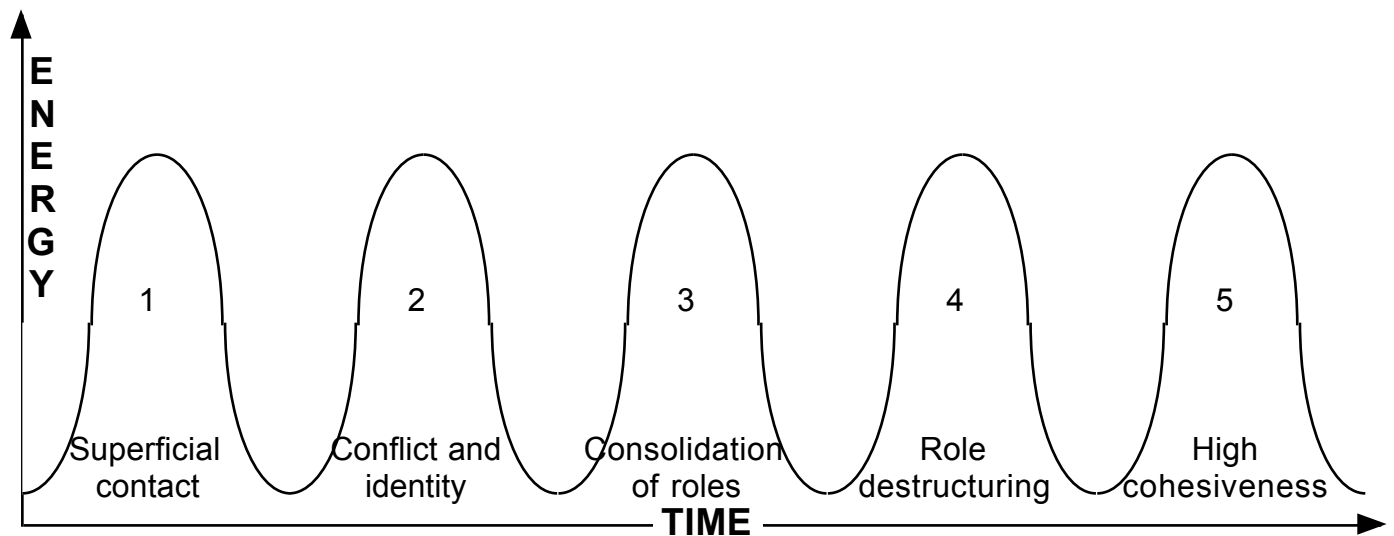


A Gestalt Model of Group Process

John Mitchell and Vivian Broughton, November 1995.



Introduction

Joseph Zinker talks about the group as an organism in its own right: "The group is a living, organic entity. It is larger than the sum of individuals in it. That large figure, that organism, is in process, constantly changing. Aside from its initial scattered quality and subsequent cohesiveness, the group transforms itself: its colour, its playfulness, its mourning, its sense of contact, as well as its deflections, may stand out at any given moment of its life." (1980)

Previous Gestalt and other theorists (Frew, Yalom, Kepner) have generally talked of three stages of a group:

1. Orientation
2. Conflict
3. Cohesiveness

Zinker takes this a step further and includes four stages.

1. Superficial contact and exploration.
2. Conflict and identify.
3. Confluence and isolation.
4. High cohesiveness.

In expressing the developmental process in terms of the cycle of experience, we have sought to convey the dynamic nature of the process. We have emphasised a further stage, that of role destructuring, which we consider crucial in the organismic flow towards the high cohesiveness of the closing phase.

In its elaborated form this map is intended as an aid to the experimental understanding of group process. It is highly selective, simplified and does not and could not represent the complex interactions and myriad intersections of individual/group process. It does, however, give a view of the likely dynamics of how a group develops in terms of contact styles/interruptions and possible initiatives of the facilitator. It is intended to stimulate and provoke as well as to inform.

The map is not the territory.

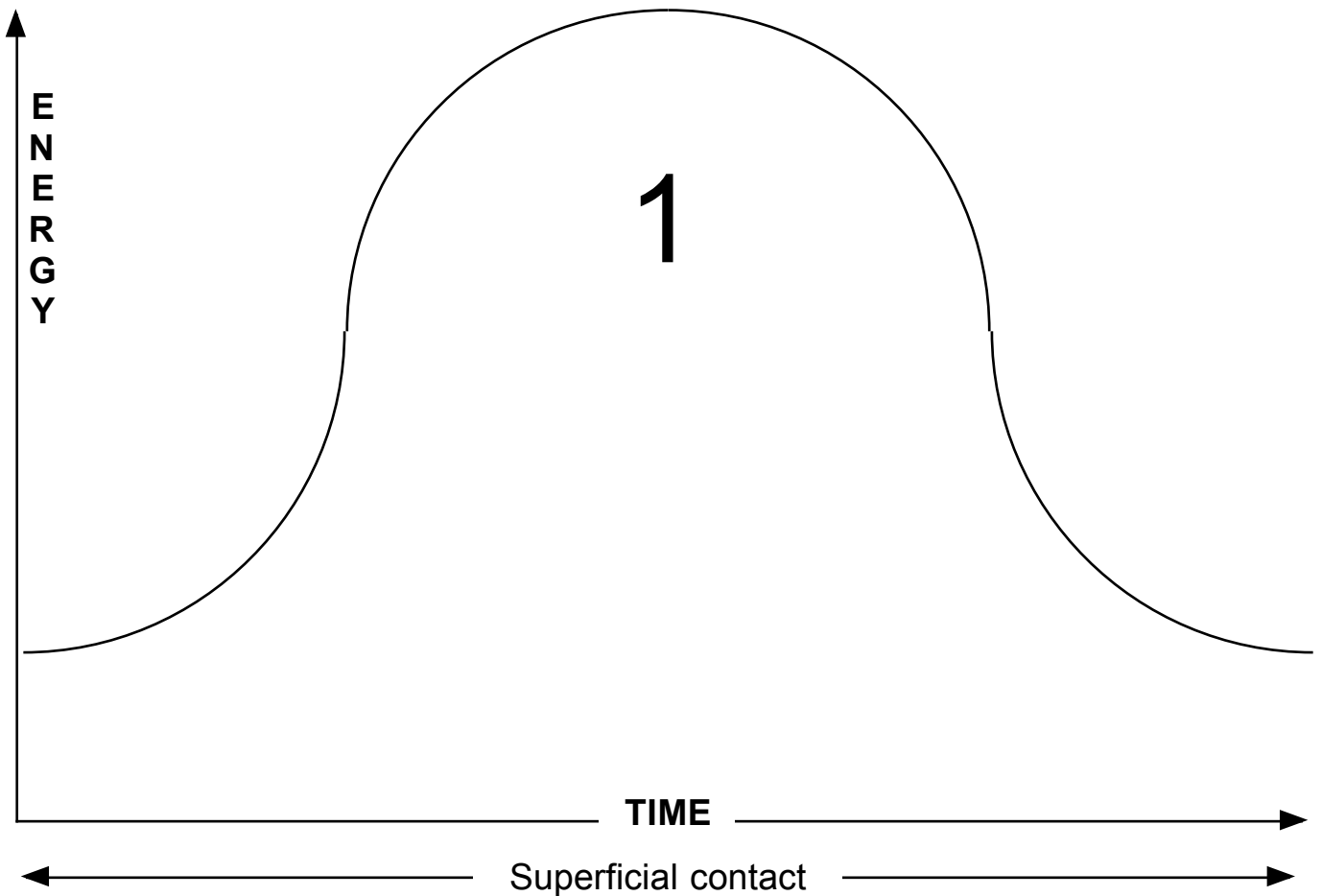
Kepner, L., in Beyond the Hot Seat.

Frew, J.E., The U.S. Gestalt Journal, Spring 1986.

Yalom, I., The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy.

Zinker, J., in Beyond the Hot Seat.

Intrapersonal (interpersonal and group in ground)



Characteristics of this Phase

- High anxiety
- Stereotyped behaviour
- Self doubt
- Mistrust
- Not seeing, hearing
- Self-consciousness
- Veiled dissatisfaction
- Superficial contact

Issues of this Phase

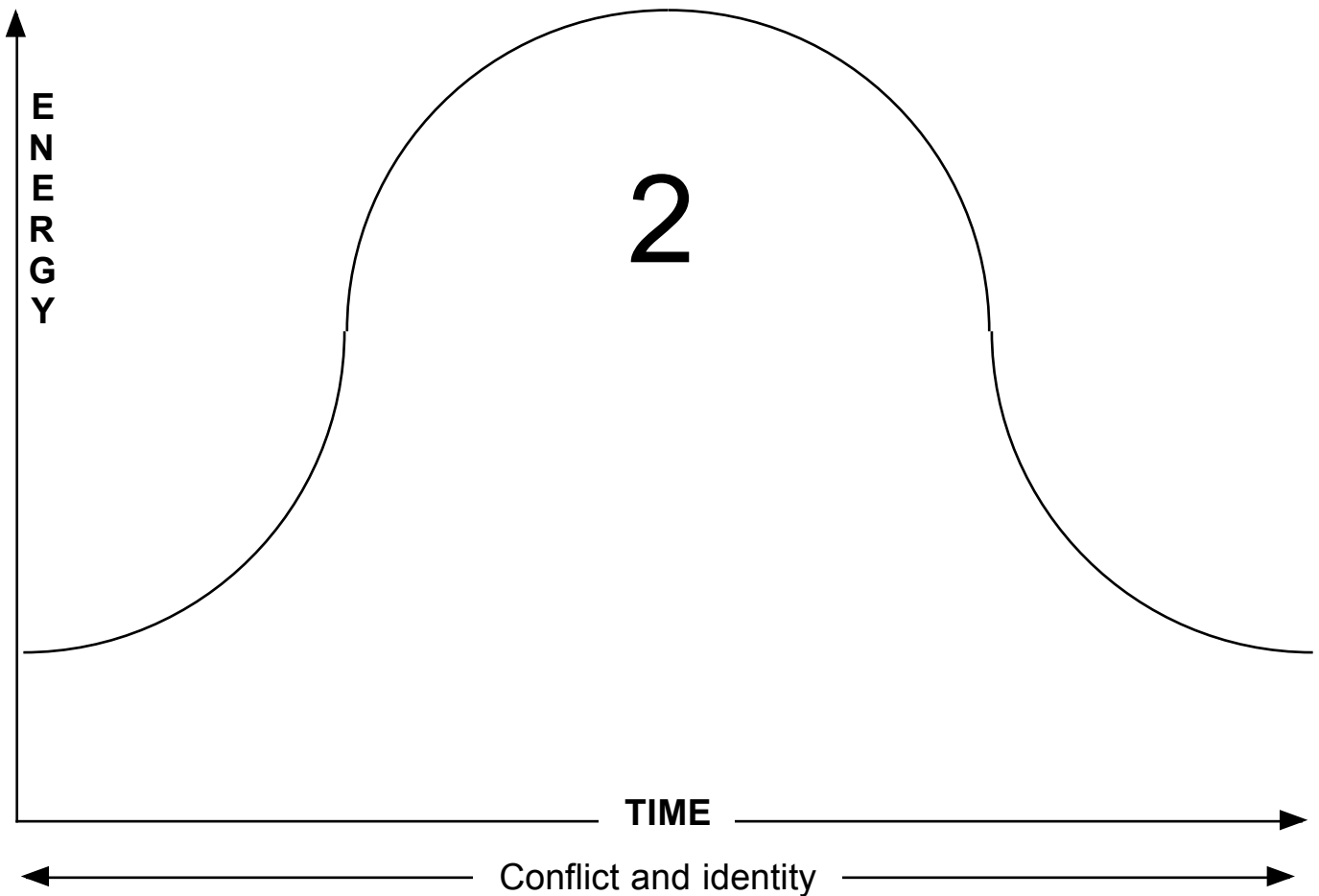
- Who am I? (with these people)
- Who are they? (with me)
- What is the leader's role

- Am I safe here?
- Can I trust leader/myself/others?
- What is allowed here?
- Will I be shamed/humiliated?

Therapists Role

- Giving insight into therapist's approach
- Modelling
- Creating a climate where anxiety can be owned
- Setting boundaries, contracting, safety
- Legitimising work on all levels (grading)
- Encouraging interpersonal contact (graded)

Intrapersonal and interpersonal (group in ground)



Characteristics of this Phase

- Challenge to leader
- Expression of dissatisfaction
- Awareness of difference
- Pushing boundaries
- Questioning of rules/norms
- Sub-grouping

Issues of this Phase

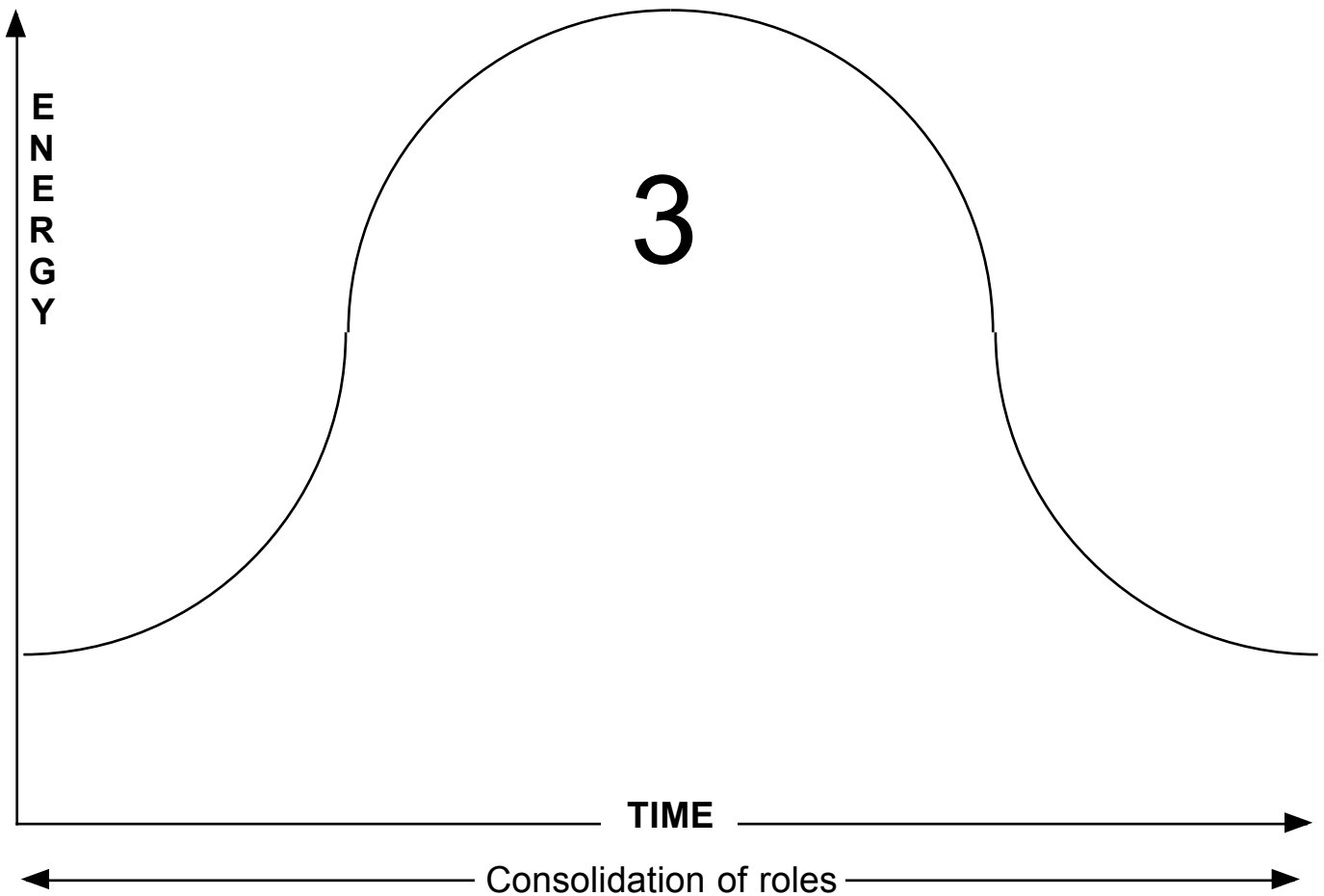
- How far can I go?
- What are the rules/norms?
- Am I getting/going to get what I want here?

- Who are my friends/allies/enemies?
- What is the leader's role - how far can I test this?

Therapists Role

- Encouraging expression of difference
- Holding firm boundaries
- Raising awareness of norms/rules
- Differentiating between boundaries and norms/rules
- Awareness of scapegoating
- Survival while continuing to confront/be confronted

Intrapersonal interpersonal group



Characteristics of this Phase

- Freezing of roles
- Non-discriminating support and/or
- Hostility without much warmth and contact
- Possibly an "us against the world" attitude
- Consolidating group norms

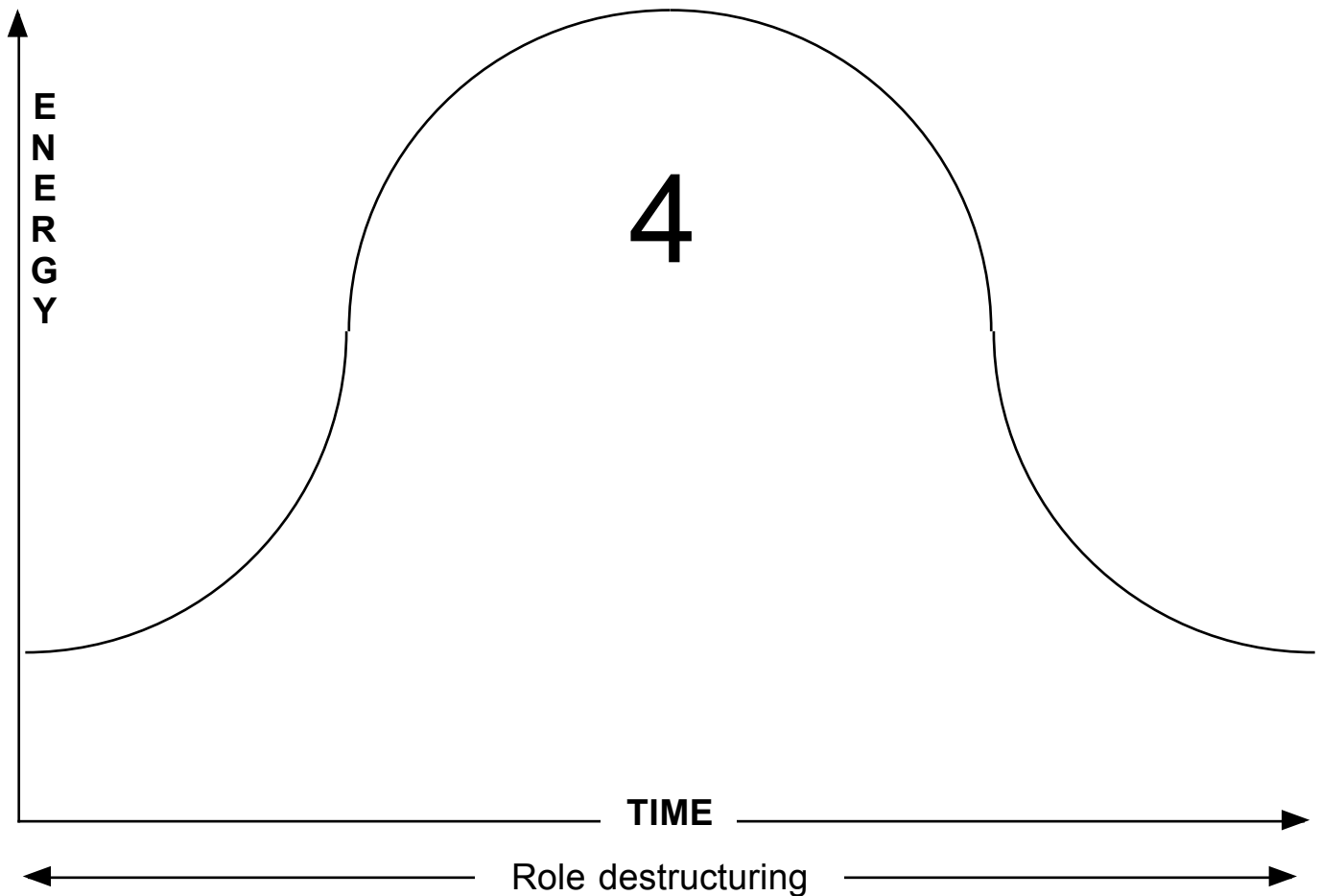
Issues of this Phase

- Who's rocking the boat?
- How can we keep things stable?
- How can we keep what we've got?

Therapists Role

- Generally 'staying with'
- Feedback on process without invitation to speed up or move on
- Support cohesiveness
- Put up with feeling bored
- Not to push the group
- Acknowledge usefulness of this stage
- Encourage into implosion

Intrapersonal interpersonal group



Characteristics of this Phase

- Conflict in open
- Vulnerability and awkwardness as roles crumble
- Further challenge to leader
- Experiment leading to further experiment (ripple effect)
- Destabilising confluent structure
- Taking responsibility for role
- Sense of mobility, shifting, uncertainty along with strengthened sense of self and group
- Self-compassion
- Shame replaced by embarrassment/excitement
- Increased sense of choice
- Not so careful with self and others
- New possibilities of how to cope
- Increased sexual awareness
- Physical release
- Resolution of some group issues e.g. gender
- Exploring polarities e.g. male/female, talkers/non talkers
- Increased sense of relationship
- Fluent performance of complex tasks
- Role of leader moving towards that of consultant

- Increasing sense of cohesion
- Possibility of group as its own therapist

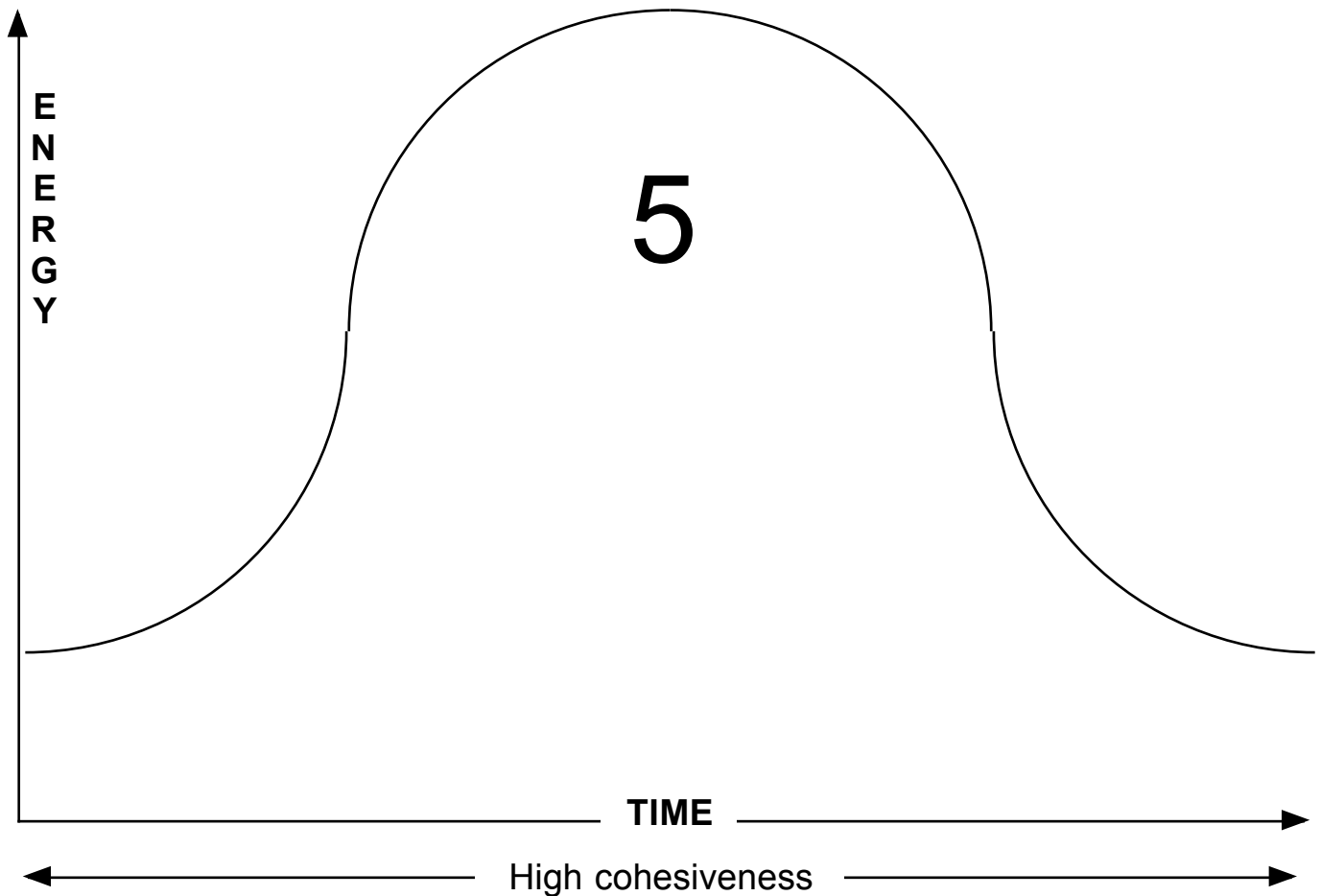
Issues of this Phase

- How am I keeping myself/others in role?
- Who might I be if I let go of my role(s)?
- Can we survive this conflict?
- What would it mean to be honest with these people?

Therapists Role

- Same as for Phases 2 and 3 plus
- Introducing experiments to heighten awareness of roles and rigid structures
- Therapist more as facilitator and consultant
- Role Experiments
- Role owning
- Role swapping
- Fishbowl polarities (e.g. talkers/non talkers)
- Hierarchies
- Sub-groups
- Non-talking group
- Zinker's experiment
- 'Street'

Intrapersonal interpersonal group



Characteristics of this Phase

- Cohesiveness
- Capacity for caring and confrontation
- Respect for each other's level of individuation
- Giving/taking merged into functional unity
- Interest in exploring each other with seriousness, humour and patience
- Recapitulation and resolution of issues earlier in group
- Can I/have I resolved my original themes?
- How close to get to others in context of prospective ending?
- Group as its own therapist

Issues of this Phase

- Can I/have I resolved my original themes?

- How close can I/should I get to others as the group approaches the ending
- How can we play/work/struggle together?
- What does it mean to know others and be known?
- How have we come through (our history)?
- Where do I go from here?
- How do I say "goodbye"?

Therapists Role

- Therapist as consultant
- Group member with special task
- Facilitate closure
- Acknowledging unfinished business