

GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP Meeting Agenda

Group structure-group will meet (every week, every other week, once a month, etc..) for 1-1/2 hours. We will begin on time and always end on time to honor everyone's time commitment to the group. The first 20 minutes of the group will be to discuss the handouts for that session and then take a 10 minute refreshment break. The second half (60 minutes) will be group sharing.

Group ground Rule: Before we begin, let's discuss the group rules. Here are some basic group rules that apply to support groups and please feel free to suggest other additional rules you would like to include.

ENTER. Light conversation until everyone arrives.

LIGHT CHALICE.

MEDITATION. Opening meditation read by a group member

NAMING. My name is ---- and i am living with grief.

SHARING. About 5 minutes for each person

CROSS-TALK between group members

BENEDICTION by Wayne Arnason

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:

You are not alone.

OPENING MEDITATION FOR GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP

(SPEAKING SLOWLY AND GENTLY)

Close your eyes and let yourself become aware of your body in your chair and your feet on the floor. Bring attention to your breath. Notice your body expanding and relaxing as you breathe in and out.

(PAUSE)

For now, let go of the thoughts coming in of your attention being drawn to other things and tasks that need to be done. There is no place that you have to go right now, nothing that you have to do. Let yourself be right here with yourself.

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(PAUSE)

As you keep your attention on your breath, notice any sensations in your body; any tension, any emotions, any thoughts or images, sounds or movements. Being aware of them as they come and go. Just allow yourself to experience whatever is happening inside of you right now.

(PAUSE)

As you keep your attention on what is happening inside yourself, there might be there in that space, a need or desire. Something that wants to be expressed. Notice whatever feels important to you right now. Bring forth what would be most helpful, most true. There might be an "I want" or "I need" or "I want to be heard." "This might be a part of you that is rarely shared, rarely exposed, even to yourself. I invite you to speak from that place tonight if it feels safe to you..."

(PAUSE)

In a moment we will be moving our attention from inside ourselves back to the group. Please take your time as you complete your experience of being with yourself. Taking your time, let us know you are finished by opening your eyes when you are ready.

GUIDELINES FOR THIS MEETING

For the support of all our members, we ask you to abide by the following guidelines:

- 1.) We speak only of our own feelings and experiences. We do not tell others what they should or should not do, but we may share our own feelings and perceptions.
- 2.) Try and keep your sharing in the personal "I". Examples: I feel strong when I speak about my feelings; I know that I get frustrated easily.
- 3.) When someone else is sharing we silently sit and listen. We do not interrupt for questions or comments while someone is sharing.
- 4.) As you share and listen, please give others the courtesy of understanding and accepting them.
- 5.) We respect the privacy of everyone here. The things you hear here are spoken in confidence and are not to be repeated elsewhere.
- 6.) Referring to somebody else's share is permitted in this meeting, but only after a person has finished sharing.
- 7.) No aggressive or disruptive behavior is permitted.
- 8.) The opinions expressed are strictly those of the person who gives them. Take what you want and leave the rest.

Coping with Grief and Loss

Understanding the Grieving Process

Losing someone or something you love or care deeply about is very painful. You may experience all kinds of difficult emotions and it may feel like the pain and sadness you're experiencing will never let up. These are normal reactions to a significant loss. But while there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can renew you and permit you to move on.

What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief will be. You may associate grief with the death of a loved one – which is often the cause of the most intense type of grief – but any loss can cause grief, including:

- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of health
- Losing a job
- Loss of financial stability
- A miscarriage
- Retirement
- Death of a pet
- Loss of a cherished dream
- A loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after a trauma
- Selling the family home

Preparing for Grief

The death of someone close to us is the most severe stressor imaginable. Bereavement brings a high risk of mental and physical health problems for a long time afterward.

Grieving is a completely natural process, but it can be profoundly painful and distressing. Occasionally, we are aware in advance that someone is reaching the end of his or her life, and in this case, the experience of grieving partly begins before their death occurs.

To a certain extent, it is impossible to be prepared for the loss of a loved one. It is a time of overwhelming emotions. Despite these feelings, however, it may be possible to plan ahead for this difficult time, particularly to ease any practical issues surrounding the eventual death. This can help reduce the complication in the first hours and days of bereavement, and also later as you struggle to carry on. Taking action in advance can be comforting because you are able just to cope with the circumstances without the added pressure to “get yourself together” and sort things out.

- **Build a network of caring people.** Family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and strangers in a self-help group who have “been there” can give support. Let the people close to you know what you’re going through and warn them that you may soon need more support than usual, or not to be offended if you don’t contact them for a while. Knowing when to ask for help

Coping with Grief and Loss Tips

1. Get support

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to carry. Wherever the support comes from, accept it and **do not grieve alone**. Connecting to others will help you heal.

Finding support after a loss:

- **Turn to friends and family members** – Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Draw loved ones close, rather than avoiding them, and accept the assistance that's offered. Oftentimes, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need – whether it's a shoulder to cry on or help with funeral arrangements.
- **Draw comfort from your faith** – If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you – such as praying, meditating, or going to church can offer solace. If you're questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member or others in your religious community.
- **Join a support group** – Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To

find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers.

- **Talk to a therapist or grief counselor** – If your grief feels like too much to bear, call a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

2. Take care of yourself

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- **Face your feelings** – You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.

The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief. However, even subtle losses can lead to grief. For example, you might experience grief after moving away from home, graduation from college, changing jobs, selling your family home or retiring from a career you loved.

Everyone grieves differently

Grieving is a personal and highly individual experience. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith, and the nature of the

1. Denial and Isolation

The first reaction to learning of terminal illness or death of a cherished loved one is to deny the reality of the situation. It is a normal reaction to rationalize overwhelming emotions. It is a defense mechanism that buffers the immediate shock. We block out the words and hide from the facts. This is a temporary response that carries us through the first wave of pain.

2. Anger

As the masking effects of denial and isolation begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge. We are not ready. The intense emotion is deflected from our vulnerable core, redirected and expressed instead as anger. The anger may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends or family. Anger may be directed at our dying or deceased loved one. Rationally, we know the person is not to be blamed. Emotionally, however, we may resent the person for causing us pain or for leaving us. We feel guilty for being angry, and this makes us more angry.

Remember, grieving is a personal process that has no time limit, nor one "right" way to do it.

The doctor who diagnosed the illness and was unable to cure the disease might become a convenient target. Health professionals deal with death and dying every day. That does not make them immune to the suffering of their patients or to those who grieve for them.

Do not hesitate to ask your doctor to give you extra time or to explain just once more the details of your loved one's illness. Arrange a special appointment or ask that he telephone you at the end of his day. Ask for clear answers to your questions regarding

medical diagnosis and treatment. Understand the options available to you. Take your time.

3. Bargaining

The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control-

- If only we had sought medical attention sooner...
- If only we got a second opinion from another doctor...
- If only we had tried to be a better person toward them...

Secretly, we may make a deal with God or our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitable. This is a weaker line of defense to protect us from the painful reality.

4. Depression

Two types of depression are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss. Sadness and regret predominate this type of depression. We worry about the costs and burial. We worry that, in our grief, we have spent less time with others that depend on us. This phase may be eased by simple clarification and reassurance. We may need a bit of helpful cooperation and few kind words. The second type of depression is more subtle and, in a sense, perhaps more private. It is our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our loved one farewell. Sometimes all we really need is a hug.

5. Acceptance

Reaching this stage of mourning is a gift not afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden and unexpected or we may never see beyond our anger or denial. It is not necessarily a mark of bravery to resist

the inevitable and to deny ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and must be distinguished from depression.

Loved ones that are terminally ill or aging appear to go through a final period of withdrawal. This is by no means a suggestion that they are aware of their own impending death or such, only that physical decline may be sufficient to produce a similar response. Their behavior implies that it is natural to reach a stage at which social interaction is limited. The dignity and grace shown by our dying loved ones may be well their last gift to us.

Coping with loss is ultimately a deeply personal and singular experience – nobody can help you go through it more easily or understand all the emotions that you're going through. But others can be there for you and help comfort you through this process. The best thing you can do is to allow yourself to feel the grief as it comes over you. Resisting it only will prolong the natural process of healing.

Are there stages of grief?

In 1969, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced what became known as the “five stages of grief.” These stages of grief were based on her studies of the feelings of patients facing terminal illness, but many people have generalized them to other types of negative life changes and losses, such as the death of a loved one or a break-up.

The five stages of grief:

- **Denial:** "This can't be happening to me."
- **Anger:** "Why is this happening? Who is to blame?"
- **Bargaining:** "Make this not happen, and in return I will ____."
- **Depression:** "I'm too sad to do anything."
- **Acceptance:** "I'm at peace with what happened."

If you are experiencing any of these emotions following a loss, it may help to know that your reaction is natural and that you'll heal in time. However, not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages – and that's okay. Contrary to popular belief, **you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal.** In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through *any* of these stages. And if you do go through these stages of grief, you probably won't experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don't worry about what you "should" be feeling or which stage you're supposed to be in.

Kübler-Ross herself never intended for these stages to be a rigid framework that applies to everyone who mourns. In her last book before her death in 2004, she said of the five stages of grief: "They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but **there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss.** Our grieving is as individual as our lives."

When grief doesn't go away.

It's normal to feel sad, numb or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.

- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.
- **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.
- **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.
- **Plan ahead for grief "triggers."** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

Talking about the future loss may help you get used to the reality of death and work through some of the pain. Remember it isn't morbid to talk about death, and it's sensible to be prepared for it as far as possible. At times, you may be the person who can support others also affected by the loss. As you do this you will probably, slowly, find a way of imagining life after the loss, with the person in your thoughts and memories.

Depression is a natural part of grief, and usually lifts of its own accord. But if it doesn't, you may begin to worry that you are becoming clinically depressed. This can be treated and there are different ways of getting through it, which you could discuss with your doctor.

Mindful grieving informs us to allow ourselves to feel what is there, without judgment. For me, there was sadness there and I needed to nonjudgmentally acknowledge it, feel it, and let it be. It was important in that moment, I didn't resist it or strive make it any different, but just feel it as it was. Ronald Pies, M.D. wrote to is. "Having problems means being alive," and I'd add "Being alive means grieving loved ones who pass." Grief is a natural part of human experience.

While many will relay common grieving experiences, every grieving experience is unique as it's in relationship to different relationships lost. If you or someone you know has lost someone you know, that grief may be something that doesn't completely go away, but instead evolves and weaves into your life, lessening during some hours and making its presence known during others. No one can truly predict how long grief will last, but we do know one thing, it is a natural and

is important and so is being allowed to be alone with your thoughts. One of the keys to coping is to consider bereavement as a normal natural part of life which can be a topic of conversation without fear or discomfort.

- **Look after yourself physically.** Try to eat well and get plenty of rest. It is very easy to overlook your physical needs when you are busy dealing with everything that has to be done surrounding a death or struggling with grief.

You may have difficulty getting to sleep, and your sleep may be disturbed by vivid dreams and long periods of wakefulness. You may also lose your appetite, feel tense and short of breath, or drained and lethargic. Don't try to do too much.

- If possible, **speak to your boss** about having time off work or at least delegating some of your workload to a colleague. Gather information on the financial and legal aspects of bereavement in advance, so you feel less overwhelmed.
- **Prepare children by explaining the situation** and how they are likely to feel at the time of the death and afterward. Warn them if any practical arrangements are going to change. Think about whether to find a specially-trained counselor to help them, and keep their school informed.

Emotionally you will be getting used to the idea of the loss, but this may happen gradually, in fits and starts. It is often not as simple as it sounds, especially if you have known the person for a long time. You may switch between talking rationally about the situation, then have a sudden surge of hope that the person will recover.

important process in remembering and feeling the connection to those who have passed. The intensity of the grief informs us how deeply we can feel for ourselves and for others. It informs us of the deep love we have in our hearts.

Poet Kahlil Gibran informs us, "When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."

The Case of Jim

I recently had an essay published in the *New York Times* (9/16/08), in which I argued that the line between profound grief and clinical depression is sometimes very faint. I also argues against a popular thesis that says, in effect, "If we can identify a very recent loss that explains the person's depressive symptoms – even if they are very severe – it's not really depression. It's just normal sadness."

In my essay, I presented a hypothetical patient – let's call him Jim – who was based on many patients I've seen in my psychiatric practice. Jim comes to me complaining of "feeling down" for the past three weeks. A month ago, his fiancée left him for another man, and Jim feels that "there's no point in going on" with life. He has not been sleeping well, his appetite is poor, and he has lost interest in nearly all of his usual activities.

I deliberately withheld a lot of important information that any well-trained psychiatrist, psychologist, or psychiatric social worker would obtain. For example: in the past three weeks, had Jim lost a great deal of weight? Was he awakening regularly in the wee hours of the morning? Was he unable to concentrate? Was ge extremely slowed down in his thinking and movement (so-called "psychomotor retardation"). Did he lack energy? Did he see himself as a worthless person? Did he feel completely hopeless? Was he filled with guilt or self-loathing? Had he been unable to go to work or function well at home over the past three weeks? Did he have any actual plans to end his life?

Now, it is certainly true that life is full of bumps, bruises, and falls. It is also full of disappointment, sorrow, and loss. Not all of these are occasions for a medical diagnosis or professional treatment – most are not. But there are times when a simple cut can become infected, and there are also times when so-called “normal” grief can become a very nasty beast called clinical depression. Learning how to deal with disappointment and loss is part of becoming a mature human being. Coping with loss may indeed be a “growth-promoting” experience, under the right circumstances. But “hanging tough” and refusing to seek help in the face of overwhelming pain – physical or emotional – is an affront to our humanity. It is also potentially dangerous.

Is Grief a Mental Disorder? No, But It May Become One!

Imagine this scenario. Your seven-year old son is riding his bike, and takes a nasty fall. He has a gash on his knee that looks pretty bad, but you get out your first-aid kit, clean the wound, put a little iodine on it, and cover it with a sterile gauze pad.

Two days later, your son complains that his knee hurt a lot and that he "feels crummy." He didn't sleep well the night before, and his face seems a little flushed. You remove the gauze pad and notice that his knee is red and swollen, and there is a foul-looking, greenish liquid oozing out of the wound. You get that sinking "Uh-oh!" feeling and decide you had better have your family doctor take a look at the knee.

As you are about to drive off, your friendly neighbor buttonholes you and asks where you are going. You explain the whole situation to him. He looks at you like you are from Mars, and says, "Are you nuts? You want this kid to grow up to be a wimp? He is supposed to be in pain! Pain is a normal part of life! We all have to learn how to live with pain. Redness and swelling are normal after you pang up your knee! Let the kid heal up naturally! The doctor is just going to put him on some damn antibiotic, and you know the kind of side effects those drugs have. Those doctors, you know, they just make money on those prescriptions!"

Would you feel that your well intentioned neighbor was giving you good advice? I very much doubt it. Well, it's the kind of advice some well-meaning but misinformed individuals give when dealing with the issue of severe grief and depression. In part, this attitude is a remnant of our Puritan roots – the idea that suffering is God's will, that it ennobles the soul, or that it is just plain good for us!

Here are 7 tips to help during this time:

- If you are mourning for a recent loss, make sure to make time for feeling the emotions that arise, whether they are anger, sadness or pain. There is no need to judge these emotions as good or bad and know that it is OK to feel these and they will not last forever as all things come and go. You may even create a little ritual where you spend time with the picture or object connected to the person who has passed.
- Friends sometimes get uncomfortable around grief and if they try and make you feel better in the moment, thank them for this, and let them know it is normal and natural to feel how you feel.
- Make sure to also take care of yourself during this time, go out on a walk, and make sure to eat healthy.
- Try and open your eyes to delights around you. It could be a smile on a child's face or your own. Smelling a wonderful flower or maybe tasting your own favorite food. Even in the midst of grief, we can be open to the wonders of life.
- Know your limits and allow yourself to take a break from feeling when it's becoming overwhelming, but make sure to let your grief know that you will come back. Make a time to revisit it otherwise, it will occupy you all day.
- Being altruistic can be a great way to move through grief. Maybe you would like to volunteer at a homeless shelter or make some things for those you care about.