

Advice from Frank Hammock, Grief Ministry Facilitator, Cert. of Spiritual Formation

St. John the Baptist & Holy Spirit Catholic Churches, Covington, WA



Frank Hammock is an experienced grief support leader with years of experience in this ministry. He shares this advice for Catholics who feel the call to start a grief support group at their parish community.

1. Have an open heart

Having an open-heart means being able to feel your surroundings and the level of loss that your participants are going through. This will require you to be able to show a caring nature that is genuine and honest towards them, even if you yourself have not experienced what they are personally going through. Your participants may not always be at every meeting because of their feelings and struggles and you must be open to that, no questions asked and no judgment upon them. They may be struggling beyond your level of understanding.

2. Have patience

Have patience in your meetings and with your participants, especially when they don't always show up for every meeting. They may be struggling with their emotions, their pain, and more. Even so, you will need to be a leader for them – NOT their caretaker, counselor, etc. Others in your group need support too.

3. Experience with grief

Having experienced prior loss or a death in the past will give you an edge in this ministry because you will KNOW what your grieving participants are going through, how they are feeling, and what they are experiencing. If you have not had this experience, you may have difficulty relating to them and this may create a barrier between you and the feelings and emotions of your participants. This may be a MUST for all volunteers, technically.

4. A willingness to stay in this ministry for a WHILE

One should not join this ministry for a mere 6 months, for example, and then move on to something else. This is a ministry where one grows over time, and it requires a fair degree of commitment. A MINIMUM of 3 years or so is ideal because a replacement will need to be trained, have the same skill sets, etc. to fit in and get comfortable with the program in place.

5. Keep a professional line drawn

As a volunteer, you may only be a Facilitator. You are NOT a counselor, so you are NOT an Expert. BE CAREFUL not to act like a counselor. You are there to facilitate the program and follow the guidelines as set forth by the curriculum you are utilizing; straying from these guidelines can get you into trouble. Be up front and honest when informing your participants that they should seek individual counseling if they need it, since you are not a counselor. If you are a counselor by profession, or something similar like a chaplain, then utilize that capacity outside of the meeting. At the meeting, practice within the confines of the Facilitator role. The Experts are the professionals on the videos that are presented in the Walking Through Grief video series, GriefShare video series, or other professionally developed grief support group curriculum. You ARE there to offer hope, support, warmth, etc. where and when needed.

6. Empathy and kindness

Always stay positive to the best that you can and remember that empathy and kindness will go a long way. Try to foster a sense of “feeling” for your participants and reach out to those who are not engaging in the group discussions, being sensitive to the fact that some may not be ready or able to share yet. There are ways to open conversations with care and empathy to “test” the waters and see who feels comfortable participating. You may have participants who have anger issues; these grievers will present a challenge to you. But still, remain positive, use empathy and kindness no matter what. There are ways to deal with participants struggling with anger. Remember their anger is not a response to your facilitation.

7. Talk little about yourself

As a volunteer, the meetings you will be guiding are NOT about you- they are about the participants. Therefore, if you need to provide some brief details about your personal story or experience in reference to a conversation, keep it extremely short. You want the participants to talk about themselves and amongst themselves as they grow. You are there to support their growth in this grief ministry. It's not about you. Don't share your history or past, etc. We want THEM to share MORE about themselves because by sharing, they are growing and are better able to move forward in their grief journey. When you do share, you can provide something for them to “keep in mind”, which is okay, if needed. NOW – with that, you *will* grow with them in ways that will surprise you. You will learn in time if you stay in this ministry long enough. You will be surprised because what you give in time to others will come back to you. It's a promise from the Holy Spirit.

8. Be flexible

Remain flexible for changes that may come about within the group. I have experienced situations where many participants did not make it to a specific meeting and we were able to reschedule that meeting. Missing participants were able to see the video that they needed to see before moving on to the next week's video episode. The weather can be a factor that can cause meetings to be postponed as well. Other factors can play a role too. Whatever happens, be sure to get the consensus of the entire group so everyone is onboard with the changes.

Be flexible with participants but continue the planned schedule and keep everyone informed (your participants, etc.). Things can change, and you will need to be ready when they do.

9. Be a practicing Catholic and know your faith

Being a practicing Catholic and knowing your faith can be helpful when a conversation steers to the topic of faith. Try to limit faith discussions in these grief groups because we are here to discuss the grief curriculum. However, on occasion, faith enters the picture. When one knows the faith from a volunteer leadership role, one can guide the participant on how to resolve a faith issue (such as suggest the participant contact their parish priest for further support or go to a particular website or book for further reading).

10. Have the strength of a leader

Know when to open a conversation and take control of it when things are getting out of hand. Group discussions can go too far at times and will need to be "pulled in" to allow others a chance to have their turn. This intervention will require tact, fairness, and professionalism, not to mention - timing. It is good to have participants enjoy an open conversation amongst themselves from a question that is provided by the volunteering leadership, however there comes a time when the conversation may be taking up too much time and it may be beating a dead horse, so to speak. Move on to the next question/topic so as to be more fruitful within the confines of the meeting, that way the participants get more from the meeting at hand.

In our group, we had to remove someone from the group once ONLY because the group was not a good fit for them. We do grief ministry for the loss of people, and not animals and the individual we had in the group was there for the loss of their "best friend", which we didn't realize until the first meeting, was their dog. So, we politely asked that individual to meet just us volunteers/leaders after the meeting (it was being held via zoom) and we politely apologized for the misunderstanding – however, we did offer a redirection to another parish whom we knew held grief ministry meetings for any type of loss. So, we didn't just throw

them out, we offered an alternative place for them to go because they had a legitimate type of loss, it's just that our ministry was not geared towards that kind of loss and the individual would not benefit from it.

So, if the volunteer staff deems that an individual is not a good fit for the ministry, they can approach that individual with a loving heart and talk to them after the meeting with no other participants around and give them other options (e.g. counseling, etc.).

Adhere to the guidelines as well (e.g. no one talks out of turn, no one uses their cell phone during the meetings, etc.).

11. Rely on each other

Hopefully, you have another support volunteer in the ministry, and if so, have a meeting after each group/meeting to go over how it all went, dos and don'ts, etc. Support each other and cover what went on during the meeting, what can be done to better support the next meeting(s), etc. This is critical as you keep going through your grief support program. You will always want to rely on each other throughout the grief ministry to make the jobs and tasking easier. You are a TEAM and teamwork is essential. Utilize the professionalism of your parish staff as well. That's what they are there for. Talk to your parish priest, if needed, as he can be a wealth of knowledge.