

EXPLORE THE EXTRAORDINARY

EVERYTHING YOU
NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT STARTING A FRIENDS
OF **IANDS**



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES

Contents

IANDS Mission & Visions' Statements.....	3
IANDS History.....	4
Purpose and Policy Guidelines of Friends of IANDS groups (FOI)	5
Why IANDS?	
Advantages.....	10
On the Other Hand.....	10
Pre-Planning	
1. Focus	13
2. Keep It Simple.....	13
3. Finding people.....	13
Group Diversity	
Support Groups.....	15
After-Effects.....	17
Seven Common Challenges Following a STE.....	21
Facilitating Support Groups.....	28
Leading Skills & Activities-Running the Meeting.....	31
Bereavement Support Groups.....	41
Interest and Study Groups.....	51
Money Talk – Financing Your Group.....	54
What People Ask about Non-Profit Status.....	55
Incorporation.....	55
Financial Relations with IANDS.....	58
Publicity – The Art of Being Recognized.....	61
Local Expos, Fairs, etc.....	61
Universities, Community Colleges.....	61
Hospice, Adult organizations.....	61
Hospitals' Grand Rounds.....	61
Working with the Media.....	63
At Meetings.....	63
For Publicity.....	63
A Few Guidelines for Interviews.....	63



Mission and Visions

IANDS' Mission

Through research, education and support, IANDS is dedicated to creating a greater awareness and understanding of near-death experiences.

The Vision of IANDS

We envision a future in which the study of near-death and near-death-like experiences are established and integrated into all relevant scientific, academic, healthcare, and spiritual/religious communities.

We envision a future in which all near-death and near-death-like experiencers are accepted, respected, and supported by their healthcare providers, families, co-workers, and the public at large as they integrate the experiences into their lives.

We envision a future in which people from all walks of life, religions as a potential source of meaning and inspiration for a better world.

For more information, contact:

The International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc. (IANDS)

2741 Campus Walk Avenue

Building 500

Durham, NC 27705

Office: 919-383-7940

www.iands.org

Conference info: www.ndeconference.com or www.conference.iands.org

What is IANDS?

The International Association for Near-Death Studies began as an informal consortium of academic researchers, not long after the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* in 1975. These founders were John Audette, MS, Bruce Greyson, MD, Raymond Moody, MD, Kenneth Ring, PhD, and Michael Sabom, MD. Turned down by other educational institutions to have their near-death experience research published, the researchers founded their own organization, originally named Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena in 1978. IANDS was later incorporated as the International Association for Near-Death Studies at the University of Connecticut in 1981 and received 501(c)(3) status from the Internal Revenue Service in 1982.

In 1981, a quarterly newsletter titled, *Vital Signs*, was published to present time. IANDS first peer reviewed academic quarterly journal titled, *Anabiosis*, was published from 1982-1987. This was then renamed the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* in 1988 and has been published to present time. IANDS is now a membership association of individuals and groups around the world, with the main office now located at 2741 Campus Walk Ave., Building 500, Durham, NC 27705. Additional IANDS history can be found at: <http://iands.org/about/about-iands27/history.html>.

Purpose and Policy Guidelines For IANDS Groups

According to its Bylaws, one of IANDS' special purposes is to "serve as a fraternal organization for those who have experienced or have interest in such phenomena." In some local communities, people have come together to offer support to experiencers and their families or to share interest in near-death experiences. Those groups that hold membership in IANDS, look to the Association for information, brochures, program resources, IANDS office support, annual conferences, and various types of networking such as monthly Group Leader conference calls.

So many people have asked how to start a group that this booklet became necessary. Written for people with little or no prior experience in group leadership, it includes introductory material on forming a group in your own local community, with emphasis on those issues which we as group leaders or members of IANDS' board of Directors believe to be the essentials.

The Friends of IANDS groups agree to operate in accordance with the IANDS' Bylaws, Policies and Principles described below:

- IANDS is a network of support and discussion groups around the world holding membership in the International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc. and sharing information through these auspices or Friends of IANDS (FOI) groups. IANDS Affiliated Groups serve near-death and near-death-like experiencers by providing understanding and information to those who have had such experiences. Groups also offer education and discussion of near-death and related experiences to the general public in a supportive, accessible setting. Located in various cities in the U.S. and a number of other countries, the IANDS Groups hold regular meetings for NDE and NDLEs and the general public.

Friends Of IANDS groups are listed on the IANDS website at:

<http://iands.org/groups/affiliated-groups/find-a-group.html>

- IANDS Affiliated Groups may be formed to serve specific communities interested in near-death and related experiences. An Affiliated Group may be geographically based, such as a country, city or regional Group, or may serve an Internet or telephone connected community. The governance, control, bank

accounts, and finances of Affiliated Groups shall be separate and distinct from those of IANDS itself.

- Any IANDS member may form an IANDS Affiliated Group and may obtain support in doing so from an IANDS Board member assigned to Groups. When an IANDS member proposes to form a Group in their community, they may contact the office to obtain the documents available to help start-up Groups, including IANDS Policies for Affiliated Groups, and to get contact information for the Board member(s) assigned to Groups.

<http://iands.org/groups/affiliated-groups/group-resources.html>

The following are requirements for all Groups who wish affiliation with IANDS:

- 1. The Group Leader must be an active IANDS member **at the Supporting level or higher**.
- 2. A proposed Group shall apply for affiliation status with IANDS in writing (may be by email), supplying IANDS with the name of the Group, the leader's name, address, telephone number and email address. Groups shall keep IANDS informed of any changes in their contact information or of termination of the Group or of its affiliation status.
- 3. The Group shall agree to operate in harmony with the mission and purposes of IANDS, to focus primarily on the NDE and similar experiences, and to follow IANDS Policies for Affiliated Groups.
- 4. The Group shall agree to be open to people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and views and to not proselytize any single interpretation of near-death experiences or point of view.
- 5. The Group shall agree not to engage in legislative (lobbying) or political activities using the IANDS name (as this would jeopardize the IANDS tax exempt status) and shall agree not to otherwise bring harm to IANDS, its name, or its Groups.
- 6. The Group shall make every effort to assure that all people will be safe at their meetings, and therefore shall agree not to offer instruction in any procedure that mimics the NDE or any of its aspects during their meetings.
- 7. To be designated as an "IANDS Affiliate Group" in good standing, a group will submit the group affiliation fee of \$50.00 with a completed group organizational request form pledging adherence to IANDS policies as described herein.

•8. Thereafter, by **August first** of each year the group shall maintain affiliation status in good standing by submitting the annual affiliation renewal fee of \$50 (\$75 for Groups that are part of the IRS group exemption), accompanied by an annual group status report including up-to-date group leadership and contact information.

More in-depth information regarding IANDS' Group Affiliation Policy can be found here: <http://iands.org/groups/group-affiliation-info/group-affiliation-policy.html>

Upon approval of an affiliation request by a new group, IANDS will:

- 1. Grant affiliation, in writing, to the Group.
- 2. Provide a start-up packet to the leader(s), list the Group on the IANDS web site, and provide mentoring for new Group leaders, if desired.
- 3. Invite the Group leader(s) to take part in annual Leaders Seminars, monthly conference calls, and periodic selection of a Board Member at Large for Groups (BMLG), if and when such are conducted.
- 4. Provide back issues of Vital Signs, other printed brochures and pamphlets, if desired by the Group, as long as supplies last, as samples for Group attendees.
- 5. Group leaders and their representatives are invited to join the IANDS Group Leaders Network website to share with and gain experience from existing groups participating in this online tool sponsored by IANDS.

Friends of IANDS (FOI) groups do or are:

- A community based support system for anyone who has had a near-death, out-of-body, spiritually transformative or similar experience. Many of these groups are open to the public and offer sharing discussion.
- We provide support groups not therapy groups. We can recommend them to check the ACISTE website www.aciste.org for professionals but we do not recommend a particular therapist or professional to a FOI attendee.
- An educational information source for anyone who wants to know more about NDEs and other numinous experiences. As founder and researcher, Kenneth Ring stated, even non-near-death experiencers (nders) can have similar nder benefits/aftereffects just from listening to near-death

experiences. He named this phenomenon, the “benign virus” in his book: Lessons from the Light, or being an “NDER once removed”.

- Allow for freedom of interpretation of NDEs and similar experiences (no “party-line”) and does not proselytize any single point of view. IANDS’ purpose is to promote responsible, multi-disciplinary exploration of near-death and similar experiences. IANDS is impartial and open to the presentation of varying points of view. While all personal beliefs are respected, IANDS does not support **proselytizing** or promoting personal religious beliefs.
- While fostering the free exchange of ideas through open discussion, it safeguards the stability of its participants by not demonstrating or teaching techniques which are known to have been emotionally hazardous for some individuals;
- A group shall not engage in legislative lobbying or political activities using the IANDS name as this would jeopardize the IANDS tax exempt status.
- Encourage and promote meeting attendees to join IANDS by purchasing a membership. A trial group run is happening in Tucson/Phoenix for this as follows:
 - This is more properly seen as a partnership with IANDS as the major controlling partner and the group as a substantially incented junior partner.

Member Level	Member Pays	IANDS Share	Group Share
Basic – first year	\$30	\$20 (67%)	\$10 (33%)
Basic – renewals	\$40	\$30 (75%)	\$10 (25%)
Supporting (std, senior/student)	\$65, \$55	\$50, \$45 (77%, 82%)	\$15, \$10 (23%, 18%)
Professional (std, senior/stud.)	\$125, \$105	\$105, \$90 (84%, 86%)	\$20, \$15 (16%, 14%)
Sponsor (std, senior/student)	\$250, \$220	\$210, \$190 (84%, 86%)	\$40, \$30 (16%, 14%)
Patron	\$500	\$425 (85%)	\$75 (15%)
Benefactor	\$1,000	\$850 (85%)	\$150 (15%)

- Before the end of the year, AZ IANDS will provide a full accounting of memberships sold and the accrued income for each party. AZ IANDS will cover all expenses (charge card fees, etc.) for collecting for these memberships and will pay IANDS the exact income per membership sold as quoted in the above table by membership level.

- 5. The alternative to this proposal is that the group will (and must) sell its own memberships without a direct contribution to IANDS. The group membership incentives will accrue to the group's participants with or without an IANDS membership. The following list recaps a sample list of incentives that benefit group members...
 - a. Incentive #1: discounts on group sales (bookstore, recordings of a groups prior guest speakers, and other fundraising merchandise).
 - b. Incentive #2: preferred seating at crowded events for the most popular guest speakers.
 - c. Incentive #3: raffle bonus – 3 tickets for \$5 instead of the non-member 2 tickets for \$5 in a raffle to have dinner with a guest speaker.
 - d. Incentive #4: free member only events – like movie night (of course, people can join at the door if they aren't members or if their membership isn't current – i.e. renewed yet).
 - e. Incentive #5: member only communications – enriching the sharing of experiencer narratives and other group news.
 - f. Incentive #6: special recognition – there can be pride in carrying that membership card for IANDS and AZ IANDS.
 - g. And you name it as this approach will fire up other participating group imaginations on how to promote membership in ways we haven't thought about yet.

A group operating in accordance with these policies may use the name IANDS-[town], or Friends of IANDS-[town], or may choose another name.

Pursuant to these aims, the Association shall publish a newsletter, Vital Signs and a journal, Journal of Near-Death Studies; sponsor larger conferences for the general public; maintain archives of material pertaining to near-death and related phenomena; provide opportunities for experiencers of near-death and related phenomena, and other interested persons, to meet one another and share their mutual interests; lend support, as funds permit, to research near-death and related phenomena and the clinical application of the findings; and undertake fund-raising initiatives as needed to support and sustain its various activities.

Why IANDS?

Advantages -

Membership in IANDS provides your group with the credibility of affiliation with an established international organization recognized as the leader in the field.

Membership also provides services:

- Reliable information often not available elsewhere;
- Organizational and program assistance;
- Networking opportunities locally and worldwide;
- Printed and audiovisual resources;
- Advance notice of IANDS conferences and programs;
- And an occasional special-interest newsletter just for groups.

On The Other Hand—

Association membership may not appeal to every group because IANDS' program emphasis is mainly focused on the NDE and similar experiences. It may consider but does not long remain with other topics (past-lives, astral travel, channeling, apocalyptic interpretations, etc.) Furthermore, IANDS programs do not include instruction in any procedure that mimics the NDE or any of its aspects. The reasons: many experiencers are emotionally fragile; not all instructors are competent. We want people to know that they will be safe at an IANDS meeting. For these other interests, there are many alternative avenues.

Furthermore, IANDS holds no official "party line" on the interpretation of the experience. People of widely differing views and backgrounds have had similar experiences, though the language in which they talk about their NDEs may be quite different. A group that tolerates only one point of view or that wishes to promote its own beliefs to the exclusion of other perspectives, is incompatible with the purpose of IANDS.

More in-depth information regarding IANDS' Group Policies can be found here:

Addendum to IANDS Group Policies, Specific Situations:

The Board reviewed their existing policy on local IANDS groups and came up with the following answers to multiple questions raised to the board:

1. HOW CLOSE CAN TWO GROUPS BE LOCATED?

- A. There is no limitation on the number of IANDS groups allowed in any county, city or other jurisdiction. Anyone who is a supporting member can start and lead a group, all they need to do is sign up and pay the proper registration fees.
- B. Several groups can even meet in the same building.
- C. Social organizations always form cliques, and people tend to take political positions on many questions. Sometimes members may no longer get along, or people outside the group who want to attend, might find that people they disagree with on other topics are already in that IANDS group, and so may not want to attend the same group. So, just like churches sometimes break up IANDS groups can split as well.

2. WHO DECIDES WHAT THE GROUP SHALL INVESTIGATE?:

- A. There are a lot of paranormal subjects which are closely related to the NDE which group members might like to investigate. For example, Mediumship, Out-of-Body experiences and Remote Viewing, which are all controversial subjects in the scientific community, but all three are also the object of much scientific research, and these as well as a number of others are legitimate subjects for IANDS groups to investigate.
- B. On the other hand occult things like fortune telling (Tarot, Palm Reading, Astrology,) and Ghost Hunting are also para-normal subjects, but are not the subject of current scientific research and are probably not a good idea for an IANDS meeting. IANDS is not condemning participation in these areas by members, but because they are not of any current scientific interest, they should probably not be the subject of IANDS meetings.
- C. But, no group leader "owns" their group. The group leader is merely the "coordinator", and when there is a conflict within a group, the group leader should be lead by the will of the majority of the members in their group, rather than by their own interpretations.

3. WHEN THERE IS A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION?:

- A. While informed leadership should allow the majority to rule.
- B. When that level of magnanimity is not forthcoming, then rather than argue within the group, it is better to form two groups and allow each to go their own way.

4. FINALLY: When a group leader fears losing members because another group has formed to investigate subjects, which that original group leader would not allow them to investigate. The restrictive group leader should consider that their own choice, not to allow the members what they had the right to choose to study, forced them to leave.

Again, it is important that IANDS group leaders comprehend the importance of their role as leader, and that they are the administrator representing IANDS to the community, and as such, no IANDS Group leader “owns” their group as a private entity.

CONSEQUENTLY, If the existing IANDS group members vote NOT to have one particular topic as one of their subjects, they can collectively decide to restrict what they investigate to just NDE’s, but this should not be dictated by the group leader on the other members.

Pre-Planning

Decide Purpose; Find People; Find Place; Find Time

1. Focus

Early on, decide the group's purpose and stick to it. Do you want a support group primarily for experiencers or a study and discussion group for the general public? Or a speaker group one week and support discussion sharing the next meeting week? Your purpose will determine which people you invite and the program structure once they arrive.

2. Keep it simple

At the exploring stage you need only a handful of people, a library or church-friendly room or someone's living room, and a couple of hours a month for quiet discussion. Officers, letterhead, and rented meeting space can come later.

3. Finding People

Tell every sympathetic person you know what you are planning to do, invite them to attend, and ask for their suggestions about finding others. This applies both to experiencers and to other interested people, depending on your focus. Post flyers you've created in various places or hand-out in NDE-friendly places. Some places and people to contact:

IANDS website listing your group activities;

Online media such as Facebook, Meetup.com or Twitter;

Local metaphysical stores, yoga studios, alternative healer locations,

Whole Foods, etc. to name a few;

Nurses and hospital personnel (remember the VA and VNA, too);

Physicians and emergency personnel;

Funeral directors, workers in nursing homes and hospices;

Clergy; counselors and therapists; social workers;

Groups for bereaved parents, victims, the terminally ill;

Death and dying teachers

Word of mouth works too! (For more ideas, see the publicity section)

Facilitating a Group:

Basics to Remember

Honesty - People value freedom to say what they really think and feel without contradiction. NDEs and their aftereffects are not always wonderful, and insistence on a “rose-colored glasses” approach helps no one. Besides, it will soon show up in diminishing attendance.

The experience is not the person – Having “seen the Light” does not make a person “better” and it does not guarantee loving behavior. Conversely, a terrifying or hellish experience does not mark a person as “bad” or “negative.” At all costs, avoid judgmental or self-righteous comments with people who have had a frightening experience.

Listen, listen, listen – Meetings almost always meet people’s needs when the leader stays open to respond to cues from facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.

Focus – Do not allow anyone to attempt to teach such things as past-life regression, channeling, astral projection, speaking in tongues, or similar activities as part of an IANDS meeting. These and other topics will come up in conversation and can certainly be discussed, but acting on them has sometimes caused serious problems for emotionally vulnerable individuals. What people do on their own time is their business; what happens at the IANDS meeting is your business. Refer people to other groups to meet these interests, or separate the event and assist the presenter in hosting a workshop.

Confidence – Enjoy! Most group leaders and attendees find they can hardly wait for the next meeting. Some meetings will be wonderful, others might be a challenge. If you are worried about your abilities, share leadership with a trained social worker, counselor, or other person with strong group skills. Most groups find themselves able to handle just about any situation.

Contact information -- Have a sign up list so attendees can provide their contact information.

Support Groups

A support group can serve not only those people who have had a near-death or similar experience who may want to share it and are trying to integrate it into their lives, but

also close friends and family members of experiencers often need support, too. In addition, people who are losing (or have lost) a loved one, others who have questions about death, or who are themselves dying often find the sessions helpful.

Emphasis in a support group is on listening, openness, non-judgmental response, and absolute confidentiality, unless permission is granted by the experiencer. Its greatest strength is often simply giving people the opportunity to be with others “who know what it’s like.”

The most effective support group leaders are well organized, open, and non-judgmental – people who are not thrown by high feeling levels and unexpected disclosures. A sense of humor and the ability to be firm are also important. (And the very best leaders know their weak points and surround themselves with people who will “fill in the blanks.”)

It is easy enough to deal in a group with the “good stuff” that leaves experiencers feeling loved and purposeful. Early meetings are apt to emphasize these “good” aspects of the NDE. As people come to know and trust each other, another side of the NDE is likely to emerge. It’s not only that NDEs may lead into unfamiliar territory – for sometimes even positive aftereffects will sound genuinely bizarre to the uninitiated – but also that terrifying experiences do occur, and a group needs to be prepared to hear them. (Read “Understanding and Coping with a Frightening Near-Death Experience,” from IANDS.) Additionally, many experiencers encounter great difficulties in their lives after the NDE.

Common problems include:

- Feelings of vulnerability
- Fear- about insanity, ridicule, of not living up to the message of the experience, of the experience itself, if it was frightening;
- Anger – at being back, at loss of the former self and life
- Euphoria – a continuing radiant enthusiasm which others may not understand or find exhausting;
- These above can often be compounded by close family and friends wanting the old experiencer’s self-back.
- Grandiosity – ego-inflation, the sense of being “special” and “on a higher plane” than non-experiencers.
- Electrical or drug sensitivities may be heightened; change in belief systems. So be aware of recognizing these aftereffects:

AFTEREFFECTS by PMH Atwater

<http://iands.org/ndes/about-ndes/common-aftereffects.html>

Around eighty percent of the people who experienced near-death states claimed that their lives were forever changed by what happened to them. On closer examination, though, a pattern of surprising dimensions emerged. Experiencers were not returning with just a renewed zest for life and a more spiritual outlook. They were evidencing specific psychological and physiological differences on a scale never before faced by them. And this was true with child experiencers, as well as with teenagers and adults.

Various researchers have attempted to profile these changes over the years. Even without the necessary funding to do clinical studies, most feel that enough research has been done to justify acknowledging the **aftereffects** pattern and making information about it available. Knowing what is typical for experiencers should help to alleviate any worry or confusion not only for the individual involved—but for family and friends, as well as health-care professionals and the community at-large.

The pattern of **aftereffects** from near-death states can best be understood if considered under the separate headings of major characteristics of psychological and physiological changes. Details and explanations follow:

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES

Loss of the fear of death, more spiritual and less religious, easily engage in abstract thinking, more philosophical, can go through various bouts with depression, more generous and charitable than before, form expansive concepts of love while at the same time challenged to initiate and maintain satisfying relationships, "inner child" or unresolved issues from childhood tend to surface, less competitive, convinced of a life purpose, rejection of previous limitations in life and "normal" role-playing, heightened sensations of taste-touch-texture-smell, increased intuitive/psychic abilities plus the ability to know or "re-live" the future, charismatic, a child-like sense of wonder and joy, less stressed, more detached and objective, can continue to dissociate or "separate" from the body, easily absorbed ("merge into" whatever is focused on), hunger for knowledge and learning, highly curious.

- Near-death experiencers come to love and accept others without the usual attachments and conditions society expects. They perceive themselves as equally and fully loving of each and all, openly generous, excited about the potential and wonder of each person they see. Their desire is to be a conduit of universal love. Confused family members tend to regard this sudden switch in behavior as oddly threatening, as if their loved one had become aloof, unresponsive, even uncaring and unloving. Some mistake this "unconditional" way of expressing joy and affection (heart-centered rather than person-centered) as flirtatious disloyalty. Divorce can result.
- One of the reasons life seems so different afterward is because the experiencer now has a basis of comparison unknown before. Familiar codes of conduct can lose relevance or disappear altogether as new interests take priority. Such a shift in reference points can lead to a childlike naivete. With the fading of previous norms and standards, basic caution and discernment can also fade. It is not unusual to hear of near-death experiencers being cheated, lied to, or involved in unpleasant mishaps and accidents. Once they are able to begin integrating what happened to them, discernment usually returns.
- Most experiencers develop a sense of timelessness. They tend to "flow" with the natural shift of light and dark, and display a more heightened awareness of the present moment and the importance of being "in the now." Making future preparations can seem irrelevant to them. This behavior is often labeled "spaciness" by others, who do their best to ignore the change in perception, although seldom do they ignore the shift in speech. That's because many experiencers refer to their episode as if it were a type of "divider" separating their "former" life from the present one.
- There's no denying that experiencers become quite intuitive afterward. Psychic displays can be commonplace, such as: out-of-body episodes, manifestation of "beings" met in near-death state, "remembering" the future, finishing another's sentence, "hearing" plants and animals "speak." This behavior is not only worrisome to relatives and friends, it can become frightening to them. A person's religious beliefs do not alter or prevent this amplification of faculties and stimuli. Yet, experiencers willing to learn how to control and refine these abilities, consider them beneficial.

- Life paradoxes begin to take on a sense of purpose and meaning, as forgiveness tends to replace former needs to criticize and condemn. Hard driving achievers and materialists can transform into easy-going philosophers; but, by the same token, those more relaxed or uncommitted before can become energetic "movers and shakers," determined to make a difference in the world. Personality reversals seem to depend more on what's "needed" to round out the individual's inner growth than on any uniform outcome. Although initially bewildered, families can be so impressed by what they witness that they, too, change-making the experience a "shared event."
- The average near-death experiencer comes to regard him or herself as "an immortal soul currently resident within a material form so lessons can be learned while sojourning in the earth plane." They now know they are not their body; many go on to embrace the theory of reincarnation. Eventually, the present life, the present body, becomes important and special again.
- What was once foreign becomes familiar, what was once familiar becomes foreign. Although the world is the same, the experiencer isn't. Hence, they tend to experiment with novel ways to communicate, even using abstract and grandiose terms to express themselves. With patience and effort on everyone's part, communication can improve and life can resume some degree of routine. But, the experiencer seems ever to respond to a "tune" no one else can hear (this can continue lifelong).

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF PHYSIOLOGICAL CHANGES

Altered thought-processing (switch from sequential/ selective thinking to clustered thinking: thoughts bunch together/ideas pop up), comfortable with ambiguity, heightened intelligence, more creative and inventive, unusual sensitivity to light and sound, substantially more or less energy (even energy surges in body, oft times more sexual), reversal of body clock, lower blood pressure, accelerated metabolic and substance absorption rates (decreased tolerance of pharmaceuticals and chemically treated products), often turn to alternative healthcare treatments, electrical sensitivity, synesthesia (multiple sensing), increased allergies or sensitivities, can possess ability to heal, a

preference for more vegetables and grains (less of meat), physically younger looking (before and after photos can differ).

- Sensitivity to light and sound can be a serious issue and may necessitate some lifestyle changes. While most experiencers learn to limit sunshine exposure, others can't get enough. Almost everyone, though, has similar difficulties with loud or discordant sounds. Many can no longer tolerate "hard" rock music. The vast majority prefer classical, melodic, and/or natural sounds, and become passionate about using music to heal.
- Energy surges up and down the body happen to many, and can be accompanied by "lights" in the air. Researchers usually regard this as the release of "kundalini" (a Sanskrit term meaning "coiled energy at the base of the spine"). Supposedly, kundalini energy and spiritual energy are one in the same, yet the theory behind this idea remains unproven. To keep informed about ongoing research, contact Kundalini Research Network, c/o Dale Pond, R#5, Flesherton, Ontario, NOC IEO Canada.
- Electrical sensitivity refers to a condition whereby the forcefield or energy around an individual affects nearby electrical equipment and technological devices. Usually sporadic in effect and impact, some experiencers have noticed: watches can stop, microphones "squeal," tape recorders quit, television channels change with no one at controls, light bulbs pop, telephone "drops off," computers suddenly lose memory, and so forth. Experiencers more at ease with their new traits report fewer of these incidents than those still in the process of making adjustments.
- Physical differences, along with attitudinal changes, eventually lead experiencers to alter their approach to health and healing, employment, finances, lifestyle and relationship issues. Many say that it's almost as if they have to relearn how to use their own body and brain. Once adjustments are made, the majority come to live healthy, productive lives that are happier, more spiritually-oriented and energetic than before. To deny or repress the **aftereffects** seems to leave individuals feeling somehow "incomplete," and can foster unwanted "breakthroughs" years later.

Aftereffects cannot be faked. Nor can you hide your response to the way they affect you (whether you realize what you are doing or not).

You may be able to delay their onset or lessen the impact they have, but you cannot pretend away the complex and life-altering potential they bring.

Irrespective of any drama brought on by near-death states, what happens afterward is where true value and real meaning are established.

HELPFUL NOTES

It is possible to have near-death-like experiences without the threat of impending physical death. Children, for instance, can have death dreams that are unusually powerful. Adults can emerge unscathed from mishap, or find themselves slipping into a different meditative state, only to discover later on "they have changed." If a genuine case, the individual will exhibit the same pattern of **aftereffects** as a near-death experiencer.

Adjusting to the **aftereffects** takes time. The first three years tend to be the most confusing, almost as if the individual isn't "fully back." Experiencers and their families are urged to attend or start a local IANDS group, and to read the following books for in depth research studies about **aftereffects**.

➤ Become familiar with Yolaine Stout's spiritually transformative experiencer seven challenges list at the American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE):

Seven Common Challenges Following an STE

As part of the integration process that leads to positive changes and transformations following a spiritually transformative experience, an experiencer may also have to deal with one or more challenges. Not every person who has had a spiritually transformative experience deals with difficult challenges, nor to the same degree. The intensity, scope, or absence of the challenges depend on many factors, including the age or health of the experiencer, their cultural background beliefs and attitudes prior to the experience, the content of the experience and/or how the experience was accepted by one's significant relationships, including spouses, parents, friends, colleagues, doctors, clergy, therapists, etc.

The following is a list and description of possible challenges faced by people who have had one or more spiritually transformative experiences. The challenges may overlap and they may not occur in the sequence provided.

Common challenges include:

- Processing a radical shift in reality
- Accepting the return and "homesickness"

- Issues related to sharing the experience
- Integrating new spiritual values with earthly expectations
- Problems dealing with psychic abilities
- Increased sensitivity to electricity, chemicals, smells, sounds, etc.
- A yearning to find and live one's purpose

Depending on the severity of these challenges and other life factors, an experiencer may have difficulty with isolation, depression, anxiety, divorce, substance abuse or financial distress.

Processing a radical shift in reality

A spiritually transformative experience can be a dramatic and complete immersion into a reality unlike anything experienced in one's life previously. As a result of this experience, experiencers may undergo a permanent and complete paradigm shift in their views of their roles in life, reality and what happens when they die. It can be a sudden diversion from one's accustomed perspective on life and catalyst for profound change. Childhood experiencers may not describe or remember their lives prior to their experiences, but are impacted by feeling different from children who have not had these experiences.

Unlike dreams or hallucinations, STERs often describe their experiences as either equally real or more real than reality itself. To re-enter one's body or reality after this experience, with a new view of self and life's purpose, much time is needed to process the experience and all of its implications. The adjustment or integration period can continue for years or for the rest of one's life. Henceforth, experiencers may struggle to integrate or bring into balance the two differing subjective experiences of reality – a physical and a non-physical realm, this life and an afterlife, an earthly reality and a spiritual reality.

Accepting the return and homesickness"

How easily an experiencer accepts being returned to his or her life depends on many of the above-mentioned factors. While many experiencers may refer to the reality of their experiences as "home," not all experiences are filled with love and light. Some may be extremely frightening.

In the case of uplifting experiences, many can develop a yearning to return or become "homesick" which can be an ongoing challenge or one that is intermittent. The yearning for "home" can be so strong that some may become depressed or even consider suicide. They may not carry out their suicides, for fear or guilt, or religious concerns. Others may feel ungrounded for some time, or devote themselves to spiritual or meditative practices in the attempt to recapture the love and peace felt in their experience.

In the case of near-death experiencers, a good percentage choose to return to their bodies, for the sake of loved ones or other reasons, however many more are not given a choice to return at all. Emotions regarding the return can range from anger to

giddiness at the thought of being able to serve others. Other emotions are fear, disappointment, bitterness, unhappiness, acceptance, rejection, gratitude, confusion, relief and humility.

Near-death experiencers, in particular, may still be dealing with the physical pain, illness and/or emotional traumas that led up to the experience in the first place, which can exacerbate any feelings of homesickness, sadness or anger over being sent back.

Issues related to sharing the experience

One of the most common challenges experiencers face are those related to labeling, describing and sharing their experiences. At the same time, research has indicated that in order to successfully integrate the meaning and impact of these experiences, experiencers need to be able to share them and discuss their meanings and consequences in supportive contexts. Yet, most experiencers deal with invalidating, uninformed, or otherwise harm-producing responses or do not share them at all, for fear of invalidation. The need to disclose or share the experience, especially immediately afterwards, may be intense, especially with one's loved ones. Their response can greatly influence whether or when the experiencer chooses to share his or her experience again. Perhaps the least shared experiences are those which may invoke ridicule or judgment, including those who had suicidal near-death experiences, ones associated with substance abuse or for those who had terrifying or distressing experiences.

Dealing with invalidation

Another issue related to sharing the experience is coping with traumatic and isolating effects of having shared this very intimate and personal experience with doctors, family members or trusted friends who were dismissive, misunderstanding, or otherwise negative. There is a valid concern that one could be pathologized or diagnosed with a mental illness by uninformed professional healthcare providers. Experiencers have reported divorce, ex-communication from churches and being fired from jobs for issues related to sharing the experience. As long as people commonly dismiss these experiences as "dreams," "tricks played by Satan" or hallucinations, experiencers' fears are well justified. – hence the importance of confidentiality within ACISTE.

There are several kinds of invalidating responses, even from well-intentioned persons. While a near-death experiencer may be seeking validation and understanding, listeners may be more interested in the details surrounding the manner of death. Others may be curious about the experience, but are seeking confirmation in that experience for their own religious or spiritual beliefs. Others may not believe in a person's near-death experience because the experiencer was not clinically dead or did not see a tunnel or other expected feature. Others may expect an experiencer to behave more positively or have certain attitudes or beliefs because of their experience. If their expectations are not met, they may dismiss the experience or reject the experiencer.

Ineffability

Even in a supportive context, experiencers struggle to express what happened to them because there is no earthly comparison or existing vocabulary for much of the content of the experience. Those can include new and palpable feelings of love, peace, unity, timelessness or all-knowing. There may be perceptions, colors and sounds never felt, seen or heard before. The inability to convey the totality of the experience leaves many feeling that other people can never truly share, comprehend or believe them.

As a result of the difficulties related to sharing many have kept their experiences to themselves for decades, often with stressful consequences. Some have never shared their experiences even with family members. Experiencers often report feelings of alienation, isolation or depression.

Integrating new spiritual values with earthly expectations

The values, message and meaning of the experience are often completely inconsistent with one's life prior to the experience, but the experiencer is compelled to align that inconsistent life with his or her new paradigm. Perhaps the most common message in these experiences is the importance of unconditional love and how we treat each other on earth. Experiencers are frequently given implicit instructions, guidance warnings, lessons, prophecies, knowledge or messages. They report feeling challenged, urged or compelled to live up to these upon their return becoming more compassionate, forgiving tolerant loving or empathetic.

These new outlooks, directions and changes can bring friction in almost all important areas of an experiencer's life. The experience affects relationships with others, careers, money, religion, spirituality, etc. Divorce and career changes bring on stressful emotional and financial upheaval, in addition to the other challenges an experiencer faces. In studies of near-death experiencers, the divorce rate among adult experiencers is higher than that of non-experiencers.

Changes in attitudes towards careers and money

Experiencers frequently report career changes due at least in part to their experiences. Conflicting values and attitudes may be: "A position of power no longer meant anything to me." "I saw how my job was irrelevant." "I couldn't handle how they treated people." "They took earthbound things too seriously." "They saw me as weak." "I could no longer tolerate the avarice and greed." "I had a heightened intuition about what was happening and didn't dare speak the truth." "It wasn't acceptable to talk about my experience at work." Experiencers may have difficulty in choosing new careers or directions that are more closely aligned with his or her spiritual values. To meet this challenge, experiencers often turn to careers or volunteer work with charitable organizations or service-oriented businesses.

Changes in religious views

Experiencers may no longer hold conventional views of "heaven," "hell," "God," "evil," or "sin." In one study, 78% of near-death experiencers said their attitudes about their religious upbringing changed following their NDEs. An experiencer's new and often passionate views of spirituality and/or religion, can evoke tension and even hostility among family members and religious followers. A radical change in spiritual, religious views may alienate the experiencer from previous relationships with family, friends and one's traditional religious community. Some may strengthen their previously held religious views and become more involved with their religious communities.

Changes in societal, political views

Views towards social issues of violence, prejudice, disease, poverty, or justice often become very pronounced. An experiencer may become an activist or intensely devoted to a cause that previously held little or no interest to him or her. Changes in political or social views can bring additional tensions to spouses, family members and friends who once shared similar views.

Changes in attitudes toward death

As the vast majority of near-death experiencers lose their fear toward death, they may express a joy or assurance in the afterlife for the dying or the grieving. These helpful emotions can be difficult to suppress as they see their loved ones suffer, in their view, perhaps needlessly. These views can put them at odds with family members who may misinterpret an experiencer's confidence in the afterlife. Many experiencers become hospice workers or spiritual counselors for the dying and the bereaved.

Changes in attitudes toward healing

While little research has been done in this area, it can be surmised from changes in careers that experiencers change their attitudes in what causes or heals disease. Many experiencers become healers using energy, visualization, intuitive or other alternative approaches to standard medical treatments. They themselves may be reluctant to seek out medical attention for a number of reasons, including a lack of confidence in medical procedures, heightened sensitivities to chemicals, an aversion to the system itself, a belief in the power to heal themselves, or by alternative methods, a belief that the health problem is the result of fate, punishment or spiritual lesson, or they may have a yearning to return "home." These beliefs may frustrate family members or friends of the experiencer who rely on standard medical procedures as their chief source of healing.

Problems dealing with psychic abilities

Of all spiritually transformative experiences, near-death events have been the most studied, especially as it relates to aftereffects. Initial survey results by ACISTE indicate that these same aftereffects apply, whether or not an experiencer was close to death. As part of the change experiencers undergo, they describe the challenge of adjusting to

heightened sensitivities and or psychic gifts, not all of which were welcomed. In one study, 78% of near-death experiencers said that these heightened sensitivities or gifts caused them problems.

In this same study, 100% of the respondents reported a heightened awareness and sensitivity to strong emotions and negative behaviors. Typical comments were: "I had to be alone with my senses a lot. This caused a problem with my relationships." "It's hard for other people to understand why I am so sensitive." "Lying behavior is most troublesome." "I feel other people's pain." "I would pick up on people's anxiety and get stomach problems." "I walk out of places that feel evil."

83% reported being more acutely sensitive or aware of smells, visions, tastes, sounds and/or touch. The majority reported a heightened awareness or sensitivity to electricity, energetic fields, chi and/or auras.

In addition to these aftereffects, they may report one or more psychic abilities. The abilities may include:

- intuitive, auditory or visual knowledge of what is or what is to come
- mediumship
- telepathy
- seeing auras
- ability to communicate with animals
- automatic writing

While many people may embrace or seek these abilities, that is not necessarily the case with some experiencers. These abilities can surprise and disrupt one's customary thought processes and actions. Some may adjust them into their lives or turn them into careers, accepting them as gifts, while others described how they prayed to be "left alone."

Increased sensitivity to electricity, chemicals, smells, sounds, etc.

Many experiencers report a heightened sensitivity to electricity, chemicals, smells, loud noises, etc. They frequently describe difficulties readjusting into previously "normal" environments, job settings, situations and events. The sensitivity towards electricity or energetic fields can be so intense that experiencers may feel they cannot work with computers, wear watches or be around electrical devices. They may believe devices not only malfunction in their presence, but feel uncomfortable around any event, device or person who generates "negative energy."

Some report new allergies or sensitivities to chemicals or smells. Many to turn to organic foods, avoid perfume or scented or chemically treated products.

A yearning to find and live one's purpose

Experiencers may struggle not just with the fact that they were sent back, but also with the reason for it. Some are told they have a purpose, but they may not be told what it

is. Many rely on some form of guidance or intuition to make their decisions, but others struggle with finding a specific purpose. Experiencers may agree that, in general, we are here to serve and show unconditional love, but that may be a tall order – short on specifics and difficult to apply.

Many believe that everything happens for a reason, although they may not know what those reasons are. Some believe that we chose our lessons. Comments may include: “It’s all homework.” “It’s not the experience, but how we respond to it.” “We manifest our own disasters.” “To keep us on the path.” “In order to appreciate life more, we must experience loss.” These are beliefs that often run counter to traditional religious views.

Experiencers may have a very urgent need to live according to the message or values learned in the experience. Some may fear returning without having fulfilled their mission.

Chances are that with a few simple guidelines the group will be able to respond to almost any issues. It is important to remember that the group exists to offer support, not therapy. For the occasional individual who cannot let go of the experience, who cannot seem to reenter this world, or who has problems that are not met by the sharing and support of the group, you will want to recommend them to ACISTE <https://aciste.org/support-directory/>

If some experiencers attend meetings for months without saying anything, you will want to be sure that the meeting structure is not keeping people from talking. Is someone monopolizing conversation? If so, you can stop the person at a good point, ask what others think? Do comments sound judgmental? Are some points of view discouraged? Do you as a leader freeze up or adamantly disagree with certain experiences? Know what your ‘buttons’ are, that when pushed they cause you to vehemently take a side. It’s helpful to recommend at the beginning of a meeting that people use “I” – not “You” statements (you should believe X or you should do X). Privately, ask the non-talkers for their comments. The group may be meeting their needs even without their active participation.

If you are genuinely concerned about your ability to lead a support group, find someone with group skills as a co-leader. Visit a couple of other groups – Compassionate Friends, AA, or any other support organization. Notice how the meeting is structured & how it is kept moving.-

More in-depth detail about Facilitating a Support Group can be found here:

Facilitating Support Groups

Support groups are among the best and most popular approaches to empowering and connecting people. In support groups, participants can open up, realize they are not alone, heal old hurts, set new goals, learn new skills, take charge of their lives, and become leaders themselves. For many people, a support group is the best arena for these kinds of changes.

Leading a support group can be a rewarding and growth-enhancing activity. However, it can also be very challenging. This article discusses ideas and approaches to facilitating an effective support group. It addresses the planning process before the group begins, an overview of leadership skills and activities, ways to include people with communication impairments, difficulties and challenges that may arise, and evaluation of the group.

Support groups have changed millions of people's lives for the better.

Planning in Advance

The Power of Support Groups

Support groups are among the best and most popular approaches to empowering and connecting people. Leading a support group can be a rewarding and growth-enhancing activity. However, it can also be very challenging. This article discusses ideas and approaches to facilitating an effective support group.

Planning in Advance

Goals of the Group

Start your planning session by thinking about the goals of the group. Goals may change with input from members. However, facilitators should decide in advance what they want the group's objectives to be so they can better orient members. Goals of a support group can include the following:

- Sharing stories, thoughts, ideas, and emotions
- Listening and learning about commonalities and differences
- Breaking debilitating isolation and realizing that no one is alone with particular feelings and experiences
- Deepening understanding of personal or social issues
- Grappling with difficult life experiences
- Exploring new ways of learning or acquiring new skills

Qualifications for Support-Group Leaders

Support-group leaders must have good organizing and follow-through skills, be able to set relevant goals, be good listeners, be welcoming, confident, and empathetic, and hold high expectations for others. They should be respectful, warm, genuine, relatively calm when facing interpersonal conflict, and willing to ask for help when necessary. Support-group leaders should be prepared to make referrals to community resources, if appropriate, and be able and willing to evaluate the group.

Prerequisites for Leading Support Groups

Leaders need to become familiar and relaxed with the dynamics of group interaction. Challenges can arise, including conflict between group participants, and observing veteran leaders address these challenges is helpful to the leaders-in-training.

Experience with meetings or trainings taking place in work settings, for example, is different from experience with support-group dynamics, which encourage emotional sharing. Potential leaders can find opportunities for group experiences in faith-based, personal-growth, and recreational activities, 12-step programs, adult-education classes, and other venues. Individuals who are not experienced with group interaction need to make sure they have a co-leader who is.

Shared Leading

Having two co-leaders facilitate a support-group meeting helps the group because two individuals are observing and responding to the group's dynamics. Co-facilitating provides the group's leaders with the benefit of jointly planning the meeting's [logistics](#) and gives them the opportunity of constructive debriefing after meetings. Sharing leadership of support-group meetings also means there is a backup if one leader is absent.

If the co-leaders have comparable experiences and similar skills, the group leadership can be shared. If one individual has more experience as a leader, the other person can function as an assistant or apprentice leader and hone his or her leadership skills. To avoid unnecessary competition or confusion between co-leaders, they must decide in advance who will function as the main leader for the group series or for a specific group meeting. The designated main leader then has to exercise his or her best judgment in consultation with the co-leader.

Some groups rotate leadership duties and responsibilities. This approach has definite advantages. For one, it allows everyone the opportunity to think broadly about the group's goals, plan meeting logistics, facilitate meetings, and be exposed to a variety of leading styles.

Solo leadership can be difficult, especially if conflict arises (see the [section on Group Challenges](#)). Sole responsibility for leading a support group can be a lonely job and result in early burnout, but can work if no qualified person is available to co-lead. Solo leaders, though, need to make sure to get help with the logistics of the meetings and ensure they have someone to talk to occasionally about how the group is going, especially if leading the group gets difficult.

Regular Planning

Support-group leaders should initially discuss their expectations of the group, finances, logistics, and how they will share the authority and responsibility of the leadership role. Leaders may need to keep some records, such as contact information, attendance, participant roster, finances, issues raised, difficulties and solutions, ideas for future meetings, participants' ideas, input, and evaluation. Leaders should plan whether group sessions will include only predictable activities or can have spontaneous and/or creative activities.

Leaders also need to think about topics in advance and plan approaches to the meetings. They can pose topics for discussion, and eventually, group members might even become a good source of inspiration for topics to discuss and share. Group leaders have to allow for time spent in meetings brainstorming topics for future discussion. Depending on the kind of group, facilitators may want to invite speakers, watch movies, or share reading materials as stimuli for sharing and learning. Arriving at meetings without clear ideas about the topic or focus should be avoided. In many groups, "What shall we talk about tonight?" doesn't inspire confidence, and may make participants feel uneasy. It may be effective, however, to change the group-session focus spontaneously, depending on what participants are excited or concerned about. Leaders need to communicate regularly in person or by phone or email to plan meetings that reflect what is currently happening in the group.

Finite or Open Duration, Closed or Open Membership

Facilitators should determine in advance if the group meetings will be open-ended or have an ending to be determined.

Logistics

Leaders must plan in advance for the group's logistics. These include finding a space to meet; deciding how often and when to meet; coordinating with organizational calendars as necessary; organizing reminder calls or emails; arranging rides or transportation and parking; considering [disability access](#) and accommodations; planning finances, including whether to charge participants a fee and who will collect it, whether leaders will be paid, and whether to provide refreshments; and deciding who will set up, clean up, and lock up. Eventually, after the group is underway, participants will likely help with logistics.

Outreach

Outreach or recruitment for the group can be done through flyers, bulletin boards, email or postal mailings, newsletters, ads in newspapers, announcements and presentations at community centers and events, and word-of-mouth via already interested members.

Leading Skills and Activities

Ground Rules

Ground rules are part of the structure of successful meetings. They need to be in place prior to the first meeting. Leaders may open the first meeting by stating the ground rules and making sure that every participant understands and agrees to them. Leaders may

even decide to restate the rules at the beginning of every meeting to refresh participants' memories. Restating them is certainly a must if the meetings are open-ended and have an open enrollment.

Depending on each support group's [logistics](#) and goals, ground rules will vary from group to group. However, the following areas are applicable to the majority of group meetings:

- *Confidentiality*
A request for confidentiality allows group members to feel more comfortable sharing or discussing sensitive issues. Confidentiality is highly important for most support groups. Inform and ask that group members agree that information shared at the meetings is not to be repeated outside the group. It is not possible to guarantee that all members will respect this and regular reminders will be helpful, especially if the group is open to new members.
- *Positive Regard*
Positive regard is the assumption that everyone is doing the best she can. Leaders can remind the group's participants that everyone's viewpoint is formed by his or her own personal history and values, and that these should be respected.
- *Good Listening*
Group members may feel the urge to offer each other suggestions and advice. Facilitators can counteract this urge by encouraging participants to listen to each other without giving advice or interpreting what they hear. Equally helpful is teaching them to assume that everyone knows best what she needs, and deserves the space and support to figure it out on her own. Sympathetic comments, such as "I know how you feel," may be appropriate or not, depending on the goals of the group. Group leaders need to remind members that overenthusiastic sympathy may be felt to be [patronizing](#) or distracting, and that good listening is the best way to promote open sharing and an empowering group experience.

Styles and Modes of Leading

Conducting or structuring the interactions between group members can be done in various ways and these often can be combined. Yet each style has its advantages and disadvantages. Leaders can develop a repertoire of styles to use with different kinds of groups or participants.

- *Conversational Discussion Style*
Most people are already familiar with conversational discussions in small groups, such as at parties or in classrooms. This style of interaction encourages people to speak up when they feel comfortable contributing. The disadvantage is that those with more confidence may dominate the discussion, and those with less confidence, for reasons such as language facility, race, class dynamics, age, [disability](#), gender, etc., may end up being silent. Often, silent members want to participate, but feel hesitant. The facilitator can direct non-confrontational questions at individuals, calling on people by name to draw quieter members into the discussion. Passing around a "talking stick" (or any object) makes it more obvious in the group who is doing most of the talking and helps encourage more equal sharing.

- *Taking Turns*
Establishing a practice of taking turns, such as going around the circle or making sure each member gets a random turn, ensures that everyone has a chance to actively participate. Turns can be timed precisely with a clock or timer, or be estimated. With the latter, leaders are responsible for paying attention so that informal, untimed turns are approximately equal. For many, taking turns is a welcome contrast to ordinary conversation because it easily enables fairer distribution of sharing. The disadvantage of having participants take turns is that members may, at first, feel restricted or stilted in responding or connecting with each other. Similarly, the restriction on crosstalk during turns may make some people feel overly controlled. Turns can be alternated with open discussion to allow the advantages of both.
- *Following a Script or Prescribed Agenda*
Some group programs offer preset agendas with scripts or designs that prescribe a step-by-step plan for learning or sharing activities, with varying degrees of optional or individualized activities. These can help less-experienced leaders successfully facilitate groups. The downside is the lack of spontaneity or creativity in responding to group members' needs or preferences.
- *Listening Pairs*
Including short timed "listening pairs," or dyads, within a group of six or more participants can greatly enhance the effectiveness of a support group. Having group members meet in listening pairs for a few minutes, within a one- or two-hour meeting, has many advantages:
 - It encourages members to connect with each other individually, creating stronger relationships between participants, which in turn greatly enhance the group's closeness and rapport.
 - It allows focused listening, which encourages people to share more deeply than they might feel comfortable doing in the larger group.
 - It takes good advantage of meeting time, enabling more individual focus than is typically possible in the larger group.
 - It offers a variation in the activities of the group.
 - It teaches and reinforces good listening skills in one-to-one interaction.
 - It gives the leaders time to observe and rethink the group dynamic.

Sometimes group leaders or members object to breaking off in pairs because they assume that everyone in the group would want to hear everything that's being said. But the advantages of occasionally using listening pairs are well worth the trade-off of sometimes missing other participants' comments.

Some participants may find dyads logistically difficult, due to mobility issues, limited space, or distraction from the noise of several pairs talking at once. Planning for specific needs in advance can help accommodate people who may otherwise not get to enjoy this opportunity.

Listening pairs may easily regress to conversation and mutual interruptions. Inviting members to stick to the role of "listener" and "speaker" helps remind them of the rare and helpful resource of receiving the full attention of a respectful listener.

Openings and Closings

Opening group meetings with a go-around has several functions. Since support groups often focus on painful issues, sharing positive experiences in the beginning can contribute more of a balanced view. For example, leaders could ask group members to share something that went well for them that week. Beginning the meeting with a go-around gives each person a voice and visibility in the group and helps "break the ice" for less confident people; each person will have spoken and thus speaking up spontaneously later in the discussion might be easier. Go-arounds give an opportunity to share personal information that might not emerge in discussion, so members can get to know each other better.

However, some people feel "put on the spot" in a go-around. People with differing language backgrounds, shy personalities, speech impairments, such as stuttering, or people with autism or other kinds of hidden disabilities may feel uncomfortable with the whole group focusing on them during the opening. Leaders should allow anyone to pass on their turn. Reassure everyone that it is alright to just listen. Leaders can approach people individually before or after the group meeting and ask if there is a way to make participation more comfortable.

Group meetings also benefit from a focused closing, such as a brief go-around where each member shares a comment, such as a positive reflection on the meeting. Group facilitators should avoid asking for evaluative comments or feedback at the end of the meeting because responses can degenerate into complaints or criticisms, without time to address them, because the meeting is over. (Feedback is important, just not at the very end of the meeting. Leaders can suggest that people offer constructive suggestions at a time when they can be considered.) Here are some suggestions for a focused closing:

- Share one thing that was moving or useful from this evening's meeting.
- Say one thing you appreciate about someone else in the group.
- What's something you're looking forward to this week?

Shared Responsibility

Group leaders need to allow a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for brief announcements and questions, such as where drinking water or the bathrooms are located, inquiries about refreshments, finances, logistics, reminder calls, or emails, rides, and plans for clean-up, etc. Encouraging members to share in the logistics of the meetings often enhances participants' commitment and gives them a sense of belonging. It also lets them share some of the responsibilities and work of organizing the meetings.

Group Members Leaving

Leaders should decide in advance on how to handle people leaving the group mid-series or mid-meeting (and whether to ask them to say goodbye); how to solicit feedback from all participants, using a questionnaire or evaluation session, for example; how to determine criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the group; and whether to have some kind of certificate or final party or event at the end, if a finite series of meetings is planned.

Keeping an Eye on the Time

Leaders must keep an eye on the clock, so they will have enough time to address important group business and end the meeting with a focused closing. Leaders who find themselves often running out of time can ask a participant to help remind them unobtrusively about the time. For example, facilitators could arrange for a participant to signal how many minutes remain before the end of the meeting.

Humor and Fun

People need to laugh! Opportunities to laugh about difficulties and serious topics are precious and necessary. Facilitators need to think about ways to lighten up the group discussion with jokes, silliness, skits, play, or games. It is usually worth the risk of making adults feel a bit embarrassed or childish in order to have them try creative approaches to fun. Leaders can also invite participants to take turns generating ideas and opportunities for humor and fun.

Bringing Objects or Photos

Group leaders can invite members to occasionally bring personal items for a show-and-tell session. Members can bring a few family photos or treasured objects to share with the group. Making show-and-tell activities part of the group meeting helps personalize as well as make more vivid the sharing of life stories.

Including Participants with Communication Impairments

All human beings need contact with others to learn, grow, and flourish, and to become more confident about relationships. Group leaders should never assume that individuals who cannot talk or who do not communicate in the usual ways do not want to interact with others or participate in groups. People with communication impairments may in fact long for contact with others, because they are often isolated or limited from ordinary conversational communication with friends, family, and the general public. Like everyone else, they can benefit from group interaction and socializing.

Focusing on Inclusiveness

The typical focus of support groups is on talking and listening. Of course, people with communication impairments face **barriers** to free-flowing verbal interaction. However, support groups can include many different kinds of interaction in addition to verbally sharing information. Interactions can include listening to and making music and rhythm, watching movies, doing artwork, engaging in movement, dance, and physical play. Opportunities for laughter are especially important.

Yet not every person with a communication impairment will or can benefit from a support group. For example, some people with autism (though not all) may not enjoy group interactions. Still, the majority of people with communication impairments are unnecessarily excluded from group activities. With some advance planning and allowing for necessary accommodations, support group leaders can include people with many kinds of communication impairments. A host of websites and printed materials pertaining to specific impairments and offering accommodation information are

available. For example, topics addressed are sign language interpretation, assisted listening devices, computerized communication boards, facilitated communication, and other technologies.

.

Group Challenges

Deeper Sharing

Sometimes group members reveal a deeper level of sharing than expected. This can be considered a compliment to the group and to its leaders for creating a safe atmosphere for participants to open up and reveal personal struggles in order to move beyond them. While this level of sharing can contribute to a deepening of the group dynamic, it also can lead to some challenges for the leaders.

Disclosure of Painful or Unexpected Information

Group members sometimes surprise other participants (and often themselves) by revealing painful stories or disclosing sometimes shocking personal information. For example, members might share suicidal or homicidal thoughts or talk about recent divorces, deaths, prison terms, abortions, or suicides of loved ones. Other loaded issues that could arise include infidelity, psychiatric or [disability](#) history; gay, lesbian, or transgender identity; past or current alcoholism or illegal drug use; stories of abuse or criminal history; or terminal medical diagnoses given to group members or their loved ones. This level of sharing may or may not be welcomed by participants and, depending on the focus or goals of the group or prevailing community values, such disclosures can create confusion, embarrassment, or dismay. Others in the group may not know how to respond, causing an awkward silence or shock to ensue. Sometimes members will make (directly or indirectly) a request for help that isn't expected or may exceed the group's abilities to respond adequately.

Here are some suggestions for how group leaders can respond to unexpected disclosures:

- Thank you for taking the risk of sharing your story/such personal information with us/the group.
- Thank you for sharing that with us. I know some of us, including myself, may feel a little uncomfortable (or upset, distressed, sad, etc.) hearing that and do not know how to respond, but we really appreciate your honesty and the trust you have in us by sharing this information.
- Thank you for being open with your information/story. I know others in the group would like to be of support to you. (Depending on the goals of the group, ask if she would be willing to speak individually after the meeting.)

If the response is yes, leaders might ask:

(Name of individual) has shared some very personal/difficult information (or asked for help). Would anyone in the group like to connect with her about this after the meeting?

If no one responds, facilitators could add:

- That's okay, how about you and I talk about some options after the meeting is over.

Dominating Members

Sometimes a group member dominates the discussion, but appears unaware of taking more than their fair share. One approach to address this imbalance is by saying, "Let's hear what others have to say on this issue or topic." If that doesn't work, group leaders might want to take the person aside after a meeting. They can mention that they noticed she has a lot of interesting things to say, but are concerned that others in the group are silent or not opening up as much. They can ask the individual to engage other group members by suggesting she ask more questions of others.

If a group member is really dominating and appears unable or unwilling to control her enthusiasm, leaders may need to set some limits. They can suggest a finite number of times the individual in question may comment in the group, 4 times per meeting, for example, or that they speak only for a specific length of time per meeting, say 5 minutes. Usually people who tend to dominate the discussion feel embarrassed about this tendency and are actually grateful if it is brought to their attention. Most people really want all participants to share equally.

Conflict between Members

Sometimes group sharing and discussion can reveal disagreement in opinions and cause conflict between group members, or can even bring up differences in deeply held values. Sometimes comments from one person can trigger old resentments or upsets that a second person ascribes to insensitivity, but are actually just a reminder of something painful from long ago. At times, even a casual comment can be misinterpreted as oppressive, sexist, racist, or in some way discriminatory.

Group members may also make thoughtless comments, oppressive jokes, or reveal unawareness and be unable to apologize sufficiently to defuse an upset. These upsets can snowball in the group, as other members are made uncomfortable by the tension and may react emotionally themselves. Upsets can occur even if the focus of the group is intended to be benign sharing.

Experienced group leaders can anticipate conflicts between group members and stay relaxed and encouraging. The most productive attitude for leaders to take is that conflict is not necessarily detrimental to the group's process. Moreover, if handled with relaxed and reassuring guidance, working through conflicts can help group members connect more deeply with each other and promote growth, increased trust, and a greater willingness to share.

Why Conflict Arises

A certain degree of conflict in an ongoing group is inevitable. For some people, a support group seems to be a natural trigger for upset feelings and subsequent conflict. All of us find ourselves at times annoyed or ticked off by others, often people we have a close relationship with, but sometimes by strangers, co-workers, or casual friends. This

process of "getting our buttons pushed" can be explained in the following, simplified way: We have all been hurt earlier in our lives. Important needs did not get met in our families of origin. Insults and injuries have occurred throughout our lives, and while some were aimed specifically at us as individuals, others were more systemic mistreatment, such as sexism, racism, or disability discrimination.

This backlog of previous hurts is not typically present in our consciousness, but it is waiting to surface. We all have an unconscious desire to recall these old injuries, reveal them to others, and get help with recovering to the point of reframing them from an adult perspective. But until we get a chance to elicit those old hurts and reflect on them repeatedly, they will continue to arise as raw emotional pain. We are usually not aware that the current situation is just triggering old pain, because it flashes back as if it were fresh. And since typically we first experienced the pain as a victim targeted with mistreatment, we often tend to repeat that stance, blaming someone else for causing us pain.

In a support-group setting, the casual comment or interaction triggering our old pain to resurface is generally benign. Even if the content is less than thoughtful, it likely will not warrant a strong reaction from us in the present. However, since the present occurrence reminds us of some distant, unconscious distress, we do react. Indeed, for most people and most upsetting incidents, the old pain lurking in the unconscious greatly distorts many of our interactions in the present, even if the current interaction was in some way "off" (meaning unsatisfactory or inappropriate), for example. The old pain makes it much more difficult to sort out what is really going on in the present. Yet bringing it to the surface can be a growth-promoting experience if it is handled well.

A support-group setting can become a productive arena for this process of defusing old pain. It invites people to share and reflect on their experiences, positive as well as negative, and to express their feelings in an environment that is meant to be caring and thoughtful. Yet two challenging developments may take place:

1. People may unconsciously decide to feel emotionally safe and eager to show their old pain to this unusual gathering of people who offer to listen and care.
2. The interactions in a group will not always go smoothly, because people are people. We all have our ragged edges, history of hurts, and areas of unawareness, and we are not always sensitive to everyone's needs. Thus, old disappointments arise from early family life, where our own loved ones sometimes failed to offer unconditional caring and respectful listening.

These two factors can create a "double whammy" of an unexpected safety to feel and express typically hidden emotions, potentially pleasing as well as alarming to participants, and a setup to feel disappointed that the "perfect (unconditional) caring" we've always hoped for isn't here either.

With some groups, these factors can be discussed and explored in advance, so that members are better prepared when their buttons get pushed. If the focus of the group is charged or controversial, upsets are even more likely to happen. Participants will inadvertently remind each other of painful experiences they may have forgotten or repressed, and the level of upset is likely to be high when sharing a fair amount of painful experiences.

In most community support-group settings, particularly those run by inexperienced leaders, this potentially turbulent process may seem mysterious and overwhelming. The new relationships being formed in the group may not yet be strong enough to handle such intense emotions and conflicts, which sometimes can seriously disrupt the group. Leaders can prepare in advance by role-playing possible scenarios and incorporating the suggested responses in the following section.

Tips on Handling Conflict

Here are some techniques leaders can use to help ease conflict:

- Rather than ignoring the conflict, it is better for the group leaders to openly acknowledge that the conflict exists and is difficult for them, too. They can say something like, "It feels like there's tension in the air. Maybe we can all take a deep breath...Let's take another deep breath."
- Remind other group members to offer relaxed, generous attention and request that they try not to get pulled into the conflict.
- Don't take sides. Suggest to members that a conflict is potentially an arena for insight and growth, not a debate about who is right or wrong. Feelings are not right or wrong, feelings are feelings.
- Adhere to [positive regard](#) for all involved. Remind all group members that people are doing the best they can.
- Ask the members in conflict to hold off the debate until after the meeting, or alternatively, to consider just letting it go. If someone refuses to comply or insists on demonstrating control through shouting or demands, the meeting must end.
- Do not attempt to resolve the upset while group members are still agitated, because it often leads to further conflict. People do not think clearly when they are angry and they may end up making further provocative comments.
- Never attempt to remove one member engaged in the conflict and continue the meeting with the rest of the participants. This is too upsetting for everyone and has a potential for serious repercussions. If upset members seem likely to regain their composure, then leaders may proceed with the meeting.
- Do not accept other members' attempts to negotiate, but let them know that the main task is to help their fellow participants calm down, so they can think and act more rationally. Those not involved in the immediate conflict can help the participants in disagreement by modeling a calm and thoughtful temperament.
- Suggest the group as a whole take a 5-minute cool-off break to help defuse the tension. The cool-off break will give group leaders a moment to think or strategize about what to do after the break. Leaders can ask the other group members to keep the following in mind during the break so that they can help keep the group together:
 - Not to dwell on the disagreement during the break, since it could fan the flames of the conflict and sometimes even cause individuals to take sides. A polarized group is very difficult to reclaim as a connected whole.
 - To focus their attention on something neutral, move around a bit, or get a drink of water or some fresh air.
 - Not to roll their eyes or make comments in support or disparagement of either or both the sparring members. Remind participants that upsets happen, and that they need to hold positive regard for everyone.

When the group reconvenes, leaders can suggest an exercise, a guided meditation or deep breathing exercise, a reading, poem, or song -- something that changes the tone. They might say something like, "We know this may seem a bit contrived, but given the upset, we find it helpful to refocus on something lighter to remind us of our goals here." Leaders need to prepare in advance activities that will help diffuse conflict and redirect the group's attention.

Dealing with Troublemakers

If group members seem prone to getting into conflicts, leaders can use subtle ways to facilitate a relatively positive attitude change. If possible, they can sit near the individuals, make frequent eye contact, offer an occasional positive comment, or suggest a logistical task that gives them a visible role. Leaders should not avoid contact with someone who seems disruptive. This will backfire. Sometimes individuals who seem to be looking for trouble will respond well to additional appreciation, validation, and inclusion. They might even be able to relax a bit, decide they belong, and rise above their usual difficulties with relationships because they feel cared about. Leaders need to value members who may be typically regarded as marginalized people. They are precious. Their presence reassures everyone that all are welcome and important. They are specifically the individuals group facilitators wish to benefit from the group's support and resources. Leaders need to avoid holding an "us and them" attitude towards anyone in the group. **We are all "us."**

Apology is Powerful

One of the greatest resources to help people when they are upset is apology. People who feel hurt want acknowledgment of that hurt. Just saying, "I'm sorry that what happened just now was painful," can sometimes defuse the difficulty. Sometimes people resist apologizing because they didn't do anything wrong. Using an apology does not necessarily mean an admission of guilt; it is an acknowledgment of the other's hurt. Group leaders can model relaxed and forthright apology in the group.

Brief Listening to Upset Members

If one or two participants engaged in the conflict are extremely agitated, group leaders can try to arrange to listen to one or the other for a finite time, five or ten minutes, for example. They need to make sure to time the responses and stop the persons at the end of the allotted time. Leaders should not ask or expect people in disagreement to listen to each other, especially not right away. That rarely works. If there is only one leader, she can suggest the parties involved each take a 5-minute turn. If a relaxed, skilled listener is among the other members, the leader might enlist her in the listening role, not as a negotiator or problem solver, but as a neutral listener who will help defuse the upset.

Group leaders need to be careful not to get pulled into listening, either individually or as a group, to one person's upset for a lengthy time period. Some people may try to maneuver others into listening to a long diatribe. This is rarely productive.

If the Meeting Must End Early

If an upset member insists on refocusing on the upset or is demanding a resolution, leaders should not comply. They can stop the meeting and inform the upset member that they will speak to her at another time when tempers have cooled off. If necessary, group leaders can suggest intervention from a more experienced facilitator. Leaders do not need to listen to someone rail at them. Instead, they need to walk away, saying, "We're really sorry, but this feels unproductive and hurtful to us."

If the group leaders feel significantly challenged by the upset, they can remind themselves to use "I" statements (non-judgmental comments framed as "I feel scared/ confused/ uneasy/ unclear, etc."), which reduce inflammatory or blaming behavior by requiring individuals to take responsibility for how they feel, rather than holding someone else responsible. Leaders should avoid saying anything judgmental, which could imply that a specific individual was the main or only cause of the upset.

Group facilitators benefit from apologizing to the other members for shortening the meeting and suggesting that they try not to take sides or gossip with each other about what happened. Leaders can suggest that if group members feel upset about the conflict, they might want to debrief with someone outside the group. Group facilitators also need to remind all present to adhere to the confidentiality agreement: not to share names or disclose other group members' personal information. Leaders can encourage participants to focus on past upsets that might have been triggered by the current conflict.

If the Leader Gets Hooked

Group leaders can also have their old feelings triggered by interactions in the group and may end up making inappropriate comments. If this happens occasionally, it is important that they apologize to the group for getting triggered. It is not wise to pretend it didn't happen. This will backfire and the group will likely dissolve. It is best for the group to understand the simple truth that everyone can get pulled in sometimes, and then move on. Modeling apology is a powerful lesson for the group. The possibility of leaders getting triggered reinforces the advantage of co-leaders. If one gets pulled in, chances are the other can remain calm and continue to think clearly.

However, if group facilitators often get triggered, if they find themselves deeply upset and dwelling on the interaction, if they get into conflicts with their co-leaders, or if they allow their upsets to threaten the safety or continuity of the group, they may not yet be ready to be group leaders. Similarly, group leaders who blame others in the group for their emotional reactions need more experience observing experienced leaders -- and observing and working on their own personal history and emotional reactions. It's part of the growth process and doesn't mean they won't become good leaders.

Check-in After an Upset

Before the next meeting, leaders can check in with the individuals who experienced conflict and listen to them for a few minutes to find out if they are able to move beyond the upset. Facilitators can also encourage the individuals to reconnect with the person with whom they had the conflict, without having to necessarily resolve all of their differences.

Asking Someone to Leave

Unfortunately, some individuals hold on to their upsets, pinning them onto others in the group. Their presence in the group may make other members' participation impossible. If that occurs, group leaders may need to make the difficult decision about whether the upset person can remain in the group or if it is better for all involved if she takes a break from the group. If leaders must ask someone to leave the group permanently or temporarily, doing so in person and outside the group meeting time will be best. Group leaders need to be prepared to listen, within limits, and then adhere to them. They can also offer to refer the individual to another community resource, if possible.

Difficulties Can Be Useful

Group leaders should not be discouraged by difficulties. Although the difficulties described in the previous paragraphs are rare, they do occur sometimes. Leaders should not assume any given group will be immune from conflict. Even the nicest people get upset in relationships. Leaders can view facilitating a group that experiences conflict among its members as an opportunity for their own growth as leaders and human beings.

Sometimes difficulties arising in group settings can be rewarding and enlightening to participants. For example, some group members may be able to break through their agitation and actually thank each other for helping them uncover and clarify old hurts. Other group members can learn from witnessing upsets and exploring their sensitivity to them. Leaders need to be careful not to assume that the occurrence of disagreements and tensions means the group is not successful. It may be a sign of success! The facilitators' attitude that conflict can be positive will help the group ride out the difficulties and reach for more closeness, deeper sharing, and growth.

Evaluation

Leaders can evaluate the group's successes and challenges in order to learn from the experience and plan for the next group. Evaluation can be done by leaders alone or with input from group members. Evaluations can be solicited on anonymous feedback questionnaires or informally in discussion. If feedback is requested, leaders can ask participants to frame their answers as constructive suggestions rather than as disappointments. Possible questions for constructive feedback might include the following:

- What went well in this group?
- What were the benefits for you?
- What were your favorite parts?
- What might be done differently the next time?
- What suggestions do you have for future groups?

Rewards of Leading Support Groups

Support groups have changed millions of people's lives for the better. Participants can open up, realize they are not alone, heal old hurts, set new goals, learn new skills, take charge of their lives, and become leaders themselves. For many people, a support group is the best arena for these kinds of changes. Support-group leaders can feel great pride and satisfaction in facilitating these opportunities for participants. The

rewards are worth the challenges. With experience, leaders can become more effective and powerful in facilitating positive changes in participants' lives.

More in-depth detail regarding Bereavement Groups, can be found here:

Bereavement Groups Information

Grief Counseling Resource Guide: A F I E L D M A N U A L

Table of Contents

Introduction

Section 1 - Bereavement Counseling – A Framework

Section 2 - Helping Skills for the Outreach Worker

Section 3 - Personal Impact of Grief

Section 4 - Sudden Death Loss Issues

Section 5 - Secondary Loss Issues/Adaptation Strategies

Section 6 - Rituals

Section 7 - Gender Issues in Bereavement

Section 8 - Care for the Caregivers

Bibliography

Introduction

This manual has been developed as a guide for those who encounter individuals reacting to trauma related grief reactions in the course of their outreach work. It is hoped that this document will be helpful for both licensed mental health practitioners with limited experience working with individuals who are grieving as well as for paraprofessionals and outreach workers. Whenever a person is encountered who is experiencing severe reactions or complicating conditions for which the worker feels unqualified to address, consultation with an appropriate mental health professional and an appropriate referral for more formal services should be made.

SECTION 1 Bereavement Counseling – A Framework

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has taught us that we must see the bereaved people we serve and counsel as our teachers. We need to allow them to teach us what their experience is, rather than constructing some set of goals and expectations that we expect them to meet and achieve. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki wrote, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." We are not the experts on anyone's grief. As bereavement workers we must meet the grieving without expectations about what should happen or what they should be feeling. There are no experts in this work.

John Welshons, in his fine book entitled *Awakening from Grief*, states: "So there is no way to apply systems, rules or emotional road maps. Our job is to be a presence, rather than a savior. A companion, rather than a leader. A friend, rather than a teacher." (p 159)

The Companioning Model of Bereavement caregiving developed by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is one in which we as bereavement caregivers help people to integrate life's losses by being present to them and observing them—companioning. He tells us that observance comes to us from ritual. It means not only "to watch out for," but "to keep and honor, to bear witness." Wolfelt elaborates on the companioning idea:

- ◆ Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.
- ◆ Companioning is about curiosity; it is not about expertise.
- ◆ Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.
- ◆ Companioning is about walking alongside; it is not about leading.
- ◆ Companioning is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.
- ◆ Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it is not about filling every painful moment with words.
- ◆ Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.
- ◆ Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others; it is not about directing those struggles.
- ◆ Companioning is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.

Section 1: Bereavement Counseling – A Framework 1

- ◆ Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic.
- ◆ Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

(Part 3-The Forum. ADEC. N/D.98)

Utilizing this model of bereavement caregiving, the helper:

- ◆ Listens in a supportive manner to individuals' concerns.
- ◆ Helps disaster survivors recognize that, in most cases, their emotional reactions are natural, normal, and to be expected.
- ◆ Assists survivors to reduce additional stress by organizing and prioritizing day-today and recovery-related tasks.
- ◆ Helps individuals to understand and recognize the wide range of reactions to trauma, such as numbness, frustration, confusion, anger, anxiety, sadness, and feelings of helplessness.
- ◆ Assists individuals to draw on their own strengths and develop healthy coping mechanisms that permit them to gradually resume their pre-disaster level of functioning.
- ◆ Sensitive and caring helps individuals to grieve their losses in their own unique ways.
- ◆ Systematically draws upon an array of recovery resources for appropriate referrals.

The heart of grief counseling, according to Dr. Ken Doka, writer and lecturer in grief and loss, is validation. Grieving individuals need reassurance that what they are experiencing is normal. Counselors can help people understand and identify the ways they are reacting. Some people grieve through their expression of feelings. Others grieve through problem-solving, thinking, and activities. Doka, in a recent presentation (2002), maintains that there are many different ways in which individuals experience, express and adapt to loss.

SECTION 2 Helping Skills for the Outreach Worker

These skills are ways to show people that you are paying close attention, that you care, and that you are actively listening. The better the helper listens, the more the individual may share. This is a caring relationship and develops through mutual respect.

Eye Contact and Facial Expression:

- ◆ Make eye contact and vary your eye contact.
- ◆ Allow your face to reflect caring.
- ◆ Avoid any gestures that hide your face from view.

Body Language:

- ◆ Be attentive and relaxed, and use positive gestures.

- ◆ Orient one's body toward the person who is speaking
- ◆ Sit on the same level.
- ◆ Create an "open" body posture: legs and arms uncrossed, body upright and centered.

Vocal Style:

- ◆ Use a natural vocal style. Your voice communicates emotions.
- ◆ Speak in a relaxed, warm manner.

Verbal Following:

- ◆ Stay on the topic. Don't topic jump or interrupt. Take your cues from the grieving individual.
- ◆ Give the time he/she needs. Don't rush to respond.
- ◆ It is ok to have a pause/moments of silence to reflect.

Verbal Skills/Interventions:

Open Questions:

- ◆ This skill opens new areas for discussion.
- ◆ It is useful to aid the individual in exploring his/her feelings and thoughts.
- ◆ Begin open questions with "How," "What," "Could."
- ◆ Avoid "Why" questions which could make the individual feel defensive.

Examples:

"How do you feel about the situation?"
 "What are some things that trouble you most?"
 "Could you tell me how the job is going?"
 "Could you give a concrete or specific example?"

Paraphrasing:

- ◆ Encourages more in-depth discussion.
- ◆ Focuses on using key words of the individual and then saying back to them the most significant things that are said to you.

Example:

"I have been having a terrible time at work. I am so restless and just can't seem to concentrate. My supervisor told me that I am not doing a good job and that if I don't improve, she would fire me."

Example Paraphrase:

"You're saying that you have difficulty concentrating and that your supervisor is displeased with your work and may fire you." The helper statement above is a distilled, shortened and clarified statement which catches the essence of what has been said.

Reflecting Feelings:

In reflecting feelings, the following steps are most essential:

1. The feeling must be named. This may be through the actual words of the individual or through observation of non-verbal communication (eyes, facial expression, posture, voice tone).
2. Use the leads: "You seem to feel...", "Sounds like you feel...", "I sense you are feeling...." Then ask: "Is that close?" "Is that right?"

Examples:

"Sounds like that makes you angry." "You feel very discouraged right now." "I sense some feelings of confusion." "You are feeling really sad at the moment."

Additional helpful comments/phrasing:

- ◆ Tell me about...
- ◆ What works for you...
- ◆ How do you react when...
- ◆ I'm wondering...
- ◆ Have your feelings changed?
- ◆ What are your most difficult times?
- ◆ Could you be more specific?
- ◆ Do you feel like talking about it today?

◆ I encourage you to...

Non-Supportive Behaviors

Verbal Behaviors:

- ◆ Responding too quickly
- ◆ Changing the subject
- ◆ Talking too much about yourself
- ◆ Asking "why" questions
- ◆ Giving advice
- ◆ Preaching, placating, lecturing
- ◆ Over-interpreting
- ◆ Asking too many questions
- ◆ Interrupting silence
- ◆ Allowing the individual to ramble on

Non-Verbal Behaviors:

- ◆ Rigid severe posture
- ◆ Taking notes
- ◆ Clock watching
- ◆ Letting your gaze wander

SECTION 3 Personal Impact of Grief

The grief experience impacts all aspects of the being of the individual. The manifestations listed are more intensified when there has been a sudden, unanticipated death. With the intensification, the period of time to process the reactions will often be longer. It is important to remember there is no timetable for processing. Grief reconciliation depends on many other factors confronting the individual in his/her life. People are not only grieving, they are also participating in life and those stressors will affect the journey of adaptation.

An individual may not experience all reactions that are listed. Reactions may change over time. What needs to be noted is that the reactions FOLLOW the loss event; it is then that a grief reaction is considered.

Physical Reactions:

As part of the individual's way of handling the stress and anxiety of his/her loss experience, the following are possible physical reactions:

Changes in appetite:

- ◆ Overeating; binge eating
- ◆ Under-eating; loss of appetite

Sleep disturbances:

- ◆ Oversleeping; difficulty falling asleep and awakening; inability to get started/motivated for another day
- ◆ Under-sleeping; nightmares, loss-centered dreaming; interrupted sleep

Exaggeration of other physical situations:

- ◆ Blood pressure, diabetes, allergies, digestive and stomach problems, headaches/migraines

Note: All are often triggered by poor eating and sleeping habits, thereby affecting the immune system and the body's ability to maintain a healthy balance.

Behavioral Reactions

Because the loss event changes the individual, behaviors, whether while alone or in social settings, also reflect the change the individual is experiencing.

- ◆ Aggressive behaviors: volume/tone in speaking; irritability; tension
- ◆ Withdrawn/passive behaviors: very quiet and introverted; short answers; limited conversation; feels unworthy of happiness
- ◆ Self-doubt increases: needs much reassurance; decisions are difficult, indifference/apathy may follow; meaninglessness; not wanting to initiate activities or leave home.
- ◆ Reckless or self-destructive behaviors:

- Alcohol use/abuse: often to numb feelings
- Drug use/abuse: to numb and escape the emotional reactions
- Sexual promiscuity: to seek comfort; or to “dare” something to happen to me – such as AIDS.
- Reckless driving or other behaviors to challenge fate/the world.
- ◆ Hyperactivity: excessive energy to act out the stress/anxiety
- Cleaning — Attention-getting
- Working — Shopping/Spending
- Talking — Home fix-it projects
- Shopping — Excessive organizing

Cognitive Reactions

- ◆ Reduced attention span: inability to follow a conversation, to read and to stay focused; this affects many on the job regarding performance; forgetfulness
- ◆ Loss-centered thinking: focus of much of the individual’s thought process to the point of obsessiveness
- ◆ Impaired self esteem
- ◆ Idealization of the past, of the future and of the individual and the relationship lost
- ◆ Exaggerations in magical thinking (I made it happen)

Emotional Reactions

- ◆ Self blame and guilt: “I could have..,” “I shouldn’t have...,” “If only...,” “ Why didn’t I...”
- ◆ Fears: of getting through each day; of being alone; of being a single parent; “What will I do now?”; “Will God punish me too?”; of the dark; of new places and of old favorite places; of social settings; of making the right decision(s).
- ◆ Helplessness/Hopelessness
- ◆ Anger: at life’s situation, at God, at unfairness, at the one who died, at others for being happy.
- ◆ Yearning/desiring the lost loved one and the world that was.
- ◆ Withdrawn; not sharing feelings with others because they don’t understand or “get it,” not able to give emotionally to others—even family members.
- ◆ Anxiety: all of the above create an accumulation of general anxiety for many grieving individuals. Trying to handle life in a new fashion means creating a new “normal.” This is all transition and for many that means anxiety until it becomes the “new” acceptable way of life.

Spiritual/Philosophical Reactions

- ◆ Whatever one’s belief system (part of their assumptive world according to Rando) there may be challenges to that system. What was believed often comes into question and is examined in light of the loss and goes through its own change— strengthened or weakened—but changed. This is part of the process of grief and adaptation to the loss.
- ◆ Those with a belief in God may question: why God didn’t intervene, why did God let this happen, where is God in their paining/adjusting experience.
- ◆ Various questioning about God and one’s anger towards him, often creates guilt for the individual to work through.

The experience of grief and the mourning process involves many changes in the life of the individual. It is a period of ADAPTATION and TRANSITIONS in all aspects of the individual’s life. Therefore, it is the WHOLE PERSON that faces this forced change. Individuals seek support and encouragement as they find their way through this maze. Adapting takes as long as it needs to take. An individual’s circumstances in life, coping mechanisms, and spiritual/philosophical beliefs will all contribute to the outcome. Learning to accept that we do NOT get over a loss, but learn to live with the loss experience, can assist individuals in accepting their grief response as a JOURNEY—as a part of their own life experience—and not see this merely as tasks to be accomplished to “get better.” The loss experience is part of the individual’s life journey in all aspects listed above—physical, behavioral, cognitive, emotional and spiritual.

SECTION 4 Sudden Death Loss Issues

As described in Section 3, some of the possible reactions involved in the “normal” processing of a death loss are more intensified with a sudden death loss, and tend to take much longer to process due to the overwhelming disbelief that impacts the individual. Some issues that lead to complications in reconciling the loss include the following.

- ◆ Inability to comprehend— the disbelief of the event does not allow the individual to grasp what has actually happened. There is a searching for “why” and “how” this happened in the initial period following the death-loss event.
- ◆ The ability to cope is diminished due to the shock of the event and the additional stress that has just been imposed on the individual.
- ◆ Because the death event is sudden there is a loss of safety and security in the survivor’s world. This affects all aspects of the person’s life and creates much anxiety as the person attempts to confront “who” was lost to his/her world.
- ◆ There was no time to say good-bye to the individual and this often adds hurt and emotional pain. There was no time to say or to hear “I love you,” “I’m sorry,” to reminisce or review past events—both good and bad—and for the survivor to plan a future without that individual.
- ◆ Major secondary losses, including financial, loss of friends, loss of a job, need to relocate, loss of family-unit stability, loss of faith/belief, may all impact the adjustment of the individual and how he/she reconciles the loss.
- ◆ “The assumptive world is violently shattered: Without time to incorporate the change, the mourner’s assumptive world is abruptly destroyed. Control, predictability, and security are lost, and the assumptions, expectations, and beliefs upon which the mourner has based her (his) life are violated.” (Rando 1993).
- ◆ Some losses are categorized as “ambiguous.” When a body is not or cannot be recovered, then complications will occur in the mourning process. Shifting their perceptions about absence or presence is difficult in cases such as those experienced by some with the World Trade Center disaster, with planes that have crashed at sea, with those who have a loved one missing in action. Depression, anxiety, and movement from hope to hopelessness all intensify the individual’s response almost to the point of freezing the grief (Boss 1999). Verification and proof of the death are concrete ways of making the loss real. Rituals may need to be developed to assist the mourner to move beyond this uncertainty.

SECTION 5 Secondary Loss Issues/Adaptation Strategies

During the mourning period, the grieving individual not only focuses energy toward the deceased, but must adapt the self to changes and continue life incorporating the loss —the good and bad—of the relationship. What is truly lost is examined; what roles, expectations, opportunities and hopes must be given up; and what personal adjustments must be made all comprise the transitional aspects of the grieving process. The personal experience of grief must be processed through the eyes of the grieving individual as he/she sees his/her loss and its ramifications. Each secondary loss perceived requires its own grief response.

The following is a list of some identified aspects of the loss that may be perceived as part of the unique process.

- ◆ Part of the Self: That which was given to the other in love, care, concern, is immediately altered in sudden death. Where does that energy go? to whom? The unique relationship has changed; the energy from one to the other is now severed. The individual does not feel whole. Rediscovering roles and sense of purpose and how he/she is needed by others helps an individual process the change knowing the specialness can never be replaced. Wholeness can be restored over a period of time.
- ◆ Loss of Self-Confidence: Because the individual has difficulty seeing him/herself as a whole person he/she experiences feelings of inadequacy, which may lead to much indecision. Those who struggle with a poor sense of self will struggle more in this grief situation. Assisting the individual by reinforcing simple decision making and helping him/her identify areas of success in daily activities helps rebuild personal confidence which can then be extended to the work-world and community/social interactions.
- ◆ Family Structure: The family unit undergoes forced change due to the loss of a member. The role(s) lost here must be addressed on a daily basis. Not only do we grieve the personality lost but all the roles and expected behaviors that became so much a part of daily living. Loss of a mom presents certain issues; loss of a dad presents others; loss of a child of any age will affect the dynamic of what is vs. what is desired and expected for the present and the future.
- ◆ Desired Lifestyle: Sudden death forces a change in marital status. Many individuals have not chosen to be “single” again; to be a single parent with all the responsibilities and sole decision making. The emotional pain, and day-to-day struggle with the issue needs to be part of the process, respected and not minimized by being “strong.”
- ◆ Loss of the Future and Dreams: Survivors and the deceased had seen and planned a particular future. That is now gone and the survivor is often directionless for a time. The future is now uncertain and viewed as an obstacle; dreams are dashed regarding spending time with that individual and/or watching

him/her grow and succeed. Again, role plays an important part here—who was the deceased? a spouse? an adult child? a parent? a grandparent? a sibling? a fiancé? a coworker? Loss of hope and anticipation for that lost individual are part of the grieving process.

◆ **Social Changes:** Often survivors now relate differently to friends, acquaintances, even family members—including in-laws. Because many individuals are unsure of how to relate to the survivor, they step back and often avoid the individual. They do not know the survivor in this changed situation; the survivor may be less confident, more emotional, not as cheery or uplifting, more temperamental, indecisive, more withdrawn. In-laws may be reminded too emotionally of who was lost and struggle with confronting that issue when the survivor is seen. Friends may have been connections through a work setting or school or religious place of worship. Some individuals are forced to relocate creating another loss of support and forcing more change. Financial situations may force a change in school for children, creating a loss of friends and teachers who knew them before and who try to journey with them through the loss.

One can see there are many issues that may be part of any loss, but are often an immediate aspect of sudden death loss. The world in all its day-to-day intricacies is impacted. Awareness of the perceptions of the one in grief is important in providing emotional support and in companioning this individual through the intense response to a reconciliation of the loss. There is often intense yearning for what was as well as much frustration and anger for the way life IS. Those counseling or assisting in any way must be aware of the normalcy of the protest. This is part of the struggle; this is part of the emotional pain of letting go of a way of life as they simultaneously are forced to create something new that they really don't want. It is often during this change into the new normal that survivors feel they will forget the loved one. They need reassurance that forgetting need not happen as they continue on their life journey. Developing a balanced view of the individual—their strengths and weaknesses—is important. Good memories can be surfaced and become a part of the survivor's journey never to be forgotten. We are a product of our experiences and these need not die when a participant in that event dies. Grieving individuals may need to be encouraged to:

- ◆ Recall humorous events
- ◆ List qualities of the deceased person that impacted them
- ◆ Review the time/events important to both
- ◆ Review the struggles in the relationship
- ◆ Identify change in self due to that other individual in their life...how did I change for the good.
- ◆ Identify how the deceased changed because I was part of their life.
- ◆ List favorite foods, scents, events, teams, holidays of the deceased, so you never forget, and to share the history of that person with others (possibly children and/or grandchildren).

All of the above are intended to reinforce that the loved one has become a part of us due to the relationship experienced. It is this that is grieved—the connection—the need for the individual and the need by him/her for us. This is intensified in sudden death because there was no time to plan for this change; the individual is forced into many adaptive processes at once causing an “overwhelming” aspect to the grief reaction.

SECTION 6 Rituals

Rituals provide us with acts to engage in for the purpose of meaning-making (Neimeyer). Dr. Kenneth Doka discusses ritual as giving extraordinary meaning to the commonplace. Ritual provides symbolic connection to the lost persons. For example, on Thanksgiving a woman makes her deceased mother's recipe for cranberry relish. Only a few people in the family enjoy this dish but she continues to prepare it because during the preparation she feels connected to her mother and feels her mother is within her and thus, present at the holiday.

Dr. Kenneth Doka has identified four functions of ritual that may help in a variety of situations:

- ◆ **Rituals of Continuity** – This type of ritual implies that the person is still part of my life and there exists a continuing bond. The Thanksgiving ritual described above is an example of this.
- ◆ **Rituals of Transition** – This marks that a change has taken place in the grief response. For example, parents who have lost a child marked a transition in their mourning by cleaning out their deceased child's room after a period of time acceptable to them.
- ◆ **Rituals of Affirmation** – This is a ritual act whereby one writes a letter or poem to the deceased thanking the person for the caring, love, help and support. This is especially useful for those who never said “thank you.”

◆ **Rituals of Intensification** – This type of ritual intensifies connection among group members and reinforces their common identity. For example, the AIDS Quilt, the Vietnam War Memorial, the Oklahoma City Memorial Park.

Rituals must fit the story. They must be planned ahead and thoroughly processed after completion.

Certain dates are particularly troubling and anxiety producing for the bereaved. These include birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, religious celebrations, Valentines Day, anniversary of the death and other specific family markers.

The goal is to plan ahead a remembrance ritual in order to acknowledge the day both cognitively and symbolically. Utilizing any of the above mentioned rituals will help acknowledge in some personal way the relationship and life that was shared. The day is best confronted and dealt with through ritual rather than avoided. Following is a list of rituals.

Rituals To Commemorate

Rituals are effective and meaningful when they have significance to the deceased and to the survivor.

The following are merely suggestions and might be altered and enhanced to appropriately accommodate the relationship involved.

- ◆ Prepare a favorite meal of the loved one and enjoy it as he/she did.
- ◆ Prepare a favorite dessert – share with family or friends.
- ◆ Watch a movie(s) enjoyed by your loved one.
- ◆ Plant flowers, a tree or a flowering bush in memory of your loved one.
- ◆ Enjoy a toast to your loved one on a birthday, anniversary or holiday.
- ◆ Light a candle and recall the comfort or guiding light he/she was for you.
- ◆ Read book(s) or article(s) on a favorite topic(s) he/she enjoyed.
- ◆ Play music appreciated by your loved one and see if you can enjoy it now.
- ◆ Attend a concert/performance that would be pleasurable to you both.
- ◆ Look through photo albums and focus on shared times and memories.
- ◆ Wear a piece of jewelry that was a favorite of the person.
- ◆ Wear cologne or perfume he/she liked on you.
- ◆ Wear an item of clothing given to you by him/her.
- ◆ Buy something for yourself he/she would like you to have.
- ◆ Enjoy lunch or dinner at a favorite cafe/restaurant.
- ◆ Visit the burial place – bring a balloon or symbolic item to leave.
- ◆ Journal some favorite stories.
- ◆ Travel to a place he/she enjoyed or always desired to visit.
- ◆ Review how your life is better because he/she was a part of it.
- ◆ Focus on the gift he/she was to you.
- ◆ Purchase flowers on the anniversary. Bring for display at church or home gathering. When people leave, have them take a flower.
- ◆ Send flowers to a close family member on the anniversary.
- ◆ Read a favorite poem(s) or book enjoyed by your loved one.
- ◆ Watch home videos and remember.
- ◆ Volunteer for an organization in memory of your loved one.
- ◆ Become an activist in the cause of death issue – by participating in a walk-a-thon, phone-a-thon, etc.
- ◆ If you kept greeting cards given to you by your loved one, take time to read them again.
- ◆ Enjoy a leisurely walk taking time to recall shared events in life together.

SECTION 7 Gender Issues in Bereavement

There is literature on the market focusing on gender differences in processing a loss event. These may be helpful, but often give a stereotyped view of gender in the grief process. We must recognize the uniqueness of each individual and therefore his/her personal style may be a blend of often stated gender patterns. Some of the items listed may be more “feminine” in style; others may seem more “masculine” in style. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is the individual’s way; whatever works for him or her is what is important. Helping individuals find successful methods can be part of the companioning model previously explained.

Beliefs:

- ◆ Women talk about feelings with little effort.
- Men are more stoic and appear to lack feelings.

- ◆ Women tell and retell their story and the events to make sense of it.

Men know the story is etched in their mind—no need to be reminded.

- ◆ Women seem to FEEL their way through grief—EMOTIONS are the pilot.

Men tend to THINK their way through grief—INTELLECT is the guide.

- ◆ Feminine language is often described as intuitive, earthy, fluid or elusive.

Masculine language is thought to be orderly, concise, controlled and goal-oriented.

- ◆ Women largely focus on CONNECTIONS and interdependence; they explore emotions.

Men's language focuses on independence, self-reliance with the external world as a priority for maintaining control.

- ◆ Women are encouraged to focus on affiliation, connectedness, and intimacy.

Men are taught to be less self-disclosing, less expressive, less interdependent.

- ◆ Women seek companionship to support feelings and meet intimacy needs. They find help in groups.

Men grieve on the inside and their work is more cognitive. They appreciate time alone to think it through. Because some individuals choose not to talk about their feelings does not mean they do not feel; but rather they don't have the words to express their feeling in the face of the tragedy or don't have the need to do so. For some the event is beyond words or expression and is felt deeply. This must not be misconstrued as cold or unfeeling. The person may not be ready to live with the reality once it is expressed openly.

In their recent work Kenneth Doka and Terry Martin talk of "transcending gender stereotypes" and describe two main styles of grieving—the "intuitive griever" and the "instrumental griever." They present a third, the "blended style griever." Below represents the two components that comprise the "blended" style:

Intuitive Griever:

- ◆ FEELINGS are intensely experienced.
- ◆ Expressions such as crying and lamenting mirror the inner experience.
- ◆ Successful adaptive strategies facilitate the experience and expression of feelings.
- ◆ There are prolonged periods of confusion, inability to concentrate, disorganization, and disorientation.
- ◆ Physical exhaustion and/or anxiety may result.

Instrumental Griever:

- ◆ THINKING is predominant to feeling as an experience; feelings are less intense.
- ◆ There is a general reluctance to talk specifically about feelings.
- ◆ Mastery of oneself and the environment are most important.
- ◆ Problem-solving as a strategy enables mastery of feelings and control of the environment in creating the new normal.
- ◆ Brief periods of cognitive dysfunction are common—confusion, forgetfulness, obsessiveness.
- ◆ Energy levels are enhanced, but symptoms of general arousal caused by the loss go unnoticed.

Patterns, according to Doka, occur along a continuum. Those griever/responders near the center who demonstrate a BLENDING of the two styles experience a variety of both patterns. One pattern may be more pronounced than another depending upon the loss and the personal connection to that loss. This pattern suggests a need for even more choices among adaptive strategies than for the griever who is more fixed in either strategy mentioned above.

Gender may contribute to a particular style due to socialization rather than gender itself. One needs to carefully consider the style of the individual and support it. Accordingly, know there is not a right or wrong way—just the way this individual must process this particular loss. Some individuals have never dealt with a sudden death, so the way to grieve and adapt to the loss is unfamiliar to them. Patience is important; support and encouragement for where the individual is at any particular time after the loss is important.

Personality and style are important—some people are less verbal than others; others think things through before reacting. Some go right into a task and take control of a situation, while others react emotionally first then gather themselves for action. Both genders may represent the "blended" pattern.

SECTION 8 Care for the Caregivers

Burnout occurs in any helping situation when there is too much work and too little support for the caregivers. If burnout is to be avoided, support must be available to the helpers through regular supervision and through sharing their work with other helpers. Group support is nurturing and can renew commitment to loss and bereavement work. Keeping a personal journal of the helper's work and feelings

and reactions can help. Stories of grieving individuals' resiliency serve as powerful reminders that healing does occur.

Each worker must find what works best to help him or her keep in touch with self. Walks, family and free time, prayer, meditation, exercise, cooking, gardening, and yoga can serve as opportunities for a breathing spell from work. Daily rituals and routines can help to ground helpers for the work ahead each day. Lighting a candle daily before beginning work, meditating, or reading a particularly meaningful passage can help center us. Keeping fresh flowers nearby and caring for one's workspace in a way that makes for an atmosphere of comfort and security can help. Even when one does not have choice or control over workspace, personalizing the space in some small way can create a caring and safe atmosphere for oneself and one's clients. Perhaps bringing a few pillows or lighting a small candle can be enough to support a sense of solidness and centeredness.

Following are a few suggestions for preventing burnout of caregivers (Corey 2001):

- ◆ Find other interests besides work.
- ◆ Learn to monitor the impact of stress at work and at home.
- ◆ Develop a few friendships that are characterized by mutuality of giving and receiving.
- ◆ Learn how to work for self confirmation and self reward as opposed to looking externally for validation.
- ◆ Avoid assuming burdens that are properly the responsibility of others.
- ◆ Take classes and workshops, attend conferences, and read to gain new perspectives on old issues.
- ◆ Form a support group with colleagues to share feelings of frustration and to find better ways of approaching the reality of difficult work.
- ◆ Make time for your spiritual growth.

Bureau of Education and Workforce Development

Produced by 518-474-2578 Deborah Wagoner Director

New York State Office of Mental Health, Sharon Carpinello, RN, Ph.D. Commissioner

Joe LeViness,

Project Director

Authors

Susan Wheeler-Roy, Ed.D.

Bernard A. Amyot, M.S., M.A.

Special Thanks To:

Gail Meehan

Ann Cohan

Copyright © 2004 by New York State Office of Mental Health. All rights reserved.

Interest groups

Interest groups include both experiencers and non-experiencers, often with NDErs in the minority. Meetings tend to be more planned than in support groups, with speakers, audiovisual presentations, and/or discussions.

On the plus side, the interest group format is fully open to a broader range of people and appeals to those who are more comfortable in a cognitive, “learning” atmosphere than in the feeling-centeredness of a support group. With a varied program structure, the interest group offers exposure to new ideas and perspectives.

Interest groups also have common differences from support groups:

- They may have less time for sharing opportunities, although sharing time can be provided either at the beginning for a specific length of time or towards the end of the meeting. Also, another separate support meeting can be scheduled at another time during the month. It is recommended to provide some regular support mechanism.
- The cost of speakers if you are using non-local speakers and film/video/projector equipment, etc. However most gathering places, such as churches, etc. can provide this.
- It may be challenging at times to maintain an adequate supply of speakers over the long run. One solution is to schedule the program meetings every other month or less frequently.

Study groups

Like a book club, members of a study group usually choose a specific theme, book or topic and devote a series of meetings to exploring and discussing it thoroughly. A study group may meet for a series of weeks and then changing topics/books for another series of weeks.

Interest and study group programming ideas

With some creativity and plenty of room for discussion, there is almost no end of NDE/STE/OBE-related topics for meetings. Here are some tested program ideas:

- Show a film or videotape, see it together, and talk about it. If meeting needs new enthusiasm, present a 20 minute Youtube or video, or 10-minute shared reading, then let others share. It can breathe new life into a groups since there’s always fresh material.
- In inviting speakers, know that there are certainly nders/sters/obers potential speakers in your community with an estimate of every one in twenty people are near-death experiencers. Try to present from various perspectives, such as a near-death experiencer, a spiritually transformative experiencer, then an out-of-body experiencer, or a hospice worker familiar with nearing death awareness,

etc. Occasionally, have a panel of speakers (usually only time for three) to have a balance of points of view. Here is a list of 24 months worth of topics:

1. Introductory NDE 101
 2. Research that NDEs are valid experiences if not covered in #1
 3. Life Reviews in depth
 4. Afterlife Glimpses
 5. Grief/Bereavement/Hospice/Nearing-Death Awareness
 6. The Light
 7. After-effects
 8. Distressing NDEs
 9. Healing Abilities evidenced after the NDE
 10. Veridical Evidence
 11. Suicide Attempter NDEs
 12. War/Combat/Military related NDEs
 13. Childhood NDEs
 14. Multiple NDEs
 15. Empathic or Shared Death NDEs
 16. Future Visions from NDEs
 17. OBEs
 18. STEs
 19. Effects of NDEs on Relationships and Learnings from NDEs about Relationships
 20. After-Death Communications (ADCs)
 21. Experiences of Emergency Personnel: Police, Firefighters, EMTs: Sense of Contact with the Deceased
 22. Precognitions of Death
 23. Music Heard during NDE or Returning with Musical Gifts
 24. Psychic Abilities after NDE
-
- A Jungian therapist to discuss archetypes in the NDE, (remember to mention that Jung had an NDE), or how the concept of the Self may relate to an experience;
 - Chaplains to give their perspective on numinous experiences or how the NDE has modified/changed their spirituality (a single-session panel or a series with individuals);
 - A physicist who can explain the principles of quantum physics to a lay audience and how they may apply to the near-death experience;
 - An energy worker – perhaps a dowser or Kirlian photographer – to discuss the implications of these phenomena as related to the NDE.
 - A hospice professional to talk about deathbed visions;
 - A person experienced with the field of spiritual direction who can discuss

common effects of the journey (your members may be surprised to hear some familiar themes).

- Vital Signs and the Journal of Near-Death Studies are goldmines of ideas for programs. Choose an article or idea, a research finding or a quote, and center the meeting on it.
- Base one meeting or several on a current book or one of the classic nde books. Pick a chapter or the entire book and share opinions, alternate ideas, other findings. Even books that are not specifically about the NDE, but which have been helpful in understanding or integrating the experience.

The possibilities are endless!

Financing your group

Start-up costs and small-group expenses are minimal, but finances should be considered before any organizing begins. Basic costs may include printing/copying, postage, telephone calls, probably refreshments, and possible room rental and additional website. Interest groups may have additional program costs as well.

There are three basic approaches to financing a group: donations, fees, and dues. Most IANDS groups pass a basket at each meeting and ask for donations, possibly suggesting a minimum but with the assurance that whatever people give is welcome. Others establish a moderate fee for each meeting (usually \$5 or so). These approaches allow people of limited means to participate. However, IANDS would like to see that anyone is able to attend and many groups do not require money if the person does not have the means to pay. Recognize that many experiencers are looking for short-term help, not long-term commitment.

At some point, expenses are likely to run ahead of income. The most common ways of making up the difference are:

- \$ Tell the group about the need and ask them to put a little more in the basket. Ask for their suggestions – but strictly limit discussion time.

- \$ Find people to donate services or give discounts – an employer willing to donate use of a copier, a church to allow use of a room, a printer to work at cost, an office supply house with a good discount.

- \$ Contribute honoraria. Groups are invariably asked to provide speakers for other local organizations. It is always acceptable to say, “We would appreciate your making a donation to [your IANDS group].” Some will wind up as freebies, but other organizations will give a small honorarium. Cumulatively these can make a big difference.

- \$ IANDS t-shirts and other merchandise are available at a discount to local groups. Check your local tax regulations as you may have to pay sales tax in your state.

- \$ Carefully planned and budgeted, local programs or workshops (an evening or one-day) can be a source of funds.

- \$ For larger and more experienced groups, hosting the national IANDS conference is a great way to earn a scholarship for the next year’s conference while building group solidarity and providing education and a larger network in your community. Ask the IANDS office for information.

What People Ask about Non-Profit Status

In 1982, IANDS went through the lengthy process required to receive the not-for-profit status known as 501(c) (3) under Internal Revenue Service regulations.

Tax exemption: Internal Revenue Service Section 501(c)(3), [IRS Determination Letter](#);

This designation applies only to the originally incorporated organization (IANDS national) and does not carry over to funds raised for use by any local group unless affiliated. Therefore, charitable contributions made to an unincorporated local group are legally not deductible; if challenged, the deduction would be disallowed.

In 2014 IANDS got authorization from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for groups to join the affiliation, so 501 (c) 3 can be attained after groups have been in existence for 12 months old and have filled out the following online paper work and are proper financial methods are practiced and approved.

IRS Tax Exemption for IANDS Groups (optional)

An IANDS Group may elect to join IANDS' IRS Group Exemption Letter. An IRS group exemption allows a central organization (IANDS) to include subordinate organizations (our Groups) under its 501(c)(3) IRS tax exemption. If an IANDS Group is included under IANDS' group exemption, the Group may receive tax-deductible donations. **IANDS was granted Group Exemption status on August 29, 2014** with **Group Exemption Number 6038** .

A. In order to be included under IANDS' group tax exemption, an IANDS Group must:

- 1. Have been active as a Group for at least the last 12 months.**
2. Be organized and operated within the United States, not be a private foundation, and not already have an IRS tax exemption.
3. Be under IANDS' general supervision or control. This means that the IANDS Group completes its Annual Affiliation renewal each year and adheres to IANDS policies and the requirements for IRS group exemption. These requirements include, for example, having **a separate checking account for the Group** and sending out appropriate, timely acknowledgment letters for donations received.
4. Complete an application to be included under IANDS group exemption which will include:

- The official name of the Group and its employer identification number or EIN (apply for one using [Form SS-4](#) or [via the Internet](#)).
- Adoption of the "uniform charter document" (see B, below) that applies to all Groups in the IANDS group exemption. (If the Group already has a formal organizing document, a copy of that must be included instead.)
- Agreement to adhere to IANDS policies and the requirements for IRS group exemption.
- A statement authorizing IANDS to include the Group under the IANDS group exemption.
- A description of the activities of the Group (e.g., regular meetings and presentations about NDEs), the sources of receipts (e.g., admission fees, donations, sales income), and the nature of expenditures (e.g., speaker travel and honoraria, meeting room rent, advertising, purchase of sale items)
- An **application fee of \$75 payable to IANDS**. This fee is needed to help offset the cost to

IANDS of the initial \$3,000 application fee to establish the IRS group exemption.

5. File an annual 990 tax return by May 15. For Groups that normally have gross receipts of \$50,000 or less, the 990 form is a simple on-line [e-Postcard 990-N](#). This form requires simply entering the Group's identifying information, **entering the IANDS Group Exemption Number of 6038**, and confirming that the organization's annual gross receipts are \$50,000 or less for the tax year. In addition, if the Group earns **more than \$1,000 per year** in "**unrelated business income**" (**e.g., from Internet advertising**), the Group will need to file [Form 990-T Exempt Organization Business Income Tax](#).

6. Maintain affiliation status in good standing by submitting the annual **affiliation renewal fee of \$75**, accompanied by an annual group status report including up-to-date group leadership and contact information. Some additional information will be required for tax-exempt Groups.

B. The "uniform charter document" for Groups sets out the purposes and activities of the Group:

1. The purposes of an IANDS Group are (1) to serve near-death experiencers by

providing understanding and information to those who have had such experiences and (2) to offer education and discussion of near-death and related experiences to the general public in a supportive, accessible setting.

2. The IANDS Group's activities may include (1) holding periodic meetings open to Group members and the public, dealing with near-death and related experiences, (2) advertising the periodic meetings through various media and mailings, and via an Internet web site, (3) inviting outside speakers to speak at Group meetings, (4) distributing information and selling

books and DVDs about near-death and related experiences and other related topics, and (5)

collecting admission fees and donations to cover the expenses of these activities.

3. The IANDS Group's activities shall conform to the mission and purposes of IANDS, shall focus primarily on the NDE and similar experiences, and shall follow IANDS Policies for Affiliated Groups. The Group's purposes shall not exceed IANDS' tax-exempt purposes and its activities shall be within the scope of IANDS' permitted tax-exempt activities.
4. The Group will select a designated Group Leader and one or more Assistant Group Leaders to organize and conduct the Group's activities.
5. The Group will adhere to common accounting practices: the Group's fiscal year will be January through December, the Group will manage cash funds separate from any personal funds, and the Group will restrict the use of all Group funds solely to the Group's permitted activities.

C. The general requirements for inclusion under IANDS' group exemption include:

1. **Having a separate checking account in the Group's name**, so that funds are managed separately from any personal funds and donations can be made out to the Group directly. (Free checking accounts can be obtained through some banks and credit unions. For example, check FindABetterBank.com).
2. **Adhering to common accounting practices**: using the fiscal year January through December, managing cash funds separately from any personal funds, recording cash transactions from time to time in the checking account, restricting the use of all Group funds to activities supporting the Group, and so on.
3. **Sending out appropriate, timely acknowledgment letters for donations received.**

D. In support of the IRS group exemption, the IANDS Treasurer and office staff will:

1. Collect and approve applications from new Groups wishing to be included in the IANDS group exemption.
2. Collect and review the Annual Affiliation renewals from all IANDS Groups.
3. File an annual report with the IRS by October 1 of each year listing the IANDS Groups in its IRS group exemption, including those Groups that have been dropped and those that have been added.

Joining the IANDS group exemption involves some additional work and additional expense for the Group and for the IANDS staff. On the other hand, joining allows the Group to receive tax-deductible donations which will strengthen the Group's work. Joining the group exemption is completely optional and a Group may elect to join at

any time or to drop out of the group exemption. A Group will be dropped from the IANDS group exemption if it does not fulfill the requirements listed in A. and C. above.

To apply to join the IANDS group exemption:

[Application to join the IANDS group exemption](#) (member login required).

[IRS Group Exemption Letter for affiliated groups](#)

If Group Leaders of local groups opt out of the choice to become affiliated under the 501 (c) (3) umbrella, then the non-deductibility of contributions underscores the importance of designing program activities to be self-supporting. Starting small avoids major miscellaneous costs until the income from meetings can support them.

Meeting in private homes (which we don't usually recommend) saves rental costs but must be weighed against the possibility of security risks. Inexpensive meetings can often be provided by using the program suggestions of the IANDS Group Leader Mentor or other IANDS Group Leaders. Should expenses reach a point at which individuals feel burdened, it is time to rethink – and redesign – activities and income structures.

Each IANDS group determines procedures which will ensure that Vital Signs and the Journal of Near-Death Studies are available for view usually by inserting in a plastic binder or notebook so that they are not easily removed from the group's location. Providing circulation on a regular basis to non-members defeats the purpose of an IANDS membership.

IANDS Director of Research will be informed of any research activities planned or undertaken by a local group. In the United States, research funding is funneled through the IANDS main office.

Materials of general interest developed by a group will customarily be shared through the main office with other IANDS groups and their members; the originating group will be credited with authorship. [\(Insert Neon location to house these\)](#)

Financial Relations with IANDS

Each local group is financially independent of IANDS. IANDS accepts no responsibility for financial agreements made by a local group without the express written authorization of IANDS' treasurer.

Publicity – the Art of Being Recognized

To let the public know about your group and its meetings, several common approaches work well:

- Set a meeting time and place, [in the U.S. popular IANDS group locations are Unity Churches, libraries and civic buildings, Saturdays are often the most popular but any day of the week can work] and be consistent. For example, "The second Thursday of each month, 7:00 pm, at the public library meeting room."
- ➔ Post notices of every meeting on the IANDS website or to your website such as
Meetup.com or any other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- ➔ Post to online calendars of your local newspapers or appropriate popular magazines, such as Natural Awakenings about 1.5 months ahead. Remember the neighborhood papers and any other method of advertising you can think of.
- ➔ Post simple flyers in carefully chosen locations where people will see them.
When the group is new, send flyers to churches with weekly bulletins, and other support groups amenable to our topics. Use easy-to-read lettering (not Gothic or script) and give basic information: date, time, place, email address, a contact phone, and something like "information and support for people who have had a near-death or similar experience."
- ➔ Send a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to your NDE topic-friendly radio and television stations or community bulletin boards.
- ➔ Using Mail Chimp, email each person on your emailing list (that you've been collecting at each meeting with a sign-in sheet passed around) see sample, ten days before each meeting and again 1 day before if possible. Meetup.com does this automatically if you have posted a meeting. For smaller groups, you can set up a phone tree so each person is called to be sure everyone knows when and where the meeting will be and has a way of getting there.
- ➔ The Neon membership system has a location for group leaders to view samples of most of the above.

Working with the Media

At Meetings

Your group will need a clear policy about media attendance at meetings. Despite the possible benefit of publicity, media presence severely restricts open discussion, may encourage grandiosity in people who already believe they are special because of their NDEs, and has other drawbacks. For these reasons, most groups have elected not to permit the press at “live” meetings. Media representatives may be invited to a special meeting with screened volunteers, or they may be welcome at the introductory part of a general meeting with a couple of interviews arranged later. If your group receives many calls for interviews, rotate among experiencers so as to avoid creating “stars.”

For Publicity

Whether electronic or print, the media’s business is news, not publicity. If you keep that in mind and address their needs, your publicity will follow.

The near-death experience is news. Local experiencers who are willing to talk about it are news. A speaker or special program coming to town may be treated as news. Any local relationship to a new book or movie is news.

Local news departments are almost guaranteed to be interested in local NDEs. They are likely to want a story about the formation of a group that knows about near-death experiences and serves the local community.

Get to know people associated with the media in your area – news directors, reporters, etc. When calling, ask for the name of the individual you need to talk to and use it during your conversation and in correspondence. Tell the person you have a story you think they will want to know about. Give them a reason for being interested:

- Larger media have featured stories about near-death experiences. Through your group, local people will discuss their experience with a reporter from your targeted newspaper or station.
- A local resident’s life has changed radically since an NDE. This would make an interesting feature piece but be protective of new experiencers. Do not subject or recommend them until they feel ready. Research shows it takes about 7-7.5 years to integrate their experience into their life.
- A new and unusual resource is available in the community. Numbers of residents in the area have had NDEs, and now they meet regularly. Attending part of a meeting and talking to some of the people could provide a solid news story.

By giving local reporters and editors fresh angles and story approaches, you can help keep the subject of NDEs (and your group) in your community’s awareness.

A Few Guidelines for Interviews

Rule #1: **KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT!** If you will be talking only about your own experience, there's no question: it's your experience, and you are the authority. But if you are expected to discuss the near-death experience in general, **know what you're talking about.** Know the literature. Know some experiencers. Know the basic research findings. Know IANDS. If you don't know, don't go near the media except with your own NDE. At best, you will spread misinformation, and the encounter will be embarrassing.

Be prepared with accurate information – who, what, when, where, how.

Be ready to work quickly and concisely. Rambling may get you edited out. Practice without Ums and Ah's! This is also a great skill for any Group Leader to possess.

News coverage is an investment in public relations, not a source of revenue. In other words, don't expect to be paid for a news story or talk show appearance, although it is fair to ask for expenses.

Be appreciative of time and space provided to you. A brief thank-you note can earn good will and a return story in the future.

Remember the idea that in the future everybody will be famous for at least fifteen minutes? The greatest hazard of so much publicity is its effect on egos. Although it may be difficult, we strongly advise that you avoid using the same individuals (including yourself!) too often.

Finally, it's all right to say no! You may sometime find yourself inundated with more media requests than you and your group can handle. Or you may have negative feelings about a particular project or producer. A simple, tactful refusal may be your best response.

We believe deeply in the importance of IANDS' work. We are pleased to encourage local groups and hope that you will, in turn, encourage IANDS membership within your community. If you have questions not addressed in this booklet, please contact the office, 2741 Campus Walk Ave Bldg 500 Durham, NC 27705 (919) 383-7940