Should I go to a support group?

By Kenneth J. Doka

When I counsel bereaved people, they frequently ask if I think they would benefit from a support group. I answer the question with one of my own: “What do you expect to gain?”

Support groups are a time-tested method of help for people struggling with all sorts of difficulties. They have evolved from a model that sought to inhibit certain behaviors, such as drinking, to groups that try to enhance and support individuals as they adapt to life issues.

Groups are not magic. There are no words that can be uttered within a group setting that can make grief disappear. Groups are places to work together to support one another; they are places where one gives as one takes, and this is very important, because sometimes individuals can be so needy in their loss that they have nothing to give. In such cases, individual counseling may be the best approach.

Not everyone will find a support group suitable; each individual grieves in his or her own way. Support groups, though, have much to offer. They can offer, for example, validation. After all, grief can be so isolating. One is besieged by so many reactions: physical, emotional, and spiritual. One needs a place to sort out all these reactions—to recognize that they are part of the journey of grief. In counseling, I am often asked, “Am I going crazy?” Support groups reaffirm that one is not going crazy; one is simply grieving.

While every loss is unique, through support groups, one

The whole exhausting thing

By Elizabeth Uppman

It was time to begin. The facilitator suggested we break the ice by saying our names and the names of our loss. I expected to have the most tragic story—a little boy, three years old, disability and illness, a year in hospice, pneumonia, death. I expected my story to overwhelm them.

But everybody else had an overwhelming story, too. One couple found their four-year-old dead in her bed one morning, her heart damaged by a rare virus. One couple’s little boy drowned in a swimming pool not ten feet from his father. One woman’s son died in bed of a heart attack, leaving her to raise her two teenage grandsons. And on and on and on.

These stories, all from folks who had found the strength to drive here and face a roomful of strangers—these stories should have squeezed some sympathy out of me. They didn’t. As each parent spoke of a lost child, I knew each loss was unbearable, but I couldn’t respond to it; I didn’t feel it inside my rib cage. My rib cage was full. The loss of my little boy was too fresh to allow in any more loss.

Letters

Peer Support

Q: After the tragic death of my wife, I arranged for my teenage son to have counseling. The therapist suggested a peer support group. I’ve heard of groups for adults, but are they appropriate for children?

A: Yes, kids are people, too. When faced with the death of a family member or friend, grief is the natural response for individuals of all ages. For more than two decades, children and adolescent support groups have been organized to help young people cope with their emotional, social, and academic needs. A group is a safe and caring environment where your son could feel less isolated. A group can bring fresh
Profile: a life redirected

By Kim Graber

A t the point in her life when she lost her husband to sui-
cide, Maryjane Bottonari understood little about his
depressive illness or about suicide itself. Eleven years later,
she is leading a suicide survivors support group at Arbor
Hospice and Home Care in Ann Arbor, Michigan and talk-
ing openly about her experience, hoping to help erase the
stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness.

The time in between has not been a linear progression
from pain and questioning to healing. “No one can say, ‘This
is now you do it. This is now you get from point A to pint B.’
It’s a lifelong process,” she said.

Maryjane says her own initial response to her husband’s
suicide was one that is very common among survivors dealing
with traumatic deaths—an extended period of shock that
enabled her to function. She had to concern herself not
only with her own emotional well-being, but also that of her
daughters, who were both teenagers when their father died.
She immediately sought counseling for herself and both
girls. She also found a support group for young widows and
widowers.

“A group provides different support from individual
counseling,” she said. “The two can be wonderful comple-
ments to each other. In a group, you can learn from other
people based on what they’ve done. As the group bonds, they
become support systems for each other.”

During this time, Maryjane was reading whatever she
could find about bipolar disorder and suicide. The answers
she found through her research were different from the ones
she was expecting to find. Like many who are close to some-
one who commits or attempts suicide, she was seeking a rea-
son why. What she found is that suicide results not from a
single event or cause, but from a complex combination of
factors including depression, hopelessness, impulsiveness,
isolation, and ineffective coping skills.

Maryjane also learned a great deal about her husband’s ill-
ness, and the chemical imbalance that caused it. In her hus-
band’s role as a corporate executive, she said, he felt unable to
seek the help he needed. He feared people’s misunderstanding
of his illness, and resources were not available to help
him as they might be to help someone who struggled with
heart disease or some other more widely understood physi-

cal ailment.

By this time, Maryjane was participating in a suicide sur-
vivors support group, where she found a safe place to cope
with grief issues specific to surviving suicide.

“You don’t have to explain yourself in a support group,”
she said. “There is a commonality of understanding this trau-
maic experience.”

Gradually, Maryjane decided she wanted to start her
own group and to use her experience to help educate others

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can bask in the support of others who have some basis of
empathy. They have experienced loss. They understand.
They know.

Also, groups provide some time away. For many people,
their support group can be a break in the loneliness and the
boredom that are a daily part of grief.

Support groups offer suggestions for coping with daily
difficulties of grief. There is no one solution to dealing with
loss; however, support groups can offer a range of alterna-
tives. By listening to stories of how others coped with a
particular problem, one can find the solution that might
work best.

Some support groups can even be advocates—either by
working to change laws or challenging social conventions.
For example, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
reformed the way the law treats driving while intoxicated.

Support groups offer two other gifts. They provide hope
by providing models that reaffirm that one can survive loss.
Also, they reaffirm that in helping others, one helps oneself.
One finds, even in the midst of grief, new empathy, new un-
derstandings, and renewed strengths.

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Still, I listened—who couldn’t?—and I remembered to say what was required: "I’m sorry" and “That must have been terrible,” and "I’m sorry" again. Though I didn’t connect emotionally with these people, I respected them for what they’d gone through. I couldn’t treat their losses casually, the way outsiders sometimes treated mine.

When everyone returned the next week, I wondered what was left to talk about. How many times can you say “He died and I can’t stand my life anymore?” The facilitator gently teased us out and we had a stumbling conversation. It was painful and awkward.

As the weeks wore on, I sometimes thought it odd that almost everyone attended the meetings, and yet the meetings were often more silence than talk. Did it help people to sit in a room staring at other people staring back at them? Did it help them? I respected them for what they’d gone through. I couldn’t treat their losses casually, the way outsiders sometimes treated mine.

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As the weeks wore on, I sometimes thought it odd that almost everyone attended the meetings, and yet the meetings were often more silence than talk. Did it help people to sit in a room staring at other people staring back at them? Did it help them? I didn’t often break those silences—I didn’t want to cry in front of everyone or bore them or share too much of my precious, private store of feelings—but I usually left the place angry that I hadn’t gotten to say what I wanted. In the car on the way home, I rehearsed what I should have said. My emotions seemed thicker and more difficult after a meeting, more stirred up. The whole thing was exhausting.

But just when I’d be thinking, once again, that this was a big waste of time, one of the other parents would tell a gripping story. The parents whose little girl died in her sleep described the police arriving at their house the night of her death, suspicious, looking for signs of abuse or neglect, and I felt horrified for them, heartsick for them. The mother who lost her adult son found an undeveloped roll of film among his things, and I felt her mixture of dread and wonder as she described looking at those pictures for the first time. These stories made me wish for a way to hope on behalf of another person, as if my hope could spark some hope in them, like a chain reaction.

After those meetings, I didn’t feel angry. Something big and clear, something quiet and humane, stepped through my grief, blocking me out and creating a little space for someone else.

Elizabeth Uppman is a freelance writer and mother of two. She lives in Overland Park, Kansas, and is currently working on a memoir.
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Regarding mental illness and suicide prevention.

“Surviving suicide is a life-changing experience,” she said. “But it’s up to each person to decide what they’ll do with it. For me, it’s been a process of starting the suicide survivors support group and going to graduate school, I wanted to have the educational credentials to back up my personal experience.”

In 2002, Maryjane completed her Masters degree in Social Work. Her support group meets for eight-week sessions that are offered three or four times a year. She provides information and resources for group discussion.

Specifically, participants talk about guilt, anger, depression, self-care, positive coping skills, and forgiveness—of both their deceased loved ones and themselves.

“Nobody wants to talk about death, much less talk about suicide,” she said. “But time doesn’t heal unless you do the work. A group provides an opportunity for people to speak openly wherever they are in their grieving process.”

Kim Graber is a freelance writer. She frequently writes profiles and educational articles for associations and other nonprofit organizations.

Finding a Support Group:

- A hospice bereavement coordinator can offer information and resources about support groups. To find a hospice, go to www.hospicedirectory.org
- Funeral homes may sponsor a support group. If not, they are good sources for referrals and information.
- There are many national bereavement groups with local chapters. Compassionate Friends (www.compassionatefriends.org) is a national non-profit network for bereaved parents. Other groups such as AARP (www.aarp.org) serve surviving spouses.