

Guidance for Suicide Postvention Circles

Before: Preparation for Circle

Circles are intentional spaces and require thoughtfulness, awareness, and preparation. Here are some things I think are required practices prior to a circle:

- **Bring a talking piece that is intentional, thoughtful, symbolic for gathering or to you.**
- **Review your circle format/plan. Find appropriate quotes that resonate with you.**
- **Practice a mindful moment, meditation, safe place or grounding exercise.**
- **Make sure chairs can be put in a physical circle WITHOUT tables in the middle.**
- **Ensure chairs are in a true circle or folks won't all be seen, and it will impact connection.**
- **Take a mindful moment just prior to circle start time.**

During: Circle Format/Plan

1) Welcome & Orientation

- **A circle is a different way of engaging, a different way of being together. Circles are a sacred tradition passed down by Indigenous ancestors to establish community and connection.**
- Most of us are used to meetings or presentations where one person talks to the rest. A circle is different. It is intentional, sacred space where we are all equal participants.
- People have gathered in circle for centuries – around fire, dinner tables, to share, to celebrate, and to grieve. Circles are a space where we can tell our story and truly listen to that of others. It's a space to witness and be witnessed.
- We set group agreements and expectations so that we can maintain the integrity of circle and show up as fully as possible. The core agreements are:
 - Honor the talking piece; it's okay to pass. ("The talking piece is a reminder that it is a privilege to share our story with others and be heard; and it is also a privilege to truly get to listen to that of others.")
 - Speak from your heart, no need to rehearse. ("This is important because it gives us permission to truly listen without thinking about what we are going to say. We believe that what is meant to be shared will come to you when it's your turn.")
 - Practice nonjudgment with self and others.
 - Practice presence, *as much as possible*.

2) Ask if anyone wants to add to the agreements before proceeding. If they say no, begin the circle by saying, "I am going to share a quote to ground us in the space together, then we will talk a little bit about grief and what that process is like. Then, I will share a few prompts, we will go around and share our thoughts, and I will close us out with a quote."

3) Opening Quote

-Invite everyone to take a Collective deep breath-

"We've all been through a lot we don't understand in a world made to either break us or make us so hard we can't break even when it's what we need most to do." – Tommy Orange, **There There**

"Through the sacred art of pausing, we develop the capacity to stop hiding, to stop running away from our experience. We begin to trust in our natural intelligence, in our naturally wise heart, in our capacity to open to whatever arises." Tara Brach

4) Grief Psychoed

- Grief comes with a wide range of very powerful and even conflicting emotions – sadness, shock, longing, frustration, confusion, anger, fear, blame, guilt, despair, overwhelm, relief – can come like waves. *These waves are even more complex with suicide loss which brings with it layers of uncertainty, questions upon questions, confusion, anger and sadness. Unanswered questions are often the most difficult part of the grief process for suicide survivors, as it leaves closure much more difficult and even impossible at times.
- Everyone grieves differently. There's no right or wrong way.
- Grief is not linear, it doesn't even flow in the stages we've learned in the past. It comes in waves. It doesn't always make sense. The range of emotions comes at varying times and varying degrees.
- There are some things we know and can anticipate: grief reminders. This can be a place, an event, a person or simply a smell, a song, a time of year. Be gentle with yourself as you notice grief reminders emerge, and carefully consider ways to take care of yourself around anticipated reminders.
- *Optional if appropriate: There are 3 categories of grief reactions: separation distress (missing the person), existential distress (feeling lost, existential and identity questions that come up), and circumstantial distress (emotional pain over the way they died).*
- All of these things are complicated by suicide loss because of the complexity of suicide itself and vast amount of unknowns. It can be complicated to sort through the unrest this can stir up in us.

5) Prompts & Storytelling

- **Opening Prompt** (if appropriate/needed): Let's do one check in go around before we begin. How are you showing up today, right now? How are you feeling?
- **Prompt 1:** What is one word that comes to mind when you think about name ?
- **Prompt 2:** What has been the hardest part of this loss for you?
- **Prompt 3:** What is one question on your heart right now?
- **Prompt 4:** What has helped you walk through this grief? And, as you think about all that you're holding, what is one thing you need today or this week to honor yourself during the grief process?
//OR// How have you found comfort in the past during times of difficulty, grief, loss, or uncertainty? Where can you go in the next 3 days to get that comfort?
- **Prompt 4 (optional):** Is there anything else you'd like to share before we close?
- **Closing Prompt:** What is one word you are leaving this space with today?

6) Closing Quote

"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim." – Vicki Harrison
/OR/ "We can be our worst selves when we're afraid, or our very best, bravest selves. In the context of fear and vulnerability, there is often very little in between because when we are uncertain and afraid our default is self-protection. We don't have to be scary when we're scared. Let's choose awkward, brave, and kind. And let's choose each other." – Brene Brown

After: Coming Down from Circle

Circles are intentional spaces and can be heavy, heartfelt, and deep. Give yourself time to debrief with a friend or colleague, acknowledge the space you held, and release any of the weight you carried away from the circle. Take a moment to honor yourself, your heart, and your needs.

Additional Prompts Bank

What is one word that is coming up for you when you think about ____?

What is one word that describes how you are feeling in this moment?

What's been the hardest thing about this loss for you?

What is something that you will remember about _____? Something silly, funny, special, or that stands out.

What is something from _____'s life that you want to take with you or be more like?

What is one question on your heart today or surrounding the loss of _____?

If you could ask ____ anything, what would you ask?

If you could tell ____ anything, what would you want to say, share, or ask?

How do you find comfort during grief/where can you go to get that comfort?

What can you do to honor your grief and emotions over the next 3 days?

Is there anything else that you want to share or say?

As we end our time together, what are you leaving with today?

Additional Quotes Bank

Suicide Loss

"I am a survivor of suicide, a zebra among horses; distinct from those who have not suffered the loss by suicide of a loved one or dear friend. I do not feel like you, I do not respond to things as you do, and nothing you do or say can remove the pain from my heart or the reminders of my loved one from my thoughts.

I am a zebra among horses; I may seem a normal person, but inside, the differences are as marked as the stripes that distinguish a zebra from a horse. The knowledge that I am different wears on me like a saddle.

I am a zebra among horses; like you, yet not like you." - Peter J. Warshaw

So why is our grief different?
Why can't we just pull through?
We mourn our loved ones just as much
But we have burdens too
Your loved one didn't want to go
In that they had a voice
But we were haunted by the thought
Our loved one had a choice
You can't imagine what it's like
To be where we have been
For many of us had the shock
Or were first upon the scene
That picture's burned into our minds
And it can't be erased
It haunts us still at any time
Unbidden, any place
We all would like to change the past
And most did what they could
But we are wracked with heavy guilt

Grief

"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim." - Vicki Harrison

"You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to." - Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

"Perhaps they are not stars, but rather openings in heaven where the love of our lost ones pours through and shines down upon us to let us know they are happy." - Inuit saying

"Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve." - Earl Grollman

"I weep but not for me. I weep for all the tomorrows that you will never see. It's not my loss that makes me sad it's thinking what you never had." - Authur Unknown

*I savor each moment because I do not know
Exactly when a heavy gust or breeze might blow.
Should it be today, I'll shed my sorrow in a tear
While my courage battles the uncertainty I fear.
Dreadful emotions for which I can't prepare
Will likely taunt me with sporadic despair.
But I'll be patient amid the highs and lows
For the is the process by which grieving goes.
-Maria Dawson*

*This is me grieving. This is me doing well. This is me being strong.
Lots of tears. Shaking sobs.
Bursts of anger.
Extreme confusion.
Consistent forgetfulness
Tentative smiles
Ripples of laughter
Always remembering. Forever missing.
This is my doing well. This is me being strong. This is me grieving.
-Tanya Lord*

O'er things we think we "should"
We should have been there earlier
We should have known their mind
We should have sought professional help
We should have been more kind
We should have phoned more often
We should have understood
We should have seen it coming
But we all did what we could
So that is how we're different
We're coping best we can
We're rarely given peace of mind
Please try to understand
-A M Maxwell

Additional Quotes

“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in the brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.” Henri J.M. Nouwen

“We’ve all been through a lot we don’t understand in a world made to either break us or make us so hard we can’t break even when it’s what we need most to do.” – Tommy Orange, **There There**

Values are not static: they evolve, and they involve a great deal of choice. –Marsha Linehan

“**Radical acceptance** rests on letting go of the illusion of control and a willingness to notice and accept things as they are right now, without judging.”-Marsha Linehan

“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.” – Chief Seattle, Duwamish

“She told me we could only do what we could do, and that the monster that was the machine that was the government had no intention of slowing itself down for long enough to truly look back to see what happened. To make it right. And so what we could do had everything to do with being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories. She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories, and stories about stories.” Opal says this in *There There* by Tommy Orange

