

# How To Start Your Own Peer-Led Widowers Group

A MANUAL FOR MEN



*While there is no one perfect way to start a men's bereavement group, nor a pat format for conducting group sessions on an ongoing basis, there are some basics that will get you up and running.*

*Here are a few ideas based on guidelines from the American & N.J. Self Help Clearinghouses, the National Widowers' Organization and other sources, adapted for the men-only grief group experience.*

## Don't re-invent the wheel

Check the support groups page of the National Widowers' Organization website ([www.nationalwidowers.org](http://www.nationalwidowers.org)). It's one of the most comprehensive listings so far of men-only bereavement groups around the United States. If there's a men's group in your area, you may just want to attend theirs. However, if you are set on establishing your own group anyway, a good start might be to get in touch with the organizers of an existing group and ask for advice. If they'll let you attend a few sessions, that's all the better. (Please respect if you are refused the chance to "sit in,"

as the success of such groups depends on slow but sure trust building.) Otherwise, ask if they will share any start-up guidelines, suggestions or experiences, along with sample materials such as flyers, press releases, etc.

Another source of ideas and inspiration would be local hospitals and hospice centers that have started men's grief groups. Also, some churches, synagogues and other religious groups sponsor bereavement groups. Meet with the organizer, ask questions, take notes, and borrow whatever materials they will copy and lend you.



## Think mutual help from the get-go

You do not have to start a group by yourself. There are other widowers in your community going through the same difficult transition, who also want to figure out how to rebuild their lives.

The first challenge is to find them, then to figure out how to encourage



them to join you in creating a men's bereavement group.

One way to find out who has become a widower in your community and among your friends is through word of mouth – as the saying goes, bad news travels fast. Another way is to read the obituaries in your community newspaper. Leaders of local religious groups will also know.

When you do find and meet one or two fellow widowers, if you don't know them, that first cold call is

very hard. But try; your reaching out may face some resistance but in the end you will be appreciated for trying. Invite him to meet for coffee. The conversation may start from common interests – or the weather – but eventually it will turn to the very personal experience you have shared in losing your wives. If it doesn't naturally move toward that, try to direct it there. If you both feel some connection and if you both feel better for the opportunity to

unload some of the difficulties widowhood presents, ask if he would be willing to share the responsibilities of organizing a group for a specific period of time just for that purpose: for men who've lost their wives to find some solace and support from each other.

It also may help to contact a mental health professional who will serve as an advisor or consultant, eventually as a possible observer at the ongoing sessions. But if your goal is a peer-led group, make it clear to the professional that you

are looking only for initial support and networking advice, but that the sessions themselves will be led by widower members.

## Overcoming the Catch-22

Men have a reputation for not being joiners, and for not reaching out for help – even when they know it would help them feel better. So getting widowers to sign up and attend grief groups on a fairly regular basis may be the hardest hurdle to jump.

The National Widowers' Organization has found that one-to-one contact works best to break the ice with a fellow widower. Once you have identified a widower who is having great difficulty, make the phone call. Let him know you too have "been there," and that you found coping with the loss was much easier in the fellowship of other men going through the same thing.

Expect resistance; be persistent but not pushy. Ask if you can meet for a cup of coffee. You are the best representative of what will happen in the group. Tell your story in the briefest; then let the other man talk. If he doesn't respond, ask gentle but probing questions – in the spirit of camaraderie and empathy. Having someone who simply listens, without judgment, will itself be the beginning of healing, as this new widower will discover. If he feels better from this initial meeting, chances are high he'll want to participate in the group sessions.

## Who Should “Lead”

The National Widowers’ Organization advocates peer-led men’s bereavement groups. That means the sessions are led by widowers who are members of the group, not led or facilitated by a mental health professional such as a psychologist or therapist specializing in bereavement counseling. To be clear, this is not “group therapy.”

At the same time, the Organization does recommend having a mental health professional attend as an observer and in the event of an emotional impasse or breakdown.

Some groups rotate leaders; others designate one or two to lead alternately. No man should be required to lead a session if he does not want to. Often the man who spearheaded the creation of the group leads the first sessions, but he should make sure anyone else who wants to lead can do so.

The main responsibility of the group leader is not “to lead,” but to facilitate: to bring the group to order, to diplomatically ensure that everyone who wants to speak gets a chance to speak, to make sure that no one dominates the floor. He also is in charge of making sure the meeting starts and ends on time; he handles other details such as making sure the meeting place is open and pre-arranged, that there’s enough seating, that if there are refreshments, that’s all taken care of as well, and to close the meeting with details about the next sessions.

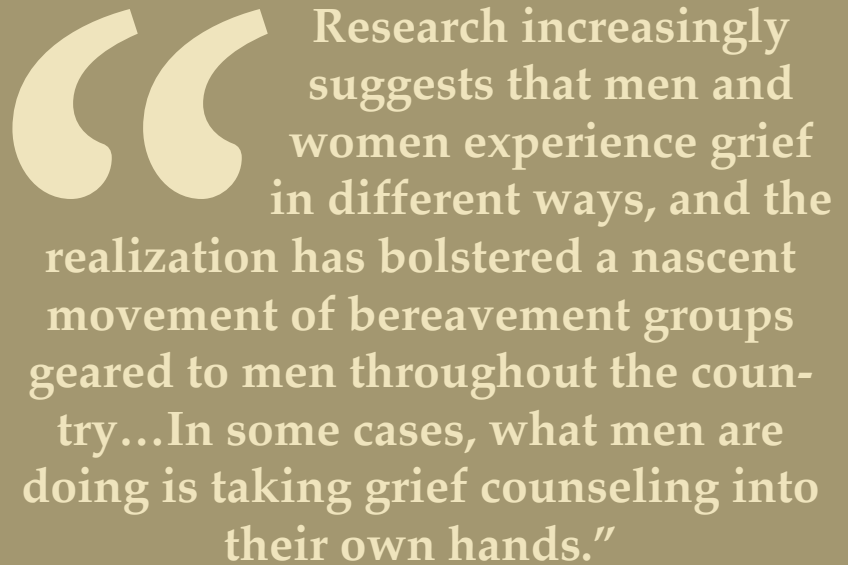
## Find a Suitable Meeting Place and Time

Try to obtain free meeting space at a local church, library, community center, hospital, or social service agency. If the group is small enough and some members want to be generous hosts, meeting in a member’s living room or den is also a viable option. And it may be a warmer

meeting place after work. Other groups may agree that weekends are easier.

Sessions can run from an hour up to two hours. That too can be negotiated, and that too may change as seen fit.

With regard to who “qualifies,” that too is up to the organizers. Gener-



Research increasingly suggests that men and women experience grief in different ways, and the realization has bolstered a nascent movement of bereavement groups geared to men throughout the country...In some cases, what men are doing is taking grief counseling into their own hands.”

– New York Times, July 26, 2011

more comfortable environment. If you do meet at someone’s home, make sure the host member is not left with dishes to do and seats to move back – make that the final group effort to end each session.

Seating should be arranged in a circle; avoid a lecture set-up.

Discuss the meeting time so that all participants are more likely to attend. For example, some may want to meet on a weekday about 7 pm, allowing enough time to reach the

ally speaking, there should be no age limit. Some groups prefer the members all to be widowers; other interpret “men’s bereavement” to include men who have lost siblings or offspring, men who might also seek and benefit from the solace of other men. In any regard, the subject should be discussed and agreement should be made as to whether the group is open only to widowers or to all grieving men.

## Publicize Your Meetings

To reach potential members, consider where they might go to seek help.

Try circulating a flyer or letter to hospice groups, hospitals, churches, synagogues and temples, libraries, post offices, cafes, retirement and assisted living communities. Look in the yellow pages or online for



psychologists in your area specializing in bereavement, and mail or drop off flyers.

Take advantage of the Internet by emailing any and all of the above as well; you can even attach a flyer as a PDF file. If you have a budget, place a classified ad in local newspapers. For free, you can send a small 3- to 4-paragraph article to the local community news editor, asking if your “press release” can run as a public service. Many community newspapers have weekly Calendar listings, including ongo-

ing sessions. Study the format, create one that fits and mail or email it to the appropriate editor. Also, send Public Service Announcements (PSA’s, as they are known) about the sessions to radio and TV stations.

## Moving Forward

For on-going meetings, consider the following suggestions that might

be put into a word document that can be distributed to current and potential new members:

**Purpose:** Establish a short informal “mission statement” in words that helps define the purpose of the group. This can become your compass, valuable if some feel the group is moving off point. Also determine any basic guidelines your group will have for meetings, for example to possibly ensure that group discussions are confidential, non-judgmental, and mutually supportive.

**Membership:** It might be advisable to determine the maximum and even the minimum number of members. The main and possibly only criteria the National Widowers’ Organization does establish is that the group is for men only. The National Widowers’ Organization does not suggest members of groups pay a membership fee but some groups may want to create a “kitty” that goes into the group treasury which helps cover drinks and light snacks.

**Meeting Format:** How will the meeting be structured? Do you go around the room, clockwise? Do you let whomever feels like talking just jump in? Are there rules of courtesy about letting one man finish talking before another jumps in? How long will the meetings be? How much time devoted to business affairs, discussion time, planning future meetings, and socializing? Can guest speakers be invited? If the group grows too large, consider breaking down into smaller sub-groups.

**Roles and Responsibilities:** Continue to share and delegate the work and responsibilities in the group. Who will be in charge of updating the contact list? Do we need officers or just a treasurer? To stay in touch with each other more individually between meetings, a sort of buddy system might be encouraged. Members could be “assigned” to approach other widowers they know are suffering and invite them – not command them or guilt trip them or cajole them – to attend. Possible opening lines: “It couldn’t hurt.” “What have you got to lose?”

“We’re all in the same boat.”

**Networking:** Many groups encourage the exchange of telephone numbers and emails to provide help to members between meetings, as well as to send reminders of meetings and/or changes. These days emails, cell phones and texting are the fastest and often the easiest way to connect. Ask your membership if they would like this arrangement.

## Final Thoughts

- **Listen to the needs of your members.**

Periodically ask new (as well as old) members about what they think they and the rest of the group can do to better address and meet their emotional concerns. Similarly, try to avoid allowing one member to become too dominant a voice. Some men naturally are more verbal than others; it’s important that everyone be “heard.” Be flexible, open to constructive criticism. Be flexible. None of this is etched in stone. Your group is a work in process, and as new members join and other drop out, the character of the group will necessarily change, as will the needs of the individuals.

- **Expect ups and downs in terms of attendance and enthusiasm.** It’s natural. Men can get distracted at times – by work, by family commitments, by learning how to fend for themselves in the kitchen, by the need to be alone at times to process the whole thing. But when you notice a regular member of your group has dropped out for too long without telling anyone, place a call to him, knock on his door, reopen the lines of communication.

Some men have a tendency to withdraw into themselves, and this may not be the best way for them to get past the deep grief. It might be a good idea to create a sort of “buddy system,” where men are more or less responsible for “watching each other’s back.”



**Always remember:  
you are not alone.**

## Bereavement Resources in Print and on the Web

Ames, Ed, A Handbook for Widowers, [www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org)

Bonanno, George A., THE OTHER SIDE OF SADNESS: WHAT THE NEW SCIENCE OF BEREAVEMENT TELLS US ABOUT LIFE AFTER LOSS (Basic Books, 2009).

Campbell, Scott and D. Phyllis Silverman, WIDOWER: WHEN MEN ARE LEFT ALONE (Prentice Hall, New York, 1996).

Doka, Kenneth J., with T. Martin, foreword by Dr. Therese A. Rando. MEN DON'T CRY, WOMEN DO: TRANSCENDING GENDER STEREOTYPES ON GRIEF (Routledge, 1999).

Doka, Kenneth J, and Davidson, Joyce D., foreword by Jack Gordon. LIVING WITH GRIEF: WHO WE ARE, HOW WE GRIEVE (Routledge, 1998).

Golden, Thomas, R., LCSW, SWALLOWED BY A SNAKE, HG Publishing, [www.webhealing.com](http://www.webhealing.com).

Golden, Thomas R. and Miller, James E., A MAN YOU KNOW IS GRIEVING, [www.willowgreen.com](http://www.willowgreen.com).

Levang, Elizabeth, Ph.D., WHEN MEN GRIEVE: WHY MEN GRIEVE DIFFERENTLY AND HOW YOU CAN HELP (Fairview Press, 1998).

Page, Patrick W., Cowbells and Courage, [www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org)

Petrie, Dr. Ronald G., INTO THE CAVE: WHEN MEN GRIEVE, 503-771-4341

Rando, Therese A., Ph.D., BCETS, BCBT, GRIEVING: HOW TO GO ON LIVING WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

Schaefer, Gerald J., with Tom Bekkers, MSW, APSW, THE WIDOWER'S TOOLBOX, (New Horizon's Press, Far Hills, NJ, 2010) <http://www.widowerstoolbox.com/index.html>

## Organizations that have information about grieving and bereavement:

National Funeral Directors Association  
LIST OF FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.  
<http://www.nfda.org/grief-resources.html>

Hospice Foundation of America  
[http://www.hospicefoundation.org/pages/page.asp?page\\_id=45851](http://www.hospicefoundation.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=45851)

## Frequently Asked Questions About How Men Grieve

### What should I expect to go through in my grief?

It's not always easy to talk to another man about the most painful loss in his life. It's just as hard sometimes to "sell" him on the idea that talking to other widowers will help ease the hurt, and even provide some constructive coping ideas. Hard, that is, until you show him how much better he'll feel afterward. Your conversation is a model. In preparation for that talk, here are some questions you will likely be asked so be ready to offer up some of your own answers – not what a "professional" would



say but based on your own personal experiences and your own learning curve. If you don't hear these questions, or any others, it's fair to "prime the pump," by saying you had questions when you first lost your wife, questions like...

### Why am I angry?

Anger is a common reaction, and it can drive people away when we need them the most. You're angry at your lost love, you're angry at the Powers That Be, you're even angry at yourself – for not doing more to save a life. In the end, though, the process of grieving helps you let go of anger and allows you to be open and loving to those you do love, and maybe even to someone you'll love in your future.

### Is there really such a thing as "closure?"

We used to think that grief was time-bound. It is not. We live with loss. Intensity may lessen over time but the grief remains. You might experience a profound, unexpected reaction to the death of your spouse years later, perhaps triggered by an emotional event of one kind or another – such as the marriage of your son or daughter, an accident barely avoided, the birth of a grandchild, or something as simple as a memory triggered by an aroma.

## How do I know the difference between grief and depression?

Grief and depression are different. Grieving is not unhealthy. But if you are exhibiting manifestations of depression during the grieving process, it might be wise to seek the opinion of a trusted friend, a counselor or a mental health professional. If your grief becomes disabling, if your anxiety becomes overwhelming and paralyzing, and certainly if your behavior becomes destructive to yourself or others, then seek professional help.

As Thomas Golden writes in *Swallowed by a Snake*: "Grief is like manure:



if you spread it out, it fertilizes; if you leave it in a big pile, it smells like hell."

The message here is to look for support. Look for fellowship and companionship. Share your feelings, spread them out in a safe environment, whether in therapy or a men's support group. It helps.

## Is participation in a men's support group necessary?

That depends. Many men who have participated in groups report that they have undergone considerable transformation. Granted, they may have done that even without the support of a group experience. The support and communication of fellow group members may expedite a renewed awareness of the simple fact that life does go on. Our lives continue. Our children's lives continue. Yes, there's a hole in your soul, a missing of someone that no one or no thing can replace. But life itself is still a beautiful thing, and very much worth living to its fullest.

By interacting in an organization of men who counsel other men, men who have gone through it often share their experiences, and in the sharing they pass along great wisdom. While each individual's needs and motivations are unique, this bond of loss creates a connection that goes beyond the weekly circle. Often groups evolve and become a network of friends who share more than their grief – they share their joy.

As grieving men reach this understanding and appreciation, they begin to move on. Grief counseling, as found in men's group sessions, may no longer be necessary.

## How can I find a men's support group in my area?

You can check the database on the Support Groups page of our website to see if we have identified a group in your area (<http://www.nationalwidowers.org/mens-bereavement-support-groups.html>). If you don't find one that's conveniently near you, check with the local hospice, hospital, VNA or similar organizations to see if they offer men's support groups. If word of mouth does not work, a little Internet surfing may turn up something. If you can't find help or support you may contact us by email to: [info@nationalwidowers.org](mailto:info@nationalwidowers.org) or by telephone at 1-800-309-3658.

## After my wife died, my friends and neighbors have been bringing meals to my house. I know this will soon stop and I am dreading the day. What do I do then?

Many widowers are strangers to the kitchen. The good news is that there are many solutions to this problem. Here are just a few of them for the main meal of the day:

Eat out with friends. The company of a good friend even makes the food taste better!

If friends are not available, or you just feel like being alone, but feel awkward sitting alone, sit at a counter if there is one. Or sidle up to the bar and order from the bar menu. You may even meet someone nice to chat with. Sometimes the company of a stranger is enjoyable – with no strings attached.

Use a food service to deliver pre-cooked frozen meals, which you can pop in the microwave.

Some local supermarket prepare the food for you., some at no extra cost. As well, many have prepared dishes you can buy at the deli counter.

Don't forget your charcoal grilling skills; it wasn't your wife who did the outdoor cooking. The manly foods – steaks, burgers, hot dogs, chicken – these will put you back in touch with yourself.

Do it yourself: Remember, if you can read a recipe, you can cook. You don't have to be Chef Boyardi to make decent pasta with tomato sauce (you can cheat and buy bottled marinara).

## How do I deal with household matters I was never involved with before?

You may not have ever realized the complexity of running a household – until you have to do it yourself. The lazy and most efficient way is to hire someone to clean and shop for you on a weekly basis, or more if you like. On the other hand, if money is a problem, or you prefer to do it yourself,

keep a list of needs, write them down, and take the list to the local markets. When in doubt, ask a woman for guidance, or another widower who has figured it out already.

**What can I do about coming home to find an empty house?**

Leave the lights and the radio on while you're gone. It might cost a little in electricity but it will be worth it rather than enter a dark and silent home. A couple of simple things might help: making sure there are lights on when you came in at night and having familiar music playing. Keep a photo and other belongings of your wife in a place of honor. When you really miss her, take a break and turn the sadness and loneliness into a memorial to her.

**I'm interested in finding new companionship. Is that ok? How can I communicate this desire to my children?**

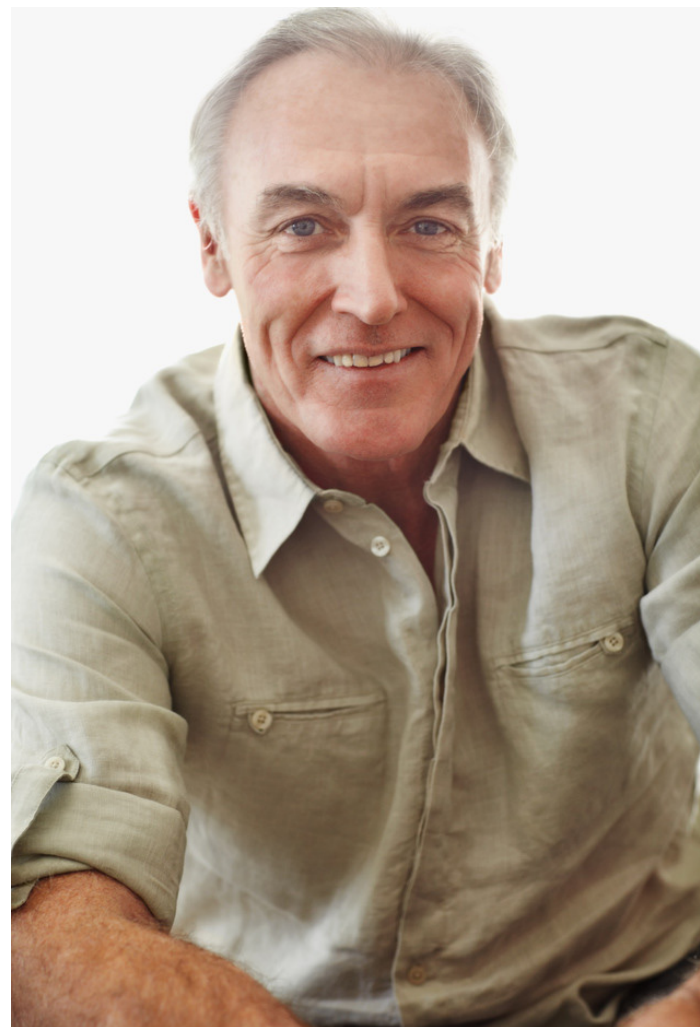
Clarify that you are ready and why you are interested in dating. At the same, ask yourself what you are seeking? You may be longing for companionship so you feel you must date but dating isn't the only form of companionship. Seek a social life first, before a sex life. Don't just use another person, but be ready for the give and take of a relationship. Don't seek a replacement for your spouse. Consider what this new relationship would mean to your family? Talk to your children or other close family members. Make sure they are ready. Is the resistance by family members worth the cost? Evaluate the consequences of the choice you make. Introduce the new person to your family slowly. Recognize that your family members have their own issues; they too have lost someone very close to them. Be patient and understanding with them.

**I have no desire to meet someone new. I feel like there's no one who could replace my late wife. Is there something wrong with me?**

Definitely not. You may have no interest in romance, or even simple female companionship for some time and that too is fine. Every man moves at his own pace. Low sexual energy might also be part of the grieving period. That too is understandable.

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For more information about the National Widowers' Organization, go to <http://www.nationalwidowers.org>. Contact us by email at [info@nationalwidowers.org](mailto:info@nationalwidowers.org) or by calling this toll-free number: 800.309.3658.

Tax-deductible donations to the National Widowers' Organization can be made by going to their website and clicking "Donate," or by calling 800.309.3658.

