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# Models of Adult Bereavement Support Groups

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## Course Objectives

*Upon completion, students will be able to:*

1. Identify at least two benefits of offering groups.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of at least two topics and activities appropriate for a group.
3. Articulate knowledge of ways in which to successfully manage group challenges.

Before taking on some of the nuts and bolts of adult bereavement support groups, it is probably a good idea to consider what support groups are and why they can be a useful option for supporting the bereaved as they grieve. This will enable the laying down of some groundwork, what might work best for you and those you hope to serve.

The Center for Advancement of Health released a very extensive document in 2003 entitled "Report on Bereavement and Grief Research" ([www.cfah.org](http://www.cfah.org)). Although acknowledging that much more research needs to be done, this report raised questions about the efficacy of some interventions for some bereaved. Specifically, it suggested that those who are considered to be a low bereavement risk may not benefit from (and they even suggest might be harmed by) bereavement counseling. However, they also convey that people considered to be at "high risk for complicated grief" do better with bereavement interventions. This suggests that it is important to consider for whom groups are appropriate, as well as the sorts of groups to be offered. For example, a further discovery of this report is that "there is danger of losing sight of the fact that family and friends can meet the needs of most bereaved people". One option to be explored, if this is true, is offering groups or workshops which support the efforts of these "natural helpers" so they can be more effective in their support of their family or friends. What this also suggests is that designing groups and other programs for the bereaved need to be well considered and thought out as to who is best served and with what methods. Many experts in this field believe, however, that there are so many variables to be considered in designing bereavement support for those who are grieving that those reviewing research reports need to pull out the information relevant to their population and services.

A report by Stroebe and Schut, released in 2001, suggests that bereaved individuals may benefit from efforts aimed at "restoration-oriented" coping, which would offer the bereaved the following:

- Distraction from grief
- Focus on new roles/identity/relationships
- Efforts to adapt to changes in life circumstances

Not that different from this, is the "social-functional" model discussed by Bonanno, which emphasizes a shifting of attention away from focusing on expression of negative emotion and instead suggests that more healing occurs when the "grief-related distress is minimized and positive emotion is activated or facilitated".

Both of these models would suggest that a particular type of bereavement support program, which allows for the learning of new skills to adjust to changes, has some benefit. While engaging in a program or group which emphasizes this skill development, the bereaved are also provided an opportunity to learn new roles and develop new relationships, simply by virtue of participation in a group with other people. At the same time, at least while participating in this experience if not beyond it, they are also offered the chance to be distracted from what may be some of the more intense feelings associated with their grief.

Several other researchers and authors have discussed the tasks of grief and the benefit of certain interventions. For example, Silverman, MacKenzie, Pettigrew and Wilson (1974) as part of a Harvard Medical School study, introduced the concept of widows helping one another. This study showed that "widows were helped by having someone to talk with who was also widowed, who had survived the experience, who had no ulterior motives, and who could openly listen and discuss problems". Another study, written about by Osterweis, Solomon and Green (1984) also endorses the value of support groups. They observed that "group members identify with

each other and are helped in the reciprocal relationships that characterize bereavement support groups....the members' personal self-worth is enhanced as they recognize that all are facing like situations".

The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) "Guidelines for Bereavement Care in Hospice" discuss the following under its chapter on "Availability and Scope of Services":

*Based upon current knowledge and understanding of the grief process and accepted standards of practice, hospice bereavement care should focus on:*

*Helping family members understand and move forward in the grief process by:*

- a) *facilitating their expression of thoughts and feelings*
- b) *helping them identify or develop and utilize healthy personal coping strategies*

*Helping with problem-solving around adjustment issues:*

- a) *Providing guidance about decision-making*
- b) *Addressing social and spiritual concerns*
- c) *Assisting survivors to adapt to an environment without the deceased while experiencing a continued (transformed) relationship with the deceased.*

Because of the uniqueness of the individual perception of loss and the expression of grief, it is imperative that bereavement programs provide a variety of services to promote effective grieving. Mentioned among these is the offering of either referral to grief support groups and other appropriate community resources, or "opportunities for support and facilitation of thoughts and feelings surrounding the loss through groups, classes, counseling, etc..."

All of these viewpoints recognize the significance of "social connection" to some degree in the grieving process by suggesting that there is value for some people in participating in support groups. In the design and offering of them, we ensure success by thoughtful, purposeful planning focusing on what we can do, who we serve, how we reach them, and what we offer. In other words, the "whys and wherefores" of groups.

A support group is not a therapy group. While it can most definitely be therapeutic, it is distinct from therapy groups in that it does not focus on the psychological growth of the individual members, as most therapy groups would. We live in a society which often frowns upon "too much" emotion or grief which lasts "too long" and many people live far from supportive family. Support groups can offer people who are grieving a supportive environment in which to work through some of their grief when, for many of them there may be few places in their lives in which they can get this support and be themselves as they grieve. By introducing people to others who are going through a similar experience, support groups offer a way in which to "normalize" the grief experience. Groups offer participants opportunities to learn new roles, new ways of problem-solving or coping with situations by hearing about and discussing these with the group facilitator, and from listening to the experiences of other members. Experience has also shown that people who are grieving are often helped by the opportunity to reach out and help others, and participation in a group not only offers members the chance to be helped, but also help others.

Support groups allow for a very cost effective way of providing services to numbers of people, particularly when resources may be limited. They also provide people with a place in which to tell their story and talk about their loved one. It allows a safe place in which to not only express emotion, but oftentimes to "try out" new ideas or new ways of behaving. Groups can, of course, often provide participants with a way in which to develop new friendships by bonding with some of those who are also in the group. Groups also very often provide people with a chance to laugh, learning that not all grieving needs to be sad and painful.

After you have established some rationale for offering groups, and as you begin to consider what you might offer, a good way to begin planning is to do some "research" or, as the NHPCO guidelines suggest, some form of needs assessment. This means asking within your organization or among colleagues what they may see as needs, but also externally (people who might serve or come in contact with bereaved, such as hospitals, funeral homes, clergy, etc.) what is available, what is working and what isn't, and what do they see as needs or gaps. Because very often well meaning people might make suggestions of what they think grieving people need or "should" have available, it can also be very enlightening and helpful, if possible, to ask the bereaved themselves. This can be done informally by just asking a few people face to face or by phone calls, by convening actual focus groups or distributing a more formal survey. All of this will help guide your progress forward in designing programs which are useful, meaningful, purposeful and thus, successful.

The following are things which should be addressed as you design and set up any group or workshop.

### **Who Will Facilitate It?**

While there are differing opinions on whether the facilitator should be a trained "professional" or not, there are qualities of any facilitator which should be sought. The decision about whether you use a trained paid professional, or volunteers, or some combination of this, is up to each individual agency, but regardless of this decision the following characteristics are important:

- A facilitator needs to have knowledge of the grief process, including signs of complicated grief.
- A facilitator should have some knowledge of the impact of different types of losses on the grief process, especially loss which was traumatic (suicide, homicide, accident), or grief which is disenfranchised (not acknowledged by society).
- A facilitator needs to have a basic understanding of group dynamics and how to respond to and manage certain situations which can arise when a group of people interact over time.
- A facilitator needs to be accepting and nonjudgmental.
- A facilitator needs to be skilled at listening as well as communicating and teaching.
- A facilitator needs to be able to demonstrate compassion, empathy, respect and authenticity.
- A facilitator needs to be comfortable with silence as well as conflict.
- A facilitator needs to be able to set boundaries, not just for the members of the group but also for himself/herself.
- A facilitator should be flexible, able to adjust plans for a group as needed.
- A facilitator should be aware of community resources, open to learning and aware of when to seek help.

### **Where Will the Program Take Place?**

It is suggested that location is very important to a groups' success. The location should be barrier free, easy to find, with adequate parking, good lighting and good signage (meaning easy to find the building and room). Preferably seating should be movable, to allow for rearranging the room, people moving to see or hear better, etc. Although it may seem obvious, seating should also be comfortable, not so low or soft that some people may have a struggle getting into or out of it, or so hard it is uncomfortable to sit for long. It is also crucial to ensure that the room is without distractions (noise, people passing by), private, and of a comfortable temperature, remembering that this may need to be adjusted as people have varying degrees of tolerance for heat and cold. Little details are very important to people coming to be "taken care of", so ensuring there are tissues, that the room is visually appealing, etc. becomes very important. If you plan to use audio or video equipment, make sure the room has it or can accommodate it.

### **How Many People Should Be in a Group?**

Although you may have reasons to modify this, it is commonly felt that a group is best with a minimum of 5 people and a maximum of 12. Experience has shown that, although recognizing it is not optimal, it can be acceptable to run a group with 13-14 people, because often at least one or two people will find a group is not for them or have something come up in their lives, and will not complete the group. Some have also been known to run a group with just three people, but only when having called the three to let them know the group is going to be very small, is it okay with them and to determine their commitment to coming based on the small number and its impact on the other members if someone doesn't attend.

### **What Time of Day Should You Offer the Group?**

Timing may impact the success of a group, but often the best way to determine what is best for you is to offer a group at one time and, if not successful, consider an alternate. There are people who prefer a day group, often because they do not like to drive at night, go to sleep quite early or work at night. There are others who need or prefer night because they have work or other day time obligations. Some people have indicated they prefer a weekend because they are too busy or tired after a long day to come at night. If possible, experiment with what will work and what seems to meet the most need. The key in considering this is the willingness to be flexible based on the needs of the participants and to have the resources and ability to offer a group that meets those needs.

### **Should You Charge a Fee?**

Hospice regulations require that bereavement services be made available for up to a year at no charge to family members of those served by the hospice. While many programs do not charge anyone a fee, there are some who run separate programs for their hospice families at no charge, and other programs for community members who did not receive hospice care, for which they do charge a nominal fee. Other programs do not charge for support groups, but do charge for certain special programs such as camp, retreats, programs involving a paid speaker or meal, etc. Many not for profit programs, while not charging a fee, will indicate to participants that their organization is a non-profit and therefore donations are always welcome.

If you need or want to charge fees, it is recommended that, as part of any needs assessment, you consider what is being offered at no charge and offer something which differs from that and explain how, in spite of seeming to be quite similar, what you offer has differences (thus offering an explanation for the fee). If accessing one's insurance benefit to pay for the group is an option, this should also be explained.

## What Format Should the Group Follow?

There are a variety of ways in which groups are offered. Each has pros and cons and much depends on your resources, the mission of your organization, the needs of your community (what others are doing and what therefore might be an alternative), etc. If possible, it might be useful to try one method and be willing to re-structure if you see the need.

**Open Groups.** An open group generally will serve more and a greater variety of people. This will allow for greater diversity from which people might learn more. It also suggests that people will be at various places within their grieving, and can be helpful to others who are at another stage of the process. For participants, an open group also allows them to choose when they come and not feel a need to make a commitment to a series of time limited groups, which for some people who are grieving can be difficult—they may feel like going out or talking one week and not another. The disadvantage can be less bonding and continuity for members and the potential for more challenges for the facilitator, who may have more participant needs to try to balance as people come with different losses, at different places in their process, etc.

**Closed Groups.** A closed group allows for more bonding among members, which means they may trust and share more, as well as have a greater likelihood of developing new friendships which last outside the group. Obviously with this model people cannot come and go as they wish, which for some bereaved can be a struggle. A closed group, unless you offer many groups, means that someone who missed the start of a group may have to wait some time before entering a new one. (This is a reason to be aware of other offerings within your community to which you might refer people.) Another thought on this is that you can offer a once a month introductory session, with a title such as “The Experience of Grief.” This is often a two-hour one-time psychoeducational program allowing people to begin to learn about and understand some things about the grief process and also an opportunity to tell their story or ask questions. This enables people to have at least something to be a part of until the next group starts. Additionally, this program can be a wonderful introduction to what a group might be like for people who are uncertain they want to be in a group, and certainly benefits those people who feel they just need/want a brief, one time session to ask a few questions or clarify a few issues. A closed group also allows for more definition, if you wish, of who participates, so there may be more commonalities, such as type of loss, age, etc. For some participants, having a group with a beginning and end is more comforting and also can further assist them in saying goodbyes. For others, however, this is a disadvantage, in that some members may feel the group ended “too soon” and they needed more.

While closed groups tend to have more structure to each session, regardless of whether a group is open or closed, most tend to have at least some structure in how the group starts, progresses and ends:

- At the beginning, most sessions start with a welcome, and any necessary “housekeeping comments”. Some groups have an opening ritual.
- The session then progresses to checking in, when members are invited to introduce themselves (for open groups) and say a few words about how they are doing, perhaps how they are feeling at that moment, how their week went, any thoughts they have had since the previous meeting.
- Many groups also include time for input or learning from the facilitator. This might include discussion of an article or reading (typically best done in a closed group where everyone has received the material), viewing and discussing a video, focusing on a particular topic or issue with validation, information and suggestions offered by the facilitator and discussion by the members.
- The facilitator should allow time for summing up the session as it nears an end, highlighting any significant points made or things learned.
- Many groups finish a session with a ritual.

## Group Guidelines

It is generally a good idea during the first group session (and at the start of all sessions if an open group) to review some basic “rules” or guidelines for how the group will run and what is expected. For most people, it can be helpful to give them something written, but also go over it briefly to both reinforce some points and to make sure people understand.

**Following are two sample versions of guidelines:**

### Sample One

1. **Confidentiality:** Whatever is shared within the group remains confidential. Share with others outside the group only what you have learned about yourself.
2. **Respect:** It is important to respect your own grief as well as others. Every relationship and loss is different and therefore people will respond differently. This is ok, but is also why grief can be a lonely process. There is no one or simple path to follow. It is

important to respect everyone's right to grieve in their own way. We can compare, but cannot judge.

It is also important to respect the time you and others are giving to work on your grief by joining a group. Please turn off beepers and cell phones or, if necessary, set them on vibrate.

3. **Advice:** We are here to share personal feelings and current concerns but are not here to fix problems. You are welcome to ask questions, make suggestions.
4. **Freedom of Speech:** You may choose to share or remain silent. No one will be put on the spot or forced to talk, but everyone who feels comfortable sharing will be given that chance. Make every effort not to interrupt when someone is speaking. At times, the facilitator may interrupt so that everyone has the opportunity to share.
5. **Feelings:** Feelings are neither right nor wrong; they just are.
6. **Concern and Caring:** Because concern and caring for each other is an integral part of the group process, please let us know if you will be missing a session or if you decide not to continue. The phone number to call is xxx-xxxx.

*Taken from the Bertolon Center for Grief and Healing*

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## Sample Two

1. **Each person's grief is unique.** While you may share some commonalities in your experiences, no two of you are exactly alike. Consequently, respect and accept both what you have in common with others and what is unique to each of you.
2. **Grief is not a disease, and no "quick-fix" exists for what you are feeling.** Don't set a specific timetable for how long it should take you or others to heal.
3. **Feel free to talk about your grief.** If, however, someone in the group decides to listen without sharing, please respect his or her preference.
4. **There is a difference between actively listening** to what another person is saying and expressing your own grief. Make every effort not to interrupt when someone else is speaking.
5. **Thoughts, feelings and experiences shared in this group will stay in this group.** Respect others' right to confidentiality. Do not use names of fellow participants in discussions outside the group.
6. **Allow each person equal time** to express himself or herself so a few people don't monopolize the group's time.
7. **Attend each group meeting and be on time.** If you decide to leave the group before this series is complete, be willing to discuss your decision with the group.
8. **Avoid "advice giving" unless it is specifically requested by a group member.** If advice is not solicited, don't give it. If a group member poses a question, share ideas that helped you if you experienced a similar situation. Remember that this group is for support, not therapy.
9. **Recognize that thoughts and feelings are neither right nor wrong.** Enter into the thoughts and feelings of other group members without trying to change them.
10. **Create an atmosphere of willing, invited sharing.** If you feel pressured to talk but don't want to, say so. Your right to quiet contemplation will be respected by the group.

*Taken from Alan Wolfelt*

## What about Screening Participants?:

In an open group, this can be difficult to do and many who offer this type do not screen. Depending on what you are comfortable with and can do, while you can allow people to come and go from a group as they need, you can also ask that they register before attending their first session. This would allow you to obtain some information and meet the individual, depending on your screening process. Obtaining information on group participants in a closed group is clearly easier.

Whether you conduct personal or face-to-face screening is also an individual choice. Some organizations conduct all screening with a face to face interview, while others are comfortable with a phone interview, and still others do not conduct any interview at all. This becomes a matter of your comfort level in how much you need or want to know about group participants prior to their joining a group, as well as your ability to engage in face to face personal interviews with every group participant. Most groups minimally ask participants to complete a brief questionnaire. If you plan to ask the bereaved themselves to complete the questionnaire, remember



that thinking, writing, perhaps looking up information, can be daunting when one is grieving, so try to keep the questions to the barest minimum.

## How Do We Let People Know about our Groups?

Offering a fantastic program is only helpful if you get people to know about and participate in it. How you inform people, therefore, is very important.

**Media.** An obvious source for most people is use of the media, such as newspapers, radio and TV. Although posting what's known as public service announcements (PSA) and calendar listings is always a good idea because there is generally no charge for these, anything you can do to garner more of a "story" (i.e., more attention) is even better. This means attempting to get announcements for anything newsworthy, such as new staff, new programs, interesting information or statistics, or if you receive any funding for something. Additionally, try to get a story about a particular loss or situation, such as pet loss, loss to suicide, losing a child. These hold special interest for some media. However, it is even more enticing to them if you can get a personal aspect to the story by having someone who has experienced this loss (and even better if they've been in your groups) to talk about it. You might consider writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece; even better, to have someone who has been in your program write it (you can offer to help them if that makes it easier). If a grief related event should occur in your community, try writing to the paper or asking to be interviewed on TV or radio to respond to this event.

**Newsletters.** Using any newsletters your organization publishes to promote your groups and workshops is very important and useful. Don't just use a bereavement newsletter if your organization has more than one. Also consider that many other organizations have newsletters (such as churches/synagogues, civic groups, employer), and will often be willing to at least print an announcement of your programs, and may even be willing (if not delighted) to actually let you write an article for them. In any article you are able to write, it is particularly moving and often best highlights what you are trying to say, if it can include direct quotations or "testimonials" from folks who have benefited from your programs.

**Brochures and flyers.** Creation of brochures about your bereavement services can be very helpful if it is affordable for you. Flyers created to promote specific events are also useful. These can be mailed to the bereaved, of course, but also created for posting, and sent or delivered to churches/synagogues, senior centers, funeral homes, nursing homes, libraries, work places, and other places which have a bulletin board for posting information.

**Phone calls.** Often a more personal can be the incentive and encouragement someone who is grieving needs to feel comfortable participating in a group. If possible, having bereavement counselors or volunteers call the bereaved, reminding them of your groups and asking if they'd like to come, can be what is needed to encourage their joining.

**Advertising.** Sometimes placing an advertisement about a particular group or workshop captures people's attention, and is often especially useful when targeting a specific population. If your budget doesn't allow for this, you may be able to get a business to "sponsor" an ad for you, or a paper to donate it.

**Speaking.** Offering a speakers' bureau is not only a good way to provide education and information to folks, but it should be used as a forum for promoting the other services you offer. Preparing a handout which highlights your upcoming groups and workshops should be part of your materials.

**Websites.** If your organization has a website, make sure your groups and workshops are listed on it. Additionally, you might ask other appropriate organizations to include your website as a link within theirs.

## How Do We Know We Are Meeting People's Needs?

Asking people to evaluate their experience in a group or workshop is the best way to learn what is working and what you might want to modify. Written surveys can be helpful although some organizations also use phone surveys after a group has ended. If using a written survey, it is suggested you might distribute these the week before a group ends, asking people to bring them when they return for the last session. Experience shows there is a greater return rate in this than allowing people to take them home the last session and hope they'll be sent back. If you do offer a return by mail option, please consider providing a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Some people do build in time during the last session for participants to complete the evaluation and while the return rate can be very good, it does put people under some pressure (either to complete it because everyone else is or to not have adequate time to think about their answers).

You might consider asking questions such as:

- What was the most helpful part of the group?
- What was the least helpful?

- Would they recommend any changes and if so what?
- How did they feel about the facilitator (this can be a check-off scale of 1-5, or options such as excellent, good, fair, etc.)?
- If you distributed materials or readings, were these helpful?
- Would they have preferred a different day, or time of day?
- Was the location/room comfortable and easy to find?

Most meaningful to our organization in our evaluation are the questions: *how did you feel when you started the group; how do you feel now*. Some typical responses have been:

**Before:** *Helpless, hopeless, alone and isolated. Sometimes panicky about being alone.*

**After:** *Sitting in a quiet room with other people with the same feelings made me feel not so alone with my grief.*

**Before:** *Groping in the dark—not knowing how to cope with a significant loss.*

**After:** *Better—more capable of dealing with my loss.*

**Before:** *Confused, guilty, angry.*

**After:** *I feel so grateful to have had the opportunity to come to this group. I feel so much better now.*

**Before:** *Lost, alone—in denial—very tearful, afraid, life not worthwhile—I isolated myself.*

**After:** *Not less sad yet, but less alone due to the wonderful women in my group—I realize there are many grieving people out there who feel and suffer as I do.*

This is not only useful and validating for the facilitator but more importantly often enables the participants themselves to really think about and see what changes they’ve made.

You might also consider sending an evaluation to folks who start but do not finish a group. This one would be slightly different, but could say that you are aware they did not complete a group they started, ensuring that your services are meeting the needs of as many people as possible is important to you and you would welcome their feedback as to what could have been done differently (if anything) for them to have completed the group.

## Structure

If you are running an open group, this will likely work best with limited structure, as you will need to accommodate people who are coming at different times and different stages of their grief. As mentioned previously, however, it is suggested that even with this format, you allow for introductions and telling the story during each session, and time for the facilitator to summarize and close each meeting. Additionally, many of the activities and topics listed below are also appropriate for an open group.

In order for a group to be most successful, it is recommended that you have some sort of plan prior to each session, bearing in mind that there must be room for flexibility to accommodate the needs of the members at the time of the meeting.

Although there are many ways in which to structure the sessions, examples of a six and eight week closed groups are the following:

### 6-Week Group

#### Session 1

##### Possible Topics:

- Introductions/Sharing losses/Expectations
- Overview of grief process

##### Possible Handouts:

*Support Group Guidelines*  
*The Stages of Grief*  
*Loss Affects People in Different Ways*  
*Be Sure to Take Care of Yourself*  
*Some Myths and Facts About Grief*

##### Possible Discussion Questions:

- Are there times it doesn’t seem real?
- How are family/friends responding to your loss?

## Session 2

### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Continue with reactions to grief

### Possible Handouts

*Some Normal Grief Responses*  
*Do Nice People Get Angry*  
*Suggestions for Handling Guilt*

### Possible Discussion Questions

- Where are you in your grief?
- What are you finding helpful?

*Invite members to bring in a picture of a loved one lost to share with the group for the following week.*

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## Session 3

### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Coping with emotions: anger, guilt, sadness, etc.

### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part I*  
*Tools for Healing*  
*The Elephant in the Room*

### Possible Discussion Questions

- What was one of the deceased's special qualities?
- What qualities did they have that you would like to develop in yourself?

*Share pictures and stories.*

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## Session 4

### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Practical considerations/new roles (wedding rings, timing of going through belongings, gravestones, finances/legal)
- Changes in family/dealing with family

### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part II*  
*Mourning, Grief and the Task of Knowing*  
*Mourner's Bill of Rights*

### Possible Discussion Questions

- What is the most difficult time of day?
- Does anyone have an elephant in the room?
- How has your identity changed?
- What new roles are you learning?
- What roles are most difficult?

*Invite members to bring in something significant to share.*

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## Session 5

### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Influence of spirituality on grieving
- Finding new meaning in life
- Healthy ways to cope and care for oneself (music, writing, art, exercise)

### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part III*  
*Suggestions for Helping Yourself with Grief*

### Possible Discussion Questions

- Has your grief changed? If so, how?
- What has someone said/done to help you?
- Has anyone said/done anything to disable you?

*Presentation of memorabilia*

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## Session 6

### Possible Topics

- Check-In with participants
- Saying goodbye and possible plans for how they will continue to cope
- Share the meaning of their group experience
- Importance of memories/rituals
- Conduct ritual (if appropriate)

### Possible Handouts

*Suggested Readings*  
*You Know You Are Healing*  
*Litany of Remembrance* (if appropriate)

### Distribute Group Evaluations



## 8-Week group

### Session 1

#### Possible Topics

- Introductions/Sharing losses/Expectations
- Overview of grief process

#### Possible Handouts

*Support Group Guidelines*

*The Stages of Grief*

*Loss Affects People in Different Ways*

*Be Sure to Take Care of Yourself*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- Are there times it doesn't seem real?
- How are family/friends responding to your loss?

### Session 2

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Continue with reactions to grief

#### Possible Handouts

*Do Nice People Get Angry*

*Some Normal Grief Responses*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- Where are you in your grief?
- What are you finding helpful?

### Session 3

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants

#### Possible Handouts

*Some Myths and Facts About Grief*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- What was one of their special qualities?
- What qualities did they have that you would like to develop in yourself?

*Invite members to bring in a picture of a loved one lost to share with the group for the following week.*

### Session 4

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Coping with emotions (anger, guilt, sadness, etc.)

#### Possible Handouts

*Suggestions for Handling Guilt*

*The Elephant in the Room*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- What is the most difficult time of day?
- Does anyone have an elephant in the room?

*Share pictures and stories.*

### Session 5

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Practical considerations/new roles (wedding rings, timing of going through belongings, gravestones, finances/legal, etc.)

#### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part I*

*Tools for Healing*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- How has your identity changed?
- What new roles are you learning?
- Difficulties?
- What has someone said/done to help you?
- Has anyone said/done anything to disable you?

*Bring in something significant to share.*

### Session 6

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Presentation of memorabilia
- Changes in family/dealing with family

#### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part II*

*Mourning, Grief and the Task of Knowing*

*Mourner's Bill of Rights*

#### Possible Discussion Questions

- Has your grief changed?
- If so, how?

### Session 7

#### Possible Topics

- Relaxation Exercise
- Check-In with participants
- Influence of spirituality on grieving
- Finding new meaning in life
- Healthy ways to cope and care for oneself (music, writing, art, exercise)

#### Possible Handouts

*Going Crazy Syndrome: Part III*

*Suggestions for Helping Yourself with Grief*

### Session 8

#### Possible Topics

- Check-In with participants
- Saying goodbye and possible plans for how they will continue to cope
- Share the meaning of their group experience
- Importance of memories/rituals
- Conduct ritual (if appropriate)

#### Possible Handouts

*Suggested Readings*

*You Know You Are Healing*

*Litany of Remembrance* (if appropriate)

#### Distribute Group Evaluations

## Materials

*Materials you might need or want to think about for a group:*

- Most groups ask people to complete and wear a name tag, making it easier to learn and remember names.
- A pad of paper for people who are interested, to share names and contact information.
- Flip chart or some other board to write on.
- TISSUES
- Paper and pens/pencils in case people want to write down something to remember.
- Refreshments (This is not a requirement. Some groups just have water, some have coffee and tea, some have a light refreshment such as cookies. Additionally, some groups have special refreshments just for the last meeting, such as a cake, or a potluck meal. What you choose to do should depend on cost, location—whether food and drink are acceptable in the room—and the preferences of the participants. Most people do feel that at least something to drink makes them feel welcomed.
- TV/VCR/DVD or CD player if you want to play music or show a video.

\*A note about videos: The following are videos which have been considered popular and helpful by those who facilitate groups:

*A Ray of Hope: Managing Holidays and Special Days*

38 minute video available through Compassion Books or [Griefsong.com](http://Griefsong.com)

*Beyond Death's Door*

35 min. video available through Compassion Books

*Newborn Death*

60 min. DVD available through Compassion Books

*Footprints on our Hearts: How to Cope after a Miscarriage, Stillbirth or Newborn Death*

60 min. video available through Compassion Books

*Journey through the Shadows: Hope for Healing After Someone You Love Has Committed Suicide*

35 min. video available through Compassion Books

*To Touch a Grieving Heart*

40 min. video available through Compassion Books

*Seeing Our Way Through*

30 min. video available through [Griefwatch.com](http://Griefwatch.com)

*Tear Soup*

17 min. video available through [Griefwatch.com](http://Griefwatch.com)

Many groups begin each session with a ritual of some sort, which might include lighting a candle and saying the name of the deceased, reciting a poem or some other meaningful reading, a “centering” exercise such as closing eyes and breathing deeply. While these rituals can serve the purpose of helping people to “shut out” or leave behind the stresses and responsibilities of their daily lives for a bit and focus on the purpose of the group, some find them uncomfortable, so it is important to determine a ritual with which everyone is comfortable.

Some groups have asked members to pick a “buddy” whom they call during the week to check in. This not only provides some support to members during the week between sessions, but also encourages relationship building. We need to be cautious about this, however, as sharing phone numbers or other contact information with “strangers” may make some people uncomfortable.

Because many symptoms of grief are similar to those of stress, it is helpful to make this connection for people and then help them learn ways in which to better manage stress. This can include gentle stretching and deep breathing, meditation, gentle yoga, sharing lists of stress reduction/self care suggestions. There are also fun self assessments people can take to determine their stress level or how well they take care of themselves. One activity to support this concept is to write suggestions for taking care of/being good to yourself on slips of paper, then place these in a basket and have participants each pick 2-3. They are then instructed to make every

effort during the next week to implement whatever tips they've picked and talk about it at the next meeting. (Folks are free to swap tips if something they've drawn is not possible—such as taking a walk—or not at all appealing).

Many groups have participants bring a photo of their deceased loved one to “introduce” him/her to the group, as well as using this to reminisce/share a memory. Sometimes people are asked to share the story related to the photo or just a memory of their loved one.

Many groups incorporate letter writing activities. These can be writing a letter to the deceased, writing a letter to yourself FROM the deceased (what he/she might say to you now), writing a letter to the GRIEF, making it a real entity.

One group facilitator had members write and mail a sympathy card to themselves. Another, recognizing the importance of saying the name of the deceased and how often bereaved say this is ignored, had members each write the name of their loved one on a piece of paper. They could write it in any way they liked (i.e., James Raymond Smith, Jr., Jimmy Smith, Big Jim, etc.). The names are then all placed in a basket, participants each select one, and then they are all read aloud.

Other groups ask people to bring some memento that reminds them of or represents their loved one, and tell the story about it.

An activity which some people have found meaningful is passing around either scraps of fabric or a variety of picture postcards, and asking each participant to choose one which reminds them of their loved one or of a story about him/her they would like to share. Then each person takes a turn explaining their choice and telling their story related to it.

Some groups have chosen to make collages either of things that remind them of their loved one, or of what they envision the future might hold for them. This activity can be done as “homework” and brought to the group, or done as a group activity. For some people, having an activity on which to focus their hands, eyes, etc. makes talking and sharing feelings a bit easier, so doing this as a group task allows for this to occur. However, having a significant “homework” task can be intimidating for some people, so you want to talk to the group about how they'd like to do this. A comfortable compromise sometimes is to have people prepare their materials during the week to bring to the group for assembling together. Things people have incorporated into collages have been photos, clippings of pictures and/or phrases from magazines, poems, pieces of fabric taken from a loved one's clothing, buttons or small pieces of jewelry.

Another helpful activity can be listing on a board or flip chart, as recommended by Alan Wolfelt, the “Five Realms of Nurturing Yourself”—*Physical, Emotional, Cognitive, Social and Spiritual*. Then ask participants to list things under each category which are practical and possible for them to do to achieve self-care. If the group is large enough, this activity can be done by breaking into smaller groups, perhaps representing the five realms, working on them, and then reconvening to share with the group as a whole.

You might ask participants to list on a chart the most and least helpful things people have said or done for them during their bereavement, or the least helpful things people have said to them, and then strategize ways to address these. This activity often generates not only practical ideas but often much laughter.

Some questions which can generate good dialogue:

- How are friends and family responding to your loss?
- Where are you finding the support you need?
- Can you share some of your fears?
- What do you wish you had done differently before or after the death?
- Are there times when it doesn't seem real? What is that like and how do you deal with it?
- What did you gain from your loved one that you will always have?
- What special quality did they have that you would like to develop in yourself?
- Since no one is perfect, what was your loved one's most irritating trait?
- What is the most difficult time of day? How do you manage it?
- What are your most difficult reminders (such as favorite restaurant, place where loved one died, loved one's favorite chair) and how do you deal with these?
- What new role is most difficult for you?
- Where can you go for help?

For the last session of a closed group, most people respond well to some ritual and/or activities which acknowledge this is another ending. Creating a list of participant names and numbers for those who may want to keep in touch is often helpful, although it is important to allow this to be a voluntary task, and to make it comfortable for anyone who chooses not to do this. You might leave a sheet somewhere for people to put their contact information on it without passing it around the room, so it is less apparent if someone doesn't write on it, and then make copies to be distributed or mailed later.

During the last session it is important to summarize what has taken place during the weeks of the group. Point out some of the key topics you've discussed, significant ideas or insights people have shared. Recognize the progress people have made. Reinforce the optimism and hope most people have gained. Validate that there will likely continue to be difficult days but these don't have to be viewed as a setback, and tie this into some of the skills they've acquired to manage this.

Some groups use this last session as a sort of "graduation" or celebration, making it more festive than previous meetings. This might include inviting each person to bring a favorite dish of their deceased loved one, bring something which represents and tells the group something about themselves they've not yet shared (one gentleman had been fairly reserved and quiet during his group, but on the last day brought a large stuffed monkey given to him by his deceased wife, letting the group know he actually had a more playful side than he'd been able to share). You might invite people to bring something to read or a song to play which says something about themselves, their grief, or how they feel about the group.

You might plan a closing ritual, which is particularly meaningful if people can keep something from it to take away with them. This might be a candle "ceremony" where each person, in lighting their candle, says something about their experience in the group, or one feeling about the group they will take with them. People then leave with their candle.

A few words about some emerging alternatives to the more traditional support group involving a group of people meeting together face to face in a room. These include **telephone support groups**, where participants call a prearranged "800" number, much as professionals often have telephone conference calls. Once everyone is on the line, a facilitator guides the conversation in ways similar to the above format. You can even mail out readings and an evaluation tool. The advantage is that people can participate without leaving home if things like transportation, demands on time, or physical limitations make this a challenge. The disadvantage is the cost of arranging the phone service, and the inability for people to interact more personally.

Another somewhat popular support format is **online support**. Your organization can arrange this to be offered by you, if interested and able, or you can refer people to existing ones. Some to explore include:

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

[www.groww.com](http://www.groww.com)

[www.beyondindigo.com](http://www.beyondindigo.com)

[www.grief-recovery.com](http://www.grief-recovery.com)

[www.webhealing.com](http://www.webhealing.com)

[www.hov.org](http://www.hov.org)

## What Else Can I Do Besides Run Groups?

One very successful option for many organizations is the offering of educational workshops. These can be geared to the bereaved, those who care about them (their "natural helpers"), or both. Workshops can be one time offerings, or perhaps a short series. While workshops may have a supportive and therapeutic element, unlike groups their focus is educational. Most workshops run for 2-3 hours. Topics which have been offered include:

- Coping with the Holidays
- Raising Grieving Children
- Spirituality and Loss

In the same vein as one time workshops are educational series. While people may be encouraged to attend all of the programs in a series, many might prefer to "pick and choose" based on their interest or availability. Some series ideas include:

### Expressing Grief Creatively:

- Healing through Creative Writing
- Art as Healer
- Quilting
- Let the Music Heal

### Mastering New Roles:

- Simple car maintenance
- Simple home maintenance
- Financial management
- Shopping and cooking for one

Since many men find participation in “traditional” support groups uncomfortable, some programs have instituted things like a men’s breakfast club which, as the name implies, is an opportunity for men to meet over breakfast (typically held at a restaurant) while talking about what is going on in their lives.

Some organizations have instituted book clubs where participants are given assigned books to read (related to death, dying or loss) and then convene with a facilitator to talk about them. This works especially well for people who tend to process their loss in a more intellectual fashion. Some possible books have included:

*Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom

*The Year of Magical Thinking*, by Joan Didion

*Remembering with Love*, by Elizabeth Levang

*Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Harold Kushner

*The Tao of Pooh*, by Benjamin Hoff

*For One More Day*, Mitch Albom

*The Memory Keepers Daughter*, Kim Edwards.

Since exercise is known to be helpful to people who are experiencing stress, offering a stress reduction class of some sort can be popular. This might include teaching a variety of methods, or focusing on just one, such as sessions on meditation or yoga. Additionally, you might consider forming a walking club. Two hospices with very active, successful walking programs are Hospice Care of Boulder and Broomfield Counties, [www.hospicecareonline.org](http://www.hospicecareonline.org) and Victoria Hospice, [www.victoriahospice.org](http://www.victoriahospice.org).

Some hospices have helped to organize or facilitate gatherings of a more social nature. One program, called Meal and More, meets monthly and serves a meal to participants allowing for roughly an hour of socializing, followed by a 90 minute program or activity. This can be playing Bingo or Trivial Pursuit, or speakers addressing things like Ethical Wills, Financial Planning, or local authors talking about a book they’ve written. They’ve had someone from the police department talk about personal safety, a chef talk about shopping and cooking for one with an emphasis on turning it into a comfortable even special experience, someone who talked about backyard birds of the area and someone who talked about art appreciation.

A number of organizations sponsor an annual event for women who have lost their mothers. These are special events, such as a luncheon, with a speaker and generally ritual—perhaps bringing photos of their mothers for display with a candle lighting ceremony.

## What If It Doesn’t Always Go Smoothly?

While many groups just seem to have a “perfect” flow, with people respectfully and meaningfully bonding and connecting, there are times when, as a facilitator, we are faced with some challenges. Before we end, we will spend a few moments talking about what some of these might be and some ways you might consider coping with them. Typically these occur when people with certain agendas and personalities participate in a group. These might include:

**The Interrupter.** This is a person who frequently interrupts when other people are talking. Ways you might manage this:

“Sue, I can see you have a lot on your mind, but it’s John’s turn to talk right now.”

- Maybe remind this person of the “rules”/guidelines for group (which should include letting each person finish speaking).
- If necessary, you might need to be more direct, by pointing out that this person is interrupting, did they realize that, and how can you help him/her to control this.

**The Advice-Giver.** This is the person who seems to need to tell fellow participants how they should solve all their problems. You might manage this by:

- Reminding them of the rules about giving advice.
- Thank them for their input and then remind them that what works for one person may not be right for another.

- Ask other members if THEY have tried the recommended solution and how it went. Or ask the members to discuss the “merits” of the suggested solution.
- You may want to remind the advice giver that, in this type of group, most often people have some idea of what they need to do in a problem situation and are not looking to be told what to do, so much as to process it and work it through.

**The Person Who Goes On Tangents Or Rambles.** This is a person who goes on and on, as one thought reminds him of another. This person generally monopolizes the group and can cause people to lose interest. You can try:

- When there is a pause, quickly thank him/her for their thoughts and then either direct a question to someone in the group or make a statement which brings things back to the topic at hand.
- Try to find something within his/her comments which is relevant and build on it.
- Ask the group if the subject he/she is talking about is of interest to pursue and either direct the conversation there, or suggest holding the thought for another time.
- You can just point out that the group is getting off track and “let’s bring it back to...”
- Sometimes holding up a hand or placing your hand on this person’s arm is effective in getting them to pause or stop enough for you to intervene.
- If necessary, you may need to speak to this person outside the group to point out their behavior and the impact it has on the group.

**The Person Who Doesn’t Talk.** While we want to be respectful of people who are shy or uncomfortable talking in a group, and also realize that they can gain a great deal simply by listening, the perpetually quiet person makes others uncomfortable. As time goes on, the silent person tends to be ignored and, even when they do want to add something, can’t find a way to interject. You might consider:

- Commenting on nonverbal signals, such as “you look amused, John” or “you seem a bit sad, Sally”, would you like to share how you are feeling?
- When they do speak, without making a big deal and thus causing more discomfort, try reinforcing and validating what they say. If appropriate, refer back to it at another time.
- Try asking a question of the entire group, which you ask each person to go around the room and answer.
- You may want to speak to this person outside of the group if these efforts fail, asking how you can make the experience more comfortable for them to participate.

**The Development of Small Cliques.** This tends to occur most often in ongoing groups, although even in closed groups if people form friendships in one and then sign up for another, it can happen. What you will see is a small subset of people making “inside” jokes, and talking about their activities outside the group. Because they’ve begun to know and understand each other, they may also reference events or remarks made in another group or time period. This of course makes newer people feel left out. You might try:

- Pointing out that, while you encourage people to form friendships as a result of being in the group, as this can help the grieving process and allow for new relationships once the group ends, private jokes and remarks are inappropriate in a larger group context.
- Perhaps they reference something or someplace which you can bring back to the group as a whole, such as a new restaurant people might try, or a vacation spot comfortable for single people.
- Consider ordering the seating arrangements, so that people who know each other do not sit together.

**The Person Who Blames or Complains.** This person seems to struggle with taking responsibility for any of his/her actions and instead blames others for the things which aren’t working out. Or they just find fault with everything, nothing is right or good, or solutions are often met with negativism. This person can not only be annoying to others in the group, but can cause people who are trying to find solutions and hope to feel discouraged. You might try:

- Offering different or unusual solutions to some of the complaints.
- Use one of the complaints as a launch for the direction of a discussion, by asking if others have a problem with this too, strategizing as a group on ways to address it, or how have others solved it.
- Pointing out that sometimes we don’t have control over the way things are, and leading a discussion on how this feels and how we can live with that.
- Pointing out to this person that they seem to find ways in which other people play a role in the cause of the problem and would they consider looking at what part they may play in it.



- Acknowledging that you know this is a very hard time for her/him and, while it would be nice if others did what we needed or wanted, this doesn't always happen. We can only control ourselves. So is there anything she/he can do differently if this is accepted.

**The Very Angry Person.** We all know that anger is a common emotion for people to experience when grieving. However, this person is one who can't seem to move beyond their anger, and at times expresses this towards those in the group, including the facilitator. This can be dealt with by:

- Validating that feeling angry about a loss is not uncommon, and that you can hear how pained and angry he is, but that directing it at people in this group is neither helpful nor appropriate. You might then ask if he has any ideas as to how to manage it better, or ask if it would be okay for members to share how they have dealt with their anger.
- If the anger continues, you may need to speak to this person outside of the group, which could include making appropriate referrals for more help or requesting they not continue with the group until these feelings are more under control.

## Summary

This course has offered theories, ideas and guidelines for providers who are interested in planning and creating bereavement support groups or workshops for adults, or those who are currently doing so, but would like to reconsider or redesign some of what they are doing. We built a foundation for the benefits of offering groups and elaborated on the basics of providing groups, addressing things like location, facilitators, fees, and format. While there was discussion on some specifics of what to actually DO in groups, some alternative options to the "traditional" group, and how to address some challenges which can occur in offering groups, there remain many creative ways in which to offer support to those who are grieving. Researching what others are offering, learning from colleagues and modifying what we learn based on available resources and needs of the bereaved we hope to support, can enable a provider to bring programming to grieving people which is meaningful and healing.

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# Models of Adult Bereavement Support Groups

## POST TEST

Please circle 1 correct answer per multiple-choice question.

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>1. Bereaved individuals may benefit from restoration-oriented coping, offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. distraction from grief</li><li>b. focus on new roles/identity/relationships</li><li>c. efforts to adapt to changes in life circumstances</li><li>d. all of the above</li></ul> <p>2. One theory suggests that more healing occurs when the grief related distress is minimized and positive emotion is activated or facilitated.<br/>True or False</p> <p>3. NHPCO suggests bereavement care should focus on :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. helping family members understand and move forward in the grief process</li><li>b. helping with problem-solving around adjustment</li><li>c. assistance with financial concerns</li><li>d. addressing social and spiritual concerns</li><li>e. all of the above</li><li>f. a, b, and d</li></ul> <p>4. By introducing people to others who are going through a similar experience, support groups offer a way in which to “normalize” the grief experience.<br/>True or False</p> <p>5. Groups offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. an opportunity for grieving people to reach out and help others</li><li>b. opportunities to learn new ways of coping</li><li>c. a supportive environment</li><li>d. all of the above</li><li>e. none of the above</li></ul> | <p>6. A group facilitator should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. be accepting and non-judgmental</li><li>b. be flexible</li><li>c. share their personal grief history</li><li>d. be aware of community resources</li><li>e. a, b, c</li><li>f. a, b, d</li></ul> <p>7. A closed group means only people with a certain type of loss can participate.<br/>True or False</p> <p>8. Some pluses of offering a closed group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. more opportunities for bonding</li><li>b. greater opportunity for developing new friendships</li><li>c. greater opportunity for sharing and trust</li><li>d. all of the above</li></ul> <p>9. Support group guidelines can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. confidentiality</li><li>b. acceptance of feelings as neither right nor wrong</li><li>c. freedom of speech</li><li>d. attend each session and be on time</li><li>e. all of the above</li></ul> <p>10. Promotion of groups can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. media</li><li>b. advertising</li><li>c. attending funerals and handing out information</li><li>d. newsletters and flyers</li><li>e. all of the above</li><li>f. a, b, d</li></ul> <p>11. Asking people to evaluate their group experience doesn't help much with group planning.<br/>True or False</p> | <p>12. During the last session of a group, it is important to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. summarize what has occurred in the group</li><li>b. recognize the progress people have made</li><li>c. share phone numbers and addresses</li><li>d. reinforce the hope people have gained</li><li>e. a and b</li><li>f. a, b, and d</li></ul> <p>13. If someone frequently interrupts a group session, a facilitator can remind the person of the guidelines about letting each person finish speaking.<br/>True or False</p> <p>14. If a group participant doesn't talk, the facilitator can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. comment on non-verbal signals</li><li>b. validate what they say when they do speak</li><li>c. congratulate them for finally speaking</li><li>d. ask a question of the group but go around the room and ask each person to answer</li><li>e. a, b and c</li><li>f. a, b and d</li></ul> <p>15. If small cliques develop in a group, the facilitator should consider rearranging seating<br/>True or False</p> |
|--|--|--|

## FOCUS CE Course Evaluation

Circle the most appropriate number below to indicate the extent to which the course's learning objectives were achieved.

(5 = Achieved in full / 1 = Not Achieved)

1. Identify at least two benefits of offering groups.

(Achieved in full) 5    4    3    2    1 (Not Achieved)

2. Demonstrate knowledge of at least two topics and activities appropriate for a group.

(Achieved in full) 5    4    3    2    1 (Not Achieved)

3. Articulate knowledge of ways in which to successfully manage group challenges.

(Achieved in full) 5    4    3    2    1 (Not Achieved)

Please provide comments on current course and suggestions for future courses:

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## Get Your CEs

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