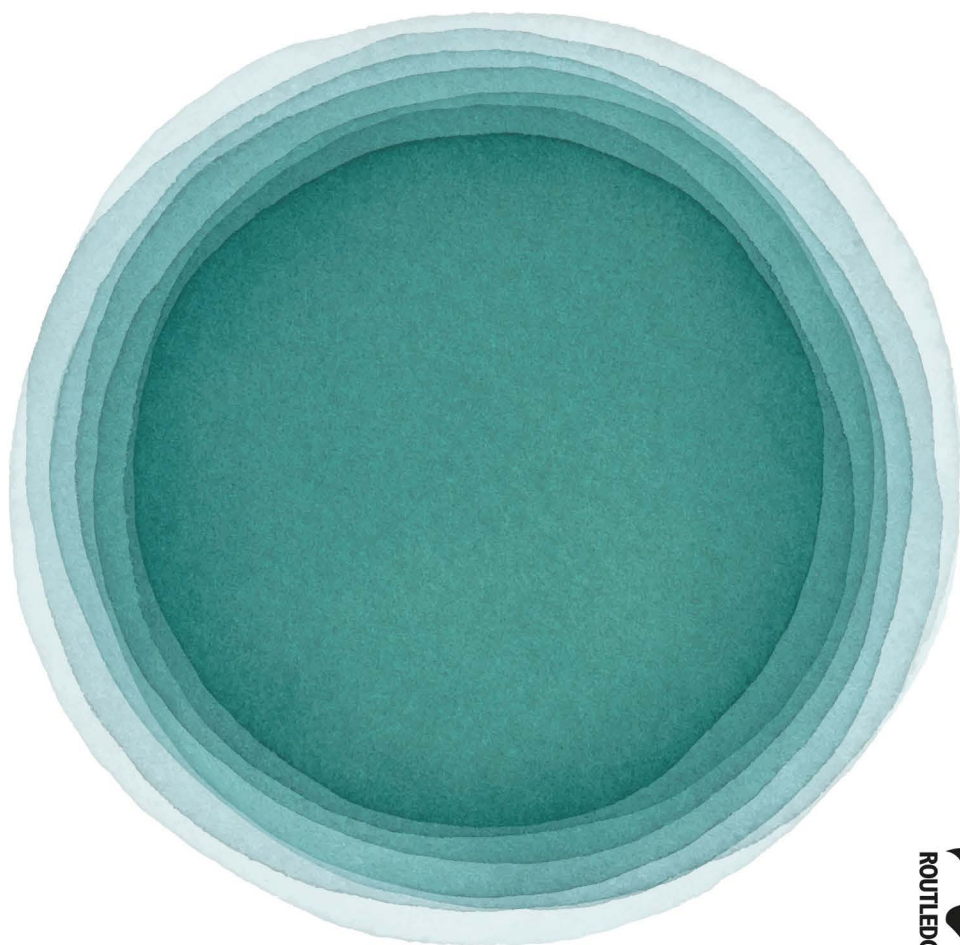


# EATING DISORDER GROUP THERAPY

A Collaborative Approach

CAROLYN KAROLL AND  
ADINA SILVERMAN



“Having run inpatient and outpatient eating disorder groups for over 45 years, I expected to have several things to contribute to Carolyn Karoll and Adina Silverman’s book *Eating Disorder Group Therapy: A Collaborative Approach*. Reading this book is like taking a superb college course on the topic with a gifted, interesting, and understanding professor. From how to screen applicants, organize a group, facilitate process and content, and deal with innumerable possible problems, these two authors cover everything. They even give the clinician numerous topics to use and how best to present them (materials included)! The detail in this monumental book is fantastic and should prepare a good clinician on best practices for eating disorder group therapy. They even make it look easy. If you ever want to run an eating disorder group, this book is a must. I regularly consult for eating disorder clinicians and treatment programs, and this will be on my recommended reading list.”

**Carolyn Costin, MA, MEd, LMFT, CEDS, FAED**, founder of The Carolyn Costin Institute, author of *The Eating Disorder Sourcebook, 8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder* and more

“What a treasure trove! This book offers the practical strategies and inspiring guidance you need to lead with confidence! If you’re looking to amplify the power of group therapy for folks in eating disorder recovery, consider this manual your trusty GPS.”

**Rebecca Scritchfield, RDN**, Co-Founder of Self-Care for Diabetes virtual support group and Author of *Body Kindness*

“Eating disorders are healed through connection with others and eating disorder professionals know how challenging it can be to create treatment groups that are successful. Karoll and Silverman have created a step-by-step guidebook that lays out all that a clinician needs to know to create successful and meaningful eating disorder groups to facilitate and foster that essential connection.”

**Anna M. Lutz, MPH, RD, CEDS-C**, Lutz, Alexander & Assoc. Nutrition Therapy

“This book strikes a rare balance between offering the ‘nuts and bolts’ of group work as well as appreciating the soulfulness and meaning of the enterprise. This book is chock full of exercises that any therapist can use to further their work. I find that these exercises enhance group work and help the group to be a meaningful vessel for the deep and meaningful work that each individual in the group must undergo in order to find healing. The book appreciates the depth and nuance of group work without losing sight of the realities and practicalities that

make this work possible. In particular, this book is an excellent resource for any therapist who is considering group work as a part of their eating disorders treatment. No eating disorders therapist's shelf is complete without this book."

**Dr. Dana Harron, Psy.D,** Founder, Monarch Wellness & Psychotherapy and author of *Loving Someone with an Eating Disorder*

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# Eating Disorder Group Therapy

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This is the only book that teaches clinicians how to run an effective, evidence-informed, and multi-disciplinary eating disorder group, incorporating psychoeducation, process group dynamics, and experiential elements.

Whereas group therapy for eating disorders is widely used across many levels of care, the outpatient setting is uniquely poised to deliver effective, multi-disciplinary group therapy. The first part of this book offers practical guidance for conceiving, organizing, and initiating outpatient groups, equipping clinicians with the necessary tools to foster supportive and transformative environments. The second includes seven chapters that delve into the core themes of eating disorder recovery, featuring 60 activities and discussions empowering participants toward growth and resilience. This book teaches clinicians how to collaboratively lead groups to optimize cohesion and harness the collective strength of the group to facilitate change. It provides thorough rationale and psychoeducation for each group exercise and is complete with sample forms, worksheets, and handouts.

Suitable for clinicians and students alike in the eating disorder field, this guide on how to successfully begin and run your own group is a necessary resource.

**Carolyn Karoll, LCSW-C, CEDS-S**, holds a master's in Social Work from the University of Maryland at Baltimore. She has her own private practice in Baltimore, Maryland and is an iaedp™ certified eating disorder specialist and supervisor.

**Adina Silverman, MS, RD, LDN**, holds a master's in Nutrition and Wellness from Benedictine University. She is in private practice in Baltimore, Maryland and specializes in the treatment of eating disorders.



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# Eating Disorder Group Therapy

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A Collaborative Approach

Carolyn Karoll and Adina Silverman

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To the women of Thrive, past and present, your strength, resilience, and unwavering spirit inspire us daily. This book is dedicated to each of you, for your courage on the path of recovery, your vulnerability in sharing your stories, and your steadfast support for one another. – CK & AS

To my beloved mother, Barbara, you were my guiding light, instilling in me the belief that my voice mattered, and empowering me to make a difference. Your love and inspiration are woven into the pages of this book, a testament to your enduring legacy. – CK

To my beloved husband and three children, your endless curiosity, laughter, and zest for life remind me to be the best I can be. To push myself to do hard things. To grow. I am blessed to share such a beautiful life with each of you. – AS

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## Notes About the Authors

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Carolyn Karoll, LCSW-C, CEDS-S, is a highly regarded therapist with a wealth of qualifications in her field. She holds the distinction of being a Maryland State Board-Certified Licensed Clinical Social Worker, a Maryland State Board of Social Work approved supervisor, a Certified Eating Disorder Specialist, and an Approved Supervisor from the International Association of Eating Disorders Professionals Foundation. She holds a bachelor's degree in Women's Studies (now Gender Studies) from Towson State University, complemented by a master's in Social Work, specializing in clinical mental health from the University of Maryland at Baltimore. She is a member of the National Association of Social Workers and the Academy for Eating Disorders.

Carolyn's extensive experience in the field of eating disorders includes her roles as a family and group therapist at The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt Health System and as the Clinical Supervisor at The Renfrew Center of Baltimore prior to opening her private practice in Towson, Maryland, with a specialized focus on the treatment of eating disorders. Her therapeutic expertise encompasses a broad spectrum, including individual, family, couples, and group therapy. She has leveraged her expertise to present crucial topics such as eating disorder prevention, diagnosis, treatment, group therapy, and body image concerns to mental health professionals as well as the broader community. Her insights have also been featured in print media.

Distinguished by her empathetic approach, Carolyn not only supports her clients, but also educates them about the multifaceted influences that shape their body image and self-esteem. Her commitment extends to helping individuals delve beneath their struggles with food and weight, empowering them to cultivate new mindsets and skills that lead to self-efficacy, self-compassion, and self-acceptance.

Since 2015, Carolyn has co-facilitated the "Thrive" eating disorder recovery group alongside her co-facilitator and co-author, Adina Silverman, MS, RD, LDN. This group serves as a vital support system for women in recovery from eating disorders, guiding them toward achieving harmony in their relationship with food and their bodies. Carolyn's dedication to her profession and her

unwavering commitment to the well-being of her clients make her a respected expert in the field of therapy, particularly in the treatment of eating disorders.

Carolyn resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her husband and two boxers.

Carolyn Karoll

Adina Silverman, MS, RD, LDN is a renowned Registered Dietitian specializing in the treatment of eating disorders. She holds a bachelor's degree in Nutritional Sciences from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's in Nutrition and Wellness from Benedictine University. She is a member of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Academy for Eating Disorders.

After working in various levels of care in eating disorder treatment programs, Adina began her private practice in Baltimore, Maryland and continues to see clients there. She is passionate about helping adolescents, teenagers, and adults heal their relationships with food and their bodies. She supports her clients to have the courage to cultivate the relationship with food that feels best to them and reject mainstream diet culture messaging. Her thorough and compassionate approach has impacted many individuals and families and distinguished her as a leader in her professional community.

Adina regularly speaks to students, teachers, mental health professionals, and the public on the topics of eating disorders and cultivating healthy relationships with food. She has spoken at professional conferences and been featured in print media and live news broadcasts.

Adina co-facilitates the “Thrive” eating disorder recovery group with her co-author, Carolyn Karoll, LCSW-C, CEDS-S. She is energized by the strength and resilience of the women in this group and firmly believes in the transformative power of group work in eating disorder recovery.

Adina resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her husband and three children.

Adina Silverman

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## Preface

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We have been leading an outpatient eating disorder group together since 2016. Initially, we did not think long and hard about the decision to co-facilitate our group. We had worked together in a treatment setting for years, worked smoothly together, and had complementary strengths both clinically and professionally. Not long after our group took off, we realized that what began as a way to split the load turned out to benefit our group members profoundly. We provided a more holistic group experience by having the therapist and dietitian in the room at the same time. We each responded to topics brought up or different group members' comments through a different lens. We had additional insights and wisdom to offer to the community. Our group members raved that they had never experienced a group like ours.

We wondered, *Was our group really that much of an outlier?* We knew that creating and running an outpatient eating disorder group took careful consideration, ample planning, and skilled leadership. One cannot simply throw a group together and rush the end result. After realizing that some clinicians were unaware of this or lacked the resources to acquire this knowledge, we decided to disseminate our approach and materials to others.

Mental health clinicians may receive training in facilitating groups, but that training is likely not specific to eating disorder group therapy. Registered Dietitians, on the other hand, may never receive formal support group training. With the rapid growth of private practices in both of our disciplines, it would not be surprising to see an increase in outpatient groups offered. Yet facilitators need an evidence-informed, outcome-driven resource for providing this needed service. We set out on a mission to offer new ideas, creative prompts, and inventive discussions that utilize both clinicians' skill sets and experience. The fruit of that labor is this book.

Eating disorders are isolating illnesses. They sometimes keep sufferers from spending time with loved ones, trying new experiences, or engaging in life in the ways they want to. The precious time of their lives may be tied up looking up calories, compulsively exercising, or hiding away to engage in symptom use. Feelings of disappointment in oneself, or an even stronger sense of shame, form

an emotional bunker that is difficult to penetrate. This can feel confining and limiting for some who have been in individual therapy for years. This is why coming together as a group, validating shared struggles, and lifting sufferers out of their isolation has such a profound impact.

Eating disorders are insidious conditions with devastating consequences. It is a harsh reality that eating disorders have the second-highest mortality rates among all mental illnesses, surpassed only by opioid use disorder.<sup>1</sup> The toll is alarming, as one person succumbs to the direct effects of their eating disorder every fifty-two minutes, whether through medical complications or the tragic outcome of suicide.<sup>2</sup>

In the face of this staggering reality, as clinicians, therapists, and Registered Dietitians, we have devoted our lives to helping individuals with eating disorders find their path to recovery. We have witnessed firsthand the profound impact of effective group support on individuals and their families. With great pride and dedication, we present this book as a comprehensive guide for clinicians seeking to establish and lead their own evidence-informed, multidisciplinary eating disorder therapy groups.

A group focusing on specific symptoms alone would naturally alienate some members. This was another reason we felt compelled to write this book. After working in higher levels of care, attending conferences, and reading books pertinent to the field, we wanted to create group exercises that do not assume participants hate food and are restricting food intake or are only in “thin bodies.” You will find that the discussions and activities in this book can be used for more than one type of eating disorder, for individuals in larger and smaller bodies, and for all gender identities.

Fast-forward eight years from our first co-facilitated group in 2016. The night of the week has changed, the community members have changed, and even the location has changed to a virtual group (thank you, COVID-19), but the group continues to go strong. The dedicated women who have participated in our group have inspired us, taught us, and pushed us to create group discussions and activities that are meaningful, transformational, and memorable. These women are the inspiration behind this book.

Drawing upon our collective experience of twenty-five years working with individuals struggling with eating disorders and their families, we have led a combined number of eating disorder groups in the thousands. Our passion for supporting those on the path to recovery has fueled our commitment to compile this invaluable resource.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the individuals and families who have entrusted us with their journeys toward recovery. We invite readers to join us in using this book’s knowledge, experiences, and exercises to guide their outpatient eating disorder groups. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of individuals struggling with eating disorders as we foster connection, empowerment, and healing.

**Notes**

- 1 Arcelus, Jon, Alex J. Mitchell, Jackie Wales, and Søren Nielsen. 2011. “Mortality Rates in Patients with Anorexia Nervosa and Other Eating Disorders.” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 68 (7): 724. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.74>.
- 2 “Report: Economic Costs of Eating Disorders.” *STRIPED*, September 27, 2021. [www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/).





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# Introduction

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Part One of *Eating Disorder Group Therapy: A Collaborative Approach* serves as a manual for the conception, organization, and implementation of successful virtual or in-person outpatient eating disorder groups. It provides clinicians with the tools and strategies to establish and maintain a supportive and transformative group environment. Part Two consists of seven comprehensive chapters covering critical themes in eating disorder recovery. Accompanying activities and discussions empower group participants to explore and address these themes, fostering personal growth and resilience.

Readers of this book will find a subtle focus on the female experience more than other gender identities. However, the activities and discussions are written to allow participation by all gender identities. We focus more on women because the social constructs of gender impose stricter expectations for people identifying as women to conform to these depictions.<sup>1,2</sup>

We hope readers will keep in mind several things as they use this book. For simplicity, the mental health professional will be referred to as “the therapist” and the Registered Dietitian will be referred to as “the dietitian.” In the United States, Registered Dietitians go through undergraduate education and beginning in 2024, a graduate degree minimum requirement will be implemented. Registered Dietitians must complete a comprehensive dietetic internship and pass an exam through the Commission on Dietetic Registration to earn this title. While the term “nutritionist” is often used to refer to a Registered Dietitian and is a legally regulated term in most states, it can sometimes refer to someone who has very little, if any, higher education in the field of dietetics. Professionals working with individuals with eating disorders should always encourage their patients to work with a Registered Dietitian.

The use of “therapist” throughout this book refers to a mental health professional specializing in diagnosing and treating eating disorders. This typically requires a master’s degree in clinical social work, psychology, marriage and family therapy, counseling or a doctorate in psychology followed by requirements of their licensing board.

We use the phrase “larger bodies” in reference to a body type. We are aware of the potentially problematic nature of this term, as it implies “larger than” something. We use this term as a neutral descriptor and an adjective, not a judgment. In her groundbreaking book *Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture*, journalist Virginia Sole-Smith endorses that individuals in larger bodies should choose and use the descriptor they identify with instead of others choosing these labels for them.<sup>3</sup> Following suit, we recommend that group facilitators ask about and honor the language that resonates with the group members, whether that be fat, larger-bodied, or plus-sized, just to name a few.

Throughout the book, we make a distinction between discussions and activities. Discussions are solely conversation-based; they do not require using materials or having members complete worksheets, make lists, or engaging in any other experiential task. Conversely, activities involve something more than discussion. This varies from completing a worksheet to engaging in a body scan. We hope this distinction allows group facilitators to effectively distinguish between the different exercises and easily select what they are looking for.

There is a gray box with a prompt or question inside for most activities and discussions. This feature is meant to allow group facilitators or other readers of this book to quickly identify the prompt or “gist” of a specific discussion or activity without having to read the full instructions. While other questions are posed later in the discussion or activity to further the group’s conversation, the material in the gray box is intended to capture the focus of that particular exercise for quick reference.

With each discussion or activity, several discussion questions are meant to help group facilitators commence, guide, and deepen the conversation. We pose many questions throughout this book that can be used in group discussions, but we hope that group facilitators will use this less as a script and more as a roadmap in each exercise. One of the joys of leading our groups is seeing the organic twists and turns that discussions take. We provide group facilitators with enough background information and structure to begin each exercise. We do not provide answers or expected answers to each discussion question, as the answers will vary from group to group.

For activities, all materials needed to run the activity are listed. Clarification is provided when materials differ depending on whether the group is in-person or virtual. Virtual group facilitators are encouraged to familiarize themselves with features available through virtual conferencing platforms, such as screen share and group chat, which are necessary to lead many of the activities in this book without any physical materials.

Readers will find a special section called the Facilitators’ Forum at the end of each discussion or activity in this book. This dedicated section is designed to provide support and enhance the facilitation process. Within this section, readers will discover valuable tips, recommendations, and practical strategies to create a dynamic and impactful group environment. Drawing from our own experiences

and insights, we offer guidance on navigating challenges, fostering meaningful engagement, and cultivating a supportive atmosphere for participants.

### **Notes**

- 1 Piran, Niva. 2017. *Journeys of Embodiment at the Intersection of Body and Culture the Developmental Theory of Embodiment*. Saint Louis: Elsevier Science.
- 2 Wolf, Naomi. 1991. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. New York: W. Morrow.
- 3 Sole-Smith, Virginia. 2023. *Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.



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# Part I

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# The Role of the Multidisciplinary-Led Group in Outpatient Treatment for Eating Disorders

## A Comprehensive Overview

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I have felt “normal” and understood at the end of each group and have also found myself doing some soul-searching as a result of conversation or questions asked by group members. I have been inspired, motivated, encouraged, and, most importantly, challenged by each member in different ways. This group and the women in it have shown me in their own special ways how to begin to love myself and heal.

— Former group member

Eating disorders thrive in isolation, making a supportive community vital for recovery. Group therapy offers a powerful approach, enabling individuals to connect, share experiences, and support one another on their path to healing. This chapter provides a comprehensive guide to understanding the pivotal role of group therapy in treating eating disorders in the outpatient setting.

This chapter explores the distinctive features of outpatient groups, highlighting their differences from higher levels of care. Considerations for in-person and virtual group formats and practical strategies are offered to facilitators to create inclusive and welcoming environments that foster engagement and trust. The benefits of a multidisciplinary approach are emphasized, showcasing the collaborative partnership between therapists and Registered Dietitians as an innovative and effective means of leading these groups.

Furthermore, this chapter addresses the evolving landscape of virtual group therapy, which has gained significant prominence following the COVID-19 pandemic. The benefits, challenges, and best practices for implementing virtual group therapy are examined, providing practitioners with insights to navigate this evolving treatment modality effectively.

### **Group Therapy in Eating Disorder Recovery: Breaking Isolation**

Eating disorders create an inherently isolating experience as they thrive and persist in secrecy, irrespective of their specific symptomology. The pervasive shame



associated with that secrecy and the enduring stigma surrounding eating disorders further compounds the isolation experienced by so many.

Group therapy is an essential component of comprehensive eating disorder treatment. Eating disorder support groups provide a space for members to relate to one another, reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing motivation to recover.<sup>1</sup>

When individuals enter eating disorder treatment, the transformative power of finding a supportive community of people who “get it” becomes evident. By sharing their stories and experiences, group members discover a profound sense of connection, realizing they are not alone in their struggles. Together, they inspire each other to confront the societal pressures and obstacles perpetuated by a culture that idealizes restrictive diets and thin bodies.

A safe and accepting environment is created in group therapy, fostering compassion and validation among members. This nurturing atmosphere promotes the development of skills such as self-compassion and self-validation, which are fundamental in the journey of eating disorder recovery. Additionally, group therapy offers an opportunity for interpersonal growth. Members are encouraged to practice vulnerability within the safety of the group setting, creating an environment where they can provide and receive support and accountability throughout their recovery process.

### **Group Therapy Across Levels of Care**

Group therapy is offered in all levels of care, from inpatient treatment centers and residential programs to Partial Hospitalization Programs (PHP), Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP), and outpatient settings. Despite the prevalence of group therapy in treating eating disorders, there is little guidance on this subject. This book focuses on outpatient groups and is intended to be a resource to support professionals. Its purpose is to provide support and guidance in forming meaningful groups that enrich the therapeutic experience, ultimately fostering healing and growth for individuals receiving outpatient treatment.

Treatment needs differ depending on the acuity of symptoms. Groups for patients conducted in higher levels of care typically focus on developing motivation to change, medical stabilization, and cessation of eating disorder symptoms. Higher levels of care require intense, exhausting work as one may be undergoing meal plan advancement or experiencing physical symptoms, including constipation, edema, and night sweats. For others, blocking urges to binge or exercise stirs up overwhelming emotions that the use of these symptoms has suppressed. Many of these patients are not ready to begin the work of body acceptance or build the skills to live in a diet-centered culture with narrow beauty ideals.

Patients in outpatient groups are typically ready for a more psychodynamic, experiential approach. Once a person receives adequate, consistent nutritional intake and does not regularly engage in their symptoms, such as restricting,