

Support Group Meeting Assignment

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At 8PM on Monday, March 6th. I attended a virtual support group as a participant. I am interested in grief work and currently facilitate a young adults bereavement group in Fairfield County, CT. I was looking to gain insight by watching another facilitator and observing their techniques. After some research, I found My Grief Angels, which is a human resources and social services nonprofit organization that provides free online grief resources. Their site offers support chat rooms, articles, and virtual bereavement groups. All groups are free to attend, so they are accessible to anyone with a phone, tablet, or computer.

The group I attended was for individuals 18 years or older who have lost a parent, grandparent, or parent-figure. It is an open-ended, peer-led group that welcomes new participants each session. The group is always growing and changing since older members leave as new members join. "Open-ended groups provide a measure of synergism through the addition of new members." (Zastrow, 2018, p. 16). New members can offer different perspectives and help others in the group to explore different facets of their grief journey through active listening and reflection. There are pros and cons to having an open group. A closed group can allow for a deeper level of trust to be formed between the participants. This promotes an environment where difficult memories or feelings can be shared. These same discussions can be had with newer participants in an open group, but more senior participants may have their guard up until they get to know the new participant. This open group structure allows for individuals to gain insights from a variety of individuals who share a similar experience with loss. However, the facilitator needs to promote an environment where participants trust one another and can be vulnerable.

Prior to joining the group, all participants were sent a list of rules along with the zoom link to the 1-hour session. All participants needed to join with their cameras on and recording the

session was prohibited. Participants also had to be sure that they were in a private place or had earphones in so that no other individuals outside of the group could hear what was being shared. Once the group began, the peer facilitator, a middle-aged caucasian female, shared about herself and her experience with the death of her mother. She then explained that the group would have 3 main sections, a check-in or introduction, a discussion, and a closing. She stated that the group was confidential and that anything shared in the group was to not be discussed outside of the meeting. She proceeded to have participants introduce themselves, their loss, and check-in. Each participant took approximately 2 minutes with this first check in. Others in the group were welcoming to me since it was my first time attending. I was the only new member this week. The returning participants consisted of 2 middle-aged caucasian females, 1 middle-aged Hispanic American female, and 1 Asian American male who was in his fifties. It was clear to me that I was the youngest person in the group. I was not surprised by this since I know there is a need for young adult bereavement groups across the country. The one I facilitate through the Family Centers is one of the only grief groups specifically for individuals ages 18-35 in the country.

As each member shared, the facilitator offered validation and encouragement. Other group members often started their turn by acknowledging what the previous participant shared. As a new member, I could tell there was already a sense of community that had been formed. I was eager to see how they would embrace me. I shared about the loss of my father nearly 5 years ago, but also stated that I was here to mostly listen and learn from others in the group. They were respectful and offered their support for me joining them that evening.

I was able to observe an enormous amount of validation and empathy being shared between participants. When one individual would share a symptom of their grief they were struggling with, other participants offered their support. They were often able to share similar

experiences and explain how they got through it. I particularly enjoyed observing one member suggesting the idea of attending individual therapy along with the grief group. As a facilitator, I aim to mention this in every group session. I want my participants to be aware of the resources available and the benefit of attending both individual therapy and a support group while navigating their grief journey.

After the check-ins, we moved into a free-flowing conversation. Some members offered advice and tried to help another member who was having conflict with her extended family in the aftermath of her husband's death. This participant expressed that she was not sure that her conflict will be resolved, but she felt better having the support of the group. This participant began to cry after she shared this. The facilitator said that she was glad she felt supported and that this is why we are here together, to heal through sharing and listening to one another. "When we share our experiences with the group, we can all hold some of that pain for each other and lighten the load."

When we had only 5 minutes left in the session, the facilitator asked if there was anything else that the participants wanted to share and leave here at the session before we closed. All participants agreed they had nothing else to share. The facilitator then shared her screen and read a poem about loss and its impact on how we live our lives. It was a hopeful message which helped to re-center participants.

Throughout the course, I have been able to learn about groups and the theories that can be applied to them. I have also been able to put these into practice while facilitating the young adults bereavement group through the Family Centers. By attending the My Grief Angels group, I was able to see similarities between the structure of my group and theirs. In both groups, we

have a beginning, middle, and end. We also both try to close with a message that is hopeful so participants are not leaving feeling worse or in distress. I was able to see how the facilitator's use of self-disclosure allowed others in the group to feel more comfortable sharing about their own loss. Self-disclosure refers to "the process of deliberately revealing information about ourselves that is significant and that would not normally be known by others" (Zastrow, 2018, p. 149). The facilitator was careful not to share so much that the group became about her experience. She used it as a technique to break the ice and begin the check-in portion of the group. According to Jourard, "self-disclosure is necessary for psychological health and growth because people cannot be themselves unless they know themselves." (Zastrow, 2018, p. 149). A key component of self-help groups is mutual aid through self-disclosure. If participants are not able to share openly and honestly, the group will not be effective.

Tools such as empathy, validation, and a sense of community are aspects of an effective self-help group. Creating a bond between individuals who share a common struggle, can empower participants to keep moving forward. However, "when help is offered from the outside, from an expert or professional, there is a danger that dependency may develop." (Zastrow, 2018, p. 254). This is the opposite of empowerment. This can leave the individual feeling less confident in their abilities. The sense of empowerment that can be gained through a self-help group increases motivation, energy, and personal growth. It gives the individual the ability to help others in ways far beyond helping oneself (Zastrow, 2018, p. 254). This process of providing mutual-aid is what causes healing and change to occur.

References

- My grief angels - online grief support for & by people grieving.* My Grief Angels - A Social Services and Human Services Non Profit Organization For and By People Grieving. (n.d.). Retrieved March 11, 2023, from <https://www.mygriefangels.org/>
- Zastrow, C. (2018). (10th ed.). *Social work with Groups: A comprehensive work text.* Belmont, CA: Thompson/Brooks Cole.