

THE VALUE OF GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS

By Rev. Lynn Fonfara

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Matthew 5:4

Grief happens. We all have many opportunities to grieve in life.

- We must replace “Old Bessie,” the car we’ve had for 15 years.
- We move to a new location, leaving behind years of memories, good friends, trusted doctors, and a mental map of our town.
- A pet dies, and it feels like we have lost a child.
- Decreasing ability to live alone forces us to move to a care facility. We are forced to downsize our belongings and to give up our independence at the same time.
- Our spouse of many years develops dementia, and no longer remembers who we are.
- Our marriage ends, and the tangle of relationships remind us constantly of our losses.
- Our spouse or child or sibling dies and our lives will never be the same.

My ministry has mostly focused on helping folks who are grieving the death of a spouse or a child, though I often raise the topic of grief when conversing with parishioners about other subjects.

Grieving

We all grieve differently, and at a different pace; there are as many ways to manage grief as there are grieving people. One common way to manage our grief is to keep our grief private, because it’s the way we are. We use healthy practices to manage our grief, we give ourselves enough time to grieve, and in time we become reconciled to our loss and seek new life.

Some of us grieve privately because our friends expect us to “get over it” quickly and they don’t want to be bothered with our sadness. It can be difficult to grieve well when we can’t share our grief with other people.

Another way to manage our grief is to join a grief support group, where we can share our grief with others who are also grieving. We can cry and no one tells us to stop. We can tell the stories of the loved one’s last days and everyone listens, again and again. We can comfort one another in our grief as we have been comforted. We discover that the feelings we thought were crazy are not so crazy after all. It is very comforting to know that others feel the same way we do, and we find that in a support group.

While leading grief support groups, I have noticed this pattern: over the weeks of a group’s life, the mood of the group begins with the sadness, mixed with the relief of knowing we are free to tell our stories and no one will try to change the subject. At about the middle, we begin to realize that there is still life to be lived, and we are empowered to know we can get through this time in our lives. By the last week or two, there is more laughter than tears. The sadness may still be very present, but it is no longer front and center. We begin looking to the future with hope.

Support Group Basics

In my experience, small groups of 5-10 people with a planned yet flexible schedule of topics work best. My preferred resource is Dr. Alan Wolfelt's book *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*. I adapt this book to fit 8-9 weekly gatherings, a chapter at a time, including or skipping some chapters based on the needs of the group.

I include a scripture reading and brief discussion at the beginning of each class, as a reminder that we can find people just like us in these ancient texts, and that we can find comfort through the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

In my congregation, I try to gather those who have recently experienced a loss, to help them move from grieving into hope and healing. Not all who grieve are willing to participate, but it's worth the effort to try to help those who will come. Advertising to the community has had mixed results in my community. It seems God sends those who are supposed to be there, and we rejoice in the possibilities we are given.

A Story

We who minister among older adults have plenty of opportunities to help people who grieve. Here is a story affirming the value of grief support groups. In one group, Sally was grieving two deaths at once. Her husband of 60 years died after an illness of several months. During his funeral, I noticed that Betty, their 45 year old daughter, did not look well. I learned that she had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Two weeks later, Betty died. Her body was cremated, and the urn placed on a shelf in the china cabinet. Betty's husband was not able to part with it. It was several months later that the family was able to hold a service for her. Betty's husband was very distraught throughout the service. Afterwards, Sally said to him, "You should attend Pastor's class!" Clearly, the support of others had helped her become reconciled to her losses.

Resources

There are many good resources for grief support. These are the ones I use:

- Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart* (Companion Press, 2004)
- Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., *The Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide: Starting and Leading a Bereavement Support Group* (Companion Press, 2004)
- Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., *The Understanding Your Grief Journal: Exploring the Ten Essential Touchstones* (Companion Press, 2004)

Dr. Wolfelt's books are available at the Center for Loss and Life Transition, Ft Collins, CO, www.centerforloss.com at the bookstore, and at national retailers online and in-store.

If you would like to have the outline I use for grief support groups, including the Scripture passages, please contact me at LMFonfara@gmail.com.

Pastor Lynn Fonfara serves Hope Lutheran Church (ELCA), Citrus Springs, Florida. Her ministry has led her to work with many individuals and small groups as they grieve, as well as lead workshops in starting grief support groups.