

## Working in Groups

An important aspect of learning on your course involves taking part in a group project, where your ideas, skills and knowledge are pooled with other members of the group. Your work may also be assessed collectively rather than individually. This is a part of the curriculum where students often face unexpected challenges. Your learning is focused not only on the task, but also on the experience of working with others, within the group dynamic. This leaflet is designed to help you think about this, especially focussing on the thoughts and feelings you may have when collaborating with others.

At different points in our lives we all have to learn to survive and thrive in small groups. We are born into one, the family, and throughout our lives we may become members of many different groups. These include those of our own choosing, such as friendship groups, and those where we have less choice, such as work teams.

As with any other part of your course of study, working in a small group is an opportunity to build on an existing strength or discover a new aspect of yourself. The idea of recreating your self and finding new skills can be an exciting prospect, but can equally hold fears and the risk of disappointment.

Feelings we experience in small groups can be powerful, whether positive or negative. We may have a sense of cooperation, excitement and warmth towards our fellow group members. Or we may feel antagonistic and blocked, unable to make our voice heard, or to contribute as we would like. Taking time to reflect on any fears or negative feelings that arise when you are in your group will help you to cope better with any difficulties or disappointments.

### Difficult feelings you may experience

- I am not going to fit in. I feel like an outsider
- I will be ignored or overlooked and won't be heard
- I will have to take the lead and get the blame if things go wrong
- I am going to end up in my usual role, picking up the pieces
- I am doing most of the work and the assessment will not reflect this

- I don't feel really involved or motivated and the group has to carry me
- I am fed up with the way other people dominate the group
- I wish I was in another group. The other groups seem so much more together.

As well as your own responses, you may be influenced by the feelings of other group members, whether or not they are voiced. For example, you may have expectations that are higher or lower than those of other group members, and you may feel either disappointed, or daunted by the amount of effort expected by your fellow group members. Feeling out of step with the group can dampen your enthusiasm.

The group will inevitably generate its own 'culture'. The negative or positive feelings you experience within the group may not be generated by a single individual, but may be related to the culture of the whole group. In an optimal situation, this will be a culture of optimism and enthusiasm, where people support and encourage each other. However, if the group assignment does not progress as well as you hoped, you may all begin to feel that the group is not functioning well. These feelings can spiral into a shared hopelessness. In such cases it can help to think about how the group is operating, and your position within it.

### What might help

- when setting up a new work group, it is important to establish clear guidelines about individual tasks and expectations. Your tutor may go through this process with you, allowing you the opportunity on your meeting to establish agreements or ground rules for the group. These may include respect for each member's contribution, and codes of behaviour such as attendance and punctuality. As the work progresses, it may also be helpful to call a meeting to review or revise these initial agreements and to decide whether the group is still working within its initial agreement

- if there are problems, give yourself time to think about the overall dynamics of the group in order to try to understand where the difficulties lie. You can also suggest to the group that you all give some time to thinking about it together. Clearing the air in this way can improve the effectiveness of subsequent meetings about the task
- if the group seems unable to progress, it can help to think about the individual strengths you can all contribute. Most people will contribute more if they feel that their contribution is valued, so it is important to acknowledge each other's efforts
- if you have a sense that your experience of the group is so difficult that it is getting in the way of your contribution to the task, then it could be useful to let others in the group know. If it turns out that your feelings are shared by others in the group, it could be useful to bring in an outsider, for example a tutor, to help the group move forward and return to the task
- if you think that very difficult personal experiences you are having in the group are triggering painful memories, perhaps from the past, it could be helpful to seek counselling, to explore these and help you get back to working effectively in the group.

### Additional Sources of Help

- if you find that problems in your group are not getting resolved and you want some help from outside, you could ask to meet individually or as a group with the seminar or module leader. Giving some thought in advance to the points you want to discuss will allow you to get the most from this meeting
- if you would like to think more generally on the skills needed for working in groups, you may find it useful to refer to the Study Skills Handbook (Second Edition) by Stella Cottrell, in the Palgrave Study Guides Series. Chapter 5, 'Working with others' offers information, suggestions and methods of evaluating your contribution in the group.

### How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:  
<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling Service or email at: [cmh@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:cmh@mdx.ac.uk)

### Further leaflets in this series

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 Addictive behaviour  
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 Cognitive Behavioural Therapy  
 Coming to Britain to study  
 Coping with trauma  
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 Helping someone you are concerned about  
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