

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY
Bereavement Literature

FINDING SUPPORT IN A GROUP

Unfortunately friends, family members and co-workers may not fully understand or appreciate the attachment you have with your loved one and the pain you may still be feeling weeks and months after the death of your loved one. What is more, your need to talk about your loss may outlast the willingness of others to listen. So later in your grieving a support group may be one of the few places where you can come to be among others who understand, and where you can still talk about the one you have loved and lost.

It's important to note that group support is not the same as group therapy. Support groups aren't meant to cure long-standing emotional problems, alter people's personalities or change their basic values or beliefs. Neither are they just social gatherings designed to introduce people of similar interests, although friendships may develop outside the group as members get to know one another.

As the name implies, a bereavement support group forms a healing circle that helps members bear up under the heavy burden of loss without giving way. The group provides a safe, structured place where normal, healthy people bound by the experience of loss can come together on a regular basis to share their stories, get their concerns and feelings validated, learn more about the grieving process, express and work through their feelings, and reflect with one another on the meaning of it all. Members have the opportunity to grow by giving help as well as receiving it.

Most support groups are facilitated by people who've lost loved ones themselves, worked through their own grief and are committed to helping others get through the experience. Although some groups have the added assistance of a professional bereavement counselor, who can offer expertise and educational information on grieving that may not be available otherwise, the facilitator's role is the same: to provide structure and to make certain that everyone in the group feels safe.

What goes on in a support group meeting will vary with its leaders, its membership and what is shared, but typically the facilitator starts by stating the purpose of the group and its "ground rules". (For example, *Group begins and ends on time. Information shared in the group stays there. When outside the group, members aren't free to talk about another member by name without that member's permission. Members can exchange telephone numbers if they wish to do so. Members may share as much or as little as they so choose. A person who isn't ready to talk can "pass." One person speaks at a time. Everyone gets equal time to share, so no one monopolizes the time. Suggestions may be offered, but unsolicited advice is not given.*) One by one, people then are invited to introduce themselves and to tell as much or as little of their stories as they wish. Experiences, thoughts and feelings are openly expressed, and painful as well as pleasant memories are recalled. Oftentimes photographs of loved ones are passed around. Sometimes poems, eulogies or tributes are read — but whatever is shared is held in the strictest confidence by everyone there.

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Depending upon where you are in your grieving process, you may not feel the need for a support group just yet, but that may change over time. There is no right or wrong time to come to a meeting, but if you decide to do so, you might try coming to several meetings rather than just one, since each one changes depending on the composition of the group and what is discussed in it. Once you've found a support group, make certain it's made up of griever with whom you can identify, whose facilitator is not only comfortable running support groups, but also knowledgeable about the grieving process.

— Marty Tousley, CNS-BC, FT, in *Finding Your Way through Grief: A Guide for the First Year*,