary states of consciousness, ufo, fortean, spiritual, healing or parapsychological subjects without judgment and reply with the intention to further open and investigate the information without criticism or advice giving. Additional information, acknowledgment and questions are invaluable responses.
2. All posts having to do with political, religious, philosophical or miscellaneous subject matter must be related in some manner to the above subject matter.

Please put MISC in caps in the title so that anyone opening it knows it may contain controversial information. Please open posts of this kind realizing this material may come from a personal point of view and does not need to be challenged by others. Comments disagreeing must be without reactivity and be respectful. It is very easy for someone new to the site to be unaware they have posted something controversial. Our older members have the responsibility to model behavior they want from others. A simple sentence, "I don't feel this is appropriate to our site" is absolutely sufficient if you find yourself thinking it's inappropriate and feeling you "must" comment..

If you disagree with someone's statements, just let it be and learn compassion. There are many points of view and belief structures present in our group. This is not a place to advocate for any personal point of view or expect others to support your personal point of view. You certainly may reply respectfully with your own point of view and add it to the pot.

3. Please do not comment on the grammar, writing skills or spelling of another member. We are here to appreciate the contributions of members, not criticize how they are expressed. Swearing and otherwise "testy" language is not appropriate at any time for original posts or responses.
4. Please do not give advice or tell someone what their experience means. It is up to each individual to do their own work to explore the meaning, growth and integration necessary for their own healing. Do share what your own experiences and feelings are around similar subjects. Help others explore deeper context by asking questions and helping them to deepen and integrate their experience.
5. OPUS moderators have the right to remove any list member responding inappropriately. Warnings will be given, if possible and appropriate, before asking anyone to leave. They may also request an individual's apology to the group, if warranted.

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