

AN OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP LEADERS: FACILITATING BEST PRACTICE IN PEER SUPPORT

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A. AIM & INTRODUCTION

The aim of the presentation is to examine an ongoing outreach program developed by The Compassionate Friends Victoria (TCF) for their support group leaders. These outreach processes are encompassed within an overall program designed by TCF to produce safe and knowledgeable leadership for their regular monthly open-ended bereavement support groups.

The Compassionate Friends (or TCF, as we will refer to it during this presentation) is a worldwide peer-support based organisation established in 1968 for parents, siblings and grandparents where a child has died (by any means and at any age).

B. AN IMPORTANT TCF PRINCIPLE

All TCF bereavement support groups must be run by leaders who are themselves bereaved, because TCF believes there is an additional support power in sharing similar experiences. This means that leadership training and post-training support must recognise and cater for the added vulnerability of the leaders, and hence the outreach program we are outlining in this presentation

C. DIAGRAM OF TOTAL GL PROGRAM

See Diagram for brief overview setting total context of presentation.



OUTREACH TEAM

- Andrew McNess (Coordinator of TCF's Support Groups)
- Sue Stebbins, Jon Stebbins (Facilitators of TCF's annual Lifeline-accredited group leader training)

D. CORNERSTONES OF THE PROGRAM

1. The first cornerstone of the program is a belief in "the power of the shared experience" – a belief now grounded in strong research evidence. Within this overarching belief lie important sub-beliefs:

- (a) A belief that within each person is a drive/need for empathic understanding. This drive, which appears to be linked to survival of the species, is particularly in evidence when we are faced by personal adversity or are moved by adversity in others.
- (b) There is also a suggestion that as personal perceived trauma increases, so the need for empathic understanding becomes more important.
- (c) A belief that the growth of all people, or in the case of bereavement, the creation of new lives, is immeasurably enhanced through the interactive sharing of experiences.

2. The second cornerstone of the TCF support group leadership program is the belief, also based on strong research evidence, that "helping may be for better or for worse" (Carkhuff, 1969). We believe that accepting the implications of this is vital in bereavement support (in fact in all "helping" contexts), because the need for empathic understanding instinctively triggers expectations about giving and receiving such understanding. This belief indicates that although we may all possess a basic need for giving and receiving empathic understanding, the effective *expression* of this drive in interactions between people is a learned skill. That is, both the ability to effectively communicate empathic understanding, *and* the effective receiving of empathic understanding, are skills or processes to be learnt.

Which means there is a real potential for well-meaning caring people to lead or interact destructively, and this in turn means that effective bereavement recovery facilitation in groups must go beyond simply selecting leaders who are genuine caring people. Hence the need for good leadership training programs, which involve learning the skills of effective interpersonal empathy, as well as understanding the grief process, and being able to apply the organisational skills associated with setting up and running groups related to bereavement.

3. The third cornerstone of the TCF program relates specifically to The Compassionate Friends situation. TCF believes that the leadership is more powerful, and the bereavement recovery of members is greatly enhanced, if the leaders and members attending the group have shared similar experiences. Hence all TCF support groups must be led by bereaved parents, siblings, or grandparents, as appropriate.

And, as stated earlier, an important corollary of this belief, is that TCF leaders/ facilitators carry an extra degree of vulnerability compared to non-

bereaved leaders. This extra vulnerability has implications for leadership training programs and for ongoing leadership support.

E. THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP LEADERS

Each aspect is an equally important part of the outreach program. The ongoing outreach program is essentially a three year repeating program with a number of other support opportunities “feeding into” this basic structure.

- 1) Year 1: One-on-one meetings with group leaders (GL)
- 2) Year 2: Visits to & participation in actual group meetings
- 3) Year 3: Weekend GL Retreats
- 4) Other opportunities for sharing & discussion: Gathering program; GL Bulletin; Email discussions; Debriefing team; Informal contacts between GLs

Discussion of elements of the program:

One-on-one visits

- Outreach team members meet with group leaders of a given group
- Discussion guided by core themes/questions
- *(general meeting attendances, issues arising, additional support required from TCF Centre)*
- We meet at a venue chosen by group leaders *(a comfortable context)*
- Outreach team follows up all issues discussed
- Report on each group submitted to TCF’s board of management

Visits to group meetings

- Volunteer coordinator and outreach team attend one meeting of each group
- Debriefing session with leaders after meeting
- Gain an overview of group’s functioning (leadership styles, community impact, assessing resource needs)
- Attendance of outreach team provides group members a personal face of wider organisation
- Report on each group submitted to TCF’s board of management

Group Leader Retreats

- Structured weekend of activities covering latest bereavement support information & research;
- facilitated discussion of group issues and needs;
- Opportunity for group leaders to exchange ideas and build support networks and a knowledge base of group meeting strategies;
- Involves 2 retreats – regional & metropolitan
- Outreach team follows up any issues raised.

Other Outreach Processes

- Debriefing team (ex-group leaders available to debrief with group leaders)
- Quarterly Group Leaders Bulletin (includes articles that address common group issues)
- Email Discussion Group (opportunity to discuss topics related to group meetings)
- Bi-yearly TCF Gathering Program (open to all TCF members, but includes time for GLs to meet together in facilitated workshops)

- Informal networking contacts between GLs

REACTIONS TO THE OUTREACH PROGRAM

From retreats & other feedback data:

- *"[The Outreach program] demonstrates that the power of peer support works for group leaders as it does for members within their support groups."*
- *"Great to hear [in the group leader retreats] how others manage issues in their groups. It normalises what I do or how I have experienced certain difficulties."*
- *"[The outreach program] fits so well with the mutual support self-help model. Wonderful to see we are all "on track" in most instances, as it's often hard to gain a sense of this working in isolation."*
- *"Very important from a skills development point of view."*
- *"[It is valuable] in touching base with TCF [the organisation] and knowing support is available."*
- *"Good to hear current information on running groups, and have it clarified."*
- *"Helps to remind me of the importance of debriefing and looking after myself after a meeting, and having strategies in place so I could do so."*
- *"Helps to establish a connection between all group leaders."*

VALUE OF OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR TCF

- help identify "niggling" issues (at individual, group and/or organisational level);
- identify how TCF's duty of care to group members is practised/upheld in each group;
- acknowledge group leaders' novel/individual application of the tenets of group leadership (as imparted through TCF training);
- "listen for anecdotes" (in one-on-one meetings, retreats, etc.) to gain impression of how meetings are structured and duty of care is exercised.

THE OUTREACH PROGRAM PROVIDES AN ESSENTIAL "ONGOING FEEDBACK LOOP"

- Eg. feedback at 2013 metropolitan group leaders retreat suggested a significant increase in numbers of "the very newly bereaved" (0-6 months since child's death) at group meetings

TCF's RESPONSE THUS FAR

- article produced in Group Leaders Bulletin suggesting strategies for nurturing the very newly bereaved
- preliminary planning for a support group geared specifically for "the very newly bereaved"

F. CONCLUDING STATEMENT

A comprehensive leadership support program is particularly important in a volunteer based organisation where leaders have experienced similar losses to those attending their groups. Furthermore, TCF upholds the belief that all group leaders must undergo a recognised training program. In TCF's case, the training program has been developed and tested by Lifeline Australia, and is internationally recognised.