



HEART HOUSE

H O S P I C E

How to Facilitate a Grief Group



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Heart House Hospice provides palliative and bereavement services in the Region of Peel. Today, HHH serves over 1,000 individuals living with life limiting illness, and thousands of family members and loved ones in Mississauga and Brampton, offering services that are valued by our community and our health care partners.

This guide has been prepared based on my experience running bereavement groups at HHH. My background as a counselor and a workshop facilitator working in a variety of health care settings has also informed this book. Thank you to Jodi Pereira, Peggy Moore, Samantha Gajindranauth, and Deepak Ramachandran for comments, research and editing support.

HHH Grief Model

Organizations that provide bereavement support benefit from the work of grief theorists and bereavement professionals working to create safe spaces for participants to do the hard work of mourning. Much of the programming at HHH is grounded in the expertise of author, educator and grief counsellor Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt. His guide, *Understanding Your Grief - Support Group Guide*, and his book, *Understanding Your Grief – Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*, were two resources used in creating this guide, listed in the appendix.

HHH (like Wolfelt) takes a “companioning” model in providing grief support. This approach is less about being an “expert”, and more about the willingness to be present with another’s pain. It is about helping others to discover or reclaim inner and outer resources. It involves listening more than directing; and walking alongside, not “fixing.” When grievors enter the unknown territory of grief, and work to integrate the reality of the death of a loved one, they are forever changed. In a grief support group, both participant and facilitator must be willing to undergo that transformation.

Using this Guide

This guide is written for those who, while not certified grief therapists or regulated professionals, feel called to work with grieving and/or bereaved people. Whether planning to facilitate a group as a volunteer, as a student or professional-in-training, or because of your own personal life experience with loss and grief, you know how important it is to find validation, companionship and a sense of belonging at this most vulnerable time in a person’s life. Companioning is about supporting people, through acceptance of the pain of loss, to come to a renewed sense of hope, meaning and purpose. Ultimately, HHH believes that community is at the heart of healing. We hope this booklet aids you in your efforts to build compassion within your community.

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SECTION 1. *A POWERFUL METHOD FOR HELPING WITH GRIEF*

WHY RUN GRIEF GROUPS?

Bereavement groups can provide many benefits to grieving people. They can:

- Help to normalize the intense impacts of grief
- Provide a safe, non-judgmental space for the griever to share his/her thoughts, emotions and struggles
- Provide a venue to grapple with changes in identity, roles and relationships
- Enable the participant to discover and develop inner and outer resources and learn coping strategies
- Encourage grievers to ask for and receive support, understanding and compassion, and to offer support to others
- Help participants learn new ways of problem-solving from peers
- Help participants learn about self-acceptance, self-care, self-compassion and resilience;
- Support participants to search for meaning and purpose in life without the presence of their loved one
- Support members to accept and integrate the reality of the loss, embracing the pain in “doses”
- Protect against isolation and shame in a mourning-avoiding culture
- Help to build compassionate communities

Grief groups can be a positive, rewarding program for an organization, and a powerful component of a counselor’s private practice. Groups are a timely and cost-effective way to help multiple people. In addition, they offer facilitators and organizations the opportunity to learn about and respond to community need. For example, Heart House learned from bereavement group participants about the need for social programs for bereaved people, and subsequently started a social walking group.

If you have any questions or suggestions for improvement to this guide, please email info@hearthouseospice.com. Please use the subject line **“How to Run a Grief Group”** to ensure your comments reach the right people at HHH.

SECTION 2. HOW GRIEF GROUPS WORK

As you plan, prepare for and run your grief group, it can be helpful to remember the basic needs of mourning, which are well described in a number of books and resources (see Appendix). According to Alan Wolfelt, an experienced grief expert, mourners have 6 central needs:

THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING

Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, *Understanding Your Grief: 10 Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*.

NEED 1 | Acknowledge the Reality of the Death

The bereavement group will allow mourners to gently confront the reality that someone they loved has died and will not return. The group will provide an opportunity for members to tell their stories, and to move from head to heart in embracing the reality and impact of the death.

NEED 2 | Move Toward the Pain of the Loss

Bereaved people need to find a balanced approach to grief, moving both “toward” and “away” from grief. The grief group is one place members are encouraged to move “toward” their grief, exploring the broad range of thoughts and feelings that accompany loss.

NEED 3 | Remember the Person Who Died

Grief theorists are shifting the dialogue from ideas about closure and “moving on” from grief, to the idea of continued bonds with the person who died. Mourners are encouraged to discover a different kind of relationship with the person who died – one that is based on precious memories, the presence of objects and photos that recall the person who died, conversations about dreams and legacies the bereaved person hopes to continue in his/her loved one’s honour, letters or journal entries written to the deceased, and so on.

NEED 4 | Develop a New Self-Identity

With a significant loss, come changes in self-identity and the role a person plays in life. Grief group participants may have gone from being wives/husband to widows or widowers, or parents to bereaved parents, etc. Support groups help meet this need by allowing members to talk out their thoughts on these identity changes and explore the adjustment with others in similar situations.

NEED 5 | Search For Meaning

It is common for group members to struggle with “why?” questions about death: why did this happen? Why now? Why in this way? Bereavement groups provide a safe, non-judgmental place in which to ask these questions, and make meaning of the loss. Participants may also broaden the question from “why?” to “how? (e.g. how can I best care for myself?), or “where from here? (e.g. how will I create new purposes?).

NEED 6 | Continue to Receive Support From Others

Grief is an ongoing process that unfolds over the course of many years. Sometimes participants express a desire to continue to meet after the sessions are complete. Continuing as a group can take many forms such as continued emotional support, meeting for meals or coffee, or pursuing activities of interest (yoga, book club, for example). Some groups do not wish to continue together and may benefit from a list of community supports for social and recreation activities. It is helpful to distribute a list of community supports for people in grief, as well as those that are more social or recreational in nature.



THE SUPPORT GROUP'S 5 DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, *Understanding Your Grief: Support Group Guide: Starting and Leading a Bereavement Support Group*.

As a facilitator, you can expect a grief group to move through five phases. A facilitator does not normally discuss the stages explicitly with group members; however, they are useful for the facilitator to keep in mind, particularly if a group seems “stuck.” In this case, it may be helpful to reflect on the possibility that some group members might feel a lack of safety or trust. In the majority of situations, the process unfolds organically. Groups can straddle more than one phase at a time, as the stages naturally overlap, and each group will spend more or less time in these phases depending on their make-up.

PHASE 1 | Warm-Up; Establish Group

Purpose And Limits

A certain degree of anxiety about what will happen should be expected. Group members may wonder if they will be able to tolerate their own and each other's pain. Common questions (which may not be asked aloud) include: Who else is in this group? Will I be accepted? Do I belong? What is expected of me? Is it safe to be me? Will I have to talk? Can I trust these people? People will participate according to their personalities.

Leadership roles during this stage include:

- Clarify the purpose of group; Introduce the structure of sessions
- Gently encourage each member to “tell his/her story” (who died, the nature of the death, why they are attending this group)
- Communicate ground rules (and support people to adhere to them) – vital for safety
- Model nonjudgmental acceptance, compassionate listening, and welcoming.
- Facilitate logistics

PHASE 2 | Tentative Self-Disclosure and Exploring Group Boundaries

As members begin to learn what is expected to happen in the group (through spoken and unspoken means) they begin to disclose more about themselves in a tentative way. Members are learning how to participate in the group, and seeing if it is safe to move to a deeper level of risk. Members learn more about each other, the leader and themselves, and continue to explore group norms or boundaries. Different ways of coping with grief become more apparent at this stage. Differences in interpersonal styles emerge.

Leadership roles during this stage include:

- Continue to model listening, openness and caring
- Continue to clarify member expectations of the group
- Remind members of the ground rules established at the first meeting
- Normalize the unique and common effects of grief
- Be responsive to conflicts and problems that might evolve
- Facilitate any activities or homework to be discussed



PHASE 3 | In-Depth Self-Exploration and Encountering the Pain of Grief

Members are beginning to develop group trust at a deeper level. The focus begins to shift from the “why” of the group, and toward the work of mourning. Members see themselves as more of a group: A natural insider/outsider feeling may emerge and certain members might begin to express how important the group is to them, and that they are looking forward to meeting. Sharing might become more intense and emotional. A higher rate of interpersonal self-disclosure and deeper self-expression are taking place. Interactions between members can become more intense and emotional. Informal co-leaders may begin to emerge – that is, some members of the group may seek to direct the group. It is important that the facilitator not relinquish oversight and responsibility for the group.

The leader may need to speak up to redirect (in a supportive manner) members who demonstrate behaviours that don’t adhere to group norms, or detract from the group’s primary purpose.

Leadership roles during this stage include:

- Continue to model listening, openness and caring
- Continue to encourage continued participation of group members
- Continue to normalize the unique and common effects of grief
- Support the group in learning and sharing self-care and coping strategies
- Assist the group in dealing with conflicts and problems that might evolve
- Make adjustments to the content and format of the group as needed
- Allow and encourage the group to be more self-responsible
- Facilitate any activities or homework to be discussed

PHASE 4 | Commitment to Continued Healing and Growth

The group takes on a more relaxed tone as people grow more comfortable and “at home.” Members begin to ask for, and reach out to, others for mutual help, and offer each other empathic responses. Respect and trust levels are high and people feel free to share what they need to share. People will begin to share insights into the grief process, as well as more open-ended expression of thoughts and feelings. Missing members will be noticed, and a focus of discussion. Members take a more active role in their healing, and talk about how the group helps them to understand themselves and their grief. The interdependence of the group helps individuals discover and accept their individual and personal grief. Planned activities may need to be shortened or dropped to make more space for open discussion, and the self-expressed needs of the group.

Leadership roles during this stage include:

- Continue to model listening, openness and caring
- Continue to encourage ongoing participation of group members
- Modeling of shared leadership principles
- Assist the group in dealing with conflicts and problems that might arise
- Make adjustments to the content and format of the group as it evolves
- Facilitate any activities or homework to be discussed

PHASE 5 | Preparation for Closing the Group

With the closeness and intimacy that develops in the support group, it is natural that separation will raise feelings when the group comes to an end.

“Graduation” from the group is an important step toward reconciliation of the death of a loved one, yet closure of the group is another loss for group members. This ending deserves careful attention to the various feelings that arise, including sorrow and laughter. Reflecting on and affirming the growth and healing of group members is vital at this stage. There is likely to be a general feeling of optimism and recognition of strengths developed, and it is helpful to allow time for participants to express their gratitude to each other, along with wishes for continued growth and healing.

Leadership roles during this stage include:

- Create safe opportunities for members to say goodbye to each other and the group
- Recognize and understand the dynamics that occur when a group begins to end
- Encourage reflection on individual and group growth related to the grief journey
- Provide referral for additional resources
- Create and distribute an evaluation of the group
- With permission of group members, circulate a contact list so group members can continue to stay in touch

SECTION 3. *DESIGNING A GRIEF GROUP*

SHOULD YOU CREATE A GRIEF GROUP?

Before designing a grief group, it may be helpful to consider the local context and resources, including your organization’s resources, the needs of your clients, and programs already offered in the community.

OPEN AND CLOSED BEREAVEMENT GROUPS

A lot of your other design choices will depend on whether you choose to offer an open or closed bereavement group. Your answer will depend on your the needs of your community, your mandate and your resources.

Open Groups

Open groups involve changing membership, which can mean participants learn from a variety of people over time. This kind of group gives people flexibility in terms of how often to attend – helpful if energy levels are inconsistent, or demands in a person’s life are high. Open groups generally allow for more flexible content or structure that meets the needs of a changing cohort. A disadvantage of open groups is that it can be challenging for the facilitator to deal with unsteady or unpredictable numbers, and to create and/or develop a sense of safety anew each week.

Closed Groups

In closed groups, the same participants make a commitment to attend a pre-set number of weeks. It’s recommended that no members join a closed group after the 2nd session. The benefit of closed groups is that trust between members builds over their time together, and there is continuity in terms of getting to know each other’s stories, struggles and successes. Closed groups tend to have a more defined structure, with the opportunity to present and discuss materials along the way. Such groups can be designed to meet the needs of particular cohorts, as for example, those grieving the loss of an adult partner, friend, parent or child, resulting in more commonalities among members.



Closed Groups cont'd

The disadvantage of a closed group, is that participants must be able to join in at particular times that only happen so often. Sometimes participants may need to wait a period of time before the next one starts. For this reason, it is helpful to refer to other bereavement groups being offered in community. Your organization can also meet community needs by offering one-night educational workshops such as *Grief 101* or *Preparing Your Heart for the Holidays*, or wellness programs such as meditation, therapeutic touch, music therapy and other programming that can nurture a person in his/her grief.

Common Themes

Whether open or closed, some participants will be recently bereaved, and some may be joining a group quite some time after their loss. The facilitator must be comfortable with helping participants to lend or borrow strength and hope from one another according to their circumstances. Both open and closed groups benefit from some structure and common elements.

THE STRUCTURE OF GROUPS

Whether a group is open or closed, most tend to have at least some structure in how the group starts, progresses and ends. The facilitator should prepare and plan a weekly focus on a particular topic or theme. The facilitator role involves validation and creating opportunities for conversation and learning.

THE FACILITATOR

The Facilitator can be a trained professional or peer/volunteer. It is helpful if the facilitator can:

- Handle the planning and logistical aspects of leading a group, including marketing registration, communication with participants, compiling materials, room set up, supporting participants between sessions, evaluation, etc.
- Create a non-judgmental, safe space into which participants can bring their whole selves
- Listen and mirror empathically
- Demonstrate compassion, openness, caring, genuineness, empathy, and respect to and for participants
- Embrace difference and create an inclusive environment, with cross-cultural sensitivity
- Communicate clearly
- Be comfortable with silence, the expression of emotions, and conflict
- Respond to conflict and problems and guide participants toward constructive behaviours
- Establish a flexible structure that can bend with the needs of the group
- Set appropriate boundaries in therapeutic settings
- Assess for signs of complicated grief, and the impact of different types of losses on the grief process, e.g. traumatic grief
- Screen participants, and know when to refer someone for specialized support
- Troubleshoot group dynamics and common group scenarios (training is helpful here)
- Refer participants to resources in the community as well as provide take-home tools



It is also helpful if the facilitator has:

- Peer support and supervision
- Participated in a volunteer training or other program that prepares people to work with others safely, respectfully and with sensitivity; or has been a participant in other support groups, for familiarity with the process
- Familiarity with the hosting organization's policies and mission

SIZE OF GROUP

The recommended group size is 12 people, allowing for diversity of group membership and sufficient time for individual participants to share and hear from each other. Keep in mind the likelihood that a few participants will drop out, so allowing a couple more than your maximum is reasonable at the outset. Each organization can decide the minimum number for whom you will offer a group. With numbers below 5, it can prove to be problematic when members of the group run into scheduling conflicts and don't show on a particular night.

TIME OF DAY TO OFFER GROUP AND FOR HOW LONG

You may choose to run the group during the day, or in the evening. Keep in mind that there are barriers to various individuals with any choice. For example, some work during the day, and others prefer not to drive at night. It can help to experiment to see which time suits your community best. Some Open groups run on a continuous basis, or according to community need. Closed groups typically run from 8-12 consecutive weeks, and 2 to 2.5 hours allows for a spacious evening, without overly tiring participants.

SESSION TOPICS

A good closed group will take participants through a cycle of sharing, understanding and adjustment. In an open group, you may choose to address a similar cycle of topics on a rolling basis, but you'll need to dedicate the beginning of each session to introducing and orienting new or irregular members.

Here is a sample 8-week schedule of topics, designed for a closed group:

1. Introductions, ground-rules, group structure and curriculum. Basics of grief, mourning; self-care. Tell story of loss.
2. Check-in / catch-up. Normal grief responses; handling emotions in grief.
(Recommend: Session 2 is last night for new members to join a closed group.)
3. Check-in / catch-up. Myths and Facts about grief; share favourite qualities of loved ones, mementos.
4. Check-in / catch-up. Coping Strategies – Building Resilience.
5. Check-in / catch-up. Practical considerations.
6. Check-in / catch-up. Changes in family, identity, roles.
7. Check-in / catch-up. Spirituality, meaning, self-care (music, writing, art, exercise).
8. Check-in / catch-up. Good-byes, sharing plans; memories and rituals, connections going forward.



SECTION 4. *MARKETING AND LOGISTICS*

Some items to consider as you prepare for your group and recruit participants.

MARKETING: GETTING THE WORD OUT

Ideas for letting participants know about the group include:

- Public Service Announcements targeted to local print, online, radio and television media
- Targeted ads with outlets that cater to a specific population, e.g. Seniors
- Adding your event to calendar listings in community newspapers, newsletters
- Write a letter to the editor or article (or have someone who has participated in a past group) write a letter or article for a local news outlets that focuses on how the group helped them heal. Ditto for local radio or TV programs
- Use your own organization's website, newsletters, events calendars, e-blasts, bulletin boards and mailings to promote the group
- Produce a flyer that highlights upcoming groups and workshops and circulate it to your membership
- Ask your staff and volunteers to spread the word about the group
- Contact community partners to let them know of your group and ask for referrals, example partner organizations; churches/synagogues/mosques and other religious centers, senior centers, funeral homes, libraries, community and recreation centers, cultural centers, and other locations which have a bulletin board for posting information
- A local business may sponsor a paid advertisement for you (i.e. funeral home)
- Ask other appropriate organizations to circulate your flyer, or include a link on their websites

LOCATION

You may already have a location provided by your organization; or you may need to scout one out.

Either way, the location should:

- Be accessible to those with mobility devices
- Be easy to find, with adequate signage, lighting and parking
- Feature movable, comfortable seating, ideally with back support
- Allow for privacy/confidentiality (few or no people passing by, or little distracting noise from other parts of the building, or ringing phones)
- Feature adjustable temperature and lighting control
- Have on hand whiteboards or flip charts as needed
- Include side tables or tables for resources
- And the facilities to provide refreshments during breaks as needed

MATERIALS

- Since people pre-register, you can prepare reusable name tags with clips or on lanyards, or ask people to write their own name tag each night (first names are sufficient.)
- A sign-in sheet for attendance.
- A flip chart or white board for recording notes.
- Boxes of tissue.
- Extra pens and paper.
- Chairs arranged in a circle, and side tables (helpful for mugs and tissues, etc.)
- Equipment for showing videos or playing music.
- Floor or desk lamps that can provide softer lighting than fluorescents.
- Some groups offer light snacks (cookies, nuts, fruit, veggies, coffee, tea), some water.
- You can plan a potluck for the last session (refreshments or meal), or stick with the usual routine.

SECTION 5. *RUNNING THE GROUP*

Every communication with participants is an opportunity to provide sensitive and empathic support - from your marketing materials, to website, telephone calls, signage and facilities.

WELCOMING & SCREENING PARTICIPANTS

It is good practice to meet with the people who intend to join the group beforehand to assess his/her appropriateness for the group. Requiring people to register before joining is one way to assure that you speak with or meet in-person. You may choose to ask participants to complete a brief questionnaire or self-assessment for grief as part of your process, which will give you and them a sense of their challenges and goals.

SESSION STRUCTURE

Regardless of the specific topic, each session should provide a reasonable amount of orientation, education and structure; and then allow participants to express themselves, learn and find comfort from each other as they share their experiences.

Elements to consider:

- Start with welcome and introductions;
- Review housekeeping and ground rules;
- Some groups include an opening ritual;
- Check in with introductions (on the first night or in open groups), with a few words on how each participant is doing/feeling/coping, and an update how it's gone between sessions;
- Discussion around theme for the week, which may be based on hand-outs the participants have read, or videos watched; or involve a particular activity, such as presenting a photo and introducing the group to the person that died;
- Check-out and closing ritual. At the end of the session, the facilitator can summarize key points, offer encouragement and tools for self-care, and distribute handouts, if any.

GROUP GUIDELINES

In the first two sessions of a closed group, and at the beginning of every session for open groups, the facilitator should offer basic “ground-rules” for norms and expectations, and may choose to provide a written summary. Below are some sample guidelines which you could use in their entirety, or you could choose the ones that appeal to you. The group can discuss safety in general, and add any other rules they feel would make them feel safer.

Sample Guidelines / Ground Rules

1. Closed Group defined: Membership for this group will stay the same throughout. No new members will join the group after session 2, to create continuity and allow members a chance to develop trust and connection to each other.
2. Participants are asked to attend without the influence of non-prescription drugs or alcohol.
3. Be on time for each session.
4. Please make every effort to attend each session, and if you must miss a session, or decide not to continue, let the facilitator know.
5. Please turn off devices and be prepared to stay in the group without interruption.
6. Please avoid side conversations that can distract from the session.
7. Confidentiality: Whatever is shared within the group remains confidential. Share with others outside the group only what you have learned about yourself. Do not refer to people’s names or identifying characteristics outside the group.
8. Respect: Everyone grieves in their own, unique way, and the context for each person’s loss is different, so it is important to respect others’ right to the feelings and thoughts in grief.
9. Cultivate an attitude of acceptance (non-judgment) for yourself and others.
10. Actively listening to another’s share without interrupting is the most compassionate, healing response we can offer.
11. Avoid giving unsolicited advice or taking on the responsibility to “fix” another’s problem.
12. Please use the “I” pronoun (as opposed to “you”, ie. you are invited to share your own story, feelings, thoughts and struggles, along with coping strategies you are discovering along the way. You can be assured that others will share elements of your grief process, and will feel less alone for your sharing.
13. The facilitator will aim to create a space that is shared, allowing each person time to express him/herself.
14. You are free to share as much or little as you like at any given session, and say “pass” if you need to.
15. While there are common elements of grief, no two people are the same, and no particular strategy will work for all of the people all of the time. Take what works for you, and let go of what does not serve you. Similarly, offer what works for you knowing it may or may not work for others.
16. You are the expert on your needs: you are encouraged to speak up if the room is too warm, you need a break, you cannot hear, etc.
17. Allow yourself the time to grieve at your own pace, and take care of yourself between sessions.



EVALUATING THE GROUP

Asking for feedback from participants is vital to ensure you are meeting people's needs and to learn what is working well, and what needs adjustment.

It is up to your organization to decide whether to:

- Hand them out on the second-to-last week, and ask people to bring them back to the last session. This gives people time to reflect on the questions;
- Hand them out on the last session, and give time for people to fill them out before the closing ritual. This ensures you will get the evaluations back. Alternatively, you can ask them to mail the evaluation back by a certain date, allowing for more time to reflect on the series. The risk is you may not get them back.
- Send an electronic evaluation after the group. The survey should be simple enough (i.e. short) and allow people to offer suggestions about improvements, as well as to comment on what they valued the most.

Sample Evaluation Questions

- What was the most/least helpful?
- What changes would you recommend?
- Was the facilitator clear, knowledgeable and sensitive to the needs of the group? (You can use a rating scale here, if you choose, 1 being low, 10 being high.)
- Did you find the resources and handouts helpful?
- Did you find the location and timing of the group suitable?
- How would you compare how you felt before the group, and now that you have completed it?
- Did you make connections with one or more other members, and do you intend to keep in touch?
- What was the most important thing you learned about your grief and coping with grief?
- Was there anything missing for you in this group?
- Would you recommend this group to a friend, family member or colleague? Why or why not?

SECTION 6. TROUBLE-SHOOTING

POTENTIAL TROUBLE SPOTS

Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, *Understanding Your Grief: Support Group Guide: Starting and Leading a Bereavement Support Group*.

Most of the time, people will be generous in showing compassion and respect to each other, and will form deep bonds through their participation in the group. However, every group also contains a mix of personalities and communications styles, and sometimes competing needs. Below are some tips on intervening when group members demonstrate challenging communication styles or behaviours.

The Interrupter: frequently interrupts or speaks over others. You might raise the ground-rule about interrupting, and ask the person to allow the other to finish. You might add that finding the words to convey our pain is not easy and often takes more time and space than we imagine. For someone who continues to interrupt, you may need to ask for a conversation after the group has disbanded that day. You can ask them if they realize they are interrupting, and can offer to create a plan together to help them prevent or correct interruptions.

The Advice-Giver: can't help offering ideas about how the other person should solve their problems. You could remind the person about the ground-rule about advice giving, and encourage them to speak using "I" language. It's reasonable to share "things that have worked for me" but important to do so with the assumption that the other person may simply need time and the chance to talk to work out the challenge. You could ask if the speaker is interested in hearing from the group about what has worked for them, to bring more voices to the table.

The Challenger: might accuse the leader of not knowing what s/he is doing, or like to put the facilitator on the spot in front of the group and cause him/her to question their competence. You can calmly acknowledge the comment to show that you have heard the person, but resist the urge to prove your competence, or justify your choices at that moment, as it will likely lead to more challenging behaviour. You can invite the person to meet with you after the group so that you can discuss the situation and better understand each other, and say that you need to keep the group on course for the moment.

The Blamer: finds others the cause of his/her problems, and has difficulty looking at his/her own role in a given situation, preferring to focus on other people's faults. This self-defeating pattern is likely long-standing, and difficult to change. It may be difficult for group members to remain patient with the blamer, particularly if they are taking the risk to be honest about who they are. You can support this person to become more self-responsible, pointing to the power s/he has to learn more about his/her strengths, yearnings, needs and limitations so that s/he can begin to make positive changes.

The Person Who Monopolizes the Conversation. This is the person who tells long, interconnected stories, without stopping. You can remind the group about the ground-rule to share the space. You can thank the person and say that you want to be sure others have the opportunity to share. If the person has taken the conversation off topic, you can let them know the group will have a chance to discuss that theme at a later time (if that is the case), but for now, you'd like to return to the topic at hand. You can say to the person, "I see how important this is to you; let's find a time to connect about this after the group is over." You may need to be direct, holding up a hand, or interrupting the person, to manage this behavior.



The Quiet or Shy Participant. It's important to give space to people to share when they feel comfortable, however, when silence becomes chronic, a person may need more support to participate. You can say in advance, “today I'd like to invite everyone to stretch out of your comfort zone: so, if you are normally quick to speak, I invite you to explore pausing and listening, and if you are normally quiet, I invite you to explore speaking up today, so you can experience what it is like to be received in compassion.” You can remind people that everyone's voice contributes to learning and coping. Include a practice of going around the circle, inviting each person to share to help people acclimatize to speaking in public. You can also ask the person (outside the group setting) what s/he might need to participate with greater ease.

The Very Angry Person. There are no “right” or “wrong” emotions in grief, but if someone is stuck in chronic anger, or directs their anger at group members or the facilitator, participants are likely to feel unsafe and be reluctant to share. You can remind the person about the ground-rule on respect and the importance of gentleness in our relations with those in grief. You can validate the person's anger, and suggest safe ways to express that anger, such as journaling, singing, dancing, and painting their anger, and moving the anger out of the body in a safe way. You can normalize how common it is to feel anger, and be curious about what other emotions might be underneath it (e.g. pain, hurt). You can ask the participants if s/he would be open to hearing from members of the group about constructive ways they have worked with their own anger, or transformed anger into positive action. If the anger continues, you may need to speak with the person about creating a plan for support to address their feelings and what lies beneath, or brainstorm ways to increase resilience (more self-care, more sleep, stress management, meditation, specialized support, and anger management support, etc.).

RED FLAGS

When to Refer

It is important to know when to refer a person for additional support. In the case where a participant has harmed another person physically, or threatened to do so, asking the participant to withdraw from the group is necessary until such a time as they can gain skills to manage their anger. (Your obligation is to the safety of all participants.)

When participants demonstrate any of the following, a more in-depth discussion may be needed, along with referral to community partner.

- Participant communicates persistent thoughts of suicide, or serious intent to complete suicide, or tells you of a specific suicide plan;
- Group member arrives at your group under the influence of alcohol or drugs;
- You notice profound and debilitating symptoms of anxiety or depression that interfere with the participant's basic self-care, and the person's ability to participate;
- Participant demonstrate uncontrollable rage directed at others, including making threats-to-harm, or actual harm to others;
- The person acts out in uncharacteristic ways or reports sudden, dramatic or persistent inability to manage in his/her life, suggesting that a referral for diagnosis and specialized support may be needed.



SECTION 7. *FACILITATOR SELF-CARE*

Those who work or volunteer in caregiving roles are at risk of caregiver burnout if we continue to focus on others at the expense of our own needs. We need to take time to fill up our own batteries, and ensure we are giving from a place of fullness and wellbeing. Getting to know ourselves and what we find nourishing is important. E.g. walks For example, do walks in the woods fill your battery? Time with friends? Listening to music? Massage? Yoga? When we give ourselves permission to meet our own needs and set healthy boundaries, we do a service to ourselves, and to those we serve.

Kristin Neff, researcher on Self-Compassion, suggests that having compassion for oneself is no different than having compassion for others. In carrying out the important work of facilitating groups for bereaved people, it's important to offer as much compassion to ourselves as we do to participants. For example, instead of holding harsh judgments toward ourselves when we've made an error or failed to live up to our own or other's expectations, a simple acknowledgement of our distress or regret in the moment, coupled with an intention to be kind and caring toward ourselves usually sets the stage for whatever corrective action we need to take.

Here's a list of recommendations that will help facilitators keep self-care top of mind (adapted from the website Whatsyourgrief.com, which includes many helpful articles on self-care, and other topics related to grief.)

- Be honest with others about your needs.
- Be realistic about how much you can take on.
- Recognize when focusing on others is enabling you to avoid focusing on yourself
- Assess your support system.
- Deliberately set aside time for yourself.
- Learn how to draw boundaries.
- Practice saying 'yes' when someone offers to help or practice asking others for help.
- Make a self-care contract with yourself and have a friend, family member, or therapist hold you to it.

SECTION 8. *PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER*

1. **Grief groups can be very beneficial and rewarding** for participants, facilitator and host organization alike: participants grow and heal from sharing in their experiences; the facilitator learns and grows through the process of offering the group, and the organization contributes to creating compassionate communities.
2. **Understand how groups can best address participants' mourning needs.** This guide provides a summary, borrowed largely from Alan Wolfelt's work. There are other materials available on the web and in bookstores; see Appendix for some ideas.
3. **Your most important choice is whether to offer an open vs closed grief group.** Open groups can run on a continuous basis, but can often involve inconsistent participation and therefore may compromise participants' ability to delve deeply into their experience. Closed groups can leave new participants waiting for a chance to join, but often provide a deeper and more rewarding experience. Other important choices include: the facilitator; group size; time of day; location; materials; and marketing.
4. **Every interaction is an opportunity to connect with, and offer support to, participants.** This applies from your initial marketing materials through your sign-up website, welcoming/screening calls, group experience and facilities. A welcoming atmosphere is vital for a sense of belonging.
5. **Session topics should work through a natural cycle of grief and adjustment.** A sample 8-week curriculum is provided at the end of Section 3. The facilitator will need to develop a clear outline and content to ensure the group's success.
6. **Structure and guidelines can provide a strong foundation for participants to work through their grief.** Consider in particular: welcoming/screening calls; a consistent session structure; clear ground rules, agreed upon by the group and renewed at appropriate times; and evaluations by participants. (See Section 4.)
7. **Be aware of typical "trouble spots" in running grief groups.** Know when to refer participants for professional assistance. It's your job as organizer and/or facilitator to ensure everyone's safety, acting pro-actively.
8. **Don't forget to care for yourself!** Like all grief work, running a group takes effort and energy. Remember to build in self-care, and call on members of your organization for supplemental support. Modeling self-care, and knowing when you need support ensures the best quality of care for your group's participants.

Running a grief group requires commitment and preparation. However, the rewards of creating a safe and compassionate space for bereaved participants are many! Mourning takes courage and community. Those who venture into grief work ultimately discover that it is an honour to facilitate and witness the unique and collective journeys of participants complete with stories, struggles, tears, growth, integration and laughter, and, ultimately healing and renewal.

APPENDIX

Wolfelt, Alan. Understanding Your Grief: Support Group Guide: Starting and Leading a Bereavement Support Group. Fort Collins, CO, Companion Press, 2004.

Wolfelt, Alan. Understanding Your Grief: 10 Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart. Fort Collins, CO, Companion Press, 2003