



Bereavement Support Groups

A Guide for Group Leaders



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Bereavement Support Groups

The main purpose of a bereavement group is to provide a safe, supportive environment for people to express their feelings related to loss and grief. Bereavement groups can provide an effective way to promote healing from a loss through both education and support. The goal is for group participants to begin reconciling, resolving and integrating their loss, allowing them to find new ways to live with their loss.

Bereavement Groups typically provide:

- Emotional support in a non-judgmental environment.
- Education about loss, grief, and coping skills.
- Understanding from others who have experienced a loss.
- Healing through sharing personal experiences and listening to others.

This guide is intended to be a resource to assist group leaders in thinking through key aspects of planning and leading bereavement groups. The guide will explore:

- **BEFORE group meetings:** Planning, Screening & Preparation
- **DURING group meetings:** Ground Rules, Facilitation, Group Dynamics
- **AFTER group meetings:** Reflection, Self-Care

Before Group Meetings

A typical bereavement group is a meeting of 6-12 people, all having experienced the death of a loved one. A bereavement group is not intended to treat long-standing mental health issues. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for participants to talk about their loss experience with a group of individuals who are likely to understand, because they have had a similar experience.

In order for a bereavement group to run effectively, it will be important to:

- Develop a plan for the group
- Have a process for screening group participants
- Set aside time to prepare for leading the group

Planning for a Group

When planning for a bereavement group, you will need to determine the type of group you would like to hold. Groups come in all different shapes and sizes. Consider the following:

- Is the main goal of the group to provide emotional support, education about grief or social support?
- Will the group be for coping with a specific type of loss (spousal, sibling, parental) or a general support group?
- Would the group be open to new members joining at each meeting (with a drop-in format) or is it a closed group with the same members from start to finish?
- Will the group be time-limited (for a set period of time, typically 6-8 weeks) or on-going?
- How many members will be in the group? Is there a minimum or maximum number?
- Where will the group be held? What day and time of the week? How long will each group meeting last?
- Will the group be:
 - **Curriculum focused** - readings are assigned and discussion is about them.
 - **Topic based** - topics are introduced and discussion centers on the topic.
 - **Open forum** - there is no pre-determined structure, and discussion topics vary as group members bring them up.

Before Group Meetings

Screening Group Participants

The cohesion of the group is important to its overall effectiveness, which makes screening participants an important step in preparing for a group. You will want to screen participants to make sure that the group will be able to meet their needs and expectations based upon the structure and purpose of the group.

When screening participants for a group, you should have a clear idea of who would, and would not be appropriate for group participation.

You will want to consider a few factors:

- **Timing of the loss** – Establish a sense of where the person is with regard to their loss. How recent is the loss? Has it been years since the loss?
- **Type of loss** – spouse, child, sibling, parent – if the group has a specialized focus you want to identify the right individuals.
- **Special problems**, which might be better addressed through individual counseling – you will want to identify individual problems that might overwhelm the group. These issues can be related mental health, substance abuse, physical health, finances, relationships, exploitation, abuse, or neglect.
- **Goals aligned with group** – Ask what they would like to get from the group? What would they like to learn? How would the group help them with their goal?
- **Group participation** – Have they ever participated in a group before? Was it a psycho-educational, counseling or therapeutic group? How comfortable are they in talking about personal feelings in a group?
- **Group rules** – Are they willing to attend all group sessions on time? Will they be able to keep what is shared in the group confidential?

Before Group Meetings

The Screening Interview

When speaking to prospective group members, you can consider using the following outline for your screening interview.

- Introduction to the group purpose, goals and ground rules for the group
- Information about how the group typically works
- Ask for basic information about the loss: date of death, relationship, cause of death
- Ask questions specific to the selection criteria for the group
- Ask if the potential group member has any questions or concerns about group
- Close screening interview by letting the person know if they are a good candidate for the group or make an appropriate referral if they are not a good fit

Preparing to Lead

When planning for a bereavement group, you will need to consider the most effective way to lead the group, in order to ensure that the goals of the group are met.

- Should you facilitate the group alone or with a co-facilitator? Consider your experience as a facilitator and the goals of the group. Is it a good match?
- How will difficult or sensitive issues be addressed? Consider your facilitation model and how it will be used during a group session?
- Check in with yourself about your own losses. How are you feeling about your most recent loss? About past losses? Know what your triggers are and be prepared to manage them. Group conversations can touch your past losses.

During Group Meetings

As the group leader, your focus and responsibility is to create safe, supportive environment for people to express their feelings related to loss and grief. The group leader should focus their attention in the following areas:

- Establishing Ground Rules
- Facilitating a Group Session
- Managing Group Dynamics

Establishing Ground Rules

When beginning a bereavement group, it is important to have a set of rules by which the group is conducted. Ground rules are essential to ensuring that the group experience is both useful and safe for all participants. The group ground rules should be discussed and handed out in print for all to review at the beginning of a group meeting.

Here are a few examples of typical ground rules:

- Confidentiality, what is said in the group stays in the group.
- Be on time to all group sessions.
- Be present and attentive to what other people are saying, put away electronic devices.
- We are not here to give advice to each other, we are here to give support and constructive feedback without judgment.
- Focus on what works for you as an individual in your grief, from your own experience.
- Every loss is unique and every person has his or her own unique experience, please do not compare losses.
- You are free to share as much or as little about your loss as you would like.
- Be aware of others personal space – offering a touch may or may not be welcome.

During Group Meetings

Facilitating a Group Sessions

Facilitating a support group can be a very rewarding experience. It takes time and practice to become an effective group facilitator. Below are guidelines, which can assist in building your facilitation skills.

Frame of Mind

Pay attention to your frame of mind prior to and during the group meeting. Take a deep breath and center yourself prior to entering the room. Minimize distractions and remain focused on the goal of the group and the participant experience.

Go with the Energy Flow

Be aware of the group energy and pay attention to body language. Follow the lead of the of the group and help guide them towards meeting their needs. They will let you know what the focus needs to be.

Avoid Focus on Yourself

Avoid talking about yourself and your own experiences. Your focus needs to remain on the individuals in the group: maintain eye contact, address people by their names, and gently invite participation from all participants.

Acknowledging and Summarizing

Listen carefully for cues so that you can provide feedback and extend support. Let participants speak first and then acknowledge, summarize or ask the group questions like, “what do you all think?” to invite conversation.

Be Flexible

You will have a prepared agenda for the group meeting although need to remain flexible to accommodate the needs of the group. Don’t be too rigid with your agenda, yield to what the group needs to work on and help guide them along the way.

During Group Meetings

Managing Group Dynamics

When working with a bereavement group, you will need to pay close attention to the dynamics of the group. Group dynamics reflect the attitudinal and behavior characteristics of a group. As the group is forming, it will be important for the facilitator to guide the group towards cohesion. Cohesion binds the group, it is what holds it together, and ultimately assists the group in meeting their goals. A group is said to be in a state of cohesion when its members establish a bond linking them to one another and the group as a whole.

Building Trust

Group participants want to know that the group will meet their needs. Trust needs to be built with the facilitator and other members of the group. This happens over time, as the participants begin to support each other during the group sessions. The facilitator builds trust by adhering to ground rules, offering gentle encouragement for individuals to share their experiences, and listening carefully to give positive feedback, extend support or point out similar and conflicting points of view.

Balancing Participation

It is important to take note of those in the group who actively participate in discussions, and those who do not participate. You should gently invite, not pressure participants to join the conversation. Ensure that one person is talking at a time and finishes talking before someone else begins speaking. Maintain eye contact with all participants to keep engagement flowing.

Working through Challenges

Encourage “I” statements so that participants are speaking from their experience and not using generalizations. Guide participants away from offering advice and refocus them on their own experience. When a ground rule is broken, address it with the group and allow participants to voice their feelings about it.

After Group Meetings

After leading a group meeting, it is important to set time aside to think about the group experience. This will provide you with the opportunity to review your facilitation skills and ensure that the needs of the group participants were met.

Reflect on the Group Experience

Reflecting on the group experience will allow you to think about what went well and what you will want to do differently the next time. Think about your ability to listen, question and direct the group. How was the level of participation, was it balanced or did the same few people contribute? Were you flexible and did you follow the energy of the group? Note what you want to continue doing and one thing you would change for the next session.

Self Care

Remember that group leaders need care. The group experience can leave you feeling physically, emotionally and spiritually drained. It is important to check in with yourself and identify what you need. It might mean taking a break and going for a walk, reaching out to someone in your support network or rewarding yourself with something special.

Summary

Leading a group meeting should be a rewarding experience for both you and the group participants. It is not important that you become an expert with all the answers. Many times the group can arrive at the answer if you remain in the role of facilitator and act as their guide.

It takes time and practice to become a good facilitator. Being aware of your strengths and areas for improvement will help you focus on what is important for your own personal development as a group leader.