This chapter offers practical guidelines for conducting grief workshops on college campuses.

Designing and Conducting Grief Workshops for College Students

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If colleges and universities are truly committed to promoting the well-being of their students and fostering their academic success, they must attend to the needs of grieving students (Balk, 2001). One way to do this is to invite students to use the university’s counseling services following the death of a loved one. However, although grief counseling can be of benefit to bereaved students, many students might not perceive their grief as a mental health issue (Balk, 2001) and might therefore be disinclined to seek counseling.

As an alternative to counseling, some bereaved students might benefit from participating in structured grief support groups (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, and Colletti-Wetzel, 1993; Janowiak, Mei-Tal, and Drapkin, 1995). Such groups can, however, require a substantial commitment of time from group leaders as well as members; furthermore, some students might feel stigmatized by participating in a support group.

The purpose of this chapter is to propose a third alternative for assisting bereaved college students: psychoeducational workshops. Psychoeducational workshops are relatively unlikely to evoke student concerns regarding stigmatization, since workshops are offered in college settings so frequently. Whereas traditional mental health interventions are aimed at providing therapeutic treatment, psychoeducational workshops tend to be more didactic in their focus. Grief workshops emphasize informational resources and can be facilitated by counseling staff or other trained campus professionals. Also, unlike therapy, such workshops generally require limited staff time, do not entail establishing a confidential and ongoing...
relationship with clients, and do not involve the creation of clinical records. Grief workshops of this sort can serve many important functions, including the following:

- Providing students with a conceptual framework for understanding their loss
- Normalizing and legitimizing students’ grief-related thoughts and feelings
- Enabling students to interact with other bereaved individuals and thereby feel less isolated by their grief experience
- Helping students identify options for coping with their grief
- Directing students to other resources

This chapter furnishes campus professionals with practical guidelines for conducting grief workshops. After addressing how to plan a grief workshop, I present an overview of potential risks associated with conducting grief workshops and cite key recommendations for mitigating such risks and enhancing a workshop’s utility. The chapter concludes with a discussion of content areas that might be covered in a grief workshop.

**Planning a Grief Workshop for College Students**

Preparing to offer a psychoeducational grief workshop (or a series of workshops) is in some respects a simpler process than offering more traditional mental health services such as individual or group counseling. Because the goal of a workshop is to provide education and support rather than treatment, such a program requires no advance screening of participants and allows for greater flexibility in facilitator credentials. Nevertheless, careful planning is essential to help ensure a workshop’s success. Among the issues that must be addressed are the following five.

1. **What process should be used in determining goals and selecting content for the workshop?** Choices regarding workshop content should be guided by a consideration of the nature of the individual campus and an assessment of the participants’ needs. If a campus has experienced a recent and prominent death, a workshop might be developed to address the needs of students affected by that loss.

   The needs of individual participants can and should be assessed at the start of the workshop. Therefore, facilitators would be well advised to prepare a variety of materials for possible inclusion in their presentation. Such preparation will enable facilitators to tailor their program to the students who choose to attend. For instance, students grappling with diverging, incongruent grief-related feelings might profit from hearing about the paradoxical nature of grief experiences. For students who are unfamiliar with the grief process, a conceptual framework to help them make sense of their experience (for example, discussing common tasks associated with grief in contrast to the idea of linear stages of grief) might be useful. Students who
have experienced losses of a traumatic nature can profit from learning ways that trauma can both hinder and facilitate grieving. Finally, students who have worked through various aspects of their grief might benefit from opportunities to explore ways to grow through their grief and move forward with their lives (Oltjenbruns, 1991). More detailed information about all of these topics is offered following the discussion of potential risks.

2. **How should the workshop be structured?** A psychoeducational grief workshop should include, at the least, an initial didactic component (a presentation about grief, for example) and time for participants to share experiences and concerns. By including time for sharing, the workshop can function in part as an opportunity for support. Plan on at least ninety minutes to ensure sufficient time for both components.

3. **Who should facilitate the workshop?** In identifying who should facilitate a grief workshop, the following issues should be considered:

   - Identify facilitators who are both knowledgeable about grief and effective at establishing connections with students. It might be advantageous for one of the facilitators to be trained as a counselor, but this is not necessary. Potential facilitators can gain additional knowledge and training about grief by attending conferences and reading appropriate texts, such as those offered by the Association for Death Education and Counseling and Compassion Books.
   - Be conscious of the possibility that talking with students about their grief experiences will evoke emotional reactions in your facilitators (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, and Colletti-Wetzel, 1993). Whenever possible, refrain from using facilitators who have experienced recent major losses in their own lives.
   - Consider using two facilitators. This allows one facilitator to focus on the overall group process while the other attends to the reactions of individual participants (Vickio and Clark, 1998).

4. **Where and when should the workshop be held?** In making arrangements to hold a workshop, seek a location that is accessible to students yet also affords them a quiet, private, and comfortable space. Schedule the workshop at a time that is most convenient to students, such as during the dinner hour or following the conclusion of evening classes. If the workshop facilitators are aware of a particular group of students affected by a recent loss, the facilitators might attempt to schedule the workshop at a time particularly convenient for those students.

5. **How should the workshop be publicized?** Facilitators should consider how students on their campuses are mostly likely to hear about workshops and take advantage of such means of communication. Counseling center staff and other student affairs professionals might distribute flyers describing the upcoming workshop. The workshop can also be promoted by purchasing advertisements in the campus newspaper or by encouraging the newspaper's journalists to write a feature story on grief. Efforts also can be
made to advertise the workshop by including the program in calendars publicizing campuswide events and by sending information via university electronic mailing lists.

**Grief Workshops: Potential Risks**

Although grief workshops can be beneficial, they can also pose risks. Whenever counselors or student affairs professionals conduct a grief workshop, they face the potential for exacerbating the emotional reactions of some of the participants or rekindling reactions associated with past grief-related experiences. Also, in attempting to address the needs of the entire audience, facilitators may fail to attend to important differences among participants sufficiently.

Furthermore, the didactic segment of the workshop may be perceived by some participants as affording a neatly packaged intellectualized model that fails to capture the affective, phenomenological experience of their grief. When attempting to engender feelings of hopefulness or when addressing opportunities to grow through grief, facilitators can run the risk of being perceived as minimizing the painful aspects associated with loss. Although such potential risks are quite real, there are ways to minimize them or their impact.

**Minimizing Risks and Enhancing the Effectiveness of Grief Workshops**

When conducting grief workshops, several steps can be taken to reduce the risks I have outlined and to heighten the overall effectiveness of the workshop.

1. **Recognize and address diversity.** Facilitators must acknowledge the many differences that exist among members of the audience. Workshop participants are likely to demonstrate considerable diversity in the types of losses they have faced. They are also likely to differ in many other important respects, including personalities, developmental issues, age groups, coping styles, faith traditions, cultural heritages, and past experiences with loss. Even when participants appear to have much in common (such as two sophomores whose siblings have died), facilitators should avoid the temptation to gloss over their differences. These students might find some solace in giving voice to the shared aspects of their experience, but their grief and grieving are likely to differ in important ways. Workshop facilitators can help students recognize the uniqueness of their grief reactions by discussing diversity issues in the didactic portion of their program; facilitators can also highlight participants’ different grief experiences as they emerge during the open discussion period.

2. **Invite participants to share their thoughts and experiences, but do not force disclosure.** Many workshop participants may find the time devoted to mutual sharing valuable. Such sharing allows participants to feel heard and understood in a caring environment. But participants should be afforded personal control, and facilitators should respect their right to keep certain
thoughts and feelings private. For example, addressing questions to the group as a whole is preferable to asking students to go around the circle with the expectation that all will speak. Some participants who elect to share little out loud may nevertheless profit immensely from having attended the program.

3. Be aware that workshop content can elicit strong emotional reactions from participants. In the introductory segment of the workshop, explain that parts of the ensuing discussion might evoke strong emotional reactions. If participants feel distressed during the program, invite them to take appropriate steps to attend to their personal needs. For example, facilitators can suggest that they “tune out” for a brief time or even remove themselves from the setting temporarily. If two facilitators are present, one could step out and talk with students who depart abruptly. Students who experience strong reactions to the program may benefit from an opportunity for individual conversations with the facilitators after the workshop. Such conversation could lead to a referral for treatment if warranted (for example, if the student reports a sense of isolation, speaks of substance abuse, or admits to thoughts of suicide or self-harm).

4. Avoid overly intellectualized descriptions of grief. Strive to share (and to elicit) personal stories that illustrate key points appropriately. Recounting true stories of others’ grief experiences can be quite moving; sharing such stories can provide vivid illustrations of how others have dealt with their grief and found effective coping strategies. Such personal examples can shift the workshop from an academic lecture to an experiential event and thereby help facilitators reach participants at a much deeper level.

**Workshop Topics**

This section contains suggestions for content in psychoeducational grief workshops. These suggestions are intended as an outline of key ideas to be addressed, not a verbatim script for presentation. Prospective facilitators must tailor the specific details of their presentation to the needs of their audiences.

**The Polarities of Grief.** Bereaved students may feel pulled in multiple and conflicting directions. For example, they may find themselves alternating between the need to face their loss and the desire to avoid confronting it. Workshop participants can benefit from hearing that such conflicting feelings are normal and that important functions are served both by confronting and by avoiding their loss. By facing their loss, the bereaved can find opportunities for coming to terms with reality and for relearning their world. By avoiding thoughts of death and loss, the bereaved are given a respite from the painful, difficult work of grieving and can attend to other aspects of their lives (Neimeyer, 2000; Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

The process of grieving can entail wrestling with other polarities, including such quandaries as these:
Should I hold on to my relationship with the deceased or let go?
Is this loss simply a reminder that my life is ultimately meaningless, or am I being given the chance to discover a deeper meaning to life?
Is grief a passive process that I must undergo, or can I make conscious choices about the ways that I grieve?

Discussing such polarities can help workshop participants recognize that there are no clear-cut answers. Participants can be helped to recognize that grieving is a very complex process that entails both holding on and letting go, confronting and avoiding, conflicting perceptions regarding life’s meaning, and experiencing loss passively while making active decisions about how to handle it. The challenge for the bereaved is to integrate such polarities by honoring both sides of these seemingly opposing forces and recognizing the legitimacy of each.

**The Tasks of Grief.** Didactic information about the key tasks associated with grief can provide workshop participants with a conceptual model or framework for attributing meaning to their experiences. Presenting a task model of grief (in which the grief process is framed as a series of tasks) rather than a stage model (in which grief is conceptualized as involving a succession of stages) has a couple of advantages. First, students are likely to feel more empowered by conceptualizing their grief as entailing a series of tasks they can undertake rather than a series of stages that they will experience passively. Second, unlike stage models of grief, the task model is more flexible: it assumes no rigid, preordained order in which grief tasks must be undertaken. In fact, the tasks may be addressed simultaneously rather than in sequence.

Four tasks are commonly associated with grieving: (1) accepting the reality of the death, (2) doing one’s duty to the deceased, (3) reestablishing a sense of control, and (4) revising one’s worldview (Attig, 1996, 2000; Neimeyer, 2000; Rando, 1993; Worden, 1991). As facilitators explain the grief tasks, they must consider the developmental levels of participants (see Chapter Two). Because, for example, many college students of traditional age are likely to be dualistic in their thinking (Perry, 1968), workshop facilitators should emphasize the fact that there is no single right way to accomplish any particular grief task.

1. **Accepting the reality of the death.** Facilitators should acknowledge and also ask participants about the challenges of accepting that a loved one has died. As bereaved college students struggle to accept this reality, they may find themselves searching their environment for the person who has died, sensing the presence of the deceased, or engaging in an obsessive review of the deceased’s life or death (Vickio and Clark, 1998). Students can be reassured to hear that such actions are common and serve an important purpose: helping the bereaved come to terms with the harsh reality that a loved one has died.

In further commenting on the challenge of accepting the reality of one’s loss, workshop facilitators may choose to raise other related points for discussion. They may, for example, state that accepting a loss is an ongoing
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process rather than a onetime event. Even after acknowledging that a loved one has died, the bereaved may still have difficulty accepting this reality on an emotional level or may be unaware of the attendant or “secondary” losses that can accompany the physical absence of the loved one. For college students, key secondary losses may include the dashing of future opportunities, such as having the deceased present at their college graduation ceremony or other major life events, as well as the loss of certain fundamental beliefs about the world. Bereaved students can benefit from knowing that their struggles are normal and that with time, they can expect to accommodate to the many ways that their loss will affect their lives.

2. Doing one’s duty to the deceased. Participants can benefit from learning that it is typical for many bereaved individuals to seek to honor the deceased and to feel regret or guilt for not doing so while the loved one was alive. Facilitators should help participants recognize that such feelings are normal and explore means to honor the deceased. This exploration can include acknowledging that doing one’s duty to the deceased can take forms that are adaptive or maladaptive. For instance, feeling the need to suffer in honor of the deceased can be unhealthy for the survivor. In contrast, striving to build on the deceased’s legacy can imbue survivors’ lives with a heightened sense of purposefulness. This is particularly true when individuals balance duty to honor the deceased with duty to be true to themselves (Vickio, 1999). Although offering this information can be useful, facilitators are likely to have a greater impact by encouraging participants to share thoughts and ideas with one another (Yalom, 1995).

3. Regaining a sense of personal control. Following the death of a loved one, the bereaved might experience a pronounced sense of helplessness (Parkes, 1991; Rynearson, Johnson, and Correa, 2006). Workshop facilitators should acknowledge this sense of helplessness and note that bereaved students may struggle to accept that they lack control over many of their life circumstances. Facilitators might also note that this challenge can be especially troubling for grieving college students, many of whom are wrestling with the developmental task of establishing autonomy (Balk, 2001).

Facilitators can, however, also help participants realize the extent to which they can make important life choices. Grieving is an active process that affords individuals a wide array of options for coping (Attig, 1996, 2000; Neimeyer, 1997). Through the process of making active choices about how to perceive and respond to loss, the bereaved can experience a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Facilitators can promote discussion focused on the topic of choices and encourage members to share personal methods of coping.

4. Making sense of the world. Experiencing the death of a loved one can violate certain core beliefs about life (Attig, 1996; Rando, 1993; Vickio, 2000), but it also provide opportunities to construct new belief systems that are compatible with the experience of death. Furthermore, facing the death of a loved one can prompt development of new perspectives on the world that focus attention on what truly matters and promote living life more fully.
(Attig, 1996, 2000; Braun and Berg, 1994; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Milo, 1997; Neimeyer, 1997, 2000; Oltjenbruns, 1991; Weenolsen, 1996). In grief workshops, facilitators can assist participants in considering such a perspective. Students can be encouraged to think about how their lives have changed and how their worldviews have shifted in the aftermath of loss. Making sense of the world following a death can, for example, entail recognizing the preciousness of each moment and the importance of connections with others.

**Intersection Between Trauma and Grief.** Students who have faced losses of a sudden and violent nature are likely to experience reactions that are both similar to and distinct from normal grief reactions (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies, 2002; Regehr and Sussman, 2004). Traumatized students who are also grieving can benefit from understanding such similarities and differences because this information can have important implications for how they cope with their loss. Note that although grief and trauma (for example, emotional pain, distress, and shock following an extreme event) are experiences that often overlap, they are distinct concepts. Individuals may experience a death that is or is not traumatic just as they can experience trauma that does or does not involve death.

Like grief, the experience of trauma can include shock, numbness, and disbelief; difficulty acknowledging the reality of what has occurred; alternating between confrontation and avoidance of stimuli; violation of fundamental beliefs; and irritability and anger. Beyond these similarities, trauma has unique symptoms that can hinder the bereaved by interfering with the cognitive processing that grief work requires (Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies, 2002). Trauma symptoms include heightened physiological reactivity; a pronounced sense of endangerment; hypervigilance; fragmented, intrusive images; and dissociation (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

To be free to work on the tasks associated with grief, bereaved individuals may need treatment for their trauma symptoms. Possible treatments for trauma include therapeutic use of grounding strategies, anxiety management techniques, relaxation training, systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring, distraction and refocusing strategies, mindfulness techniques, and medication.

**Growing Through Grief.** Students who have moved beyond the initial shock of their loss and have made progress in coming to terms with accepting its reality may benefit from an extended discussion of positive facets of grief experience. By discussing opportunities to grow through grief, workshop facilitators can encourage their participants to develop a sense of hopefulness about their future lives. In elaborating on this task, facilitators could present different approaches to maintaining meaningful, rewarding connections with the person who has died (Attig, 2000; Vickio, 1999). Workshop discussion also can include an in-depth examination of new worldviews that can be forged in the aftermath of loss, such as the view that life is a gift rather than a right.
Additional Comments About Topic Selection

The list of topics cited so far is by no means exhaustive, and there is considerable overlap among them. All of the topics entail altering one’s fundamental beliefs about life and, to some degree, changing the ways that one relates to the world (Attig, 1996; Neimeyer, 2000). Given the significant links that exist among the topics, workshop facilitators may wish to incorporate discussion of a variety of interrelated issues (such as doing one’s duty and finding meaning) into their programs.

As facilitators interact with bereaved students and learn their specific needs, facilitators may discover that participants would profit from information beyond what I have outlined in this chapter. Students may wish to learn more about subjects such as grief and spirituality, gender differences in grief, similarities and differences between grief and depression, emotions associated with grief, and ways to help others who are grieving.

Conclusion

Many college students must contend with the death of a friend or loved one. Students’ grief experiences have the potential to disrupt all facets of their lives significantly. Although grieving students differ tremendously in their coping skills and overall levels of resilience, many are apt to benefit from participating in educational workshops on grief and loss. Such workshops can help students make sense of their grief, feel validated in their experiences, identify options for coping, and derive needed support from their peers.

References


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