



STRUCTURE

PEER GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS

This basic outline can be used as a guide to facilitate a peer grief support group.¹ The structure is based on a tried-and-true approach, but it is not meant to be prescriptive. It can be used as a template to adapt and modify according to local needs and practices.

The Circle

- Ideally, people are seated in a circle that has only open space in the middle of it (but if it is necessary to sit around a rectangular table or in a similar arrangement, that is OK). However the seating is arranged, *it is important to affirm that the group is a circle of support.*
- The symbolism of the circle communicates the aspirations that participants:²
 - Are present to help each other
 - Are interested in the common good
 - Are equals who respect one another
 - Are safe and able to say what they need to say

Opening

- *Statement of Purpose.* After briefly welcoming everyone, thanking them for attending, and introducing yourself and the co-facilitator by name only, read the following:

We are guided by our Statement of Purpose: This support group is for people who have experienced the death due to substance use of someone they care about. You are welcome here no matter what your relationship to the person is or how drugs or alcohol took their life. Our purpose is to help each other cope with our grief. A shared experience of tragedy brings us together, but we are each on our own journey, and our differences must be respected. Being together helps us all cope with grief in our own way, based on our individual needs and beliefs. We are peers, not professionals, and each of us is an authority regarding only our own grief. We help each other by sharing both the difficulties we face and how we cope with them.

- *Opening Ritual.* Have a simple and brief Opening Ritual, such as lighting a candle and/or sharing a meaningful reading.³
- *Go-Round.*
 - Ask people to introduce themselves one-by-one, instructing them to share only the same information: *your name; the name, age, and relationship to you of the person who died; and when or how long ago the person died.*

¹ This structure is for a *drop-in* or *open* group, which features ongoing meetings that anyone can attend for as many or as few sessions as they wish and where the activities at any meeting do not require familiarity with the content of previous meetings.

² It is not necessary to formally present or explain anything about what the circle symbolizes. It is fundamental, however, to consistently affirm and practice these principles.

³ See, for example, *Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief*, by Martha W. Hickman, and *Grief Day by Day: Simple Practices and Daily Guidance for Living with Loss*, by Jan Warner.

- You share first, precisely modeling what you have asked them to do, then proceed consecutively, person after person, around the circle.
- *Group Sharing Guidelines.* Immediately after reading the Statement of Purpose, read the Guidelines.

In order to create a safe place where everyone is respected and supported, we follow these Group Sharing Guidelines:

- *Keep strictly confidential what happens here and who is present.*
- *Respect everyone's experiences, beliefs, and point of view.*
- *Listen wholeheartedly to the person who is speaking.*
- *Take turns, share the time we have together, and be patient when there is silence.*
- *When you share, focus on your own experiences. Tell your story in your way, and allow others to tell their story in their way.*
- *Share what does or doesn't help you, and allow others to decide what will or won't help them.*
- *Be careful about questioning a person—so everyone can choose what they want to talk about and how much they want to share.*
- *Be sensitive to the effects that graphic descriptions of substance use or of traumatic experiences may have on others.*
- *You have control over how much you participate in the group, it is OK to cry and to feel however you feel, and you have permission to ask for what you need.*

Sharing

This is the major activity of the group, which takes up 75% to 80% of the meeting time.

- It commonly begins with an open-ended invitation to begin sharing.
- That is followed by a facilitated conversation in keeping with the Group Sharing Guidelines.
- Then there is a transition during which the group is assisted in coming away from the experience feeling supported.

Closing

- *Closing Statement:* After the sharing has ended, read the Closing Statement:

Our intention has been to support each other in our grief and to share the lives of those who have died. Our world has been forever changed, but we know that love lives on. We hope you find the resources and assistance you need as you continue on your journey. Until we meet again, may you carry this experience with you as a reminder that you are not alone.

- *Closing Ritual.* Use a closing reading and/or other closing ritual to conclude the meeting, for example, extinguishing candles that were lit in the Opening Ritual.
- Announce that the meeting has concluded and thank everyone for attending.