

CHARTER

for ALTERNATIVES TO SUICIDE MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS

Since 2008, the Western Mass Recovery Community (RLC) has cultivated a healing space where conversations are held that otherwise rarely happen. Alternatives to Suicide is a peer-to-peer support practice for voicing, sitting with, understanding, and moving through suicidal thoughts.

The primary focus of Alternatives to Suicide lies in mutual connection and relationship. While one outcome may be suicide prevention, the parameters of Alternatives to Suicide groups are distinctly different from current suicide prevention efforts. This difference is most evident in that we emphasize responsibility *to – and not for or over*. In other words, we are responsible to be honest, transparent, and present with one another, but cannot be responsible for one another's choices or actions. Furthermore, we acknowledge that, at times, great harm has been done when the system has attempted to take responsibility for or over an individual, and that that has sometimes had the effect of causing more harm, isolation, and disconnection.

As a recognized and sought-after way to enter into conversation and change how each of us sits with thoughts and perceptions around suicide, it is important to maintain clarity around what Alternatives to Suicide is and is not. The Alternatives to Suicide approach and groups are separate and very different from traditional mental health services and suicide prevention overall. While we are pleased that enthusiasm around the Alternatives to Suicide philosophy is growing and impacting the mainstream, it is essential that the Alternatives to Suicide culture, philosophy, and values remain distinct.

Based on past experience (such as sharing the values of Hearing Voices groups more widely) and extensive dialogue, our community feels we need to clarify the identity of Alternatives to Suicide groups by stating conditions and shared values we've known to keep our groups thriving, non-coercive, and based in genuine human experiences. This CHARTER, and the conditions it outlines, is useful for three (if not more) reasons:

- It can act as a *guide* for creating your own groups,
- It can be used as a *shield* to protect a group's integrity when there's pressure to shift it in another direction
- It can serve as an advocacy *tool* to challenge existing values and policies that prohibit conversations and groups of this nature to occur

If the below conditions and shared values currently seem untenable, please refrain from calling any group you may create an 'ALTERNATIVES TO SUICIDE' group. Instead, please refer to the guidelines for 'Alternatives Conversations' groups. Meanwhile, keep in mind that no changes worth making come without a struggle and that this CHARTER can be a useful tool for change!

Core Values:

- Group is based in self-help with a focus on relationships
- Culture of mutual respect, support, and empathy is cultivated
- Facilitators openly identify with the experience of suicidal thoughts
- Framework is that of a mutual support group and not a clinical group or treatment program
- No 'red tape' or 'hoops' for anyone attending (including no intake or discharge processes, no referral requirements, etc.), provided reasons are genuine and based in a desire for mutual support
- Each person is honored as the expert of their own experiences
- Complete transparency around limits to privacy is maintained at all times
- No documentation or attendance records are kept (beyond total numbers)
- Value is placed on people sharing from their own life experiences
- Ordinary, common language is used
- Relationships are based in respectful curiosity instead of fear and judgement
- Value is placed on meeting and accepting people as they are
- Willingness to sit with people in deep distress and explore thoughts and feelings without jumping to clinical or other interventions
- Attendance is completely voluntary and self-determined
- Freedom to interpret one's own experiences in any way is central
- Freedom to challenge social norms is present and openly explored
- Freedom to talk about anything, not just thoughts of suicide
- No assumption of illness, including no assumption that suicidal thoughts are connected to mental illness
- Differences between suicide and self-injury or other ways of coping are acknowledged and respected

Group-Led Core Values:

- Group is a community to which people belong for as long as it suits them
- Decisions are made by group consensus as much as possible
- Group decides limits to maintaining privacy, and there is transparency at all times around any limits that are identified
- No clinical pressure on facilitator to report back to anyone
- Responsibility for the group is shared by the group and not held solely by the facilitators
- Group meets in a community and not a clinical setting
- Group is open to people not using services
- Group is open to people from other geographical areas

