Social groups and their contribution to recovery

by Derek Nuttall, Cruse Director



CRUSE HAS SOCIAL GROUPS BECAUSE BEREAVED PEOPLE HAVE social needs as well as the emotional, psychological and practical needs our counselling and advisory services are designed to meet. Not all widows and widowers wish to join in our social activities and generally they are not suitable for the newly bereaved, but many have their first experience of Cruse when they attend a social group. Here, they usually find new friendships and a chance to re-build self-confidence. Some may learn about our other services for the first time in the social group.

Loneliness is an especially important consequence of bereavement. Social activities offer an opportunity to widows and widowers to meet each other, to try their shaky feet in the company of other people and widen their social contacts. Above all, they offer a safe and supportive place from which to begin the difficult journey back to the community and a meaningful life.

Cruse has to be able to accept people and let them go. Those we help who stay on are much appre ciated, but we do not start from the premise that they will or should stay. For this to happen it is essential that non widowed people are as involved as the widowed; they help to provide the stepping stone back to the community.

THE GOOD GROUP

What makes a good social group? First, the right philosophy; second, acceptance of the social group as part of a well integra ted service and third, the careful selection of those who organise and staff social gatherings.

Other essential ingredients are:

.the presence of counsellors

.the interest of committee members and other workers, as appropriate

.flexibility of approach to allow for different times of meetings, different ages and social needs

.a balanced programme which includes time simply to meet and talk

.a warm, caring welcome especially for newcomers and the nervous and, at the close of the gathering, a check on any who may have difficulty or anxiety about travelling home alone, particularly from evening meetings.

.a planned programme - people feel cared for if someone has taken time to arrange things; but the programme should not be so tightly organised that mem bers' ideas are missed or under-valued.

. sensitively chosen meeting place

. appropriate response to anyone showing signs of distress or need

. the creation of an atmosphere of safety, personal interest, mutual support and understanding.

DEFUSING THE PAIN

All this clearly cannot happen without careful planning and regular assessment. Giving the social side this level of attention, however, will bring its own reward, in the benefit to those who attend and the satisfaction to those running it.

Some areas need special care:

Mixing widows and widowers: Discussion in a mixed group may need to run for everyone's benefit, but on occasions it needs defusing before too much pain is caused. Of course, there should be opportunities for individuals to talk through feelings privately.

Different ages and their needs: The older a widow or widower is when they join a group the more inclined they will be to see it as their primary group. It may, in fact, be the only group they belong to. Younger people, faced with an older person's situation, may be afraid they are seeing an image of themselves in later life. Several social groups, meeting at different times of day, and being brought together occasionally may be the answer.

Availability of counsellors at all social gatherings: For most people the single fact that they are in a safe atmosphere will allow them to release and express their feelings. The onus is on counsellors to take

the initiative if they sense the need to talk. It is in the essence of Cruse that we move towards the bereaved and do not stand back waiting for them to approach us on such occasions.

Coping with the passive side of widowhood: social organisers sometimes feel frustrated that no ideas for the programme come from those attending the group, who seem to want everything provided. There are various reasons for this. Members may have no experience of organising activities; some may have been accustomed to their partner doing things for them, including being the passport to social life; others may lack confidence to offer suggestions; some may be too sad to contribute. It is a measure of our caring that there is sufficient organisation to take the strain off those who come to receive and to use those who are able to give.

Following up those who come once and do not return: it is possible that someone has come too soon after a death and has felt unable to attend a second time, or simply that the group was not what had been expected. We must not intrude or chase. Sending a letter or asking a member who knows the person well to call are possibilities. If there is no response, sending a Christmas card or an invitation to a special event is perhaps all Cruse can do. If the records show when the person lost her spouse, then a letter or better still, a telephone call on the anniversary explaining that Cruse has been thinking of her, might produce a helpful response. The process of grief takes us into different areas of need as time passes; and it is not easy for someone to return to a group they have rejected.

OFFERING NEW HORIZONS

A constant concern is how to help people move on out of the social group. There are things we can try - such as arranging speakers from other community organisations to let members know what else is available and to widen their horizons; or a group might be encouraged to go along to an evening class. For some the fear of trying something new may be almost as acuse as was the fear of coming to the social group in the first place. Counsellors may have a part to play at this stage, as well as earlier stages. The difficulty in moving on may indicate that very need.

DEEPER ISSUES

Many skills are needed to provide the Cruse service and a successful social group does not happen accidentally. Those organising social activities need to be supported, feel their problems are appreciated and know they are part of the team. It will help if a counsellor can be part of the group planning social meetings and if, when reports of the activities are given, discussion can be not only about events and plans but also about the deeper issues of the social side.

Cruse aims to help those who turn to us to find their feet again, rejoin the mainstream of society and make a contribution to their community.

A social group provides one further and often crucial purpose - a chance for the widowed to learn from others who are coming through that they can make it.

JOHN HAMER is 32 and has a daughter who is two years old. His wife died two years ago. Here he writes about his social needs

I WORK FULL-TIME AND MANAGE TO maintain a reasonable standard of living, a fact which I think has an important bearing on the way I am coping with my present life.

Before my wife's death there was not the same need to go out and socialise. We were quite happy with our own company at home. Now there is a need to compensate. to an extent. for the loss of companionship.

For this reason I try to go out as much as babysitting availability, domestic jobs, money, will allow - an average of three times a week.

By inviting people round to the home and taking part in activities where children are involved, such as Gingerbread, I find I can meet the need to fill up my spare time as fully as possible. This stops me looking back too often and becoming introspective.

I am very aware of not wanting to confine my activities to a certain type of group. I am also not keen on the out and out single orientated, 'cattle market' style of organisation.

I have a wish to broaden my circle of friends and acquaintances. I think it is important not to restrict this circle to single parents, single people, couples or families with children, each fitting into a category. I want a broad spread of friends, acquaintancies and social activities. My main outlets at present, therefore, are Gingerbread, Cruse, Inter-Varsity Club and working with the church.

Obviously, both Gingerbread and the Cruse Parents Circle are not open to widowed people without children, and in this sense, one is luckier to have more organisations available than have those widowers without children. It also has to be said that children are a tremendous help

It is worth noting also that there are wide differences among widowers in the sort of social lives they feel they need.

In conclusion, I should recommend the following to any young widower:

Fill your spare time to the full. Life is too precious to waste it. This becomes more apparent after a close bereavement, of course.

Get to know people in a similar situation to your own, but take care you do not restrict your social life only to them.

Pass on your experiences of bereavement to others. It helps.

Be positive and make sure that what you do actually gets you involved.