

## **GRIEVING WORKSHOP:**

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## **GRIEVING WORKSHOP:**

### ***Introduction***

The aim of this workshop is to help us to become better at supporting bereaved people as they grieve the loss of a loved one. We are going to talk together about grieving. And that is perhaps an exceptionally sad, tender topic for some of us, who may have been recently bereaved. So, it is entirely appropriate to shed a tear in the next couple of hours if you feel moved to do so.

I have spent more than three decades of my workaday life listening to clients, most of whom are grieving, most of whom have very sad stories to tell. People have asked me: How can you stand it? They do not realize that there is deep satisfaction in giving yourself away. Being there for them. That is what you do when you support someone who is grieving by being and staying with them. By being with and staying with bereaved people who are grieving you help them complete their grieving work.

Now, I have handed out an outline and I can certainly give you some pointers on how to best support grieving people. And that will be useful for you, I trust. But I am also, and even more so interested in having a discussion in order to find out what you have to say.

### ***Relating experiences of loss and grieving and questions you want answered***

Probably the most helpful thing in supporting bereaved people in their grief is that you have experienced the loss of a loved one yourself in your life. And, I dare say all of us have lost a family member, a friend or even a pet. So, I am going to ask each you to tell us briefly about the loss of a loved one you may have had in your life and also how you experienced that loss. Second, you may have come to this workshop with a question that is especially important to you and to which you hope to get an answer. I would like to hear that question so that I can focus my presentation in that direction by way of answer. So, let's start here. You don't have to say anything if that is what you want. Just shake your head when it is your turn and we will move on to the next person.

(Write common themes on the board)

### ***Defining bereavement, mourning, grieving and communal support***

I should begin by giving some definitions:

Bereavement: loss of a loved one

Mourning: process of coming to terms with loss

Grieving: the emotional side of mourning, or the feelings involved in experiencing the loss of a loved one.

This is the focus of this workshop, plus how to facilitate the grieving process.

Communal support: providing comfort/comforting, expressing consolation/consoling, being with and staying with/ surrounding the bereaved by family and friends. This facilitates the grieving process.

### ***The importance of communal support for the bereaved***

Comfort, consolation, company  
Isolation: the fear of grieving alone  
Crying in front of others

Losing a loved one is a sad experience. Crying, as an expression of this sadness alleviates the sadness, provided one is comforted, consoled. Grieving is an inherently social process. It happens between people. To cry when there is no one there to console is a terrible thing for the bereaved. That is the fear of isolation.

Facilitating grieving through comfort, consolation, and company works. Being with the bereaved helps because shared sorrow is half the sorrow

### ***An example of communal support: Jewish mourning rituals***

The Jewish community, perhaps because it has experienced so much death, accepts death as a reality of/in life. Given that people die, Jewish law dictates that the life of the dying must be made as anxiety free as possible. It also prescribes a communal mourning practice that occurs in stages.

Jewish view of mourning:

Never leave the bedside of the dying. This is of value for the dying but also for the bereaved. This is the family's, but also the community's, responsibility rather than an individual's responsibility (e.g. spouse, child). It relieves the guilt of not being there when the loved one dies. Bedside vigil does not allow the mourners to escape the reality of death, they have to see it, this is necessary for the continuation of life after the death.

The burial is the responsibility of the mourner. Burial itself should be characterized by realism and simplicity: no cosmetics, no denial (this is not really happening) possible. No expensive coffin.

Kryah: tearing of the clothes: releases feelings of anger and anguish via a controlled religious act of destruction.

The bereaved is expected to fall apart/ to lose it. Jewish practice opposes the repression of emotion. The eulogy is aimed at awakening tears.

The mourners actually bury the dead by shoveling the dirt.

After the burial the community's attention shifts to the mourner, where mourning is essentially a process of unlearning the expected presence of the deceased.

After the burial there is a meal of recuperation and communal solidarity. Life must go on. Resocializing after withdrawing in grief.

Jewish practice prescribes one year of mourning with levels of mourning:

Shivah: 3 days of deep grief, followed by 7 days of mourning, followed 30 days of gradual readjustment, followed by 11 months of remembering and healing.

***Stages in the process of anticipatory grieving:  
Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance***

Whenever we experience a loss of any kind, as with the loss of a loved one, we are said to go through a number of stages emotionally. These feelings in response to news of terminal illness are shared by the dying person and his family.

Denial: This is not happening to me!!

Anger: Why is this happening to me??

Bargaining: (Often with God) I'll be good.

Sadness/depression: I'm not having a good day!

Acceptance: OK, what do I do now?

***The purpose of grieving: Grief work: learning to live without the loved one***

Time does not heal by itself. There is work to do to learn to live without the loved one. Remembering and talking about the departed allows the bereaved to come to terms with/ to get used to the absence of the loved one in bits and pieces.

***Obstructions in the process of grieving:  
Inhibited grieving: stiff upper lip  
Distorted grieving: anger and guilt feelings***

We have a tendency in our circles to appreciate when the bereaved maintain their composure after the death of a loved one. (Yeah, John just lost his wife. Oh, how is he doing? Oh he is taking it so well!) We value *flink zijn*, not *showing* emotion, stiff upper lip, especially for men. But this inhibits the necessary grieving that must take place. The bereaved are not permitted to grieve because of our attitude, and they often break down *after* the funeral, when everybody has left, when they are alone, in private.

Grieving is also inhibited when children lose one of their parents. In that case the surviving parent often postpones his/her own grieving in order to be strong "for the kids".

It is better for the bereaved that the community takes over the day to day responsibilities so that the bereaved is allowed to fall apart/ to grieve deeply.

Sometimes the grief process is distorted when a person is unable to grieve/ or to express sadness because all (s)he feels is anger or guilt. A spouse of the deceased may resent being left with the responsibility of having to raise their children alone (or feel guilty about that, so that he/she is not permitted to grieve). How can you be angry with the dead

for dying and live with yourself? Or a spouse or a child may have wished the deceased dead and then he/she dies. One then feels responsible for the death. (Story of the lady who turned off her feelings about her husband's death completely. "It leaves me cold" Felt nothing.)

***Resistance to facilitating grieving in our culture:  
Denial of death, anxiety about sadness***

Some argue that we systematically deny the reality of death in our culture (pretty it up, makeup, looks so good, expensive coffin, body kept in funeral home instead of home, funerals are professionalized.) Doctors see death of patients as a failure because they view themselves as healers. Etc. The result can be that we deny the reality of death in funerals also. He/she is in heaven/ free from pain/ lived a good life/ trying to cheer up the bereaved.

We seem to have *anxieties about sadness* and thus want to avoid sad situations just at a time when people experiencing sadness need our presence. We seem to have natural tendency to avoid facing atrocities in our culture. Depressed people complain friends become anxious and dismissive when they talk about their depression to them. (Bible: better to be in the house of mourning. Jesus: do not mourn when child is not dead. But he cries at the grave of Lazarus. ) In any case, we are not comfortable with sadness.

***How (not) to facilitate grieving***

How can we support the bereaved? How do we facilitate grieving?

***Not knowing what to say vs. touch and presence***

If you are like me, you sometimes/often do not know what to say to the bereaved. When that happens I find it helpful not to say anything other than "I am sorry!" and to touch or hug the grieving person. In any case, you don't have to *do* anything. Just *be* there.

***Empathy vs. sympathy: Knowing how vs. wanting to help***

When friends have lost a loved one, we naturally want to comfort them. We feel deep sympathy for them. But we do not always know how to console them. We have sympathy but we lack empathy, i.e. we lack the ability to sensitively gauge what our friends need right now and we feel awkward. And so, we go by what we would want our friends to do or to say if we were bereaved. But that does not always work because people are different.

***Examples of well meant but unhelpful support***

Here are some examples of well meant but unhelpful ways of supporting the bereaved:

Things best not to say:

Be strong.  
Everything will be OK.  
Time heals all wounds.  
I share your sorrow.  
May you know no more sorrow.  
Rest assured. It is God's will, or  
I am so sad. He died for nothing.  
Don't cry. It's going to be all right  
Be glad. He/she is in heaven

Things not to do:

Change the subject when the bereaved want to talk about the loved one and wants to cry

### ***The funeral is for the bereaved***

The funeral service should facilitate expressions of sorrow by the community. (communal weeping) Its aim is first of all to envelope the bereaved into that grieving community. There is something comforting, I know, in being carried by the community. (communion of the saints?)

### ***The eulogy as a celebration of the deceased's life.***

Funerals can be a celebration in two ways: I have been to funerals which say: Do not cry, instead be glad! Let us celebrate the fact that the loved one is now in heaven. That kind of celebration misses the point that the bereaved is still on earth without the loved one and feels anything but glad.

It is better to celebrate the past life/ the memories of the deceased. This allows the bereaved person to be thankful in their grief for the time they had together with the loved one.

### ***The communal meal shows solidarity with the bereaved***

The communal meal after the funeral says to the bereaved: You may have lost the one you love, but you are not alone. We are here for you now that life must go on.

### ***After the funeral***

After the funeral the grieving may be done but the mourning continues. It can take years to get over the loss of a loved one.

### ***The need for company in the months after the funeral***

One common thread in the stories I have heard by people who have lost a loved one through death is that the worst time is after the funeral when you continue to hurt, but the

people stop coming. The general assumption is that one ought to get over the loss soon after the funeral when the grieving gets done. And so, people often end up mourning alone without the comfort of friends and family.

### ***Special topics***

#### ***Supporting bereaved children***

For children the death of a parent involves an additional fear of insecurity. (One of) the nurturing one(s) is now gone.

Adults have a hard time sensing how children grieve because children show their grief indirectly, some times through regressing, e.g. bedwetting. They also do not have the words to say what they feel.

Some times, to protect the children we shield them from the death by not telling them about it or by not including them in the burial, funeral, mourning. This leaves children alone with their sorrow, confusion and fear.

Better to tell them the facts by answering their questions,

Include them in the family as the grown up members share feelings and memories. This makes the children feel supported in spite of their loss. It allows them to express their feelings and worries in their own way.

Be a grownup support to them.

Support them indirectly by being a support to the surviving parent, who often feel they cannot mourn because of a felt need/ sense of obligation to help their children mourn.

#### ***Supporting parents with the loss of a child***

Losing a child through death is an added burden for parents. They often struggle with guilt feelings: in death by accident the feeling of I should have protected him/her. In sickness the felt guilt of having passed on bad genes to the child. Parents really never get over the death of their child. Let them voice these feelings.

#### ***Giving the loved one permission to die***

It is some times difficult for spouse or children to allow the loved one to die when they themselves are ready to let them go.

#### ***Mine fields: anniversaries of the death of a loved one or the death of friends rekindle the grieving experience***

Subsequent sad events (anniversaries, the death of friends) tend to rekindle the mourning response in survivors.