

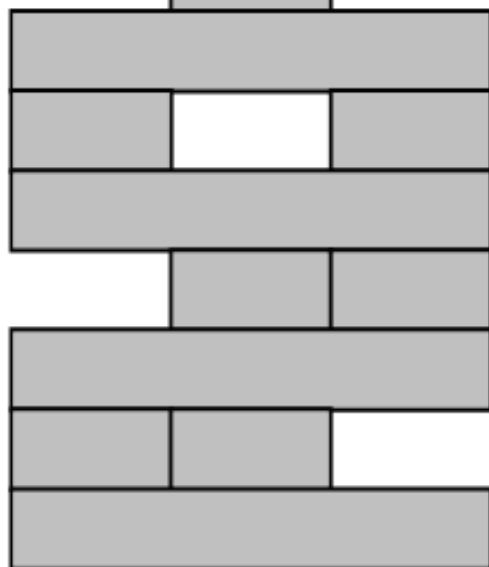
Jenga®* in Therapy

A Therapeutic Game for Groups and Families

Playing Jenga® in a therapeutic setting can provide a great opportunity for groups or family members to have fun and learn something about themselves and their relationships in the process. This game also provides the opportunity for group members to apply the skills discussed immediately in a fun environment.



I have used this game in groups for 20 years. In that time, I have identified many topics that can be effectively discussed using Jenga® as a way to jumpstart the discussion. Group members have a lot of fun and this helps them remember the concepts discussed long after the group.



I have used Jenga® in a variety of groups in 20 years:

- teenage boys and girls in a psychiatric hospital setting (Dual Diagnosis).
- family therapy with adolescent patients in a psychiatric hospital
- adolescents in children's residential home
- adolescents in a partial hospitalization program
- adults in an outpatient group
- adults in an IOP
- adults in a 30 day residential substance abuse program
- adult males in a 6 month jail-based substance abuse program (SAP)

My experience with using Jenga® in a therapeutic setting indicates group members enjoy themselves and remember concepts discussed—including ways to apply the concepts to their life. Any, or all, of the therapeutic skills or goals may be discussed in a session though I have found it more effective to have a specific focus for the session.

* JENGA® is a registered trademark of POKONOBE ASSOCIATES in Ross, CA, 94957. Jenga® is distributed by Milton Bradley Company/Hasbro.

The Author, Tim Gray, is not associated, in any way, with the makers, distributors, or trademark holders of Jenga®. All information related to using Jenga® in therapeutic group and family sessions is the original work of Tim Gray based on his experience with using this game in therapeutic settings since 1992.

You will probably think of additional topics of discussion as you observe the group or family while they play the game. I have included some possible goal ideas that I have used in the past (you will have to make them measurable and appropriate for your therapeutic setting).

Using Jenga® in a Therapeutic Setting

There are many ways Jenga® may be used in a therapeutic setting. In this document I share several ideas, but there is no way I could anticipate all possible topics your clients might need to discuss. A game like Jenga® lends itself well to illustrating therapeutic and recovery concepts. I have developed some specific rules to force topics like team-work, communication among team members, following a leader (sponsor or parent) and more but there are many topics that can be effectively discussed but using the rules as they exist on the box.

Here are some examples:

- It is important to be careful with the rules
- Remaining calm helps you make better choices
- It is important to gently test something new before jumping all in (some pieces are easier to get out than others)
- It just takes a small mistake to knock over the tower
- Learn from other people’s mistakes
- Pay attention to what other are doing (watching other players move might help you see a loose piece)

No matter how you choose to play the game in your group, pay attention to group member’s actions and interactions and you will see many opportunities for therapeutic discussion. You may want to take notes while playing to help you remember specific things you observe.

Also, be sensitive to timing as you watch, some concepts will have much greater impact if discussed immediately, as they occur. But, if you interrupt the game too often you will lose a lot of the “fun” and power of using a game in therapeutic settings. You will need to weigh the options, in the moment, to decide if you should stop now or if the discussion can wait and still have impact.

The Rules:

All of the original rules for the game Jenga® are observed.

As the group facilitator you will also need to be the referee and enforce the rules. Make sure you are very familiar with the rules before you begin the group session.

I have developed the following rules over time as I have used this game in groups. These rules work for me and my purposes. You may choose to follow different rules or alter these to fit your tastes. I encourage you to do what makes sense to you. No matter what rules you use be sure to be consistent.

Rules for using Jenga® as a therapeutic game:

Teams of Two

Team members – Divide group into teams of two group members each. If there is an odd number of group members and I am needed to make even teams I play along with the group. When I play, I try to let the group member I am paired with take the lead and get the most from their time in the game. If you are playing along, make sure you follow them like everyone else—call yourself on any rule violations and any penalties. Believe me, they will be watching. Make sure you set a good example. This is especially important since you are still the referee/facilitator. You want to make sure all the attention is on their actions and observation about the game-play and not you.

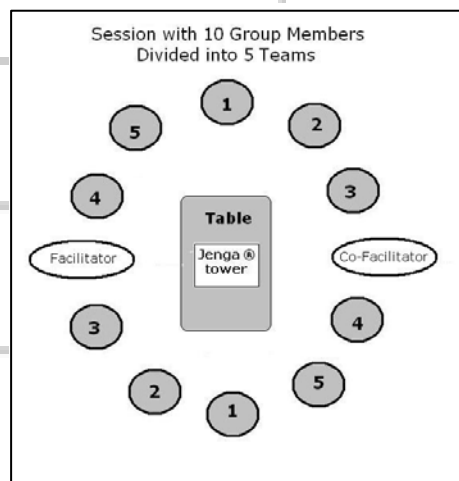


Figure 1

I always have the teams divided up as in Figure 1. I prefer the team mates to be across the room from each other rather than sitting next to each other. This way they are not as likely to carry on side conversations and disrupt the group or miss what others are doing on their turns. I have used this in groups as big as 25 people (adult residential 30 day program). Since the play goes pretty quick after the first few moves it is possible to keep things under control in large groups though it is better in smaller groups since players will get more time to play and also discuss.

I have included a Co-Facilitator in Figure 1 but I have rarely had that luxury. If you do have a Co-Facilitator, I encourage you to sit across from each other so they can see what you might miss with the people next to you. It is always good to have a partner for decisions, observations, and insights.

One finger – Each member of the team must have one (and only one) finger on the Jenga® block that is being removed from the stack to be placed on the top. Fingers do not have to be in contact with the block at all times. Both players must have a finger on the block most of the time. There will be times when only one person’s finger is on the piece as they move it to the top; you have to decide how strict you want to be with this.

If the piece falls while being moved to the top there is no penalty but their turn is not over until the piece is on top of the stack.

More than one finger – If one of the team members touches the piece with more than one finger (i.e., two or more fingers or a finger and a thumb, etc.) that team must move a penalty piece. If this rule is broken more than once a penalty piece must be moved for each time before that team’s turn is over.

The tower – The tower must be able to stand for at least 30 seconds before the next team moves.

“No Talking” – Optional / Additional Rule

Talking – Team members are not allowed to verbally communicate once they leave their seat (until they return to their seat). This forces them to be more creative in their game play using non-verbal communication.

If a team member speaks, in any way, that team must move a penalty piece after they move their original piece. If they speak more than once they need to move a piece for each time they speak. You can be as strict with this as you choose. I recommend you enforce rules strictly as this makes it easier to be consistent than when you enforce a rule leniently.

This rule can be used from the beginning or added as an additional rule for a “second round.” I have done this both ways with good results but, I generally add this rule from the beginning due to limited time constraints.

Penalty Pieces

Penalty pieces are moved when:

- A team member touches a piece with more than ONE finger.
- A team member speaks when they are not supposed to.

It is very important that group members are monitored closely to make sure they are following these rules. If these rules are broken the team that breaks the rules must move an additional block.

Penalty limit per turn – You may want to set a limit for how many penalty pieces a team would have to do. Usually one or two penalty pieces are the most a team will have to do. When a team has had to do several penalty pieces it is a good opportunity to talk about following the rules, consequences, responsibility, and accountability. When a player denies breaking the rules but you (the referee) knows they did, this is a great opportunity to remind them honesty is important for their emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

Jenga Therapy

Rounds

The first round ends when a team knocks over the tower OR after each team has had at least two or three moves, depending on the size of the group.

You may not have time for a second round if you have a large group and everyone is really good at Jenga®. Most of the time, I have had time for a second or even a third round. Once group members get the flow and understand how it works to play as a team, it will go pretty fast. Make sure you leave yourself plenty of time to, adequately, discuss all concepts you plan to discuss.

This is what I usually do – When I stop after the first round, I begin to rebuild the stack so we are ready to begin the second round, if we have time for a second round. If the stack has not fallen you do not have to rebuild the stack of game pieces though you may choose to rebuild it anyway. At the same time, I begin to get the group talking about what they noticed as we played the first round. I usually ask the group to tell me what they noticed during that round of play. Most groups quickly identify some of the obvious topics such as communication and team work. You may have to refocus the discussion to your desired topic(s) with some simple questions like, “did you notice when both team members were trying to find a loose piece and the whole tower moved?” Sometimes, one person presents as a much more aggressive leader which provides a great opportunity for discussion about leadership or cooperation when working as a team among other possibilities.

Before we play the first round, I usually tell the group to pay attention to everything that happens as they play since we will be discussing what happens.

Additional Rounds

As mentioned before, you may use the same rules as above or you may choose to save the no talking rule for the second round.

Players will be anxious to begin the second round because they are beginning to have fun now they have been able to play a few moves but make sure you discuss everything you need to from the previous round before you start additional rounds—timing is important in order to maximize the benefits of using this game to jump start the discussion.

Second round ends when a team knocks over the tower of after each team has had at least two or three moves.

Discuss the differences between the first and second round incorporating any of the therapeutic topics of concepts listed above or others you may think of while observing the game-play. As you observe the different teams playing you will certainly notice specific ideas that relate to individual group members, such as:

- Pointing out the danger of impulsively “poking” at the tower of Jenga® pieces without gently checking to see if a piece is loose and how that relates to their constantly making impulsive decisions which often lead to mistakes.
- Talking with a group member about trying to “lead” when they should be “following.”

Three Member Team

An additional round may consist of a three member team to further illustrate the concepts of team-work, leadership, cooperation, following directions, and others.

The team consists of one leader and two followers. The followers will play as above with the additional complication that they will have one hand over their eyes. The leader will give them instructions to help them move the Jenga® piece. The followers are not supposed to move their hands without the leader telling them what to do and the leader may not touch the followers or the stack of Jenga® blocks.

You never know what will happen—you may have a leader who does not have good leadership or communication skills and/or you may have followers who do not wait for the leader to lead them. No matter how it turns out you will have plenty to discuss.

Each move with these rules takes a little longer so you will probably want to discuss what happens after each move if you have time for more than one.

It is sometimes beneficial to allow a different person to be the leader to allow opportunity to discuss specific relationship dynamics such as who is more dominant and who is submissive and the differences between the performances of each as leader. This is beneficial in family sessions to point out dynamics in families (especially if the roles are reversed, i.e., parents allowing their 14 year old son to make decisions that should be made by the parents).

Jenga® in Family Sessions

In family sessions, I have found it more beneficial to change the focus from teams or individuals playing against each other to working together to accomplish their goals, in this case, to get the tower as tall as possible.

Family Play – With the goal of cooperation and team-work in mind remind the family they are one team—working together to accomplish their goals.

To the right you will see a sample family—Father, Mother, and 2 children.

Play begins with 2 family members working together, using 1 finger each to move the piece from somewhere in the middle of the stack to the top (as described above). Any two family members can begin, for this example we’ll begin with Father and Child 1. If possible, it is desirable to provide the opportunity for all of the family members to partner with every other family member to encourage team-work and cooperation among all family members.

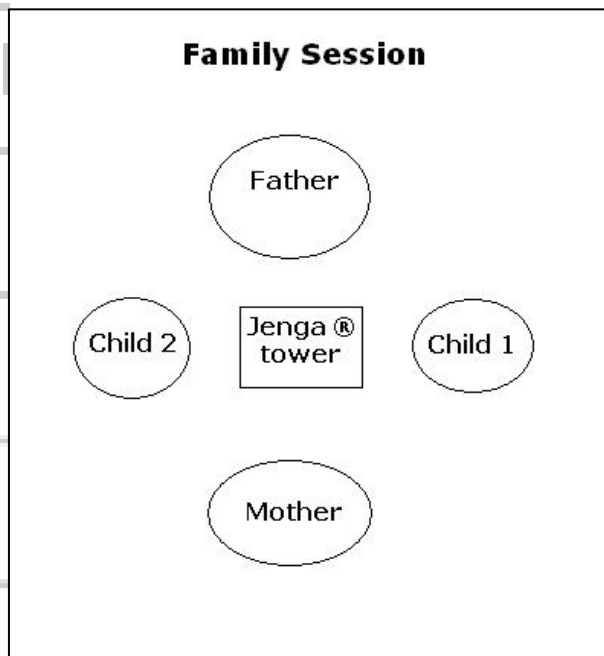


Figure 2

Father and Child 1 will move the 1st piece using all or any of the rules as above. You will need to decide how you want to handle rules and penalties. I use all the rules as with any other groups (one finger only and no talking after standing up). I encourage families to think about penalties as complications in life that could surface at any time—the family needs to work together to overcome these obstacles. We all make mistakes and sometimes poor choices.

Make sure to **remind the family** it is not the end of the world if they have to move a penalty piece. I’m sure you have seen family members (parents or siblings) being critical of every mistake someone makes. Often, one person gets more of that than others.

After Father and Child 1 successfully move their piece play moves clockwise to **Child1 and Mother** partnering together to move the next piece to the top. After this move it is **Mother and Child 2** who move the next piece and then **Child 2 and Father**. In order to allow every family member to work with every other family member you can use the following table as a guide for who each person partners with for each of their moves.

	Father	Child 1	Mother	Child 2
Person's 1 st Move	Partner with Child 1	Partner with Mother	Partner with Child 2	Partner with Father
Person's 2 nd Move	Partner with Mother	Partner with Child 2	Partner with Father	Partner with Child 1
Person's 3 rd Move	Partner with Child 2	Partner with Father	Partner with Child 1	Partner with Mother
Repeat 1-3 as needed				

Partners for Each Move Drawn from a Hat – Another method for deciding who works together for each move, is to have each person write their name and each of the other family member's names together on a slip of paper—a slip for each pairing. Using the family above you would have 12 slips of paper. You could also prepare these ahead of time. Put these slips in a can, box, or hat and draw them out for each move. This will ensure you have 12 moves with each family member partnering with each other family member. If you continue to play after the 12 moves, simply put them all in the hat again and draw them out again. In many ways, this is the least confusing and easier way to determine partners for each move.

3 Member Teams in Family Sessions

There might be times when it is beneficial to use the 3 member team rules described above in a family session. An example might be when the family dynamics are such that parents are being undermined by a child and there is a power struggle and a lack of respect for authority. In a situation like this you might chose to have the child be the leader and the parents as the followers. I have used this in many family sessions to illustrate how important it is for the followers to “obey” their leader to achieve the desired results. Also, this is good for encouraging clear communication and limit setting for parents.

I have also used this effectively with single parent families—parent as leader and 2 children as followers. This effectively illustrates how children need to listen to parent and obey their direction for everything to go smoothly. It doesn't work for one of the children to try to lead when they should be following—this is a recipe for disaster.

The beauty of using games in family settings is this allows them to play together and have fun. Many families don't play together and don't ever have fun together.



Therapeutic Concepts/Goals:

Communication Skills:

Topics of discussion related to communication:

- importance of clear communication
- non-verbal communication (intentional or unintentional)
- verbal communication
- listening/hearing (being a good listener)
- Are they “hearing” what you are “saying?”
- Communication gaps due to:
 - age differences
 - gender
 - language
 - cultural differences
 - geography
- Are they “hearing” what you think they are “hearing?”

Possible goals for group members:

- To provide group members with the opportunity to discuss/develop/practice communication skills in group setting.
- To develop/improve communication skills with team members, group members, and/or family members.
- To improve team performance as a direct result of improved communication among team members and positive results of team-work.
- Practice/Display improved communications skills in safe environment/group setting.

Relationship Dynamics:

Topics of discussion related to relationships:

- Trust
- Rapport
- Cooperation
- Conflict Resolution
- Responsibility
- Accountability
- Sharing Responsibility
- Respect
- Communication
- Compromise
- Patience
- Leading / following

- Impulsivity
- Healthy and unhealthy boundaries
- Roles and expectations

Possible goals for group members related to relationship dynamics:

- To provide group members with the opportunity to discuss/develop/practice improved interpersonal relationship skills
- Explore and develop interpersonal relationship skills to assist client with engaging in more healthy relationships.
- Display improved knowledge of interpersonal relationship topics through discussion in individual and group settings.
- Client will practice interpersonal relationship skills in a controlled, therapeutic setting, such as life-skills group/group therapy.
- Client will display improved conflict resolution skills in role-play exercises in group counseling sessions.

Team-Work Skills:

Topics of discussion related to team-work:

- Team dynamics
- Leadership qualities
- Following the leader
- Being a good team player
- Compromising among team members
- Communicating as a team.
- Impulsivity (dangers of)
- Patience when working with a team

Possible goals for group members:

- Client will explore and develop improved communication skills related to being a member of a recovery group.
- Client will meet with Sponsor and Counselor weekly and discuss triggers, relapse prevention, and other topics as needed.
- Client will display improved conflict resolution skills to help with compromising among group or team members.

Problem-Solving Skills:

Topics of discussion related to problem solving:

- Conflict Resolution skills
- Discuss problems and solutions.

- Provide the opportunity to apply new skills as the game continues.
- Importance of good communication in problem solving
- Making better choices
- Healthy and unhealthy boundaries
- How self-esteem relates to problem solving skills

Possible goals for group members:

- Client will explore and develop problem-solving skills in individual and group therapy sessions.
- Client will practice problem-solving skills in individual and group sessions.
- Client will maintain a journal and daily identify any conflict resolution skills used throughout the week and discuss them in therapy session each week.

Family or Group Dynamics:

Topics related to family or group dynamics:

- Parental authority
- Following rules
- Family working together as a team
- Identifying the strengths of team members.
- Identifying the weaknesses of team members
- Healthy and unhealthy boundaries
- Roles and expectations
- Enabling / Enmeshed
- Power struggles
- Arguing / Conflict
- Consequences
- Responsibility (holding yourself accountable so someone else doesn't have to do it) vs. Accountability (someone else forcing you to be responsibility)
- Elevating child to parent roles and expectations
- Discipline

Possible goals for group members:

- To provide an opportunity to identify and discuss roles and relationships of group or family members (leader and/or follower in addition other roles in group dynamics).
- Provides an excellent opportunity for the therapist to observe families and groups as they interact.
- Provides an opportunity to discuss passive, aggressive, and assertive interpersonal communication styles.
- Provides an opportunity for group members to practice assertiveness skills and receive feedback immediately.

Recovery Related Topics

Recovery Team:

Topics of discussion related to recovery team:

- Higher Power
- Support group members
- Home group members
- Sponsor is an important member of your recovery team
- Friends and family
- Trusting team members
- Counselor/Therapist as a member of your recovery team
- How self-esteem relates to recovery
- Healthy and unhealthy boundaries and recovery
- Impulsivity and recovery
- Peer pressure
- Consequences
- Responsibility (holding yourself accountable so someone else doesn't have to do it) vs. Accountability (someone else forcing you to be responsibility)

Possible goals for group members:

- Identify and discuss (in therapy sessions) barriers to trusting relationships with recovery team members.
- Client will develop a relapse prevention plan that includes specific details about trigger situations and methods to prevent relapse in each situation (include roles of recovery team members in relapse prevention plan).

Following the program:

Topics of discussion related to following the program:

- Following the advice of program members and Sponsor
- Following the rules – 12 Steps
- Following the program guidelines
- Following the rules
- Importance of a good support system
- Commitment
- Consequences
- Responsibility (holding yourself accountable so someone else doesn't have to do it) vs. Accountability (someone else forcing you to be responsibility)

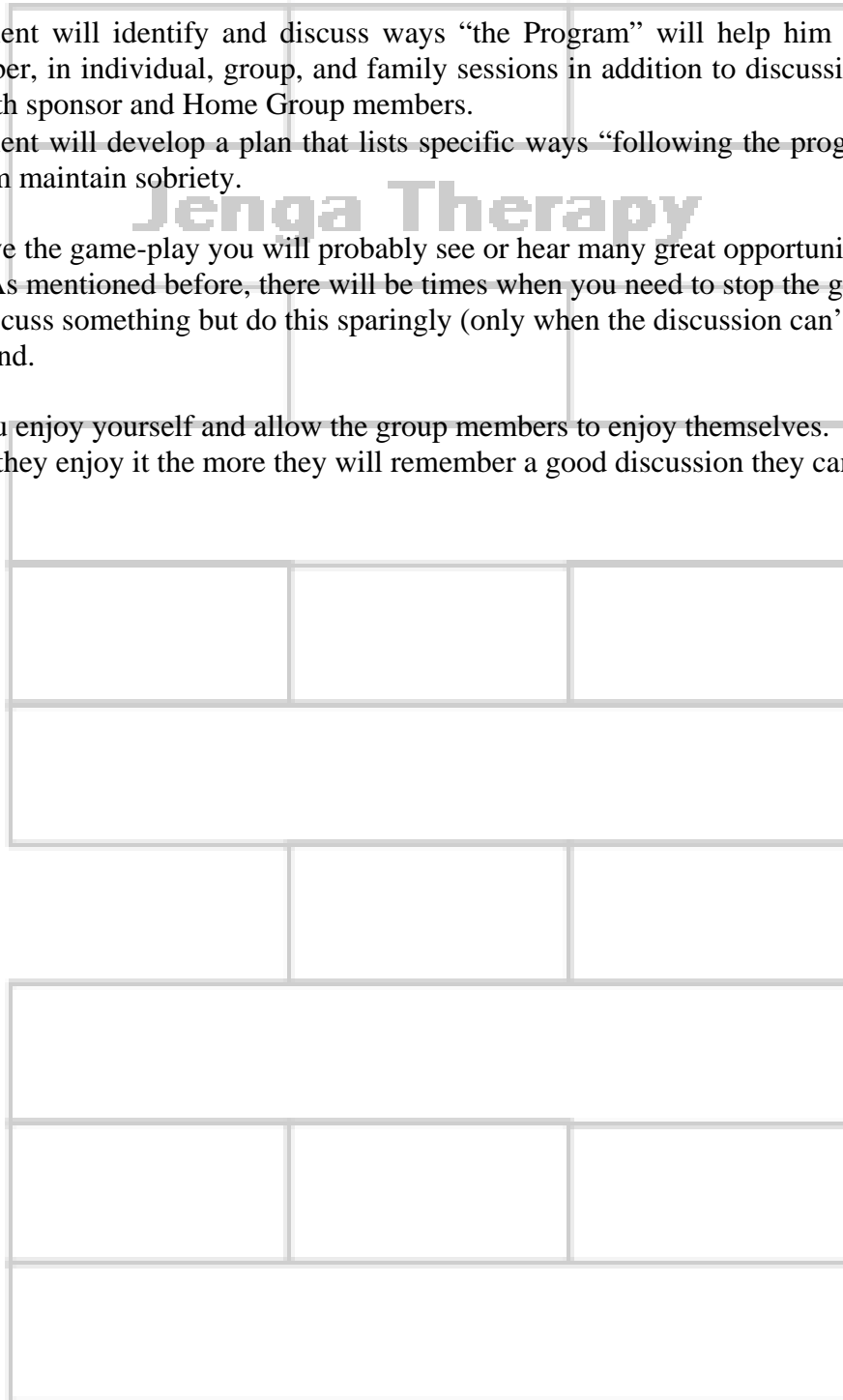
Possible goals for group members:

- Client will identify and discuss ways “the Program” will help him stay clean and sober, in individual, group, and family sessions in addition to discussing these topics with sponsor and Home Group members.
- Client will develop a plan that lists specific ways “following the program” will help him maintain sobriety.

Jenga Therapy

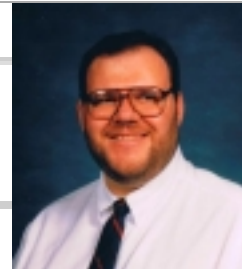
As you observe the game-play you will probably see or hear many great opportunities for discussion. As mentioned before, there will be times when you need to stop the game for a moment to discuss something but do this sparingly (only when the discussion can't wait till the end of the round).

Make sure you enjoy yourself and allow the group members to enjoy themselves. I guarantee you the more they enjoy it the more they will remember a good discussion they can relate to.



About Tim Gray, MA, CADC

I'm a husband, a father, a minister, a musician, a person in recovery, and a therapist.



My desire is to honor God in all of these parts of my life.

I accepted the call into ministry in 1982. Since then, I have served as a pastor, a minister of music, and a minister of youth. Through all these years I was bi-vocational and also working in the mental health and substance abuse fields.

Bachelors degree in Music - 1989 (trumpet)

Masters degree in Mental Health Counseling - 1991

Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor

23 years of experience in mental health and substance abuse fields

26 years of experience in Christian ministry



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Tim's Websites

<http://www.STABLERecovery.com> -- blog related to recovery from addictions

<http://toolkit.STABLERecovery.com> – Counselor's Toolkit – Handling Stress and Anxiety eBook available here.

http://www.selfgrowth.com/experts/tim_gray -- Self Growth page

<http://www.livetohonorGod.com> -- blog about living life to honor God.

<http://www.HonoringGodMusic.com> -- Selling my arrangements of hymns, sacred music, and original music for brass quintets, quartets, choirs, worship teams and over small ensembles.

<http://www.TimsTrumpetPlace.com> – blog/site about anything and everything related to trumpets.