

Case Study 1

A support group of persons with cancer meets weekly at a local hospital in a medium-sized community. Although the group is open-ended, a stable group of seven women, four white and three black, have met for the past three weeks. The group members are beginning to trust each other, share personal experiences with friends and family, and discuss ways of coping. Four days before the meeting under discussion, an incident occurred in the community in which a white police officer shot a black youth. Racial tensions in the community have been high since then.

All seven members are in attendance at the fourth meeting. The meeting begins with the social worker, a black woman, greeting members and asking them how they have been doing this week. The members talk about how they are feeling physically and emotionally. Conversation is much more guarded, however, than at the previous meetings. Black people and white people avoid looking at each other, and there is little cross-racial communication.

Members start talking about experiences they have recently had with the medical care system, and a couple of interchanges suggest that racial tensions are running high. One of the white members mentions by name a secretary and a nurse. She says they were very rude to her the last two times she was at the clinic and that she is going to report them to someone. Race is not mentioned but all members are aware that the people involved are black. Shortly thereafter, one of the black members describes an emotional healing session she participated in at her church. A white member remarks, "If you people were less emotional and paid more attention to facts, you'd do better in this world." A black member retorts with obvious anger, "You don't seem to be doing too well yourself."

The leader intervenes in the session and asks the members what is going on in the group, stating she feels the atmosphere has changed. Members do not reply, and the group worker notes that they have seemed caring and supportive of each other until today. She asks what makes this meeting different, but no one responds, and members appear tense and uncomfortable. The worker reminds the women that they agreed to discuss group problems with each other in the group. She inquires whether the recent shooting of a young black man in the community by the police has anything to do with what is going on with members right now. The more outspoken members, one black and one white, say yes, and others chime in to express their agreement. One of the white women says she does not feel safe discussing personal matters in the group anymore. A black member then states that the white member would not know anything about not

feeling safe until she puts herself in the shoes of a black person facing a white police officer.

At this point the leader initiates a discussion of the community racial incident. She starts by establishing rules that there are to be no racial slurs, no name calling, and no threats. Members, however, should be free to express feelings without being put down. With a few gentle proddings from the leader and these baseline instructions, members begin to express their feelings.

The leader notes how hard it must be for the women to talk about issues related to having cancer, given the racial tensions in the community right now. She reminds members of the ways they have been supportive of each other in previous meetings and asks if they would like to continue as a group. All of the members nod in agreement. One of the black members then states that so far this group has been very helpful. A white member replies that she feels the same way, but after the shooting of the black youth she does not know if the group would ever be able to deal with personal concerns as freely as they had in previous weeks. The worker states that by facing racial issues openly as they have today, they are finding ways to discuss difficult matters. She praises the group for being honest with each other and for their willingness to tackle problems.

The group members agree that they need the support the group has been providing. After a few more minutes of discussion about the racial incident, the women proceed to talk about some of the challenges they face because they have cancer. One of the members describes how upset she was when a neighbor was afraid to let her child play in the member's home for fear that he might catch cancer. The members get into an intense discussion of people's fears of those who have cancer and the stigma attached to the disease.