

THE PERSONAL GRIEF COACHING MODEL

Personal Grief Coaching is a model for Life Coaching¹ developed by Franklin Cook, a survivor of traumatic loss with 14 years of experience as a peer helper for grief support.² Franklin offers one-on-one helping sessions by telephone to people who have experienced the tragic death of a loved one. He works with all kinds of bereaved people but specializes in helping those who have experienced a traumatic death (a death caused by a person, misfortune, catastrophe, or acute affliction, such as suicide, homicide, accidental injury, medical emergency, or natural disaster). The sessions he facilitates are *not* “counseling” or “treatment,” and he is *not* a mental health clinician. The Personal Grief Coaching approach to helping traumatically bereaved people is described below, and source documents are cited that further explain the principles on which it is founded:

- Personal Grief Coaching was created from the idea that many people who have suffered a traumatic death can benefit from focused one-on-one helping sessions facilitated by a skilled and compassionate caregiver who assists the bereaved person by employing peer support, heartfelt dialogue, and exploration of the unique meaning of the loss for the individual. The straightforward practices applied in this approach to helping people cope with grief are based on principles related to the following:
 - **Each person’s uniqueness**
 - **Compassion**
 - **Peer support**
 - **Dialogue**
 - **Meaning making**
- An essential, overarching feature of Personal Grief Coaching is the degree to which the interactions between the caregiver and the bereaved person are “customized” according to **each unique person’s** experiences, needs, capabilities, and intentions.
 - The approach is based on the practice of “*bearing witness*,” which requires that caregivers “understand that they themselves are the ‘student’ and the client is the ‘teacher’ about the client’s own experience.”³
 - Because every person is unique and the relationship between the helper and client develops dynamically and naturally through the course of their interactions, each individual garners different benefits from Personal Grief Coaching. Examples include a person being better able to:
 - Deal with life in the face of loss and pain
 - Cope with intense emotions
 - Handle family and social relations
 - Understand what roles the deceased played in his or her life

¹ An excellent definition of Life Coaching states, “a life coach’s primary role is to help clients ... discover for themselves, through relationship with the coach, what lies uniquely within themselves” (see bit.ly/coachdefined).

² A brief biography for Franklin is available at bit.ly/fcookbio.

³ Jordan, J.R. (2011). Principles of grief counseling with adult survivors. In J.R. Jordan & J.L. McIntosh (Eds.), *Grief after suicide: Understanding the consequences and caring for the survivors* (pp. 179–223). New York: Routledge, p. 203.

- Find meaning in what has happened
- Define his or her ongoing relationship with the person who died
- Memorialize the loved one
- Look toward the future⁴

The possible outcomes of Personal Grief Coaching go beyond those examples—because the process is designed to meet each person's individual bereavement needs, whatever they might be.⁵

- **Compassion** is practiced in helping sessions through the caregiver ...
 - genuinely *sympathizing* with the bereaved person's situation;
 - empathically *embracing* the person's sorrow;
 - *identifying* with the sense of tragedy inherent in the loss; and
 - *being hopeful* about the transformation of the person's suffering.
- **Peer support** "is a system of giving and receiving help founded on ... *respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful*."⁶ The caregiver engages constructively with the bereaved person by relying on characteristics of peer support that have been proven to be effective, including:
 - *Experiential knowledge*, which comes from the helper's own grief journey
 - *Trust*, which is built through honesty, unselfishness, and reliability
 - *Confidentiality*, which creates a safe space for the bereaved person to share his or her thoughts and feelings⁷
 - *Individual connectedness*, which strengthens a person's social ties and can help decrease stress, increase psychological health, and improve coping behavior⁸
 - *Empowerment*, which aids "self-efficacy, self-esteem, and the belief that positive personal change can come about through one's own efforts"⁹
- True **dialogue** is a powerful type of conversation that involves:¹⁰
 - *Listening*, which requires that the helper hear the bereaved person completely and whole-heartedly
 - *Respecting*, which requires that the helper accept the person's story of his or her experience as entirely valid and authentic

⁴ Adapted from: Ibid., pp. 195–201.

⁵ Personal Grief Coaching is a *client-centered* or *person-centered* service (an idea first developed in: Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

⁶ Mead, S., Hilton, D., & Curtis, L. (2001). Peer support: A theoretical perspective. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 25(2): 134-141. Retrieved from www.mhrecovery.org/var/library/file/18-peersupport.pdf (see p. 6); PubMed entry at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11769979>

⁷ Experiential knowledge, trust, and confidentiality are among the "key ingredients" of peer support identified in: Money, N., Moore, M., Brown, D., Kasper, K., Roeder, J., Bartone, P., & Bates, M. (2011). Best practices identified for peer support programs: White paper. Arlington, VA: Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Connectedness as a strategic direction for the prevention of suicidal behavior. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/connectednesscdc>

⁹ Campbell, J., & Leaver, J. (2003). Emerging new practices in organized peer support. Alexandria, VA: National Technical Assistance Center for State Mental Health Planning (NTAC) and National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD), p. 14.

¹⁰ This formulation of listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing is adapted from: Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

- *Suspending*, which requires the helper to be open-minded and nonjudgmental about the person's behavior, ideas, feelings, and beliefs (and which "involves an acceptance of and a caring for the client as a person, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences, and to find his own meanings in them")¹¹
 - *Voicing*, which requires that both the helper and the bereaved person speak in their "own voice" and from their "own authority"
- **Meaning making** is the process through which a bereaved person reconstructs "a world that again 'makes sense,' that restores a semblance of meaning, direction, and interpretability to a life that is forever transformed."¹² Meanings can be explored when a bereaved person tells his or her story of loss and touches upon the changes in his or her life that are related to the loved one's death, including changes in:
- Physical surroundings (objects, places, physical health)
 - Relationships with others still living (family, personal, work, social)
 - Places in time (sense of past, present, future) and space (subjective "closeness to" or "distance from" people, events, ideas)
 - Spiritual "grounding" in the world (beliefs, purpose)
 - Relationship with the deceased (love, connection)
 - Identity (who a person is fundamentally, as an individual)¹³

The process of making meaning unfolds differently for every person: For some it is more literal and deliberate; for others it is more complicated and unplanned; and for almost everyone it is intuitive and unpredictable. The most fruitful outcome to be hoped for from the process is described wonderfully by Ted Rynearson in reference to his wife's death: "I can prevail over her dying by finding some meaning and coherence in my living memory of her."¹⁴ The Personal Grief Coaching model is designed to provide a structure, encouragement, and support to help bereaved people—each in his or her own way—to discover and embrace a "living memory" of their loved one that meets the most essential needs in their relationship with the deceased and in their personal aspirations for the future.

¹¹ Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p. 283. [Rogers popularized the term *unconditional positive regard* to describe this point of view toward a client.]

¹² Neimeyer, R.A. (2006). *Lessons of loss: A guide to coping*. Memphis, TN: Center for the Study of Loss and Transition, p. 92.

¹³ Adapted from: Attig, T. (1996). *How we grieve: Relearning the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Rynearson, E.K. (2001). *Retelling violent death*. New York: Routledge, p. 10.