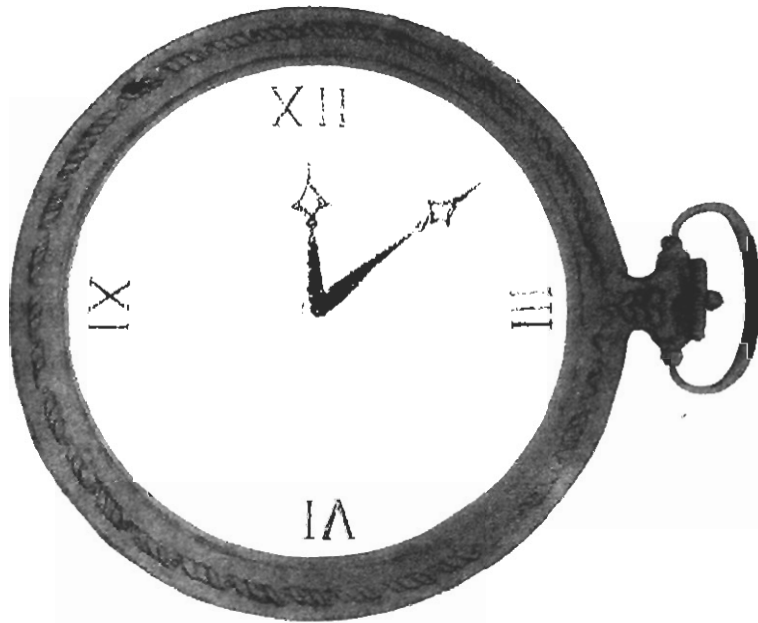


# THE ANATOMY OF A SUPPORT GROUP

bereavement support group—

*It's a gathering of people, some with fresh grief and others far down the path to healing.*



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What is a bereavement support group? To answer that we want to start out by saying what it is not. It is not a place that has all the answers. It is not a place where one learns to get on with life as though nothing tragic has happened. And, for at least two reasons, it is not a twelve-step program. Grief, unlike substance abuse, is not an addiction. Also, whether or not we are persons of faith, we don't surrender to a higher being in our grief. We don't want to turn over our love for that special person who is no longer present in our lives.

Please understand that we affirm the good work twelve-step programs do, and we encourage anyone who needs them to use them. That program works for addictions, but not for grief. A bereavement support group is a gathering of people with a common situation—the loss of a loved one, outside the normal cycle of life. We share the common circumstances of a loss.

There is a time when the pain of our grief has subsided enough so that our surroundings can come back into focus. We look around. We ask ourselves how can this be? Where are we? If our lives once had a direction, if what we did used to serve as a compass guiding us toward goals and aspirations, often we feel as though we have lost our way. Where do we go? To whom do we turn?

Then someone suggests that we go to a bereavement support group. We think of reasons not to go, and we tell our friends we don't need these groups. But, perhaps our pastor, rabbi or priest has sent another bereaved person to visit with us, to sit with us. We listen because this person knows how we feel. We are told that it is time to go to the support group, and so we go.

What happens at a meeting? Mourners need a place to go where they can leave behind the rest of their concerns and focus on the person they miss so very much. It is a place where it is safe to talk about our loved ones, and the rest of the world stays home. A bereavement support group is a place where others will get to know our loved one because we share our memories. It's okay to talk about them, and to both laugh and cry as stories are exchanged. Knowing that we can introduce our loved ones to people who genuinely want to know more about them is essential if we want to walk the path to a good life—as different as that may be.

What will we have to do in a bereavement support group? One thing we can do to help work through our own grief and preserve the memories of those we mourn is simply to listen to others. We don't have to talk unless we want to say something. We don't have to voice the painful feelings we keep inside our hearts. If we listen, we will hear others saying the things that we have been thinking—expressing tormented thoughts of guilt, anger, depression, and even fear—and we will discover that our emotions are a natural response to tragedy. In listening, we will hear hope expressed by others. We can take an interest in their stories, and we can begin healing by helping others who are more newly bereaved reach that same understanding.

What is a typical bereavement support group? It's a gathering of people, some with fresh grief and others far down the path to healing. We are greeted as we enter. Someone introduces himself, leads us to a refreshment table. We may be asked to fill out a data sheet, recording our loved one's birthday and the anniversary of the death. When you tell the greeter how your loved one died, perhaps they will introduce you to someone whose loss was similar. We feel better talking with one who knows what we've just begun to experience. Maybe we'll even share our story, but no one will force us.

In time, people will gather in a circle in chairs we didn't notice are nicely arranged. There is room for everyone, and no one sits behind anyone else. A person may stand up and say, "We're sorry you had to meet us this way, but we're glad you found us." That makes sense. Sometimes they add the request that we give them two or three tries, because the meetings can be quite different, depending on the makeup of the group. We are surprised when the leader sits down and the person next to him shares a bit of her story, then the next one and the next. The progression of stories is coming our way. Each story is different but somehow the same. Someone talks about going to the cemetery every day. I do that! And her husband won't go with her. The facilitator says that each of us grieves in our own way, and that it's okay for him not to go. Soon it will be our turn. What will we say? We decide just to give our name, our loved one's name, maybe the cause of death. What else is important? Then it's over. Where did the time go? When is the next meeting? I want to talk to that woman. She knows how I feel. We make plans to return. We have found a support group and it helped.