

Support Groups: The Five Most Commonly Asked Questions

Everyone seems to have advice on how to cope with the death of a loved one. Some words are wise. Some cause even more pain. And some are simply confusing. Attending a support group, for example...how do you know if it would be helpful to you?

For many, a bereavement group may be their first experience of a support group in action. If that's the case for you, here are answers to the top five questions that grieving people ask about support groups.

What exactly is a bereavement support group?

A bereavement support group is a meeting of up to 10-12 people, all of whom have experienced the death of a loved one. It's an opportunity to talk about what that experience has been like with a group of people who are likely to understand because they themselves have been there. Often, attendees describe a bereavement support group as a "safe place," a place where normal people who have experienced significant losses can tell their stories as often as they need to, knowing that those stories will be respected and held in strictest confidentiality by everyone there.

A bereavement support group is not a therapy group. When it works well, it is healing...but it is not intended to cure long-standing issues of emotional well-being. For that reason, most grieving people who have a history of emotional difficulties are encouraged to seek out individual counseling for grief work. Similarly, a bereavement support group is not primarily a social network. Often, friendships form as people get to know each other, but that is not the purpose of the group.

What happens in a bereavement support group?

Generally the facilitator of the group will start by describing the principles by which the group is run, for example, reminding the group that what is said is confidential. Often, each person is then given a chance to introduce himself and to tell as much or as little of his story as he wishes. An open discussion period is usually included, and some groups also include educational input by the facilitator.

Who runs a bereavement support group?

Bereavement support groups can be facilitated by people with many different backgrounds. Some support groups, called self-help support groups, are facilitated by people without professional training but with significant personal experience of grief. Other groups are led by mental health professionals: people with training in social work, psychology or counseling.

Whatever their backgrounds, the role of facilitators is to make sure that the bereavement support group is a "safe place." And while a professional facilitator may provide some information on the grieving process, the most valuable input usually comes from the group members themselves as they share their stories and experiences.

Why might a support group be helpful?

People who attend support groups find them helpful in two basic ways. First, they are able to connect with people who have had a similar experience and who, therefore, are better able to understand. Second, they can talk about their experience long after others have stopped listening.

How do I choose a support group?

Most important in choosing a support group is finding one that is comfortable for you. Many group members say they specifically look for a group that meets two criteria: a facilitator who appears to be knowledgeable about grief and running a support group as well as griever with whom they can identify (for example, other young widows or others who have lost a loved one to cancer).

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