Ongoing Support for the Supporters: An Outreach Program for Bereavement Group Leaders

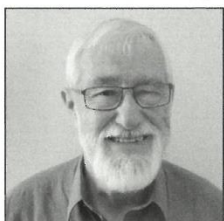**Andrew McNess**

PhD (Soc), BA (Hons)

Volunteer Co-ordinator
The Compassionate Friends
Victoria Inc.

Address
173 Canterbury Road
PO Box 171
Canterbury VIC 3126

Phone:
(03) 9888 4034

Fax
(03) 9888 4900

Email
andrewm@compassionate
friendsvictoria.org.au

Jon Stebbins

DEd, MA (Couns), GDEd
(Couns), BEd, BSc, TPTC,
MAPS

Facilitator – Group Leader
Training & Outreach Program
The Compassionate Friends
Victoria Inc.
Canterbury, Victoria

Sue Stebbins

GD (Loss & Grief Couns),
AppSocSc (Childcare),
CertApp (Aspects Loss &
Grief)

Facilitator – Group Leader
Training & Outreach Program
The Compassionate Friends
Victoria Inc.
Canterbury, Victoria

Abstract

A central element of the charter of The Compassionate Friends – an international bereavement support organisation – is that all leaders of their bereavement support programs must themselves be bereaved. The underlying belief is that peer-support (the sharing of similar experiences) can provide a powerful extra dimension of support. One consequence of this leadership stipulation is ensuring that the bereaved leaders, who must balance the potential intrusion of their vulnerability against their potential for greater empathic connection with other bereaved people, receive strong ongoing support. This paper outlines the total context, then discusses the measures put in place by The Compassionate Friends Victoria to provide ongoing outreach support for the leaders of their open-ended support groups.

Setting the Context

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a volunteer-based peer-support organisation. Originally established in England in 1965 and now found worldwide, the first Australian Chapter was established in Melbourne in 1978 by Lindsay and Margaret Harmer. TCF's charter is to offer support to bereaved parents, siblings or grandparents *by* bereaved parents, siblings or grandparents, and a corollary to this is that all TCF support programs must be led or facilitated by bereaved parents, siblings or grandparents.

There are two components that essentially define TCF as an organisation: its volunteer base and its provision of peer support services (support to the bereaved by the bereaved). Consequently, there is a need for special care with the selection, training and ongoing support for facilitators or leaders of all their bereavement assistance programs. In Victoria, TCF's programs range from one-on-one information and "drop-in" support, including 24-hour phone support and a well-stocked library, as well as strong outreach community education programs on supporting the bereaved.

There also exists a range of group support experiences, including statewide, regularly run (usually once a month), open-ended support groups. To ensure bereavement support groups have safe, knowledgeable and skilled leaders (and leaders who feel valued as members of the TCF family), TCF Victoria has made a special commitment to provide leaders with strong continuing support in carrying out their very challenging role. The program associated with this commitment is the central focus of this paper.

The Complete Group Leadership Program

Providing high-quality, supported leadership for TCF groups involves three-stages:

1. Selection. The first focus is to ensure that group leadership is undertaken by sensitive and caring parents or siblings or grandparents whose bereavement time span allows them to bring some objectivity to their support of others. The general TCF rule of thumb is at least two years after the death of their loved one.

2. Training. The second focus is to ensure that all those volunteering and accepted to lead a group are appropriately trained and thus able to provide consistently safe, knowledgeable and skilled support. Such an emphasis on sensitivity or caring *and* approved training is vital, since there is unequivocal evidence indicating that "helping may be for better or for worse", telling us that "caring" leadership is not enough (Carkhuff, 1969). Responsible duty of care must also include recognised training in effective leadership, and TCF Victoria group leader training mirrors the internationally recognised training program researched and tested by Lifeline Australia (2009).

3. Posttraining or ongoing support. The third focus of TCF's support group leadership program recognises that because all TCF leaders are themselves bereaved, it is vital that well-planned, ongoing and closely monitored support also be provided for these volunteer leaders.

Having briefly outlined the three stages in providing good sustainable leadership, we will now focus on the posttraining outreach support program established by TCF Victoria. In particular, the paper highlights the unique demands and responsibilities inherent in the leadership role for bereavement support group leaders, and how the outreach support program crucially assists leaders in fulfilling this role. The benefits of the program are illustrated through reference to themes that emerged in report papers on posttraining support. The papers were submitted to TCF Victoria's Board of Management.

The Responsibilities of Group Leadership

Current research and experiences in working with the bereaved suggest that a dialogic relationship, with an emphasis on empathic understanding of the here-and-now narrative (or story) of the bereaved – rather than the diagnostic predetermined closure implied in the earlier stage and task models of grief recovery – more appropriately assists those treading the very sensitive, personal, and ever-changing grief recovery path. Evidence also suggests that this dialogic interchange,

narrative-based approach, when grounded within a social-constructivist framework, is more in tune with the grief recovery processes involved. It is therefore more likely to lead to productive outcomes for bereaved individuals in both the short and long term (Neimeyer, 2001a; Klass, 2006; Stebbins & Batrouney, 2007; McNess, 2006; Stebbins, 2001; Stebbins & Stebbins, 1999). We further contend that a dialogic sharing, with an emphasis on empathic understanding of feelings and experiences, becomes even more powerful when those engaged in the dialogue have shared similar loss experiences.

This model or perspective on the grief process is also a very pragmatic process, reflecting as it does the educational model of change (read: grief recovery). The educational model was expounded by the great educationalist and philosopher John Dewey in the early to mid-1900s and it argues that recovery is essentially a relearning process where new meaning is constructed for alien experiences (Dewey, 1961/1916; Dewey, 1929).

Of central significance to the bereavement process model presented in this paper is our belief that the most productive recovery is constructed in a climate of empathic understanding and genuine nonjudgemental acceptance of the unique pathway that the bereaved individual is treading. The presence of this climate is perceived as the crucial stepping-stone to forward movement, regrowth or recovery (Rogers, 1969; Rogers, 1961).

A Safe, Growth-Encouraging Atmosphere
In the context of TCF support groups, where the leader has experienced a similar loss, we have observed that a strong expectation commonly occurs within the group – an expectation that the conditions for change or growth (empathy, respect, genuineness) are automatically present – that the mere knowledge of shared experience within the group is all that is needed to promote exploration, risk and change.

We suggest that it is the combination of the vulnerability engendered by TCF leaders' own loss, combined with this expectation of "understanding" within the group, which leads to a greater and more complex level of responsibility being carried by TCF leaders. And it is this recognition that drives TCF's thrust to provide the strongest ongoing support program possible for leaders.

Of course any competent leader (bereaved or nonbereaved) supporting grief recovery, and effective relearning generally, will need to be able to: (a) help manage complex and intense emotions; (b) help manage complex and multifaceted issues – practical, organisational, intrapersonal and interpersonal, (c) help set up rational cognitive strategies and structures to assist the bereaved to construct new knowledge that gives meaning to their loss experience; and (d) take the lead in establishing a supportive context – both practically (as in a relaxed setting) and emotionally (as in one embodying trust and security) that will encourage self-disclosure and personal exploration, and hence resource the new knowledge creation. But TCF leaders must carry the additional responsibility of managing the grief associated with their own loss and "carry" it in such a way that it does not present a barrier to the healing and regrowth of the others in the group they are leading.

In assisting change, many bereavement therapists have tended to overfocus on teaching/learning processes (those cognitive processes, strategies and structures associated with the reconstruction of knowledge – essentially points [a], [b] and [c] above), perhaps because this is easier to operationalise. They have tended to underplay support facilitation (those contextual conditions or courses of action that encourage change – point [d] above). Perhaps this is because establishing a supportive environment is a little more nebulous, involves taking responsibility for establishing the conditions, and refers to change in relation to some aspect of the self, all of which present much greater challenges.

Our strong contention is that, challenging though it may be, only when a safe, growth-encouraging atmosphere is established (as in a secure environment that includes the presence of the Rogerian conditions of empathy, genuineness and nonjudgemental respect – point [d] above), will those cognitive processes associated with the reconstruction of a new self and life become most relevant and effective.

How Our Ongoing Outreach Program Supports Group Leaders
The above illustrates a vital component in the complex list of responsibilities carried by all support group leaders, which emphasises their need to retain a degree of objectivity. For TCF leaders there is the added responsibility of maintaining a comfortable balance in their own grief journey. Hence their special need for strong, ongoing support, which brings us back to the ongoing posttraining outreach program set up by TCF for its support group leaders.

In Victoria the delivery of this program has been greatly assisted by the creation, in 2009, of a paid part-time position: Coordinator of Support Groups. With the introduction of the position, as well as the ongoing voluntary involvement of those running the Group Leader Training, an ongoing outreach system has been developed. Each year one of the following outreach activities is delivered: (a) meeting with each of the support group leaders on their home turf; (b) attendance at one support group meeting by the Volunteer Coordinator Support Groups and/or the training facilitators, for each of the groups, followed by discussion with group leaders afterwards; and (c) a group leader retreat weekend (one held in the Melbourne metropolitan area, the other in a regional area).

As well as the above, every second year TCF holds a weekend residential conference or gathering exclusively for TCF members. Most group leaders attend this, and apart from the informal opportunities to share issues with each other, provision is made in the program for them to meet and more formally explore new research and discuss group leadership issues.

Each element of the outreach program is guided by similar aims and intentions. Namely: providing group leaders with ongoing posttraining support; ensuring, through opportunities for debriefing and access to TCF Victoria resources, that group leaders do not feel isolated; and enabling TCF Victoria to gauge the level and breadth of peer support each of its groups provides, and each group's adherence to "duty of care".

A report is written following each outreach visit, informing TCF Victoria's Board of Management of the "make up" of a given group (i.e. number of attendees, adequacy of venue, consistency of attendances, characteristics of leadership), concerns of group leaders, and appraisals of the adequacy of the support provided by TCF Victoria's central office. Additionally, the reports have been beneficial in gaining a firm sense of exactly how leaders are benefitting from the outreach programs.

Analysis of Themes From the Outreach Reports

The following section of this paper selects for discussion some of the themes that emerged from the reports to TCF Victoria Board of Management.

The first excerpts illustrate how outreach visits provide opportunity for group leaders to articulate and examine "niggling issues" that, left unexamined, may compromise the provision of a safe, growth-encouraging atmosphere in their group meetings.

> **Excerpt 1:** *Of interest was a discussion we had about a difficult situation in a meeting, when someone was talking while someone else was having their turn in sharing their story with the group. The group leader felt in this incident she didn't take control of the situation. After talking about strategies, the group leader felt she needed to refer back to the ground rules and plans to read them through with the group at the beginning of the meeting.*

> **Excerpt 2:** *We discussed a couple of difficult situations the group leaders have encountered in the group sessions and how they have handled them … and they have now put our suggested strategies in place. This has made them more manageable. Sheryl feels more confident and in control of the situation.*

> **Excerpt 3:** *We addressed the group leader's uncertainty about initiating contact with those who have attended and not returned, or came for a time then dropped out. The group leader was worried about "privacy" and "intruding". We left her with our belief (from experience) that most people appreciated that their distress and vulnerability was recognised. This outweighed the very occasional person who gave the message that they just wanted to be left alone.*

The next two excerpts emphasised for us the importance of proving that we care (by attending groups, meeting leaders; following up with phone calls or emails, etc.). It seems concrete proof is needed to generate a real belief that ongoing support does exist – and can be called upon.

> **Excerpt 4:** *The group leader has found that the knowledge that debriefing support is available should she need it has provided an important level of reassurance.*

> **Excerpt 5:** *Both group leaders feel well supported by TCF through the volunteer coordinator's emails and they know they can contact the Centre at any time for support or to have materials sent out.*

A quarter of TCF Victoria's support groups are run as "social support" groups. Groups run in a more relaxed social setting (most commonly a café) rather than a formal setting (such as a community room). The social setting suggests less formality, but through the outreach visits we have been constantly reassured that duty of care has still been carefully nurtured in these groups.

> **Excerpt 6:** *Despite the social setting of the meetings the structure of the group meetings aligns with the structure of a formal support meeting … For instance, a discussion of how everyone's month has gone takes place in the meeting's first half. The group leader also prepares a subject for each meeting.*

> **Excerpt 7:** *Sharing ranged quite informally and widely, moving in and out from talking about their children who had died, to their families, and other interests. We did think the group might have benefited from systematically asking each person how their grief journey was going, but over the time we were there, all shared something about their loss and/or related issues, so …*

Implicit within the above excerpts is the importance of "listening for anecdotes" from group leaders in order to gain a clear impression of structure, and how duty of care is exercised within their group. This is because one of our inevitable tasks in the outreach visits is to "assess" the safety of the group and whether the group is allowing adequate opportunity for all those attending to express and talk about their grief. Group leaders' anecdotes help here.

> **Excerpt 8:** *We discussed how the meetings were run; the group leader explained their meeting is commenced with the TCF credo being read and lighting of a candle. The meetings are closed with a reading and a minute's quiet reflection time followed by the extinguishing of the candle.*

> **Excerpt 9:** *The group leader explained to us how if a new member was to attend a meeting she would ask some of the more "colourful" group members to tone themselves down, so that new members would not feel intimidated … This indicated the group was nurturing of new members and had not forgotten the tensions associated with walking into a bereavement support group for the first (or second or third) time.*

Outreach visits further reveal the group leaders' personal commitment to assisting their members, as well as the spontaneity and personal touches they add to the "safe and secure" structure expected of them.

Excerpt 10: *The group leaders reported that there seemed to be a high number of suicide-bereaved attending the group. With this in mind one of the group leaders attended a two-day workshop run by The Salvation Army to try to understand more about those bereaved by suicide. This emphasised just how dedicated these two are at providing the best support possible.*

Excerpt 11: *The group leader has a hand out with the credo printed on one side and the ground rules on the back, and these are handed out at the beginning of the meeting.*

Excerpt 12: *The group leader is very creative with activities for her group members. For example, she ran a scrapbook afternoon, with each member making a memory page about their child, and these pages were then made into a book called a TCF memory album which is taken to each meeting. When new members join they are invited to contribute a page.*

Importantly, however, anecdotes from within the groups must also reassure us that group leaders are applying direct duty of care towards themselves, and not just towards their members.

Excerpt 13: *The group leaders debrief with each other after meetings, but one of them also has a close friend outside TCF who is excellent for her to further debrief with. They are also aware of using the staff at the Centre if they need to and they have in the past. They feel their debriefing is well covered.*

Finally and crucially, an outreach support program must be ongoing, establishing trust by providing constant support, and an essential link between TCF Victoria and all the statewide support groups.

Excerpt 14: *We had met the group leaders at the group leader retreat in 2009. At the time they felt TCF Central was critical about the type of support they were offering in the community – that their social support group was not a true support group. At the time we thought we had reassured them that this was not the case, but we again got the impression that they thought we were there to judge them. A curly one, this. It is true that in one sense we are checking that groups are "safe, caring, inclusive, etc.". But in our minds the main aim of our visits is to offer support and thank them for what they are doing. Guess there is no easy answer. We (and the volunteer coordinator especially) just have to keep in touch and build a relationship, which in the long run will lead to mutual trust.*

Conclusion

Added to providing useful as-needed practical support, those final words of Excerpt 14 *("have to keep in touch and build a relationship, which in the long run will lead to mutual trust")* encapsulate what we believe is the real goal, and desired outcome of the ongoing outreach support program for group leaders – building a genuine relationship of trust and care. A hands-on, practical relationship; a face-to-face presence that demonstrates persistence, long-term commitment, and shows a sensitive, nonjudgemental understanding of the responsibilities and challenges the leaders are facing. In short: a relationship that the group leaders can believe in – and use.

Ideal? Perhaps. But it is a goal worth pursuing, because we believe the very vulnerability of our TCF leaders that drives the outreach program, is also the ingredient with the potential to really understand the experiences of those who attend their groups, and provide such powerful help.

References

Carkhuff, R. R. (1969). *Helping and human relations: Volume 1: Selection and training.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Dewey, J. (1929). *The quest for certainty: A study of the relation of knowledge and action.* New York: Minton Balch.

Dewey, J. (1961). *Democracy and education.* New York: Macmillan. (Original work published 1916)

Lifeline Australia. (2009). *Standards and guidelines for suicide bereavement support groups.* Deakin, ACT: Author. Retrieved from http://www.lifeline.org.au/ArticleDocuments/578/Standards%20 and%20Guidelines%20for%20Suicide%20Bereavement%20 Support%20Groups.pdf.aspx

McNess, A. (2006). *Bereaved young adults: Social isolation and the influence of gender* (Doctoral thesis). Deakin University, Victoria, Australia.

Rogers, C. R. (1969). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy.* London: Constable & Co. Ltd.

Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered therapy.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Stebbins, J., & Batrouney, T. (2007). *Beyond the death of a child: Social impacts and economic costs of the death of a child.* Canterbury, VIC: The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc. Retrieved from: http://www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au/reports/FINAL%20 TCF%20Summary%20Report_19Jul07.pdf

Stebbins, J. W. (2001). *Understanding the experiences of the bereaved: Interpreting how the bereaved give meaning to their loss in the context of a suicide-bereaved self-help group* (Doctoral thesis). University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia.

Stebbins, J., & Stebbins, S. (1999). The contribution of the self-help support group experience to the survival of the suicide-bereaved. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement, 2*(3), 52–54.