Resolving Personal Loss

TI 042 - Thematic

By

J. Eugene Knott

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Introduction

This program was designed to provide bereaved persons with a structured, deliberate means of dealing with their personal grief and the consequences of the attendant losses caused by the death of a “significant other.”

The specific goals of the group for “resolving personal loss” are these four:

• To assist the bereaved to recognize their loss.
• To further the necessary grief work.
• To create an acceptable mourning rite.
• To enable the bereaved to begin resuming satisfactory living in the absence of the dead person.

The target group for this program is people who have lost a relationship important to them due to death. In order to determine who is best suited to participate in this structured group, a screening interview is held with each prospective member. Criteria for inclusion are a combination of how recent is the loss and relationship of the decedent. Members of the family and other intimately related survivors seem to be ready for such “grief work” only after the passage of a month or so following the death. Persons with ties not so close in relationship do not appear to need the several weeks interim period to be psychologically open and prepared for the group. In any case, the composition of the group should not reflect too much variance along the above lines, and should be somewhat homogeneous with respect to the criteria stated.

Membership should be limited to a maximum of eight, unless a co-leader is used, when a dozen is a recommended limit. The program runs weekly sessions of two hours each, and focuses on a sequence of “topics” common to the bereaved. Resolution of these issues is felt to be a priority for successful grieving as shown in studies on the matter.

Those writers whose influence has fashioned the format and content of this program include the following and appear in the Reference section at the end of this manual: Lindemann’s (1964) classic work, Bowlby (1973), Parkes (1972), Kreis and Pattie (1969), Engel (1964), Switzer (1970), and Schoenberg, et al, (1970).
Session I

A. The leader introduces her- or himself and convenes the group by asking each member to take a turn stating his or her name and answering these three items by way of self-introduction:

(1) Why I am here.

(2) What I hope to gain.

(3) Who has died.

It is usually easier to “break the ice” slowly by having members pair up to do this initially for about ten minutes before asking them to discuss their responses to the group as a whole.

(Total of 30–40 minutes)

B. Following this, the leader extends a welcome to all and proceeds to describe the stated goals (see the Introduction) of the program. The leader then briefly gives an overview of the five sessions as outlined in the ensuing pages, and answers any questions posed.

C. In the latter half of Session I, the group leader offers some commentary covering the types of changes members might expect for themselves, drawing on the aforementioned sources. These touch on both somatic and psychic manifestations of grief. The members are encouraged to share their feelings as candidly as comfort allows and to discuss the impact of their particular death–loss. Unlike many other group experiences, they are also encouraged to talk about the feelings between sessions with non–members, particularly others who knew the dead person.

Such objectives as “grief shared is grief diminished,” and giving “permission” to detach oneself from all but the memory of the dead are facilitated in this manner. In the first meeting then, these issues are openly discussed (remainder of session).
Session II

A. The leader begins this session by addressing some of the most typical reactions of persons bereaved by the death of someone cherished. This is best done by asking each member to react briefly to such experiences as feelings triggered by key words like “loneliness,” “anger,” “guilt,” and “deprivation.” Each is mentioned in turn, and participants are asked to respond to the emotions the word evokes.

Later topics for discussion in this session may include both the physical reactions alluded to in the first session, and economic situations consequent to the loss.

B. Through this activity, group members are given the opportunity to identify their primary grief reactions and begin to “own” them.

Thus, the objectives are several:

• for members immediately to see the “legitimacy” and commonality of having such emotional responses to their death loss;

• to provide the leader (and group) with a picture of the range and intensity of these issues for this particular group (they usually vary somewhat); and

• to gain information so that this and the next two sessions can be organized about the more demanding concerns of the members.

Other aspects of coping with death–loss that come up at this time include the consequences of stigma (social treatment of the bereaved by uneasy sympathizers), and the notion of transition itself, including the goals of detachment, and reintegration—all prime needs which are frequently stated (full session).

C. This is a good point at which to give members some “homework,” beginning with a voluntary exchange of phone numbers among those who desire.

The purpose is to enable them to “check” with each other between sessions. All too often the recently bereaved undergo “leper-like” social treatment by people normally close to them, and the concern demonstrated by one person’s merely attending to another with as little as a periodic phone call can be a powerful element in helping to resolve grief.

This is often the case when death is relatively recent, and is especially useful if the death resulted in someone being widowed.
Session III

A. This session is begun with a general inquiry about the “homework,” and members’ contacts since the last session, plus any notable occurrences a group member may wish to share.

(20 minutes maximum)

B. Following that, the leader focuses attention on a topic uncovered in the previous session’s debriefing. It seems that “anger” and “guilt” feelings are most often the dominant concerns at this juncture of the group’s life.

In talking openly about such conflicting and (to them) supposedly inimical feelings, members vent their feelings and hopefully gain some perspective on understanding them.

(1 hour)

C. The last portion of this third meeting is devoted to a lecture by the leader on “normal grief reactions,” and on time as a key variable in the mourning process.

Material for this can be drawn particularly from the work of Lindemann (1944), Bowlby (1961), and Parkes (1972).

Often, issues such as the quandary of keeping up with the daily demands of living in the race of immobilizing depression, the ambiguity of the future, and strained or absent social activity, are teased out and discussed at some length in this session. All of this discussion obviously is intended to help bereaved members pursue their grief work.

(Remainder of meeting)
Session IV

A. During this session, the focus is on “stigma” and the social distance and relative isolation that the death of a person confers on anguished survivors. Also, the effects of “deprivation” — both social and economic — are dealt with at this time.

Personal fears of vulnerability and mortality, especially such fears as “cancer contagion” or heredity defects should also be dealt with openly in this meeting if they have not surfaced before. These are common, yet will vary from group to group.

Also, in this meeting, and to a lesser extent in the previous one, the leader may find it useful to employ some “rational contradiction.” Disputation of seemingly irrational fears, while not always consoling, will usually make an impact on a bereaved person over time.

B. This is also the session in which the group begins to “bridge the gap” from being centered on the past (dead) to focusing on the present (the living self and others), and ultimately to planning for the future.

One way to facilitate the transition is to use a device like the Gestalt “empty chair” technique for “saying good-bye” to the dead person(s), usually with one member who has evinced difficulty in affirming the death as ‘real.’

This has the purpose of helping members to confirm (aloud) the death/absence and thereby gain some semblance of psychological “closure” on that episode.

(A and B together are the full session’s agenda.)

C. The homework assignment for the final session requires members to return the following week with some well-considered strategies for dealing with their day-to-day needs and wants in light of the major changes incurred by the death loss.

Usually it is best to have members write down these strategies for sharing at the next meeting.
Session V

A. To begin this final meeting, members form themselves into groups of two to four persons each, the exact composition to be of their own making. Within these small groups, each individual shares his or her plans with the other members and the members offer supportive critique, suggestions, and encouragement.

(About 30 minutes)

The leader then reconvenes the total group and solicits voluntary reactions to the discussions held in the subgroups.

(15 to 20 minutes)

B. After briefly processing the reactions, the leader then recapitulates the progress of the group, soliciting members’ comments along the way. The leader urges individuals to recognize and affirm their change/progress to date and their growing abilities to adjust to life in the face of death, and to note other gains made in the course of the five weeks, including making new friends and gaining resources. This serves as a summary debriefing for the previous four sessions as well.

(25 minutes)

C. Finally, the predictable matter of separation anxiety needs to be dealt with. It has been found useful to respond to this need by asking each member to speak briefly about what the group has meant to her or him, citing specific personal highlights.

This activity concludes the group experience itself.

(30 minutes)

The objectives of this session are to make the transition from GROUP to SELF as “major resource” in the grieving process, and to enable participants to gain reinforcement for their strategies and goals for “satisfactory survival.”

D. At the very end, written evaluation sheets (see Appendix A) are passed out, and unsigned returns are requested.

(About 10 minutes)
A Further Note

With a target behavior like the process of grieving, there are other options which can be exercised. The five-session format outlined herein, for example, seems most useful with persons who are dealing with the death of a family member. However, the general outline and many of the specific activities can be used with other types of death loss.

With such incidents as campus suicide or homicide, for example, a slight modification of this format has been used successfully. In such cases, the students living in close proximity to the dead victim become the target group. Adaptations suitable for their needs include initiation of the group very soon after the incident and special emphasis on feelings of guilt and personal vulnerability — typically of paramount concern in those situations.
References


Appendix A: Evaluation

Resolving Personal Loss

Evaluation

Please respond openly and thoroughly to the following open-ended questions. Do not sign your name.

1. What is your overall evaluation of the group program? (Please comment particularly on what effect the program has had on you behaviorally and attitudinally).

2. How would you assess the worth of each individual session?

   Session I

   Session II

   Session III
2. Any suggestions for revising the program’s format or content?

4. Any comments/suggestions for the leader(s)?