

# GUIDE

## to ALTERNATIVE CONVERSATIONS GROUPS

It is important for us to recognize that groups influenced by Alternatives to Suicide values may be set up and run by facilitators sponsored by the services in which they work, and that these organizations may limit how groups operate. As a result, some groups may not meet all the conditions that would bring them completely in line with the culture of Alternatives to Suicide. However, we welcome these groups to be part of our larger network. We know from personal experience how needed these types of conversations are in conventional mental health services and inpatient psych units. Although we reserve the ALTERNATIVES TO SUICIDE name for groups outside of these settings, we offer ALTERNATIVE CONVERSATIONS as one of many possible names for groups informed by but not fully aligned with Alternatives to Suicide values. Below are the conditions and values we find crucial for ALTERNATIVE CONVERSATIONS groups:

### **Required Actions & Agreements:**

- Each person is provided with an information sheet when they first attend that includes the following:
  - A clear and full description of any privacy limitations (e.g., any predictable consequences for saying one is suicidal, etc. such as reporting them to emergency officials, calling a supervisor or 911, etc.).
  - A statement about their right to freely attend or not attend these groups without any negative consequences should they decide to leave or not attend in the future.
  - Available resources where they are able to speak more openly without as much worry about these sorts of privacy limitations (e.g., local or national warmlines or peer support lines, Alternatives to Suicide groups, etc.).
- A verbal statement is made at the start of each meeting that reminds people of the framework detailed above.
- If someone does speak about killing themselves or other difficult topics during the course of a group, every effort is made to be curious about and explore what that person truly means rather than jumping to conclusions or enacting any sort of emergency response protocol.

## 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