



Ask an Expert

Question

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?

Answer

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 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 insights by integrating your son's mother's death into his changed life.

Question the group leader in advance: Where, when, and how often do they meet? Is your son expected to attend all sessions? How many individuals of his age and gender are usually present? Do they honor the diverse spiritual and cultural beliefs of the members? What is the length of time

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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 of give and take. This is very important, because sometimes individuals are 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 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 can bask in the support

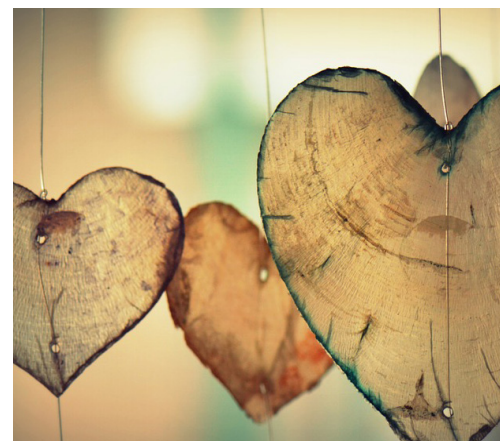
of others who have some basis of empathy. They have experienced loss. They understand. They know.

Also, groups provide some time away from other family members who are also grieving or who you may be supporting and allows you to focus solely on your own grief. 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 for dealing with loss; however, support groups can offer a range of alternatives. 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

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"I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process."

— Author C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Virtual grief support: What to expect

by Maria Georgopoulos

The pandemic has changed how individuals connect during grief experiences for those dealing with the deaths of significant people in their lives. Reaching out for support when you are grieving can be daunting. You may be finding it difficult to complete tasks that were once routine, your heart may be feeling quite heavy, and your patience running thin. Among the most common types of support are individual and group support. Like so many other gatherings, bereavement groups are now being offered virtually. It's helpful to give yourself time to gather information about different resources and then decide what might best fit your needs and lifestyle.

Grievers often find bereavement groups helpful. Many hospices offer bereavement support groups, and even if they don't, they usually have a list of local resources. Look for organizations that offer bereavement groups specific to relationship or cause of death, such as a group for people experiencing the death of a child or a group specific to death from Alzheimer's disease; you may experience more validation. If a specific group is not available, a general group can still be helpful.



Virtual groups allow people to access support more easily because they are not restricted by location and travel is not required.

If you are anxious about using technology for grief support it can help to prepare, here are some suggestions:

- Ask the group facilitator for a tutorial prior to group.
 - Save your meeting link somewhere for easy access weekly.
 - Arrive onscreen early to work out any technical issues.
 - Choose a private, quiet spot for limited distractions and use headphones for privacy and good audio quality.
 - Make sure you have adequate lighting so everyone can see you.
 - Try to be sure others have finished speaking before adding to the conversation. It is easier to unintentionally interrupt others in a virtual group.

Committing to attend all scheduled sessions helps to build trust within the group. Connection feels different in the virtual world, and facilitators can assist the group with transitioning to this experience. You may relate to others, but it's natural if there are things you don't resonate with; don't let that discourage you. You can still support and

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that the young people usually attend?

Young people explain why support groups are so healing for them: *I don't feel embarrassed to cry here. I can smile, I even laugh, without feeling guilty. I don't feel like I'm so alone anymore. People reach out to me. And I can reach out to them! I've learned to be more patient and to be more of a friend to myself. I know that others have been through this, and they've survived. I think I can, too.*

And some thoughts from parents: *At last, my daughter shared her real emotions with me. I felt more comfortable in speaking about my own feelings. For both of us, it was a great transforming moment. At first I was hesitant to make the commute and effort, but... when I saw my daughter's smiling face, I knew I had done the right thing by having her join a support group.*

A word of caution for all who attend the first meeting: The initial impression may not be the correct one. Go at least two or three times to more accurately assess the facilities, the facilitators, and the members. If the timing is wrong at this juncture, then you might try again at a later date.

■ **Earl A. Grollman, DHL, DD**, was a rabbi, a pioneer in the study of death and dying, and the author of several books on crisis intervention. Rabbi Grollman died in 2021.

Email your question for the experts to askjourneys@hospicefoundation.org.

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. A little boy who 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.

Still, I listened, and I remembered to say what was required: "I'm sorry" and "That must have been terrible," and "I'm sorry" again. 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 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 me? I didn't often break those silences, but I usually left the place angry that I hadn't gotten to say what I wanted. 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, someone 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 her son's 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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validate other members even if you can't entirely identify with them. In addition, connecting with peers outside the group can be helpful for ongoing support.

Listening to others' perspectives can bring up many emotions in your grief journey. It's common to feel both relief and heaviness as you share your own experiences and listen to others. The details of someone else's story or the intensity with which they share their feelings may trigger your own pain, so be patient with yourself. Let the facilitator know if something feels especially painful so you can process it with them instead of carrying it alone.

The virtual platform can be intimidating at first, especially for something as intimate as a bereavement group. Remember to be gentle with yourself; adjusting to a new way of interacting with others in a time of great need is a process.

■ *Maria Georgopoulos, LMHC, FT, is a psychotherapist, public speaker and Director of Bereavement Services at Calvary Hospital*

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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 understandings, and renewed strengths.

■ **Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, is Sr. Vice President, Grief Programs, HFA and recipient of the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Death Education and Counseling.**

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.

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UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT GROUPS

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PUBLISHER
Amy S. Tucci

EDITOR
Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

MANAGING EDITOR
Lindsey Currin

EDITOR EMERITUS
Earl Grollman, PhD

LAYOUT
Kristen Nanjundaram

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Lisa Veglahn



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