

The Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle offers the following Parish-Level Grief Support Ministry Programs as a model for parishes. Under the leadership of Frank Hammock, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Covington has been offering one highly successful Grief Support cyclic program called ***Walking Through Grief™*** (from *The Grief Toolbox*) since 2021. Participants and facilitators meet on a given evening per week, usually a Wednesday, from 7 to 9 PM, via Zoom (or in person if the demographics provides the opportunity to do so).

The most current one in use at St. John the Baptist will be featured here.

Walking Through Grief™ is a 9-week educational and inspirational grief program offering support and hope to those experiencing the loss of a loved one (e.g. spouse, parent, friend, or child) in their lives. It is cyclic and designed to repeat throughout the year as parish facilities and scheduling permits. There is typically not an ongoing support group with this program since participants meet only during the cycle run time with short intervals between cycles. However, there is nothing said that one cannot continue the support on a weekly (or perhaps bi-weekly) basis beyond the program cycle run time. This will depend upon facilitator availability, facility availability, participant interest, etc.

The program offers insight and education about how to cope with the death of a loved one/friend through professionally produced videos featuring professionals in the field of grief, as well as a group of contributors who share their own grief journey and provide inspiration into how they dealt with their personal loss. Each week will have a specific topic or theme and include a group discussion as well as some workbook self-tasking for the participants to do on their own entirely. A workbook is provided at no charge to the participant along with some tools, handouts, and articles to help in the grief journey. (Note: Tools, handouts, and articles are typically either produced as a printed copy if in the in-person forum, depending upon copying facilities being available, or sent via email for the in-person and Zoom forums)

The program meeting is a simple but fairly structured forum, with some degree of flexibility, around two **key elements:**

- Video
- Group discussion

CONFIDENTIALITY

Everything that participants share during a meeting is confidential. The weekly Grief Support meetings are a safe forum, and those attending can be vulnerable. When a participant shares what she or he is going through or what a loved one meant to him or her, they trust that those listening will respect their need for their personal comments to be treated as confidential. They will not want their personal stories to be talked about outside of the forum. You should also value the safety of their email and personal phone numbers and if a participant wishes to share separately with another participant, obtain permission first from the other participant before providing the information to the one requesting it. Emails are always sent to the participants as “BCC” so that their emails are not revealed.

PROGRAM CONSISTENCY

This type of program at St. John the Baptist parish succeeds because it offers an ongoing cyclic program that touches the heart and soul of each participant in a unique way with respect to the many handouts,

program content, videos, etc. offered and the support during the program's cycle. Each participant is encouraged to continue their journey with each consecutive cycle since each individual's grieving journey changes as they grow in their grieving process and with each successive cycle, although the content remains the same, they will discover or learn something different that they hadn't seen or recalled from the previous cycle. This has been continuous feedback by participants who have gone through several cycles (sometimes as many as 3), revealing that with each succession, they learned more and more along the way. We will encourage them to continue their journey with us as often as they feel they need to.

MARKETING

This can include a variety of things, some of which are:

- **Parish Bulletin** – add either small paragraphs size inserts or full-age inserts to your parish bulletin for your upcoming program cycle dates, times, brief description, and who to contact. This must be done WELL IN ADVANCE of the program cycle start date to ensure potential participants get the word.
- **Parish Website** - add the program cycle dates, times, brief description, and who to contact to your parish website (if available). This must be done WELL IN ADVANCE of the program cycle start date to ensure potential participants get the word.
- **Cycle Program Website** - add the program cycle dates, times, brief description, and who to contact to the program website itself. Note: *Walking Through Grief™* will provide you with a separate method of advertising on their own website so that others can find you locally if needed by an address search. This must be done WELL IN ADVANCE of the program cycle start date to ensure potential participants can discover you.
- **Pulpit Talk** - if allowed, you can also do pulpit/ambo talks during weekend Masses with a table set up in your parish narthex for questions and registration. This will depend upon your parish leadership as to whether it will be authorized or not.
- **Brochures** - create a tri-fold brochure describing the grief ministry and program to add to your parish narthex so that potentially interested participants can pick up one at their leisure and contact you if needed.
- **Postcards** - send an informational “postcard” to the family who had a death of a loved one about 30 days after the passing of their loved one informing them that a grief ministry is available to them if needed.
- **Emails** - should be sent out to each of the participants who have signed up/registered for the program in advance of each meeting so that they are aware of the meeting date, times, and you can include a copy of the handouts as well for their own personal use for downloading/printing at their leisure. Remember to email them as “BCC.” For the **Zoom** participants, you should include the link to the Zoom login and login information as well. This is done usually 3 or 4 days prior to the meeting date.

Note: some of this may or may not depend upon your parish budget, or personal budget, personal time, size of your grief ministry team, etc.

THE MEETING BASICS

The following elements in each weekly meeting offer a consistent framework that participants and facilitators will follow as they continue to attend your Grief Support Ministry:

- If your meeting is **in-person**:
 - Pre-meeting preparation
 - Setup
 - Initial gathering
 - Opening prayer
 - Welcoming and Introductions
 - Candle Lighting, Memory Stones, central Crucifix
 - Group Guidelines
 - Introduction to the weekly topic
 - Check-in
 - **Weekly video** (*key element*)
 - **Group discussion** (*key element*)
 - Closing prayer
 - Departure
 - Post-meeting evaluation
- If your meeting is on **Zoom**:
 - Pre-meeting preparation
 - Initial gathering
 - Opening prayer
 - Welcoming and Introductions
 - Candle Lighting
 - Group Guidelines
 - Introduction to the weekly topic
 - Check-in
 - **Weekly video** (*key element*)
 - **Group discussion** (*key element*)
 - Closing prayer
 - Departure
 - Post-meeting evaluation

Zoom versus In-Person:

With some parishes, such as at St. John the Baptist, we have found that many participants are coming to us from areas outside of our local territory and are unable to drive to the parish to participate in-person. This means that if we choose to do an in-person forum, we would have to turn down those individuals outside of our local area in need of grief support, which is something we did not want to do. The online Zoom forum offered a format that has been very successful to meet the needs of those who are both local and non-local, as well as accommodate participants who are not able to drive at night and during the challenging Winter months as well. A hybrid forum, offering both in-person and Zoom at the same time has been suggested, however, discussions with the creators of the ***Walking Through Grief™*** program suggested not to pursue this type of forum because it had not been successful for them, and it

tends to keep the Zoom participants at a disadvantage or “out of range” from the personal touch that the in-person forum typically provides. There is nothing more satisfying than an in-person forum if you can do it in that way – although the Zoom forum has been quite successful.

PRE-MEETING PREPARATION

The facilitator/co-facilitator team should meet early before the meeting gets started to ensure they have their strategy set for the particular forum. This includes who will do what (e.g. read the prayers, the guidelines, how to handle talkative participants, etc.). Also, let the Holy Spirit work with you and for you to ensure that things run according to God’s will. This will ensure a success. This includes both in-person and Zoom forums.

SETUP

Setup, for those meetings that will be done **in-person**, are typically done in a location that is comfortable and peaceful, and will not be interrupted by other parish activity (e.g. non-activity room, conference room, etc.).

The room can either be set up with chairs arranged in a circle around a table in the center with a candle, memory stones, and a crucifix in the center – all atop a white table cloth or other cloth that is representative of the season as needed.

If a conference room is used, the candle, memory stones, central crucifix are all typically either set up at one end – or can be in the center of the conference table, depending upon the size of the meeting group. (if at one end, it will be a bother to those who may need to sit at that end)

Have Kleenex boxes on the tables as a necessary element of need should someone become emotional. This has been found to be a useful tool for the in-person meetings.

Also, have some pencils/pens and paper (if you are able to) for the in-person forum kept nearby just in case one of the participants needs something to take notes.

Snacks are always encouraged in the in-person forum to help soften the setting and make the gathering more “personable.” Food can bring people together in a remarkable way. Be sure to be careful in case someone is allergic to something (e.g. peanuts, etc.).

If you have the ability in your in-person forum to provide coffee and tea, etc., that too is a wonderful way to help people feel more “at home” and more comfortable.

Be creative.

Setup, for those meetings that will be done in **Zoom**, is to prepare your video, login to Zoom early, etc. to ensure that your computer is working and will have no interruptions for the timeframe allotted for the meeting (e.g. computer system updates that can show up at a moment’s notice, computer volume is good, computer microphone/speakers/video are all good, etc.). Make sure you are in a room that will not be interrupted by outside noise for the timeframe allotted for the Zoom meeting.

OPENING PRAYER

Nothing starts without a prayer. This incorporates the Holy Spirit into our lives and into our hearts as we begin (or continue) this journey together. Even if you have individuals present who are not on a faith-based journey, we still provide a prayer for several reasons:

- We are a Catholic Church, providing a grief ministry and we want those present to know that we support them from this perspective even if they don't have faith in their perspective as part of their journey.
- Prayer involves a lifting of our hearts to God. There may be someone in the participant group who needs God in their life that we may not be aware of – so we would like to offer the Holy Spirit to be given a chance to work as needed (if needed). You never know when or how a seed may be planted into a needful heart.
- Prayer has a calming effect.

Use any prayer you like so that it settles the heart and mind and is preferable to a grief content.

WELCOMING and INTRODUCTIONS

Here is where the lead facilitator will start the process of welcoming everyone formally to the grief ministry meeting and starting the introductions. He or she will briefly ensure that everyone has the materials they need. This can literally start as the participants walk through the door – as you offer and firm “welcome” to them so that they feel comfortable right from the start.

The lead facilitator will make everyone feel comfortable. Let the all know right up front that you are very sorry for the death (loss) of their loved one and that you are here to provide support and offer some tools to travel **WITH** them as they move **THROUGH** their journey. He or she will introduce themselves and ask each individual, going around the room (if in-person or selecting the if in Zoom) to briefly explain why they are present (who it was that died). Keep in mind, the participants may have wounds that are still very fresh and emotions may run raw. We often let them know that if they DO NOT wish to share, they do not have to.

CANDLE LIGHTING and/or MEMORY STONES

Either the lead facilitator or a co-facilitator can then light the candle (either in-person or in Zoom). We let the group know that the candle is lit for three reasons:

- For the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with us during the meeting
- For the benefit of each participant present in need of grief support, prayers, and healing
- And, more importantly, for the thoughts and prayers of our loved ones who have died as we remember them during the meeting

Memory Stones are a wonderful tool to have if you are able to provide them, whereby you have a large selection of polished stones. This is usually best done when you are in the **in-person forum**. A participant is allowed to select a stone and with a permanent marker, write the name of their loved one/friend with whom they have lost through death on the stone and take the stone back to their seat, or place the stone in the center (or at the end) of the table where the crucifix and candle are located. This is a great tool to help in offering comfort in a physical way to those who are grieving by giving the participant a feeling of “presence” for their loved one. After the meeting is over with, the participant returns the

stone to a basket or other holding container where they are all kept until the next meeting when the participant will once again select their loved one's name/stone to keep at their seat or place by the candle for the entirety of the meeting. This process will go on until the end of the program cycle when the participant will be allowed to take the stone with them permanently as a gentle reminder of the program and their journey, and a continued physical reminder tool of their loved one.

GROUP GUIDELINES

This is a list of behavioral conduct that either the lead facilitator or the co-facilitator can read to the group. It is typically done at the beginning only (the first session of the cycle), and whenever a new participant starts during the cycle so that the new participant is aware of the guidelines, and as a reminder to the existing participants as well. Guidelines vary but are typically as follows (here are a few examples) (*you can add more or change these if you wish*):

- Please put your cell on silent or vibrate so as not to interrupt the meeting.
- Anything that is shared here stays here; please respect everyone's stories and desire to share openly and confidentially.
- Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. Please respect everyone's right to express their own feelings.
- Please do not monopolize the conversation or interrupt when others are speaking.
- Everyone will have a chance to speak, though, you are not obligated to speak.
- There is support and hope in listening; please listen respectfully to one another.
- Please refrain from giving advice, just share what has worked or not worked for you.
- Be respectful - we all have different circumstances, stories and beliefs that are to be honored.
- Support means that we will walk **through** grief together. We will not try to change how we feel.
- Don't Categorize, Classify, or Type Losses - Everyone suffers loss differently regardless of whether it is a loss of a child, a spouse, a friend, a parent, etc. We cannot assume that the loss of one loved one or friend is going to be stronger than another. It can depend upon a lot of factors (e.g. relationship, love, etc.).
- Please take note of the time when you share – to keep in mind that others need to have their time to share as well. We want everyone to be given an opportunity to share if they wish to.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WEEKLY TOPIC

Here either the lead facilitator or the co-facilitator will briefly introduce the meeting/weekly topic or theme. This is usually read from the Facilitator's Guide that provides the topic in a brief summary. (See Appendix A for a list of Topics for ***Walking Through Grief™***)

CHECK-IN

Here the lead facilitator or co-facilitator will then ask the participants – those who wish to share openly and briefly – if they would like to check-in. They are asked how their previous week has been (good or

bad), and how they have been handling their grief. This portion of the meeting is generally kept short so that the main focus will be on the upcoming Video and Group Discussion.

Remind the participants that emotions are “Okay” and “Allowed” and they are safe and confidential to share in this forum (either online Zoom or in-person).

Workbook assignments are self-paced in the ***Walking Through Grief™*** program and there is very little to typically go over in the meeting.

WEEKLY VIDEO (*key element*)

This is a **key element** because the heart of the grief material is provided through the videos, which feature experts in the field of grief as well as a number of contributors who have experienced the death of a loved one. Each will share their stories along their journey of loss and recovery.

There are several ways to share a video with the participants depending upon the audio/visual capability of your forum. ***Walking Through Grief™*** does make them available on their online website, as well as in the purchased DVD format.

For example, you can connect your computer to a large screen TV, and if you have Internet, you can pull the videos from an online website for the program you are presenting. You can also use DVD's if you have that equipment as well. If you are running an online **Zoom forum**, you will have to pull from an online source and then “Share” your screen, making sure that you select the two boxes at the bottom of the Share screen to ensure that audio and video are being used. Without those checked boxes, you may hinder your online presentation.

If you are in a **Zoom forum**, ask the participants to mute their screens to ensure no background noises will interrupt the video. Ensure that the lead facilitator or co-facilitator is made a co-Host of the Zoom session because whomever runs the video online, they will not be able to “see” anyone and cannot tell if there are issues while the video is running. Ask that if issues with the video do come up, for the participants to send a chat to the other facilitator so that they can then send a text to the facilitator running the video to stop the video if needed.

GROUP DISCUSSION (*key element*)

This is a **key element** and in this segment of the meeting, the participants are given the opportunity to discuss the video concepts as they are related to their own experiences in accordance with where they are in their grief journey. Sharing is an important aspect of going through the grief journey so that participants get a chance to openly air out their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and more while others share right along with them – offering condolences, and a dynamic energy of togetherness that is unique towards healing. Participants will find themselves changing in their journey if they repeat the program cycle since their journey will grow as they move forward. During this time, participants are also encouraged to just listen if the group discussion forum becomes at times difficult or unbearable. Listening can be quite valuable and as each participant continues to be engaged throughout the given program cycle, participants will learn from not only the video series but also from each other. It is quite common to see participants develop friendships during their program cycle as a kind of group dynamic can form amongst them. This depends upon the participants as a group and can be different with each program cycle. Be sure to be aware of excessively talkative participants or any participants that may be

troublesome (although quite rare). For those participants who are not particularly talkative, it is good to check in with them from time to time as carefully as possible to see if they would like to open up a little. This can be done by “reading” their actions and the group overall. Sometimes all they need is a little nudge. Be respectful but as a facilitator, you will need to be in control, to a degree, to move the group along and in line with the given meeting forum and questions at hand unless there is a particular subject that is of special interest from the video that the group feels the need to focus on.

In the **Zoom forum**, we have found that it is very useful to have the Zoom chat set up so that each participant can “chat” with anyone in the group individually/directly. Sometimes one participant makes a connection with another participant in the group and they want to spend some time getting to know that person (a friendship begins to develop). Thus, we make sure that the group chat allows for that and we let the participants know about its availability.

Pre-set questions are provided from the Facilitator’s guide for the program. Facilitators have the flexibility of going off of the group if there is interest in a particular subject as a result of the video, etc. or if a facilitator feels a question is needed that is not part of the pre-set questions. The pre-set questions are only a guide.

CLOSING PRAYER

As with the opening prayer, use any prayer you like so that it settles the heart and mind and is preferable to a grief content.

DEPARTURE

This is a formal gesture of good hope and genuine love, whereby the lead and co-facilitators will actually stand up in the **in-person forum** and either shake the hands of those who are willing, provide hugs to those who are willing, or just offer a warm “good-bye” or “see you next week” as the participant leaves the room” – and thanking them for coming. This offers an outward sense of warmth and love to those who are suffering and it lets them know as well that they are in a place where they are appreciated and where they will be genuinely cared for. Such a departing gesture can bring them back, which is what we hope for, just in case one or more of them may be having second thoughts about the program.

In the **Zoom forum**, it’s all done verbally and with a wave of the hand and a bright smile, thanking them for being there and offering the participants a warm and loving “good-bye” or “see you next week.”

We at St. John the Baptist always tell them that it is our pleasure to “serve them,” along with the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit. We give credit to the Holy Spirit, of whom without God’s help, the ministry would not be successful.

POST-MEETING EVALUATION

The lead facilitator/co-facilitator team should get together briefly after the meeting to discuss how the meeting went and if there were any issues or concerns that need to be addressed in anticipation for the next meeting.

APPENDIX A:

WALKING THROUGH GRIEF™ WEEKLY TOPICS:

- Topics in 9-Week Cycle include:
 - What is Grief?
 - Am I “Crazy” or am I Grieving? (PT 1)
 - Am I “Crazy” or am I Grieving? (PT 2)
 - Different Grieving Styles
 - Charting a Course for Healing
 - Handling the Holidays
 - Things that can Complicate Grief
 - The 5 H’s [*Hurt, Hope, Help, Honor, Healing*]
 - The Other Side of Grief

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