



Journey Group Guidelines

Unfinished Conversation: Grieving and Healing after a Loved One's Suicide
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"I can feel very alone in this journey, but I don't have to take this journey in isolation. We are conditioned by our society and culture not to talk about our pain. But if we don't talk, if we don't create a language to express our feelings, healing will not take place. We will continue to store up and re-create the cycles of suffering. What is helpful and necessary in this process is a safe container such as a therapeutic environment or a community of like-minded people who can assist, help, support, and encourage each other in this process of waking up."
~ Claude Anshin Thomas, *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace* ~

The journey through the aftermath of tragic loss is best done with the support of others who care. Sharing your experience with someone who truly understands your grief is an important part of resolution and healing. Creating supportive connection that is safe, consistent, and caring can help to heal the pain and separation following the loss of a loved one.

Consider reading *Unfinished Conversation* with other survivors and use the exercises at the end of each chapter to inspire self-inquiry, as well as a means of exploring, learning, and being supported by each other. Consider the following guidelines, and discuss them together.

- **Choosing a Journey Group:** Select a small group of fellow survivors with whom you can develop safety and trust. Consider meeting with friends or relatives of your loved one, or visit the *Unfinished Conversation* website Healing Forum to be connected with a Journey Group matched by similarities of loss, age, and/or geographic area. If you discover that you are not compatible, bring closure in a caring way and select a different group. In addition to a Journey Group, choosing a licensed therapist or health professional to support and guide you through the aftermath of tragic loss is an important aspect of healing.
- **Honor Agreements:** Make clear agreements about the time, place, and length of each meeting, beginning and ending on time, and honor your commitment to be there for each other. To ensure that each person has equal time to share, one person can be a time-keeper, perhaps using a bell to pace the sharing.
- **Create a Safe Supportive Environment:** Cultivate the physical and emotional conditions that support safety, openness, and trust. Protect each person's privacy and confidentiality by not disclosing anything that is shared unless you have his/her approval, and not discussing them if they are not present.

Suggested Format

- **Opening:** Begin with a few minutes of silence to let go of the day, relax, and connect with yourself. Align with your motivation to create a compassionate space for the unique grief and healing process of each person.
- **Brief Check-In:** Take 3-5 minutes for each to share their intentions, fears, and boundaries for the meeting, what they are noticing about their grief and healing process, and/or any special needs. Time-keeper can ring a bell to ensure equal time.
- **Grief and Healing Journey Exercises:** Before the meeting, each person reads the selected chapter and completes the exercises at the end on their own. As the exercises are read at the meeting, each can share their own experience or read from their journal entries. If the group is larger, consider breaking into dyads or triads so everyone has a chance to share equally, then come together for a full group discussion.
- **Feedback:** At the end of each meeting, express gratitude and reflect on your time together. What was the hardest part? What was most valuable? What did you learn that will support your grieving and healing process?
- **Closing:** Allow a few minutes for discussion about what is or isn't working with the group. What would create an experience that is more connected and supportive? Consider ending the meeting with a handshake, a hug, or a group bow to honor your time together.

Speaker Guidelines

1. *Show up and choose to be present.*
 2. *Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.*
 3. *Speak your truth (and listen to the other's truth) without blame or judgment.*
 4. *Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome.*
- ~ Angeles Arrien Ph.D., from *The Four Fold Way* ~

- **Focus for the Speaker:** Share your own experience and be open to discover something new about yourself. Take your time. Notice your thoughts, emotions, images, and body sensations as they arise, and choose what you want to share or not share. Remember, there is no right way to grieve – each person's experience is unique and different.
- **Speaker Self Care:** Take your time. Remember to relax your body, soften your belly, and breathe comfortably. Observe your own feelings. As painful emotions arise, teach the group how you want them to be with you that helps you feel most supported, comforted, and stable. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, shut down, or in any way uncomfortable, tell the group what you need, or take a break and indicate when you would like to share again.

Listener Guidelines

“Listening is all about giving. It heals through the power of generosity. It’s an open handed gift that asks nothing in return. Listening asks that we become empty. Willing to receive without agendas or judgment. To be surprised. Good listening requires both attention directed toward the other person, and also toward our own inner life. We need to pay careful attention to our own sensations, feelings, and intuitions. This is what allows us to resonate with another person.”

~ Frank Osteseki, Founding Director of Zen Hospice and Metta Institute ~

- **Focus for the Listener:** Listen deeply and well. Provide a safe space for the Speaker to share even hard truths and deep feelings. Maintain a neutral compassionate presence, offering validation and empathy both verbally and non-verbally. Remember that your supportive attention may convey more than your words.
- **Actively Listen:** As you listen, occasionally ask for clarification or reflect back what you have heard to support understanding. Listen beyond their story for unspoken feelings, needs, and values, and focus on what most matters to the Speaker.
- **Protect the Speaker’s Experience:** Contain the urge to analyze, interpret, judge, agree or disagree with what is shared, and avoid offering suggestions or focusing on solutions. Reserve your own feelings and story until it is your time to be the Speaker. Simply witness and honor the Speaker’s reality with gratitude for their honesty and courage, compassion for their experience, and empathy for their feelings.
- **Welcome Silence:** When silence arises, give your partner space to reflect, feel, and explore more deeply. Learn to become comfortable with silence as an opportunity to relax, as you practice non-judgment and acceptance.
- **Listener Self Care:** Remember to relax your body, soften your belly, and breathe comfortably. As you listen, regulate your own feelings without leaking them verbally or non-verbally. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, shut down, or in any way uncomfortable, tell the group what you need so that you can again return to being a caring Listener. Use any painful feelings that arise for your own self awareness and, if you choose, share them when it is your time to be the Speaker. Rest in a relaxed receptive awareness, with compassion for the Speaker, as well as yourself.

*May transforming your pain give rise to courageous compassion, kindness, and equanimity.
And may your heroic grieving and healing journey allow a renewed relationship
with your self, your life, and with your loved one.*