**How to fail at running a Balint Group**

**Antony Froggett**

**Introduction**

I like to think of myself as something of an expert when it comes to running groups that fail. Several years ago I was asked to set up a 'learning set’ group for locum GPs for a year. This group stumbled along, typically with two or three members each time, before coming to a close. I’ve set up a private Balint Group that started with eight GPs and closed after a year because of low attendance. I also co-led a group with Ceri Doman for junior doctors at a local teaching hospital. This group had nine people signed up for it on paper. Four people attended the first couple of sessions but the numbers quickly dwindled to the point where we were sat by ourselves eating the sandwiches that had been ordered for the group!

Talking to other Balint Group leaders, I don’t think these experiences are uncommon. Many groups are enthusiastically conceived but few reach full maturity. Why is this the case? What are the factors that lead to a group not enduring? Thankfully I have also conducted groups that have managed to survive, including a private Balint Group that has met for the past ten years. So, what is the difference between groups that thrive and those that limp along or close after a short period?

In *The 'essential' and 'desirable' characteristics of a Balint group* (1994), Paul Sackin gives a helpful outline of the core elements that are necessary to run a successful Balint Group. He describes the task of the group and gives helpful tips about things such as the size of the group and not using case notes for presentations. He refers to “the standard rules for small group working” such as confidentiality, but what are these rules? They are omitted perhaps because a list of all the things one had to think about in order to lead a successful group would be long, tedious and perhaps rather obvious. I doubt a complete list of “rules” would be possible. In this short article, I have set myself the much easier task of listing some of the ways to get things wrong when running a Balint group.

Here is my list of ten ways to run a group in order to demoralise participants, encourage drop-outs, and to ensure the early closure of the group.

10 ways to run a group that will fail: 1. Run the group as soon as possible without

minimal planning. Allow yourself to get carried away by your own enthusiasms. Assume that each enquiry about the group is someone who is committed and willing to join. Start with low numbers if possible and assume that others will soon be joining the group.

2. Isolate yourself professionally from others if 10

you can. If it is a private group - don’t bother to network with colleagues - send out an email to a general email list. Better still, get someone else to do this on your behalf.

3. You may be asked to run a group to fail in an organisational setting. Although this may not always be explicitly stated - look for signs such as the group being optional, last minute organising, and clashes with other meetings. If you are asked to run a group in an organisational setting then assume that all practicalities have been sorted out beforehand. Turn up on the day and see what happens. Don’t speak to tutors or managers; especially do not speak to secretaries, caretakers, or admin assistants. Assume everyone in the organisation knows what you are doing and are fully supportive of the group.

4. If you are setting up a private Balint Group try to avoid any discussion of money. Wait until the last minute to mention fees and then ask, in an embarrassed way, in order to communicate the lack of value you attach to the group. If possible don’t ask for money at all and pay all expenses yourself. This will ensure that you are left resentful and do not want to continue running the group.

5. Choose an inappropriate venue if possible - medical settings are best, if these are not available choose another venue with strong emotional feelings attached to it (I know of a course that was successfully closed by running it in a hospice for several years). Venues that are obscure, or with poor parking, or that are very busy are a good option. Choose a room that might get double­ booked or where you might be interrupted.

6. Don't have any ‘selection’ or induction process for the group. Let anyone who wants to join come along, regardless of their interests or suitability.

7. Don't ask for any commitment from participants - be as flexible as possible. Let people come for a trial period rather than making a commitment to attending. If people do not attend the group don’t follow them up by email or telephone. If this is not your style, then alternatively you can anxiously contact each member about the group to check if they are going to attend the next session - in order to communicate that you don't think the group will survive without their unwavering commitment and attendance.

8. Choose a co-leader who is unknown to you, or (even better) someone whom you actively dislike or distrust. Don’t take time to discuss and plan running the group together. Dyna­ mics of competition and rivalry are very help­ ful in getting a group to fail.

9. Don’t have any system for taking notes about the group. Do not record attendance, apologies and notices of future absences. Do not write down your thoughts about how the group went or ideas that you have had about the group.

10. Finally, avoid reflecting on how the group is going. Arrange your schedule so that you have to immediately dash off after running the group without speaking to your co-leader. Do not arrange any form of supervision or consultation to help you with thinking about the group.

**Conclusion**

I have listed above ten of the things I have done that have resulted in the failure of Balint and other groups that I have conducted. There are, of course, many other ways to fail at running a Balint group. You may even have done some of these yourself. Most of the ways of failing stem from not wanting to think about the ordinary difficulties of running a group. Paradoxically, by trying to avoid the feeling of failure we often inadvertently bring it about. By avoiding awkward conversations with colleagues we temporarily feel less anxious, but we are also no longer in a position to learn from our experiences. Running a successful Balint group requires many of the same attributes needed for being a participant in a Balint group - one must learn how to reach out to others in order to achieve something that is not possible by oneself, to be tolerant of one’s own and others’ mistakes, and to have the courage to learn from these. Instead of trying to avoid failure we should perhaps consider

how we might embrace it; that is to celebrate our mistakes, stumblings and mishaps as we learn. In the words of Samuel Beckett “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”1

1. Samuel Beckett, W orstward Ho (1983)

Antony Froggett is a training analyst and training supervisor with the Institute of Group Analysis. He was the Director of Training for the IGA training courses in group analysis in Manchester (2007-2012). He leads two on-going Balint groups for GPs in Manchester - one co-led with Ceri Doman and the other by himself.

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