



Peer Support Group Guidelines *Virtual Open Groups*

The following guidelines are in place to create a safe environment for all group members to benefit from the virtual support group experience. Our aim is to create a safe space for members to explore their grief and to share and support one another. The facilitators may gently remind you of these guidelines throughout the course of the group.

- Note: Gallery View vs. Speaker View: top right-hand corner, gallery view allows you to see everyone equally. When someone is speaking, their box is outlined in yellow.
- Ensure all technology (audio/video/camera, Wi-Fi) is working for the duration of the group
- Plug in your device so you don't run out of power during the group
- Find a quiet space to participate, eliminate disruptions/distractions
- Using headphones can enhance your participation and sound quality of the meeting
- Close other programs/apps and windows on your device
- Turn off all notifications and make sure your cell phone is on silent
- Remain engaged - do not multi-task during the group
- Follow along with the Topic Handout
- Don't interrupt other people when they're speaking (or attempt to speak over them)
- Be mindful that there may be a lag due to technical constraints of people's laptops/devices so allow time for people to respond
- Maintain confidentiality

In addition to the above guidelines specific and crucial to virtual support group meetings, please review the following guidelines BFO-MR has in place for all members and facilitators.

- **Be on time**

Please plan accordingly and give yourself enough time to prepare and set-up for the meeting to start.

- **Group participants**

No one under the age of 18 is permitted to participate in the support group. We encourage the use of headphones if children are in the vicinity while the group is taking place.

- **Maintain confidentiality**

While participating in a virtual group, we ask that you ensure you are in a private space where the conversation cannot be heard by others. The best way to ensure this is to join the meeting through headphones, so that you are the only person who can hear the audio from the meeting. While we ask that all facilitators and participants join the meeting from a quiet, private spot, we recognize that there are factors beyond our control, and cannot guarantee that everyone adheres to these guidelines. What occurs in the

group is strictly confidential. Do not use names of fellow group members in discussions outside the group at any time. However, you may wish to share with family and friends some of the general topics that were discussed (i.e. coping with special days, relationships to other family members etc.) and that is fine as long as you don't use any identifying information. (See below for exceptions to confidentiality.)

- **Participation is encouraged but not forced**

We recognize that some group members may find it difficult to share. Everyone benefits from the group experience in her/his own way and sometimes people choose to observe and listen before they are ready to participate in discussions. If you decide to listen without sharing, **just say pass** and everyone will respect your choice.

- **Be respectful of differences**

People differ in how they respond to death and grief, and everyone's unique experiences and feelings will be valued in the group. Many things impact the grieving experience and we all come with different stories. We ask you to try to speak only for yourself and avoid giving advice or making generalizations (i.e. use "I" statements, I think/feel/believe). Please speak in a language that is respectful and inviting to other group members.

- **Share time equally – silence is okay**

While you are encouraged to be open and take risks to share, we also ask that you be mindful of allowing space for everyone to have an opportunity to speak. Facilitators may gently intervene in discussions to ensure that this happens. In a group, silences can also be productive and help people to gather their thoughts/feelings.

- **Listen, listen, listen**

It is the most precious gift we can give each other.

- **Respect and non-judgmental communication**

Respect is a requirement for participation in the group. Discriminatory language, comments and unwelcome remarks or slurs about an individual or groups' background, culture, faith etc. will not be tolerated and will be challenged by the facilitators.

- **Mutual support**

The mutual support group model centres on the sharing of experiences between members in the group. We gather strength from hearing about how others in a similar situation are living with their loss. Appreciate and be open to each other's wisdom, understanding and coping strategies.

- **Peer support**

Your facilitators are bereaved people who have experienced a loss, have received support, in many cases have participated in a group such as this one, have taken BFO-MR's facilitator training and now volunteer their time. **Your facilitators are not therapists or counsellors.** As people who have walked – and continue to walk – their own path of grieving, they can share with you some of their experiences, insights and learning. They receive support from a professional consultant as well as the staff of BFO-MR.

- **Facilitator's role**

The facilitators are here to help create a container to hold all of your stories. They want to provide a helpful and safe group experience for all of you. Sometimes, their job is to maintain structure by posing questions to the group, pulling discussions back or redirecting them, as well as intervening if the group guidelines are not being followed. Please be respectful, patient and compassionate with them and with each other.

- **Alcohol and drug use**

We ask that you do not drink alcohol and refrain from drug use on the day of your group, as it impacts your participation in the group and may limit the effectiveness of the group for you and other members.

- **Confidentiality exceptions**

All of the volunteers at BFO-MR have signed a confidentiality agreement. However, it should be noted that **exceptions to the confidentiality rule are:**

- a) If a person has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child, under the age of sixteen, is or may be at risk of physical, sexual or emotional harm or neglect, the person must promptly report the suspicion and the information upon which it is based to a Children's Aid Society. (Child and Family Services Act)
- b) If a person suspects that a group member may be in danger of seriously harming themselves, or others, the person may seek advice or consultation that could result in breaching the confidentiality of a member. This could include: alerting the authorities and/or warning the person who is being threatened; and/or contacting a third party.
- c) If called upon (subpoenaed) to testify in court.