

The Role of Grief Group Facilitators

Technically, there are two types of grief groups. Informational and support groups are for individuals who have an interest in the grief process. The purpose of these groups is to promote grief education and awareness. It covers the grief process in a more academic fashion.

The second type of grief group is a process and personal growth oriented group focusing on facilitating the individual participant's own personal loss management. It is therapeutic in nature and can take many different forms including: Individuals, Couples, Father's, Mother's, Siblings, and Family groups. Each group typically focuses on a specific type of loss (death-loss, suicide, homicide, SIDS, divorce, etc) as well as the unique needs of the group members. Though many commonalities exist between these groups each has its own unique dynamics and concerns. We will be focusing on this type of group, sometimes referred to as Grief Recovery groups. I prefer the term "Grief Management".

Before we can help people manage their grief, we need to understand the term "manage." Manage can mean to succeed in doing something, especially something that seems difficult or impossible. The intransitive verb means to survive or continue despite difficulties, especially a lack of resources. Both of these variant meanings apply to managing grief. "Healing" on the other hand implies a restoration to a former state. Though we are talking semantics, it is important to understand that loss leaves a permanent void; a permanent part of the survivor is missing, never to be restored.

Grief

Grief is characterized by confusion in which it is difficult to pinpoint feelings. Dozens of emotional reactions occur simultaneously. Analyzing the parts of grief can help the person to segregate one feeling from another. Once a feeling is identified, it can be expressed. It can be brought out into the open where healing takes place.

Grief not only causes many physical reactions, but it is accompanied by many practical, social, philosophical, and spiritual problems as well. A person may not receive or expect to receive answers to the problems, but he/she should certainly have the chance to voice the questions. There are answers and solutions to many problems in grief. When time is taken to do problem solving, the instances of unresolved grief are reduced.

Given proper support, grievors are enabled to move to a state of peace and acceptance. This is the goal of Grief Management groups.

Group Leaders/Facilitators:

When working with grieving individuals in a group, you must be clear about your role in the process. As grief facilitators we assume important responsibilities. The bereaved should be able to expect a high degree of professionalism from us. It is necessary for us to have a working knowledge of the grief process, group dynamics, and the impact

significant loss has on the psyche. Active listening and helping skills are extremely important. We listen empathetically to their stories, give validation, interpret the emotional content, and translate it into the language of grief.

All Grief Facilitators must:

Be open to what grievers can teach you about grief and mourning. Understand that the focus of attention during group is on each member's journey through their own particular grief work. The group exists for their benefit. Our job is to create the environment, set the course, and steer the group process within the boundaries of mutual respect and purposeful dialogue. It is beneficial to everyone to stay "on task" and "on topic."

Accept all group members unconditionally, "as they are." We are not there to "do therapy" with them. We cannot take away their pain or in any way "fix" their lives. Each person's viewpoint is appropriate because it is formed from his or her own personal knowledge and experiences with life up to this moment in time. Our job is to listen without judging and offer new understanding and perspective. We can validate their feelings as they tell about their experiences. We can help them to externalize their thoughts. We can assist with bringing feelings to the surface. We can facilitate expression in the language of grief.

Be open to the idea that most often it is within the context of sharing and discussion that we also teach. For example, we may use what a mother shares as a way to teach the common denominators of grief and mourning. As facilitators we may ask: "Has anyone else felt like Sandra feels?" or "feelings of isolation are experienced by many people, Nicole, tell us more about how it feels for you," or "It sounds like what Grant is saying about feeling guilty is similar to Gail's experience. Can anyone else add to that?" or "What other feelings are a normal part of grieving?"

Our expectation is that this kind of interactive sharing will bring them new information, new experience, and new insight that will promote positive healing. The main aspect to remember though is to "keep the ball in their court." It is their life, their feelings, and their job to do the grief work. Be attuned to each griever, to the feelings behind his/her words, and to the overall atmosphere in the room. We want each participant to have an equal chance to be heard. Each participant deserves the full attention of the group while sharing. We make every effort to include everyone in all activities and discussions, while still allowing them the freedom to refrain or "pass" if they choose.

Recognize that your role is to help the bereaved understand and then move through the tasks of grief. Covering this agenda is desirable; however, "the best laid plans" may go out the window in favor of the agenda that the griever brings to the session. It is important to work through their immediate concerns and burdens. We want to stay flexible. We remind ourselves that we can almost always expect unfinished business at the end of each session. In my experience and in the experience of many colleagues, it has been found that planned topics, tasks, and curriculum ultimately get covered in a natural and spontaneously relevant way.

Be willing to share your role as facilitator. As your group evolves, some members will probably exert themselves as unofficial co-facilitators. Encourage them. Go with the immediate flow (dynamic). The skill, of course, is to intervene and redirect when the dynamic is not healthy.

Understand that the atmosphere of each group session may be distinctively varied. The temperaments, personalities, and experiences of everyone present will be significant factors in how the group interacts. Do not be surprised or discouraged by the variations in the mood from one session to the next. Sometimes we worry that no "progress" is being made or that we have "lost control." Other times the group is so quiet that it is like "pulling teeth" to get a response or, in contrast, they may digress to any other topic rather than "deal with the grief." It is frustrating! We continually relearn to deal with our lofty expectations by replacing them with more gentle assessments of what is being accomplished. Each group can have a different flavor and still be highly effective, even if at the onset we had our doubts that the group would ever "gel." Our own hindsight and the members' evaluations at the end of the series often reveal and affirm the value of each group's process.

A Word of Caution

There is a fine line between strong group facilitating and strong-arming or dominating your group. While members will appreciate your nurturing leadership, they will not appreciate too tight a rein on the group's interaction. Sometimes that means letting the group dynamic dictate what will happen next. Other times your "gentle firmness" will be welcomed as you guide the group in discussion.

I have found the most effective facilitators in grief management groups lead unobtrusively but firmly. That is, they are warm and responsive and at the same time they make others feel comfortable that someone is "in charge."

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