

Developing and applying a framework to understand mechanisms of action in group-based, behaviour change interventions: the MAGI mixed-methods study

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts from group session recordings obtained in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

The MAGI mixed-methods study

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Why is this important?

Group-based programmes are commonly used to support people in making healthy lifestyle changes (e.g. diet, physical activity, weight loss) to prevent growing health problems, such as obesity and type 2 diabetes mellitus. It is known that groups can have powerful influences on individuals, but little is understood about how and why groups work. This study aimed to increase understanding about how group programmes work, so that they can better support people in improving their health.

What did we do?

There were three stages to this study. In stage 1, research and theories about groups were reviewed. Materials (e.g. instructions for group leaders) and 10 audio-recordings of group sessions from three group-based weight loss programmes were then analysed. Group participants, group leaders and researchers were asked about how they thought groups worked. The information gathered was combined into a structured 'Mechanisms of Action in Group-based Interventions' (MAGI) framework. This identified, categorised and defined important group features and processes occurring in groups that explain how groups can support people to make lifestyle changes. The framework was summarised in a diagram and a table. In stage 2, instructions were developed on how researchers can use this MAGI framework to analyse what happens in groups. These instructions were used to look for real examples of group features and processes in a further 28 recordings of group sessions, and what group leaders do to help the groups run smoothly was described. In stage 3, data from selected groups in one of the weight loss programmes were used to suggest questions and develop methods for future research on group-based programmes.

Key messages

This study increased understanding of how group-based programmes work. It provides resources that can be used to improve group-based programmes when designing, leading or doing research on group programmes in the future.

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