



Bereavement Support Groups

Three months ago Mary's life was shattered: Her husband of 22 years was killed in a head-on collision. Friends and family members who visited so frequently those first weeks now seldom come around. Sad, lonely and unsure of herself, Mary struggles to pick up the pieces and rebuild her life—a life of her own. Mary's friend, Kathi, who is grieving the death of her twin sister, invited Mary to join her in attending a hospice-sponsored bereavement support group. For both women, the group has been an invaluable source of understanding, comfort and healing.



Support groups enable people with a common bond to share and assist one another. A bereavement support group provides a safe place for sharing pain, struggles, successes and hopes with other people whose similar experiences facilitate understanding. Talking helps. And helping others often enables you to better understand your own feelings; strength is gained, pain is eased.

A support group need not be a large, formal gathering of people sitting in a circle. It might be small—only three or four participants—and informal.

Even if you seem to be handling grief well, you still might benefit from the warmth, insight and caring environment of a good support group. Equally important, you can reach out to others who are struggling.

Is a bereavement support group for you? Perhaps the best way to find out is to attend a few meetings. If you leave the meetings feeling better, consider returning.

LOCATING AN EXISTING SUPPORT GROUP

Most hospice organizations offer bereavement support groups. Check with your local hospice to see what's available. Your Comprehensive Care or Mental Health Center may offer a bereavement support group or direct you to an appropriate resource elsewhere. Other good sources of information include your minister, priest or rabbi. Funeral home directors also may be able to assist you.

Organizations that may provide information on local support groups include:

- *National Self-Help Clearinghouse*, New York, (212) 354-8525
- *Widowed Persons Service* (AARP), Washington, (202) 434-2260
- *The Compassionate Friends*, for parents who have experienced the death of a child. Oak Brook, IL, (708) 990-0010



- *National Organization for Victim Assistance*, for homicides, Washington D.C., (202) 232-6682
- *The Samaritans*, for suicidal deaths, Boston, (617) 247-0220
- *Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation*, Bethesda, MD, (301) 657-8401 • (800) 366-2223.
- *The Dougy Center*, for children in bereavement, Portland, OR, (503) 775-5683

ORGANIZING A SELF-HELP GROUP

While many support groups are led by a professional counselor or griefwork specialist, a self-help group is member-led. Members may take turns leading the sessions.

Though self-help groups are member-led, such groups should consult regularly with a professional bereavement worker or therapist. The professional can offer guidance, answer questions, and be a referral source if a group member is having unusual adjustment problems or shows signs of being suicidal.

A religious organization or mental health center can be an ideal setting for starting a self-help group. Typically, a group might meet for one to two hours once a week. It's important to include at least one person who has worked through grief before.

Here's a good way to start a support group: Let each member introduce herself and share a favorite picture of the person who died. They should be encouraged to talk about their loved one and the memories associated with the picture.

Members may wish to invite a guest speaker occasionally. Many groups find it helpful to have one or more books to read and discuss. An excellent book for this purpose is *Understanding Grief* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. It is available in paperback.



GUIDELINES FOR SELF-HELP GROUPS

Here are some guidelines for a group, drawn in part from the work of Dr. Wolfelt:

- Do your best to be on time and to attend each group meeting. If you decide to leave the group before the agreed-upon number of sessions are completed, stop by to say goodbye and share the reasons for your decision.
- Maintain a code of confidentiality. What is said in the group stays in the group, except for consulting with a professional trained in grief work, as mentioned above.
- Respect each person's unique expression of grief.
- Create an atmosphere of sharing. But respect a member's opting to remain silent.
- Listen with an open heart and mind. Avoid interrupting. Let people finish their sentences.
- Try to give each person time to express himself. Don't allow a few people to monopolize the group's time.
- Do your best not to be judgmental. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Try to understand and be sympathetic.
- Avoid giving advice unless a group member asks for it. If a person asks, share ideas and approaches that may have helped you in similar situations.
- Remember: Grief is a normal, healthy process. There's no quick fix for the pain and struggle it requires. There will be ups and downs, and it will take time. Don't rush the process.

ALTERNATIVES TO SUPPORT GROUPS

Support groups aren't for everyone. Some people don't like groups or think their grief is too personal to share in such a setting. Others, especially those who live in outlying rural areas, might find it logistically impossible to attend meetings.

In these cases, support can be given one-on-one, and it need not take a lot of time. A friendly phone call or visit can ease the pain, provide perspective, and help motivate the bereaved person to cook a meal or perform other daily tasks. It also provides a healing opportunity for sharing and reminiscing.



The healing process following the death of a loved one is unique for every individual. And it is a process that involves seasons—times when we need to be alone with our grief, and times for sharing and support.

No man or woman is an island. We need one another. It has been said that we are each angels with only one wing, and that it is only by embracing one another that we can fly. This is particularly true in times of crisis, sorrow and grief. George Bernard Shaw expressed it this way: “We all are dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.”

As we reach out to one another in a bereavement support group, we ourselves are blessed. The caring, acceptance, and listening heart we extend to another also generates understanding and healing within ourselves. We cannot genuinely help another without receiving a gift. Friedrich Nietzsche, the

19th century German philosopher, said it well: “Should not the giver be thankful that the receiver received? Is not giving a need? Is not receiving a mercy?”

The credo of The Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who have lost a child, emphasizes that we need not walk alone in our times of sorrow. We can reach out to one another with the gifts of love, understanding and hope.

REFERENCE:

Wolfelt, A. (1992). *Understanding Grief: Helping Yourself Heal*. Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.

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This GriefWork publication is one of 33 fact sheets on topics related to death and dying. For more information about the GriefWork Project, contact your local Cooperative Extension Office. Although these publications are copyrighted, you are free to reproduce them for non-profit, educational purposes.

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