

Teacher Tricks for Grief Group Success

Practical tools to increase engagement, retention, and connection
in grief support and education settings

Brad McMasters, Certified Educator, Integral Coach, Grief Educator & Coach

Introduction

I began my career as a teacher, and many of the strategies that worked in classrooms work just as well in grief groups. These tools can help participants feel safe, engaged, and more connected. This resource provides practical strategies you can start using immediately.

The Challenge

- Grievors may have difficulty concentrating or remembering.
- Some participants are naturally quiet or hesitant to share.
- Engagement drops without variety and interaction.
- Facilitators must create safety, variety, and opportunities for all voices to be heard.

Teacher Tips & Tricks

Group Agreements (Collaborative Norm-Setting)

Co-create guidelines with the group on the first day. Builds buy-in and accountability, creates a safe, respectful space, and encourages participants to take ownership. Post agreements at each session and add new ones if needed.

Partner Sharing (Think-Pair-Share)

Have participants turn to a partner to discuss a question or reflection. Gives introverts a safe way to share, increases participation, and warms people up for group discussion.

Reflective Listening with Report-Back

Partner A shares, Partner B listens, then Partner B summarizes to the group what they heard. Strengthens listening skills, builds empathy and trust, and ensures quieter voices are represented.

Supplemental Handouts

Provide worksheets, summaries, or prompts alongside the main book/journal.
Reinforces learning, offers tangible takeaways, and supports reading/writing learners.

Session Agenda (Advance Organizer)

Share a simple breakdown of the session's flow. Reduces anxiety, improves focus, and helps participants pace themselves emotionally.

Multimodal Learning

Incorporate videos, music, or recorded stories. Appeals to different learning styles, evokes emotion to improve memory, and re-energizes the group.

Art Projects (Creative Processing)

Use creative activities like collage, painting, or symbolic crafts. Accesses emotions that may not have words yet, encourages meaning-making, and creates tangible representations of their process.

Visual Anchors (Flip Charts & Whiteboards)

Write key points where everyone can see them. Participants see and hear the content (Dual Coding), have an ongoing reference, and retain more information.

Guided Notes (Fill-in-the-Blank)

Provide lecture notes with blanks for key words or phrases. Keeps participants actively listening, encourages focus, and produces a complete, personalized set of notes.

Why These Work in Grief Groups

- Lower barriers to participation.
- Meet different learning and processing styles.
- Keep the group dynamic and emotionally safe.
- Improve retention, even for those struggling with concentration.

Quick Wins for Facilitators

- Start with just one new strategy.
- Always explain why you're doing it.
- Adapt for your group size, demographics, and needs.
- Stay flexible—let the group lead when it can.

Where to Start

1. Choose one strategy to try in your next group.
2. Reflect afterward: How did it feel? What shifted?
3. Keep what works, adapt what doesn't.

1 - Group Agreements (Collaborative Norm-Setting)

Description

Co-create group guidelines with participants at the first session. Add your non-negotiables, then invite the group to suggest the rest. Post and revisit them each week.

Why It's Beneficial

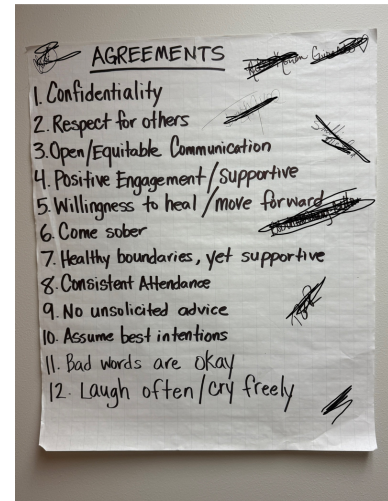
- Builds buy-in and accountability
- Creates safety and respect
- Encourages group ownership

Steps for Facilitators

1. Write 2–3 non-negotiables on flip chart.
2. Ask group: “What else do we need to feel safe and heard here?”
3. Record their answers.
4. Have each participant initial the list.
5. Post at every session and add if needed.

Ideas/Things to Remember

When I facilitate in person, I use a flip chart. For online groups, you can create the same experience with a slide, a virtual whiteboard, or a shared document. Build the Agreements together during the first session, then review them at the start of each meeting. Add to the document as needed along the way.



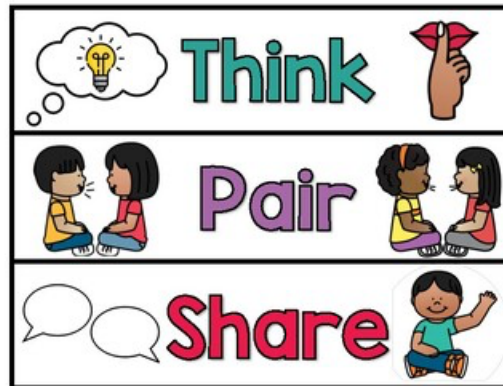
2 - Partner Sharing (Think-Pair-Share)

Description

Participants pair up to share thoughts before bringing them to the larger group.

Why It's Beneficial

- Lowers risk for introverts
- Boosts participation
- Warms up the room
- Saves time



Steps for Facilitators

1. Pose a reflection question.
2. Ask participants to turn to a partner
3. Give a specific amount of times for each to share.
4. Give them a heads-up when time is coming to an end.
5. Invite a few volunteers to share with the larger group.

Example

I've used this in presentations. For example, I'll invite them to turn to their neighbor and "share one thing you've learned about grief from your own experience or from walking alongside someone else."

Ideas/Things to Remember

- You can adapt this activity for three people instead of two if it fits your group — just allow a little extra time.
- Always meet participants where they are. Participation is never required, only gently invited, and there should always be an "out." Use your judgment ahead of time to decide if this activity feels appropriate for the group.

3 - Reflective Listening with Report-Back

Description

One partner shares, the other listens, then summarizes to the group what stood out to them.

Reflective Listening with Report-Back

Why It's Beneficial

- Builds empathy
- Encourages deep listening
- Amplifies quieter voices
- Makes a person feel *heard*



Steps for Facilitators

1. Ask Partner A to share for 2 minutes.
2. Partner B listens without interrupting.
3. Partner B reports back to the group: "What stood out to me was ..."
4. Switch roles if time allows.

Example

I use this in the fourth session when I'm emphasizing that our grief is as unique as was the relationship we had with the person we lost. I ask them to share what was special (or complicated) about their relationship. By this time, attendees are more comfortable with one another.

Remember

Always meet participants where they are. Participation is never required, only gently invited, and there should always be an "out." Use your judgment ahead of time to decide if this activity feels appropriate for the group.

5 - Session Agenda (Advance Organizer)

Description

Outline the session structure so participants know what to expect.

Why It's Beneficial

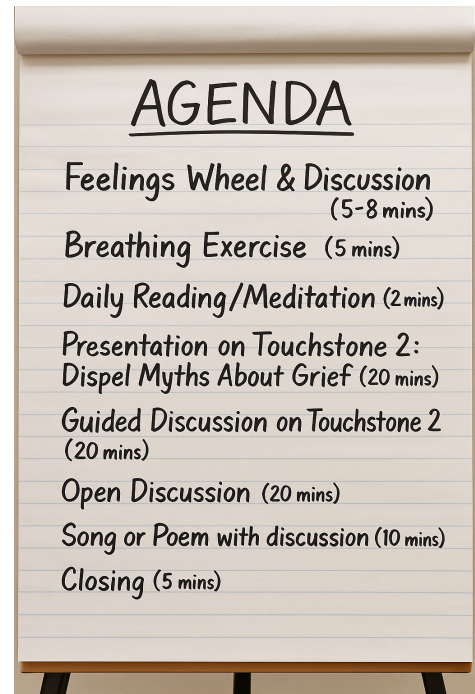
- Reduces anxiety
- Helps participants pace themselves emotionally
- Increases focus
- Smooths transitions

Steps for Facilitators

1. Write agenda on board or flip chart.
2. Briefly walk participants through it at start.
3. Refer back to agenda to track progress.

Ideas/Things to Remember

- I find this is really valuable in the beginning to create a safe, structured environment.
- It's important that your participants know you will always meet them where they are and if you or they need to go "off script", it's totally okay.
- If we stop using a written agenda, I will continue to begin and end each session the same way to retain continuity. For example, we begin each session with the feelings wheel (participants know to enter and do that activity first thing) and we end with a song or a poem supplied by a participant.



6 - Multimodal Learning

Description

Integrate videos, music, podcasts, or recorded stories.

Why It's Beneficial

- Appeals to multiple learning styles
- Evokes emotion, making memory stick
- Breaks up long talking segments



Ideas/Things to Remember

- Keep it short: A video or song clip should be only a few minutes — enough to spark thought or emotion without overwhelming.
- Always debrief: Ask afterward, “What stood out to you?” or “What feelings or thoughts did that bring up?” If you don’t, it may just feel like filler.
- Match the mood: Choose media that supports your session theme or things support or reinforce themes in your discussions.
- Avoid content that may feel too jarring or off-tone for grieving participants. Remind participants they don’t have to engage with every activity and they can listen quietly or step back if it feels too strong.
- Have a backup: Tech glitches happen. Always test media beforehand and have a summary or transcript ready in case it doesn’t play.
- Diversity matters: Include voices, music, or stories from different cultures, ages, and perspectives to make sessions feel inclusive.
- Accessibility: Provide lyrics, captions, or transcripts when possible so everyone can participate fully.

Examples

Stephen Colbert – Anderson Cooper interview, Mary Frances-O’Connor TedTalk, participant songs (with lyrics, etc)

7 - Art Projects (Creative Processing)

Description

Creative activities such as collage, painting, or symbolic crafts.

Why It's Beneficial

- Accesses emotions beyond words
- Encourages personal meaning-making
- Creates a lasting symbol of their process
- Engages multiple learning styles
- Builds community



Figure 1- Kintsugi Heart Art Project

Ideas/Things to Remember

- Choose a simple project that all members can participate in
- Provide clear instructions and supplies.
- Tie it into what you are learning or processing.
- Allow time for quiet creating.
- Invite (but don't require) sharing afterward.

Examples:

Rock painting, Kintsugi Hearts, Memory Box or Jar, Timeline art, Acrostic poem (words or names), etc

8 - Visual Anchors (Flip Charts & Whiteboards)

Description

Record key points where everyone can see them.

Why It's Beneficial

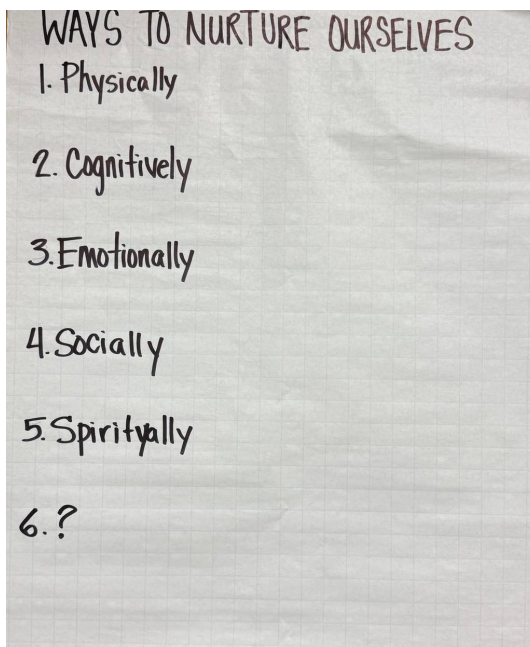
- Supports dual coding (visual + verbal)
- Provides ongoing reference
- Improves retention

Steps for Facilitators

1. Write major points on flip chart.
2. Leave posted during discussion or for future sessions to add to it if needed.
3. Refer back when wrapping up key ideas.

Ideas/Things to Remember

Use these to create comprehensive lists between groups (e.g. “What Not to Say” or “What’s Helpful” lists).



39

Rediscovering Pleasure—A Step Toward Healing
To be used with Touchstone 7: Nurture Yourself in Understanding Your Grief by Dr. Alan Wolfelt

Directions:
Take a few quiet moments to reflect on what currently brings you pleasure, or what brought you pleasure before the death of your loved one. Write down ten things—big or small—that fill or once filled your heart, lifted your spirit, made you smile, or gave you a sense of peace or connection. There are no wrong answers.

If you think of more than ten, feel free to continue writing on the back of this sheet.

Over the next week, gently invite yourself to choose one, two, or even three of the items on your list to try doing again. These don't have to be "accomplished"—just approached with gentleness and openness. When we meet again, you are welcome to share how it felt and what you noticed.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

You can continue your list on the back of this page.

Brad McMasters, Grief Educator & Coach

9 - Guided Notes (Fill-in-the-Blank)

Description

Provide lecture notes with missing words for participants to complete.

Why It's Beneficial

- Keeps participants actively listening
- Strengthens focus and retention
- Produces personalized notes

Steps for Facilitators

1. Prepare notes with key blanks.
2. Provide handout to participants.
3. Fill in together as you teach.

Example

David Kessler teaches that the sixth need of grief is finding meaning.

- Meaning does not mean that the death was good or acceptable.
- Meaning is about how we move forward with our loss, not about explaining it away.
- One way people often create meaning is through _____, _____, or honoring their loved one's _____.