Assignment 6.1: Group Plan Proposal

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Rationale:

In the U.S., approximately 6 million people aged 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's disease as of 2023 (Gaugler et al., 2024). A significant percentage of these individuals rely on family caregivers, with 80% of care provided by family members, friends, or other unpaid caregivers (Gaugler et al., 2024). This underscores the critical role family caregivers play in managing the daily challenges associated with Alzheimer's. According to the Alzheimer's Association, 11 million Americans provide unpaid care for individuals with Alzheimer's or other dementias (Gaugler et al., 2024). This caregiving includes both personal and medical care, which can be physically, emotionally, and financially demanding.

Many family caregivers experience significant stress. Over 20 hours per week are spent caregiving, and some provide full-time care, which negatively impacts their own health (Gaugler et al., 2024). Nearly 50% report emotional stress, and caregivers face higher rates of depression compared to the general population (Gaugler et al., 2024). Additionally, caregivers often incur substantial out-of-pocket costs, sometimes spending thousands annually on care-related expenses (Gaugler et al., 2024). Caregiving can also strain family dynamics, especially when some family members are less involved or supportive, potentially leading to feelings of resentment or conflict (Pratt, Schmall, Wright, & Cleland, 1985). To cope with these stresses, caregivers often use different coping strategies. Problem-focused coping involves organizing routines and managing medical appointments (Pratt, Schmall, Wright, & Cleland, 1985). Emotion-focused coping entails seeking support from family, friends, or support groups, and engaging in self-care

activities like meditation or exercise. On the other hand, avoidant coping, where caregivers distance themselves from the stress or deny the burden, can lead to negative long-term effects (Pratt, Schmall, Wright, & Cleland, 1985).

Caregivers of Alzheimer's patients also experience "anticipatory grief," mourning the loss of cognitive and functional abilities long before the person's death (Skodol Wilson, 1989). This grief, combined with feelings of guilt, frustration, and the emotional toll of watching a loved one decline, can lead to depression and isolation (Skodol Wilson, 1989). Social isolation is a common issue, as many caregivers withdraw from social activities due to their responsibilities, further exacerbating feelings of loneliness and alienation (Skodol Wilson, 1989). Additionally, the demands of caregiving, especially as Alzheimer's progresses, can lead to burnout, marked by exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and constant vigilance (Skodol Wilson, 1989). Financial strain is another concern, as caregivers often reduce work hours or quit their jobs, leading to lost income and additional out-of-pocket costs (Skodol Wilson, 1989).

Support groups are vital for caregivers, offering a space to share experiences, express emotions, and receive validation. Sharing caregiving experiences can reduce isolation and provide relief from stress (Skodol Wilson, 1989). These groups also help caregivers find meaning in their roles, focusing on the quality of time spent with the person with Alzheimer's (Skodol Wilson, 1989). Over time, caregivers can adapt to the changes brought on by Alzheimer's, building resilience and learning strategies to manage the daily challenges of caregiving (Skodol Wilson, 1989). The concept of support groups for caregivers emerged in the 1980s, recognizing the emotional toll caregiving took on families (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Early groups were informal, led by volunteers or healthcare professionals. As awareness of Alzheimer's grew, these

groups became more structured, offering emotional support, caregiving techniques, and information on the disease (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Healthcare professionals have become increasingly involved, adding psychosocial and therapeutic support (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Three main models of support groups have emerged: peer-led, professionally-led, and hybrid groups that combine both peer and professional leadership (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011).

Caregivers report that support groups help them feel less isolated and more understood, offering significant emotional relief and reducing stress and depression (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Many caregivers learn effective coping techniques from other participants and professionals, improving their ability to manage caregiving challenges (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Support groups also provide crucial educational resources, helping caregivers feel more competent and less overwhelmed (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). The sense of community that support groups foster is another benefit, as caregivers gain validation from knowing others are facing similar challenges (Barnes et al., 1981). Sharing caregiving experiences also helps reduce feelings of guilt and shame, often felt when caregivers cannot meet the high demands of the role (Barnes et al., 1981).

Despite these benefits, support groups face challenges. Many caregivers are hesitant to join due to the stigma surrounding dementia or because they feel embarrassed about their caregiving experience (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Time constraints, imposed by caregiving duties, make it difficult for caregivers to attend support groups (Barnes et al., 1981). Additionally, not all caregivers have access to support groups, particularly in rural areas or with limited financial resources (Barnes et al., 1981). There is a clear need for online support groups to accommodate caregivers unable to attend in person (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). It’s also

important to tailor support groups to meet the needs of different caregivers, such as those caring for early- or late-stage Alzheimer's patients (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). By expanding access to both peer-led and professionally-guided groups, caregivers can improve their mental well-being and caregiving effectiveness, leading to better outcomes for both caregivers and patients (Barnes et al., 1981).

I propose an online group counseling program for family caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's or other dementias to improve their mental health. The online format removes barriers such as travel time and financial constraints, allowing caregivers to participate from home. This hybrid model, combining peer support and professional guidance, ensures caregivers receive emotional support alongside practical advice (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). The group will offer a supportive space for caregivers facing emotional, physical, and financial stress. It will focus on providing emotional support, coping strategies, and practical guidance, especially around anticipatory grief, and will teach methods like problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping (Pratt, Schmall, Wright, & Cleland, 1985). The group will also emphasize the importance of social support, self-care, and offer educational resources about disease progression and caregiving techniques (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Recruitment will occur through Alzheimer's organizations, online forums, healthcare providers, and social media. A licensed counselor specializing in dementia care will lead the group, providing structure and emotional support while creating a safe space for sharing experiences.

The group will be small (6-10 participants) to encourage meaningful interaction, with sessions lasting 90 minutes weekly for 8-10 weeks (Gladding, 2020). Virtual meetings will make it accessible to caregivers with time or logistical challenges. Sessions will begin with a 15-minute

check-in, where participants briefly share their current feelings and situation. This will help establish a supportive environment and allow the counselor to gauge the group's emotional state (Gladding, 2020). The next 45 minutes will focus on the weekly topic, with discussions on themes like anticipatory grief, family dynamics, stress management, and self-care. These conversations will blend professional input with caregivers' personal experiences. The final 20 minutes will introduce coping strategies such as mindfulness, problem-solving, and relaxation exercises, giving caregivers the chance to practice within the session. The group will end with 10 minutes for additional questions, reflections, and plans for applying coping strategies.

Group Objectives:

The online counseling program for family caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's aims to address several important needs. One key objective is to provide emotional support and validation by creating a safe space where caregivers can share their feelings and experiences without judgment. This support helps reduce isolation and boosts mental well-being (Alzheimer's Association, 2024) (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011). Another goal is to teach caregivers coping strategies to manage stress, emotional strain, and anticipatory grief. The program will introduce various techniques, such as problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, along with self-care practices, to help caregivers better navigate the challenges of their roles (Pratt, Schmall, Wright, & Cleland, 1985). The program also emphasizes the importance of fostering social support and peer connections, giving caregivers an opportunity to share experiences and provide mutual encouragement, which can reduce feelings of guilt and frustration (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011) (Barnes et al., 1981). In addition, the program will offer caregivers valuable information and practical advice on Alzheimer's disease progression and caregiving techniques, empowering

them to feel more capable in their caregiving duties (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011) (Alzheimer's Association, 2024). To address the risk of burnout, the program will include strategies like relaxation exercises, mindfulness, and problem-solving techniques to help caregivers take care of their own well-being (Resource: Skodol Wilson, 1989) (Gladding, 2020). Lastly, the program will ensure that caregivers who face barriers like time constraints, financial limitations, or geographical challenges can still participate by offering an online format. This approach removes common obstacles and makes support accessible to a wider audience (Hornillos & Crespo, 2011) (Barnes et al., 1981). These objectives are designed to provide comprehensive support for caregivers, improving both their mental health and their ability to manage the demands of caregiving.

Informed Consent:

You are invited to participate in an online counseling group designed to provide support for family caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias. This program aims to address the emotional, physical, and financial challenges of caregiving, offering a space for caregivers to share experiences, learn coping strategies, and receive professional guidance. The group will consist of 6-10 caregivers and be led by a licensed counselor specializing in dementia care. Sessions will be held weekly for 8-10 weeks, each lasting 90 minutes, and will combine both peer-led discussions and professional input. The focus will be on emotional support, stress management, anticipatory grief, coping strategies, self-care, and practical caregiving techniques in a safe, supportive environment.

Confidentiality is a fundamental aspect of the group. You are expected to respect the privacy of other participants by not disclosing personal information shared within the group outside of the sessions. However, while every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality, it cannot be fully guaranteed. Confidentiality may be breached in situations where there is a risk of harm to yourself or others, or if required by law, such as in cases of suspected abuse or threats of harm. As the group will be conducted online, you are encouraged to take steps to ensure your own privacy, such as using a secure internet connection.

Participation in this group is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of services, and if you decide to leave the group. It is requested that you inform the group leader. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your current or future access to other services. Although participation in the group may lead to emotional discomfort due to the sensitive nature of caregiving experiences, the group aims to provide emotional relief, practical support, and a sense of community, helping reduce feelings of isolation and improving your ability to manage caregiving challenges.

By signing this document, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided, including the nature of the group, its limits of confidentiality, and your rights as a participant. You are voluntarily agreeing to participate in the group and consent to the terms outlined. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask before signing.

If you wish to participate, please sign below:

Participant Name (printed): _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Group Leader Name (printed): _____

Group Leader Signature: _____

Date: _____

Detailed Plan for Two Group Sessions:

Session One:

The goal of this session is to help caregivers understand the sources and impact of caregiver stress and introduce basic strategies for managing stress. The session will begin with an opening activity called the "Check-In Circle" (Greater Good Science Center, n.d.). This activity will last for fifteen minutes and aims to foster connection and openness by encouraging participants to share their current emotional state and caregiving experience in one sentence. Participants may also describe any challenges or successes they've had since the last session. The group leader will model the activity by sharing their own emotional check-in first, setting a tone of openness and mutual support.

Following the opening, the group will engage in a skill-building activity called "Identifying Stress Triggers and Coping Techniques". This activity will last thirty minutes and aims to help caregivers recognize the sources of their stress and introduce effective coping strategies. First, a group discussion will take place, where the group leader will ask participants

to describe what stresses them most in their caregiving roles. Some guiding questions will include, “What parts of caregiving do you find most overwhelming?” and “What emotions come up most often as a caregiver?” After identifying these stressors, the group members will brainstorm the coping techniques they use and evaluate whether those techniques are helpful or harmful. Next, participants will be given a worksheet that lists common caregiving stressors and corresponding coping strategies. Each participant will complete the worksheet by identifying one major stressor and one coping strategy they will try using in the coming week. Participants will then share their chosen stressor and coping technique with the group, receiving feedback from the group leader and other group members. The group leader will highlight problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Pratt et al. 1985).

The session will conclude with an activity called “One Takeaway”. This activity will last fifteen minutes and each participant will be asked to describe one key thing they will take away from the session. This could be a new coping strategy, a new understanding of caregiving stress, or a personal insight. To close the session, the group leader will summarize the main points discussed and remind participants that caregiving is a shared experience, with the group providing mutual support. The session will end with a brief mindfulness exercise, guiding participants to take deep breaths and acknowledge any positive feelings from the session. Materials required for this session include pen and paper for each participant and a stress and coping worksheet. A watch will also be needed to keep track of the time for each activity.

Session Two:

The second session focuses on helping caregivers process anticipatory grief and build emotional resilience. The session will start with the opening activity, “Feelings Wheel”. This activity will last for fifteen minutes. Participants will be provided with a "Feelings Wheel" and asked to choose one emotion that they are currently feeling in their caregiving role (Centervention, n.d.). They will briefly explain why they chose that emotion, allowing for emotional expression and connection. The group leader will model this by sharing their own emotion and the reason for choosing it, creating a space for honest emotional sharing.

The core activity of the session will be “Anticipatory Grief Mapping”. This activity will last thirty minutes with the goal of helping participants understand anticipatory grief and identify their personal experiences with it. The group leader will begin with a discussion about anticipatory grief, explaining that caregivers often mourn the loss of their loved one's cognitive and functional abilities before their death (Skodol Wilson, 1989). Participants will then create a simple map or timeline of their caregiving journey, noting key moments when they’ve felt grief, even if the loss hasn’t fully occurred yet. After completing the map, participants will share their experiences with anticipatory grief if they feel comfortable. The group leader will guide a discussion on coping strategies, such as journaling, talking to family members, or taking time for self-care (Skodol Wilson, 1989). The group will then practice a brief relaxation or grounding exercise to help cope with grief. This exercise might include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or focusing on positive moments in caregiving.

To close the session, participants will engage in the “Grief Reflection and Affirmations” activity. This activity will last fifteen minutes. Each participant will write down one affirmation or positive self-statement they can use when feeling overwhelmed by grief in the future, such as

“I am doing the best I can” or “It’s okay to feel sad.” Participants who feel comfortable will share their affirmation with the group. The group leader will close by emphasizing that anticipatory grief is a natural part of caregiving and does not indicate failure. Participants will be reminded to continue building emotional resilience by finding moments of joy and practicing self-compassion. The materials needed for this session include a printable "Feelings Wheel" for each participant, pen and paper for note-taking, and a whiteboard for group discussion. The group leader will also need a relaxation or grounding exercise script.

Outcome Evaluation Outcome:

Thank you for participating in this counseling group. Your feedback is valuable as it will help us improve the experience for future participants. Please take a few moments to complete this evaluation. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Demographic Information

1. Age: _____

2. How long have you been caring for someone with Alzheimer’s or another form of dementia?

_____

Leadership of the Group

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

1. The group leader was approachable and easy to talk to.

1 2 3 4 5

2. The leader effectively facilitated group discussions and activities.

1 2 3 4 5

3. The group leader demonstrated knowledge and expertise in supporting caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's/dementia.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The leader created an environment where I felt comfortable sharing my experiences.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The leader was responsive to the emotional needs of the group members.

1 2 3 4 5

6. The leader offered helpful feedback and suggestions when necessary.

1 2 3 4 5

Facilities

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

1. The online platform or virtual setting used for the group was easy to navigate.

1 2 3 4 5

2. The technical quality of the virtual meetings (e.g., audio, video) was sufficient for effective participation.

1 2 3 4 5

3. The length and structure of each session were appropriate for the content being discussed.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The size of the group (6-10 participants) allowed for meaningful interaction.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The group meeting schedule (frequency and duration of sessions) worked well with my availability.

1 2 3 4 5

Effectiveness of the Group in Achieving Its Objectives

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

1. The group provided a supportive environment for me as a caregiver.

1 2 3 4 5

2. The group helped me develop new coping strategies for managing caregiver stress.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I gained a better understanding of anticipatory grief and how to process it.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The group sessions improved my ability to manage difficult emotions related to caregiving.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I learned useful caregiving techniques and resources from other group members.

1 2 3 4 5

6. The group allowed me to connect with others facing similar challenges and reduced feelings of isolation.

1 2 3 4 5

7. The group was effective in addressing both the emotional and practical aspects of caregiving.

1 2 3 4 5

Open-Ended Questions

1. What was the most helpful part of the group for you?

2. Were there any topics or areas you feel were not addressed adequately during the group?

3. How do you feel the group could be improved for future participants?

4. Do you feel more equipped to manage the challenges of caregiving after participating in this group? Please explain.

5. Any additional comments or suggestions?

Resources:

Resources for Members of the Counseling Group:

1. Alzheimer's Association

Website: https://www.alz.org

Description: Offers comprehensive resources for caregivers, including information about Alzheimer's disease, caregiving tips, and support groups. It also includes a helpline for caregivers seeking advice and emotional support.

2. National Institute on Aging (NIA)

Website: https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/caring-for-someone-with-alzheimers-disease

Description: Provides evidence-based information on caregiving, including practical advice on caring for someone with Alzheimer's, managing daily activities, and dealing with behavioral changes.

3. Caregiver Action Network (CAN)

Website: https://caregiveraction.org

Description: Offers a range of resources including toolkits, support groups, and advice to help caregivers manage their responsibilities and maintain their own well-being. The site also includes a caregiver forum for peer support.

4. Family Caregiver Alliance (FCA)

Website: https://www.caregiver.org

Description: Provides educational materials, fact sheets, and support programs specifically tailored for family caregivers of individuals with dementia or other chronic illnesses.

5. The Dementia Caregiver Center

Website: https://www.dementiacaregiver.com

Description: A dedicated resource offering articles, strategies, and support for those caring for individuals with dementia. Topics include self-care tips, coping strategies, and managing difficult behaviors.

Resources for Group Leaders:

1. The Alzheimer's Association - Caregiver Support

Website: https://www.alz.org/professionals/professional-providers/caregiver-support

Description: A resource for professionals providing caregiving support, offering tips and strategies to improve caregiver interactions, and information about training for professionals working with caregivers.

2. The National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP)

Website: https://www.acl.gov/programs/support-caregiver

Description: Offers information on the federal resources available for caregiver support, including funding for caregiver services, training materials, and caregiver education programs.

3. Caring for Alzheimer's Caregivers: A Training Program for Counselors

Website: https://www.alz.org/professionals/professional-providers/training]

Description: This training program provides resources for counselors and other professionals working with caregivers, including educational modules on Alzheimer's care, communication strategies, and offering emotional support.

4. Center for Excellence in Dementia Care

Website: https://www.alz.org/professionals/professional-providers/training-center

Description: Offers webinars, resources, and tools specifically for professionals working with Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers, covering best practices in communication, caregiving, and support.

5. The Compassionate Friends - Grief Support for Caregivers

Website: https://www.compassionatefriends.org

Description: While focused on grief support, this site provides valuable resources on how professionals can support caregivers dealing with anticipatory grief, emotional distress, and the loss of a loved one.

Issues in application:

Practicality of Conducting the Group in the Proposed Setting:

Running the group online is a practical option, especially considering the challenges faced by family caregivers. Many caregivers have limited time due to their caregiving responsibilities, and an online group offers flexibility that allows them to participate without needing to travel or adjust their schedules. It's particularly beneficial for caregivers who might not have access to local support groups or live in more rural areas. Additionally, the combination of peer support and professional guidance in a virtual setting creates a dynamic environment where participants can learn from each other and receive expert advice. The planned 90-minute weekly sessions over 8-10 weeks are a manageable format, ensuring that the group can offer both structure and the opportunity for meaningful interaction.

Obstacles in Implementing the Group:

While the online format offers many advantages, there are some potential obstacles to consider. One challenge could be technological barriers. Some caregivers may not have access to reliable internet or may struggle navigating virtual meeting platforms, which could affect their ability to engage in the sessions. Another concern is keeping participants engaged and committed to attending every week. Caregivers often deal with burnout, and with their many competing responsibilities, it might be hard for them to make time for regular participation. Additionally, some participants may have varying levels of emotional readiness, especially when dealing with sensitive topics like anticipatory grief, and this could impact group dynamics. Caregivers' individual circumstances, such as a sudden increase in care needs or personal crises, could also interfere with their ability to consistently attend.

Ethical and Cultural Concerns:

There are several ethical considerations with this group. Confidentiality is a major concern, particularly in a virtual setting. While the group will be private, participants need to be reminded to ensure their home environment is secure so that sensitive conversations are not overheard. In terms of cultural sensitivity, caregivers come from diverse backgrounds with different values, traditions, and perspectives on caregiving. It's essential to ensure that the group remains a respectful space where all participants feel heard and understood. Cultural differences could influence caregivers' approaches to managing Alzheimer's or their emotional responses to caregiving challenges. For example, some cultures may place a greater emphasis on family caregiving, while others may be more inclined to seek professional help. The facilitator should be attentive to these differences and foster a supportive atmosphere where participants can share their unique experiences without judgment. Additionally, some caregivers may face stigma related to Alzheimer's in their communities, so it's important to create an environment where they feel comfortable and validated in their experiences. Being aware of these factors will help ensure that the group is effective, ethical, and inclusive for all participants.

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