

# Potential difficulties

With careful planning and execution, it is possible to run a course or workshop on effective interaction with patients with few difficulties. The priority will be that the group will work as a cohesive whole to improve and develop their skills, knowledge and attitudes towards effective interaction. There are, however, potential difficulties to which a tutor needs to be alert so that should any of them arise, prompt action can be taken and further difficulties avoided. Some of these problems, such as triggering, can be caused because of the interactive nature of the work. Others can occur in any group no matter what the subject to be taught or how it is being taught, such as a participant who is disruptive or a constant late arriver.

If difficulties do arise within a group, the tutor should stay as calm as possible and not become defensive, no matter how much he/she is challenged. Very often a quiet approach will be much more effective than confrontation. Below, some of the common difficulties are considered with suggestions for dealing with them.

## PERSONAL VERSUS PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

In other chapters, the advantages of teaching effective interactive skills based on clinical problems of the group are extolled. The other side of that coin is that in any teaching that asks for experiential material, there is a risk that some participants may wish to bring up issues that are more personal than professional. Such participants will see a workshop or a course as a vehicle for working through their own problems even when the tutor has made it clear when briefing the group that their agenda should be based on professional problems. This is not always a deliberate attempt to bring in personal issues, but what comes to mind when thinking of clinical problems may be influenced by unconscious worries on a personal front. It can be seen in Chapter 12 that in an agenda-setting session the problems identified are screened by the tutor to check exactly where they come from and where they apply. In Chapter 10 the importance of screening out a problem that is too close to home is also shown.

No matter the situation, whether setting an agenda, setting up a role play or, indeed, giving a formal or semi-formal lecture on a difficult area such as bereavement, the tutor is dependent on participants' honesty. It is important to point this out to group members and also to make absolutely clear that the course or workshop has the aim of improving interactive skills and is not there for a cathartic experience.

This approach may appear to be over-careful in terms of the stress put on the aims of the course, the nature of the agenda to which the group will work and the care for the members of the group. The rationale for such stress both at the beginning and throughout the course is based on the experience that if personal issues are brought into the forum, then difficulties will ensue. This applies not only to the participant who wants to share his or her problems, but for the group as a whole, which may not be able to deal with the information given. The individual, if he or she is allowed to disclose personal problems, may disclose too much and then be very embarrassed at meeting the group and working with them later on. The group members, too, may be very embarrassed and may perhaps even take sides on what is an appropriate answer. What happens then is that, instead of a session that is helping to improve skills in a professional setting, group members will find themselves moving into therapeutic mode. This is unacceptable unless the whole group has agreed to use the time in such a way, and the tutor has the necessary skills to handle the session.

The following is an example of what might happen in a situation where the professional problem is overshadowed by a personal one. Sally had identified an agenda item on anger. She gave a scenario where an elderly lady was in hospital and her daughter was very dissatisfied with the care being given. Sally offered to role play the patient and, when screened, assured the tutor that this was not too close to home in any way. Half way through the role play, Sally burst into tears and started telling the group about her dying mother who she felt very guilty about because she could not visit as often as she would like to. When she did visit, she was never satisfied with what was going on.

At this point the tutor stopped Sally and said, 'It looks as if the problem that you gave us was in fact very closely linked to a personal problem. You may not have realized this but I can see you're upset and I think we should stop this role play now. Would you like to say any more to the group or would you rather we left it until later?' Sally decided to leave it until later when she was able to talk through with the tutor the nature of her problem. As a result she contracted to go to the hospital and, as calmly as she could, tell them how unhappy she was.

It could be argued that this problem could have been aired in front of the whole group. The rationale here for making it less public is linked with the fact that Sally has to work with the group after such disclosures and should not be left to feel that she has said too much to too many.

If the link between the material being used in the class is linked unconsciously with a personal problem of a student, then triggering may occur.

## TRIGGERING

One of the difficulties of using interactive teaching methods is that the tutor, when planning the course and the material to be covered, cannot know what personal 'luggage' each participant brings with them. What can be certain is that no-one will arrive for any session in neutral. What is also important to realize is that individuals who are working on such a course will not necessarily know what sort of material might trigger them, for if someone has had something very difficult or unpleasant happen to them in the past, they may well have 'put the lid on' that experience and closed their minds to it. What will trigger such a memory is often something quite small, and although it does not happen very often, the tutor needs to be alert to the fact that triggering is possible when handling difficult material such as clinical problems, bereavement and other areas involving deep emotions.

In obvious areas such as sessions on bereavement, the tutor can screen for anyone who may find it difficult by saying, for example, 'This next session on bereavement is likely to be quite heavy. If any of you have been bereaved in the recent past and feel that this would be too painful, then please feel free to go to the library and I'll give you a handout later on the material covered.' In fact, such an offer is seldom taken up since most participants feel that they can deal with whatever comes to them. Indeed, triggering often occurs in a totally unexpected way, as follows:

Jane, an experienced nurse, was on a course and agreed to role play a 'confronting colleagues' session where she, in fact, would be the difficult colleague and someone else from the group would confront her with undesirable behaviour. Jane herself had given the problem as an agenda item and had explained that she was having difficulty with her manager who would not understand the need for more resources in her particular area. She had agreed to play the role of the recalcitrant manager because she knew the sort of responses that the manager had given.

In this instance, the colleague confronting Jane was quite assertive and before the tutor could stop the role play because she could see that the confronting colleague was getting aggressive, Jane suddenly burst into tears and then ran from room a few seconds later. The tutor asked if someone in the group would go and see if Jane was all right and she went on with the session. At the coffee break she found Jane and talked to her.

Jane subsequently described an incident when her first marriage had broken up, and relayed with absolute clarity the situation she was in when she had felt totally helpless in the face of her husband's infidelity. The colleague who had been confronting her (very successfully) had rekindled that feeling of helplessness in Jane and, in sitting there, not knowing what to say as the recalcitrant manager, she suddenly was transformed back to the last time that she had felt so helpless. This had triggered all the grief about the loss of her marriage that she had shut away at the time that it had happened. She described how everyone had said how wonderfully she had coped at the time, and admitted that her first marriage had not been in her mind in any way when she agreed to the role play. The two items were totally unconnected as far as she was concerned.

It is argued here that if a participant becomes triggered by the events happening around them, that the tutor's place is with the group and that a group member should go to talk to the person who has left the room. If the person does not leave the room but sits obviously very upset, then the tutor should ask her gently if she would like to leave. It is then the participant's choice whether to stay in the room or whether to leave it. In either event the tutor, again, should explore the problem with the participant's permission during a coffee break, and never assume that if someone says, 'I'm OK', that they really mean it.

Triggering can, however, have a beneficial effect as well, though this is more rarely seen. In a recent session entitled 'Child of a dying parent' (Help the Hospices) a young man became very distressed when the section on the angry adolescent was shown. The tutor asked him if he would like to leave and he said he did not want to leave or to talk. He appeared to settle down and accept the rest of the session without any problems.

Over a coffee break the tutor asked the young man if he would like to tell her what the problem had been. He described the death of his mother when he was nine years old and the fact that he had been pushed from pillar to post, from one aunt to another, during his formative years, and then explained that as an adolescent he had been very undisciplined, shoplifting and stealing from his father and committing a number of other 'sins'. He had always blamed himself, from his perspective, for his appalling behaviour and said to the tutor, 'When I saw the video this morning and realized that all that anger was due to the fact that my father had mishandled my mother's death and my involvement in it, then suddenly I was able to let myself off the hook.' Such experiences are very rewarding and also very rare.

Triggering will have an effect on the group for it may be uncomfortable for them to experience someone else's grief. They may turn their attention to the tutor, arguing that either he or she should have

gone out after the person who has left the room, or that they should have spent more time being more careful. This need to blame someone for someone else's distress needs to be taken on board by the tutor. If it is talked through, the group will generally realize that the only course of action was the one that was taken.

## THE NON-PARTICIPATOR

Any group will include a wide range of personalities, from the extrovert to the very quiet and often non-participating member. It could be argued that if somebody is quiet and does not want to contribute, that is their right. Also, the individual may still be learning and absorbing the content of the session. However, other group members can become quite angry if there is someone who simply does not make any sort of contribution at all. It is therefore quite important to think of how one deals with this without causing the non-participator to feel embarrassed, or the group to feel that they are somehow 'carrying' the non-participator.

As a rule of thumb, there is little point in making an issue of non-participation in the first session or two because different individuals require different amounts of time to feel comfortable enough to take part. However, if the non-participation continues, then the tutor has a choice of exploring what, if any, the problems are and how to deal with them. This can be done in class by directing questions particularly to the participant or out of class where the tutor can ask the participant if there are any problems in terms of contribution.

The problem in asking someone in class a specific question means that they are put on the spot if it concerns something that is totally out of their experience. This can lead to a participant feeling that they are being 'picked on' and made to look small in front of the rest of the group. For this reason alone it may be worth taking to the individual during a coffee or lunch break. The tutor might say something as follows:

- Tutor: 'Joan, how are you enjoying the course so far?'  
Joan: 'I'm really enjoying it.'  
Tutor: 'I wondered, because you're actually very quiet in class.'  
Joan: 'I'm actually a very quiet person and the others all seem so clever compared to me.'  
Tutor: 'It would be good, though, to hear your opinion some time. I wonder if you could think about that.'

The aim here is to reassure the participant that they are valued as much as other people and that their contribution will be used in a positive way. It also allows the tutor to differentiate between the person who is quiet because that is in their nature and the person who is quiet because they

are perhaps hostile to the material being presented or have problems that are getting in the way of their being a full group member. If this latter is the case, then the tutor will need to explore with the participant whether the hostility can be overcome or, indeed, whether this participant should be with the group at all. If the individual is not participating because they are hostile and this is not identified and addressed, then they may well turn into the disruptive participant at a later time.

Sometimes group pressure can deal with non-participation. The tutor may be asking for suggestions for a way forward on a particular topic and one group member may turn to the non-participant and say:

'Jane, you haven't said anything yet. Don't you have any ideas?'

This sort of pressure from the group, if it is handled in a good-humoured way, may well break the deadlock of somebody who is a little nervous of saying what they think. Non-participation is much less likely to occur in an atmosphere where teaching is based on positive feedback and a sense of value is given to each member of the group.

### THE OVER-PARTICIPATOR

Just as groups almost always have quiet members, they also have members who seem to want to hold the floor most of the time. What is required here is that the tutor explores to see why this person needs to be always at the forefront, and this must definitely be undertaken away from the main group. The problem is every bit as important as the non-participant because the person who takes over and does not give other people a chance to talk can be even more irritating than someone who does not talk at all. For this reason, group pressure is much more likely to happen sooner rather than later. However, if the group is largely passive and prepared to let someone do all the work, then the tutor will have to step in and control what is happening. The interaction may go as follows:

Tutor: 'Carrie has shared with us that her problem in this role play is that she simply doesn't know how to deal with what seems to be quite justified anger. Has anyone in the group got any ideas?'

John: 'Yes, I don't mind. I'll take over if you like. I don't mind doing this role play; I feel very good about this.'

Tutor: 'Well, no John, that's not what I'm wanting. What I'm asking for are suggestions from all members of the group as to how Carrie can deal with this anger.'

John: 'Well, what she needs to do is to tell the patient that it's OK to be angry.'

Tutor: 'Very good, John. Has anybody else got any ideas?'

John: 'And then...'

Tutor: 'John, I appreciate your input but I'm wondering if other people in the group would like to make a contribution too.'

In this sequence, John wanted to take over, but the tutor sensitively controlled his participation so that he felt valued but was made to understand that other people had the right to make suggestions. The important thing here is that the teacher goes back to John so that he does not feel that he has been closed down forever.

The over-participant does often have a problem and if the tutor talks to that person they may find that this is somebody who has got a chip on their shoulder about something in either their personal or professional lives. In such an instance, the tutor's role is simply to help that individual to gain some insight into what is happening.

The over-participant can be useful in a group in that if, for example, a small group is meeting and going to feedback to the larger group, the over-participant is often a very good choice of person to check that everybody has a chance to speak up. In this way, they are being invited to take on more responsibility, but in a way that will control their over-exuberance. They are also very useful in the first role play or the first audio feedback session in that often they will jump forward and start the ball rolling.

### THE DISRUPTIVE PARTICIPANT

The disruptive participant almost inevitably has a problem. The problem may or may not be associated with the material that is being covered but very often there are links. The disruptive participant often shows first as the non-participant and if this is the case, the quiet hostility is often very apparent in the way that the participant sits or reacts, even at a non-verbal level.

The following is an example of a non-participant who was quiet in the first two sessions and then became disruptive. The material being covered was 'Talking to AIDS patients and their families' and the particular problem that had been identified was to do with friction between the parents of a homosexual AIDS sufferer and the AIDS sufferer's partner. The tutor suggested a role play between the AIDS sufferer and his partner, who felt he was being pushed out by the patient's family.

The participant, who up to that time had been very quiet, suddenly became very vocal about role play and said that he did not feel that role play was appropriate in sessions to do with AIDS patients. The rest of the group became very unhappy and the disruptive participant challenged the tutor as follows:

Guy: 'I do not want to role play. I think that it would be damaging for everybody and if you want role play then you can do it without me.'



Tutor: 'Guy, I'm sorry you feel like this. I wonder could you sit down while I negotiate with the rest of the group? We're going to do some role play and I felt we'd agreed to that so what I wanted to do now was to go through the safety rules so that immediately after coffee we could start with the first role play. I wonder how you feel about that in view of Guy's obvious antipathy to the idea?'

Marge: 'Well, why don't you go through the ground rules. I don't mind role playing, I don't know about anybody else.'

Margaret: 'I don't mind either. I don't know what's the matter with you, Guy.'

Guy: 'I've made myself clear.'

Tutor: 'Well, look, let's go through the ground rules for role play, and I have to say now Guy that if you don't want to do the role play, then I suggest you go to the library after coffee.'

During the coffee break the tutor found Guy and asked him if he would come into her office, and then she asked him why he was so angry before the role play had even started. Guy was very quiet and then after careful exploration from the tutor admitted that he was, in fact, a homosexual and that his lover was currently in hospital very sick. He felt that the whole business of AIDS was difficult for him.

The tutor was very puzzled because she did not understand quite why he was on a course which she had been told comprised nurses who had all requested to attend. At this point, Guy admitted that he had been sent on the course by his manager who felt that if he understood some of the issues to do with AIDS patients, he would more readily come to terms with his own situation. Guy and the tutor agreed that he should leave the course and the tutor promised to talk to his manager about the reasons for this.

In the above example, Guy had every right to be upset. It was totally inappropriate for him to come on a course, with a very personal agenda, which was for professional discussion and learning. So often this is the case with the disruptive participant; they have some major problem that is exacerbated by sitting in a class discussing areas that are far too close to their own personal experience.

There are times when a participant appears to be disruptive for no particular reason. This happens more often in a course where the participant is bound to attend rather than choosing to attend. If an individual is not particularly interested in the subject, it can be a very pleasant game to be disruptive. In this situation the tutor has little choice but to confront the participant and ask them if they are prepared to work with the group or whether they would prefer to leave.

There is a belief that if the course is part of the overall training or education of a participant, then the tutor is bound to have that person in

her class whether or not he or she is disruptive. This is simply not the case. The tutor can make it quite clear that there are ground rules for the group to work to and that if people do not wish to work to those ground rules, then they should not attend the sessions.

#### THE LATE ARRIVER

In many ways the late arriver is like the disruptive participant in that they appear to want attention. It may not be that they are angry, as the disruptive participant often is, but there is usually a very good reason why somebody is late over and over again. An example in one of the 'Help the Hospices' workshops was of a doctor on a course that included other doctors, nurses, social workers and a member of the clergy. This doctor arrived late at the start of the course and was late in arriving at several of the sessions, usually coming in with a lot of fuss. The first session was coloured by the individual arriving late and giving lengthy explanations as to what had happened on her way to the course.

The temptation is to play into the late arriver's hand by answering comments and getting involved, much to the annoyance to the rest of the group who arrived on time and would like to get on with the matter in hand. In many years of experience the only way to deal with the late arriver is to ignore them completely in terms of their arrival. This means that you do not recap on what has been happening in the few minutes that they have missed because this will feed what appears to be attention-seeking behaviour. Similarly, there should be no discussion about the time of arrival. Ideally, the tutor will continue with whatever was happening as if that person had not come into the room late and then, since the play is not working, the late participant will probably start coming on time.

The female doctor described who came late to several sessions and was completely ignored in terms of late arrival, though not in terms of contribution to the group, finally arrived at one session 15 minutes before it was due to start. The tutor was at the white board working out the next session from the original agenda and went on working at it though she nodded pleasantly to the individual. After a few seconds, the doctor said to the tutor, 'Can't you notice I'm early?' and the tutor smiled and said, 'I did notice, and I am pleased.' This doctor was never late again.

Whether an individual is a non-participant, an over-participant, disruptive or disruptive in being a late arriver, the outcome is usually a test of will between that individual and the tutor. If the tutor remains calm and continues to work with the group, very often the 'maverick' will begin to conform. It is important, however, always to explore why any member of a group behaves in an obviously different way from other group members. Sometimes it is simply that the individual needs

to be different, but very often problems are identified and will need to be addressed.

### THE HOSTILE GROUP

Perhaps the most difficult situation of all is when the group is hostile as a whole. Again, this seldom happens but when it does, it needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. It may be, for example, that the group is not pleased to be where it is. For example, members on a workshop away from their own clinical setting usually attend because that is what they want to do but occasionally a group might be set up by their manager who asks an outsider in to do some sessions with them. If the tutor finds such a group to be hostile, then there is little point in doing any work with that group until the hostility has been acknowledged and explored. This may take place as follows:

Tutor:

'I get the feeling that somehow as a group you are not happy because you are not participating well and certainly I don't feel that you are very pleased to see me. I wonder if we can look at this?'

(Silence)

'Mary, would you like to tell me how you feel about being here?'

Mary:

'Well, I was sent. The manager came round and said she was getting this course put on for us and I'd got to come because I needed it.'

Sue:

'That's why I'm here. I was told I had to do it. I had to give up my days off to come here.'

John:

'Well, I felt I wasn't doing my job properly the way it was sold to me, two days with you on how to communicate. I don't think I've got any problems with communicating.'

The tutor found that each member of the group had been identified by a manager and sent on the course to improve their skills, almost as a punishment. The tutor had to negotiate with the group as follows:

Tutor:

'I'm sorry you feel the way you do and, yes, if you had to give up days off I can see that would irritate you, and certainly I can understand you being irritated if you've been made to feel that somehow you are not as effective as you could be. I am now faced with a difficult situation. We are in this lovely hotel, the weather is beautiful, I know from last night that the food is good – I wonder if we can make the best of the time we've got together and see what we can do that you will find useful?'

This approach worked with that group, primarily because it was then made clear that the only areas of communication that would be covered would be those that were identified by the participants with the exception of basic assessment. The group began to feel that they had some input into their two days and they felt, too, that they were being encouraged to use the time to their, rather than their manager's, advantage. This was of course an illusion because the areas that they wanted to explore were very much those that their manager had identified. What had gone wrong in this situation was that the manager had not recruited the staff in a sensitive way that would have left them feeling that they had some choice.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, a range of potential difficulties has been explored, which may occur in the teaching of communication skills. The tutor needs to be alert to identify such difficulties and to take swift but sensitive action.