

## Offering Support to Persons who have experienced Loss and Grief Activity

Adapted from The Support Team Development Guidebook available at [www.supportteams.org](http://www.supportteams.org).

### **Bolded text – Is what the leader says**

(Materials needed – pens or pencils; sixteen slips of paper, approximately 1” x 4”, for each participant – slips to be used in sets of four (different colors may be helpful).

1. Share with the group the purpose of the experiential Grief Exercise

***It’s extremely important that we understand the multiple losses that persons with chronic or terminal illness experience. As Team Members, how are we to respond to a Care Receiver who is grieving over some loss or multiple losses? How can we be sensitive to fellow Team Members who are burdened by the grief of the Care Receiver, or who may be struggling with personal losses of their own?***

***Our training involves an experiential exercise that will help us with these matters.***

(**Note:** This can be a very emotional experience for participants and you will want to be sensitive to their various emotional responses. Encourage everyone to participate, perhaps with the observation that in real life we don’t have the choice to “not play.” **Do not force persons to participate.** The goal of this exercise is to give persons insight into what it theoretically would feel like to lose persons, roles, activities, and material possessions. You find a descriptive text below, but use the language and experience most comfortable for you.)

2. Distribute a stack of 16 slips ( 4 slips in each of 4 different colors, if possible) to each person and provide the following instructions.

***On each of four slips of one color (or stack), write down four important roles in your life – father, brother, vocation, mother, friend, etc.*** (Tell the participants that what they write will not be shared

with others. Give time for everyone to list the four roles, and do the same following each of the next three items.)

***On each of four slips of another color (or stack), write down four activities you enjoy – like walking, hiking, church, swimming, spending time with family, etc.***

***Using another color (or stack), write the names of four people who are presently living and who are important in your life – spouse, friend, child, family member, co-worker, etc. You may write their first names if you wish. Do not write more than one person's name on a slip of paper.***

***On the final color (or stack), write down four things for which you are most thankful. They may be material or intangible – home, health, computer, car, something of sentimental value, pets, happiness, etc.***

3. Again share the purpose of the exercise, along with some comments about grief

***Persons who have long-term or chronic illnesses normally experience multiple losses. It's important that Team Members learn to respond in meaningful and helpful ways. The purpose of this exercise is to try to get in touch with feelings associated with the loss of someone or something important to you. Remember this is a paper exercise. If it becomes too uncomfortable at any point, you may stop and simply observe for the balance of the time. Otherwise, we encourage you to participate fully.***

***Grief is inherent in the loss of something important to us – the loss of health, job, the ability to drive, the energy to engage in a favorite hobby, changes in a relationship, to name a few. When loss occurs, to be told not to grieve, or not to cry, makes no sense at all, and is hurtful for the one suffering the loss. As Team Members express understanding and engage in active listening, they encourage the Care Receiver to feel what you are feeling when you feel it. Honesty***

***and acceptance of those feelings are essential ingredients of a healthy response to grief.***

***Round 1 – Choose one slip of paper of each color (or stack), tear it up and put it off to the side.***

***You are losing one role, one activity you enjoy, one person important to you, and one thing for which you're thankful, and you choose which one from each area. Yes, this is difficult, but make your decisions quickly and tear up the slips of paper.***

Debrief thoughts and feelings:

***What did choosing one from each stack feel like? Was one more difficult to choose than the others? Why? (Most people will say the most difficult decision was choosing a person to lose.)***

***How is this experience similar to what persons with chronic, debilitating illnesses face, persons who may be constantly facing decisions about what they will have to give up? (Have participants respond to the question.) For example, these persons may no longer have the strength to do all the things they've loved doing, or the time to cultivate friendships that have been important.***

***What are some insensitive ways people sometimes respond to those experiences of loss? What are the kinds of things to do and say that will be helpful?***

***It may be that disease has removed them from circles of friends at work or a church. They may be struggling with questions about who will be there to support them and care for them. When the situation is terminal, they're facing the awareness that they'll soon lose everything and everyone important to them.***

***Main Point #1: As a Team Member, you are to be present, listening and caring in ways that assure the Care Receiver that you are a person with whom they can share their feelings.***

***Don't try to "fix" what the Care Receiver is feeling. Rather, help them know it's O. K. for them to feel what they're feeling. Don't think you've got to say some right words, make someone glad who is sad, or stop being angry if they're mad. Be present, listen, accept, don't judge, and don't try to fix it!***

***Think about the people who have been most helpful to you during a time of crisis. You may not remember anything they said; you remember they were there with you, listening and caring.***

***Round 2 – Now turn all of your slips of paper face down. Without looking, choose one slip of paper of each color or stack, tear it up and put it to the side. Without knowing which one, you are to give up one from each category. Please do this now.***

Debrief thoughts and feelings.

***What was that experience like? How was it different from the first round? Was it easier or harder not knowing what you lost?*** (You will get a variety of responses.)

***How does this experience relate to persons with chronic illnesses?*** (Get ideas from the group.) ***Sometimes choices are made when consequences are not fully known. When giving up a job, for example, the Care Receiver may not fully recognize all that they're losing – all that the loss of income means, or how important co-workers were to them.***

***Remember that you have no way of knowing what the Care Receiver is feeling about the loss. You may think that having to quit a job would be extremely painful, when the Care Receiver may be feeling relief or deliverance from a job they've never liked. In other words, don't project your own thoughts about a particular loss onto the Care Receiver.***

***Some people who are sick don't really want to know what the prognosis is, what the immediate future holds for them. You may think they need to be realistic and see things the way they are.***

***Obviously, you aren't to impose your way of seeing on the Care Receiver. Again, honor the Care Receivers's feelings.***

***Main Point #2: Accept and honor where your Care Receiver is emotionally, and walk with her/him at the pace she/he sets.***

***Picture yourself walking beside your Care Receiver, really walking with them. For one thing, this means you intentionally guard against setting the pace yourself, a pace that reflects your own feelings and needs. What a difference it will make if, in every way, you stay with your Care Receiver.***

***Round 3 – Slips of paper are still face down.***

***I am no longer acting on my own behalf. Instead, I am representing a significant illness in your life. Please sit back and pay attention to your thoughts and feelings and we'll discuss them in a few moments.***

(Walk around the room and indiscriminately take various slips of paper from the participants, not making eye contact – for example, take all slips from one person, one, two, or more from others, and take no slips from some. After going around the room once, stand silently for a moment, then go to 3 or 4 more persons and make a second pass over their slips of paper, wiping some out, others just touching their slips of paper.)

Debrief thoughts and feelings. (Process the experience with the whole group.)

***What are you thinking? What are you feeling? Anger? What does the anger mean? What other feelings do you have? What was it like for those of you who lost everything? What was it like for those of you who had nothing taken?*** (Give time for responses.)

***How is this like the experience of some people with critical illnesses? They may feel they've lost complete control of their lives, that what's happening to them is completely unfair, etc. They may be terribly afraid of what's going to happen next.***

***Main Point #3: There are no magic words that can answer the struggles illustrated in this exercise. So, simply try to listen carefully, and see your Care Receiver as your teacher.***

***What can your Care Receiver teach you in the face of such losses? Perhaps you have no idea how you would respond to the situation. So, what can you learn from your Care Receiver? Or, if you have had a similar experience, don't assume that the way you handled it is how your Care Receiver will. Again, see yourself as the one to be taught.***

***This attitude can extend to other areas of relating to the Friend. Maybe you've long recognized your need of patience. Or, perhaps you've been too driven to stay in control of things. What can your Care Receiver teach you related to your own personal growth?***

***For those of you who did not lose a lot of things, how did you feel when others at your table lost everything? Did you feel lucky? Guilty? Relieved? Overwhelmed? Do not forget that sometimes there are strong emotions for those who are Supporting and caring for someone who has experienced grief and loss too.***

Bring the exercise to a close.

***Remember that you haven't actually lost anything that was written on the various slips of paper.***

***Does the exercise remind you to be more aware of the special relationships you have in your life? How will you express gratitude for the gifts and blessings you have identified? How can these blessings become the motivation and strength you need to genuinely care for others?***

***Remember, too, that as you encounter the grief your Care Receiver is experiencing you and other team members will also grieve her/his losses. Team Members may also face past, present and anticipated losses of your own. Be aware that all this is a natural part of grief experiences.***

***How will you and other Team Members plan to care for one another?***

Give some time to discussion for the whole group on this topic.