

LIVING *with* LOSS

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT



"We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in the world — the company of those who have known suffering."

– Hellen Keller

Grieving a loved one's death can be a very difficult emotional experience, often leading to sadness, anger, heartache, and difficulty adjusting to life after loss. Having a supportive social network can be invaluable while coping with loss. Bereavement support groups can allow you to connect with others who are also grieving. They can help you find "new empathy, new understandings, and renewed strengths," according to the Hospice Foundation of America. Finding strength after the death of a loved one is important because it helps you live, hope, and heal, says Debbie Augenthaler, a grief counselor and psychotherapist.

LIVING AFTER LOSS

After experiencing the death of someone you love, grief can hit you like a wave and flood your very being. Grief not only impacts your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but it can also affect you physically and spiritually. There is no wrong or right way to grieve and no true time limit. The loss of a loved one can shatter you. Yet those around you move on with their daily lives while you feel stuck, sad, and alone. Furthermore, because we live in a "grief-phobic" society, grief is held at arm's length. We do not talk about it. Some people are even made to feel as if they need to "get over it." In her book, *You Are Not Alone, A Heartfelt Guide to Grief, Healing and Hope*, Augenthaler is not afraid to talk about her experience. She shares how many of her dreams died when her husband unexpectedly died of a heart attack in her arms. She talks about putting on a mask to cover her pain to get her through her day. Support from

family, friends, and a grief therapist was critical to her healing and survival. Debbie believes that shared experience can help people see that they are not alone in how they feel and that they can survive.

FINDING SUPPORT

Feeling connected to others who understand what you are going through can help you navigate the toll that grieving can take on you mentally and emotionally. Bereavement support groups can provide “the opportunity to release powerful emotions” that are often kept to yourself, according to the Mayo Clinic. There is power in feeling validated and accepted for your difficulty navigating life without your loved one, says the Hospice Foundation of America. Reaching out for support while grieving is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength.



Bereavement support groups can also provide a sense of community and connection with others who are grieving, which can help you adjust to life without your loved one. This can allow you the space to express your sadness about your loss. It also gives you the opportunity to tell stories and share memories about your loved one. Furthermore, joining and participating in bereavement support groups can allow you to learn more about yourself and help you identify your strengths while working through grief, according to the Hospice Foundation of America.

WHAT ARE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUPS LIKE?

Bereavement support groups can be organized many different ways. They often range from between five to 12 people. They can be facilitated by a professional counselor or an individual from the community who has knowledge of how to help others through the grief process. Bereavement support groups can be structured in different ways. Some groups follow a more formal structure, meaning that each meeting focuses on a specific topic, such as coping skills. Other groups may be less structured and more directed by the members of the group. They may be organized through places like community mental health centers, hospice organizations, or places of worship.

Online bereavement support groups allow you to participate in the group from your own home and remain anonymous, if desired. Online support groups can also be an excellent resource, offering benefits such as having a supportive space to share stories about your loved one, giving and receiving validation and emotional support from others, and accessing resources.

If you are looking to join a group of individuals going through something similar, there are bereavement support groups that are specific to the type of loss you have experienced.

Examples include:

- Spouse or partner loss support groups
- General grief support groups
- Bereaved parents support groups
- Death by suicide support groups
- Miscarriage and perinatal loss groups



IS A BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP RIGHT FOR YOU?

Support groups are not for everybody. But research from the Mayo Clinic supports that for the right person, they can be therapeutic. If you wonder whether a support group is right for you, ask yourself:

- Am I experiencing difficulty coping with grief?
- Am I struggling to get through each day because of my loss?
- Do I want a supportive group of people who are also grieving?
- Am I experiencing emotional difficulties, including anger or depression because of my loss?
- Do I want more information about how to work through grief and bereavement?
- Do I want a safe space to talk through my grief, or just to talk about my loved one?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, a bereavement support group may be helpful. A great way to find out may be to attend a few meetings to see whether you feel a support group would help you navigate your grief. If you don’t feel up to going to a meeting in person, there are many online grief support groups available.

HOW TO FIND A BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP

Funeral directors, hospice and health-care providers, worship leaders, and mental health counselors are great ways to find a group.

There are also many resources available online to help you locate a bereavement support group near you or online, such as:

- Grief Share (griefshare.org)
- Grief.com: Because Love Never Dies (grief.com)
- Grief Resource Network (griefresourcenetwork.com)
- The Grief Recovery Method (griefrecoverymethod.com)
- Grief in Common: Grieve, Gather, Grow (griefincommon.com)
- My Grief Angels (mygriefangels.org)

FINDING HELP IF A SUPPORT GROUP ISN’T RIGHT FOR YOU

Support groups are helpful because they offer empathy, hope, advice, usually have no cost, and do not necessarily require an ongoing commitment from participants. Depending on your own experience with grief or ways of processing it, however, you may not feel that a support group is right for you. And that is OK! Some people do not like or cannot thrive in a group setting. For example, it may not be helpful to hear other people’s experiences of ongoing

pain or that bad days can still happen years later. There may be concerns that support group members are comparing or judging. It may be frustrating if one or two people dominate the group. In some cases, the group culture, structure, leadership, or focus can create a negative experience and leave people discouraged, overwhelmed, and disheartened. For whatever reason, if a support group is not right for you, it is important that you do not grieve alone.

CONCLUSION

Bereavement can be a very difficult time to navigate for those who are living with loss, as grief can take a toll on you mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Having a supportive network of people that can allow you to express your thoughts and feelings and validate your experience can be invaluable during this time. Bereavement support groups, whether in-person or online, can provide the opportunity for connection with others who understand what you are going through.

REFERENCES

- Augenthaler, D. (2018). *You are not alone: A heartfelt guide to grief, healing and hope*. Boston: Everstep Publishing. ("why I wrote the book" guest contributor: <https://womenshouldknow.net/guide-grief-healing-hope/>)
- Aoun, S. M., Breen, L. J., White, I., Rumbold, B., & Kellehear, A. (2018). What sources of bereavement support are perceived helpful by bereaved people and why? Empirical evidence for the compassionate communities approach. *Palliative Medicine*, 32, 1378–1388.
- DeSpelder, L.A., & Strickland, A. L. (2020). *Survivors: Understanding the experience of loss*. (Eds). *The last dance: Encountering death & dying* (pp. 335-377). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hayley, E. (2015). Grief support groups: positives and pitfalls. Retrieved <https://whatsyourgrief.com/grief-support-groups-positives-and-pitfalls/>
- Hospice Foundation of America (2018). *Support groups*. Retrieved from [https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-\(1\)/Support-Groups](https://hospicefoundation.org/Grief-(1)/Support-Groups)
- Mayo Clinic. (2020). Grief: Coping with reminders after a loss. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/end-of-life/in-depth/grief/art-20045340>
- Mayo Clinic. (2020). Support and bereavement groups. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/support-groups>
- Mayo Clinic. (2020). What is grief? Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/support-groups/what-is-grief>
- Psychology Today. (2019). Bereavement. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/bereavement>
- Sherman, N. (2012). *Models of Adult Bereavement Support Groups* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.naswma.org/resource/resmgr/imported/FCE_2012.9_AdAdultBereaveme.pdf
- Swartwood, R. M., Veach, P. M., Kuhne, J., Lee, H. K., & Ji, K. (2011). Surviving grief: An analysis of the exchange of hope in online grief communities. *Journal of Death and Dying*, 63, 161–181.

Authors: Allison G. Smith, M.S., Marriage and Family Therapy Associate, and Amy F. Kostelic, Ph.D., Extension Specialist for Adult Development and Aging