



Grieving Well

| *How can we handle grief in a way that is healthy, holistic, and true to our faith traditions?*

Goal for the Session

Participants will learn that grief is a necessary element of any life that is filled with change and loss and that how we deal with grief is affected by the narratives that structure our lives, our racial and cultural attitudes toward grief, and our ability to find a community where we can safely and genuinely grieve.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the Participant Handout carefully before leading the session. Make changes as necessary to fit the time constraints of your own meeting schedule.
- E-mail the Participant Handout to people in advance of the session if possible, and have additional copies available the day of the session.
- Have a chalkboard or writing pad available to write down responses during discussion, and make sure participants have writing material to record ideas from their brainstorming and small-group work.
- Have Bibles ready for participants to use in their small-group work as they discuss suffering. Suggest to them that they may wish to consider psalms or Gospel stories such as those of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane or at the grave of Lazarus.

Teaching Tips

- Some powerful and perhaps even disturbing stories of grief may emerge out of this lesson. Be prepared for people to share things that are personal and that may have powerful emotions attached. This act of telling—and of corporate listening—may be one of the most valuable things that comes out of this session. If a story goes on inordinately long or if a

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Focused brainstorming

EXPLORING

- Small-group discussion

RESPONDING

- Large-group discussion
- Next steps

CLOSING

- Prayer

person seems to have taken over the session, gently say that it's important to hear from other people and ask if perhaps you and she or he can talk about this privately. But always be affirming, and express your gratitude that people are willing to share their stories and experience.

- Some participants may have questions, arguments, or disagreements about the material discussed here. Try to be sensitive to differences of opinion and belief, but be certain to gently affirm an understanding that personal or spiritual failing should not be considered the cause of suffering. Theological disagreements on the meaning of suffering are to be expected—the book of Job, after all, supplies its answers mostly in the negative. God tells Job's friends—and, at last, Job himself—that none of them know anything. What we hope is that people will come to a meaning that is personally useful and spiritually healthy.

- Listen to the stories and examples people share for their underlying theologies and philosophies. It might be useful for the group and for participants if you can gently ask follow-up questions or make summary statements that help identify those underlying beliefs: “Did you believe that God was going to come to your rescue?” or “It sounds like you think God has a responsibility to people who are faithful to God’s teachings.” You needn’t challenge these beliefs, but often they are not consciously held, and simply identifying them can be a help.
- Do not feel that you have to become an expert in grief or the theology of suffering to guide this session. Prepare as well as you can, but feel free to let participants know if you are uncertain about the answer to any question. Volunteer to find out an answer to their questions, or encourage them to seek out a pastor, priest, counselor, chaplain, or lay leader and talk with that person further.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. A Prayer for the Suffering

Heavenly Father, giver of life and health: Comfort your suffering servants, and grant your power of healing to those who minister to their needs, that they may be strengthened in their weakness and have confidence in your loving care; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

*Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer
of the Episcopal Church*

2. Focused Brainstorming

For the course of one minute, ask participants to write down anything that comes to mind on the topic of suffering. Some starter questions might be: Why do people suffer? Where does suffering come from? Where is God in the midst of suffering? When have you suffered or grieved? Ask them to write continuously, without stopping to edit themselves, following wherever their thoughts lead them. They can list, write in fragments or complete sentences, or otherwise express themselves however they feel led.

After they have written down their ideas for a minute or so, ask them to shift into a more critical mode. Now ask them to look at their writing and mark those items they

find most interesting or think most important. Then ask them to consider relationships: which items might fit together and which might stand in opposition to each other. Encourage them to return to these lists during the session to formulate questions or offer observations.

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Small Groups

Break the group into smaller groups of three or four (unless the larger group itself is fairly small, in which case you may want to keep everyone together). Ask one person to serve as reporter for the group, taking down ideas from the group for later discussion. Ask the group to respond to these questions, allotting about five minutes per question:

1. Why do people suffer? Where is God in our experience of suffering?
2. What biblical narratives might be of help to us when we experience loss and suffering?
3. What mechanisms might people of faith resort to when they experience grief?
4. What was the healthiest experience of grief you have observed or experienced, and why did it seem so healthy to you?

Responding (10 minutes)

4. Large-Group Discussion

If the group has broken into smaller groups, bring them back together and ask them to share their conclusions or questions about healthy grief. In this exercise, open the floor for discussion as to how individuals or larger groups might help to ease suffering and support those suffering from grief. Here again, personal stories might help to show possible responses to grief. Some in the group might share their own stories; others might have friends or loved ones with whom they have interacted more or less successfully as comforters.

5. Next Steps?

Consider the suggestions for action and study at the end of the Participant Handout for more information about next steps. Encourage participants to think about how some of these ideas might be put into effect, and ask if anyone wants to take responsibility for organizing

a response or further study. How might this gathering be the core for a support group for grief or for a study group on the theology of grief?

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Prayer for Healing

Almighty and ever-living God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take our human nature and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that those who walk in the way of his suffering may also share in his resurrection, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

*Adapted from the Collect for Palm Sunday,
the Book of Common Prayer
of the Episcopal Church*

Teaching Alternatives

- Review the text boxes in the Participant Handout that share things not to say to someone grieving and tips for helping someone grieve. Allow participants time to share their experiences of grief and confirm or correct these principles.
- Invite a grief counselor to come to your group and share experiences that might be helpful. Depending on your group's experience, you may wish to have the person talk about either how individuals might grieve better or how to help others in their grief.

For More Information

See the final section in the Participant Handout for additional resources.