PEER SHARING CIRCLES FOR SUICIDE GRIEF SUPPORT

(1) PREPARE THE CIRCLE

Arrange the chairs in a circle. Ensure that tissues are available
Make sure the arrangement allows everyone to see and hear one other.
Arrange for the facilitator and co-facilitator to sit across from each other.
Make certain that every chair has a copy of the Protocols on it.

This should be done well in advance, but "in a pinch" you can have Circle participants help with the set-up.

(2) INITIATE THE CIRCLE AND STATE ITS PURPOSE

If you want to begin with a ritual, make it simple, meaningful, and brief. Whether or not you begin with a ritual, please read this opening (or create one of your own that covers at least the points below):

Welcome everyone. In a few minutes, we'll all introduce ourselves.

The purpose of this Peer Sharing Circle is to help one another cope with our grief. *We are all different individuals, and we each have the right to grieve in our own way. Each of our loved ones is unique and precious, and no two losses are the same. Our common ground includes that -- for every one of us -- someone we love died by suicide. We each have our own story about how that has affected us, and as we share our stories and our struggles here today, let us also help each other find our way by sharing comfort and support and hope with one another.*

Whether this is done informally or formally, it is important to clearly indicate that we are now engaged in the Circle process together.

This Purpose is the bedrock of the Circle process, and all Protocols and facilitator decisions and actions are related to it.

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NOTE: All of the info in these gray boxes (except the one about giving the facilitator "your attention") is NOT communicated to group members unless they have questions about the Protocols or unless the facilitator is trying to further explain or illustrate the Protocols during the Circle process.

(3) SHARE THE CIRCLE PROTOCOLS

Read the Protocols (if there are questions, follow arrows to answer).

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The purpose of a Peer Sharing Circle is to give people who have lost a loved one to suicide a place where they can help each other cope with their grief. When you are faithful to these Protocols, it helps keep everyone in the Circle safe and focused on the common good of all.

- *I agree **to listen attentively and respectfully** to the person who is speaking (only one person speaks at a time).*
- *I agree **to talk only about my own experiences** and to refer only to my own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.*
- *I agree **to speak to the whole group** (not to just one individual).*
- *I agree **not to judge others,** correct others, or give advice to others.*
- *I agree **to keep confidential** what is said within the Circle.*
- *I agree **to give the facilitator my attention** when he or she asks me to.*

- Focus your attention on the speaker.
- Wait until the speaker is finished before you speak.
- Don't ask the speaker questions.

- Say things like, "This is what happened to me (or us) ..." & "My situation is ..."
- Don't add commentary to others' experiences, thoughts, feelings, beliefs.

- Treat the group as your audience.
- Speak "to the center" of the Circle.
- Don't partake in a conversation.

- Handle criticism or disagreement within the Circle by focusing only on your own experience (see the box below).
- Don't try to "troubleshoot" others' situations or fix others' problems.

- Remember how important privacy and feeling safe are.

This is the only one to explain at first.

- The facilitator will clearly and politely ask for your attention.
- The facilitator will use a hand signal.
- If the facilitator invites someone else to share, please listen and be attentive.

If you disagree with someone in the Circle or feel critical about (or offended by) something, everyone will have a chance to have his or her point of view heard respectfully. This can happen only if everyone speaks only in reference to your own experiences (using "I," "me," "my," "mine," etc.) and speaks only to the whole group (not to any particular individual).

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Franklin Cook 617-398-0243 franklin@unifiedcommunities.com

(4) BRING EVERYONE'S VOICE INTO THE CIRCLE

Explain that sharing will begin with a go-around, "to bring everyone's voice into the Circle." Everyone will ...

- share on the same questions;
- take a turn, in order, around the Circle; and
- speak briefly, literally for only a minute (share only the facts).

GO-AROUND

- YOU
  - Name
  - Where you live
- YOUR LOVED ONE(S)
  - Relationship
  - Name
  - Age
  - Date of death

- As facilitator, model the answer. Be precise.
- Start with the person on your left ... and move clockwise, person-by-person, inviting each one (by name, if possible) to share.
- Look directly and kindly at the person speaking.
- Limit each person's sharing to the answers outlined.
- As each person finishes, say thank you, and turn to the next person.

(5) AFFIRM & INVITE CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS

This is the main block of time for sharing. Begin it by saying ...

Here are two questions that might help us focus on our Circle's purpose:

(1) What is happening now -- related to the death of your loved one -- that is most difficult for you?

(2) What has been helping you the most to cope with your grief?

It's OK if the speaker does not focus on these questions, as long as he or she focuses on the purpose of the circle (helping each other cope with grief).

Question #2 (what has been helping you cope?) can be repeated in different ways, at different times, for different people throughout the meeting.

This block of time is usually at least 45 minutes and perhaps as much as an hour or even 90 minutes, but should not be longer than that.

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Franklin Cook 617-398-0243 franklin@unifiedcommunities.com

(6) REFLECT ON THE CIRCLE EXPERIENCE

Say something like ... *"We will begin to conclude our time together with another brief go-around."*
Say something like ... "*I'd like to invite everyone to share something they'll be 'taking home' with them today—a lesson learned or something that you realized because of the time we've spent together."*
Ask for someone to share first ... then, when he or she finishes ... invite the person to his or her left to share next, saying something like, *"Let's just continue around the Circle in this direction so everyone has a chance to share. If you'd like to pass, that's OK."*
After everyone has had a turn, if anyone passed, say something like, *"Before we close, would anyone who passed like to share something they'll be 'taking home' today?"*
After everyone has shared, say something like: *"I'd also like to share something I got from being with all of you today,"* and share something uplifting, if only to say how grateful you are for everyone's participation.

If you prefer a different activity to invite reflection, please use it. Make sure it includes these elements:

- Invitation to share something positive (but stated "softly" or "neutrally" -- not a requirement)
- An opportunity for everyone to share (but not a requirement)
- A reflection from the facilitator

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(7) CLOSE THE CIRCLE

If you want to close with a ritual, make it simple, meaningful, and brief. Whether or not you include a ritual, please emphasize that the time spent together is coming to a close by doing the following (or by using some other brief activity that is relaxing and reflective):

To close the circle, I'd like us to share a moment of silence and stillness. Let's just sit quietly together for just a moment and focus our attention on the center of the Circle -- where our voices have come together today. Please reflect on what you've heard and said and felt here today. You may close your eyes or keep them open, whatever is comfortable for you.

Whether this is done informally or formally, it is important to clearly indicate that the Circle process and the time together are now coming to a close.

(8) MOVE BEYOND THE CIRCLE

After the closing ritual and/or reading ... stand up and, if possible, move to a position beside or behind your chair (namely, outside of the Circle):

- Make pertinent announcements about logistics, plans, or business matters that are important to Circle members.
- Hand out or announce information about resources or further assistance that are available to Circle members.
- Follow up immediately and directly with any participants about whom you are concerned in any way.

This is both symbolic and practical.

- You are giving people permission to leave the Circle.
- You are providing people with connections (or resources) outside of the Circle.
- You are ensuring that if anyone is departing in a vulnerable state, they will be cared for.

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