

Practice Handbook-Bereavement Support Group Facilitation Lifeline Australia Department of Health and Ageing

A SBSG facilitator uses their skills and knowledge to facilitate the group in the support process and to encourage members to develop between meeting contacts. The facilitator assists group members to develop their own ways of working collaboratively and to advance ideas to support everyday functioning. Facilitators listen, encourage and support discussion, and help the group stay on task. The job of a facilitator may look easy but experienced facilitators know that this is not the case. While an effective facilitator uses their facilitation and communication skills to lead the group, they do not monopolise the discussion. They are comfortable with silence; they know how to gently encourage a member, as well as how to manage a dominating member.

6.1 Facilitation skills

It is desirable that a facilitator have the following skills and attributes:

- good listening skills
- good interpersonal and group communication skills
- “Best Practice” facilitation skills
- an understanding and appreciation of others’ feelings and the unique experience of grief
- ability to be non-judgemental and to be open to people’s different experiences, values, beliefs and opinions
- ability to manage ambivalence to changing dysfunctional emotions, behaviours and thoughts
- able to deal with difficult situations and moderate conflict
- self awareness of own responses to situations
- self knowledge of their own attitudes, values and beliefs about suicide and its impact
- ability to deal with diversity
- time management skills
- clear and evenly-paced voice
- ability to respond to challenging incidents and to activate preventative measures where needed.

A facilitator doesn’t:

- believe that the group is ‘their’ group — group members need to feel that they have some ownership of the group
- dominate discussion
- dictate what the group will discuss
- lead members to have unrealistic expectations of the group
- attempt to run a therapy group (unless fully trained and the group purpose is clearly identified as a therapy group)
- breach confidentiality.

Co-facilitation requires effort by the facilitators to:

- be clear about each other's role and who will do what
- agree about the objective and purpose of the support group
- get together to plan each meeting
- get together after meetings to discuss issues that arose during the meeting and allow time to debrief
- discuss differences, problems and tensions with each other (where needed).

6.2 Facilitation techniques and tips

This section has techniques and tips for facilitating a support group. Section 7 discusses some further challenges and difficult situations that may arise in a support group.

Some general facilitation techniques include:

- you are responsible for facilitating the session but this is not the same as chairing the session — your voice should not be dominant.
- ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute if they wish.
- keep the focus on the goals of the group while also maintaining some flexibility to meet immediate group needs.
- listen carefully and acknowledge all contributions to the discussion — such as a simple thank you or “that’s a very important point”.
- to foster discussion use prompts such as “would anyone else like to add to that?” or “has anyone else had a similar experience?”
- greater depth and clarification of discussion can be encouraged by clarifying for participants what has been said — “what I think you are saying is...”
- discussion can be encouraged by checking that people understand what is asked of them or the nature of the issue under discussion — “does that make sense?” or “has anyone got any questions?”
- realize you do not have to have the answers — you are not the teacher... Invite the group members to use their experience and knowledge — “What do you think about that?” or “What have been others experience of that?”
- it can be helpful to summarise the key points of the discussion for the group — “So what we’ve covered so far is...”
- seek members’ agreement to undertake tasks, in preference to directing members.
- step in and facilitate direction if the group is off task, experiencing difficulty getting started on an activity, or experiencing interpersonal conflict.
- identify the “less experienced” members of the group and ensure they are supported to participate in the discussion.
- remember your role is to facilitate not to teach or lecture.
- silence is OK — avoid jumping in.

Maintain your passion... and a sense of humour!

Some further tips follow:

Suggest, don't direct: suggestions may be made if appropriate

Facilitators ask permission to give a suggestion, for example: 'Would this work for you...?', not 'You should do this'. Facilitators elicit suggestions from the group. A question to the group such as 'What other approaches might be helpful?' will encourage other members to help one another. Try to avoid negating a member's opinion. For example, 'You may wish to investigate a different approach' suggests the member is capable of choices and decisions, compared with 'You need to find a better approach' which suggests the member isn't doing the right thing. An effective facilitator tries to restore control to the person and empower them to manage their grief.

Comparing grief: block members who compare grief

A facilitator may hear statements such as 'That's nothing compared to what happened to me'. There is nothing that will be gained from such a comparison. Facilitators need to guide the bereaved to the recognition that, for everyone, their loss and grief is probably the most devastating occurrence in their life. Depending on the situation, the facilitator may say, for example, "We've all been through something similar. No-one's situation is worse, though it sometimes may feel that way. Our experience is never going to be exactly the same as each other. But there are also many feelings that we share in common." This models moving the conversation away from content into process which may assist with processing of grief.

Dominating members: work to ensure those who wish to contribute have the space

Some suicide bereaved people, when they feel the relief of speaking about what happened, may begin to dominate the discussion. Generally those dominating will need to be interrupted, except perhaps someone who is newly bereaved who is being given an opportunity to ventilate feelings at length. When necessary to interrupt a person you may say 'We wish there was time for you to share more with us, but I know you understand that others need to share as well.' Or 'We have 20 minutes to share ... we have 10 minutes left and I'm concerned that other people get to share.' When parameters are established as part of ground rules (refer Section 5.4 Setting ground rules), boundaries may be more easily managed. Another strategy is to encourage those members who might model useful sharing.

Redirecting inappropriate disclosure or the commencement of over disclosure

In depth descriptions of death scenes may impose secondary trauma upon other group members. When a bereaved person begins to give vivid descriptions of the body, the scene or how death was instrumented, the facilitator may say 'I hear that it's important for you to talk about what you saw (heard, felt) but let's arrange a private time to discuss what took place.' Or another example "I'm concerned that such details may be upsetting for some group members. Let's share in a way that considers other people". Following the meeting, the facilitator may suggest that the member find a more appropriate

place/person than the support group (e.g. a counsellor, mental health professional, or pastor) to talk about such details.

Discussion about suicide prevention

Extended discussion about suicide prevention may magnify guilt, especially among newly bereaved people. Although it is important to learn about the issue of suicide, effective learning is done at the pace of the bereaved person. Information about suicide and suicide bereavement may be helpful, and access to current resources may be important for members. However, it is important for the facilitator to know about suicide prevention themselves, so that they may recognise a bereaved person who may be at risk of suicide (refer Section 6.5 Risk & crisis management).

Recognising difficult times: acknowledge all members

Many bereaved people find that the anticipation of difficult days such as anniversaries and birthdays is worse than the actual day itself. The facilitator may encourage the experienced members to share how they have coped and this may assist in removing some of the dreaded anticipation. The facilitator may also have an education session on 'Coping with Approaching Holidays' and/or 'Ways of Honouring Those We Miss during Holidays' during November and December meetings.

Managing silence: allow for silences

Don't panic when no-one immediately responds to the invitation to share. Silence may come from members trying to gain composure to speak. Silence may be the more experienced members giving the newer members a chance to speak. There are positive aspects of allowing silence, for example, silence may encourage a member to elaborate, or it may encourage another member to come into the discussion. When silence becomes prolonged and uncomfortable, the facilitator might offer a topic for discussion. However, facilitators need to recognise that point and not 'jump in' too soon.

Swearing

There are times during sharing when expletives seem the only way of expressing the intensity of feeling for some members. However, swearing may be offensive to others, may damage the dignity and for these reasons, should be discouraged in meetings. Such challenges may be addressed in formulating the group rules.

Misinformation: provide clarification where misinformation emerges

If a member makes a statement that the facilitator knows is misinformation or biased, they may want to wait to see if other members make a correction. If not, the facilitator may say 'There was a time when that was believed to be true, however research (or mental health professionals or other authority) have learned differently...'. .

Finishing positively

Finishing on a positive note, or with a good feeling, is desirable. Ask participants to share a positive occurrence in their life or what they have got out of the meeting; or summarise some of the key points made earlier about resilience and hope; or use a poem or inspirational reading.

6.3 Approach towards facilitation

A facilitator needs to be clear about the communication model they will adopt in the group. Many facilitators use a client-centred communication model, or non-directive model (Egan 1986). This model is underpinned by the belief that people can self-determine their journey to healing, or with bereaved people to integration, in a climate of unconditional respect and empathic understanding. The bereaved telling and retelling their story may contribute to the gradual development of clarity and re-engagement of control.

It is beyond the scope of these guidelines to expand on communication skills. Needless to say that working with those bereaved by suicide can be challenging and an active process as they clarify and confront painful emotions, explore confused thinking and find unhelpful patterns of coping.

A key aspect that facilitators need to monitor is self- disclosure. Disclosing their own learnings too early may be problematic. Although many group members report that the support group is a place where they can find true understanding, a facilitator must allow members to go through their own journey. Finding the balance is important. Sharing of similar experiences will help to offer hope and assist people in finding resilience

6.4 Group dynamics and group theory

A facilitator may observe the group as a whole, the interactions between individual members, and interactions between the members and the facilitator to gain an understanding of what is happening in the group at any one time (adapted from NSW Mental Health Association, 2001).

For example, silence may be an indicator of different things. It may indicate people are thinking hard about a particular issue. It may indicate a lack of trust or a level of anxiety. It may indicate that the group doesn't understand or that there are a lot of quiet people in the group. Observing the group dynamics will help the facilitator to identify the cause and therefore develop an appropriate solution.

A facilitator may monitor group dynamics:

- constantly throughout a discussion
- at regular intervals, e.g. every 15 minutes
- at the end of each segment

- when something unexpected happens.

When observing the group dynamics a facilitator may acquire information about:

- levels of trust
- patterns of communication
- levels of interaction
- body language
- roles and relationships
- patterns of dominance
- patterns of influence
- level of group effectiveness.

Generally, a group proceeds through a series of stages before it becomes effective and achieves its goals. One theory widely acknowledged is Tuckman's (1977) Stages of Group Development which identified four key stages:

Forming — groups begin as members get to know one another, come together and get clear about why they are there.

Storming — group members might have different ideas about things such as how the group should operate, its objectives and what should be covered. These differences might cause conflict with one another.

Norming — as issues get resolved and the conflict subsides, members generally establish agreements on roles, guidelines, objectives and operating norms.

Performing — the group is able to complete the work they aim to achieve.

A suggested further stage is that of **Adjourning** where group members reach mutually agreed conclusions, thereby allowing the celebration of progress and sharing experiences including planning for “what next”.

These stages may take different amounts of time to proceed through, and generally occur for most groups to some extent. An open group with a changing membership may proceed differently to a closed group where members are more consistent. Having an understanding of these stages will help the facilitator to understand what is happening in the group. For instance, some groups may need assistance in moving through certain stages. By developing ground rules with the group, the facilitator is helping the group to establish operating norms.

6.5 Risk & crisis management

Support groups need a crisis plan which identifies a line of support and management processes for emergency situations. This relates to general emergency situations such as

fire, illness, accident and also to situations specific to the risk factors due to the nature of the group, in particular suicidality.

In a crisis situation, the group facilitators are responsible for working with a group member who requires immediate crisis intervention. Crisis intervention should be provided in a location separate to the main meeting.

In a situation where a group member or co-facilitator is struggling with thoughts and feelings about suicide or some other life threatening behaviour, implement the following strategies:

- acknowledge the member's feelings. Express concern
- take the member aside — ask co-facilitator or experienced member to continue running the group
- have a list of emergency contact numbers
- undertake a risk review, e.g. ask the member whether they have a specific plan
- get help. Try to identify a trusted person (ask the member whom they trust such as a family member, friend or health professional) and offer to contact that person (you may use a third party contact from the sign on sheet — see Section 5.3 Planning and preparing for a meeting)
- don't leave the member alone until you're sure that he/she is in the hands of another responsible person
- if the member doesn't want anyone, explain your concern and that you will have to contact the mental health crisis team or another professional

A crisis situation, particularly talk of suicide or self harm, will impact on other members in the group. Once the immediate crisis is over, set aside some time to talk about the group members' feelings and thoughts in relation to the incident and let them know what action was taken to handle the person's distress or crisis.

Crisis situations may also be stressful and upsetting for the facilitator. It is highly recommended that the facilitator debrief with someone about the incident (see Section 8.2 Pre-briefing, defusing and debriefing of facilitators).

Support group facilitators may find it useful to complete the LivingWorks Education Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) course which gives practical awareness and skills for identification of a person at risk of suicide and for intervention. See www.lifeline.org.au/learn_more/livingworks for further information.

6.6 Strategies for members leaving the group

Strategies for members leaving the group may vary depending on the nature of the group, such as whether the group is a closed group or an open group. Individuals have varying needs and a group may serve some of these needs.

In an open group many members will self-select out of the group within a period of time, this may vary from a few months to a few years following the person's death. Members may attend just one or two meetings while others may attend regularly for years. It may be useful to have a strategy developed so that it is clear to the member leaving and the remaining members what the circumstances are. For example, it may be very concerning for regular members to have a fellow regular member not attending in which case having a mechanism of clarifying the situation may allay anxiety for remaining members. Most people will know when they feel the need to stop attending the group, however, a facilitator could check with longer-term members to see whether the group is of continuing relevance to them — some people keep attending a group as a regular commitment without self-reviewing whether they need the continuing support. Further, services such as anniversary cards and newsletters may also no longer be relevant. Group members could be asked for their preferences.

Some people may find comfort in being able to return to the support group at a time when their needs change as issues 'reignite' their grief and bereavement. Facilitators will need to have entry, exit and re-entry strategies in place to meet members' needs as they change over time.

Over time some group members may become interested in assisting the group in a more formal role. Strategies to help train volunteers to move into helping roles may be needed. Some support groups have interested helpers move into 'trainee' roles as they learn the skills of group facilitation or group co-ordination.

Over time some groups may gravitate towards being more of a social group than a support group. Facilitators need to be aware of this possibility, and develop a clear exit strategy for the facilitator when the group moves in this direction. A social group has different requirements than a support group. For example, a facilitator is not required, nor an auspicing agency.

6.7 Succession planning

Having an exit strategy is also true for facilitators. Facilitators may find after a period of time that they need to leave the support group. A variety of needs emerge in different stages of life, and these needs may mean that they are unable to continue. This is certainly acceptable. One of the advantages of having a co-facilitator arises in this situation.

It is important to have mechanisms in place to address potential facilitator non-attendance and personal circumstances which may lead to them no longer being able to facilitate the group as well as planning for the progression of facilitators. Such circumstances may be the source of much anxiety for some group members, as being left behind (abandoned) may be an all too familiar feeling. Putting mechanisms in place ahead of time may ensure the smooth running of the group and least disruption. Further, a facilitator may feel trapped by their sense of loyalty to the group, particularly if there is no-one who is able to succeed them.

Planning for succession may include:

- having a co-facilitator
- training experienced members of the group as a co-facilitator
- developing networks with professionals who might be interested in facilitating the support group.