

LIVING WITH HOPE

A Peer-Led Retreat for Suicide Survivors

Amanda L. Smith, LMSW

NOTE TO LEADERS

First of all, thank you!

It takes a special person to lead a day-long retreat for suicide survivors.

This curriculum is specifically designed to help a group of 8 to 12 peers begin to cope with the loss of a mutually-known friend together. Ideally, the retreat will take place within four to six weeks of the loss although I recognize that planning for and promoting a retreat may add additional time.

I've included an agenda, list of materials, budget, worksheets that can be placed in a three-ring binder, resources, and a list of references to this curriculum and I hope that you'll feel free to add to and adapt it to the unique needs of your own group. For instance, it may be helpful to have a resource table with specific information for your area.

Your location will be very important so think about a quiet setting in a peaceful place. (Being at or near a bus line will also be convenient for your attendees who don't drive.)

Finally, while this curriculum is not designed specifically as a suicide prevention program, I recognize that an open discussion coupled with the sharing of resources and stories may, in fact, encourage peers to seek the extra help they may need while they are grieving. Individuals experiencing an increase in psychiatric symptoms after the loss of a peer should always be referred to a licensed mental health professional.

You are invited to please share this curriculum. *Living with Hope* has been released to the public domain under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license. Please visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0 for additional information.

If I can be of any help, please don't hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at amanda@hopeforbpd.com.

Congratulations and don't ever give up!

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This grief curriculum for suicide survivors is centered around the work of J. William Worden's Grief Tasks and Principles.

Task 1: Acknowledging the reality of the loss

Task 2: Experiencing the pain of the loss

Task 3: Adjusting to an environment without the deceased

Task 4: Withdrawing emotional energy from the deceased and reinvesting it

Principle 1: Help the survivor actualize the loss

Principle 2: Help the survivor to identify and experience feelings

Principle 3: Assist living without the deceased

Principle 4: Help find meaning in the loss

Principle 5: Facilitate emotional relocation of the deceased

Principle 6: Provide time to grieve

Principle 7: Interpret "normal" behavior

Principle 8: Allow for individual differences

Principle 9: Examine defenses and coping styles

Principle 10: Identify pathology and refer

Worden, J. W. (2009). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*. Springer: New York.

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AGENDA

9:00 to 9:30 am	Light breakfast
9:30 to 9:45	Welcome and agenda
9:45 to 10:30	Sharing memories
10:30 to 10:45	Break
10:45 to 11:15	Confronting myths about grief and coping with loss
11:15 to 11:30	Identifying emotions related to loss
11:30 to 12:30 pm	Healthy coping skills for our physical and emotional needs
12:30 to 1:30	Lunch
1:30 to 2:00	Healthy coping skills for our spiritual needs
2:00 to 2:15	Break
2:15 to 2:45	Letter writing
2:45 to 3:30	Creating meaning after a loss
3:30 to 3:45	Break
3:45 to 4:15	Decorating sky lanterns and release
4:15 to 4:30	Adjournment and plans for self-care

MATERIALS AND BUDGET

Approximate budget (based on 10 participants—including peer leaders)

Food	\$80.00
Materials	
½ inch binders	\$17.50
Copies	\$25.00
Pens and colored markers	\$10.00
Sky Lanterns	\$20.00
Tissues	\$3.50
Matches or a lighter	\$1.00
Total	\$157.00

Notes:

- Sky (or paper) lanterns can be purchased through Amazon.com and some local party supply stores.
- It may be tempting to save money by purchasing a couple of dozen donuts but your attendees may benefit more by starting off the day with healthier breakfast that consists of coffee, milk, juice, bottled water, yogurt, muffins, fresh fruit, individually wrapped nuts or dried fruit, and granola bars.
- Many restaurants and office supply stores may be willing to make a donation for the materials listed above. If you are conducting your retreat through your local NAMI, MHA, DBSA, or ICCD Clubhouse, ask the director or program manager for a donation request on your organization's letterhead.

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BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

It's going to be a rough day.

As a leader, you're already coping with your own grief and you've now bravely taken on the extra responsibility of helping others. It's vital that you make self-care a priority before and after your retreat.

I strongly recommend working with a co-leader and if you are feeling uncomfortable with the material or with persons who may be at an increased risk for suicide you may want to ask a mental health professional to join you as well. Please take as much time as you need to go over the materials and talk about how you are coping with the loss.

If you will be leading this group by yourself, you may want to ask a good friend to join you in case you need support during the day. A quick pep talk during a break or at lunch can give you the extra encouragement you need to make it though.

You'll also want a volunteer or two to arrive early and stay late to help with setting up the room, distributing the materials, and then cleaning up afterward. If you're ordering pizza or sandwiches for lunch, a volunteer can call during the mid-morning break and make sure everything is all set for delivery at 12:30 pm.

Don't be afraid to delegate and ask for help. I bet that you'll find that many of your attendees will find some extra meaning in the day if they are put in charge of a particular task.

Again, congratulations on your decision to do this hard work.

SHARING MEMORIES

Thinking about happy or funny memories of someone who has died can be an important way to connect with others who are also sharing your loss.

Make a list of three or five things that you'd like to share with the group about the person you've recently lost to suicide.

1.

Leader Note:

2. *Start slow and take about 45 minutes for this section.*

3. *Practice active listening and give everyone an opportunity to share.*

4. *Some attendees may feel more comfortable in not sharing. Encourage participation but don't require it.*

5.

You don't know who is important to you until you actually lose them.

—Mahatma Gandhi

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CONFRONTING MYTHS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Sometimes family members and loved ones want to give you lots of advice when someone has died who is close to you. Often their well-meaning efforts can make things worse or make you think that you shouldn't be feeling the way that you do.

Can you relate to any of the following? If so, how?

- Just stay busy. That's the best way to get through this.

Leader Note:

Allow about 30 minutes for this section.

There are no right or wrong answers here and you may have a variety of ideas and opinions that are being shared.

- Don't worry. They are in a better place.

- You can't stop someone from committing suicide. There's nothing you could have done.

“You'll get over it...” It's the clichés that cause the trouble. To lose someone you love is to alter your life for ever. You don't get over it because ‘it’ is the person you loved. The pain stops, there are new people, but the gap never loses. How could it? The particularness of someone who mattered enough to grieve over is not made anodyne by death. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no-one else can fit it. Why would I want them to?

—Jeanette Winterson

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CONFRONTING MYTHS AND ASSUMPTIONS—CONTINUED

- Most people want to be alone when they grieve.
- There are stages of grief that you have to go through until you feel better.
- Eventually you'll get over it.

What other myths or assumptions have you heard about grief and loss?

The most beautiful people I've known are those who have known trials, have known struggles, have known loss, and have found their way out of the depths.

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

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IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS RELATED TO LOSS

Allow yourself just a few moments to become aware of any emotions you are currently experiencing. Can you relate to any of the following?

altruistic
joyful
passionate
bored
tired
discontent
compassionate
happy
pleased
sympathetic
cooperative
sensitive
accepting
content
insensitive
numb
shy
disconnected
moody
lonely
gloomy
embarrassed
grief
reactionary
sorry
ashamed
understood
insecure
possessive
resistant

sad
loving or loved
angry
affectionate
kind
friendly
empathetic
faithful
hopeless
encouraged
energized
selfish
miserable
unforgiving
unhappy
rejected
hateful
depressed
desperate
jealous
obsessed
hopeful
caring
self-hatred
inspired
paranoid
fearful
positive

Other:

Leader Note:

Allow about 15 minutes for this section.

Having attendees identify their feelings is way to see how everyone is doing. If needed, take an extra few minutes and have people discuss their emotions.

TIME OUT

If you are feeling emotionally triggered by this material, it's okay to take care of yourself.

Take a quick walk. Get a sip of water. Call a friend. Breathe mindfully.

We'll all be here to support you when you return.

Leader Note:

Don't be afraid to add an extra break if you or your group needs one.

An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.

—Viktor E. Frankl

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HEALTHY COPING SKILLS FOR OUR EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL NEEDS

We also need to pay attention and care for our emotional needs.

Taking time to spend with friends, enjoying a hobby, or doing something relaxing can be beneficial when we are missing someone we care about.

Make a list of the ways that you take care of your emotional self. Share as many ideas as you can with your group.

A happy life consists not in the absence, but in the mastery of hardships.

—Helen Keller

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HEALTHY COPING SKILLS FOR OUR EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL NEEDS

Don't forget about your physical needs while you are grieving.

Do you go for long walks, stay away from refined sugar or caffeine, get extra sleep, or do yoga to help yourself when you are feeling vulnerable?

Make a list of the ways that you take care of your physical health.

Welcome the present moment as if you had invited it. It is all we ever have, so we might as well work with it rather than struggling against it. We might as well make it our friend and teacher rather than our enemy.

—Pema Chodron

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HEALTHY COPING SKILLS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS

How do you take care of your spiritual well-being?

Some people say special prayers or have other practices that may be meaningful to them.

Do you have any religious or spiritual traditions that are important to you as you mourn?
Share more about the beliefs and values that are important to you in the space below.

Leader Note:

Welcome back from lunch!

Your day is half over. Affirm yourself for all of your great work.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

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A LETTER TO OUR FRIEND

Often death is expected. A friend or a family member may be sick for months or years. When death comes, it may be a relief.

When someone completes suicide, however, there isn't an opportunity to say goodbye.

Take a quiet ten or fifteen minutes to write a goodbye letter. Since your letter might be very personal, use discretion in sharing it with others.

Leader Note:

This portion should take about 30 minutes.

Remember to take a break after this exercise. It can be challenging for group members.

A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day.

—Christopher Germer

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CREATING MEANING AFTER LOSS

People sometimes find ways to create meaning after loss.

They may write a poem, or a song, create a memory book, paint a picture, make a donation to a favorite organization in that person's name, or find another way to honor someone who has died.

What will you do that helps create meaning in your own life?

One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.

—Viktor Frankl

RELEASING SKY LANTERNS

Take time to decorate your paper lantern with something important to you.

You may want to draw a picture, write song lyrics, or decorate the name of the person you miss on the lantern.

Think about the message you want to release with the wind.

Leader Note:

Remember to follow safety instructions in releasing the lanterns.

Keep a few extra on hand.

ADJOURNMENT

Today may have been a very emotional day for you.

Take a few minutes and come up with three things that you can do to honor your loss and take care of yourself this evening.

For instance, you may want to make yourself a favorite meal for dinner, light a candle in memory of your friend, and watch a TV show you enjoy before going to sleep.

Share your plan with at least one other person in the group.

Leader Note:

You did it!

Follow up with phone calls, texts, and e-mails within the next 24 hours and thank your attendees for coming and make sure people are feeling safe and connected with the extra support they may need.

READING LIST

How I Stayed Alive When My Brain was Trying to Kill Me: One Person's Guide to Suicide Prevention by Susan Rose Blauer

Choosing to Live: How to Defeat Suicide Through Cognitive Therapy by Thomas Ellis

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl

The Grief Recovery Handbook by John James and Russell Friedman

Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One's Search for Comfort, Answers and Hope by Albert Hsu

Why People Die by Suicide by Thomas Joiner

A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis

Grieving Mindfully by Sameer Kumar

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CRISIS SUPPORT

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

1-800-273-8255

Veterans Crisis Line

veteranscrisisline.net

1-800-273-8255 and then press 1 or text to 838255

Now Matters Now

nowmattersnow.org

American Association for Suicidology

suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

afsp.org

Unsuicide

unsuicide.wikispaces.com

Crisis Chat

crisischat.org

Warmlines

warmline.org

Befrienders

befrienders.org

EVALUATION

Please share your thoughts with us and circle the appropriate number.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

1. This retreat was beneficial to me.

1 2 3 4 5

2. The materials and exercises were helpful to me.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I felt connected to others during the retreat.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The day was meaningful to me.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I learned something today.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I felt understood and supported by others.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I have a plan to take care of myself while I'm grieving.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I would encourage a friend to attend a similar retreat.

1 2 3 4 5

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