

## What is a Balint Group?

A Balint group is a group of doctors who meet regularly and discuss clinical cases. The focus is on the psychological aspects of their practice, and particularly the doctor-patient relationship. The group is a supportive setting in which doctors can explore the human side of their work, adding a fresh dimension, learning new skills and avoiding burn-out.

## Why do doctors join Balint groups?

Doctors often feel “stuck” with certain patients. Interactions with such patients may leave them feeling frustrated, annoyed, puzzled or just unsettled. One way to get help with these challenging situations is to participate in a Balint group.

## Why the name “Balint groups”?

Michael Balint, a Hungarian born psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, together with his wife Enid, a social worker and psychoanalyst, developed Balint groups in London in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Balints viewed the doctor as part of the treatment offered to the patient, not just the person delivering the treatment. While the method was originally developed for general practitioners, the Balint model has been usefully applied to medical specialties and other helping professions.

## What actually happens in a Balint group?

The group comprises 6-12 doctors and a leader, meeting regularly, perhaps fortnightly, for about 60-90 minutes.

A doctor presents a case for the group to discuss. Any patient can be presented, particularly those where the doctor has experienced a strong reaction (such frustration, difficulty or uncertainty). The case is presented briefly and informally without notes, emphasizing the doctor-patient interactions and including the doctor's feelings and reactions. Then the group members discuss the case, trying to describe how they might feel from both the doctor's and the patient's perspective.

Diverse views often emerge, reflecting the group members' varied personalities, life experiences and blind spots. There is no attempt to find the “right” answer, or offer solutions. Instead, the presenting doctor is free to use the group's reflections in any way and to make their own decisions about their ongoing involvement with the patient. The approach is free of jargon, and the atmosphere one in which participants may talk freely and spontaneously, without pressure to be theoretical or diagnostic.

As achieving sustainable change needs time, and some of the effectiveness of the learning in a Balint group comes from being a member of a professional and focused group over time, some Balint groups can continue to run successfully over a number of years.

## What is it like to be in a Balint group?

Being in a Balint group can be very mutually supportive, as there is an opportunity to share experiences in a safe, non-judgmental setting. It can be empowering and inspiring to realize to what extent colleagues are facing similar difficulties and to realize how emotionally challenging their work can be.

## What will I learn in a Balint group?

Doctors gain skills in applying their medical knowledge in emotionally difficult, real-life practice situations.

They learn to connect with and care for each patient as an individual. This is in contrast to learning specific treatments for generic conditions.

They learn to identify their feelings and responses to patients and to make use of them to aid understanding. Feelings and responses to patients thus become tools in understanding patients better, rather than sources of stress or unhelpful behaviours.

One aspect of this learning is that the doctors may become more aware of their particular blind spots which create habitual and unhelpful ways of responding to particular sorts of patients and situations and become freer to respond more accurately to the needs of each patient.

## What kinds of patients are discussed in Balint groups?

Any patient with whom the clinician has ongoing contact may be discussed. Common examples include patients with psychosomatic symptoms, chronic pain, unreasonable demands, or poor compliance with treatment: or those who seem impossible to help, attend with another person (such as parent and teenager), come from a different culture, or are seriously ill or dying.

## What difference will Balint group involvement make to my practice?

Participants often report feeling more confident, finding their work more stimulating and enjoyable, being able to treat a wider variety of patients more effectively and with less stress, finding fewer patients boring and finding challenging situations more enjoyable. Many feel their participation has reduced work stress and prevented or reversed burn-out.

## How can I give Balint a try or find a group to join?

The Balint Society of Australia's website has contact information for each state. The Society regularly runs workshops and seminars or will run an event or suit local needs. You may enquire about joining an existing ongoing group, starting a new group, or about groups run via teleconferencing or video conferencing.

## Can I get CPD points for being in a Balint group?

Generally yes.

## Which fields of medicine are suitable for Balint Work?

Balint groups are used in undergraduate and postgraduate medical training and with established practitioners, in fields such as general practice, obstetrics and gynaecology, ophthalmology, paediatrics, psychiatry and oncology.

## What is the Balint Society of Australia?

We aim to promote understanding of the psychological aspects of health care, particularly general practice. We are affiliated with the International Balint Federation. Our activities include supporting Balint groups, workshops and scientific meetings, a free Email newsletter and a website.

Written by Marion Lustig and Alexa Gilbert- Obrart for the Balint Society of Australia

## Contact details on website:

**[www.balintaustralia.org](http://www.balintaustralia.org)**

# Should I join a Balint group?

## *Questions doctors ask about Balint groups*

