Humans are “meaning making” beings, and we are typically disturbed by the lack or loss of meaning, which often occurs after a death.

Support groups in bereavement work are ideal for most bereaved people, because they can talk to other bereaved people who are also grieving their loved ones who have died. “This normalising is a powerful antidote to feeling different and alone” (Koehler, 2010, p. 326).

Forums such as support groups have been acknowledged in both research literature and people helping/health care professions, as being an effective and valuable intervention for the psychosocial wellbeing of human beings. Indeed, for people who are bereaved, studies have shown that support groups lead to more effective outcomes, and out of the many resources that were offered to the bereaved, the most sought after, and found most helpful, were loss-specific bereavement support groups (Jordan, 2011; Utz, Caserta & Lund, 2013).

These studies, including other anecdotal research, showed that being around a community of people who understood, become experts in distraction in order to survive the demands of everyday life. Hence, bereavement support groups can provide a safe harbour to pull into for a while, where the loss can be integrated; much needed social connections are made; and the burden of grief and pain is shared amongst other people who understand what it is like to walk the very shadowy and pervasively isolating road called bereavement (Jordan, 2011; Underwood, 2004).

Meaning Making, Social-Emotional Processing and the Integration of Experience

Humans are “meaning making” beings, and we are typically disturbed by the lack or loss of meaning, which often occurs after a death. Since meanings only exist within an inter-relational context, bereaved individuals will often use comparisons with others to gain accurate self-evaluations, to process emotions and learn how to define the self, and their identity (Neimeyer, 1999).

This is especially pertinent in bereavement support groups, where the consistent relational exchanges can support and empower the bereaved group member in perceiving themselves more correctly, as well as dispelling the many myths around the perceived cultural norms of bereavement. In addition, these exchanges can encourage the integration of experience and meaning and help support a more secure attachment by enabling participants to reach out for connection and comfort when they are afraid and overwhelmed (Seigel, 2007).

Characteristics of a Successful Bereavement Support Group

There is a copious amount of research on how to run successful support groups. However, there are certain factors found across the literature that when present, seem to promote more efficacious outcomes in bereavement specific support groups. These are a) Having an Informed Framework From Which to Practice and b) Group Leaders That are Well-Informed and Self-Aware.

Having an Informed Framework From Which to Practice

Current research and literature recommend that bereavement support groups should ideally be:

- Initially closed and time limited: that is, a fixed amount of sessions
with the same group membership. Participants can then enter an open, ongoing group for further support if this is required after the closed group has ended.

- Therapeutic: which means through safe exploration, group members can develop and deepen emotional intelligence and self-mastery around their own unique grief journey.

- Loss specific and small in nature (no more than twelve group members, but not less than six).

- Psychoeducational: this is the fostering of conversations that explore assumptions and the meaning of the death, as well as engaging in learning other ways of approaching problems related to grief, e.g. other people’s reactions.

- Flexible and creative: that is, varying mediums are used by group leaders to engage different learning and grieving styles within the group membership.

- Co-facilitated, rather than one group leader: this allows for accountability, debriefing after a group, and more effective evaluations of the group process.

**Modelling and promotion of self-responsibility to group members**

Self-responsibility, according to research literature is a major predictor of positive outcomes. That is, when a bereaved person has a sense of being in charge of their own healing journey, they are more optimistic about their beliefs, and less avoidant in dealing with the pain and overwhelm (Meichenbaum, 2012; Cacciatore & Flint, 2012).

**Helping group members to adapt to bereavement along two concurrent tracks**

- A biopsychosocial track: A big part of this will fall under the psychoeducational component of the group, and will address psychological symptomology, physiological concerns, relationships and self-esteem work.

- A track which supports the relationship to the person who has died: Death is a relational experience and, therefore, is always about at least two people — the bereaved and the deceased. Indeed, according to bereavement experts, complications unique to grief can occur when this track is disregarded by bereavement care providers.

For group leaders, this means helping group members to process:

- their memories of the deceased
- negative affect
- preoccupation or idealisation of the relationship,
- inner and outer conflict

- attachment issues
- memorial practices (Hedtke, 2012; Neimeyer, 2012; Rubin, 1999).

**Group Leaders That are Well-Informed and Self-Aware**

Current literature suggests that the primary resource of satisfaction regarding the care the bereaved receive, is related to the relationships with care providers whose presence invited them to feel met, understood, safe and allowed movement towards natural wholeness (Hedtke, 2012; Papadatou, 2011; Yalom, 2004). Therefore, the following points are important to remember for anyone wanting to facilitate a bereavement support group:

**Group leaders need to be attuned to their own inner processes, as well as validating and allowing each group member their own organic healing process**

Ron Kurtz (2007) calls this the “Organicity Principle”, and describes it in the following way:

“All living beings have the capacity to self-heal, and self-recreate. This principle places the locus of healing and control with each individual. Other people can either help or hinder this process” (Kurtz, 2007 pp. 24–25)

This means for group members, that their own natural processes can emerge unhindered.

**Companioning versus leadership**

That is, group facilitation from a foundation of mindful curiosity, which can lead to the promotion of emotional regulation within the group membership. Companioning is also having an attitude of exploration, flexible and creative ways of learning, and when there are reparative enactments modelled by group leaders.

**Group leaders also need to be able to model, facilitate and teach the following:**

- safety, support and self-care
- education on issues related to specific losses and grieving styles
- the process of grief and subsequent life changes
- the preparation of members for future challenges related to the loss
- problem solving related to the loss sequelae
- the advocacy of social support from family, friends and, if possible, from within the group membership.

**Summary**

In conclusion, there are various ways for the bereaved to obtain support after experiencing the tragedy of a death. Bereavement support groups are distinctive in their capacity to create a safe, compassionate and empowering environment for the bereaved to unfold their individual narratives around their grief journey in a way that is organic, practical and integrative. The bereaved can feel less isolated, begin to make some sense and meaning of their loss and, on the completion of the group, leave feeling more resourced psychologically, spiritually and socially.
This edition looks at bereavement support groups. The feature article, by Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Support Group Coordinator Michal deWilloughby, outlines the benefits of bereavement support groups for participants, alongside a model that professionals can consider when running such groups. In addition to the feature article, we have also included an interview with a bereavement support group facilitator, abstracts and some resources available for purchase here at the Centre, which may be useful in your work.

We are also delighted to announce the Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference (26th-28th March 2014). This dynamic professional development opportunity will bring together five world-class keynote speakers, alongside local presentations, pre-conference workshop opportunities and social networking opportunities. For more information on this event, see page 5 or go to www.grief.org.au/conference for further information.

I would like to wish you all a safe and relaxing festive season, and hope it brings you renewed energy for the New Year. I look forward to connecting with you in 2014 and as always, welcome any feedback that assists us in improving this publication.

Warm regards,

Jenny Field,
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A Support Group Intervention for Children Bereaved by Parental Suicide


**TOPIC:** Bereavement is considered by many to be among the most stressful of life events, and it becomes particularly distressing when it concerns the suicide death of a parent. Such an event is especially traumatic for children. **PURPOSE AND SOURCES:** The purpose of this paper is to present a case for support group interventions designed specifically for child survivors of parental suicide. The authors provide a theoretical framework for supportive group interventions with these children and describe the structure of an 8-week bereavement support group for this special population of suicide survivors. **CONCLUSIONS:** A case is made for designing and implementing group interventions to meet the mental health needs of this important group of individuals.

Click here to access the full text article

**References (from feature article pp. 1–2)**


Reflections of a Bereavement Practitioner

Kaye Griffin is a Volunteer Bereavement Counsellor and Support Group Facilitator with the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. She also runs her own private practice, Mind Matters Counselling.

**What has bought you to this field of work?**

My experiences when I was very young impacted me — there was the death of my friends when they were children, my uncles and one of my friend’s fathers. My family didn’t talk much about death and the extended family thought that death didn’t impact children — they didn’t understand. I found in my older life that I was able to manage loss and death and wanted to support others who perhaps didn’t have a good support network. The group work was a natural progression, as the group became the support and their reference.

**How do you bear the sadness people share with you?**

Respectfully.

**How do you support yourself when group participant’s stories or circumstances resonate with you?**

They all resonate at some level. Each story is personal and deeply sad. I allow it to be what it is — their sadness. It’s unique and personal to them.

**How do you help people understand the complexities of grief and bereavement in support group settings?**

I think of it differently. I listen and I validate their thoughts, feelings and loss. The group has the momentum. They are there together, because they share a similar emotion, a loss, and are on a separate, but to some extent similar, journey. Each understands their loss and its unique meaning. As a facilitator, or in the role of facilitation, it is about assisting them to make meaning of the loss — their meaning, and we can provide a framework of theory and understanding to underpin and support them in their journey.

**What do you find most challenging when supporting people experiencing grief?**

It all can be challenging — it’s raw and deep emotion. In reality, it is somewhat hard to sit silently with their grief, but that is what is often needed — quietness and respect. Words can’t change it and there is nothing to fix. We provide them with respect and support when we can sit with their pain in silence.

**What do you think the benefits are for people attending bereavement support groups?**

They have a reference group. The group understands and gets it — that’s where the strength and support from the group comes from. It’s a safe space to say what they need to say, as often and as many times as they need to say it, with no judgement and no criticism. The group gets it and that supports them in their journey of growing around and moving with their loss.

**What do you find most rewarding in your work?**

It is a privilege to witness and walk beside people who are bereaved — being there with group members who connect with their grief. They find that they have the internal resources to find their way around their loss. Each of them finds that they have all the internal resources and strengths that they need to support them through their journey and healing. They choose to have the pain of their loss and this also connects them with the memories of their lives together and the love and happiness. They come to be able to sit with the pain and happiness — they go together and they then have a continued connection, a continuing bond.

**What advice/insight would you give to those working in the field of grief and bereavement?**

I think these are things to reflect on or consider, rather than advice:

- Make haste slowly. Let the individuals and the group find their own pace and direction.
- Be present and mindful. Listen as if this is the first time you have heard about the loss — because it is the first time, each and every time. It’s their loss and it’s the first time they have shared their story or a particular part of their story — their love, the sadness, the ups and the downs.
- Listen with an open mind — a beginners mind.
- Be respectful and honest.
- Walk beside them.

**What are some ways you have engaged in self-care in this intense field of work?**

- Debriefing often, which is additional to supervision.
- I use the metaphor of cradling. This was taken from John Briere at a workshop I attended many years ago where he spoke about the difference between holding and cradling — that with cradling it is OK to put it down or put it aside. It’s healthy to take a rest.
- Engaging in life. Recognising that living goes on while dying occurs and that this is not disrespectful, as dying goes on also while living occurs.
Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2014

Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice
Bayview Eden Melbourne, 26th–28th March 2014

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is delighted to announce the Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2014. This dynamic professional development opportunity will bring together five world-class keynote speakers, alongside local presentations, pre-conference workshop opportunities and social networking events.

The Conference will take place at the Bayview Eden Melbourne (26th–28th March 2014) and will take the theme Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice.

Dr J. William Worden
Harvard Medical School, USA
How the Harvard Child Bereavement Study Informs Our Work With Bereaved Families

Dr Phyllis Kosminsky
Private Practice, New York, USA
How New Insights About the Brain are Helping Us Understand Attachment and Loss

Dr M. Katherine Shear
Columbia University, USA
Using Research in Treatment: Developing, Testing and Using Complicated Grief Treatment

Dr Elizabeth Lobb
University of Notre Dame, Sydney, AUS
The ‘Shocked’ Caregiver: Caregivers Experiences at the Deathbed Suggestive of PTSD After an Expected Death in Palliative Care

Dr David E. Balk
Brooklyn College, City University of New York, USA
Getting Researchers and Clinicians to Play Nice Together: Building a Bridge to Span the Gap Separating Practitioners and Researchers

Pre-Conference Workshops

Workshop 1
Dr M. Katherine Shear
Monday, 24th March 2014
Introduction to Complicated Grief Treatment: An Evidence-Based Approach

Workshop 2
Dr J. William Worden
Tuesday, 25th March 2014
Individuality and the Process of Mourning

Call for Papers

Abstract Submission Deadline:
Friday 20th December 2013.

For further information and to submit your abstract, go to www.grief.org.au/conference

Featured Resources

Bereavement Support Groups: Breathing Life into Stories of the Dead
Lorraine Hedtke
AUD $29.95
This book fills the gap between the challenges to conventional grief psychology and the practice of bereavement counselling. It offers a structured guide for facilitating bereavement support groups, but is intended as more than a simple ‘how to’ book. The books shows how to utilise the metaphorical presence of the deceased, accessed through stories, actions and rituals, to affirm the relationship with the deceased as more than a lost memory to be shelved next to dusty old photo albums.

In the Face of Death: Professionals Who Care for the Dying and the Bereaved
Danai Papadatou
AUD $69.95
This book explores the experiences of health care professionals working with the seriously ill, the dying and the bereaved. It offers a practical approach to caregiving and insight into both patient and caregiver responses to death. Issues and challenges health care professionals face when treating dying and bereaved patients are discussed, including compassion fatigue, the inevitability of suffering and the potential for growth, suffering in the workplace, team functioning in death situations, and team resilience.

These books, along with a range of other useful resources, can be purchased from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. To order these texts, visit www.grief.org.au/resources to download a resource guide/order form or email us at info@grief.org.au

Conference Registration

Registrations Close:
Friday, 28th February 2014

For further information and to register, go to: www.grief.org.au/conference

The Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2014 is proudly supported by the Victorian Government Department of Health.
Our Services

Newsletter enquiries
For all enquiries about this publication, please contact Jenny Field on (03) 9265 2100 or email j.field@grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service
The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) operates a statewide Specialist Bereavement Counselling and Support Service for Victoria. This program is supported by the Victorian Government Department of Health and has counsellors located across metropolitan Melbourne, in regional areas (Grampians, Gippsland, Hume, Barwon South-West, and Loddon Mallee) and in areas affected by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. For further information, call (03) 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Support groups
ACGB operates a range of support groups, including groups for adults, children, bereaved partners, loss of a parent and many more. For further information call (03) 9265 2100 or email support@grief.org.au

Practitioner Consultancy Service
This service provides free information, consultation and support for practitioners who are working with bereaved clients experiencing complex and prolonged bereavements. To access this service call 1300 858 113 during business hours.

Education and training
ACGB offers quality education and training opportunities for health professionals, students, volunteers and any other individual or agency desiring to enhance grief and bereavement knowledge and practice. Education and training programs are offered as seminars, workshops, short and long courses, conferences and customised training. For full details of all programs and services offered go to www.grief.org.au/education

Bereavement Courses
The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, as the largest provider of grief and bereavement education, is offering a number of research-informed, high-quality courses including post-graduate training program, the Vocational Graduate Certificate in Bereavement Counselling and Intervention (nationally accredited). For more information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email courses@grief.org.au

Customised training and consultancy
ACGB offer a range of customised training and consultancy services that provide research-informed, high quality professional development programs that meet the specialist training needs of organisations, groups and individuals. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email education@grief.org.au

Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement
Published by ACGB three times per year, this journal encompasses both academic and applied aspects of grief and bereavement and is a ranked journal with the Australian Research Council as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative (www.arc.gov.au). To find out how you can subscribe to this journal, call (03) 9265 2100 or email griefmatters@grief.org.au

Internships
ACGB has a limited number of placement opportunities for experienced counsellors seeking to advance their knowledge and skills in bereavement counselling. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email info@grief.org.au

Membership
Access a range of benefits through the ACGB membership program. An enhanced membership option, reciprocal membership with the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC), is also available. For more information about membership options and benefits go to www.grief.org.au/get_involved or call (03) 9265 2100.

Donations
Donations over $2 are tax deductible and allow ACGB to continue to provide services including bereavement counselling, support groups, newsletters, events, education and training. To make a donation, visit www.grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100.

We value your feedback
If you have feedback about this publication, or any of the services delivered by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement we’d love to hear from you. Contact us on (03) 9265 2100 or email info@grief.org.au

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