To have loved and lost: A group for students who have lost a loved one
Background Information

- A bereaved person is grieving the loss of someone (or something) he or she valued.
- Loss can negatively impact an adolescent’s physical and mental health, behavior, learning, and development.
- In comparison to individual or family approaches, group counseling allows for adolescents to draw upon peer support and reduces feelings of isolation.
Justification for a Grief Group

• A school’s mission: Convey essential skills for life
  – including being considerate of those who have experienced a personally significant loss

• A school counselor’s responsibility:
  – The educational, academic, career, personal and social needs of every student
  – provide the necessary and appropriate services to students, such as a grief and loss group
Group Goals

- Goal #1: Alleviate the suffering of the bereaved through mutual support
- Goal #2: Facilitate healing so that children can function more effectively in the classroom and at home

Both goals are from Samide & Stockton (2002, p. 198)
Group Objectives

• Gain a better understanding of one’s grief
• Be able to effectively express one’s grief
• Obtain appropriate grief coping strategies
• Normalize the grieving process
• Gain a sense of hope for the future

Adapted from Morgan and Roberts (2010)
ASCA (2010) Ethical Standards concerning group work:

- **A.6.a:**
  - Screen prospective group members
  - Maintain an awareness of participants’ needs
  - Take precautions to protect members from harm resulting from the group experience

- **A.6.b:**
  - Best practice is to notify the parents/guardians of children participating in groups

- **A.6.c:**
  - Establish clear expectations in the group setting
  - Clearly state that confidentiality in group counseling cannot be guaranteed
Ethical Group Practice, continued

Ethical Standards concerning group work, continued:
• A.6.d:
  – Provide necessary follow up with members, and document as appropriate.
• A.6.e:
  – Develop professional competencies for any topics specific to the group
  – Maintain appropriate education, training and supervision in group facilitation
• A.6.f:
  – Facilitate group work that is brief and solution-focused
  – Working with a variety of academic, career, college and personal/social issues
Characteristics of Group Stages

• Pre-group
  – Group planning and formation
  – Attracting, screening, and selecting members
  – Orientation process

• Initial
  – Anxiety and insecurity about group structure
  – Discovering and testing limits
  – Development of group norms
  – Exploration of fears and expectations
  – Identification of personal goals and themes
  – Determination of the safety of the group environment
Group Stages, continued

• Transition
  – Begin work on presenting concerns
  – Verbally expressing thoughts, feelings, reactions, and actions
  – Acceptance of fears and defensiveness while working on anxieties and reluctance
  – Taking risks and saying things that have been held back

• Working
  – Productivity
  – Increase of self-exploration
  – Focus on behavioral changes
  – Deeper level of trust
  – Not all members may achieve this stage
Group Stages, continued

• Final
  – Identifying what has been learned
  – Creating an action plan for integrating learning into everyday life
  – Summarizing and tying up loose ends
  – Interpreting the overall group experience
  – Achieving Closure
  – Dealing with separation and termination feelings as well as unfinished business
  – Developing strategies for possible relapse and a support network
Screening Process

• Receive referrals from parents and school personnel for students who may fit the group’s criteria
• Conduct a screening interview with each potential child and his or her parent(s)
• Determine if the child is appropriate for the group and ready to address his or her loss.
Screening Considerations

**Not Suitable**
- Children experiencing pathological grief
- Children with significant interpersonal problems
- Children who have experienced loss very recently

**Suitable**
- Children who experienced loss up to two years ago
Group Ground Rules

• It is best for the group to establish their own ground rules
• Confidentiality is a non-negotiable rule
• Possible other rules include:
  – Show up on time and do not skip sessions
  – Listen to each other
  – No judgments
  – No advice
  – Be honest
  – Be respectful
  – Be supportive
Group Format

- Four to Eight members per group
- Meet once a week for one hour
- Eight sessions, with option to continue for another eight sessions if necessary
- Groups divided by developmental level, i.e. early, middle, and late adolescence
Outline of Group Sessions

- **Group One: Feelings**
  - Identifying and exploring feelings
  - Developing a grief vocabulary

- **Group Two: Death Education**
  - Answering questions about death and the funerals
  - Helping adolescents realize they are not alone in their confusion and anxiety

- **Group Three: Memories**
  - Sharing memories and mementos of the deceased
  - Creating collages of memories
Group Sessions, continued

• Group Four: Changes
  – Acknowledging how life has changed since the loss
  – Recognizing that some things are the same
  – Identifying how the group members feel about the changes

• Group Five and Six: Grief Education
  – Visual explanation of the stages of grief
  – Group members identify where they are in the grief process
  – Discussion of coping skills
Group Sessions, continued

• Group Seven: Letting Go
  – Using symbolic ways of saying goodbye to deceased, letting go of balloons or visualization

• Group Eight: Saying Goodbye
  – Discussion of how the ending of the group makes the members feel
  – Celebration of what has been accomplished
  – Reminder of coping skills and supportive adults in their lives
  – Statements of appreciation for support of fellow group members and group leader
Crises and Trauma Management

• Grief and loss group for adolescents already focus on a traumatic event, the loss of a loved one
• The group could be adapted for a large scale crisis or natural disaster, in which many lives were lost or there is loss of property and/or feelings of safety and security.
• Critical characteristics of a supportive environment:
  – Routine and structure
  – Love as displayed through adults’ words and actions
  – Honesty about the loss as appropriate for the student developmental level
  – A sense security and safety
Considerations of Diversity

• Different cultures handle death, grief and the loss of a loved one in different ways
• Variations in views of death can vary greatly depending factors, such as ethnicity and level of acculturation
• Best practice with regards to diverse populations:
  – Be knowledgeable about the practices of different cultures but tailor the group process to the individual participants
  – Learn about a group member’s individual beliefs and not assume anything based on cultural generalizations
  – Make an effort to understand differences and value diverse practices related to loss
  – Identify the individual’s level of religiosity and incorporate faith-based cognitions when appropriate
References


