Grief groups on the internet



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As well as traditional face-to-face counselling and group work, many health professionals are now using the internet to communicate with their clients through email, chat rooms, interactive web pages and, in some cases, on-line support groups. However, we know little about the operation of these new methods, the reasons for their increasing popularity, or the outcome for users. In this study, members of an on-line grief support network were asked to respond to a questionnaire exploring some of these issues.

During the last decade we have seen the internet change the way many of us live. We now can pay bills on line, make travel reservations, invest money, follow a course of study, purchase merchandise, research illnesses and communicate with friends and family. The limits of the internet have yet to be defined.

In the USA, the mental health field has begun to use the internet as a vehicle for counselling and support through groups. On-line support relies on written text instead of face-to-face communications. Belonging to an internet group can lead to social relationships since members may share mutual interests and opportunities to exchange information, as well as emotional support[1, 2].

> The internet is a social technology. People connect to each other from vast distances, read notes posted by invisible others while remaining invisible themselves, all with very little logistics and social costs[3].

After the death of a loved one, people may find themselves needing support at unconventional hours when friends, family and traditional counsellors are unavailable. Also, it is not uncommon for bereaved people to find that those close to them do not know what to say or do after a death. Friends, and even family members, may feel uncomfortable, and these feelings can be relayed to the bereaved. It seems that the internet may be a place where it is easier to grieve more freely because it is possible to communicate at any time with others in the same situation.

ON-LINE GROUPS

Many grief support websites have already been established on the internet. Typically, these offer bereaved people membership of groups categorised by the type of loss experienced. Examples include groups for widows and widowers, grieving parents, adults who have lost a parent, those bereaved by suicide or SIDS, and friend loss.

While these groups offer convenience, they are as yet something of an unknown quantity. Their demographic make-up is largely unidentified. The reasons for electing to use technological, instead of face-to-face support are unknown. More importantly, we have not identified the efficacy of on-line support relative to face-to-face contact, or the competency of those facilitating these on-line grief support sites.

Several writers have reasoned that those who choose on-line support do so because of convenience and anonymity, as well as the fact that crises and needs cannot be scheduled around times of conventional group meetings. Using the internet, it is no longer necessary to schedule an appointment or attend a group session at a set time, requiring rearrangement of work, family or social schedules. With email, clients can communicate at any time of the day or night, and thus gain increased access to counsellors and support groups. More men are found participating in these groups than in the face-to-face equivalents[3, 4, 5, 6].

However, the same therapeutic elements found in face-to-face groups are also found in on-line groups: sharing of social support, exchanging of information, personal disclosure, self-discovery, reduction of shame and guilt, and sense of community[7, 8, 9].

THE STUDY

Scientific literature searches revealed no published research on internet grief support groups. In an effort to gain more of an understanding of these types of groups, I designed a research study to:

- examine the reasons why bereaved individuals would chose on-line support instead of a traditional face-to-face group, eg is lack of accessibility to a face-to-face group a factor?
- determine whether bereaved individuals believe it is easier to discuss feelings of grief on-line than in traditional support relationships
- ascertain whether women used on-line grief support more than men.

The participants in the study were members of an on-line grief support network, GriefNet at www.griefnet.org. GriefNet hosts over 40 different support groups, with members throughout the world. An email notice was sent to 306 group members, with a web link for the researcher's independent website. Of these, 95 agreed to participate but nine were ineligible, leaving 86 participants in the study. The website housed an informed consent document as well as a four-part questionnaire consisting of 55 questions. The questionnaire was designed to be completed on-line.

Part I of the questionnaire (eight questions) collected demographic informa-

EDITOR'S NOTE

The internet is home to a vast number of on-line bereavement support groups and that number is growing rapidly. As more people gain access to the internet, it is my experience that an increasing number of bereaved clients are asking their counsellors and health care providers to recommend internet resources to aid them in their healing process. The onus is on us, therefore, to evaluate these resources objectively, but very little research has been carried out to ascertain the benefits gained and the risks faced by participants in such groups. In this exploratory study, Terry Oliveri raises our awareness of these important issues and highlights the need for further research. *AA*

tion. Part II (six questions) related directly to the loved one's death. Part III (11 questions) concerned the respondents' mental health. Part IV (30 statements) was designed to reflect the group members' reasons for using an on-line grief support group. For each statement, the respondents were asked to say if they strongly agreed, agreed, strongly disagreed, disagreed, or neither agreed or disagreed.

RESULTS

The results of the survey proved to be both interesting and informative.

PARTS I, II and III

The participants were mostly white (95%), female (86%) and employed (71%). Three-quarters were in the 41-60 age range, almost equally divided between the group aged between 41-50 years old (38%) and that aged 51-60 (37%). Married group members accounted for 37% of the survey, widowed for 36%. Over half of the participants had first degrees (63%), 13 held Masters, while 6 specified further degrees.

The respondents' relationship with the deceased fell into three major categories: loss of a partner/spouse (43%), loss of a child (29%), and loss of a parent (17%). The remaining 11% had either lost a relative, friend or pet. The predominant cause of death was illness (68%), with accidents accounting for 22%, suicide 6%, and homicide 3% of the deaths. For 43% of the participants, the death had occurred three-five years previously, but for 26% the loss had been during the previous year and for half of these it had been within the previous six months. The vast majority (82%) had become involved with GriefNet within a year of the death and of these, 67% had joined less than six months after the death.

Not surprisingly, there was a strong relationship between the type of loss and the GriefNet support group chosen. Where the bereavement had been loss of a spouse, 97% joined a group for widows; after the loss of a child, 92% chose a group for bereaved parents; and of those whose parent had died, 88% joined a group for adults bereaved of a parent. Interestingly, 80% had chosen on-line support despite face-to-face groups being available to them. Nearly a fifth (17.6%) reported being members of both face-to-face support groups and an on-line group. Approximately a quarter (24%) were also seeing a mental health professional.

PART IV

This part of the survey was aimed at gaining an understanding of why on-line grief support group was being used. The statements the participants were asked to respond to here covered four main themes.

Sharing grief with family and friends

Almost half (46%) agreed that they felt uncomfortable discussing their grief with their family; 40% felt the same about talking to friends. Their replies indicated that those close to them worried too much about them when they talked about their grief, and that neither family nor friends felt the devastation that they felt. Talking about their feelings seemed to make other people feel awkward and often they were told to get over their grief and to move on.

Empathy of group members

In comparison, there was general agreement that it was easier to discuss feelings of grief with the on-line support group, and that the group members were more understanding. The group gave them permission to grieve and they were easier to reach for support. The vast majority (98%) of the participants found that the on-line support group members understood the pain they felt; 90% felt a connection to other group members.

Anonymity

Anonymity was not felt to be a compelling reason for using an on-line support group. Only 27% had joined an on-line group because of anonymity and even less (13%) of the respondents admitted that they would feel uncomfortable in a face-to-face situation. It did not matter that they did not know what members of the on-line group looked like, where they lived or what they did for a living.

Convenience

Convenience was a major factor in the decision to join the on-line support group for most (87%) of the participants. Three-quarters of the sample (75%) had joined because feelings of grief could not be scheduled around a group meeting or sessions with a counsellor.

CONCLUSIONS

The principal findings of this study are as follows.

1. These types of groups were used because of:
   a) convenience – groups are available for 24 hours, seven days a week
   b) difficulties in discussing feelings of grief with friends and family. Groups provide members with empathy and validation of their feeling, and members feel a connection with each other even though they are not in the same room
2. Anonymity did not appear to be an important factor.
3. More women than men participated in these groups.

The data relating to the reasons for the popularity of on-line support groups is consistent with the findings in the literature, but the results on anonymity and male/female user ratios are not.

The internet is in its infancy, as is the use of on-line grief support groups. Currently not enough information is available to determine if these groups are beneficial or if they will cause harm to those who participate in them. We know very little about the people who facilitate them, what training they have or why they choose this type of group instead of traditional services. This study is an initial investigation; additional research is needed to determine:

- the needs of on-line grief support group members
- what proportion of group leaders are trained and how often a grief professional is affiliated to a group
- why members choose to leave a group – is it because the group has addressed their grief issues successfully or because it did not meet their needs?
- the impact that on-line support groups have on the bereaved.

The potential of on-line grief groups to provide help and support in a time of limited professional resources is enormous. As mental health workers we have an obligation to evaluate the effectiveness of these groups as well as the potential harm associated with participating in this medium. BC

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