

Creating and Sustaining Survivor Support Groups

Introduction and Benefits of Grief Support Groups

- Reducing the sense of isolation in a shame-based, grief avoidant culture
- Providing emotional, physical and spiritual support in a safe nonjudgmental environment
- Allowing them to explore their many thoughts and feelings in a way that helps them be compassionate with themselves

- Encouraging each other to both give and receive support in the group
- Learning new ways of approaching problems, i.e., others wanting a survivors to return to “normal”
- Helping develop a sense of trust with others in an often unsafe and uncaring world.

- **Offering a supportive environment that can reawaken their own zest for life**
- **Giving information on grief, supportive resources in the community, education**
- **Honoring their own unique grief journey after the suicide of a loved one and recognizing similarities and difference in the ways individuals grieve**

What makes survivor groups different from other grief support groups?

- Commonalities with other grief support groups
- Perceived differences by survivors
- Shame, Judgment, and Stigma Factors
- Common use of terms: killed herself/himself, died by suicide, took his or her own life versus “committed suicide.”
- Completed suicide versus “successful suicide attempt”

Confusion of terms:

- suicide survivor- someone who has had a loved one die by suicide
- suicide attempter- someone who has made a suicide attempt
- suicide completer- some one who ends his or her life by suicide
- survivors of suicide group vs. survivors of suicide bereavement/grief support group

. What skills and attributes are important for a survivor support group leader?

- flexibility
- the ability to share authority and letting the group determine direction vs. rigid planning structure.
- intervene and redirect if the group dynamics are unhealthy

- companioning versus teaching- let group members teach you what they need and share their own experiences.
- comfort with silence within a group
- warmth and responsiveness of leader with the members' perception that the leader is in charge.

- recognition of leaders in the group and giving encouragement to them.
- non-judgmental-“people have strong but different feelings about topics.”
- open-ended questions vs. closed questions (yes or no responses)
- avoids advice-giving
- encourages group interaction

What are some common dynamics often seen in groups and how to best handle them?

- lack of leader preparation
- differences between the group members' expectation and the leader's expectations

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Individual participant problems

- the absent
- the advice-giver
- the academic
- the blamer
- the challenger

- the forced- to- attend
- the religious member and /or the preacher
- the interrupter
- the rambler
- the socializer

- the speaker representing the entire group
- the silent
- blaming, complaining and scapegoating
- cliques and ganging up on one member of the group
- help-rejecting

Creating safety within the group/ Developmental Phases (Wolfelt)

- having a beginning and ending to groups- reinforcing group guidelines
- confidentiality
- consent
- support systems
- time to meet personal needs
- everyone to be given time to share

developmental phases of groups

- Establishing Group Purpose and limits
- Tentative self-disclosure and exploring group boundaries
- In-depth self-exploration and encountering the pain of grief
- Commitment to continued healing and growth
- Preparation for leaving the group

Structuring the Group (Jordan and Harpel)

- socializing
- opening/ritual
- group ground rules
- go-round
- group discussion

Formal closing

- Summary by facilitator
- Debriefing
- Closing Ritual

Common Themes in Survivor Groups

- shock and confusion
- numbness, and disbelief
- anger
- feelings of abandonment or rejection
- guilt
- shame and stigma

- sadness and sorrow
- relief
- religious/spiritual concerns
- growth, resilience, inner strength, "what really matters" and compassion

“Red Flags” suggesting need for referrals

- increase in alcohol abuse/dependence or illicit or Rx drug use
- expression of suicidal intent
- unable to care for self- not eating, not sleeping, not bathing, etc.
- intense rage towards others or self
- physical harm to self or others
- intense fears such as being alone by themselves/ panic attacks

- mourning that does not change over a period of months
- multiple recent losses of close relationships
- isolation
- replays of suicide scene
- panic attacks

■ **group member in crisis:**

- the first concern of the facilitator is the well-being of the group
- alcohol/substance use not allowed
- intervention of facilitator(s) (It helps to have two facilitators)

- determining of personal safety of individual and group
- assessing for need for immediate intervention or referral
- "Sounds like you are wondering if life is worth living."
- "We need to be sure you are safe."
Remove hazards.

- contact family member/friend or therapist.
- give resources 1-800-273-TALK
- do not leave the person alone.
- dial 911
- accompany to hospital/community center if necessary
- follow-up

. Bibliotherapy

Nuts and Bolts of Groups

- paperwork, tissues, pens, name tags
- consents
- handouts
- contacts with survivors outside of group
- referral sources
- how to find a location, fees, times, seating, snacks, insurance
- sponsorship

. Nuts and Bolts of Groups

- starting and ending the group- open vs. closed groups
- attendance in groups
- publicizing of groups
- screening of potential group members
- group meeting topics
- discussion questions

Recognizing Signs of Leader Burnout (Practice What You Preach!)

- recurrent health problems
- sleeping/eating changes
- increase in displays of anger, resentment or impatience
- avoidance behaviors
- depression
- feeling of being overwhelmed, anxiety

- sense of over- responsibility
- exhaustion
- rescuing
- problem setting limits
- giving advice based on your own experience

Locating Survivor Support Bereavement Groups

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention- afsp.org- listing of groups around the country

Locating Survivor Support Bereavement Groups

- Central Florida Bereavement Groups for Survivors of Suicide
- HALOS (HEALING AFTER A LOVED ONE'S SUICIDE)
- St. Cloud and Davenport, FL.- Contact Marie Dudek
- (863) 424-4810 or halosflorida@gmail.com
- HALOS (HEALING AFTER A LOVED ONE'S SUICIDE)
- East Orlando- Contact David Zampella (407) 947-8683
- LBAS (LEFT BEHIND AFTER SUICIDE) - Hospice of the Comforter
- Sanford, Altamonte Springs, Windermere- Contact Ann Dumont (407) 682-0808, ext. 6430

Questions and Answers