

# **HEARTBEAT**

**survivors after suicide, inc.**

## **GROUPS OF MUTUAL SUPPORT**

# **LEADERS GUIDE**

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**HEALING PHILOSOPHY  
of  
H E A R T B E A T**

**SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SURVIVORS AFTER SUICIDE**

Every community experiences deaths by suicide. When an intentionally self-inflicted death occurs families and friends suffer a magnitude of isolated, complicated grief. Because the grief that follows suicide is different from grief resulting from other causes of death there is seldom the understanding, reinforcement, guidance and role modeling for growth toward healthy reconciliation and adjustment through these compounded grief dynamics, so we have formed

**HEARTBEAT  
a group of mutual support  
for those who have suffered loss  
through suicide**

**FOR THE PURPOSE OF:** Resolving the grief for the cause of the death in order to achieve healthy resolution of grief for the loss

**HEARTBEAT** is an acronym that defines the healing philosophy.

**H** healthy coping techniques  
through  
**E** empathy and understanding  
reinforced by  
**A** acceptance without judgment and  
affirmation of self-worth  
**R** resolution of conflict and  
reinvestment in life  
**T** truth...responsibility for this death  
must be allowed to rest with the  
one who made the choice  
and by  
**B** being a resource to new survivors,  
**E** effecting public prevention education  
and  
**A** acknowledgement of suicide as a preventable  
health problem of considerable proportion  
within our community;  
**T** transforming our grief energy into positive  
action that will diminish the number of  
these deaths.

## TO FUTURE HEARTBEAT LEADERS:

The benefit of support groups has long been recognized, but until the late 1970's the healing benefit of sharing the tragedy of suicide within a group setting was non-existent. The rapidly growing movement to provide group support in the aftermath of suicide results from "grass roots" efforts of pioneering suicide bereaved who sought validation and healing, many after their own loss. They were propelled by the fear and despair of their person isolation, their struggle to survive without direction or guidance and their determination that future survivors after suicide would not be alone in the loss and grief.

The HEARTBEAT LEADER GUIDE is not a mandate but was developed to help in forming new chapters. It is intentionally detailed to lessen frustration and burnout by offering suggestions, solutions and examples of what has been most productive through years of trial and error. **It is not expected or necessary that all suggestions within the GUIDE be introduced into a single group.** The purpose of the GUIDE is to assist and encourage prospective leaders in providing suicide bereaved a haven for sharing their loss, stories and anguish, for giving and receiving comfort and the encouragement offered by role modeling of stable, *seasoned* survivor grievers. **Don't be overwhelmed** and detoured by details. Use the **KISS** (keep it simple survivor) approach. Many productive support groups/chapters began with two or three people sharing. In sparsely populated areas there may not be mental health professionals for reinforcement or advice. **Be resourceful.** Request help from another group leader, review web sites and rely upon your own good judgment.

Each community has its own personality usually created by the major source of industry, life-style, ethnicity and, sometimes, religious force. Just as farming communities differ greatly from large metropolitan areas, so do manufacturing from high tech, blue collar from academia and military from civilian. While the anguish and struggle for resolution after suicide loss is a common denominator and **is not** relevant to socioeconomics, the comfort level among suicide survivors within a support group often **is**. The GUIDE allows flexibility for incorporating your own ideas and community resources to best meet the needs of survivors in your unique community.

Many of the currently active suicide bereavement support groups are autonomous; formed and functioning successfully independent of other groups. Some groups have joined an existing support group organization as chapters, adopting the healing philosophy, relying upon and benefiting from the consistency and credibility cohesion provides. HEARTBEAT is an organization with support chapters in numerous communities in the nation, even the Arctic Circle.

There is no affiliation fee to start a HEARTBEAT chapter and no dues to belong. (Suicide survivors have more than paid their dues!) Every chapter is financially autonomous, either operating under the umbrella of a non-profit sponsor or acquiring its own IRS\* tax exempt status (\*Affidavits). The only contract between the Founder/Director and new chapters is a Memorandum of Understanding\* that new chapter leaders are asked to sign and photocopy, returning a copy to the Founding Office. The MOU is an agreement stating what will be

provided in the way of support from the Founding Office and what is expected from chapters to maintain a credible, unblemished reputation for the entire organization. It is not a legal document. It is your commitment to suicide bereaved, to the Founder and to other chapters. The healing philosophy and meeting format is pretty consistent among all chapters. It is expected that meeting format may vary from month to month depending upon the attendance. Consistency allows survivors to comfortably attend other chapters' meetings knowing they will enter a familiar support environment. If you have a meeting welcome you like better than the one provided...by all means use it or alternate. ([Addendums](#))

I suggest printing the "Starting a HEARTBEAT chapter" file, three-hole it and place it in a binder for easy access. You are free to photocopy the file for co-leaders. Please do not photocopy the file to send to another community. Rather refer those interested in a hard copy to me so that I may provide one to them. For the protection of all, it is prudent that I acquaint myself with those using these materials. Articles in the Words of Comfort file are available for you to print and copy for your group.

If you wish to start a HEARTBEAT chapter you may contact me for By-laws, Certificate of Incorporation and further support you may need. Feel free to ask questions. You are encouraged to contact other chapter leaders as listed in the HEARTBEAT directory. They have all started their chapter, just as you consider doing. They are willing to help and encourage you. HEARTBEAT leaders are an invaluable source of information and reinforcement to one another.

In Loving Support

LaRita Archibald, Founder/Director

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# 1. FORMING A HEARTBEAT CHAPTER

## 1.1 SPONSORSHIP

A good sponsor will save a chapter organizer a lot of footwork and frustration. Sponsors may be sought among churches, health agencies and hospitals, mental health agencies, hospice, suicide prevention centers and other non-profit organizations. Look for a sponsor that will provide:

- Cost free, long term meeting space, including utilities
- Copy privileges donated/available from sponsor, business/agency or print company
- Receptionists willing to relay meeting and chapter contact information
- Publicity
- Bookkeeping

The first three requirements are quite necessary, or at the least, very helpful.

Having access to a good copy machine saves time and money even if the group pays per copy. Businesses, agencies, funeral homes or print companies often donate or discount.

Most agencies/organizations will mention the availability of services offered through their organization in their newsletters. It is not unheard of for an agency to endorse a chapter by promoting it through a mailing announcing their sponsorship.

Many sponsoring non-profit organizations will agree to serve as a time-limited umbrella agency for newly forming chapters. This allows monies contributed to the chapter to be deducted as tax exempt by the donor and provides some accounting support. These monies are usually recorded as 'restricted funds'. This approach allows the group to become established and credible without the initial expense and burden of filing for non-profit status with the Internal Revenue Service.

An obvious sponsor is a suicide prevention center. Suicide prevention centers usually have a postvention\* component, required of all centers seeking/having certification by the American Association of Suicidology. A prevention center may sponsor a support group, lending credibility and endorsement, without housing the group. \***Postvention** is suicide prevention among suicide survivors. Survivors of suicide are defined by two categories (1) those left behind following a completed suicide and (2) those person who have attempted to end their lives but did not die.

## **1.2 MEETING PLACE**

Select a meeting site that is a centrally located, neutral meeting place. Ideally, this site will be permanent, provide privacy and an undisturbed atmosphere for sharing. It is important to have space that allows for breaking into relationship groups and room for expansion as the group grows in size. It is an asset if there are kitchen privileges allowing refreshments to be served. It is not advisable to meet in homes, even in the beginning. To do so necessitates eventual relocation, which breaks the continuity of the group, losses participants and creates the need and cost of additional publicity. Meeting in homes may present the group as lacking the credibility that meetings in professional settings provide.

When support groups for suicide survivors first began forming in the late 1970's and early 1980's there were concern about the comfort level for survivors meeting at hospitals, mental health agencies, even churches. The growth of the suicide support movement has proven these concerns to be minimal. These sites are appropriate, safe, productive environments for extending comfort, direction and reinforcement to suicide bereaved.

### **1.2.1 Meeting Date**

Determine dates available at the site you consider most appropriate for housing your chapter. For continuity and permanence it is important that a specific time, day and week of each month be designated and adhered to: i.e. 7:00 pm, 1st Tuesday each month. Review a full year's calendar and strive for a date that will not conflict with a major holiday. Early in the month meetings avoid most holidays. Changing dates/locations creates confusion and loss of continuity. Make every effort to avoid dates that will conflict with other grief support groups in your community; The Compassionate Friends, Widowed Persons or other suicide support groups within easy driving range. Your group will want the good will, endorsement and referrals of other grief support. Trespassing on designated times of established groups does not create good will. Alternate meeting dates also provides opportunity for your chapter participants to seek additional between meeting support within other groups appropriate to their loss.

## **1.3 PUBLICITY**

- **Advise the media** as soon as the meeting place and date has been decided upon; newspaper and cablevision companies often have a free Community Calendar. Radio, television and local health agency newsletters reach a lot of people.
- **Design, print and distribute a quality brochure.** Brochures in hospital emergency waiting rooms. Police chaplain/victim advocate kits, ambulances, coroners, mortuaries and other grief support groups must receive brochures as soon as possible.
- **Visit the Coroners Office,** identify yourself as a representative of the suicide survivor support group and ask cooperation of the office personnel to enclose a brochure when the death certificate is mailed to families of suicide victims.



- **Notify mental health agencies**, student advisors/counselors in local school districts or colleges, pastoral care personnel, ministerial alliance, hospices, other grief groups and churches. Request that your chapter be listed in their Resource Directory.
- **Mortuaries** will need a supply of brochures to make available to newly bereaved by suicide.
- **Yellow Page** listing under Suicide, Grief or Support Groups
- **Public libraries** have computer files of local resources and may have vertical files labeled "Grief", "Suicide" and "Support Groups" where brochures can be available to library users. Some libraries print a Community Resource Directory for sale.
- **Speakers** who are *seasoned* survivors; well informed, well prepared and well groomed will be an invaluable promoter at civic clubs, churches, classrooms etc.
- **Survivors** are among the most effective heralds of support they have received. Survivor participation in memorial events is a powerful promotional avenue.

### **Promotion Beyond Your Community**

- **BEREAVEMENT Publishing Inc.**, 5125 N. Union, Colorado Springs, CO 80918 will print notice of new groups in one issue of BEREAVEMENT magazine.
- **American Association of Suicidology** ([www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)) & **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)) both have support groups listed on their web sites and welcome new group listings without cost.

## **1.4 FUNDING**

Initially, the cost of starting a chapter falls to those who organize it and will be minimal when members volunteer to provide copies, refreshments, etc. The cost of starting a chapter depends upon what the organizers feel is necessary as start-up supplies (books, stamps, stationery, copying support materials and brochures). Occasionally a leader is fortunate enough to gain sponsorship from an agency also willing to provide some start-up funds. Often a local funeral home will underwrite or help with initial costs. A "Bounty Basket", available for member's donations at the close of meetings, will provide enough funds to keep the expense of operating a chapter from being a drain on the organizer. Eventually the chapter will receive memorials or donations from those appreciative of the group and wishing to keep it functioning for future survivors. . The term "Bounty Basket" is a reminder that, even as one grieves there are good things happening and blessings to be acknowledged. The "Bounty Keeper"\* is responsible for bringing attention to the "Basket" at meetings. \*Bounty Keeper - *Chapter Bonding*.

### **1.4.1 Meeting Structure & Ritual**

Arrange the chairs in a circle before meetings. The circle allows no barriers between survivors, provides the opportunity to connect and, as a circle has no end, symbolically, neither does the support and understanding within the circle. This arrangement also encourages physical reinforcement in the form of hugs and touches of encouragement.

Meetings must begin at the time advertised. Meetings need some formality and structure without rigidity. Consistency offers survivors comfort, stability and safety, allowing them to know what to expect every meeting.

#### **1.4.1.1 Sign In Sheets**

Sign In Sheets\* on a table at the meeting entrance allows group leaders to contact new group participants a few days after the meeting. When copy machines are in meeting proximity, copies can be made enabling participants to contact one another for support between meetings. \*Refer to Sign In Sheet - *Chapter Bonding*.

#### **1.4.1.2 Meeting Welcome (Introduction)**

Meeting Welcome (Introduction), read by the moderator or designated member brings the meeting to order, allows attendees to be seated and quiet and sets the tone of the meeting. The meeting welcome\* ([\*Addendums\*](#)) clearly states the purpose of the gathering...to give and receive comfort for the loss and grief resulting from the inflicted death of someone loved. It states the benefit of acknowledging and verbalizing the loss and the cause of the loss by the use of the word, *suicide*. The welcome reaffirms the worth of the one who has died and worth of the bereaved, allows survivors to recognize that externalizing emotions and feelings is necessary and healthy and it offers encouragement that loss by suicide is survivable. As well, it reminds each survivor of the need for courteous listening as others share their grief.

The chapter moderator or member who reads the Welcome concludes by stating their full name, the name of the person who died, associated dates, perhaps the means of the death or some other brief comment about the loss, if they wish. In turn, each person introduces themselves and their deceased by name. At meetings where discussion from an issue mentioned during introductions doesn't stimulate verbal exchange, the moderator\* introduces a discussion topic. \*See *Moderating A Chapter*.

#### **1.4.1.3 Age Range**

Age Range is at leader's discretion. Survivors under age 12-13 usually do not benefit greatly from chapter meetings with older survivors. They may become distraught and at times, restless or disruptive. Members are seldom at ease openly sharing when children are present. Child survivors need immediate and special attention from a good counselor. Time-limited teen and children's groups can be helpful.

#### **1.4.1.4 A Short Break**

A Short Break at the end of the sharing hour allows participants to use bathrooms, stretch, find a smoking area and, in general, relieve anxiety that builds during the first hour of sharing. Coffee, tea and sodas served should be decaffeinated.

#### **1.4.1.5 Relationship Groups**

As the group grows and there are two or more of a specific relationship in attendance, it is invaluable to spouses, adult children, siblings and parents to have an opportunity to discuss common conflicts, fears, coping techniques with others who have suffered like loss. It can be helpful to have the men meet as a group at some meetings. When possible, put mothers and fathers in separate groups. This allows these parents to discuss issues they may not feel the freedom to discuss in the presence of the other surviving parent. Encourage the small groups to exchange phone numbers for between meeting contacts. The moderator invites small groups to reconvene for the meeting finale.

#### **1.4.1.6 Tender Days**

Tender Days are the days of special significance to the bereaved such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, the death date as well as holidays. Using monthly Sign-In Sheets, the moderator acknowledges *tender days* occurring during following weeks and suggests other group members send a card or make a call to lend support through that difficult time.

#### **1.4.1.7 Announcements**

Announcements of new library books or articles, the date of the next meeting, special events related to the issue of suicide bereavement such as a seminar, workshop or conference. This is an appropriate time to ask for volunteers to help with setting up the meeting area, newsletters or web sites or other relevant needs.

#### **1.4.1.8 Closing**

It is important to close the meeting promptly so chapter members who have sitters, rides waiting or someone expecting them home will not be inconvenienced. The **closing ritual** can be a poem, reading or the moderator may ask the group to stand, hold hands and recite the *Serenity Prayer*\* together. If possible, allow time for members to visit among themselves following the closing.

\*[Attachments](#).

## 1.5 CHAPTER ADVISOR

Newly organized chapters and their sponsors may feel more confident enlisting a mental health or grief advisor to be in attendance at meetings. The advisor may be a representative of the sponsoring agency, a clergy or health professional, ideally with knowledge of both suicide and suicide grief. A leader from a neighboring suicide bereavement support group often acts as an advisor. Advisors must be willing to accept a position of low-visibility during meetings to address problems that may arise, provide professional credibility and present facts when myths surrounding suicide are an issue.

The need for an advisor depends upon the expertise and training of the moderator, the attitude/dictate of the sponsor and the availability of a willing advisor. **Most groups function very well without an advisor, but it** is reassuring for a leader to have a mental health professional and/or grief counselor as a consultant to questions about specific grief issues, problem participants and for referrals and intervention. A mental health professional serving as an advisor will recognize the possibility that members may begin to view the group as a therapy group rather than a group of mutual support. An effective group of mutual support is a haven for giving and receiving comfort after a common loss with every participant having a role; where bereaved *heal by helping others heal*.

Some chapter participants will be in therapy. Support groups **do not** replace therapy but work very well as an adjunct **to** therapy. Once a chapter is established as a credible source of reinforcement in your community there will be referrals from therapists. They know suicide bereavement support groups offer what cannot be found from another source; genuine understanding for suicide loss, validation of grief and opportunity to express feelings free of judgment. They know survivors will receive the encouragement that one not only can survive, but in time one can thrive again.

## 1.6 MEETING SURVIVOR NEEDS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The chapter you form will not meet the need of all in your community who have suffered loss through suicide. In a rural community it is more likely that suicide bereaved will learn of a suicide survivor support group soon after the death but that doesn't suggest bereaved in a rural area are more likely to attend. Support groups are not for everyone. Probably less than one-third of suicide bereaved in an urban community will seek support within a group. Some will attend one meeting and not return. Many will attend several months; drop out for a while to return at a later date to offer their support to new survivors. Others will decide the pain expressed within the group complicates and magnifies their own grief, leaves them feeling vulnerable and depressed. After a few days this very common reaction lessens as they review the positive elements of the meeting. Most will express deep appreciation for having a support group available to attend.

## 2. **BONDING A HEARTBEAT CHAPTER**

How cohesive and enduring the chapter becomes depends upon bonding among participants. Involving participants in responsibility for chapter operation such as meeting set up, small group leadership, refreshment duty and between meeting support gives them ownership.

### 2.1 **GREETERS**

It is usually very difficult for newly bereaved to attend their first meeting. A *seasoned* HEARTBEAT member at the meeting entrance 15 minutes before and 10-15 into the meeting to welcome newcomers with a hand shake, hug or some other expression of understanding and acceptance show the group to be compassionate and comforting. Since it isn't appropriate to say "We're glad you're here" or even "Pleased to meet you" we suggest the greeter offer something like "I'm sorry you have need to be here, but since you do, I'm glad you've come". Or they may just state, "This is a group for suicide bereaved. Please find a comfortable chair". After the meeting has concluded, the greeter may further extend support by seeking out the newcomer and encourage them to visit the library table or engage in brief conversation.

#### 2.1.1 **Sign In Sheets**

The leader or recorder makes a sign-in sheet for the current month available on an easily accessible table close to the meeting entrance and reminds all that attend to provide the requested information. These sheets are critical to all facets of group support for they allow between meeting support, contact on *tender days*, inquiring of the well being of a participants who has not attended for a time etc. The Founding Chapter leaders store filled Sign In sheets in a three ring Leaders binder according to date of meeting.

If there is a copy machine available copies of the sign-in sheet can be made for those wishing to make telephone contact with someone between meetings or send a card on a *tender day*. It is to be understood by the group that the sign-in sheet is yet another area of comfort and support and is used by group participants only for contact with one another.

### 2.2 **RECORDER**

The recorder (**chapter leader initially**) keeps a file of participants listing family name, address, phone number, surviving family members names as well as the name, birth and death dates of the deceased and other pertinent information i.e. method of death, identified mental illness/depression etc. This information allows the group leader to identify and connect newly bereaved attendees or callers to a member who shares relationship commonality. This information can also be invaluable in identifying high risk factors for suicide prevention professionals. The leader or recorder announces names and dates of those approaching *tender*

days (under separate heading) at the end of meetings and reminds participants of the comfort provided by a card or call.

The recorder uses the sign-in sheets to send a card or make a call to anyone who has missed two consecutive meetings. Discontinue these reminders after two months, assuming the individual has no further need of the group or wish to attend.

➤ Example of meeting reminder card:

Dear Friend:

We missed you at our (month) meeting. We hope your absence was due to an activity reinforcing to you and your family.

Our next meeting is at (time), (date) at (location). If you have need of our support please come, we have much to offer you. If you have grown beyond this need, please return occasionally, for you have much to offer others.

(Leaders name)

It is helpful to new participants to be reminded of approaching meetings a week in advance. Suggest that new members go through their calendar and note on the day each month when the chapter meeting takes place. Do not continue reminder calls after two or three months. Part of healing for each survivor is assumption of responsibility for their own participation in this source of comfort and direction.

### **2.2.1 Bounty\* Keeper**

Using the word "bounty" reminds newly bereaved that although the world is bleak, empty, painful now, there is life's 'bounty' surrounding us, waiting to be recognized and enjoyed in the future.

The bounty keeper is the chapter treasurer and responsible for making the 'bounty basket' available in an obvious location at the end of each meeting. The bounty keeper can also be designated as responsible for other bookkeeping tasks; depositing money, paying out and funds record keeping. **Initially the 'bounty keeper' will probably be the group leader/founder.** Operating under the umbrella of a community non-profit organization allows contributions and memorial donations to the chapter to be tax deductible. As the chapter grows and has a projected future it is practical to apply for IRS non-profit\* status. ([\*\\*Affidavits\*](#)).

### **2.3 LIBRARIAN**

The librarian is responsible for reproducing support material as supply is diminished and for arranging them on the library tables prior to each meeting. The librarian (**initially the group**

**leader/s)** may encourage participants to write their feelings in poems, essays etc to be copied and shared with other participants. Suggest participants place support material they pick up in a folder or three-ring notebook, keeping them easily accessible but not in obvious, constant view at home. Availability is important, but storing suicide related material out of constant view may give the survivor/family a few seconds respite from "suicide".

The librarian is responsible for placing a checkout card in each book and file card with the books name, a place for borrowers name and check-out/check-in dates. Book check out labels can be purchased at most bookstores or on-line. To minimize the tasks of the leader/librarian place a card index file box on the book table, a card for every book. Encourage participants to check out/in the books they borrow. A plastic storage box with a snap-on lid and handles makes a good portable library.

### **2.3.1 Reinforcement & Resource Materials**

Suicide survivors who seek relief and reinforcement within a support group come with broken hearts, shattered dreams and empty lives. Some come expecting answers. Some come hoping for a 'quick fix' for their obsessive pain. Leaders can provide neither of these so it is important that they have something tangible to take home and process during the weeks between meetings. The site title Comforting Words has articles and survivor writings that can be copied and available on the library/resource table. Support materials are easily accessible from a jumbo File & Go (Walmart) with hanging files inside for separating and storing copied support material. Creating a folder for each article that can be opened and laid on the table for participants to choose from, then closed and filed again following a meeting also minimizes before-meeting tasks.

Survivors may ask advice or direction in seeking professionally therapeutic resources. Leaders can direct them to local community mental health but leaders should not give the name of a single therapist. Leaders can mention several therapists, placing responsibility for choosing one upon the inquirer. Members may recommend a therapist who was helpful to them. Some leaders make available a list of therapists in the community they know to be knowledgeable and skilled in addressing suicide bereavement/related issues.

### **2.3.2 Tender Days**

Birthdays, death dates, wedding anniversaries, graduation dates are all painfully significant, especially during the first year of mourning. The leader or recorder identifies those approaching these tender days the month preceding the date. Encourage chapter members to recognize and support this grievers' *tender day* with calls or cards.

## **2.4 BETWEEN MEETING SUPPORT**

There will be participants who need contact, support and encouragement between monthly meetings. The leader, or a *seasoned* volunteer member, may telephone the new comer,

especially newly bereaved, at least once between meetings. Newly bereaved may be given the name and telephone number of volunteer respondent, who shares some of the loss circumstance in common. The leader may develop a contact list (with permission from those listed) representing specific relationships or death circumstance to provide new participants. If new participants do not initiate contact, the group leader or volunteer may call, inquire of the survivor's well-being and offer support. Again, the newly bereaved must be given time to seek coping support for themselves.

#### **2.4.1 Brochures**

Brochures can be designed on computers or professionally typeset. The brochure is often the first introduction to the support group and first impressions are lasting. Brochures promoting support groups for suicide bereaved find their way all over the country and in that sense represent all suicide bereavement groups. They need not be costly, but must describe, with dignity, the reinforcement, understanding and safety to be found within a support group. The brochure content must be clear, specific and well organized on a good quality paper of a weight that prevents the print from showing through. A soft, neutrally colored paper (cream, beige, light gray etc) is in keeping with sympathy, empathy and support. Bright, harsh colors are discouraged. Yellow may have bias implications. It is suggested that money be spent on promoting the group with a quality brochure and cutting corners in other areas. *Example in \*'Comforting Words' - Support Material.*

#### **2.4.2 Survivor Support Newsletter**

A newsletter is a great means of offering comfort and reinforcement to survivors who are unable to attend support group meetings, have no group readily accessible or for keeping in touch with members who no longer attend. A newsletter may be published monthly, bimonthly or quarterly. Editing and publishing a newsletter is a time-consuming undertaking. Mailing is costly, especially until circulation exceeds more than 200 pieces that can be sent via bulk mail. Electronic newsletters may be support of the future.

A newsletter can begin simply as a single page promoting the chapter, stating meeting information and grow over time to accommodate support materials the editor wishes to include. Many newsletters include the 'tender day' information recognizing those facing difficult times. Most newsletters encourage memorials honoring those who had birthdays, death date or anniversaries occurring during the month subscribers receive the edition. In this manner, some of the expense of printing/ mailing the newsletter is provided.

A printing company sometimes donates printing or the newsletter may be copied on a good copy machine. Editing, copying and preparing newsletters for mailing provide chapter members helping opportunity and involvement.

Support group leaders planning to publish a newsletter may get material from their subscriptions to other group newsletters, from poems or essays authored by their own members and from



publications whose articles are of interest and support. When using published articles always recognize the source. It is prudent to obtain permission from the author to reprint their work in your publication.

## **2.5 SURVIVOR EDUCATION**

One does not suffer the loss of a loved one without a need to know all they can learn about the cause of death. Suicide is no exception. Learning can be very painful, often revealing to the survivor that lack of knowledge and awareness about suicide deprived them of an opportunity to identify that their loved one was at risk and to intervene, possibly prevent. But what is learned, painful though it may be, is also the basis for acceptance and reconciliation with the cause of death. Some learning takes place within group meetings as the moderator or other group members share bits of knowledge they have gained. There are numerous books about suicide and about the grief aftermath to be included in the chapter library or bibliography. There are also web sites\*, developed by suicide survivors, that offer comfort, factual information and links to other resources. ([\\*Affiliations = Links](#)).

Community, state and national suicide conferences and workshops addressing suicide and suicide bereavement are increasingly available. Attending them broadens the perspective of survivors, allowing them to see the scope of the problem and the benefit of investing grief energy in helping resolve it. These venues provide survivors opportunity to learn from the countries foremost students of suicide and self-destructive behaviors, to meet survivors from other communities and grow through their sorrow.

Some states have opened Suicide Prevention Offices\* that make prevention information available and provide an arena for survivor involvement. Two national organizations\*, each with specific focus, invite survivor membership and participation. Survivor organization \*web sites. ([\\*Affiliations =Links](#)).

## **2.6 PACKETS FOR NEWLY BEREAVED**

Packets for newly bereaved offered to newly bereaved, often in the immediate aftermath of the suicide, extends sympathy, empathy and introduces them to HEARTBEAT. Material in the packet invites them to attend and prepares them somewhat for what they can expect. Packets are distributed in several ways. They can be made available through a cooperating coroner, mortuary, through a victim advocate program or through Compassionate Visitor programs available in some chapters. The following materials may be included in the packets.

*I Don't Know Why*, Iris Bolton, *My Son, My Son*, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

HEARTBEAT brochure, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

Letter to "Dear Heartbroken Friends", [Attachment - Support Material](#)

To The Newly Bereaved After Suicide, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

Material to address the specific loss of the newly bereaved, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

Child = Toward Healing After the Suicide of My Child, [Attachment- Support Material](#)

Spouse = My Serenity Prayer After My Husbands Suicide, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

Sibling = Unavailable at this time

Parent = Just Because My Mother Ended Her Life Doesn't Mean I Will Follow Suit -  
[Attachment - Support Material](#)

Suicide Grief Bibliography, [Attachment - Support Material](#)

When Someone Ends Their Life - [Attachment - Support Material](#)

## 2. MODERATING A HEARTBEAT CHAPTER

### 2.1 THE MODERATOR

Moderator is defined as one who keeps a group within proper bounds. The moderator of a suicide grief support group does not "heal" suicide bereaved that attend, but, rather, presides over the group to provide a safe environment where self-healing is encouraged and achieved.

**The chapter moderator is the verbal traffic director.** The role of the moderator is to allow all in attendance opportunity to share feelings, to question and comment. The moderator will be acquainted with, or willing to learn, facilitating procedure. The moderator regulates discussion by drawing out those who hesitate to speak and be gently, kindly regaining control of meetings from a survivor who dominates the sharing time. A moderator with some understanding of suicide grief dynamics and some knowledge of suicide dynamics will be able to interject supportive facts, recognize problems and refer bereaved who may need help from a mental health professional.

**The chapter moderator may be a professional caregiver** with understanding of suicide grief who wishes to volunteer to provide a consistent and continuous meeting environment and perform or delegate the duties involved in leading a group.

The moderator who is a mental health professional will recognize the risk of the group becoming a therapy group where the professional is in control of discussion rather than a support group where the healing is promoted through mutual support and experience. The therapist who is also a *seasoned* survivor usually makes an excellent moderator.

**The chapter moderator may be a survivor** who has achieved a considerable measure of healing, and has gained some knowledge of suicide dynamics and suicide bereavement dynamics beyond personal experience. These are referred to as *seasoned* survivors. Because the survivor moderator works from a foundation of personal experience they are invaluable role models to newly bereaved; "If they have known this loss and terrible grief and have achieved this measure of healing, there may be hope for me."

A monopolizing moderator can quickly destroy a group. The survivor moderator must guard against using group meetings as an arena for self-expression, speaking too frequently or long about their personal experience. They may offer their own coping examples in addressing specific survivor issues and ask participants to share how they cope. Two compatible survivor leaders', alternating moderating duties, lessens possibility of this and allows for vacations, illness and some burn out protection. Even *seasoned* survivors have remnants of grief to express.

**All moderators** must be prepared for the time, energy and commitment of chapter leadership. Leading a chapter can be both exhausting and exhilarating. But there is tremendous reward in providing an avenue of hope and healing for these wounded survivors that is not available from any other source.

## **2.2 MODERATING CHAPTER MEETINGS**

The routine of chapter ritual serves a purpose. It offers a consistent forum for mourning and sharing in a world where everything has changed, where nothing makes sense and where grief is obsessive. Humans are, by nature, orderly beings. The suicide of a loved one disturbs that orderliness to an unimaginable degree. Structure reassures one's psychic that there is safety, sanity and orderliness available.

### **2.2.1 Meeting Time**

Start and end meetings promptly. Begin the meeting with a short *Welcome* that directly states the reason for the gathering, the objective of the meeting and encouragement to share grief and extend comfort to others through listening.

### **2.2.2 Foul Language**

Discourage use of foul language throughout the meeting. There are times during sharing when expletives seem the only means of expressing the intensity of feeling for some survivors. Swearing or foul language is offensive, damages the group's dignity and serves no practical purpose.

### **2.2.3 Do Not Argue Misinformation**

A moderator will not want to embarrass a sharing survivor by confronting, disagreeing or arguing a statement even though they know it to be misinformation, misconception or bias. Often other survivors in the group will make the correction. If this doesn't occur, the moderator may wish to say, "There was a time when that was believed to be true. However, (research, suicidologists, mental health professionals or other fitting authorities) have learned differently and have enlightened society, which greatly eases the burden for us as survivors.

### **2.2.4 A Moderator Suggests**

Moderators **do not** say, "You shouldn't feel that way", or "You should do this or that". **The moderator suggests** .."Have you considered...?", or "You may wish to try..." or "Would this work for you...?" The moderator asks the group, "What other approaches might be helpful?". "How did someone present deal with this." Always, the moderator keeps in mind, this is a group of *mutual support* and other members have developed coping skills that are helpful to one another. Survivors of suicidal death feel powerless. Moderators who **tell** rather than suggest do little to restore control to the bereaved. The moderator avoids negating the opinion expressed if they respond, "You may wish to try a different approach with your daughter", rather than, "You need to find a better approach....." The word *better* suggests the survivor isn't doing what's best, while using the word *different* is empowering...suggesting the survivor is capable of good choices and decisions.

### **2.2.5 Yard Sticking Grief**

Nothing is gained from allowing grief/loss **yard sticking**. Upon hearing statements like, "Well, that's nothing compared to what happened to me." It is important to guide survivors toward recognition that, for everyone, their loss and grief is probably the most devastating occurrence in their life. It is the worse for each. However, there is a measure of comfort and growth from acknowledging that some circumstances are more complicated than other, "My situation was terrible, but at least I didn't have to go through what they had to face!"

### **2.2.6 Dominating Participants**

Bereaved enter groups deeply wounded and so full of pain that once they feel the relief of speaking of what happened they may begin to dominate the meetings. With the exception of *new grief*, who are given an opportunity to ventilate feelings at length, dominators can't be allowed to intrude upon the sharing time of others. When it is necessary to interrupt a person who is dominating it can be done without causing embarrassment by, "Thank you for sharing with us. Expressing so much pain must be exhausting for you, we'll let you rest while we move on to another now." "We wish there was time for you to share more with us, but I know you understand that others need to share as well".

### **2.2.7 Redirecting Inappropriate Disclosure**

Suicide deaths are violent. Suicide often creates ghastly death scenes. Survivors who have viewed an especially gory death scene or have heard a description of the mutilation of the body likely will have been traumatized. Moderators encourage openness, but in depth descriptions of death scenes impose secondary trauma upon other group participants. When a bereaved begins to describe the state of the body, the amount of blood or vivid descriptions of how the death was instrumented, the moderator intervenes, "It is important for you to tell what you saw, (what you smelled, heard or felt)...but let's, you and I, arrange a private time to discuss what took place"? Following the meeting the moderator either refers that person to the group advisor, clergy, therapist or health agency or makes an appointment to meet with them privately. The latter is inadvisable unless the moderator has had training and experience in addressing trauma.

### **2.2.8 Discussion About Suicide Prevention**

Avoid lengthy discussion about suicide prevention that may magnify guilt, especially among newly bereaved. While, for many survivors, it is important to learn all they can learn about the issue of suicide, productive learning is done **at the pace and in the space** of each survivor. It is not the role of the moderator to teach survivors suicide dynamics. However, it is important that the moderators acquire knowledge themselves. This helps them recognize a bereaved person who may be a suicide risk, allowing the moderator to refer or intervene. It also allows the moderator to interject bits of information that may be comforting or helpful to survivors

struggling with their "sins of omission and commission"...things we did/said we wish we hadn't, didn't do/say we wish we had.

### **2.2.9 Family Activity Conflict With Meetings**

It is not support objective to bind survivors to group meetings. Encourage members to participate in a 'fun' or family activity that is scheduled for meeting night. Chapter leaders encourage the bereaved reinvestment in activities that provide respite from obsession with their loss and restore enthusiasm for living. On the other hand, participants need to be aware that their attendance provides comfort and direction that isn't available when they are absent. A survivors goal is growing to the time their comfort and progress in not dependent upon meetings. Group support depends upon those who no longer need to attend for themselves, but return knowing their presence is helpful to others.

### **2.2.10 Recognizing *Tender Days* and Approaching Holidays**

The fear of approaching *tender days* is often greater than the actual day itself. By recognizing these times that were once joyful as difficult, by acknowledging that days prior often fill survivors with dread and by having *seasoned* survivors tell how they coped removes some of the dreaded anticipation. The moderator may want to focus on Coping with Approaching Holidays during November and December meetings or plan a way of honoring those we miss so much at during holidays.\*. (\*See Memory Tree of Lights and Candle Lighting Memorials - Memorial Events).

### **2.2.11 Storing Reinforcement Materials**

Chapter participants share their writings and helpful articles. Leaders copy materials for the Library table. It is suggested that group members place materials in a notebook or folder, keeping them readily available for reference throughout the month but not in constant view at home. Having support materials out of sight provides opportunity for a few minutes respite from thoughts of the suicide that has occurred.

### **2.2.12 HEARTBEAT Is Not Autonomous**

There are other sources of comfort and healing in your community. Providing chapter members time and location of these sources is a service that advances HEARTBEAT as credible and cooperative.

### **2.2.13 Chapter Visitors/Observers**

Leaders will receive requests from students, professionals and media to attend meetings as an observer for an assignment or news. Suicide bereaved are not assignment subjects. To allow a

group to be observed is a tremendous intrusion upon survivor privacy. Individual survivors may agree to be interviewed independently. Guest speakers are invited with group consensus.

#### **2.2.14 DON'T BE AFRAID OF SILENCE**

Support group moderators/leaders may panic when no one immediately responds to the invitation to share. Some pauses are caused by *seasoned* grievors offering the time to newcomers or newly bereaved. Silence may be survivors struggling for composure of the words they wish to speak. There are those trying to muster courage to speak at all. When silence become uncomfortably prolonged the moderator may wish to direct a question to a specific survivor, perhaps one recalled as having an especially difficult time previously, i.e. "Jane, last month was your brother's first birthday in heaven. How did your family remember him on that day?" A moderator can offer a topic for discussion (there are meetings difficult to get underway).

Suggested topics:

- a) normal responses to death - anger, guilt, depression, fear
- b) dealing with insensitive questions/remarks/stigma
- c) adjusting to the loved one's absence

#### **2.2.15 An Upbeat Meeting Conclusion**

It's a struggle through a mire of negativity to recognize mini-miracles continue to occur in our grief-blinded world. In closing, ask participants to share a positive occurrence in their life; family news and fun stuff, a trip, award, etc. Send them home with a "feel good" if you can.

### **3. PERPETUATING A HEARTBEAT CHAPTER**

Forming a chapter, encouraging bonding of members and promoting the chapter is a time, emotion and energy consuming endeavor albeit healing and gratifying. Maintaining a chapter over the long haul is an accomplishment of Herculean proportion. No one starts a chapter believing it will not continue. But sometimes the discontinuance of a chapter occurs because:

- 1) Leader becomes ill, burns out or retires with no replacement available
- 2) Reduction of suicide results in no survivors needing support

#### **3.1 Being Organized**

Be as organized as your time and personality allow you to be. Hunting through stacks of books and papers to find your meeting *Welcome* and the Sign In sheets 30 minutes before a meeting starts, diminishes your eagerness. Prepare for your meeting in advance.

#### **3.2 Putting Members to Work**

Ask a specific member to arrive early next month to help. Having to do the meeting set up alone diminishes your energy.

#### **3.3 Dual Leadership**

Leader *burn out* is probably the greatest danger to the continuation of a chapter. The obvious benefit if two leaders is having someone to rely upon in discharging duties of group leadership; someone to share the time and work involved and bolster each other through discouraging times. Dual leadership takes two compatible people willing to combine their skills, ideas and time to make a chapter available to survivors in their community. Everyone has important events that we will miss if there is no one else to moderate the meeting. Involve *seasoned* grievers as moderators occasionally so when a substitute moderator is needed you will feel comfortable placing a group meeting in another's hands. Having to miss a friend's party, a school program or family activity diminishes enthusiasm.

#### **3.4 How Many Make a Group**

Having a large group is not the objective here. Having a group available to meet needs of suicide bereaved **is**. If there are two or three bereaved persons wishing to meet for mutual support, you have a group. A group of between 15 and 20 in a medium-sized metropolitan area is about par and very manageable. Large cities will accommodate more groups i.e. Denver has three active HEARTBEAT chapters and another group specifically for parents bereaved by



suicide. The need will be determined by the suicide rate in the chapter community. Not all, by far, who survive a suicide will seek comfort within a support group.

### **3.5 Local and National Involvement**

**National involvement.** Increasingly, there are opportunities to gain local and national acknowledgement through events sponsored by existing organizations. ([\*\\*Affiliations\*](#))

### **3.6 Placing a Chapter 'At Rest'**

**Leaders! Take note!** Discontinuing a chapter, for whatever reason, will undoubtedly be disappointing but it is not to be equated with failure. The availability of even short-lived groups in a community heightens awareness of suicide as a preventable health problem and validates suicide bereavement as indescribable suffering following a terrible tragedy. You can remain helpful as a Support Contact for newly bereaved.

## ADDENDUMS

1. [HEARTBEAT Brochure](#)
2. [HEARTBEAT Meeting Welcome and Format](#)
3. [HEARTBEAT Memorandum of Understanding](#)
4. [Newly Bereaved - Eight Week Groups](#)
5. [Support Group Participant Guidelines](#)
6. [When to Refer to a Professional Grief Therapist](#)
7. [Sign-In Sheet](#)

## AFFIDAVITS

1. **HEARTBEAT By-laws & Colorado Certificate of Incorporation**  
Please request this information from the HEARTBEAT Director, [archlj@msn.com](mailto:archlj@msn.com).
2. [Employee Identification Number](#), form ss-4
3. [IRS non-profit status](#), form 1023

## AFFILIATIONS (Links)

[American Association of Suicidology](#)  
[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)  
[Colorado Office of Suicide Prevention](#)  
[HEARTBEAT](#)  
[Additional Links](#)

## ATTACHMENTS (Words of Comfort)

1. [\*A Suicide Survivor's Beatitudes\*](#)
2. [\*HEARTBEAT Chapter Directory\*](#)
3. [\*HEARTBEAT History\*](#)
4. ***Packets for Newly Bereaved***
  - a. [\*A Spouse's Serenity Prayer\*](#)
  - b. [\*Dear Heartbroken Friend\*](#)
  - c. [\*I Don't Know Why\*](#)
  - d. [\*Just Because My Mother Killed Herself Doesn't Mean I Will Follow Suit\*](#)
  - e. [\*Sibling\*](#)
  - f. [\*Toward Healing After My Child's Suicide\*](#)
  - g. [\*To The Newly Bereaved\*](#)
  - h. [\*When Someone Takes His Own Life\*](#)
5. [\*Suicide Bereavement Bibliography\*](#)
6. [\*Reinforcement in the Aftermath of Suicide\*](#)
7. [\*Religious Reflections on Suicide\*](#)