

Grief 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. For example, attending a support group...how do you know if it would be helpful to you? For many, a grief support 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 grief support group?

A grief 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, since 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, knowing that those stories will be respected and held in confidentiality by everyone there.

A grief support group is not a therapy group. When it works well, it is healing...but it is not intended to cure long-outstanding issues of emotional well being. For that reason, most grieving people who have a history of emotional difficulties are encouraged to seek individual counseling for grief-work. Similarly, a grief 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 grief 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 or herself and to tell as much or as little of their story as they wish. An open discussion period is usually included, as well as educational input by the facilitator. Group sessions have specific topics related to the grief experience.

Who runs a grief support group?

Pathways Hospice support groups are facilitated by professional grief counselors with specialized training and experience in grief counseling. The role of facilitators is to make sure that the grief support group is a "safe place" and that each person has an opportunity to participate and share. 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 several 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. Third, they have an opportunity to better understand the grief experience and learn about tools to cope with their loss.

How do I choose a support group?

Pathways has a variety of grief support groups: for the newly bereaved, for families, specific groups for widowed persons or perinatal loss. If you'd like to visit with one of our grief counselors for help in making a decision, please give us a call.