Leading a bereavement group

Avoiding helping pitfalls

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Many conference centres now include a challenge course, a team building activity in which a group has to plan, co-operate and communicate to get across a chasm of some kind, beneath which are imaginary dangers. Only those willing to work together can successfully complete the course. Leading an effective bereavement group is not unlike guiding people through a challenge course: potential pitfalls are in abundance. The focus of this article is on one such 'danger', the helping pitfall.

Shel Silverstein's whimsical poem on helping addresses the challenge for bereavement group leaders:

And some kind of help
Is the kind of help
That helping's all about,
And some kind of help
Is the kind of help
We can all do without.[1]

THOUGHTS ABOUT HELPING AND SERVICE

Another writer, Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, suggested significant differences between helping and serving. Helpers, if not very careful, want to fix or problem-solve, and fixing, she suggested, is an experience of expertise. Servers, on the other hand, help more effectively by meeting people where they are, person to person, knowing that tomorrow they, too, may be on the receiving end of service. Fixing and helping may cure, Remen wrote, only service can heal[3].

Service has long been at the heart of many of the helping professions. Bereavement counsellors, for example, are expected to serve, not because something or someone is broken, or to find a platform on which they can be seen and be recognised. Their service is a caring response to bereaved people, a way of working together – in other words, a therapy based on relationship.

These thoughts about service are offered before addressing specific helping pitfalls so that the reader may have a context for the discussion which follows. Group leadership with bereaved people involves at least three elements. One is an awareness of the growing interest and literature about bereavement and the ways people express their grief. A second is an understanding of and attention to group process. Finally, group leadership requires a consiousness of the set of values or theoretical orientation of the leader and their direct impact on the ways in which the leader guides the group process. My comments about service address, at least in part, this latter dimension by raising issues to consider when assuming a helping role.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Groups are an effective and economical way of helping bereaved people yet there are many counsellors who are daunted by them, perhaps because we imagine that very special wisdom is needed if we are to meet the needs of more than one person at a time. In this paper an experienced group counsellor reveals the essence of group work with the bereaved. The effective group leader is not a clever expert who has answers to everybody's problems, but a sensitive participant who encourages the group members to find their own way through the long valley of bereavement.

The rest of this article describes some of the twists and turns and slippery places most likely to cause a bereavement worker to slip into a helping pitfall. Try to discern those to which you are most vulnerable. Better still, discuss these pitfalls in bereavement groups: bereft people often know a lot about unhelpful helping. Invite group members to add to the list. Mutual consideration, planning, and communication can make the bereavement group safer, more resourceful and more successful.

THE ONE-TO-ONE PITFALL

Too many group leaders do one-to-one work – in a group context. A flow chart of conversations will often show that much of the communication flows directly from group leaders to group members or *vice versa*. Group participation primarily happens in the act of overhearing others as they communicate with the leader.

This is a most seductive pitfall for group leaders, indeed for any helper. It is such a nice compliment when someone treats us as if we were resourceful that this behaviour can cause us to believe it also. Then we begin to respond directly to each issue as it is raised, instead of involving the members of the group in sharing their insights and experiences. Even when we do have a response, it is often more effective to allow wisdom to emerge from the group. In other words, get the group involved, invite the person desiring information or support to ask the group, not just you. Say to the group, 'Let's share our response to this request. Who wants to go first?'

THE FIX-IT PITFALL

This pitfall is a close relative of the one above and equally powerful in its pull on our feelings. Helpers don't like to see or hear people struggling or in pain: they want the bereft to get better. This noble intention can get translated into taking over from group members responsibility for their own lives. Harriet Lerner, in *The Dance of Anger*, wrote that we should be wary when others are doing too much for us, at the expense of our own competence and growth[3]. 'Fixers' do just that. For example:

'Cory thought it was a rather simple question. He wanted some information to help him better understand his child's behaviour following his wife's death. He felt confident that with a little added

insight, he could deal with what was going on.

What he wanted and what he got were two different things. Before he knew it, the facilitator was treating him and his issue like something huge. Cory began to get chapter and verse from books and authors he had never heard of. Handouts began to be thrust in his direction. The facilitator got the other group members to offer advice which he neither wanted or could use.'

Avoid the fix-it pitfall by emphasising your role as that of a facilitator, a facilitator of group support and interaction, there to help people make their own decisions and plans about their life situation. 'Cory, how can we be helpful to you? What would you like from us right now?' Remind yourself regularly that the best kind of helping is the kind in which group members are aiding one another in creating responses to their individual life stresses.

THE 'LET ME SEE MOVEMENT' PITFALL

The title 'group facilitator' is translated by many group leaders as 'change agent'. That is, many helpers presume that by aiding people in addressing their losses, change will occur. And change for most group leaders is in one direction – forward. If movement is not detected, then something is wrong.

Remind yourself that people grieve on their timetable, not yours. They need time to integrate a death into their daily reality and, as they do so, the process may appear as lack of movement. Some choose to step backwards to earlier practices or values after a loss. C. S. Lewis described his grief as a process, not a state. 'Grief,' he wrote, 'is like a long valley...sometimes you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago.'[4] Finally, remember that appearances can be deceptive: some who look as if little is happening may be the most involved members of the group. We participate differently.

THE 'TOO NICE' PITFALL

Many of us were taught in childhood that it was rude to interrupt, or that nice people didn't confront others. These and other rules of niceness can undermine a quality group experience.

'Joyce was feeling overwhelmed by her mother's death and all the decisions now facing her and the family. When she started sharing this in the group she didn't intend to go on and on. She was not even sure how long she had been talking when she suddenly became aware that it must have been for a long time. She felt embarrassed, awkward, unsure of what to do, and very alone.'

Here, though Joyce was troubled and wanted an opportunity to share her frustrations, she did not want to go as far as she did. She expected more leadership from her group facilitator. In an effort to be nice, the group leader allowed Joyce to talk too much and did not check with her what she desired from the group as she told her story. Further, the group didn't help Joyce break her dilemma into manageable pieces.

The job of the group leader is to lead groups, not win popularity contests

This pitfall manifests itself in many ways. Group meetings can turn into general discussions about tangents to bereavement if the leader is too nice to call the group to task. Group leaders who are intent on being pleasant can fail to pose hard questions. Strongly opinionated members can dominate unless the leader intervenes to ensure that the floor is shared and announces that all opinions are welcomed.

While such situations can be delicate, the job of the group leader is to lead groups, not win popularity contests. Leading requires active involvement in determining the course of the group.

THE 'THAT'S NOT THE WAY WE DO THINGS' PITFALL

We can only help those with whom we are profoundly connected. Helping, at its best, is mutual help; it is the recognition that there but for the grace of God or fate or mystery go I, and that we are no better than those we serve. William Doherty, a colleague at the University of Minnesota, suggests a difference between natural caring and ethical caring[5]. Natural caring is the instinctive, almost visceral action we take or reaction we have when we see someone in need. Ethical caring, on the other hand, is the kind of caring which requires our responding with service and care to someone or to a situation which puts us off, to someone we don't like, or someone with whom we don't easily identify.

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Because bereavement is so unique to individuals and cultures, it is crucial that bereavement group leaders do not force their way of grieving on everyone else.

I need to remind myself often that people grieve in every way imaginable! Some cry, others wail. Some ask questions; some want answers. Others scream or yell; many are quieter. There are those who want to be alone; many need and want friends and family close by. Some find resources like music very helpful. Some want distractions like work or just to be doing things; others find it difficult to be active in the midst of their grieving. Many talk a lot; others write their thoughts and feelings on paper.

Effective bereavement group leaders meet the group members where they are and with their particular mourning patterns, rather than with a 'We don't do that here' message or tone.

LOOKING OUT FOR PITFALLS

There are many other helping pitfalls. Here are some of them for your consideration and discussion with others:

- the **fear of letting go** pitfall – holding onto group members even after they are ready to move on;
- the **talking too much** pitfall – a tempting trap for 'teacher' facilitators;
- the **refusal to ask for help** pitfall – 'I should be able to this, for I am the group leader';
- the **rigid this-is-our-agenda** pitfall – the refusal to bend regardless of circumstances;
- the **expert** pitfall – I know what's best;

and the list could go on.

In bereavement groups, making full use of the group process is an integral part of helping. The pitfalls discussed here occur when the leader takes too much responsibility for members at the expense of a more effective group exchange. Challenge yourself and your group to examine the ways in which you have been functioning, and then work as a team to enhance and improve your group skills. By working together, helping pitfalls can be avoided. BC

References

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