



#### Submodule 4.11 - The role of social support in the grieving process

Social support plays a crucial role in the grieving process. Facing the loss of a loved one, the presence and accompaniment of relatives, friends, and the community can be an invaluable source of comfort, help, and meaning. Numerous research studies have shown that social support is a major protective factor against grief complications, such as depression, anxiety, or prolonged grief. Conversely, isolation and loneliness are risk factors that can exacerbate the distress of the bereaved and hamper their healing process. The GRIEF COACH must therefore be attentive to the quality and density of the bereaved person's support network and help them mobilize and maintain it throughout their journey.

Social support can take different forms, which meet different needs of the bereaved individual. One can distinguish emotional support, which consists of offering a caring presence, empathetic listening, gestures of comfort and affection. This type of support allows the person to feel understood, validated and surrounded in their experience of grief, to be able to express their emotions without judgement and to find solace in sharing. For instance, a friend may simply be there, hold the hand of the grieving person while they cry, tell them that it is normal to feel all these emotions, or evoke happy memories of the deceased. The GRIEF COACH can encourage the person to identify resource people for this emotional support, and to express their needs in a clear and assertive manner.

Social support can also be practical and material. In the early stages of grief, the bereaved person may be overwhelmed by tasks such as administrative procedures, funeral arrangements, and daily life management. They may also be afflicted with extreme fatigue and struggle to fulfill their usual roles. Their entourage can then offer concrete help, which may include preparing meals, shopping, taking care of the children, managing paperwork,

or even providing financial support if needed. For example, work colleagues can contribute for a food basket or gift vouchers for the bereaved person, neighbors can offer to mow the lawn or walk the dog, friends can organize a schedule to ensure regular presence at their house. The GRIEF COACH can help the person delegate and accept this help, reminding them that this does not imply weakness but rather that their social circle cares for them and wishes to alleviate their hardship.

Beyond these immediate forms of support, the social network can also provide long-term assistance throughout the grieving process. Loved ones can be memory partners, with whom to share memories, photos, and anecdotes of the deceased, to maintain a living link with them. They can also be companions, with whom to experience new things, discover new activities, forge new connections, to relearn enjoying life despite the absence. They can still be confidants, with whom to discuss the meaning of loss, existential questioning, doubts, and hopes, to navigate through the quest of meaning. For example, a bereaved individual could suggest to their in-laws to create a photo album or a family tree in tribute to the deceased, enroll in a pottery course with a friend to enjoy periods of creative relaxation, or share their reflections on life and death with their sibling during long Sunday walks. The GRIEF COACH can invite them to imagine different ways to involve their loved ones in their grief journey, depending on their affinities and availabilities.

Sometimes, the most precious support can also come from people who have experienced the same ordeal, and who can provide a unique understanding and solidarity. Meeting other bereaved individuals, whether within their social circle or in specific support groups, can help break feelings of isolation and marginality. This can help normalizing and legitimizing their reactions, discovering new perspectives on grief, drawing inspiration from others' coping strategies, or even developing deep friendships based on shared experiences. For example, a person who has lost a child may join an association of bereaved parents to find comfort among people who viscerally understand their pain, to engage in awareness campaigns in memory of lost children, or to sponsor other newly bereaved parents. The GRIEF COACH can provide information on different peer support resources and encourage them to try these if they feel the need.

However, it is important to acknowledge that social support is not always ideal or sufficient. Some people may be clumsy, intrusive, or on the contrary, avoidant and distant when faced with grief. They can utter hurtful comments, like minimizing the loss, giving unsolicited advice, or exhibiting impatience due to the length of the grieving process. They may also be suffering themselves, and find it hard to be there for the bereaved person. The latter may then feel misunderstood, judged, or abandoned by their entourage, which can exacerbate their distress and feelings of loneliness. The GRIEF COACH can help them identify these toxic or failing relationships, establish limits, and protect themselves if needed. They can also encourage them to seek professional help, like psychologists or therapeutic groups, to complement or fill the gaps in their informal network.

In conclusion, social support is an essential ingredient of the grieving process, that can greatly facilitate the adjustment and resilience of bereaved people. But it is a support that needs to be built, maintained, and adjusted over time, according to everyone's needs and resources. The role of the GRIEF COACH is to aid the bereaved in cultivating and optimizing their support network, by encouraging them to express their needs, diversify their sources of aid, and to allow themselves to receive as much as to give. The aim is guiding them in creating a considerate and nourishing ecosystem, that allows them to go through grief without drowning, and emerge stronger and connected. Because even though grief is an intimate and unique experience, it does not have to be a solitary one. By offering the bereaved the warmth of presence and the strength of support, we remind them that they are not alone in facing absence, and that they can draw from their relationships the energy of life.

Key takeaways:

- Social support is a crucial protective factor in the grieving process, which can prevent complications like depression, anxiety, or prolonged grief.
- Social support can take several forms: emotional support (listening, comforting, sharing), practical and material support (help in tasks and daily procedures), long-term support (memory preservation, activities, search for meaning).
- Peer support, i.e., support from other bereaved individuals, can offer a unique understanding and solidarity.
- Social support is not always optimal, some people can be clumsy, intrusive, or unavailable. It may then be necessary to set boundaries or seek help from professionals.
- The role of the GRIEF COACH is to help the bereaved nurture and optimize their support network, by encouraging them to express their needs, diversify their resources, and allow themselves to receive.
- The goal is to create a considerate and nourishing ecosystem around the bereaved person, so they can navigate this ordeal without drowning and emerge stronger and connected.