

**GROUP PLAN FOR GRIEF/BEREAVEMENT****Heather Eig****Zadok Magruder High School, Rockville, Maryland****TOPIC: GRIEF/BEREAVEMENT**

Group level: High school (grades 9–12)

Number of sessions planned: 8

Number of members: 6 to 8

Time for each session: One class period (50 minutes)

Location of sessions: Conference room (guidance office or main office)

A single facilitator/group leader (could be colead)

**SESSION 1****Purpose of Session 1**

1. To review the purpose of the group.
2. To introduce the group members to each other.
3. To introduce an icebreaker activity to relax the group.
4. To establish group rules.
5. To share reasons for participating in the group.

Have tissues, cups, and a pitcher of water available at all sessions.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the purpose of the group.
2. Students introduce themselves by stating (1) their name, (2) their grade, (3) the name of the person who died, (4) their relationship to that person, and (5) the cause of death.
3. Introduce the co-facilitator.
4. Ten-minute icebreaker activity: the candy dish. Pass around a candy dish and allow each member to take a handful of candy. Prior to eating the candy, each member is asked to share one piece of personal data for each piece of candy selected. Personal data may include (but is not limited to) personal interests, hobbies, sports interests, family constellation, travels, favorite musical groups, favorite places to eat, books enjoyed, and so on. (Note: If the group leader is aware that a group member is a diabetic or has an eating problem, food would not be used.)
5. Explain to the group the importance of having group rules and allow them to establish rules. Among the rules would be:
  - a. Confidentiality. Anything said within the group may not be shared with others outside of the group. Group members are encouraged to share their grief with family, friends, teachers, and/or counselors. They are asked not to discuss the personal feelings of other group members with anyone. It is important that trust be created among members.
  - b. All members are encouraged to participate in every session. This may be difficult for some members. The facilitator must be sensitive to those members who are not ready or willing to participate.

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c. Group members are asked not to judge the way others are grieving or be critical of what members say. Everyone experiences different reactions to the loss of a loved one. There are no right or wrong ways to grieve.

d. Refrain from using unacceptable language in group sessions.

Group members then begin to share their stories, experiences, feelings, and concerns. The facilitator encourages the flow of conversation and prevents domination of the session by one person. The facilitator attempts to tie related comments together (e.g., "several of you have commented that you felt angry at the person who died"). The facilitator should focus on similarities and differences in feelings, anger, frustrations, sadness, or specific concerns (e.g., being asked too many questions about details of the death, friends not understanding the grieving process, missing the lost loved one at holidays and special events, etc.).

6. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 2****Purposes of Session 2**

1. To review the summary of the first session.
2. To review the group rules.
3. To encourage the group to discuss topics related to the death of the loved one.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the first session.
2. Review the group rules.
3. Encourage members to guide the discussion. Each week the group will start with a weekly "check-in" of how the members handled their grief during the past week.
4. The facilitator opens up topics for discussion:
  - Were there any secrets surrounding the death (e.g., were details withheld to "protect" family members)? Did this result in anger, disappointment, or relief when the truth finally came out?
  - Has this experience brought about changes in relationships with friends, parents, siblings, other family members, peers, classmates, teachers, neighbors?
  - What are each member's current feelings? Have family expectations for the group member changed?
  - Has it been difficult to communicate with friends, family, and others?
  - Was gender a factor in dealing with grief (e.g., male versus female reactions to dealing with how grief was expressed, crying, "getting to the business of planning a funeral")?
5. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 3****Purposes of Session 3**

1. To continue to encourage group interaction.
2. To identify a particular hardship incurred by each member while grieving.
3. To identify the impact of loss on academic performance and attention span in a school setting.
4. To allow members to talk about the funeral arrangements or what happened at the funeral, if they so desire.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary of the second session.
2. Allow each member a few minutes to check-in with issues from the week (i.e., ups, downs, encounters, outlook, any new information).
3. Has the death resulted in personal hardships? If so, in what areas?
4. Continue discussing the impact of losing a loved one on school/academics (e.g., the ability to focus on schoolwork, concern over grades and making up missed work). Has there been a change in relationships with peers or teachers?
5. Ask members if they would like to talk about the funeral and their reactions. Talking about the funeral is strictly voluntary and no one should feel pressured to respond to this.
6. Compliment the group members on their efforts to share and encourage the members to become cohesive and work as a group.
7. Allow time for reflection on how the group experience may be benefiting each member.
8. Ask each member to bring in a picture of the lost loved one to share with the group. This is also a voluntary assignment, and members may choose not to bring in a picture. Say: "If you would care to bring a picture of your loved one for the group to see, you may do so next week. Whether or not you choose to bring in a picture is up to you."
9. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 4****Purposes of Session 4**

1. To continue encouraging the group to interact with each other.
2. To share pictures of the deceased with the group.
3. To discuss issues that may not have been addressed by anyone outside of the group.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary of the third session.
2. Conduct the weekly check-in with each member.
3. Let those members who have brought in pictures of their loved one show the pictures to the group. They can mention why this particular picture was selected.
4. Inquire if there are any issues that have yet to be discussed (e.g., how other members of the family are reacting to the loss, feeling guilty or responsible for the death).
5. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 5****Purposes of Session 5**

1. To continue to encourage group interaction.
2. To identify changes in family dynamics and relationships.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary of the fourth session.
2. Conduct the weekly check-in with each member.
3. Focus on changes that have occurred in relationships, family dynamics, and family members' roles after the death (e.g., "My sister is trying to act like my mom," or, "My aunt and uncle refuse to talk about my cousin. It's like he never lived.>").
4. Ask members to recall one or two experiences with the deceased that stand out in their memories.
5. Summarize the session.

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**Continued****SESSION 6****Purposes of Session 6**

1. To continue to encourage group interaction.
2. To identify any awkward situations and discuss ways of dealing with these situations.
3. To explore methods of grief and stress relief.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary of the fifth session.
2. Conduct the weekly check-in with each member.
3. Revisit topics that need further discussion.
4. Address new issues:
  - Communicating with others: feeling that friends “just can’t understand what I’m going through” or feeling that “it’s just not fair.”
  - Changes in family dynamics since the death.
  - Media impact and privacy issues for the group member when the death has been the result of a murder or accident covered by the media.
  - Dealing with positive and negative ways of expressing grief. Positive ways would include talking about the deceased, reflecting on pleasant experiences with the deceased, realizing that grieving requires a certain time period after which grief is reduced but the memories of the deceased continue, and realizing that life goes on and time does make things easier to live with.
  - Religion. Utilizing personal religious beliefs as a source of strength.
  - Responding to grief with positive and negative coping forms of stress relief. Positive forms would include journal writing, jogging, aerobics, various team sports, fast walking, playing board games, singing, dancing, reading for pleasure, engaging in physical activities, and doing things that are enjoyable. Negative forms of coping would include taking medications not prescribed by a physician, using alcohol or illegal drugs, driving recklessly, not taking schoolwork seriously, expressing anger to family and friends, isolating oneself, excessive eating or refusal to eat, engaging in dangerous activities, and showing indifference and apathy to life.
5. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 7****Purposes of Session 7**

1. To check on how each member is feeling.
2. To review coping strategies.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary of the sixth session.
2. Conduct the weekly check-in with each member.
3. Review coping strategies.
4. Discuss how each group member has benefited from being part of the group.
5. Identify resources for additional support.
6. Mention that next week is the last session.

**SESSION 8****Purpose of Session 8**

1. To evaluate the grief/bereavement group counseling sessions.

**Materials Needed**

Copies of the evaluation form

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review what topics were covered in the seven sessions.
2. Allow the group members to reflect on their group experience.
3. Complete paper-and-pencil evaluation (see below).
4. Thank the group for cooperating.
5. Serve light refreshments.
6. Allow the group to determine if a follow-up group session is warranted.

**EVALUATION OF THE GRIEF/BEREAVEMENT GROUP**

(The group would be given sheets of paper on which to write their responses.)

I would like you to evaluate the group of which you have been a member. Please answer each of the following questions.

1. Were your expectations for this group met? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What are your feelings at the termination of this group?
3. Would you like this group to continue? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What did you find to be the most difficult aspect of this group?
5. What suggestions do you have that would improve future groups dealing with this topic?
6. Overall, has this group been helpful to you? If so, in what way?

Younger children who have experienced the loss of a loved one will often need group activities as part of the early sessions. The young child is often less vocal in the expression of grief. These activities are planned to encourage discussion and group interaction. Four such activities follow.

**ACTIVITIES FOR A GRIEF/BEREAVEMENT GROUP**

**Leah A. Geiger**

**Green Holly Elementary School, Lexington Park, Maryland**

Grade level: 4 through 6

Number of members: four to five

These activities are appropriate for younger students who have lost a loved one. The groups can have both boys and girls and should be small enough to enable the group to remember information about the person each of the group members is mourning. These activities can be used in conjunction with an eight-session group plan for grief/bereavement.

I have found that it is best when activity sheets and other materials being used in a session are on the conference table when the group members arrive. I give each member a manila folder and ask them to decorate it using crayons, stickers, glitter, glue, and other decorative materials. They put their work in this folder and take it home after the last session. I also ask them to draw a picture or bring in a photograph of their loved one to share with the group, if they wish.

### Activity 1

At the first session the group members are asked to introduce themselves and talk about their deceased loved one to the group. They are asked to bring either a photograph or drawing of the person who has passed away to the second session. At the second session, I give them a sheet of paper on which I have drawn a wheel with eight spokes. I give them a small piece of two-sided tape and ask them to tape the photo or drawing of the deceased person to the middle of the wheel. On each of the spokes I ask them to write words that describe the deceased person. I am prepared to help them find appropriate words to choose. Some of the words I have seen used are *kind, loving, athletic, hard-working, good friend, funny, handsome, beautiful, generous, strong, and intelligent*. When finished, members share their work with the group.

### Activity 2

Group members discuss a favorite memory they have of the deceased person. I create a sheet on which are listed the words *Who?* (Who are they talking about?), *Where?* (Where does the memory take place?), *When?* (When did the event happen?), *What?* (What are the details of the memory?), *How?* (How does the member feel about the memory?), and *Why?* (Why was this memory chosen?).

The memory is shared with the group. We then talk about the times we might need to use pleasant memories to feel better. (e.g., at certain holidays, birthdays, or when we are missing the person and feeling sad). This activity can be repeated at different group sessions and members can be asked to recall and share a different memory.

### Activity 3

This activity focuses on helping the group members to go on with their lives in positive and productive ways. I encourage the group to think what they could do that might please the deceased person. I would start with, "If your loved one were alive, what kind of person would he or she want you to become? What would your loved one want you to do?" Answers to this would vary from "She'd want me to finish high school and go to college" or "He'd want me to be nicer to my brother and sister," to "To get better grades," and so on.



Group members often echo what other members have said. The group leader should encourage the members to add original things to what has already been said. This activity could result in a discussion of what each member needs to do in order to do what the deceased would want him or her to do. In essence, the members are defining goals they would like to achieve. This presents the group leader with an opportunity to help each member attain the goals through individual counseling.

#### **Activity 4**

In this activity the group makes a memory book. Begin by brainstorming the ways in which we can remember our lost loved one. This could involve writing about memories, using photographs, writing daily thoughts about the deceased, drawing pictures that depict specific scenes, writing down the comments made by members of the family, or writing a prayer, if this is consistent with family values. Then bring out supplies for making the memory book. (e.g., cardboard for the covers, a three-hole punch, ribbon, markers, glue, glitter, crayons, paint, etc.). Any sheets the member may have prepared during the eight sessions would be placed in the memory book. The member would first share the book with the group and later take the book home to share it with the family, who also may be grieving.

#### **Icebreakers**

Icebreakers can be used to begin groups at all grade levels. They are especially useful for use with introductory and primary groups but can be a way of relaxing intermediate and secondary groups as well. Icebreakers should be enjoyable activities involving all members of the group. They are intended to show the group that although the group has a serious purpose, the group experience can also be fun. Because group sessions meet for a short time, icebreakers should be planned to consume less than 10 minutes. They can be used at the first session and possibly once or twice again. With introductory and primary groups, an activity during the last 5 minutes of the session would also be appropriate as a reward and reinforcement for having had a good session. Developing an icebreaker challenges the counselor to be creative and innovative. After the group seems to be cohesive and is on-task, icebreakers can be eliminated. The types of icebreaker activities would vary. Most icebreakers involve a verbal response to some stimulus, yet a mild physical activity might also be appropriate. Knowing the group composition, the group leader may elect to use icebreakers that result in low to moderate activity. Whereas an icebreaker for an at-risk group in high school can be one that has moderate activity, an icebreaker for a grief/bereavement group should be one that is low-key, usually a personal introduction and a response to a stimulus question (e.g., "If you found a \$100 bill on a sidewalk, what would you do with it?").

An icebreaker for an at-risk group could be one suggested by Ben Ouyang, a counselor at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland. He calls it the "Coin Game." Members are divided into two groups and are seated across from each other. Their hands are behind their backs. Each team has a coin (a quarter) that is passed from one person to another. The object is to not let the other side know where the coin is. As the coin is passed, the group leader counts to three. At the count of three, all members put their clenched fists on the table.

One member from each group will have the coin. Each person from the opposing team is then asked to guess the person who holds the coin. Oyang also reminds leaders to make sure to get the quarter back!

Colleen Ichniowski, the counselor at Page Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, asks her group members to share a positive statement about something that happened to them in the last seven days. She will then ask each member of the group to share something positive observed about a group member during the last seven days. Ichniowski feels this is a helpful strategy because it allows children the opportunity to say or hear something positive about themselves. She also will ask children to rate themselves as to how they are feeling today, using a seven-point scale with 7 being the best.

Tracy Cass, who completed her training as a school counselor during the time this book was written, recommends what she calls "Guess the Fib." Group members are asked to make three statements about themselves, one of which is a fib. The group has to guess which statement was the fib. She feels this is always a popular game and has been impressed with the creative things the members are willing to share about themselves.

Mira Brancu, counselor at Perrywood Elementary School in Prince Georges County, Maryland, uses the "Unique Game" for children in grades 3 and above. For this game, the group leader puts a number of poker chips in front of each group member. If there are five members in the group, each child gets five poker chips. The members are asked to place the chips in any order they want, but having placed them, they are not to touch them again unless they are forced to surrender a chip. The group is first taught the meaning of the word *unique*. The first member begins by saying his or her name and one thing that he or she feels is special, or unique, about himself or herself. If another member has the same thing in common with the first member, the first member is required to give a chip to that member and a chip to all other members who have the same thing in common. The object is for the members to say something to the group about themselves that is so unique that no one else in the group can say that they share the same thing. Brancu demonstrates by saying, "My name is Ms. Brancu and I love to collect frogs. Does anyone in the group collect frogs? I see that two people have raised their hands, which means they also collect frogs. So, I will give one chip to Charlotte and one chip to Estelle. If I want to be sure to keep my chips, the next time it's my turn, I'll need to say something about myself that is even more unique or special than I said before."

At Francis Scott Key Middle School in Silver Spring, Maryland, Sue Tuttle, one of their counselors, will place a number of slips of paper in a hat or can. On the slips are such things as "my favorite food," "my favorite television program," "the sport I like best," "the class I like the most," "what I enjoy doing," "someone I would like to meet," or "a movie I could see again." Each group member takes a slip from the hat or can and responds to what is being asked. The slips should refer to positive preferences. Another icebreaker she uses is to ask the group members to name an animal that would be their "dream pet" and say why.

Rachael Herndon, a counselor with the Department of Alternative Programs in the Montgomery County Public School System in Maryland uses icebreakers for relaxation and communication with group members. One technique she uses for icebreakers is humor. She often begins a group by asking the members to share a joke or funny story. What the group



perceives to be funny can reveal the developmental level of their humor. She feels that with adolescent groups, the school counselor can lose credibility if perceived as not having a sense of humor or of being "corny."

### Group Games

It has been suggested that with introductory and primary groups, a game during the last 5 or 6 minutes can be a reward for having had a good group session. The group leader is cautioned not to allow the game to take up more than 5 or 6 minutes or to make the game the focal point of the group session. It goes without saying that the game selected must be one that can be played in a very short time. Teachers who reluctantly excuse students from class in order to participate in group counseling could be displeased if Curtis comes back from the group and excitedly announces that he won the game that was played in the group session. The thought that would probably cross the teacher's mind would be expressed as, "Hmmm, did I allow Curtis to miss part of a science group so that he could play games with the counselor?" This would not be good public relations for the counseling program and teachers and parents might question the purpose of group counseling. A game should not be the motivation for a student to affiliate or remain with a group. Games should be used as reinforcers, and ideally, the game should have some relationship to the group topic. Guessing games are easy to create and are not too time-consuming. If a session begins with an icebreaker, it would not be necessary to end it with a game. In the event the group did not have a good discussion, a game could be withheld.

Although games involving physical activity are enjoyable for members, this writer excludes them for reasons of safety and practical issues. The group leader is responsible in the event that a member is injured, and physical activities can result in aggressive behavior with youngsters who feel they need to win. For practical reasons, the writer also discourages the use of play media that can result in a member getting clothing soiled. Finger-painting is fun, but parents may not appreciate their child coming home with paint-spotted clothing. Sand play is also fun, but group leaders must remember that they would have to clean up a messy room so that the next child or group could come into a clean room.

Games can be an important adjunct to group counseling, especially when the group is comprised of introductory- and primary-level children. The games that are selected should be uncomplicated, fast moving, and fairly short.