

Group Application – Dealing with Grief

Learning Objectives:

Participants receive a structured approach to understanding and manage grief through cognitive behavioral therapy techniques. The session combines interactive activities with practical coping strategies that participants can apply in their daily lives. This module should be used in the case of a death of a group member or facilitator.

Materials:

- Whiteboard/flipchart and markers
- Colored paper (assorted)
- Pens/pencils
- Small blank cards or sticky notes
- Tissues (accessible but not prominently displayed)
- Timer/clock

Part 1: Icebreaker – Strength Stories (10 minutes)

Purpose: To build group cohesion, normalize grief experiences, and identify existing coping strengths

Instructions:

1. Arrange participants in a circle (seated or standing).
2. Introduce the activity: "Today we're discussing grief and loss, experiences we all face. If someone doesn't want to share, they can say 'pass' and we can return to them later if they choose to share. Before diving in, let's recognize the strengths we already have."
3. Share the prompt: "Think of a difficult time you've gotten through in the past. What is one personal strength that helped you during that time?"
4. Model first with your own brief example: "When I was going through a tough time, my determination to take one day at a time really helped me."
5. Go around the circle, with each person sharing one strength.
6. After everyone shares, summarize: "Look at all these strengths in our circle today. These same strengths can help us when dealing with grief."

Part 2: Introduction to Grief (30 minutes)

Part 2a: Definition

Facilitator Script:

- Define grief: "Grief is our natural response to loss. It can come from losing someone we care about, but also from other losses—like losing a home, a relationship, opportunities, or even hopes and expectations."
- Normalize grief: "Everyone experiences grief differently. There's no 'right way' to grieve, and there's no fixed timeline."
- Connect to CBT: "Today we'll use cognitive behavioral therapy approaches to understand how our thoughts about loss affect our feelings and behaviors."

Part 2b: The Grief Response Cycle (10 minutes)

1. Draw a simple CBT triangle on the board (Thoughts → Feelings → Behaviors).
2. Explain: "When we experience loss, we have thoughts about what happened. These thoughts trigger emotions, which influence our behaviors."
3. Provide an example: "If I think, 'I'll never be happy again' after a loss, I might feel hopeless and then isolate myself, which can make grief harder to bear."
4. There are universally-accepted five stages to grief, and they can happen in any order or repeat:

- Denial – Grief can be overwhelming. Denial is a defense mechanism to those overwhelming feelings. In the denial stage, we “pretend” that the loss hasn’t happened. For example, when someone dies, we might think, “Oh this can’t be, I can just call them right now and they’ll answer the phone.”
 - Anger – Anger can also serve as a defense mechanism for other feelings that may be too overwhelming to access. Directing your anger at other people, objects, or the source of the grief may be an unconscious way of protecting yourself from even more intense feelings. For example, during a breakup we might think, “They were a terrible partner anyway, I hate them!”
 - Bargaining – “If only I/they had...” Bargaining is another defense mechanism from the overwhelming feelings of grief. Trying to rationalize or control the outcome that has already passed can make it more difficult to work through the feelings of grief. For example, “If I had just spent more time with _____, they wouldn’t have died.”
 - Depression – Hiding/isolating, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating/making decisions/remembering, confusion, hopelessness/worthlessness, lack of energy, changes in appetite. When someone dies, in this stage we might think, “How can I even go on without them? Why even go on at all?”
 - Acceptance – This is about understanding how your life will be different now. It doesn’t mean that you are “over it.” For example, when someone dies we might feel grateful to have known that person, and might want to focus on the things we learned from them while they were alive.
5. Working through grief can take time. Like many other scenarios we have discussed in this group, working through grief starts with pausing, taking a breath, and then identifying unhelpful thought patterns.
- Introduce common unhelpful thinking patterns in grief:
 1. All-or-nothing thinking ("I'll never feel joy again")
 2. Catastrophizing ("My whole future is ruined")
 3. Should statements ("I should be handling this better")
 4. Mind reading ("Everyone thinks I'm weak")
 5. Overgeneralizing ("Nothing good ever happens to me")
 - When we have unhelpful thoughts, we catch it, check it, change it, and choose it.
 1. **Catch it** What thought is going through my mind?
 2. **Check it** Am I sure that this is real, true, or right? What proof do I have?
 3. **Change it** Is there another way to look at this? What else could be happening? What would I tell a friend?
 4. **Choose it** Choose a more balanced, helpful perspective
 - Remembering back to our module on emotions, when emotions feel too big, remember this quick tool. It's called “PAC”
 1. P – Pause & Breathe
 2. A – Acknowledge Feelings and Accept Them
 3. C – Choose a Healthy Coping Mechanism
 - Additional coping strategies:
 1. Scheduled grief time: Setting aside specific time to process grief
 2. Self-care practices that honor both need to grieve and need to function
 3. Finding meaningful ways to honor losses

Part 3: Closing Activity – Reframing Grief Thoughts (5 minutes)

Purpose: To apply CBT skills directly to personal grief experiences

Instructions:

1. Distribute small cards/sticky notes to each participant.
2. Prompt: "Write down one unhelpful thought you've had about a loss or difficult experience in your life. Don't put your name on it."
3. Collect the cards, shuffle them, and redistribute.
4. Each person reads the thought they received (not their own) and suggests a more balanced alternative thought.

5. Encourage supportive feedback from the group.

Facilitator Script: "Today we learned that while grief is natural, our thoughts about loss can make the experience harder or easier to bear. By identifying unhelpful thinking patterns and practicing more balanced thoughts, we can navigate grief in healthier ways. Working with grief is challenging. Remember that healing isn't about forgetting—it's about finding ways to carry our losses while still moving forward."

Facilitator Notes:

Safety Considerations:

- Monitor participants for signs of distress.
- Have a co-facilitator or support staff available for one-on-one assistance if needed.
- Be familiar with crisis resources for immediate referrals.
- Follow mandatory reporting requirements if any disclosures arise.

Cultural Considerations:

- Acknowledge that grief expressions vary across cultures. Invite participants to share cultural practices that have helped their communities with grief.
- Avoid language that prescribes "normal" grief reactions. For example, avoid saying things like "it's normal to cry when experiencing grief," as that may be applicable to some people, but not all. Everyone processes grief differently.