

Navigating Grief:

Brief Interventions for Meaningful Support

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Objectives

- Describe grief as a multidimensional experience and differentiate key grief types to support accurate assessment across diverse contexts.
- Apply brief, evidence-informed, and developmentally/culturally attuned intervention strategies to support individuals navigating grief across the lifespan.
- Integrate principles of clinician well-being, including emotional regulation, boundaries, and reflective self-care, to sustain effective and compassionate grief practice.



What's one thing
challenging in
grief work?

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What Is Grief?

- ▶ **Definition**
 - ▶ Natural response to loss
 - ▶ Conflicting feelings created by the end of – or change in – a familiar pattern of behavior
- ▶ **Dimensions of Grief**
 - ▶ Emotional
 - ▶ Cognitive
 - ▶ Physical
 - ▶ Behavioral
 - ▶ Cultural/Spiritual
- ▶ **Key Points**
 - ▶ Grief is **individual**
 - ▶ Reactions may be **delayed**
 - ▶ Responses can intensify around anniversaries
 - ▶ Ask: “**How do you define grief?**”

Grief vs. Depression vs. Trauma

➤ Grief

- Dominant feature: **yearning**
- Loss-specific
- Full emotional range

➤ Depression

- Dominant feature: **anhedonia**
- Persistent sadness
- Low self-esteem/worthlessness

➤ Trauma

- Dominant feature: **fear**
- Trigger-driven
- Not necessarily loss-specific

Common Grief Myths

- “Time heals all wounds”
- “Grief is linear and follows stages”
- “Be strong for others”
- “Young children don’t grieve”
- “You need to move on”
- “Just stay busy”

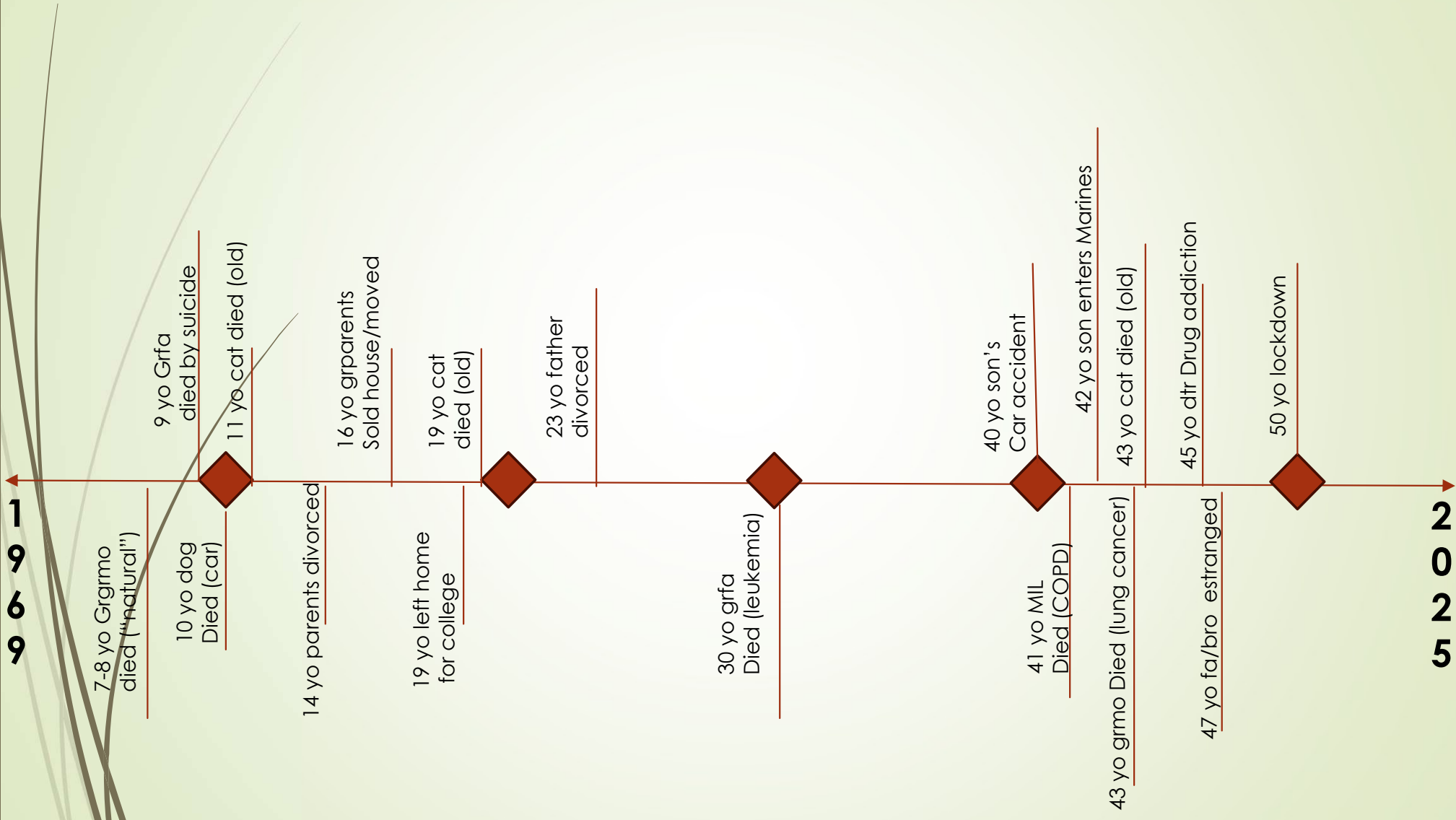
Types of Grief

- **Acute/Normative:** initial shock > gradual integration
- **Integrated:** accept the loss + continue bonds
- **Anticipatory:** grief before a loss (i.e. illness)
- **Prolonged:** persistent/intensifying grief; feeling “stuck”
- **Disenfranchised:** grief not socially recognized
- **Ambiguous:** lack of closure (i.e. missing, unclear outcomes)
- **Preparatory:** awareness of dying and impending separation
- **Living Losses:** illness, divorce, identity or role changes

Grief Considerations

- **Self-Awareness:** your losses, countertransference
- **Developmental:** children, teens, adults, older adults
- **Culture & Systems:** family rules, religious/cultural norms
- **Attachment & History:** coping styles, prior trauma, supports

Loss History



1996

2025

Grief Frameworks

- Tasks/Stages: structured milestones
- Dual Process: oscillate loss < > restoration
- Continuing Bonds: ongoing connection
- Narrative/Meaning: reconstruct the story
- Six R's/Meaning-Centered: integrate and orient to purpose

Brief Interventions (When & Why)

Phases & Focus

- **Early:**
 - Stabilize
 - Tolerate emotion
 - Safety - Self-soothing
- **Middle:**
 - Narrate
 - Expand expression
 - Rework the bond
- **Late:**
 - Meaning
 - Identity
 - Reconnection with life

Assessment

Brief Assessment Checklist

- Biopsychosocial context
- Loss history & meaning of the loss
- Circumstances of death/event
- Reactions & impacts since loss
- Relationship/attachment patterns
- Coping strategies
- Substance use & risk
- Understanding of grief process

The Basics

- Normalize, validate, reflect, listen actively
- Say: “**What you’re feeling makes sense.**”
- Provide the space for the story

Silence

Silence Helps Clients/Patients:

- Process
- Notice and name
- Self-soothe
- Grow

Imaginal Exposure (in vivo or in vitro)

1. Teach relaxation & anchors
2. Invite the loss story (before, during, after)
3. Link sensations, emotions, thoughts
4. Repeat while regulated until distress reduces
5. Identify what's missed & daily life implications

Meaning-Making

Meaning-Making Prompts

- “What did this person teach you?”
- “How did the person impact or shape your day-to-day life?”
- “What might life look like on the other side of grief?”
- Continuing Bonds: “How does this person exist to you now?”

Memory Boxes

Memory Box Steps

- Introduce the person
- Plan the box (physical, digital, or imagined)
- Gather and curate items
- Share & process in session
- Set guidelines for accessing the box

Empty Chair & Letter Writing

- **Empty Chair (Gestalt):**
 - YouTube training > <https://youtu.be/EuguxbFYfBA>
 - Bring the deceased or living memory into the room
 - Dialogue both directions
- **Letter Writing**
 - Purpose (goodbye, amends, regrets)
 - Write > read > respond as the deceased
 - Revisit during integration

Music

Grief Playlist Prompts

- Favorite songs (client/patient & deceased)
- Songs about the relationship
- Comfort songs/cry songs
- Songs for the future

Metaphors & Imagery

- **The Car:** grief moves from windshield > front seat > back seat
- **Fresh Wound > Scar:** pain changes over time
- **Images:** draw/choose a picture that represents grief
- **Lighthouse or Ocean:** track storms, currents, and guidance

Spirituality & Religious Beliefs

Explore Beliefs

- What happens when we die?
- How do these beliefs shape healing?
- Where is there doubt or crisis?
- What meaning do you find in suffering?

Grounding & Regulation: Breathing & Sensory

➤ Breathing exercises

- Square breathing (4-4-4-4)
- Hand on belly/chest) – slow exhales
- Hands crossed in front of body - on shoulders
- One hand on shoulder and one under opposite armpit

➤ Sensory tools

- Items to engage your senses
- Push feet into the ground - barefoot
- Rub hands together and place palms to face
- One hand on forehead + one on back of head (squeeze 30 sec)

Grounding & Regulation: Movement & Mindfulness

- ▶ **Simple Movement**
 - ▶ Figure 8
 - ▶ Gentle Twist
 - ▶ Yoga/Tai Chi/Qigong
- ▶ **Mindfulness/DBT**
 - ▶ Name game
 - ▶ 5-4-3-2-1 (brief = 3-2-1)
 - ▶ Progressive muscle relaxation
 - ▶ Gentle self-statement (dry erase on mirror)

Other Brief Tools

- **Containment**
 - Place emotions in a vessel (imagined or real)
- **Photo Narrative**
 - Notice, photograph, and journal daily meanings
- **Narrative Writing (dose-limited)**
 - 20 minutes per entry
 - No more than 4 days in a week
 - Not back-to-back
- **CBT Focus**
 - Catch catastrophizing, 'should', global helplessness

Take Inventory

What Matters Now?

- ▶ Life goals > small actions
- ▶ Relationships to end/change vs. nourish
- ▶ “What contributes to your happiness?”
- ▶ “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?”
- ▶ What are major life goals you have put off and may be able to work towards now?

Clean Up Work

ABC Method

- A pile: things to keep
- B pile: things to dispose
- C pile: things unsure about > revisit in one month

Purpose: adjust to the environment without the deceased

Guilt

- Write the guilt story
- Challenge “shoulds” and “what ifs”
- Write an amends letter
- Develop a ritual or a mantra
- Reframe & reduce self-punishment
 - What can you do now?

Shame

- ▶ Name it and locate it in the body
- ▶ Externalize; hold it outside the body
- ▶ Practice self-compassion daily
- ▶ Choose one purposeful action

Integration Process

- **Different, Better, or More**
 - What do you wish had been different, better, or more?

- **Rewrite the Rules/Guidelines**
 - List learned sayings about grief
 - Keep helpful
 - Rewrite if unhelpful

Self-Care

- ▶ **Sleep Hygiene:**
 - ▶ Consistent routine
 - ▶ 7-9 hours ideal – cool (63-65 degrees), dark, quiet room
 - ▶ No electronics 30-60 minutes prior to bed
- ▶ **Movement:**
 - ▶ Regular – realistic action plan
 - ▶ Do not do 4 hours before bed - increases body temperature
- ▶ **Nutrition:**
 - ▶ Predictable meals
 - ▶ Reduce impulsive eating
 - ▶ Do not eat 4 hours before bed

Holidays and Anniversaries

Plan for Amplifiers

- Anticipate and plan
- Focus on firsts and seconds
- Develop rituals with meaning
- Continuing bonds (as appropriate)
- Encourage self-care practices

Sense of Self & Identity

- **Who Am I?**
 - **Before:** who I was
 - **Barriers:** what's in the way
 - **Direction:** who I'm moving forward

Recommended Books

- Worden - *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*
- Neimeyer - *Techniques of Grief Therapy*
- Yalom - *Staring at the Sun*
- Bidwell-Smith - *Anxious Grief*
- O'Connor – *The Grieving Brain*

Web Resources

- **The Grief Recovery Handbook**
https://www.mjfamilyservices.ca/home/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Grief-Recovery-Handbook-20th-Anniversary-Expanded-Edition_-The-Action-Program-for-Moving-Beyond-Death-Divorce-and-Other-Losses-including-Health-Career-and-Faith-PDFDrive-1.pdf
- **What's Your Grief** <https://whatsyourgrief.com/>
- **Weill Cornell Research Center for End-of-Life Care** <https://endoflife.weill.cornell.edu/grief-resources>
- **Center of Prolonged Grief**
<https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/>
- **App: Grief Coach**

Support Options

► **General:**

- Grief Share: <https://www.griefshare.org/>
- Help Guide: <https://helpguide.org/>
- My Grief Angels: <https://www.mygriefangels.org/>
- Grief in Common:
<https://www.griefincommon.com/>

► **Movement-Based: Grief Yoga** <https://grieffyoga.com/>

► **Widowed: Hope for Widows** <https://hopeforwidows.org/>

► **Children: Eluna Network** <https://elunanetwork.org/>

The Role & Self-Care of the Helper: **Competencies**

- Death competence
- Emotional competence
- Cognitive competence
- Self-Competence
- Practice & knowledge competence

Role & Self-Care of the Helper: **Sustaining**

- Presence & attunement (don't work harder than the client or patient)
- Boundaries & countertransference
- Compassion satisfaction & fatigue
- Authentic Care (check-ins, break habits, restore basics)

Closing & Reflections

What is one tool you will try this week?

What is one thing you will stop doing?

What is one action you can start to apply in your practice?

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