

Session 1.2: Defining and Describing Grief

Session Type: Pre-recorded didactic presentation

Date and Time: Pre-recorded (watch before Day 1), 60 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Many peer group facilitators have personally experienced a loss and thus are experts in their own right, bringing to the group their own lived experience. Being familiar with contemporary perspectives about grief and bereavement can strengthen facilitators' ability to support group members. This presentation aims to enhance learners' grief literacy by offering an overview of grief reactions and contemporary theories about grief.

In this session, we will ask: What are common reactions to loss? What are contemporary views about grief? What kinds of struggles may grieving individuals experience? What can peer facilitators do to support grief?

Session activities

Pre-recorded didactic presentation.

Facilitator goals

- Increase grief literacy by providing psychoeducation about grief reactions and how they can be supported.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe common grief reactions.
- Discuss contemporary perspectives of grief and bereavement.
- Distinguish typical grief from more debilitating grief reactions.
- Discuss how peer facilitators can support grief.

Session plan

Faculty provides a didactic presentation and begins with the question "Why are we here?" to highlight the expertise in the (virtual) room and the importance of grief literacy.

Basic points to cover:

- Common reactions to loss: emotions, thoughts, behaviors, physical symptoms.
- Contemporary perspectives of grief and bereavement: attachment theory, non-linear experience, no stages, continuing bonds, grief lasting a lifetime.
- Useful frameworks: task model and dual process model of coping.

- Distinguishing typical grief from more debilitating grief responses, including prolonged grief disorder.
- How peer facilitators can support grief.

Session 1.3: Goals of a Support Group

Session Type: Pre-recorded didactic session

Date and Time: Pre-recorded (watch before Day 1), 30 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

This session reviews why bereaved individuals seek support groups, what groups can provide, and the psychological functions they serve. It highlights the instinctive human draw toward shared experience, the role of connection during grief, and how groups can bridge the gap between professional support and the need for emotional understanding.

Session activities

Pre-recorded didactic session.

Facilitator goals

- Introduce overarching goals of bereavement support groups.
- Review common reasons individuals seek out group support.
- Describe what groups ideally provide to participants.
- Highlight core elements necessary for groups to be effective (structure, training, supervision, evaluation).

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe common goals bereaved individuals have when joining a support group.
- Identify what support groups ideally provide (e.g., safety, validation, connection, strategies, guidance).
- Recognize the importance of thoughtful group design and facilitator preparation.
- Understand the psychological “why” behind seeking group support.

Session plan

1. Introduction by presenter

- Presenter background and clinical experience.
- Overview of the session’s purpose: exploring the goals and functions of support groups.

2. Why individuals seek groups

- Human instinct to seek connection after loss.
- Bridging function between professional care and peer emotional support.

3. What groups provide

- Safe space to share stories, thoughts, and feelings.
- Opportunities to ask difficult questions and feel seen, heard, and understood.
- Validation, decreased isolation, exposure to others' experiences, and guidance from peers.
- "Education, Guidance, and Support."

4. Common goals for joining a group

- To be with people who "get it."
- To connect with others with similar experiences.
- To reduce burden on family/friends.
- To obtain tips and strategies.
- To understand their own experience.
- To make time for grief.

5. What groups need to be effective

- Thoughtful structure.
- Organizational policies.
- Peer leader training.
- Communication and counseling skills.
- Ongoing supervision and evaluation.

6. Closing message

- Preview that later sessions will delve deeper into structure and components of successful groups.
- Emphasize supporting organizations to strengthen their group programs.

Session 1.5: Opening and Introductions

Session Type: Live large group welcome

Date and Time: 1 hour

Introduction and importance of topic

This is the first session of the course.

Session activities

Welcome from course directors, brief course overview, and introductions of faculty and learners.

Facilitator goals

At this first session, we will welcome participants, introduce faculty, present the broad contours of the course and its competencies, and ask participants to introduce themselves.

Goals:

- Welcome course participants.
- Introduce faculty and participants.
- Provide a general overview of course activities.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Become acquainted with faculty and other learners.
- Identify course competencies and underlying strategy.

Session plan

1. Welcome and brief introduction to the course by course directors.
2. Remaining faculty introduce themselves.
3. Learners introduce themselves (name, country, organization).

Session 1.6: Defining Peer Support

Session Type: Large group guided discussion

Date and Time: 45 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Across the globe, the major venue where bereaved parents find support after SUID, stillbirth, SUDC, and other types of early child loss is in peer support, usually in groups offered by parent organizations. Peer support relies on a facilitator with shared experience or a facilitator attuned to common experiences. Peer support is organized around the idea that something valuable happens when people come together with a shared experience. Respect, shared responsibility, and empathy enable honest, unfiltered questioning and conversation. The trials and experiences of each member become a resource for adapting to loss. In this session, we will ask: What is peer support? What are its unique differences and advantages compared to other forms of support? What aspects are especially helpful? What is the relationship between the peer facilitator and peer group members?

Session activities

Large group guided discussion.

Facilitator goals

- Explore the concept of peer support by reviewing definitions, basic principles (motivations, impact, positive and negative attributes), and limitations.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Define “peer” and “peer support.”
- Describe basic principles of peer support: motivations, impact, positive and negative attributes.
- Distinguish between a peer and a professional therapist.
- Explain potential problems for the peer support facilitator (triggering, countertransference, boundaries).

Session plan

Faculty teaches from the front of the room with an easel/whiteboard or Zoom whiteboard; a second faculty member acts as recorder. A PowerPoint presentation with question cues may be used.

1. Open discussion with the question: “This is a course about peer support, so what is a peer?”

2. Explore:

- Definition of peer and peer support.
- What people expect to gain from peer support.
- How peer support differs from professional counseling.
- Complexities of peer support for group leaders.

3. Review recorded points and invite further comments.

Basic points to cover

- Peer: one that is of equal standing with another.
- Peer support: unique way of sharing experiences, offering assistance with coping and adaptation to loss, reducing distress and normalizing challenges.
- Motivations for joining: meet others with similar experiences, understand coping, speak about their deceased child without burdening others, find a safe, nonjudgmental environment.
- Areas of impact: isolation/connection, stigma/self-worth, self-blame/normalizing, comprehending loss, models for reinvestment, meaning-making.
- Complexities: triggers, countertransference, boundaries.
- Peer facilitator: definition, distinction from counselor, expectations of group members.
- Hazards for leaders (e.g., over-identifying, trying to “fix”).

At ~25 minutes, faculty closes the conversation, reviews recorded points, asks for final comments, and notes the powerful work of peer leaders.

Session 1.7: Setting Ground Rules

Session Type: Small group breakout with discussion and role play

Date and Time: 1 hour

Introduction and importance of topic

Setting ground rules is a critical first interaction when a group begins. Rules establish seriousness, confidentiality, and safety as participants test the waters. Early impressions are especially important for participants who feel marginalized, both to assess whether they can trust the facilitator and group and whether that trust is warranted.

Session activities

Discussion, role play, debriefing, and reflection in small breakout groups.

Facilitator goals

1. Greet and make introductions in the small breakout group.
2. Explain that small groups will focus on skills commonly required in running a group and discuss advantages/disadvantages of role play.
3. Discuss the importance of establishing guidelines for etiquette and norms of participation in peer groups.
4. Consolidate learning by asking one volunteer to role play the explanation of ground rules, then debrief.
5. Summarize key points of the session.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe the importance of setting ground rules for new groups.
- List 8–10 key elements to include in ground rules.
- Identify skills in facilitating a group discussion on ground rules.

Session plan

Facilitator introduction (15 minutes for Parts 1 & 2)

1. Greet and make introductions in the breakout group. Model an introduction that acknowledges time since the child's death (if applicable). Invite participants to share name, location, experience with bereavement groups, and (if applicable) their deceased child's name and date of death.

2. Explain the purpose of small group work and role plays. Emphasize their parallel to home practice, acknowledge role plays can feel artificial or triggering, and introduce “lifelines” (time-outs for help).

Facilitated group discussion (30 minutes)

3. Discuss the importance of establishing guidelines (“ground rules”) for etiquette and norms. Ask the group to generate a list of guidelines; record their ideas.

Recommended list includes:

- Confidentiality.
- Respect.
- Group conversation (equal time, one at a time).
- Logistics (timeliness, attendance, Zoom cameras, privacy, children on screen).
- Silence phones/technology.
- Commitment to safety.
- Permission to express emotions in an accepting environment.
- Validity of all feelings.

Suggested discussion questions:

- a. How should people be asked to introduce themselves?
- b. Do they say their deceased child’s name? Other children? Anything about the death?
- c. Why are ground rules important?
- d. Why are clear expectations important?
- e. How can ground rules be conveyed for drop-in groups?

Also discuss ground rules specific to the breakout group (constructive feedback, normalizing awkwardness, etc.).

Facilitated role play (15 minutes)

4. Ask for a volunteer to role play the explanation of ground rules. Conduct the role play, then:

- Ask the volunteer how it went and what they felt they did well.
- Encourage self-compassion.
- Invite group feedback on effective strategies.
- Note additional topics that might be included.

5. Summarize key points and express gratitude for engagement.

Session 1.8: Incorporating Group Structure

Session Type: Large group didactic session

Date and Time: Day 1, 4:30–5:00 pm (30 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

Bereavement support groups provide opportunities for recently bereaved individuals to connect with others who have experienced a similar loss. Groups vary in format, structure, timing since death, type of loss, and facilitator background. Given this variation, peer facilitators need familiarity with different group types and challenges and must consider how best to establish group programs that are inclusive and positive for participants with diverse backgrounds.

Session activities

Large group didactic session with PowerPoint presentation.

Facilitator goals

- Outline different types of support groups commonly used in bereavement.
- Describe the importance of ground rules within all types of support groups.
- Describe challenges associated with each type of support group.
- Outline a 6-session closed group curriculum adaptable for organizations.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe different types of support groups commonly offered in bereavement.
- Compare and contrast challenges associated with each type.
- Outline components of a 6-session closed support group curriculum.

Session plan

Overview

Introduce types of support groups, challenges inherent in each, and ways peer facilitators can optimize group success. Emphasize the importance of ground rules, reflection on boundaries, and adaptation of a 6-session curriculum.

1. Outline types of support groups

- Format: closed vs drop-in.
- Timing: time-limited vs ongoing.
- Composition: type of loss, couples vs individual parents.

- Structure: curriculum vs open discussion.
- Facilitation: peer vs clinician.

2. Describe importance of ground rules

- Group formation and shared purpose.
- Clear expectations for how the group will run and how participants will behave.
- Use of ground rules to manage disruptive behaviors and group dynamics.

3. Describe challenges associated with each group type

- General challenges: managing intense emotion, overly talkative or quiet members, “red flags,” online confidentiality.
- Skills and tools to optimize success and manage challenges.

4. Outline a 6-session closed group curriculum

- Walk learners through each session’s theme and exercise.
- Emphasize preparation and planning.
- Discuss decisions about ongoing drop-in groups after the curriculum and how they will be managed.

Summary / key takeaways

1. There is wide variation in group types, each posing different challenges.
2. Preparation is key.
3. Establishing ground rules is an essential tool for optimizing group success.

Session 1.9: Developing Accessible, Inclusive, and Sustainable Peer Bereavement Support Groups

Session Type: Large group discussion and reflection

Date and Time: Day 1, 45–60 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Organizing and sustaining peer bereavement support groups involves logistical, structural, and ethical challenges that affect participation and equity. This session offers a reflective, interactive space for examining challenges such as identifying and reaching potential group members, scheduling sessions that meet diverse needs, and determining feasible and accessible formats (in-person, virtual, hybrid).

Outreach is a central focus. Passive or informal approaches (flyers, word of mouth, websites) often limit who learns about support, leading to inequitable access and reduced participation among families at highest risk. Outreach is framed not only as recruitment but as relationship-building grounded in trust, visibility, cultural humility, and equitable access. Learners will share experiences, identify barriers, and workshop strategies for recruitment and retention, including responses to community mistrust, technological barriers, transportation, caregiving burdens, language access, and other structural factors. Logistical considerations for feasibility and sustainability (schedules, formats, group size, facilitator preparation, institutional partnerships) will also be discussed.

Session activities

Large group discussion.

Facilitator goals

1. Provide an overview of logistical challenges in developing accessible, inclusive, and sustainable peer bereavement support groups (5 minutes).
2. Discuss outreach and its relevance to equity and inclusion (5 minutes).
3. Describe other common challenges (days, times, formats) that align with participants' needs (5 minutes).
4. Facilitate group discussion using question prompts (30–40 minutes).
5. Summarize themes and strategies for building sustainable groups (5 minutes).

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Recognize that passive outreach strategies compound access and participation difficulties.

- Identify obstacles to recruitment, participation, scheduling, and format selection in their settings.
- Describe strategies to broaden participation and engage underrepresented families.
- Understand how recruitment and messaging can be sensitive to systemic inequities and cultural context.

Session plan

1. Overview of logistical challenges (5 minutes)

Faculty introduces the topic and connects group development to themes of access, inclusion, and sustainability.

2. Outreach and equity (5 minutes)

Faculty discusses channels for outreach (first responders, hospitals, churches, social media, word-of-mouth), who is typically missed, and implications for equity.

3. Common challenges (5 minutes)

Review issues such as scheduling, format choice, and consistent attendance.

4. Group discussion (30–40 minutes)

Prompt questions:

- What are your current challenges in outreach?
- Who are you trying to reach—and who is not being reached?
- What are your challenges in scheduling and consistent attendance?
- What barriers (stigma, mistrust, transportation, language, childcare, technology, medical instability) play a role?
 - How might outreach or logistics be adapted to be more responsive to culture, community priorities, and inequities?
 - What organizational supports could reduce logistical challenges?

5. Summary (5 minutes)

Faculty summarizes themes and strategies identified, emphasizing structural barriers, outreach practices, and successful approaches.

Summary / key takeaways

Developing accessible, inclusive, and sustainable groups requires intentionality, creativity, and cultural humility. Peer support programs grow through visibility, trust, and connection, with attention to systemic barriers and practical strategies to extend care to all who might benefit.

Session 2.1: Training Peer Facilitators – Organizations and Learners

Session Type: Pre-recorded joint lecture

Date and Time: Day 2, pre-recorded

Introduction and importance of topic

Peer support is a cornerstone of person-centered bereavement care. Peer facilitators draw on lived experience to offer understanding, hope, and connection. Their role requires more than empathy; it demands structured training that builds knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to guide others safely and effectively.

This session provides a foundation for training peer facilitators, including organizational responsibilities for training and expectations for facilitators. It introduces key elements of adult learning, teaching methods, and curriculum development.

Session activities

Pre-recorded joint lecture.

Facilitator goals

- Build participants' understanding of an organization's responsibilities to peer facilitators.
- Support participants to explore motivations and expectations for the peer facilitator role.
- Strengthen awareness of key facilitator capabilities (boundaries, self-disclosure, reflective practice).
- Equip participants to understand differences and advantages of active vs passive learning.
- Equip participants with practical teaching and facilitation strategies to engage learners effectively.
- Guide participants in planning and structuring a curriculum for training peer facilitators.
- Help participants differentiate knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and explain how they affect training design.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Review an organization's responsibilities to the professional development of peer facilitators.
- Understand how addressing knowledge, attitudes, and skills shapes organizational culture.
- Describe essential elements of adult learning.
- Explain key teaching skills and strategies to facilitate active learning.
- Describe how to plan a curriculum to train peer facilitators.

Session plan

1. Organization's role and core capabilities

- Frame peer facilitation as both personal and professional practice.
- Discuss motivations (giving back, finding meaning, supporting others) and invite reflection.
- Outline organizational support (supervision, training, boundaries, wellbeing).
- Describe realistic expectations: bracketing one's own grief, appropriate self-disclosure, clear boundaries, reflective capacity, knowing when to seek help.

2. Adult learning principles

- Present key concepts: self-direction, relevance, respect for experience, problem-centered learning.
- Introduce techniques such as reflection, role play, and discussion; emphasize active engagement.

3. Curriculum design basics

- Explain how competencies guide training development.
- Clarify knowledge, skills, and attitudes and how they inform individual sessions.
- Demonstrate a lesson plan and note that course learning plans will be available after completion.
- Reflect on curriculum as a values statement.

Session 2.3: Diversity of Experience

Session Type: Live interactive session

Date and Time: Day 2, 45 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Understanding diversity in grief experiences is essential for inclusive, responsive peer support spaces. Grief is influenced by historical, ecological, cultural, and social contexts that shape expression, interpretation, and coping. This session invites facilitators to explore how these intersecting factors influence grief and group dynamics, and how to approach differences with humility, curiosity, and respect.

Facilitator goals

- Empathically situate how positionality impacts the spaces we create.
- Explore who may be in groups and their diverse identities.
- Discuss Dimensions of Personal Identity and visible/invisible aspects of self.
- Describe historical, cultural, gendered, and intersectional factors impacting grief coping and participation.
- Normalize collective processing of grief.
- Describe enfranchising strategies that center resilience.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Examine historical and ecological factors impacting grief experiences.
- Explore how different types of grief show up in groups.
- Discuss how to expand knowledge of diverse experiences (awareness, knowledge, skills).

Session plan

- Introduction – Frame the purpose of the session and define “diversity of experience” in grief.
- Who Are You? – Invite participants to reflect on their identities and roles (“collective centering”). Focus on how personal experience impacts participation and facilitation.
- What Makes Us...Us? – Discuss who caregivers are in their groups, similarities and differences, and use the Dimensions of Personal Identity tool to explore how these dimensions impact grief expression.

- Grief Expressions – Present how grief differs across cultures, generations, social fields, and historical contexts; highlight ecological factors and existing cultural coping resources.
- Grief Reflections – Explore socialized, gendered, and racialized responses to grief and how marginalization and invisibility affect experiences.
- Grief Complexity – Define inhibited, disenfranchised, suffocated, prolonged/complicated grief, more-than-human grief, and compounded loss, using examples.
- Grief Permissions – Discuss strategies to address invisibility and disenfranchisement; explore creating safe spaces, normative expectations, and storytelling as cultural memory. Introduce compassionate communities and grief literacy.
- Continual Learning – Review ongoing cycles of awareness, knowledge, and skills for cultural humility, offering examples of media, conferences, interviews, and mentorship.
- Group Discussion – Use thought prompts (visibility/invisibility, culturally shaped expressions, pace of trust, challenges across differences, building cultural humility).

Session 2.4: Moderating Group Participation

Session Type: Breakout group with discussion and role play

Date and Time: Day 2, 3:30–4:15 pm (45 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

A critical goal in bereavement groups is that every member feels able to honestly discuss important, sometimes painful topics. Personal style, temperament, and entitlement/disenfranchisement influence how freely members speak. Facilitators must find harmony so each member feels like an equal participant. This session addresses moderating different participation styles.

Session activities

Breakout group involving introductory discussion, role play, debriefing, and reflection.

Facilitator goals

- Discuss the ideal of equal participation and complications related to personal styles (10 minutes).
- Review strategies when observing participation tendencies (10 minutes).
- Practice mediation strategies through role play (25 minutes).

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Explain potential reasons for behaviors such as being overly talkative or quiet.
- Describe 3–4 strategies and phrases for challenges related to too much or too little talking.
- Demonstrate skills of validating, redirecting, and affirming.

Session plan

1. Discuss the ideal of equal participation and dynamics related to personal styles that complicate that goal. (10 minutes, large group)

Ask the group what they feel is important for a good group discussion. Notice their emphasis on words like "everyone" or "all" (for example, "everyone should feel included"), and build on these comments to point out the importance of feeling included and entitled to equal participation. A well moderated group is not merely a fortunate mix of personalities but requires skills in moderation.

Suggested directions:

- When you are trying to generate a group discussion, how do talkative, dominating participants affect other group members?
- What do talkative, dominating participants bring up in you?
- How do quiet group members affect others?
- What do quiet participants bring up in you?
- Though it is hazardous to generalize, why might someone talk a lot? Why might someone speak little? (notice that there are subtypes)
- How does entitlement and disenfranchisement affect participation?

Review important strategies to encourage equitable participation by observing the participation tendencies of group members. (10 minutes, large group)

Presentation/Basic skill: Encourage learners to develop a habit of assessing their group and, when they see imbalances in participation, trying to keep the focus on the problem instead of automatically acting on your emotional response or trying to solve the problem. Then review the table (also available as a PowerPoint slide, for examples of responses that address the imbalance but stay on topic.

2. Facilitated role play – mediation strategies (25 minutes)

Read the case:

It is the fourth convening of a peer support group. The group is discussing plans for the upcoming Christmas holidays. For everyone in the group, it is the first Christmas since their child's death. At the mention of the topic, some members of the group make audible moans. One member sits up in the chair and is clearly ready to talk. How do you get the entire group to look together at the common dilemma they face and talk about it with each other?

Explain that we will work on mediation strategies using a role play.

Ask for five volunteers and send each their role description in the chat. The remaining learners will act as observers.

This is a difficult role play for the “participant facilitator” —they are in the “hot seat.” Before assigning roles, explain the difficulty of the facilitator role. Explain how time-outs and do-overs can be used in role plays. Assign roles and then pre-brief the person who will be acting as the facilitator, offering advice that they can pause when they are stuck or ask to go back and change their comments. They can ask the observers for help if they feel stuck. When you introduce the scenario of Christmas, emphasize that although this holiday may not be equally relevant to everyone, it is a good example of an occasion where there are expectations for bereaved parents to join family.

Do role play.

The role play begins when the participant facilitator (role 1) asks how people are planning to manage their days on Christmas.

Shut it down after 7-10 minutes by saying 'why don't we stop it right here?'

Debrief:

After the role play, have a brief discussion where each participant describes their experience of being in their role, encouraging interaction. Remind the group to stay positive and constructive in their feedback. Role 1 should be asked to begin by saying what s/he felt they had done right. The faculty facilitator should highlight the key lessons of the role play.

Role 1: Participant Facilitator

The participant facilitator begins with a statement acknowledging that many bereaved parents have difficulty planning for the holidays. Highlight how the holidays usually mean spending a lot of time with family. Also highlight that parents may be feeling the absence of their child very strongly but feel mixed about the amount of attention to it from other family members.

As the scenario plays out, it will become clear that you must manage the participation of one parent who is dominating the conversation. At the same time, your role includes helping the more quiet participants to enter the conversation.

Role 2: Group member 1

You feel comfortable talking, if given a chance. You try to bring patient, positive energy to the group. You are worried about Christmas because you have been feeling that your family believes you need to try harder to move on. You wonder if they are right. Why can't you simply find a little happiness on Christmas? You hope this conversation, which you had hoped for, can help you find solutions that will not lead to you feeling even worse.

Role 3: Group member 2

You have a lot of thoughts about the difficulties Christmas will bring but, when you hear about the topic, you decide to sit silently. You worry that the group will think you are a selfish person who is not grateful that your family is trying their best to support you. You have never liked Christmas—you don't feel people focus on what is important in their celebrations. You are overwhelmed by the thought of sitting around your extended family while you are missing your baby with so much pain for an entire day. You have not managed to find a way that does not seem rude to get some privacy from your family when you start to feel overwhelmed.

Role 4: Group member 3

You have always loved Christmas and dreamed of sharing it with your (now deceased) baby. You have a plan to host both sides of your family, and you have made an elaborate

tree ornament to commemorate your child. You think it is important to show your in-laws that you and your husband are coping well, and you think being sad is the easy way out. You have planned a long list of events for the day. You think everyone else in the bereavement group should similarly fill the day with activities that used to make them happy. You want to discuss with the group about what gifts are appropriate to place under the tree so that their deceased infant will have a Christmas.

In this role, you should not speak until after two other group members have spoken but you should show enthusiasm for Christmas while listening to others.

Role 5: Group member 4

Father and husband of Group member 3. Group member 3 is very excited about Christmas. You remain silent unless asked. You are planning to spend the day with family and your wife has been frantically making plans. You feel a little concerned. You mainly want to support her but you feel concerned about her strategy. You want to have some private time together that day. Rather than express feelings, you emphasize how you appreciate the facilitator's skill and interest.

Session 2.5: Recognizing a Range of Emotions in the Group

Session Type: Large group discussion

Date and Time: Day 2, 4:15–4:45 pm (30 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

This session introduces learners to the range of emotions recently bereaved parents may experience when they first join a support group, as well as the peer facilitator's own responses. Emotions may be intense and rapidly shifting (sadness, shock, anger, guilt, anxiety, relief, etc.), with observable behaviors such as crying, agitation, silence, or avoidance of eye contact. Facilitators need to be familiar with these emotions and behaviors and develop skills to manage both participants' and their own responses.

Session activities

Large group discussion with faculty facilitation.

Faculty facilitator goals

- Introduce learners to the wide range of emotions bereaved parents may display.
- Outline basic skills to manage emotion in a group.
- Increase awareness of how intense emotion may impact facilitators as group leaders and as bereaved parents/individuals.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- List emotions commonly displayed in bereavement support groups.
- Describe skills that can be used to manage intense or strong emotion.
- Explain ways expression of strong emotion impacts them as facilitators and as bereaved individuals (if applicable).

Session plan

Overview

Large group presentation and discussion on emotional range, facilitator skills, and facilitator impact.

1. Introduce range of emotions

The faculty facilitators will first lead a brainstorming exercise asking the learners to call out the different emotions that participants in a support group might display, especially when

the group is new and the participants are meeting for the first or second time. One facilitator lists the emotions in the chat, and during the discussion highlights differences in intensity of the same emotion, e.g., sad, very sad, and profoundly sad, underscoring that the labels we use to describe an emotion might not fully reflect the experience. Also, the different reasons for emotions should be identified, including emotions related to the death of their child, emotions related to joining a group, or those triggered by hearing other participants' stories.

Facilitators will also ask the learners to list the common behaviors that often accompany these intense emotions, distinguishing between an emotion and a behavior. For example, a participant might say they are angry and raise their voice as they speak, or another might be expressing sadness and sobbing uncontrollably.

Suggested question:

When recently bereaved parents meet for the first time in a group session, what type of emotions might they be feeling? (Prompt for emotions related to their grief, joining a new group, and hearing others' stories – and the interplay between each.)

2. Outline basic skills to manage emotion

The faculty facilitators will lead a group discussion to elicit the different types of skills that peer facilitators can use in bereavement support groups to manage strong emotions. These include, listening (and resisting the urge to offer a 'solution' too quickly), remaining calm, acknowledging the emotion, naming the emotion (components of 'responding to emotion' will be discussed in the small group session), use of silence, offering practical help (e.g., does a participant need a tissue or a glass of water?), and creating a pause and moving to another participant if someone needs a moment to calm themselves.

The faculty facilitators will offer several examples from their own facilitation experience where a participant was very sad or angry, and the skills they used to manage or contain the emotion at the time. Time permitting, they can ask the learners for their own examples to share.

Suggested question:

Can you think of an example from your own facilitation experience when a group participant expressed an intense or strong emotion? What skill did you use to manage the emotion? What worked well, and what might you do differently next time?

3. Explore impact on facilitators

The faculty facilitators will lead a discussion inviting the learners to reflect on their own experiences leading groups when strong emotions are displayed or to imagine what they might feel if they haven't yet led groups. Again, using a brainstorming approach, learners will offer their experiences. For example, "When a group participant is uncontrollably sobbing, I feel ." Or, "When a group participant is angry, I feel ." Or, "When there is disagreement between two group members, I feel ."

The faculty facilitators also share examples of a group experience that triggered or activated something in them from their own bereavement experience. The aim here is to open up a discussion about how the nature of this work can trigger thoughts or feelings in a peer facilitator and to normalize these feelings, modeling that debriefing is important for peer facilitators as is peer supervision.

Suggested questions:

How might you feel when a group participant is uncontrollably sobbing?

How might you feel when a group participant is angry, possibly raising their voice?

How might you feel when there is disagreement between two group members? (possibly regarding religious/spiritual beliefs, or making meaning of the death)

Summary / key takeaways

1. Emotions can be intense and quickly changing; they are often messy and jumbled.
2. Managing intense emotions requires familiarity with basic facilitation skills.
3. Leading bereavement groups is rewarding and challenging; facilitators must attend to their own wellbeing.

Session 2.6: Responding to Emotions in the Group

Session Type: Group discussion and scripted response role play

Date and Time: 30 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Communication in peer support groups involves emotionally complex interactions among many participants. Facilitators must create an environment that supports emotional expression while maintaining safety and focus. When strong emotions arise, it is helpful to pause and respond without rushing to reassure or solve the problem. Responsive facilitation can create a “held,” supportive atmosphere and promote honesty. This session explores techniques for responding to emotion and managing the pressure to reassure.

Session activities

Group discussion and scripted response role play.

Facilitator goals

- Lead a discussion on facilitation challenges when strong emotions are expressed.
- Acknowledge the pressure to reassure or solve problems.
- Review steps to notice emotion, pause, listen, and acknowledge while remaining present.
- Conduct a scripted response role play to practice managing strong emotions through empathy, reflection, and normalization.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe typical personal responses that may not be conducive to group dynamics.
- Demonstrate how to notice and remain present to emotion.

Session plan

1. Facilitated discussion

- Introduce responding to emotion as a key facilitation skill and model for group interaction.
- Explore concerns about group control when emotions are intense.
- Discussion questions:
 - What do we mean by strong emotions?
 - Who has seen them managed well, and how?
 - Who has been taught to respond to emotion, and by whom?

– What are major concerns when strong feelings emerge?

2. Review steps to notice, pause, listen, remain present

- Notice and validate emotion rather than immediately solving it.
- Resist premature reassurance.
- Discuss tone, pacing, and nonverbal guidance (silence, eye contact, posture).

3. Teach general skill: Notice emotion and pause

- Pause the discussion.
- Stop talking; use silence.
- Use gaze and facial expression to acknowledge depth of feeling.
- Offer nonverbal cues (tissues, gentle touch if appropriate).
- Put words to emotion (echo statements, name feelings, validate and respect).
- Explore with curiosity (“Are you able to tell us more about that?”).

4. Teach specific responses via scripted role play

- Facilitator reads parent comments; participants read scripted replies illustrating responses to emotion.
- Each participant has a chance to read responses.

5. Debrief

- Discuss how responses validate comments and invite reflection.
- Explore how responses affect emotional intensity and the person expressing emotion.
- Discuss difference between validating and probing more deeply, and when to move toward referral or follow-up.

Session 2.7: Responding to Differences in Faith (Death Café)

Session Type: Breakout group discussions (Death Café format)

Date and Time: 45 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

A Death Café is a gathering where people eat, drink, and discuss death, aiming to increase awareness of death and surrounding attitudes. This session adapts the Death Café format to discuss how faith and religiosity are often expressed in comments about a child's death and coping with loss. Such comments can facilitate or complicate conversation, permitting some to speak comfortably while alienating others. Thoughtful facilitators may feel uncertain about how to respond.

Session activities

Small breakout groups discussing prepared “cue cards” with statements about faith and loss. Participants are encouraged to bring coffee/tea or a glass of wine.

Facilitator goals

1. Introduce learners to the idea of a Death Café.
2. Explore attitudes about faith and religiosity among learners and faculty.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Explain the concept of a Death Café.
- Discuss attitudes about the place of faith and religion in peer groups.
- Describe strategies for training peer facilitators to handle comments related to faith.

Session plan

Overview

All participants and faculty meet briefly in the main Zoom room. The lead facilitator explains Death Cafés and their purpose in exploring attitudes. The facilitator then presents the small-group activity: discussing statements (“cues”) in breakout groups. Breakout facilitators help start conversations and answer process questions but do not moderate content heavily.

Small-group discussion

Up to three scenarios are discussed; groups decide how many they address. A volunteer from each group will report back in the large group.

Scenario 1, 2, and 3: As written in original text, each includes a statement about faith, doubt, or non-belief and prompts reflection on reactions, feelings, and possible responses.

Large-group debrief

After ~35 minutes, all groups reconvene. Volunteers from each group share highlights and participant experiences.

Session 3.3: Supporting Challenges with Uncertainty and Meaning-Making

Session Type: Large group didactic with discussion

Date and Time: Day 3, 2:30–3:15 pm (45 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

This session addresses two related challenges for parents bereaved by sudden unexpected deaths: not knowing why/how their child died and trying to make meaning in that context. Medicine usually promises control, predictability, and certainty; when that promise is not fulfilled, parents must adapt to unresolved uncertainty. The session examines how uncertainty and unexplained causes affect coping and meaning-making.

Session activities

Two large-group didactic presentations with PowerPoint slides, followed by large-group discussion. The first presentation reviews aspects of medical uncertainty; the second reviews meaning-making. The interplay between these concepts is then discussed.

Facilitator goals

- Consider multiple aspects of uncertainty and lack of explanation, each requiring different reckoning.
- Present contemporary perspectives about meaning-making and how it may be facilitated.
- Review strategies for coping with uncertainty.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Recognize that uncertainty and lack of explanation have definable aspects that can be named and discussed.
- Understand meaning-making and how it can be facilitated.
- Discuss strategies for coping with uncertainty within groups.

Session plan

Part 1: Uncertainty

- Review research on cause of death and grief intensity, particularly SUID, SUDC, and stillbirth.
- Describe aspects of medical uncertainty (ambiguity, complexity, vagueness, unpredictability, unfamiliarity, perceived incompleteness, inability to discount possibilities, vacuum filled with guilt/self-blame).

- Emphasize that naming aspects of uncertainty validates experience and allows deeper, more focused discussion.
- Use example dialogue to illustrate moving from general distress to specific aspects of uncertainty.

Part 2: Meaning-making

- Define meaning-making as efforts to find meaning in the loss and in life.
- Discuss components:
 - Sense-making.
 - Benefit-finding/posttraumatic growth (with caution around terminology).
 - Identity and purpose.
 - Relationship to other sources of meaning and disconnection.
 - Legacy and meaning in the child's life.
- Highlight that adaptive meaning-making is associated with adjustment and that meaning-making may shift focus when cause of death is unknown.

Part 3: Coping strategies

- Begin with a parent quote ("It sounds wrong but...").
- Invite discussion on challenges of meaning-making while living with uncertainty.
- Generate a list of strategies parents use to cope with uncertainty and to make meaning/remember their child.
- Conclude by acknowledging the meaning inherent in learners' participation in peer facilitator training.

Session 3.4: Distinguishing Grief and Trauma

Session Type: Didactic overview

Date and Time: Day 3, 3:15–3:30 pm (15 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

Parents who experience sudden unexpected death of a child often experience both grief and trauma. Grief reflects the ongoing bond and yearning for the child; trauma stems from fear, horror, and helplessness surrounding the death. Understanding their differences and overlap helps facilitators ensure safety, avoid harm, and support referral when needed.

Facilitator goals

1. Explain the difference between grief and trauma from a psychological perspective.
2. Describe how they interact and how comorbidity appears in conversation.
3. Clarify the peer facilitator's role (normalize, not diagnose).
4. Practice facilitation skills for recognizing, validating, and safely responding when trauma content arises.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Distinguish grief symptoms (yearning, identity disruption, longing) from trauma symptoms (fear, avoidance, hyperarousal).
- Recognize that both grief and trauma reactions are normal following sudden death.
- Demonstrate language and strategies that validate traumatic experiences while maintaining group focus on connection, safety, and continuing bonds.
- Identify indicators that suggest a participant may need professional trauma support.

Session plan

Didactic overview (15 minutes)

- Introduce grief vs trauma and their overlap.
- Discuss comorbidity and traumatic bereavement.
- Clarify facilitator role: normalize, avoid diagnosing, maintain boundaries, validate trauma without probing details, and know referral indicators.
- Define and illustrate concepts of contain, validate, ground, and refer with examples.

Session 3.5: Distinguishing Grief and Trauma – Role Play

Session Type: Skills practice and role play

Date and Time: Day 3, 3:30–4:00 pm (30 minutes)

Introduction and importance of topic

This session helps peer facilitators build confidence using containment language that feels authentic and apply these skills when trauma content emerges in groups.

Facilitator goals

1. Help participants personalize and internalize containment language.
2. Provide live opportunities to apply skills during emotionally charged moments.
3. Reinforce “Contain → Validate → Ground → Refer” through demonstration and reflection.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Distinguish grief symptoms from trauma symptoms.
- Recognize grief and trauma reactions as normal after sudden death.
- Demonstrate language and strategies that validate traumatic experiences while maintaining group focus on connection, safety, and continuing bonds.
- Identify indicators for professional trauma support.

Session plan (30 minutes)

Segment 1. “Find Your Voice” Containment Warm-Up (10 minutes)

Purpose: To help participants translate scripted containment statements into language that feels natural in their own voice, culture, and context.

Facilitator Setup

Containment works best when it feels genuine, not memorized. We’ll start by practicing short responses that express empathy and safety in your own words.

Slide Display five standard containment stems:

“That sounds so hard to carry.”

“It’s okay to pause here.”

“All of these feelings are valid.”

“You’ve been through something unbearable.”

“Let’s take a breath together before we go on.”

Activity Steps

- Read each phrase aloud, one at a time.
- After each phrase, ask participants:
 - “Is this something you might naturally say?”
 - “How would you express this in your own voice?”
- Invite 2–3 participants to share their version.
- Briefly discuss tone:
 - “Which versions feel grounded and sincere rather than formal or clinical?”
- Move to the next phrase and repeat the same sequence until all five stems have been discussed

Faculty Teaching Points

There is no single “right” phrase—the key is tone, brevity, and safety.

Containment often begins with slowing your pace and lowering your voice.

Invite participants to identify one “go-to” containment phrase they can take with them.

Segment 2 – Demonstration Vignette: The Group Ripple (~10–13 minutes)

Purpose: To model real-time containment when a parent becomes activated and to show how a facilitator can steady both the individual and the wider group through tone, pacing, and grounding.

Faculty Setup Explain:

In real support groups, when one parent becomes overwhelmed, the emotional temperature of the whole room often shifts—others tense, go quiet, or show subtle signs of distress. Even though only one person may be speaking, our work is to contain both the individual and the group. Today, we’ll demonstrate what containment looks like using one volunteer. I’ll narrate what might be happening in the rest of the group so you can see how the facilitator attends to the whole room.

Roles:

Faculty Facilitator

Parent A (volunteer): Prompt Line: “Every time I hear an ambulance, my heart races. I can’t breathe.”

The group (imagined): Faculty narrates subtle group shifts: “As you hear Parent A speak, imagine two other parents shifting in their seats—one looking down, one tightening their breathing. This is the moment when your containment needs to expand beyond the speaker.”

Facilitator Tasks

1. Contain Parent A

“That sounds very vivid. Let’s slow down together for a moment.”

Pause.

Soften voice and pace.

2. Validate Parent A

“It makes sense that your body still reacts this strongly.”

3. Extend Containment to the Whole Group

Facilitator briefly shifts attention outward:

“Let’s all take a breath together.”

“Many parents feel these waves—no one is alone in this.”

4. Re-anchor the Room

“This is a lot to hold. We can pause here together.”

“We don’t need to go into details—staying with the moment is enough.”

Segment 3 – Reflection and Integration (~10 minutes)

- Discuss which phrases/tones conveyed steadiness, how to read when the group is settling, challenges of staying brief, cultural/linguistic adaptation, and referral thresholds.
- Close with a brief grounding exercise.

Session 3.6: Culturally Resonant Community

Session Type: Live interactive session

Date and Time: Day 3, 45 minutes

Introduction and importance of topic

Cultural resonance is essential to effective bereavement peer support. Understanding how culture shapes grief, mourning, and help-seeking allows facilitators to create inclusive, responsive, enfranchising spaces. This session explores how cultural meaning-making influences engagement, belonging, and healing, and how facilitators can adapt practices to ensure accessibility and resonance.

Facilitator goals

- Discuss barriers to help-seeking and retention.
- Normalize not knowing and acknowledging limitations.
- Explore ways facilitators can invite diverse experiences.
- Introduce the concept of cultural resonance.
- Encourage cultural responsiveness through specific strategies.
- Share a case study of localizing research-informed tools.
- Discuss culturally attuned community-engaged research in various settings.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Explore ways to create culturally resonant group settings.
- Examine how to recognize and include cultural drivers.
- Discuss how to adapt curriculum and group processes to fit local communities.

Session plan

- Introduction – Outline goals and introduce cultural resonance; frame the question of translating personal “case studies” into curriculum.
- Who Opt-In / Who Opt-Out? – Discuss help-seeking patterns of ethnoracial, sexual, and gender minorities and barriers to engagement; pose reflective questions about grief in social fields and strategies to address barriers.
- Bridge-Building – Explore “inviting in,” co-creating inclusive spaces, facilitator as guide, flexibility in virtual participation, and links between self-care and community-care.

- Theory of Resonance – Review McDonnell, Bail, & Tavory’s framework; differentiate resonance from competence, humility, responsiveness; highlight culture as protective factor and driver of integration.
- Cultural Resonance & Responsiveness – Discuss language justice, communication styles, participant expertise, and practical strategies.
- Adaptation in Practice – Introduce Barrera & Castro’s Heuristic Adaptation Framework and walk through its four steps with practical examples.
- Case Example: Cultural Resonance Team – Present an example of adapting an evidence-based parenting program for a specific community, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, relationships, and community ownership.
- Discussion and Closing Reflection – Use prompts on inclusivity, unintentional exclusion, meaning of cultural resonance, adapting practices/language, and building community beyond the group. Optional closing with Joy Harjo’s **First Morning**.

Session 3.7: Ending Well – Concluding a Group

Session Type: Large group activity with PowerPoint

Date and Time: (Not specified – Day 3)

Introduction and importance of topic

It is important to be intentional about how groups end. Participants have committed time and trust, shared complex parts of themselves, and worked through issues that once felt overwhelming. There is much to acknowledge while also being clear that the group will finish. This session addresses “termination” (as termed in clinical settings) and encourages closing dialogue that appreciates the work of peer facilitators.

Session activities

Large group exercise led by faculty using a PowerPoint guide.

Facilitator goals

1. Explain the tasks of a facilitator when closing out a group.
2. Illustrate areas for meaning-centered reflection.

Learning objectives

At the end of this session, learners will be able to:

- Describe a peer group facilitator’s responsibilities at the end of a group and its relationships.
- Identify personal sources of motivation to engage in peer facilitation using meaning-centered principles.

Session plan

1. Explain the idea of “termination,” acknowledging the limits of the term.
2. Detail tasks of ending: acknowledging terms of the ending, inviting reflection, obtaining formal feedback (if expected), and saying goodbye.
3. Encourage meaning-centered reflection, including self-transcendence, acting with purpose, finding oneself in one’s story (narrative coherence), and legacy.
4. End with gratitude for participants’ attention, collegiality, and hard work.