

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Anticipatory Grief: Session One

This is the first of two continuous sessions. The Opening Words and Closing Words are the same in both sessions. The Topic section differs.

Opening Words

She stopped by again the other day, as she frequently does,
To let me know what might be ahead for me, not that I wanted to know.
She insisted that I understand that someone I love might be living less than the most healthy way,
She was emphatic that the way I handle things may be because of unresolved issues I have.
She tried to get me to engage in “what if’s” – like what happens if the sky falls?

Anxiety, that’s what she brings with her sense of urgent anticipation.
I want to live in the present, secure in what is comfortable, not wanting to be pushed beyond that.
I want to live in the memories that give me pleasure.
I want to rest in the sunshine patch on my floor, or on my deck or in my heart – and forget the rain and snow.
I want to slam the door when she knocks – that “rap, rap, rap, open up!” sound.

So how do I respond to her constant intrusion?
How do I allow the change to come, how do I prepare for reality – calmly, realistically, in a balanced way?
How do I engage with the flow of change and yet honor the need for another to live his or her own life?
And how and where, as I do this, do I find support, strength, and openness?
And when I have answers to these questions, how am I able to be with others as they and I engage with my friend, Anticipation?

Helen Zidowecki

Check-in

Topic: Quotes Read around the group, or have the quotes cut apart and selected.
Sources: Except for the last notation, the quotes are excerpts from “Understanding Anticipatory Grief – Definition and Symptoms” by Lynne Eldridge, MD.
<http://lungcancer.about.com/od/Grief-Bereavement-Mourning/a/Anticipatory-Grief.htm>

Anticipatory grief is defined as grief that occurs before death (or another great loss) in contrast to grief after death (conventional grief). This type of grief includes many losses – such as the loss of a companion, changing roles in the family, fear of financial changes, and the loss of dreams of what could be. Grief doesn’t occur in isolation, and often the experience of grief can bring to light memories of other episodes of grief in the past. Anticipatory grief can be for another or for self.

Anticipatory grief can be similar to grief after death, but is also unique in many ways. Grief before death often involves more anger, more loss of emotional control, and atypical grief responses. This may be related to the difficult place – the in-between place people find themselves in when a loved one is dying. One woman told me that she felt so mixed up inside because she felt she kept failing in her attempt to find that tender balance between holding on to hope and letting go.

Not everyone experiences anticipatory grief. It is not good or bad to do so. Some people experience very little grief while a loved one is dying, and in fact find they don't allow themselves to grieve because it might be construed as giving up hope. Yet for some people, the grief before the actual loss is even more severe. A study of Swedish women who had lost a husband found that 40% of the women found the pre-loss stage more stressful than the post-loss stage.

Grief before death or loss isn't a substitute for grief later on, and won't necessarily shorten the grieving process. There is not a fixed amount of grief that a person experiences with the loss of a loved one. And even if your loved one's health has been declining for a long time, nothing can really prepare you for the actual death. Yet grieving before death does give you opportunities for closure that people who lose loved ones suddenly never have.

Though anticipatory grief doesn't necessarily make the grieving process easier, in some cases it can make death seem more natural. It's hard to let our loved ones go. Seeing them when they are weak, and failing and tired, makes it maybe just a tiny bit easier to say, "it's okay for you to move on to the next place."

Speaking from my own experience of anticipatory grief due my husband's terminal illness, I initially had these feelings and it was with some trepidation that I went to my first counselling session. Upon hearing my story, the counsellor cried, further strengthening my opinion that she could not possibly help me. I was mistaken; after a few visits I began to see the benefit of these sessions and looked forward to seeing her each week. Here, for a short time at least, I could stop acting as if everything was okay - when nothing was okay, here I could take off my brave face and let my defenses down. Lorraine Kember, "How to Cope with Anticipatory Grief" <http://ezinearticles.com/?How-to-Cope-with-Anticipatory-Grief&id=9461>

Questions:

1. How do you anticipate potential life events and changes?
2. Does your anticipation help you to live fully in the moment, or prevent you from living so? How?
3. Your "anticipation guide" is a list of what you tell yourself when faced with potential life events or changes. What do you say to yourself?
4. What might you do to make your response to anticipation more helpful to yourself and others?

Check-out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

Closing Words

God, Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change,
Courage to change what I can, and
Wisdom to know the difference.

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Prepared for the Theme of Grief and Loss, March 2015, by Rev. Helen Zidowecki

Small Group Ministry
Group Session Plan
Anticipatory Grief: Session Two

This is the second of two continuous sessions. The Opening Words and Closing Words are the same in both sessions. The Topic section differs.

Participants will need to have this session plan prior to the session.

Opening Words

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And how and where, as I do this, do I find support, strength, and openness?
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Helen Zidowecki

Check-in

Topic:

1. Read the following suggestions.
2. Select several items for reflection.
3. Be prepared to share your experience with at least one of the notations, sharing your experience and how does the idea support or enhance coping with Anticipatory Grief?

“Things to Remember When Dealing with Anticipatory Grief” (Adapted), from “Grieving Before A Death: Understanding Anticipatory Grief”,
<http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/anticipatory-grief/>

Accept that anticipatory grief is normal. You are normal and feeling grief before a death or loss is normal. You are allowed to feel this type of grief. Seriously. This is a common phenomenon that has been documented for nearly a century. You are not alone!

Acknowledge your losses. Allow yourself to acknowledge that, though the person hasn’t died, you are grieving. Consider creative outlets to express the emotions around things like acceptance of the impending death, loss of hope, loss of the person you once knew, loss of the future you imagined, etc. Explore as a way of being present and aware of the many emotions you are coping with.

Remember that anticipatory grief doesn't mean you are giving up. As long as you are there for support, you are not giving up on a family member or friend. There comes a time where we often accept that an illness is terminal and that recovery is no longer a possibility. Though it is a reality, there can be a feeling of guilt that comes with that acceptance. Focus on what you *are* doing – still supporting, caring, loving, creating meaningful time together, etc. You are shifting your energy from hope for recovery to hope for meaningful, comfortable time together.

Reflect on the remaining time. Consider how you and your loved one will want to spend that time together. Though what we want may not always be possible, do your best to spend your remaining time together in a way you and your loved one find meaningful

Communicate, Anticipatory grief is different for everyone. Expect that everyone in your family may be experiencing and coping with anticipatory grief in different ways. Keeping the lines of communication open can help everyone better understand one another. If you are planning for the remaining time to be meaningful and comfortable, make sure to include all the important family members and friends in those discussions.

Take care of yourself. I know, vague and way easier said than done!! Remember the old cliché, you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself.

Take advantage of your support system. Caregiving and anticipatory grief can be a long road. Do an assessment of your support systems so you know which people may be able to help you out (and who you may want to avoid

Relief is normal. In the case of anticipated losses there can be months, years, and even decades of caregiving that can be overwhelming and exhausting (though adjectives don't even seem like enough!). When someone dies there can be a sense of relief that is completely normal, but that can also create feelings of guilt. Remember that feeling relief after an anticipated loss does not mean you loved the person any less. It is a normal reaction after a stressful and overwhelming time in your life.

Say yes to counseling. Counseling is helpful for normal, everyday people who just need a place to process complicated emotions and have some you-time. So just say yes to counseling if you are feeling overwhelmed with the feelings of anticipatory grief.

Connect with others. Anticipatory grief is common among caregivers. When all your time is consumed with caregiving you may feel totally alone and isolated. Seek out caregiver support groups, either in your area or online, so you can connect with others who understand the challenges you are facing, including anticipatory grief.

Check-out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

Closing Words

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