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For some, online group therapy is a cause for concern

By Jake Sherman

For almost two decades, Tom Kearns had problems.

They were everyday issues—stress, anxiety and anger—but like hundreds of thousands of Americans, he thought he could benefit from counseling. Each week, he went to therapy and grew closer to his Manhattan doctor, telling him stories and fears he shared with no one else.

When his therapist died, Kearns felt the need to offer the same service to others. So he started a group on the Web site MeetUp.com, where he advertised a meeting in a diner on West 34th Street in New York City. He called the gathering “Psychology In Our Lives—a group discussion.” He said he hoped to foster a community where the exchange of ideas was encouraged. He was to use his experience in therapy to help others for a \$10 fee.

The only problem: he was a television producer for the National Basketball Association with no training in psychology, therapy or counseling.

“I wanted to learn how to listen and appreciate by being around others,” he said.

MeetUp.com, a Web site that facilitates in-person meetings across the world, has become fertile ground for ad hoc therapy groups. Whether it is for everyday maladies, social anxiety or grieving over lost loved ones, the site has created a forum to overcome problems without the use of a therapist. Participation is often free and much more comfortable for some people than professional counseling.

But some experts say the groups can be more damaging to their participants than helpful. And some are afraid that in this economy, where jobs and insurance policies are being lost at a record pace, cash-strapped people think they can find therapy online without the cost of a therapist.

“If one goes to a social worker or psychologist, the professional does an evaluation. These groups are not close to professionally trained. There’s no quality control, evaluation or confidentiality,” said Jeff Kleinberg, a Manhattan psychologist involved with the American Group Therapy Association. “To me, it’s scary.”

To many, however, it remains a welcome alternative. MeetUp.com has more than six million members in close to 60,000 groups ranging from airplane enthusiasts to poker playing clubs to vampire gatherings to samurai fans. But experts like Kleinberg take issue when a group moves beyond sharing common interests and tries to heal real wounds.

Group therapy meetings are some of the most popular gatherings available through MeetUp.com. Autism support groups on the site (172 in total) have attracted more than 8,000 members and more than 6,200 people who have listed themselves as interested from as far away as India, Pakistan and China. There are also groups for widows and widowers, people with social anxiety disorders and sexual addictions.

Representatives from numerous groups declined to speak for attribution, citing privacy concerns and confidentiality. Many did not answer e-mails or respond to messages seeking comment.

Both experts and participants say the gatherings have roots in the fact that they are cheaper than professional therapy and less formal. Some group members say their outings are social, not clinical, and instead of offering

diagnoses, they exchange laughs and cries with reassurances that things will get better. But without a facilitator, Kleinberg said, symptoms of more serious problems can be missed.

“One risk is that it takes a professional to identify the difference between a relatively moderate issue for someone and a psychological problem,” Kleinberg said. “Sometimes people will seem nervous but it is just the surface of much more difficult underlying psychological problem.”

Jennifer Luongo, a Connecticut resident, said the support she has received in her group has surpassed every other form of therapy she has been a part of. After her mother died in October 2004, she had trouble relating to professional therapists. Luongo found the group “Motherless Daughters” on MeetUp.com, and after her first meeting, she said, she breathed a hefty sigh of relief.

“I finally found people who got me and understood what I was going through,” she said.

On most weeks, the group of between 10 and 12 people gathers in someone’s apartment in New York City on a Sunday afternoon. They serve food and talk about the tough times they have gone through after their losses. On Mother’s Day—perhaps the most difficult day for these women—the group heads to Central Park and releases balloons into the sky with notes to their departed mothers.

The lack of facilitator, Luongo said, has been helpful because it allows for uninhibited dialogue without the involvement of a third party who might not know the pain they feel.

But Jayme Renee Albin, a clinical psychologist who runs therapy sessions through MeetUp, said that a facilitator is critical. When she does not step into conversations between members, she said, those well-intentioned members can do more damage than good. “If I just let them go, they just reassure insecurities,” Albin said. “They are giving the same bad advice in the outside world.”

The psychotherapy business is undergoing a seismic shift, experts say, as the recession continues to send quakes through the economy. This is scary because patients are so apt to resort to these faux-therapy groups, Kleinberg said.

“Practices are down and current patients are often negotiating less frequent sessions and are taking a leave of absence if they’re frightened about their jobs,” Kleinberg said. “This is a major public health problem.”

MeetUp.com representatives said they are not yet worried. Andres Glusman, a spokesperson and vice president for the site, said that this type of interaction is important.

“You can conceivably go to professional therapists and moderated self-help groups,” Glusman said. “Seems to me it’s part of a continuum that is available to people.”

But to Kearns, the producer-turned-facilitator, informal therapy has been a life-changing experience. He has attracted almost 200 interested people in more than 70 meetings. The MeetUp.com founders even brought him in for market research.

Two years after beginning this group in dinners at the Skylight Diner between Ninth and Tenth avenues, Kearns did what the experts said he should have years ago: got a master’s degree in social work. But he says not having a degree or a license wasn’t an issue for him.

“I never had credentials,” Kearns said, “but I do have the credentials to connect with people.”