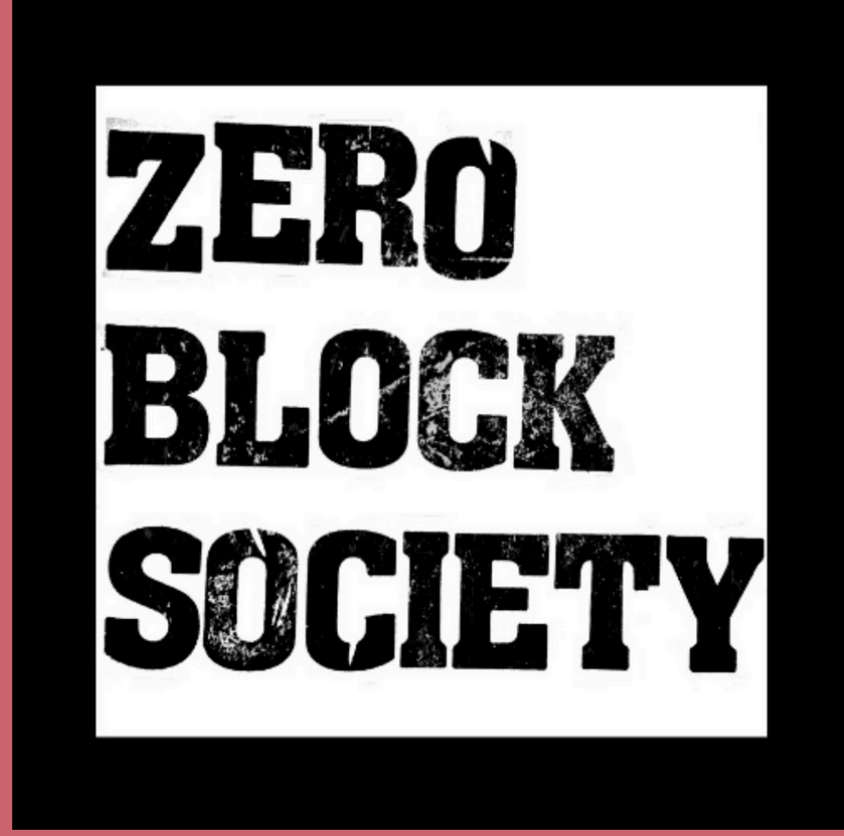


“What professionals miss is the community coming together and healing”: A community care initiative for those impacted by the toxic drug crisis in Vancouver, Canada

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Background

- The Downtown Eastside (DTES) community in Vancouver, Canada is at the forefront of the toxic drug crisis with a death rate of more than 10 times the provincial average and 23 times the national average.^{1,2}
- In 2019, Ronnie Grigg, a long-time DTES frontline worker and founder of Zero Block Society, began offering community care through grief circles in response to the community's grief caused by the toxic drug crisis.
- Zero Block Society hosts weekly grief circles at a quiet community space in the heart of the DTES. Grounded in RG's longstanding relationships in the community, this space was offered to Zero Block Society to support community care.
- Grief circle members represent a diverse group of DTES community members, including people from Indigenous and Black communities, single parents, people who use drugs and/or identify as being in recovery, and former or current frontline workers.
- The grief circle has evolved in response to community interest and capacity, and now includes Acupoint Ear Seeds following the NADA protocol, art and cultural sharings, and shared food.^{3,4}
- As awareness for Zero Block Society's grief circles has spread, many organizations have reached out to Zero Block Society to ask for support in organizing a grief circle in their community.



Narcan Jesus (mural)
Smokey D (James Hardy)



Presence
Ramona Mae and Imogen Laurel
Grief circle participants



safeguard/ safe haven
Insta: @untitled_art_etc.
Grief circle participant



Beauty for Ashes
Grief circle participant

Methods

- Between December 2023 - June 2024, we held five group knowledge gathering and sharing sessions with 17 people who participated in the grief circles.
- Rachel Cassie facilitated these sessions and compiled the knowledge translation. She is a member of the grief circle, a former frontline worker in the DTES, and currently working in health research.
- Grounded in community-based participatory research principles and a trauma-informed approach, we co-developed our knowledge gathering goals and methods with participants.
- Many participants were initially hesitant to engage in the knowledge gathering given previous harmful experiences with research and/or health and social services.^{5,6,7} To build trust with all participants, we:
 - Did not record identifiable information.^{5,6,7}
 - Used a transparent community conversation technique employed by a local drug user group in which all notes were handwritten on large paper flip charts visible to the group, and no audio recording.
 - Meaningfully acknowledged the participants' experiences and voices while respecting their privacy and security concerns. This included a group description written by the participants and a strategy where people can choose to have their initials or name included with a short description of themselves and a graphic with which they identify.

Knowledge Gathering Sessions

1st Meeting

Guiding Question:
What are our knowledge gathering goals?

Facilitators:
Debriefed and drafted guiding questions

2nd Meeting

Guiding Question:
What does the grief circle provide you?

Facilitators:
Debriefed and compiled what was shared

3rd Meeting

Guiding Questions:
Did we capture what you shared?
Is there anything you want to add?

Facilitators:
Debriefed and drafted the guidebook

4th Meeting

Guiding Question:
How does the drafted guidebook feel?
How would you like to be acknowledged?

Facilitators:
Finalized and printed the guidebook

5th Meeting

Purpose:
Celebrating the guidebook and sharing reflections

Figure 1. Knowledge gathering meeting topics.

Collectively-Determined Goals

- Understand Zero Block Society's grief circle's strengths and opportunities for improvement to better meet our community's needs.
- Share Zero Block Society's grief circle's approach and benefits to empower other communities interested in community grief care.

Findings

- Strengths of our grief circle included offering a safe and quiet space for people to build relationships, talk about grief, and receive support. **The circle's benefits were emphasized by mothers navigating child welfare services involvement.**
- While the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive, one person who identified as being in recovery said the location was challenging as it was too close to ‘the block’ (open-air drug market in the DTES).
- Throughout the knowledge gathering sessions, we heard three key themes:

1 Community care is urgently needed to support experiences of grief related to the toxic drug crisis.

“Grief can be such an isolating feeling so it’s beautiful to come together.”

“Coming to the circle allows me to revisit people I’ve lost.”

“It’s not about coming and having it all figured it out, it changes and you learn something.”

2 Groups must tailor their circle to their community's needs.

“Go by the group you’ve got and their experiences.”

3 Innovative and flexible methods are needed to engage people who experience marginalization and represent their voices in knowledge translation materials.

Learnings in Action

- We have applied learnings from this process to our grief circle by implementing a talking stick protocol and collectively setting expectations around safe responses to others’ sharings.
- The guidebook has been shared with over 50 organizations/communities throughout North America. This guidebook's implementation for community grief circles aims to centre community needs amidst the current toxic drug crisis. Empowering communities who are experiencing inordinate amounts of loss and grief to provide community care supports sustainable and long-term grief support.^{5,6,7}

GRIEF CIRCLE GUIDEBOOK

"ALWAYS NICE TO SEE YOUR SMILING HEART" ©2024
hand sewn fabrics
MONTANA KING - DTES VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA
earthbymontana

Appendix A CIRCLE GUIDE

The following is a reflection developed over time by Ronnie Grigg. We use this at the weekly grief circle hosted by Zero Block Society. Groups in other communities have also begun using this. Please feel free to use and modify our circle guide as you see fit for your group.

INVITATION

As we begin this moment of remembering, we're going to do two things. We're going to have two moments of silence, and then we're going to light some candles together. This is optional. This is a brief moment of soul care. Soul care is not exclusive to the religious experience - it's very much a human experience. This is an invitation for anyone, religious or not. This moment of remembering might be intense and there is no obligation for you to stay in this circle. The hope and the effort is that this space is safe. If you need to step out of this circle at any time, that's the right thing to do and there's no judgement or requirement in this moment. Just the freedom to be here as you are. We're going to take a look backwards to our history. We're going to take a look at our present experience, then take a look to where we can move going forward.

LOOKING TO THE PAST

Together we look to those who came before us. We acknowledge the original people of this land we're on, (personalized Territory Acknowledgement). We acknowledge their struggle to be on their land and their displacement, trauma, and loss. We acknowledge the ongoing displacement that continues due to race, social class, physical and mental illness and any other form of marginalization. We honour the struggle that precedes us and those who have survived and fought for all of us to be whole. Let's take a moment of silence to remember the history that we're building upon. (generally count 3 to 5 intentional breaths).

BEING IN THE PRESENT

(light or ask someone to light one central candle and place in the central water)

As this candle is lit, you're invited to think of this candle as a source. I'm not the source, but this candle represents our source. Some of us may have a more formal spiritual practice that provides us with a ready visualization of our source. For others, we may move from an inner ethic, a past event, or an encounter with a person special to us to fuel our action.

22

Scan the QR code to download the guidebook!

Connection
Ramona Mae
Insta: @beepbeeplemoon
Grief circle participant

Mixed Media Mushrooms
Imogen Laurel
Insta: @imogen.laurel222
Grief circle participant

Delilah
Veronica Iza
Grief circle participant

Scan the QR code to view our references

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