

**Forming Suicide Grief Groups:  
Things to Consider for Effective Facilitation**  
*Terri Erbacher, PhD*

**Types of counseling groups:** *There are several different types of groups and it is important to know which will work best for your climate.*

**Ongoing:** New students can arrive at any time, and group introductions will need to be made often. The advantage is that teens may have more time to work on their grief, but the disadvantage is difficulty in creating cohesiveness in the group.

**Time-limited:** These groups work best in the school setting. School schedules often do not allow the flexibility for an ongoing group. Teens may also be more comfortable with the structure of knowing there is a beginning and an end to the group. Encouraging attendance at each session fosters group cohesion and rapport. The number of sessions is usually 8-12 with options for a maintenance/reunion meeting 1-2 months later.

**Walk-in:** This format frees the teen from any commitment and fits into the busy routine of school life. Disadvantages include not knowing who or how many kids will attend from week to week as well as in creating cohesiveness in the group.

**Planning Logistics & Things to consider**

It is important to collaborate with school and staff members to recruit members and decide on optimal times to hold group meetings. Effective groups also require parental support and while parental permission should be obtained, it might be helpful to further discuss goals of the group with parents as well as how they can continue to support their child outside of the group.

**Group length:** This will vary by age group as older students can manage longer times. It will also depend upon activities completed as younger children may handle a longer group session if the first 20 minutes is taken up by drawing/coloring or another art activity. Younger children often do best with smaller groups with less peers as well in order to increase the individualized attention provided. For example:

- 5-6 year olds: 3-4 members, 20 minute sessions
- 9-12 year olds: 5-7 members, 30-45 minute sessions
- 12-19 year olds: 6-10 members, 45-1 hour sessions

**Scheduling group times:** Ensure that students do not miss the same class or academic area each time.

Alternating the time of the group each week often works best if possible

**Securing the setting for group:** Ensure that the location is confidential and is a comfortable environment that is not overly stimulating and has appropriate lighting and temperature along with comfortable chairs. Having chairs in a circle rather than in rows or centered around a table will promote comfort and discussion. A small center table might be good if conducting activities. Ensure there are plenty of tissues available along with snacks, water, and any materials that might be needed for activities, such as paper, pens/pencils and markers/crayons and any other art supplies.

**Group composition:** Decide whether your group will be single gender or mixed, only one grade or mixed. Decide if the group composition will be based upon the relationship with the deceased (i.e. all lost a parent or all lost a friend as these may feel very different from losing a grandparent) or if all would have lost their loved one within a certain time period (i.e. last 3 years as an adolescent who lost a loved one 10 years ago may not have even known them well which creates different issues). Never mix students with primary pre-death (i.e. mom is dying of cancer) with students who are suicide survivors.

**Screening Potential Grief Group Members:** Screen to ensure the adolescent has moved sufficiently through the trauma aspect to benefit from a group setting without traumatizing others by discussing too many traumatic details. Assess suicidal ideation as having a student who is actively suicidal or who has attempted suicide in a survivor group is not encouraged. Also assess self-injurious behaviors and/or risk-taking behaviors. The adolescent's suicide loss should ideally be at least 2-3 months prior or the student will be too numb to get much from group. If their grief is very new, offer individual support until a future group is available.

**Determining group topics and set agendas:** Have a variety of ideas, particularly as each student may be grieving in their own unique way. Ask students what they want to discuss and allow students to guide the themes and topics. The best groups are sometimes those where we forget about the agenda and focus on students' immediate needs.

**Student participation:** Don't be overly concerned with students who are more silent. Allow them to 'pass'. Many students report learning from hearing others who may be able to find the words that they can't; still finding comfort that they are not alone.

**Establish group rules and confidentiality:** It is often best to let the group generate the rules in order to ensure commitment to the rules. A few examples that should be included (and you can guide them in stating these rules) are as follows:

- Confidentiality: This is a safe place for us all, so we need to ensure we can trust each other by not sharing what others talk about.
- One person speaks at a time and do not interrupt others
- Listen to others without judgment
- Each individual does not have to share more than their name

**Have at least one parent meeting:** If it is possible, these meetings help parents/caregivers understand their teen and connects them to other parents. The goal is to help the parent learn to help their teen.

**Closure:** Group closure can be difficult for some students who perhaps feel that no-one understands their loss but other group members. Be sure to begin the closure process early, providing the group with multiple notifications of when group will end several weeks in advance. Perhaps end with a pizza party.

### **Moving on after group**

- Encourage teens to stay in touch to continue to support one another
- Schedule a group reunion in a few months to see where students are in their grief
- Follow up individually with students who need additional support
- Ensure students know where to get help if needed, even if it's months from now
- Alumni can become peer facilitators the following year
- Remember anniversaries and birthdays. If the entire group was there for the same loss, this may be the time for a group reunion

Source: Erbacher, T.A. (2008, November). Teen groups for the suicide bereaved. Presentation for the Delaware County Suicide Prevention and Awareness Task Force (DCSPATF) 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium on Suicide: A community-wide health problem, Drexel Hill, PA.