

Growing Through Grief: The Role of Support Groups

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

*We need not walk alone...
We reach out to each other with love and
understanding and with hope...
We come together from all walks of life,
from many different circumstances...
We need not walk alone*

Credo, The Compassionate Friends

Editor's note: The following article is excerpted from Dr. Wolfelt's book How to Start and Lead a Bereavement Support Group, available from Companion Press.

There is a growing realization among those who care for the bereaved that support groups are an appropriate and effective way to help bereaved people heal. Because they offer a safe place for people to do the work of mourning, support groups encourage members to reconcile their losses and go on to find continued meaning in life and living. Attending a support group facilitated by skilled leaders often brings comfort and understanding beyond many peoples' expectations.

Support groups help bereaved people by:

- countering the sense of isolation that many experience in our shame-based, mourning-avoiding culture.
- providing emotional, physical, and spiritual support in a safe, nonjudgmental environment.
- allowing them to explore their many thoughts and feelings about grief in a way that helps them be compassionate with themselves.
- encouraging members to not only receive support and understanding for themselves but also to provide the same to others.
- offering opportunities to learn new ways of approaching problems (e.g. the friend or in-law who lacks an understanding of the need to mourn and pushes you to "return to normal").
- helping them trust their fellow human beings again in what for many in grief feels like an unsafe, uncaring world.
- providing a supportive environment that can reawaken their zest for life.

In short, as group members give and receive help, they feel less helpless and are able to discover continued meaning in life. Feeling understood by others brings down barriers between the bereaved person and the world outside. This process of being understood is central to being compassionate with oneself as a bereaved person. **The more people are compassionate to the bereaved from the outside in, the more the bereaved are capable of being self-compassionate from the inside out.**

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Our mourning-avoiding culture often forces bereaved people to withdraw from insensitive friends and family or to adopt ways of avoiding the painful, but necessary work of mourning; support groups, which instead foster the experience of trusting and being trusted, can do wonders in meeting the needs of bereaved people. **In an effective bereavement support group, members can achieve a balance between giving and receiving, between independence and an appropriate, self-sustaining dependence.** The group provides a safe harbor where hurting people can pull in, anchor while the wind still blows them around, and search for safe ground on which to go on living. As a potential leader of such a group, you have the honor of accompanying people during this time.

Before we go on to explore the specifics of running a bereavement support group, though, I would like to further define what I mean by growing through grief.

Growth means encountering pain

The death of someone loved naturally brings about emotional, physical, and spiritual pain for us as human beings. Forums such as support groups provide us with a safe place where we can embrace our pain in "doses." Encountering the pain of the loss all at once would overwhelm us and leave us defenseless. Sometimes bereaved people need to distract themselves from the pain of the loss, while at other times they need a "safe harbor" to pull into and embrace the depth of the loss.

Growth means change

My experience has taught me that we as human beings are forever changed by the death of someone in our lives. To "resolve" your own or someone else's grief often denotes a return to a homeostasis (inner balance) that was present prior to the death. I believe this model of care is inadequate and often damaging to bereaved people of all ages.

A "return to inner balance" doesn't reflect how I, or the people who have taught me about their grief journeys, are forever changed by the experience of bereavement. In using the word growth, I acknowledge the changes that mourning brings about.

Growth means a new inner balance with no end points

While the bereaved person may do the work of mourning to recapture in part some sense of inner balance, it is a new inner balance. My hope is that the term growth reflects the active, ongoing process of mourning.

Growth means exploring our assumptions about life

The encounter with grief reawakens us to the importance of utilizing our potentials. The concept of potential in this context could be defined as our capacity to mourn our losses openly and without shame, to be interpersonally effective in our relationships with others, and to continue to discover fulfillment in life, living and loving. Loss often serves as a catalyst to becoming more of what we can be instead of staying exactly what and where we are.

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Loss seems to educate the potential within. Then, it becomes up to us as human beings to embrace and creatively express this potential. Growth is about not settling for homeostasis, but looking for and seeking out how we are changed by this death. Growth means discovering our gifts, our potentials, and using them to bring meaning to the lives of others.

Related Resources

- [The Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide-Starting and Leading a Bereavement Support Group](#) (book)

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