A GRIEF SUPPORT GROUP FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to develop a model for a psychoeducational support group for the grieving, young adolescent in a school setting. The literature review examined issues related to grief, death, loss, support groups, and adolescence. In this study, a focus group was conducted with seven Elementary Intervention Specialists and the Director of Prevention Services for the Peoria Unified School District to generate suggestions and recommendations in the development of the model. Other sources of data used in the development of the model included literature review and information gathered from workshops which addressed the issues of grief and loss.

The data generated by all the sources supported the benefits of a grief support group for young adolescents in a school setting. The key sessions themes included: introductory and getting-acquainted session, the telling of stories, grief education, feelings expression, memories, coping skills, self-care, and hope.
DEDICATION

To Ed, Kristi, Cheryl, and Jonathan. Thank you for all your support, encouragement, and patience. You have been unending sources of inspiration, strength, and love.
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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

It is this researcher's opinion that loss is a universal experience. Human beings will experience loss throughout their life cycle, from the moment of birth through the time of death. Loss is truly non-discriminatory, striking all ages, all religions, all cultures, all races, both male and female. In the history of humankind there has not been one individual who has been spared the experience of loss sometime during the life cycle. Loss comes in many forms; it is not experienced exclusively as a result of death. The loss experience is redundant and unavoidable.

It would appear logical to assume that assimilating healthy responses to loss would encourage and enhance one's ability to deal with future losses. It is vital, therefore, to educate oneself regarding loss in order to learn appropriate coping skills that will
allow one to deal with the many losses which one will undergo.

Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and development in the life cycle. The paradoxes inherent in this time frame are many and often confusing. As an example, Corey and Corey (1987) point out that at the same time that the adolescent is struggling to assert his or her independence, he or she is exhorted to meet parental and societal expectations.

The use of support groups as an option to deal with loss is an accepted and, many times, beneficial tool available to the bereaved individual. This study will delineate key elements of a bereavement support group for the young adolescent.

**Development of the Problem**

The past 30-40 years have produced an extensive amount of literature in the field of thanatology--the study of death. There have been studies which indicate that unresolved grief often resurrects itself later in the forms of somatic complaints, mental illness, or dysfunctional life styles (Crenshaw, 1990; LaGrand, 1986; Bowlby, 1980; Worden, 1991).

The literature also points to the experience of grief as a result
of various types of losses—not just those losses experienced through death. The grief experienced by the young child whose pet died has much in common with the grief experienced by the middle-aged man whose wife just filed for divorce. Individuals experience both small and traumatic losses throughout their life cycle (Kubler-Ross, 1982).

The founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935 spurred the use of groups as a viable tool for self-help, support, and therapy programs. Group experiences can be beneficial alternatives or adjuncts to individual or family therapy. Many bereaved individuals can benefit from sharing their experiences with others who are in the grief process. Still, there are others who will be reluctant or resistant to the group experience and, therefore, this approach may not be appropriate or helpful (Wolfe and Senta, 1995; Masur, 1996).

Peer acceptance and interaction are viewed as positive and meet many human needs. This is particularly true of adolescents who have a high regard for their peers—sometimes to the dismay of the rest of the family members. Support groups offer the adolescent the opportunity to relate to their own peers as they tackle the grief
process. The group experience may appear to be much more inviting and far less threatening than other settings. Bereavement groups and other types of groups for youth are often found in the school setting because that is where the youth spends a great deal of time (Corey and Corey, 1992).

The scope of this study will be to explore bereavement groups for the young adolescent in the school setting.

Need for the Study

The use of groups structured to focus on a specific issue is on the increase by agencies, schools and counseling centers according to Corey and Corey (1992) and Hallam and Vine (1996). These groups "share the aim of providing members with increased awareness of some life problem and the tools to better cope with it" (Corey and Corey, 1992, p. 13).

Since loss is a universal experience, the results of this study may assist the helping professional structure a support group that may be of benefit to adolescents experiencing grief. Although there has been a great deal of literature generated on the impact of death, the findings of this study will delineate important elements of a
grief group designed specifically for the early adolescent.

Identifying key issues which can be addressed in a group setting may prove to be a valuable resource for those who desire to assist others through the grief process. Ultimately this may allow group members to work through the grief process in a healthy and constructive manner.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop a psychoeducational support group for grieving, early adolescents in the school setting.

Research Question

What is the design of a psychoeducational grief support group for the early adolescent in a school setting?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will apply:

Grief: the process by which one works through or experiences emotion after a significant loss has taken place (LaGrand, 1986).

Bereavement: the state or fact of being deprived of a
cherished or valued possession, especially the loss of a loved one by death (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1961.)

**Mourning**: the cultural or ethnic patterns of responses associated with bereavement (LaGrand, 1986).

**Regression**: a retreat from an anxiety-producing conflict to a developmentally earlier and less mature mode of interacting (Comer, 1995).

**Early/Young Adolescent**: an individual approximately 11-13 years of age.

**Facilitator**: leader of a support group.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will explore different circumstances resulting in loss, the resolution of grief, and the unique characteristics of the adolescent stage of the life cycle. This chapter will also examine the group experience as a beneficial method of treatment in the resolution of grief, the school as an appropriate setting for the group, and group session themes.

Loss

Loss is experienced many times during the life cycle. Loss is inherent in the human condition. The term bereavement has been widely used in the literature to refer especially to the loss of another human being (Lindsay and Elsegood, 1996; Crenshaw, 1990; Smith and Pennels, 1995; Haasli and Marnocha, 1990; Webb, 1993; Perschy, 1997). However, there has been a great deal of acknowledgement that the grief process is experienced as a result of many different types of losses and not inclusive of the experience
of death. Lindsay and Elsegood contend that, "grief occasioned by other types of loss is far commoner and for an individual child may be equally devastating. Loss is inherent in a wide range of social, educational, domestic, legislative and medical situations to which children are exposed" (1996, Preface).

The need for and cause of grieving can be instigated by a great many events and circumstances. Many times, individuals may not even recognize an event as a loss or realize that they are, indeed, grieving. The process of grief can be activated by seemingly minor experiences or the horror of a murder. The events and circumstances can range from the loss of a security blanket to the death of another human being (Kubler-Ross, 1982).

Therefore, it is important to honor grief that is precipitated by any number of factors, including death, divorce, separation, relocation, retirement or reorganization, physical or mental illness, the loss of a body part or change in physical function, and the loss of a friendship or relationship (Bradley, 1979; Viorst, 1986; Deits, 1992; Jewett, 1982).
Resolution of Grief

The need for a healthy response to loss is also well documented in the literature. The resolution of grief results in an increased ability to cope with future losses and helps to minimize the impact of loss (O'Connor, 1984; Jewett, 1982; Stearns, 1984). As Attig points out, "past loss and grieving shadow present bereavement" (1995, p. 50). Grief allows the individual to assimilate the thousand deaths he or she experiences throughout the life cycle according to Kubler-Ross (1982). Unresolved grief may manifest itself in a myriad of complicated and unhealthy problems for those who do not work through the pain resulting from loss (Tatelbaum, 1980; Papalia and Olds, 1995). Deits believes that, "loss and the grief that goes with it may well be the number one proof that we are flesh and blood, a real, live human being" (1992, p. 1). Unresolved grief may result in bitterness, depression, self-pity, and helplessness (Kubler-Ross, 1982). LaGrand (1986) contends that unresolved grief may doom individuals to a lifetime of increased emotional pain, stress, anxiety and fear. Many psychosomatic symptoms, psychopathology, and grave relationship conflicts can be
prevented if a healthy grieving process takes place (Crenshaw, 1990; Jewett, 1982; Stearns, 1984).

Quite often, the grief experienced by children and young adolescents is discounted or fails to be recognized by the adults in their lives, resulting in decreased self-esteem, anxiety, confusion, and anger, according to Gabell (1996). As Perschy proclaims, "Some parents may not even realize the impact the death has on the children. The children often are called 'the forgotten mourners'" (1997, p. 16). LaGrand (1986) points out that loss generates many of the same implications experienced by both the young and the old. Adults may be unable to support grieving children and adolescents due to lack of knowledge, an inability to acknowledge their own grief, or a desire to protect them from further pain (Haasl and Marnocha, 1990; Kuenning, 1987). When adults inadvertently hinder the process of grief in young people, a common result may be feelings of abandonment, desertion, and isolation (O'Connor, 1991). Sims acknowledges that, "...children need as much compassion and concerned support as adults require in adapting to dramatic or traumatic changes in their lives" (1991, p. 186). She adds that loss
can manifest itself in poor classroom performance, disciplinary problems, illness and increased absenteeism. The resolution of grief may be severely thwarted or denied if the loss is not acknowledged (Hallam and Vine, 1996). Corr (1984) strongly asserts that the occasion of loss can be a prime opportunity for growth in children and refers to this opportunity as a duty which must be met by all who have significant contact with children. Attig indicates that

...ineffective grieving early in life can disrupt or complicate development. Regression is common....Missed opportunities to learn about expression of emotion can reverberate for years and even decades. Children and adolescents can suffer serious setbacks in the emergence of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-identity. (1995, p. 50)

As Marris describes it,

...loss is usually threatening: the victims recognize that unless they learn to understand the situation and cope with it, they will be helpless to secure a tolerable future. The disorientation of purpose is therefore a source of profound anxiety as well as desolation. (1974, p. 149)

Bowlby suggests that, "...there is a tendency to underestimate how intensely distressing and disabling loss usually is and for how long the distress, and often the disablement commonly last" (1980, p. 8).
Unresolved grief does take its toll on the human experience.

It is enlightening and empowering to the individual to discover that he or she has the opportunity to enhance the ability to cope with loss in the midst of all the havoc and helplessness which it can generate (Rando, 1993). Working through the grieving process can be extremely demanding and entails a great deal of work. However, it can also result in new found strengths and the enhancement of skills (O'Conn, 1991; Allen, 1990). It can be affirming and encouraging to know that one can rise above the devastating effects of loss and continue to grow (LaGrand, 1986; Neeld, 1990). Resolution of grief can restore order and meaning to the chaos generated by loss (Jewett, 1982). The bereaved can regain a sense of control and a meaningful direction in life (Bowlby, 1980). Indeed,

a major part of the growing side of grief is coming to understand that, in the midst of a life-changing loss, we still have control over our own destiny. You may not be able to choose all of the circumstances of your life, but you can always choose your responses to anything that happens. (Deits, 1992, p. 95)

In recalling the grief she experienced as a result of a sibling's death,
Sims asserts

it is in the choosing of how to deal with the experiences we are given that we find growth of the spirit....We cannot change what happens to us, but we can change how we deal with those things that happen. I am not a victim of life. I may not always be pleased or joyous with the choices I have, but I am aware that I do have choices, and that knowledge is my power. (1990, p. 37)

Growth involves the losses we experience, the knowledge and information we are exposed to, and the changes we undergo (Viorst, 1986). Though the grief process may temporarily immobilize, overwhelm, and generate feelings of helplessness, it concurrently provides the individual with the opportunity to explore feelings, gain understanding and knowledge, and promote healing and growth (Rando, 1993).

Adolescence

This stage in the life cycle is a unique and complex time which is often fraught with confusion, conflict, and fear. It is a time motivated by the establishment of autonomy and the search for identity. It is characterized by paradoxes: adolescents strive for connection, but also fear intimacy; they demand autonomy, yet require structure and guidance; they are encouraged to develop a set
of values, yet are chastised if they do not appreciate and assume the values of their families and the institutions to which they are connected (Corey and Corey, 1987; Tatelbaum, 1980; Papalia and Olds, 1995). These paradoxes often accentuate the loneliness and isolation which accompany this time of life (Corey and Corey, 1992; Perschy, 1997).

According to Erikson (1968), the chief task of this stage of life is to resolve the conflict of identity versus identity confusion—to become a unique adult with an important role in life. The virtue of fidelity is the result of successfully developing an identity. He defines fidelity as the sustained loyalty, faith, or sense of belonging to a loved one or to significant others. In the midst of trying to come to grips with their own unique identity and developing fidelity, the adolescent can undergo debilitating and overwhelming setbacks and barriers if faced with a significant loss. If an individual experiences a significant loss during this period of time in their lives, the grieving process may be complicated and render the adolescent overwhelmed and exceedingly insecure. "During adolescence a young person has to cope with specific stresses
relating to body image, self-concept, relationships, peer pressure, sexual identity and parental expectations" (Hallam and Vine, 1996, p. 59). Further,

adolescence is a time of many changes and transitions when teens struggle with parents and society's expectations, and strive for independence and the freedom to make their own choices and decisions. We must acknowledge the fact that the loss of a sibling, parent, or close friend may have profound effects on their developmental needs and their abilities to cope when they feel compromised or overwhelmed. A significant loss may threaten their self-image and generate fears associated with existential concerns about life beyond death. (Adams and Deveau, 1995, p. 2)

In addition to the many physical and emotional changes adolescents face, they are developing the ability for abstract thought. This allows them to recognize the fact that in some situations, there are no definite answers. It also gives them the ability to view the world as it could be--a vision of what the ideal or perfect world would be. This may add even more confusion to the issue of loss for the adolescent. Rather than accepting loss and death as a natural and inescapable fact of life, they sometimes lash out at the world and the people around them because life is unfair! (Siepker and Kandaras, 1985).
The inner turmoil experienced by the adolescent is compounded by the fact that often they are no longer considered children, yet are not thought of as adults either. What of the individuals between the ages of 11 and 13—the focus of this study? They may be thought of as being in a more unique position. Webb postulates that normal development during the junior high school years reflects a time of transition marked by pivotal cognitive, physiological, and psychological changes. The pubertal youngster between the ages of 11 and 14 is no longer a "child" and not yet a full-blown adolescent. The increased flow of hormones stimulates uncomfortable affects and a sense of vulnerability....These drastic changes in the body bring about an increased sense of narcissism and fear of unfavorable comparisons and rejections by peers. (1993, p. 242)

Methods of Treatment

Assistance through the grieving process can take many forms. Individual and family therapy are certainly appropriate and beneficial in many cases. Support groups are another option, which may be particularly attractive and appear less threatening to the young adolescent.

Dinkmeyer and Caldwell (1970) stress that because adolescents are social beings whose growth and development take place in groups, it seems logical that they would be comfortable
meeting and discussing issues with their peers. Corey and Corey (1987) and Hallam and Vine (1996) contend that the group experience provides young people with an opportunity to express themselves among and to be listened to by their peers. The members receive validation of their feelings, relieving some of the heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness often experienced by those in grief (Haasl and Marnocha, 1990; Brigman and Early, 1991). As Yalom proffers, "There is no human deed or thought which is fully outside the experience of others" (1975, p. 8). In addition, Webb (1993) contends that group work normalizes the grief experience and provides its members with an opportunity to interact with others who have survived prior grief experiences. Additionally, adolescents may find it appealing to relate to an adult who is facilitating the group who is not their parent (Lord, McNeil, and Frogge, 1985). Smith and Pennells (1993) and Deits (1992) point out that the encouragement and support found in groups may be particularly beneficial to the bereaved because it helps to alleviate feelings of rejection and stigmatization. Young adolescents have a keen need to fit in, to belong, "...because their sense of identity has become
increasingly peer oriented" according to Bacon (1996, p. 287). Affiliation with a support group may fulfill this need during a particularly difficult time in the life of a grieving adolescent.

The support group encourages the members through the healing process. It empowers them with hope and diminishes feelings of helplessness (Levine and Noell, 1995; Worden, 1991). Brabant asserts that, "In a real sense, support groups provide an opportunity for you to work on your own mending while learning how others go about doing theirs" (1996, p. 80). Perschy agrees that a teen support group can help a teen keep a balance while moving through the throes of grief. It can give participants the support needed to identify themselves as grieving persons and the permission to work through the pain to move to a more peaceful place of reconciling the loss. (1997, p. 6)

Finally, group members may experience feelings of satisfaction, resulting in increased self-esteem, by providing each other with feedback, suggestions, and different perceptions (Corey and Corey, 1987; Brigman and Early, 1991). Support groups are a viable and beneficial tool for the grieving adolescent (Corr, 1995).
School Setting

The school is an appropriate and ideal location for a psychoeducational support group for the grieving young adolescent. Individuals between the ages of 11 and 13 spend a great deal of their waking hours at this location. Stevenson (1990) claims that the school is very influential in the lives of young people. It has been a dream of Helen Fitzgerald, (1992), death educator and author, to see the implementation of grief support groups in the school. Many schools have counselors or other staff who have been trained to facilitate support groups and who have experience in helping students resolve grief issues. As Crenshaw points out, "most bereaved people do not turn to therapists but rather to their clergy, their funeral director, school counselor, social worker, doctor, or nurse" (1990, p. 14).

Coppock and Dwivedi (1993) delineate advantages to conducting groups in the school setting which include: group members find themselves in a familiar and comfortable environment, group rapport is more easily established because the members may already know each other, and the school will directly
reflect the positive effects of the group. Leenaars and Wenckstern feel strongly that schools need to provide postvention to its students and define postvention as a "synthesis of strategies drawn from and combining education, consultation, crisis intervention, and trauma response in general" (1990, p. 266).

**Group Session Themes**

Several recurring themes presented themselves during the course of this research. Although each loss is unique and every individual's response is unrivaled, much common ground can be addressed in a support group accentuating growth and the resolution of grief.

**Introductory session:** Because it is paramount to assure the bereaved and instill a sense of safety, security and group identity, an introductory session wherein group members get to know each other and begin to build rapport is desirable (Perschy, 1997; Webb, 1993; Wolfe and Senta, 1995). This promotes the bonding of group members and encourages a feeling of connectedness. It is at this time that the members can be given a preview of what the group is all about, discouraging apprehension and resistance (Deits, 1992).
General housekeeping details can be shared. Group rules and guidelines can be reviewed and explained.

**Telling of stories:** The grieving adolescent has the opportunity to tell his story in the group experience, which is an important feature of the support group (Bacon, 1996; Worden, 1991). This promotes acknowledgement of the loss, allowing other necessary steps of the mourning process to be realized. Each story is different, but can be told in an environment which honors the individual where she is at. This provides the members a sometimes rare opportunity to express perceptions and feelings in an accepting, safe and supportive climate. The detailed telling of stories gives the members permission to identify their grief, laying the groundwork for coping, healing, and resuming life (Webb, 1993; Perschy, 1997; Wolfe and Senta, 1995).

**Grief education:** The procurement of information and the ability to assimilate this knowledge into one’s life paves the way for the resolution of grief (Crenshaw, 1990; Hallam and Vine, 1996). Loss and death are shrouded with uncertainty, fear, helplessness and confusion. The grieving person questions Why? over and over again.
The support group can offer information about grief and the grief process which is often enlightening and empowering. As Yalom has expressed

...explanation and clarification function as effective curative agents in their own right. Man has always abhorred uncertainty and through the ages has sought to order his universe by providing explanations, primarily religious or scientific. The explanation of a phenomenon is the first step toward control of the phenomenon. (1975, p. 11)

Again, it may be "a primitive fear of the unknown, an inability to confront human helplessness in the face of suffering, or a need to deny one's own mortality and the fragility of life" (Pogriebin, 1994, p. 27), which is so frightening and which we attempt so hard to control. If fears are acknowledged rather than denied the grieving person may then be free to resume a satisfying and healthy life. The grieving person would also be assured that she is not going crazy (Jewett, 1982; Webb, 1993; Worden, 1991). A didactic experience equips the young adolescent with a vocabulary which can be extremely helpful in the expression of grief (Attig, 1995). The grieving adolescent may come to understand the varied grief responses of family members and friends and reconcile the often
negative responses she or he encounters as the grief process continues (Webb, 1993). Armed with appropriate vocabulary and a better understanding of the grief process, the adolescent is discouraged from making false inferences and erroneous conclusions (Bowlby, 1980; Jewett, 1982). Thus, the adolescent will be in a much better position to share, explore or reflect upon her own grief experience (Perschy, 1997). Additionally, expecting and planning for painful and resurging feelings on upcoming holidays and anniversaries can better prepare the bereaved to cope with a particularly difficult time to come (Webb, 1993; Brabant, 1990; Bacon, 1996).

**Feelings:** Identification and expression of feelings is an integral factor in the resolution of grief (Haasl and Marnocha, 1990; Webb, 1993). The grieving adolescent can encounter any number of intense and sometimes debilitating feelings which include anger, abandonment, sadness, relief, fear, jealousy, guilt, frustration, confusion, and loneliness (Brabant, 1990; Bacon, 1996; LaGrand, 1986). If feelings are not accepted and expressed, suppression and regression may occur, hindering a healthy resolution of grief (Rosen,
1986; Stearns, 1984). Even the identification and the expression of such negative feelings as anger, jealousy, and resentment must occur to prevent the prolonging of grief. If these feelings are not allowed expression, the results often realize themselves in the form of physical or emotional illness (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 1991). The support group offers the grieving adolescent a safe and non-threatening place to explore and express feelings which is often discouraged in other settings that the young person finds himself in.

It is important to offer the adolescent different avenues of expressing feelings. Self-expression can be achieved through a number of ways including verbal communication, writing, drawing, painting, working with clay, music, play, movement, or dance (LaGrand, 1986; Bacon, 1996; Perschy, 1997). This allows experimentation in and assimilation of a wider repertoire of feelings expression—an important life skill (Fitzgerald, 1992). As Neeld proposes, "it is the recognition, acceptance, and validation of each emotion that lets the child move from one emotional state to another so that grief can be completed" (1990, p. 6). Journaling can be a powerful way to bring to closure any unfinished business with
the loss (Perschy, 1997; Worden, 1991). It is a way for participants to express themselves when they aren't quite ready to confide in others. Jacobsen, Kindlen, and Shoemark note

the act of recording insights about ourselves, our feelings, our lives, our relationships is not only an important record of that discovery; it is also a witnessing and valuing of ourselves. If we neglect to record such information, we are in danger of dismissing ourselves and our importance—as others may have dismissed us previously. (1997, p. 19)

Healing is dependent upon experiencing the pain of grief (Perschy, 1997; Kubler-Ross, 1983). Tatelbaum (1980) believes that it takes courage to grieve, feel the pain, and face the unfamiliar and unknown. Eloise Cole has stated that, "The point of the pain is the point of the healing" (March 4, 1994, New Song Conference). She views the process of grief as similar to the act of eating a bunch of grapes: a bunch of grapes cannot be consumed in one mouthful. Rather, grapes are chewed and swallowed a few at a time!

Memories: The importance of and the need for remembering the lost object or dead person is of significance to the bereaved. As Fitzgerald (1992) points out, memories can never be taken away from the individual. As Marris asserts
recovery from grief depends on restoring a sense that the lost attachment can still give meaning to the present, not on finding a substitute. The purpose and feeling it expressed has somehow to be abstracted from its past setting and reformulated so as to make present and future behavior interpretable, as rewarding. (1974, p. 149)

This can be accomplished in the support group by structuring activities and experiences which promote the continued connection and link to the significant person or object (Perschy, 1997; Boyd, 1993; Wolf and Senta, 1995; Levine and Noell, 1995). Memories can enrich the meaning of life and encourage movement through the grief process (Bacon, 1996; Crenshaw, 1990; Tatelbaum, 1980). The bereaved are afforded the opportunity to celebrate the richness of life due to the connection and impact of the significant person or object in their lives (Haasl and Marnocha, 1990; Worden, 1991; Rando, 1993).

**Coping Skills:** Loss elicits stress and accentuates the need for relief. It is imperative that the bereaved successfully acquire coping techniques and therefore view themselves as competent and worthy. Stress management strategies are valuable tools when dealing with arduous tasks such as grief (Braza, 1991; Deitz, 1992). Loss often reduces the grieving person's ability to function at an
optimum level because of the disorganization and helpless feelings evoked by the loss (Fitzgerald, 1992). This diminishes self-esteem, rendering the adolescent as weak, powerless, feeble, or out of control in her eyes (Jewett, 1982; Gabell, 1996; LaGrand, 1986). Again, this can lead to grave consequences. Effective coping skills allow the adolescent to survive all the many disappointments and losses which are a part of the human experience, once more giving her or him the opportunity to feel valuable, capable, and competent (Sims, 1991).

**Self-Care:** Perschy (1997) believes that because grief can be consuming and overwhelming, the support group is a valuable medium to remind the adolescents that they must take care of themselves. LaGrand (1986) and Stearns (1984) point out that a myriad of physical as well as emotional reactions accompany significant loss, making the resolution of grief even more difficult. The bereaved need to reflect upon the implications of the loss and examine the impact, the changes, and the accommodations required to assimilate current and future losses (Webb, 1993; Tatelbaum, 1980; Rando, 1993). In order to regain a healthy balance in life,
humans need to nourish themselves both physically and emotionally. Human beings need nutritious food, exercise, play, leisure, relationships, and participation in meaningful activities and work, among other things. The subject of suicide and other self-destructive behaviors is an appropriate group topic because the young adolescent may turn to these choices to relieve the overwhelming pain of loss. Alternative choices can be explored and encouraged.

**Hope:** Significant losses often evoke feelings of being vulnerable, ineffective and hopeless. Viorst refers to them as "lifelong losses...necessary losses...universal, unavoidable, inexorable" (1986, pp. 2-3). However, Viorst and LaGrand (1991) wholeheartedly embrace the belief that human growth is dependent upon and promoted by losing and leaving and letting go. The awareness and understanding of this human condition can be the beginning of wisdom and instill hope in the bereaved (Sims, 1991; Stearns, 1984; Tatelbaum, 1980). There is much wisdom in the old saying: No pain--no gain! Like so many other desired states or goals, the resolution of grief requires diligence, commitment and hard
work—but it can be rewarding and fulfilling. The grieving process accommodates both pain and opportunity (Perschy, 1997). It is vital for the grieving person to identify and rely upon the support systems available to her or him outside the support group (Bacon, 1996; Worden, 1991). Participation in a support group is a healthy and beneficial technique for the bereaved. However, continuing support will be required not only for the current loss but for future losses (Smith and Pennells, 1995; Bacon, 1996). This is an opportune time to explore the need to broaden one's support network and brainstorm effective methods of doing so. Continued and constructive support "enable a return to living and contribute to establishing viable life patterns" (Attig, 1995, p. 57). Wolf and Senta (1995) and Rando (1993) stress the importance of integrating the loss and investing in new relationships. The bereaved often need reassurance that it is okay to laugh, have fun and enjoy life again (Perschy, 1997; Webb, 1993). Balk and Hogan (1995) value the exploration of the role religion and spirituality play in the grieving person's life. Rituals, customs and traditions may be an appropriate topic for discussion in the healing process (Haasl and Marnocha, 1990).
Summary

From birth through death, human beings undergo loss many times over, within various and differing circumstances. The resolution of grief allows the individual to reconcile current losses and enhances the ability to cope with future losses. Loss experienced during the adolescent stage in life harbors unique characteristics and implications intrinsic to this age group. Participation in a support group can provide meaningful assistance to the bereaved young adolescent. The school offers a convenient and ideal setting for this experience. Specific group session themes have been identified and delineated as appropriate and beneficial.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop a psychoeducational grief support group for the bereaved early adolescent in the school setting. The research question addressed in this study was: What is the design of a support group which might result in a meaningful and beneficial experience for the bereaved adolescent?

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive research design. The purpose of the descriptive design, "is to systematically describe the facts and characteristics of a given phenomenon, population, or area of interest" (Merriam and Simpson, 1995, p. 61). The descriptive research design allowed for the collection of facts, theories, and opinions; and the identification of key issues regarding grief and loss in an attempt to design a grief support group for early adolescents. A search of the literature, attendance at several workshops, and the facilitation of a focus group resulted in a list of
key elements that have been included in groups in the past, and opinions regarding what elements merit consideration.

The resulting accumulation of previous and existing grief group designs and the opinions of current professionals will assist in the design of a beneficial and powerful group experience for young adolescents.

**Source of the Data**

Numerous sources were used to gather data for this study. A review of the literature provided information and techniques utilized by helping professionals. A review of books, manuals, journal articles, and information disseminated at five workshops were helpful in gathering data on the topics of loss, death, grief, adolescence, and bereavement groups. The New Song Center for Grieving Children and Those Who Love Them presented "Theory, Tools, and Techniques: Practical Approaches to Working with Grieving Children" in Phoenix, Arizona, in March, 1994. Tim S. Ayers and Eloise Cole presented an inservice entitled "Addressing Grief Issues in a School Setting" to the Peoria Unified School District in December, 1994. The American Academy of Bereavement presented

Additionally, a focus group was conducted to elicit the responses of helping professionals currently employed in a school setting.

Assumptions and Limitations

Thanatology is a relatively new and complex field. The impact and implications of death have been conjectured to resemble losses experienced in a wide variety of situations and circumstances. An assumption adopted in this study is that the experience of loss, whether through death or other means--such as divorce, loss of a limb, etc.--is an appropriate theme for support groups. Additionally, the group setting is assumed to be of some benefit to many individuals who are experiencing grief.

An inherent limitation in the use of descriptive research design is the inability to predict and generalize with certainty.
Procedure

A review of the current literature on death, loss, grief, adolescence, and bereavement groups was conducted. Information obtained at five workshops was assimilated into the body of information.

A focus group was conducted to elicit additional information from potential facilitators of the support group that is recommended as a result of this study. The focus group was held from 12:30 - 2:00 p.m. in November, 1997 at the District Administration Center for the Peoria Unified School District. The discussion was tape recorded and explored the following topics:

1. If you were to conduct a support group for grieving adolescents--approximately 11-13 years of age--what would the themes of the sessions include?

2. How many facilitators would be involved?

3. How many sessions would it involve?

4. How long would each session last?

5. Would the school be an appropriate setting for the group?
Method of Analysis

A review of books, manuals, and journal articles was conducted. Information obtained from five workshops was included in the accumulation of data. This researcher reviewed the audiotape of the focus group. The data was summarized and categorized according to the interview questions.

A comparison and analysis of the recurring themes or key elements from the different data sources resulted in the recommendations of this study.
CHAPTER 4
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter will be to present the data resulting from a focus group held from 12:30-2:00 p.m. in November, 1997, at the District Office of the Peoria Unified School District. Each of the eight participants were employed by the district at the time of the study. Seven of the eight participants work directly with kindergarten through eighth grade students in a school setting. The remaining participant is the Director of Prevention Services for the district.

Demographic Description

Of the eight participants in the focus group, 75%, or 6, were between the ages of 40-44. The remaining 2 participants, or 25%, were between 45-50 years of age.

The focus group consisted of 3 men, 37.5%, and 5 women, 62.5%. All of the participants were Caucasian.
One participant was currently working toward a Master’s Degree. Six, or 75%, had achieved a Master’s Degree. One focus group participant had completed a Ph.D. program.

Findings

The eight participants of the focus group were asked to respond and discuss the following questions:

What are the key elements you would include in a grief support group for adolescents 11-13 years of age? Every participant recommended that the following themes be included in a grief support group for young adolescents: group rules and guidelines, getting acquainted and rapport-building activities, the telling of stories, grief education, feelings expression, memories, coping skills exploration and education, self-care discussion and encouragement, and the instillation of hope.

The focus group participants stated that an introductory session which includes an explanation of group guidelines and rules provides its members with a framework and an orientation as to group expectations and objectives. Members are more at ease when they know what to expect, promoting group cohesion and
opportunities to get to know each other and feel connected.

Every bereaved individual needs the opportunity to express her perceptions of and feelings regarding the loss. This promotes facing the reality of the loss, so that the adolescent can work through the grieving process.

Information often leads to understanding and insight. Grief education assures the bereaved that they are not going crazy, that their experiences and feelings are normal, that they will survive the loss, that they may even be stronger and healthier upon the resolution of grief.

Loss elicits a great number and range of feelings. The support group provides grieving adolescents a safe, non-threatening place to express feelings in a supportive and encouraging atmosphere. Their feelings are affirmed and they begin to sense that others are also experiencing similar feelings and situations.

It is important for the bereaved to reminisce and remain connected to the lost object or person. The group experience must accommodate the recall of memories and past experiences which have had such a significant impact on the grieving adolescent.
Learning and assimilating effective coping skills enhances the adolescent's ability to regain a sense of control and competency. Stress, chaos, and self-defeating behaviors accompany loss in many instances. The development of effective coping skills and the discovery of new-found strengths provides the grieving adolescent with tools to survive not only the current loss but future losses as well.

The bereaved individual will undergo many changes as a result of loss. They need to be aware that these changes will impact many aspects of their life including the roles they play, physical and emotional health, relationships, and financial and housekeeping responsibilities. The group allows the adolescent to explore these changes and encourages healthy and nurturing behaviors so that the resolution of grief becomes a reality.

Identification and use of healthy support systems can instill a sense of hope and give the bereaved permission to resume living again. The support group can encourage the bereaved to reinvest emotional energy into new relationships and assure them that life is worthwhile and valuable.
How many facilitators would there be for the support group? The ideal situation reported by eight of the focus group participants would be to have two co-leaders, one male and one female. All of the participants cited the advantages of having two role models for the group members to observe, allowing for any gender differences in the grief process and the expression of grief.

How many members would be involved in the grief group? All eight respondents agreed that 6-8 members would be ideal, consisting of both male and female adolescents.

What would the time frames and parameters of the group look like? All of the participants stated that the group would consist of eight 45-60 minute sessions. It was also felt that a closed group wherein no new members would be allowed to join the group once the sessions begin, would be more beneficial to the adolescents due to the need for trust and security between the members.

Would a school setting be an appropriate setting for a psychoeducational support group for young adolescents? The eight participants reported that the school is a major part of the young adolescent's life and would be an ideal setting. It would minimize
any transportation or timing problems. Recruitment efforts would be minimal due to the fact that an announcement can be made to the classrooms and school personnel are generally aware of significant losses experienced by students in the school.

Summary

The data generated from the focus group supported the implementation of a psychoeducational support group for grieving, young adolescents in a school setting. The recommended number of facilitators was two--one female and one male. The desired number of group participants was identified as 6-8. A closed group, as opposed to an open group wherein the participants can join the group at any time, would enhance a greater sense of trust and security among the participants.

Eight 45-60 minute sessions would meet the objectives of the group for this level of development. The recommended session themes included the following: an introductory and getting acquainted session, the telling of stories, grief education, feelings expression, memories, coping skills exploration and education, self-
care discussion and encouragement, and the instillation of hope.
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of the study was to develop a model for a psychoeducational support group for the grieving, early adolescent in a school setting. The research question to be addressed was: What is the design of a psychoeducational grief support group for the young adolescent in a school setting?

Relative to this question, the literature reviewed included books and journal articles on grief, death, loss, support groups, and adolescence.

The methodology utilized was a descriptive research design. Descriptive research resulted in a list of key elements for inclusion in a grief support group, taking into consideration the age of the participants. A focus group was conducted to elicit and gather data to assist in answering the research question. This researcher also attended five workshops on the issue of grief and loss.

The findings of the focus group supported the implementation
of a grief support group for young adolescents in the school setting. The session themes included: getting acquainted and rapport-building activities, the telling of stories, grief education, feelings expression, memories, coping skills exploration and education, self-care discussion and encouragement, and the instillation of hope.

**Conclusions**

Loss is a universal and redundant experience, affecting all individuals throughout the life cycle. Grief presents itself in many forms, resulting from many different types of loss. Loss can appear on a continuum anywhere from seemingly minimal and inconsequential to profound and overwhelming. Early losses affect current and future losses. The assimilation of effective coping skills allows for a healthy resolution of grief and renders the grieving individual as capable and valuable. The human need for inclusion can be met through affiliation with a support group. This need is particularly accentuated following a significant loss in early adolescence, considering the heightened sense of alienation and isolation experienced by the young person.

Grief is often overlooked as an opportunity for growth.
Adolescents have the same repertoire of feelings as adults, but they may not have the life experiences that their older counterparts have undergone. Participation in a support group can provide the adolescent with a context for his grief, normalize sometimes overwhelming and intense feelings, and encourage the adolescent to work through the pain of grief so that they can resume a healthy and rewarding life. The school can honor the adolescent's need during this particularly difficult time or an opportunity to help may be surrendered, resulting in sometimes grave and tragic situations.

A search of the literature, the information at five workshops, and the data generated by a focus group confirm the benefits of a group within a school setting. The literature and the focus group point to the advantages of two co-facilitators and limiting the number of group members to 6-8. The sources recommended a closed group, consisting of six to ten 45-60 minute sessions.

The literature and the focus group specifically recommended the inclusion of the following themes: an introductory and getting-acquainted session, the telling of stories, grief education, feelings, memories, coping skills, self-care, and hope.
Recommendations

As a result of the research, it is recommended that schools consider the implementation of a psychoeducational support group for grieving, young adolescents. Two group leaders, ideally one female and one male, will facilitate eight 45-60 minute sessions for a closed group of 6-8 members from 11-13 years of age, during the school day on the campus.

The group session themes will include the following:

**Introductory session:** As with many beginnings, the laying of ground rules allays fears and answers many questions. An explanation of what is to come alleviates many worries and apprehensions. An introductory session which effectively addresses these issues and instills a sense of security and trust is intrinsic to an efficacious and beneficial support group.

**Telling of stories:** The group experience allows each member to tell his own reality of the loss. The grieving adolescent is encouraged to recount the loss rather than chastised to get over it or be made to feel guilty because she still has the need and desire to talk about it. This provides the bereaved an opportunity to relate his
side of the story, individual perceptions, and how the loss has affected him.

**Grief education:** Grief education provides the bereaved with information and a vocabulary which sets the stage for the resolution of grief. This equips the adolescent with a sense of normalcy and a context within which to deal with grief. When the adolescent is validated and comes to the realization that grief is very much a human experience, she can regain some sense of control and balance. Knowledge and understanding of the grief process enlightens and empowers the bereaved to continue through the grief process.

**Feelings expression:** The support group offers the adolescent a safe and non-threatening haven for the identification and expression of feelings. It allows for the exploration of often conflicting and confusing emotions, promoting understanding and acceptance of the impact of the loss. Through various avenues of expression the bereaved can emote strong and sometimes overwhelming feelings which is encouraged rather than discouraged. Validation of feelings encourages the bereaved to work through their grief.

**Memories:** Reminiscing contributes to the bereaved's need for
continued connection with the lost object or person. The significance of the deceased or the lost object is honored through recall and resurgence of past experiences and feelings. The deceased or lost object can then be given an appropriate place in the adolescents’ emotional life, enabling them to resume a healthy and rewarding life.

Coping skills: The assimilation of effective coping skills allows the adolescent to survive all the many disappointments and losses which are a part of the human experience. Loss is universal and unavoidable. Successful progression through the grief process equips the bereaved with the strength and inspiration to work through the pain of loss and reclaim effective life styles.

Self-care: To resume a healthy and rewarding life, the bereaved must often make many modifications to accommodate the reality and the impact of the loss. Acquiring new skills or enhancing existing skills, such as housekeeping, decision-making, interpersonal relationship-building, and nurturing self-esteem, contributes to optimal and desirable functioning on a daily basis. This discourages the adolescent from resorting to self-destructive
behaviors and promotes self-care.

**Hope:** The overwhelming pain of loss can often lead to a sense of hopelessness and despair. Powerful feelings of guilt and regret often cause the adolescent to punish themselves and purposely make their lives even more miserable. It is as if the bereaved need permission to live, and love, and be happy again. It is imperative that the bereaved know where to go for support and validation. This allows for the integration of the loss, the instillation of hope, and the promotion of establishing healthy and positive relationships—not only with self but others as well.


