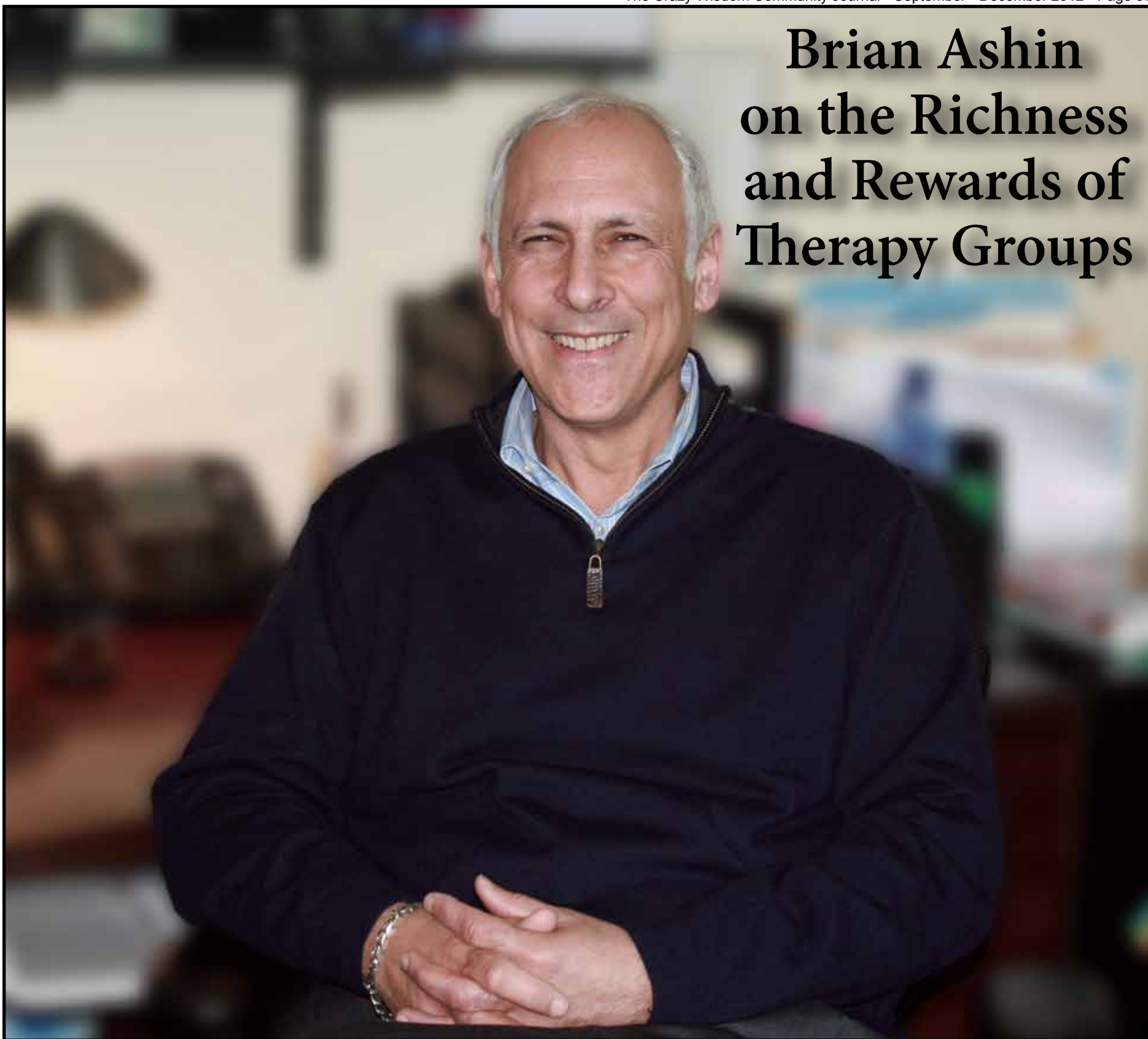


## Brian Ashin on the Richness and Rewards of Therapy Groups



"The condensing of time and the focus on the "here and now" surfaces people's needs for care and warmth, rivalrous and competitive feelings, and the worry there is not enough attention to go around. People begin to feel childlike. If they can put these thoughts and feelings into words, it is a mature expression of what is universally experienced by all."

Interview by Bill Zirinsky  
Photography by Susan Ayer

*Most of our readers consider themselves to be on psychological or spiritual journeys to greater self-awareness and interpersonal clarity. One of the profound tools for deepening one's life is participating in a therapy group. There was a time in Ann Arbor when therapy groups were abundant -- flyers for Gestalt groups, T-Groups, women's groups, encounter groups, and support groups of different stripes were plastered on bulletin boards everywhere. There are fewer offerings in recent years, but, still, one can participate in well-run therapy groups led by a number of experienced and compassionate group leaders who specialize in group work.*

*One of the solid and capable group therapists in town is Brian Ashin, 59. He was raised in Michigan, and received his MSW at Wayne State University in 1979. He has done post-graduate training at the Family Institute in Philadelphia, and was licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist. He is also a Certified Group Therapist. He currently leads four therapy groups, and is passionate and articulate about the satisfactions and nuances of group therapy. He and his wife, Judy, have been married for 31 years, and they live in Ann Arbor. She is a social worker and therapist at Chelsea Hospital.*

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# Brian Ashin on the Richness and Rewards of Therapy Groups

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**Bill Zirinsky:** Brian, it's clear you love doing group therapy work. Why?

**Brian Ashin:** I enjoy working with people and trying to help them live with resilience and self confidence. Years ago, I read the most accessible book for group therapists at that time, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, by Irvin Yalom. Yalom offered a new way of working with groups. This appealed to me because this focus on the "here and now" brought patient's difficulties in living to the surface, leading them to act out their early conflicts and struggles for all to see. Being witness to this re-experiencing of difficulties right there in the room with one another is both powerful to observe and powerful in its capacity to heal.

Being in a group allows for these self defeating patterns to arise where they can be observed by others, experienced by the person and finally given up for healthier and more adaptive satisfying behavior. It's invigorating for group members to be part of each other's psychological growth.

**"The relief comes when you speak up. Usually, others share the same thoughts and then one feels less alone, less different and less shame."**

**Bill Zirinsky:** Brian, please trace your educational background, and your background as a psychotherapist, a family therapist, and a group therapist.

**Brian Ashin:** My first major was anthropology. It didn't last long but I was interested in the relationship between people and their environment. I soon found my way to Wayne State University and the School of Social Work. We all read Freud but I also had exposure to the works of Margaret Mahler and other object relations theorists. I was interested in how experiences with early significant objects contributed to ongoing psychological development. After graduate school, I moved to Philadelphia to do post-graduate training in Family Therapy. I picked supervisors who had trained as psychoanalysts who also had an interest in systems theory. I was interested in the interplay between the internal objects (how past experiences with others are internalized) and how this plays out in real relationships.

— During my family therapy training, I began analysis with someone who was influenced by Mahler and spent the next five years on the couch. At the time I was working as a psychiatric social worker at Cooper Medical Center in New Jersey. I led the daily inpatient group on the Adult Psychiatric Unit. To learn how to lead these groups, I read Irvin Yalom. He was innovative in that he stressed having group members explore their relationships with each other in real time.

**Bill Zirinsky:** You've told me there are three ways of running groups. Please describe the three ways, and which one is your way?

**Brian Ashin:** There are two basic styles of leading process groups (where the focus of the group is on the process, i.e., here and now). In the first, the therapist is primary. The group is used to stir up an issue and the therapist does individual work with the rest of the group looking on. This will stir up memories or feelings in the others and the therapist will then work with the next person. The other members observe, may contribute something and have vicarious learning, but the main interaction is between the therapist and each patient. The other way is what we

call "group as a whole." The therapist makes group wide interpretations about why the group members are silent or just chit chatting and otherwise avoiding real emotional contact with one another. I'd say my training is a sub group of the "group as a whole" approach. Rather than making group wide interpretations, I am interested in helping them understand their resistance to building emotional bridges to each other.

**BZ:** You're currently associated with Louis Ormont's Center for Group Studies in New York; the Center's work is focused on one of the three ways, is that correct? Tell us about your association with that Center, and how you're planning to bring that work to Ann Arbor.

**Brian Ashin:** I started training with The Center for Group Studies about seven years ago. In October of 2010, I went to St. Petersburg, Russia as part of the Center for Group Studies International Training Program. It gave me the idea to bring faculty from CGS to Ann Arbor to expose therapists here who might not otherwise have the opportunity to travel regularly to New York City. Our inaugural training institute will be held in the fall of 2012...

**BZ:** So, what has Ormont's influence been on you?

**Brian Ashin:** Lou Ormont has helped shape my work with groups. He explores the myriad forms of resistance to immediacy. He has also developed creative ways to help group members resolve the resistances that interfere with authentic and open contact with others.

**BZ:** At another point, you ran PAIRS groups -- the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills. What was that based on, and how did that play a role in your evolution?

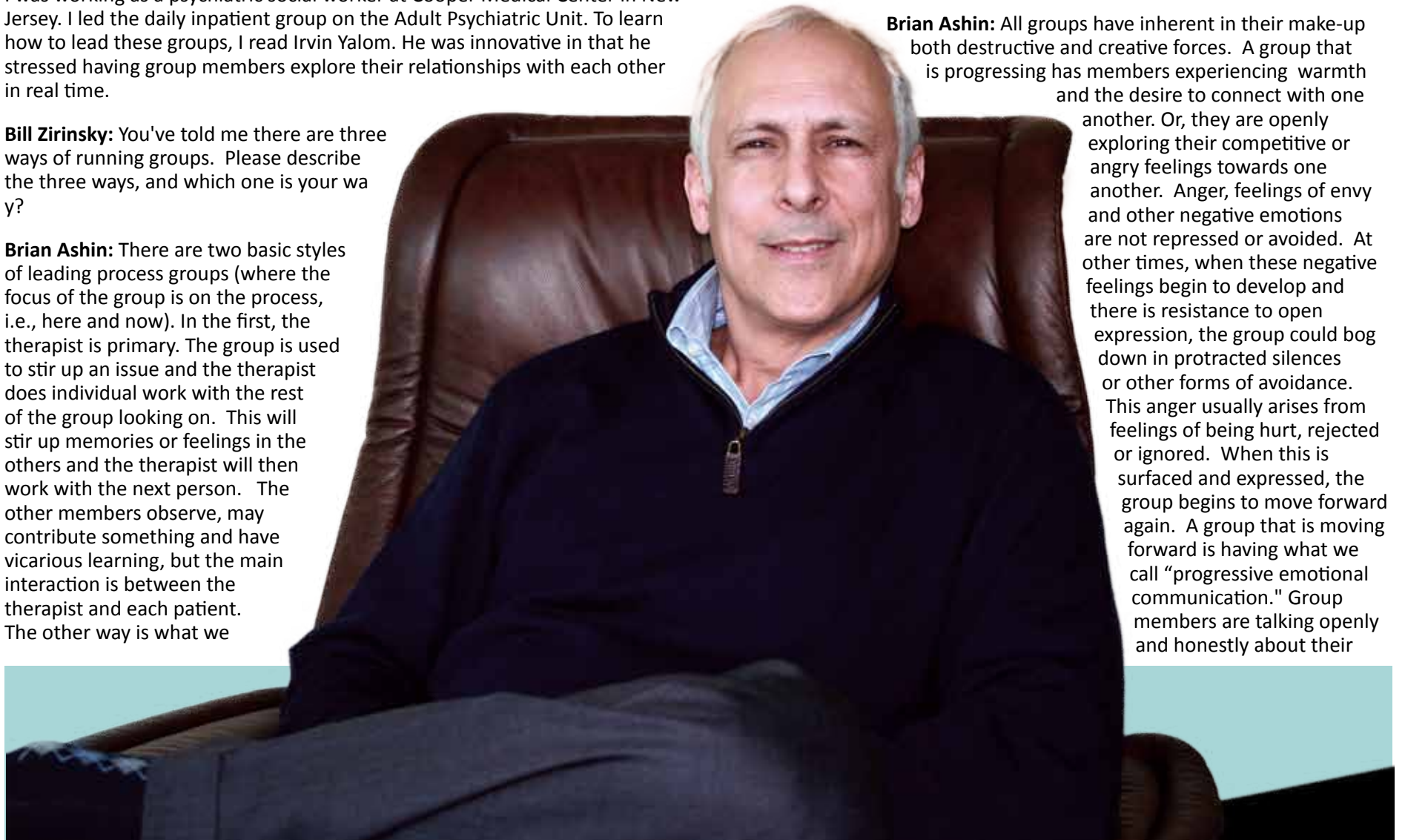
**Brian Ashin:** Lori Gordon, Ph.D., developed this psycho-educational course based on the work of Virginia Satir and other pioneers in the family therapy field. I trained with Lori and began running couples groups. Having that many people in a room together taught me how to pay attention to the interpersonal dynamics of the couples and of the larger group as well. I became interested in how groups progressed emotionally and the inevitable forces that also hindered the progression. I'd have to say that this helped me develop skills as both a marital therapist and as a group therapist.

**"It's oftentimes safer to express anger and aggression towards the leader than towards one another."**

**BZ:** Group work is, of course, experiential, and difficult to capture in words. Even so, let's try a bit. What are the signs of a group that's working versus one that's stuck?

**Brian Ashin:** All groups have inherent in their make-up both destructive and creative forces. A group that is progressing has members experiencing warmth and the desire to connect with one another. Or, they are openly exploring their competitive or angry feelings towards one another. Anger, feelings of envy and other negative emotions are not repressed or avoided. At other times, when these negative feelings begin to develop and there is resistance to open expression, the group could bog down in protracted silences or other forms of avoidance. This anger usually arises from feelings of being hurt, rejected or ignored. When this is surfaced and expressed, the group begins to move forward again. A group that is moving forward is having what we call "progressive emotional communication." Group members are talking openly and honestly about their

**"Being witness to people being open and vulnerable with one another and developing a more mature way of relating to others is very exciting."**



thoughts and feelings towards one another. One person's emotional honesty leads others to become vulnerable and self disclosing.

**BZ:** Ormont's group work is very much to stay focused on what's happening within the group, in present time. Is that correct?

**Brian Ashin:** Absolutely. Although group members understand that is the focus, we expect that they will at times do anything but. And this resistance to immediacy is really what is important to the growth of the group and the growth of the individual members.

**BZ:** There's a lot of "resistance to immediacy" generally, and it sounds as if that is constantly surfacing in the groups you lead?

**Brian Ashin:** Yes. The therapist who expects their group members to adhere to that part of the contract will be frustrated by their groups. The therapist that understands this is to be expected will be more helpful to group members. If everyone was able to stay in the present with each other, there would be no need for therapy and no need for group therapy. As therapists, we're less interested in compliance and more interested in the forces that inhibit people from fulfilling the contract to "put your thoughts and feelings into words." An example of behavior that illustrates resistance to the contract is when Joe withdraws into silence instead of telling Sue he feels hurt by her criticism of him or when Dan puts Adam down rather than saying he's jealous of the attention he is receiving from Stuart.

**BZ:** Trying to get group members to "stay present" is exciting, yes? So much power in immediacy...

**Brian Ashin:** It really is. Being witness to people being open and vulnerable with one another and developing a more mature way of relating to others is very exciting. It's moving and touching when group members make new connections that were not previously there.

**BZ:** Are you a provocative leader?

**Brian Ashin:** I could be. When the group gets bogged down with long silences and there is a halting heaviness in the air, I am assuming that there are negative or positive feelings and powerful shame or guilt around these feelings that is creating the resistance to meaningful interactions. If a more benign inquiry like, "everyone is so quiet today, Joe, what's your idea about this" falls flat and the heaviness goes on without break, I may say something more provocative like "I've been thinking about this quietness, it seems you think I've been working too hard with you and want to give me a rest." This usually annoys someone and leads to the freeing up of people's resistance to open and honest expression.

**BZ:** Are you, generally, a model for compassion and warmth, or not necessarily?

**Brian Ashin:** That's a good question. I think I model compassion and warmth when someone in the group complains about me or criticizes me and I don't get defensive but instead am interested in hearing more. For example, Shari says to me, "Brian, you look bored and I'm angry with you." I might say, "Shari, I'm glad you're speaking up, Why do you think I might be bored?" I want people to explore their reactions, not just explain themselves. I also try to protect people's egos from feeling injured or shamed.

**BZ:** You told me that group members need the leader "to love them, to compete with them, to placate them," and so on. Please say more.

**Brian Ashin:** I think I said people sometimes react to the therapist as a parent. They will love, want to be loved, will compete and placate,

essentially act out all the same needs and tensions they experienced in their family as children. And this is the beauty of group. Not only are the transference feelings towards the therapist but to one another as well, as sometime siblings and sometimes parents. This provides a rich environment for people to rework their old and persistent difficulties.

**BZ:** Does the group turn on you sometimes? If so, what might that be about?

**Brian Ashin:** It's oftentimes safer to express anger and aggression towards the leader than towards one another. Or someone is angry with me because they feel ignored or dropped by me in some way. It's not necessarily the feeling of anger to me that is important as much as the possible block to expressing it. In groups, we want people to experience and express the full range of human emotions, not just the ones they were taught to feel or express to gain acceptance. This is the path to fuller self acceptance, better self esteem and emotional resilience, and a greater capacity to enjoy intimacy with others.

**BZ:** Please talk about counter-transference in a group setting. And about objective counter-transference.

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**"We say that the [therapy] group recreates the original family and also becomes the second chance family where the difficulties arising from childhood can be reworked. Having people explore their relationships in the here and now in some way makes group members very important to each other. This allows for the surfacing of old destructive patterns arising out of childhood experiences. It's very powerful to have one's history come alive without even talking about history."**

## Resources about Group Therapy

### Books:

Nitsun, M. (1996) **The Anti Group: Destructive Forces in the Group and their Creative Potential** Rutledge

Ormont, L.R. (1992) **The Group Experience**, contact Center for Group Studies to purchase: [www.groupcenter.org](http://www.groupcenter.org)

Rutan, S. J., and Stone, N.W., and Shay, J. (2007) **Psychodynamic Group Psychotherapy** 4th ed. N.Y. Guilford Press

Yalom, I.D. and Lescz, M. (2008) **The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy** 5th ed. N.Y. Basic Books

### Resources for the Professional:

**American Group Psychotherapy Association** -- [www.agpa.org/](http://www.agpa.org/)

**Group Therapy Home Page** -- by Haim Weinberg -- [www.group-psychotherapy.com/](http://www.group-psychotherapy.com/)

### Resources for those Curious about Group Therapy:

**How Group Therapy Helps** -- [brianashin.com/services\\_offered/group\\_therapy](http://brianashin.com/services_offered/group_therapy)

**What is Group Therapy** -- [psychology.about.com/od/psychotherapy/f/group-therapy.htm](http://psychology.about.com/od/psychotherapy/f/group-therapy.htm)

**Group Psychotherapy - An Introduction** -- [www.group-psychotherapy.com/intro.htm](http://www.group-psychotherapy.com/intro.htm)

**Group Works!** -- AGPA -- [www.agpa.org/group/consumersguide2000.html](http://www.agpa.org/group/consumersguide2000.html)

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# Brian Ashin on the Richness and Rewards of Therapy Groups

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**Brian Ashin:** If transference is the feelings the client has towards the therapist and towards other group members, counter transference is all the feelings the therapist has towards the client/s. Subjective counter transference is the experience I had with a female client just a bit older than me whom I immediately experienced some anxiety with. I realized that she unconsciously reminded me of my older sister who used to boss me around and apparently still have some resentment about. So these feelings came from my more or less unresolved past.

Objective counter transference are the feelings that the client may consciously or unconsciously want me to feel and are not generated from unresolved conflicts. For example; The sexy and provocative group member will generate both sexual interest in some and annoyance in others. The reasons for this behavior may be out of the person's awareness. They might not even be aware they are acting in such a way. Unconsciously, the behaviors may be meant to generate interest all the while pushing people away. So, if I'm feeling interested and annoyed, this is what the other is wanting me to feel, for whatever the reasons may be. We call this objective counter transference because it is provoked and not having the origins inside of me. The beauty of this is that my feelings are telling me something about the person that the person is not yet able to tell me about himself or herself.

**BZ:** And what about lateral transference within the group?

**Brian Ashin:** So lateral transference is the distorted feelings group members have towards one another. Adele feels annoyance towards Aaron for his criticism of her. The feelings of annoyance are real and expected to the circumstance. But if she reacts with rage, this might represent a deeper earlier hurt, or if she can't express her annoyance towards him then she might be making him more powerful and fearful (like a parent) then he really is. In addition to "transference" there is something more destructive in people's lives. This is what Harry Stack Sullivan called "parataxic distortion." This is the individual's persistent tendency to distort his or her perception of others in ways that are damaging to healthy sustainable relationships. This is something that group therapy is particularly helpful in surfacing and resolving.



**BZ:** A lot is going on in a group at any given moment, be it verbal or non-verbal. How do you sort it out, when you're part of it?

**Brian Ashin:** Well, I realize I can't possibly know all that may be happening at any given time. I just try to be aware of what strikes me, I pay attention to others in the group and try to pay attention to what I might be experiencing myself. This oftentimes gives me some more information about what may be unspoken in the group.

**BZ:** Talk about the power of group therapy.

**Brian Ashin:** We say that the group recreates the original family and also becomes the second chance family where the difficulties arising from childhood can be reworked. Having people explore their relationships in the here and now in some way makes group members very important to each other. This allows for the surfacing of old destructive patterns arising out of childhood experiences. It's very powerful to have one's history come alive without even talking about history.

**BZ:** How does one's family dynamic get recreated in a group setting?

**Brian Ashin:** For example, John's father left his mother when his brother was born. John was eight at the time. His mother, a warm and caring person had to go to work to support the family. John was called upon to take care of his brother more than he really wanted to. But he was an obedient child and rose to the occasion. Over time, he took over the parenting while his mother went off to work to support them. John's resentment was hidden even from himself. John became a very giving and selfless father and employee. He could always be counted on to go the extra mile. John came to therapy and then to group because he felt depressed and emotionally depleted and was frequently turning on himself. In the group, other members felt a lot of warmth and gratitude to John, he was so caring of everyone. He took on the role of comforter and the balm that soothed every one's pain. Here we see John taking care of all his little brothers. Over time, others felt resentment towards John because they realized he never shared anything about himself. He would also fall into bouts of self attack in the group. John was not allowed (by himself) to be angry or to ask for anything for himself, so when other's began to express their resentment, rather than being angry with others, he would turn on himself.

**BZ:** You said to me, "Group therapy work is not about connecting per say, but understanding better how you connect in the world; not about having better relationships with others, but having a better relationship with yourself." Please explain what you mean, and give us some specifics.

**Brian Ashin:** Group therapy, like any depth therapy aims to help people become more emotionally resilient, more able to take responsibility for oneself and one's choices and be more honest in their relationship to themselves and with others. What makes group different than individual therapy is that there are many more people in the room to have impressions about and reactions to. The increasing ability to reveal and explore your thoughts and feelings toward group members allows for greater self awareness.

Alex is a placater, a people pleaser. She's afraid of and anticipates disapproval. Hidden beneath the need to please is a sadness and resentment. As other group members help her see she has other reactions than being "nice", she can develop the ability to be more honest and less self sacrificing.

**BZ:** "Group therapy is regressive -- you either tighten up and clamp down, or you begin to see your essential similarity to others." Say more.

**Brian Ashin:** The condensing of time and the focus on the "here and now" surfaces people's needs for care and warmth, rivalrous and competitive feelings and the worry there is not enough attention to go around. People begin to feel childlike. If they can put these thoughts and feelings into words, it is a mature expression of what is universally experienced by all. If one feels too ashamed of these thoughts and feelings and can't speak of them, there's a tendency to deny them, wanting to banish them from awareness. That is the "tightening up and clamping down." You probably know yourself what it's like when you have a strong feeling and want to say something to someone important but we have some fear, it causes inner turmoil. The relief comes when you speak up. Usually, others share the same thoughts and then one feels less alone, less different and less shame.

**BZ:** People in groups can "feel needy and greedy"....more on that, also.

**Brian Ashin:** I think I said people in groups can feel "needy and greedy" if they are ashamed of their desire for contact with others, for attention and particularly when early dependency needs get activated. Hopefully, they see others have the same needs and desires and the feelings get normalized. When people decrease their need to protect themselves from perceived criticism or rejection from others, they become free to make deeper connections and contact with others.

**BZ:** Revealing oneself is the most crucial part of the therapy process, yes?

**Brian Ashin:** Yes, correct. If one can't be known, real intimacy, real connections with others can't happen.

**BZ:** How does group work help a person go up the "maturation ladder?"

**Brian Ashin:** Well, John has the opportunity to see how he's in some way frozen in the role of his brother's keeper, and everyone else's for that matter. His attempts to be loved by being a selfless person have led to depression and feeling depleted. In his group, with the feedback of others, his needs for being cared about, which he hides, can be expressed. He can develop the capacity to both give and receive, a more mature and fuller way to love and be loved.

**BZ:** What's challenging in groups for you?

**Brian Ashin:** I want my group members to have as worthwhile and powerful experience as I have had in my training groups. So, sometimes, I am challenged to be more patient and let things unfold at the group's pace, not how I want it to go.

**BZ:** When you do run across a group that's resistant, what are some specific ways you might shift that?

**Brian Ashin:** Greg may be sitting there morosely drumming his fingers. I might ask Adele what she thinks Greg is telling us with his drumming. He is putting thoughts and feelings into behavior and Adele's response may motivate Greg to speak his mind or her own, for that matter.

**BZ:** What are the most important ingredients in creating a group that feels safe?

**Brian Ashin:** A contract where all agree that attacking is not productive and the shared desire for exploration and understanding.

**BZ:** What's in your contracts?

**Brian Ashin:** The two most important points are that people put their thoughts and feelings they are having towards one another and the leader into words and not behaviors and that confidentiality is protected. All else is commentary.

**BZ:** Who shouldn't one be in a group?

**“Group therapy, like any depth therapy, aims to help people become more emotionally resilient, more able to take responsibility for oneself and one's choices, and be more honest in their relationship to themselves and with others.”**

**Brian Ashin:** People in the midst of a crisis, whether it be a psychiatric crisis or an emotional crisis like a divorce or other loss need the initial support of an attentive therapist. While groups are supportive at times, they are not support groups and someone in a crisis needs more individual attention. Also, people with addictions that are still active, i.e., not yet in solid recovery (they have their own style of helpful groups) and people who have impulse control difficulties.

**BZ:** How many groups are you currently leading?

**Brian Ashin:** I currently lead four groups.

**BZ:** You mentioned to me that group therapy is less popular than it was at one time, and there are fewer groups currently taking place in Ann Arbor. Years ago, I used to lead T-Groups through Project Outreach at U-M, and students would get credit in the psychology department for being in the T-Groups. In any given trimester, perhaps a total of a hundred students would be enrolled in any one of 10 or 12 groups. While the T-Groups were not group therapy, they were groups in which the members were focused on what was happening within the group, in present time, and they were dynamic and powerful. What's now keeping people from joining therapy groups?

**Brian Ashin:** Bill, those were the good old days. The seventies were a time of exciting experiential education. I remember taking part in T-Groups while a student. It was both scary and exciting at the same time. It really brought me face to face with my anxieties and provided an opportunity to be bold. But back to your question.

For starters, there are economic reasons. When people want to use their insurance, they find there is a limit to sessions allowed. So they choose individual therapy, a model they are most familiar with. Most of my clients use their insurance with their individual therapist and pay out of pocket for



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group therapy. It is also difficult to keep optimal critical mass up in groups. I think a lot of therapists got tired of trying to fill their groups so they gave up on them, and groups slowly disappeared from the scene.

The group therapist also has to convey to potential group clients the efficacy of group therapy. This means working with the client's expected resistance. It is typical for a client to have resistance to joining a group out of fears of being seen in a negative light, or not wanting to share the therapist with others. A group therapist has to be confident in her or his group skills as well as believe in the power of group therapy. Without this confidence, it's difficult to encourage a prospective member to explore his or her resistance to entering group therapy. And, for a group to continue over the long haul, the therapist needs to have a firm grasp of group dynamics and skills specific to group therapy. This usually means a commitment to additional training.

**BZ:** Brian, a couple of personal questions. Are you from Michigan, originally? Do you have children? If so, how old are they now, and tell us about them, briefly.

**Brian Ashin:** I'm originally from New Jersey but I grew up in Michigan. We moved to Philadelphia in 1979 and returned in 1990. My son just finished up his masters in Sports Management and is living in the east, and my daughter is currently studying abroad. She talks of becoming a social worker like her mom and dad.

**BZ:** What do you love about the Ann Arbor area in the fall?

**Brian Ashin:** Ann Arbor is a great four season city. We're fortunate to live in the Huron River Valley. I love to kayak on the Huron during the fall when the leaves are changing color and the air is brisk.

**BZ:** Thank you, Brian.

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