What are the psychological functions of a holding environment between a group and its individual members?

What should the group contain for its members? What are group members to contain within themselves?

The group’s containment process allows for the group to survive the distrust and the psychological attacks from a member in the group.

In a group, we are each holding ourselves; we contain our own affect and behaviors, and we can share our authentic experience of any individual’s behavior in the group.

Group members learn to tolerate holding affect and bear the tension of holding their own behaviors. They learn to express themselves without indulging emotional reactions, and they learn to not act out their feelings onto others in the group.

‘Holding as containment’ also permits some blurring of the self-other boundary between group members. It allows for a certain amount of murkiness to be present in encounters, that can be sorted through and explored together in the group.

The group must also allow each individual the experience of having an impact on the group as a whole.

- By holding itself intact as a whole group, it can allow the resistances, the projections and the transferences of any particular member to exist between the group and the member.
An example of a circumstance when it is important for the group to hold itself intact:

- *When a client cannot look at a perspective beyond her own subjective frame, as any attempt to get him or her to hear another perspective will only feel like criticism.*

**The Fundamental Function of a Group as a Holding Container:**

‘Holding’, as a group function, communicates to teach of its members that the group is present; that they are able to be ‘here’; that the group cares and can show concern; that the group can suspend judging – all this begins to live in the background of the group process for each of its members – and creates both safety, and a sense of possibility.

When a group member is vulnerable, and thus has a more fragile sense of self, they will only be able to stay present through a felt sense of the holding function of the group. It may take a while before they can take a step out and take a risk, that starts to test the holding frame provided by the group.

When an individual becomes threatened or defensive, the group has to slow down and simply stay with that person’s self-experience only for a period of time, or else the group member will start to feel rejected or abandoned by the group.

We have to accept that in groups, one person will at times say something to another person that they cannot tolerate. Then that person will inevitably react, defend or attack, or else disengage.

Then the group members have repair work to do; this is precisely what makes group work so enriching to all – the ability to adjust, correct or repair exchanges between group members – either through active participation, or by actively witnessing the encounters.

When assessing a group member’s capacity for relatedness:

- *We have to attend to and respect each group member’s ability or inability to tolerate the ‘other-ness’ of other member’s experiences, or the ‘otherness’ of the group as a whole.*

- *Sometimes, a group member will not even be able to encompass the fact of another group member’s ‘otherness’, yet alone experience it.* This is when the group as a whole can help hold both group members at the same time.
• We tend to view particular group members as difficult when they can’t enter states of mutuality or basic relatedness.

However, this limitation may also be temporary or fluid; they can be present to the others in one moment, and not able to be there in the next moment.

Sometimes group members can ‘see’ the whole group as an ‘other’; sometimes they can’t.

• How can group hold a space so that other group members can bring their own subjectivity to a particular individual in a way they can receive and tolerate?

This is a ‘trial and error’ process of adapting as group members to the limitations of a particular individual in the group.

Yet group members can’t not be who they are, in order to adhere to a individual’s personal limitation or deficit.

• The key is always pay attention to the impact of the group’s subjectivity on its individual members.

How can group members demonstrate the ability to hold another member in their minds? How can the group shape its interactions for an individual in a way they can tolerate?

Groups hold safety - and a type of open ‘spaciousness’ - so that any individual group member can go deeper into themselves; or maybe so any individual can temporarily let go, or even regress; or so any individual can come towards an inter-personal encounter with another member in a brand new way.