

# Navigating Grief:

Before I Die Festival (October 2024)

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# Objectives

1. What Grief *IS* and what it *IS NOT*
2. How many people are impacted by grief
3. Grief responses (i.e., good and bad)
4. Coping strategies (i.e., good and bad)
5. Things you wish you would have been told
6. How 'Others' react to our grief
7. How to manage *Triggers* through adaptive coping
8. The active process of *Grief Recovery* and *Grieving Well*
9. Believe it or not - The '*Many*' *Gifts of Grief*

**Bereavement:**

A state or period after loss during which grief and mourning are experienced.

**Grief:**

A normal and natural reaction to loss, which can be either physical or *symbolic*.

**Mourning:**

The process of adapting to a loss, such as the actions and manners of grief expression; all of which are highly influenced by social norms.

**Grief work:**

The active process a mourner must complete to resolve and/or recover from grief.

**Grief Sensitivity:**

The act of being aware that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, and that everyone's grief experience is subjective and unique.

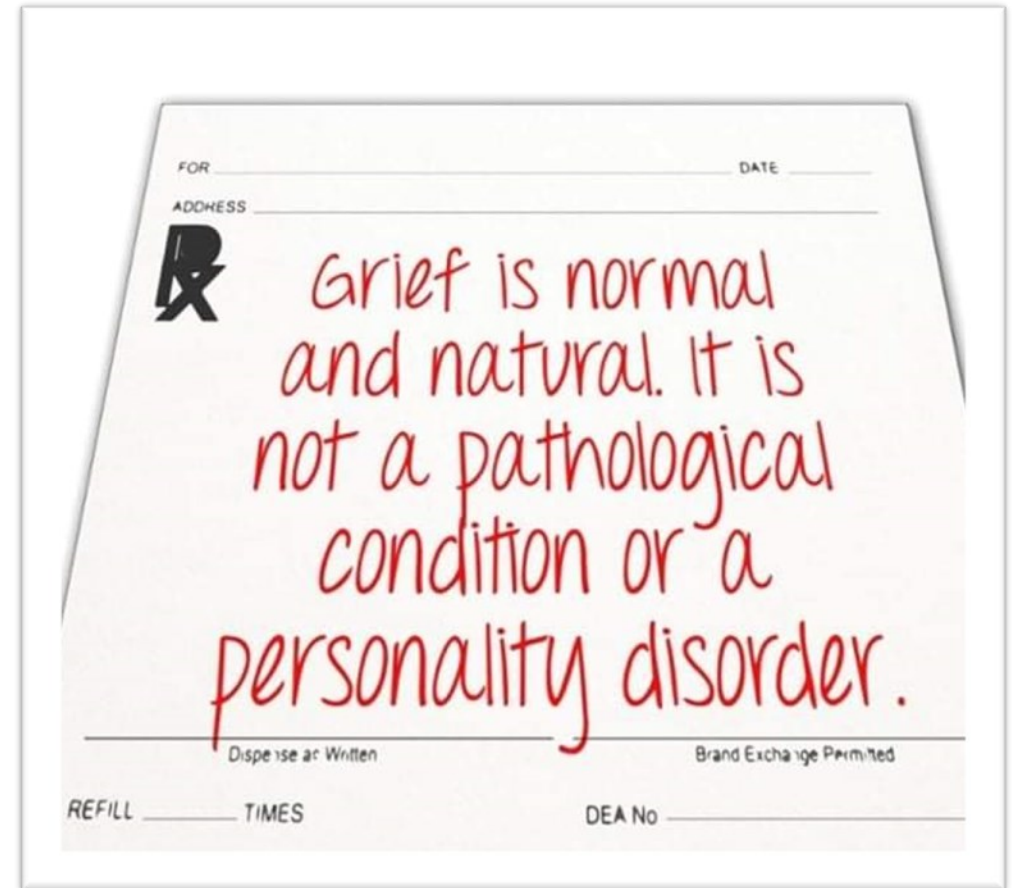
# Terms

# Grief and its Many Names

- Anticipatory grief
- Delayed (e.g., nesting grief)
- Complicated grief
- Disenfranchised grief
- Cumulative grief
- Masked grief
- Environmental grief
- Caregiver grief
- Sibling grief
- Pathological grief
- *Assassin grief*
- Ecological grief
- Distorted grief
- Exaggerated grief
- Inhibited grief
- Secondary loss
- Collective grief
- Abbreviated grief
- Perinatal or parental grief
- Symbolic grief
- Traumatic grief
- Prolonged grief

# What Grief IS NOT

- Mental illness
- Something to quickly get over, avoid, or suppress
- *Pathological*
- Identifiable or predictable
- Linear
- Easy
- Quickly recovered from



# For Some (<30%) Grief *May Become* Pathological

- Deleterious effects on psycho-social health with intensified grief reaction(s)
- Complicated by adjustment disorders (depression, anxiety, substance use, PTSD)
- Requires clinical intervention
- Not specific to loss of partner, per say...
  - Pennies in the cup metaphor



# For Some (<15%) Grief *May Become* Traumatic

- Loss occurs without warning
- Involves violence or there is damage to the loved one's body
- If it was caused by someone with the intent to harm
- If the griever regards the death as preventable
- If the griever believes that the loved one suffered
- If the griever regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair/unjust
- ***Two-fold challenge*** = 1) cope with trauma; and 2) cope with grief

# Risk factors for Pathological/Traumatic Grief

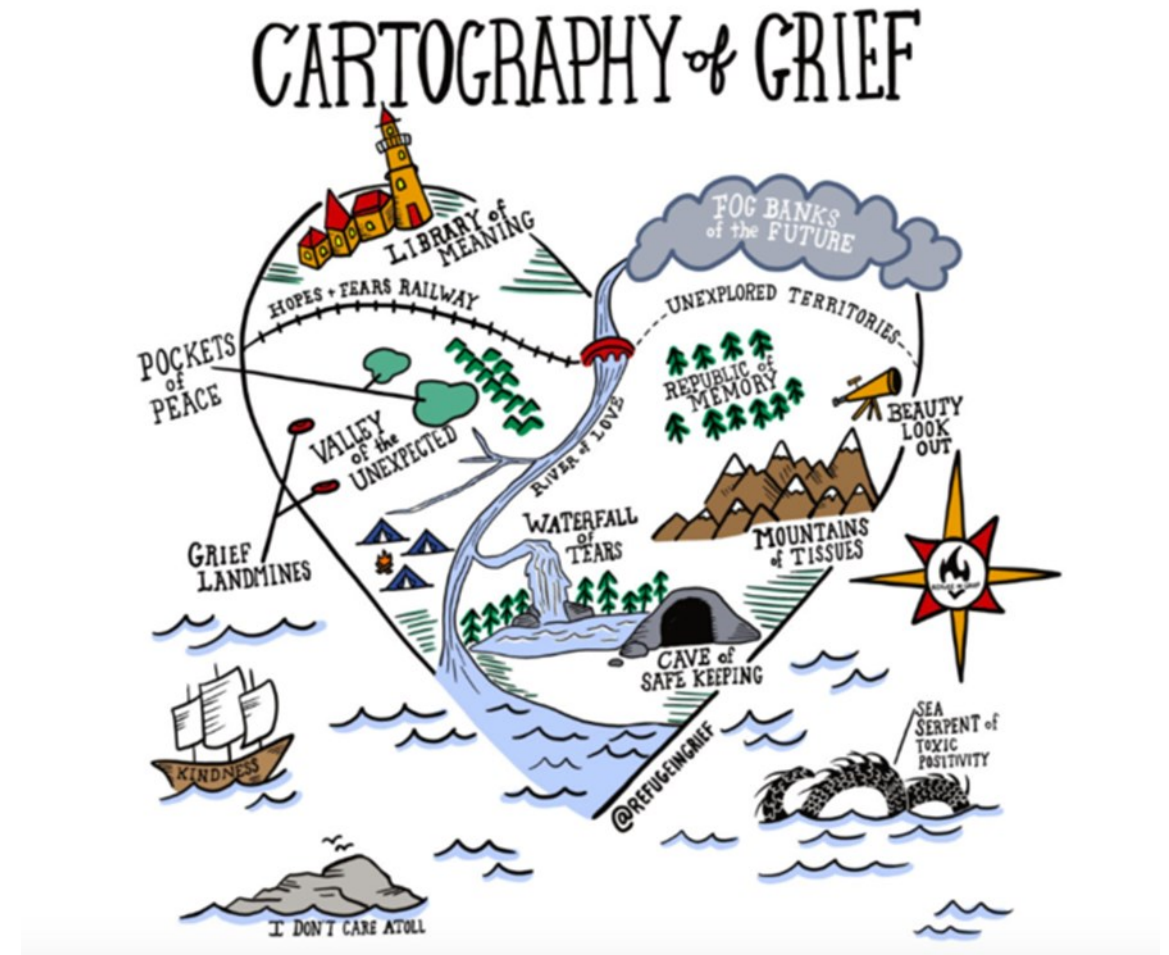
- Hx of psychiatric disorders
- Being blamed for the death
- Female sex (bias)
- Anxiety; insecure attachment
- Hx of abuse, neglect, or trauma
- Concurrent stressors
- Hx of previous losses
- *Epigenetics*
- Uncertainty concerning the death
- Type of loss (partner, child or youth)
- Lack of or poor social support
- Nature of loss traumatic/sudden
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Institutional-based death
- Failure to find meaning in the loss
- Unresolved issues or unfinished business



Category	Grief-Associated Loss	Trauma (DSM-5)
Definition	Acute, chronic, unexpected, or prolonged emotional injury; an anticipated or witnessed death; abrupt change in familiarity or pattern of behavior	Exposure to an actual or witnessed death, serious injury, or sexual assault
Response	Pain; sadness; anger; guilt, distorted blame of self and/or others; irritability; lack of concentration; isolation/social withdrawal; disbelief; shock; confusion; loss of appetite; fatigue; self-destructive or <i>attention-seeking</i> behaviors	Pain; guilt; anger; blame of self; irritability; lack of concentration; negative alternations in mood; persistent distorted blame of self or others; self-destructive behaviors
Re-experience	Recurring dreams; nightmares; persistent images that may be disturbing; excessive thoughts or psychophysiological response to cues or memories	Recurrent distressing dreams, flashbacks, or images; involuntary and intrusive recollections; psychophysiological distress to cues; nightmares
Avoidance	Persistent avoidance of thoughts, places, events, reminders, or memories associated with the loss	Persistent avoidance of thoughts, places, events, reminders, or memories associated with the trauma
Numbness	Diminished interest in life; lethargy; alienation; self-isolation; detachment or estrangement; limited ability to experience positive emotions; negative affect; apathy	Markedly diminished interest in significant activities; feeling alienated from others; detachment or estrangement; constricted affect or persistent inability to experience positive emotions
Hyperarousal/ Hypervigilance	Exaggerated startle response; flight or fight reaction; sleep disturbance; trigger-finger reaction; decreased concentration; <i>'grief fog'</i>	Exaggerated startle response; flight or fight reaction; sleep disturbance; trigger-finger reaction; decreased concentration

# What Grief IS

- *Normal, natural, and universal*
- Subjective and unique
- Produces mixed responses and reactions
- No right or wrong way
- No specific length of time
- Complicated and cyclical
- Likened to a trauma
- Stressful





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# GRIEF-PRODUCING LIFE EVENTS

Divorce, marital separation  
Loss of relationship  
**PET** loss (i.e. companion animals)  
Injury, illness  
Revision of personal habits  
Change in health status  
Pregnancy  
Sex/gender issues  
Change in financial state  
Trouble with boss, coworker  
Trouble with family  
Inability to pay bills  
Change in working hours  
Job change  
Death of a loved one  
Change in communication

Change in responsibilities  
Change in residence  
Change in schools  
Trouble with friends  
Begin or end school  
Change in living conditions  
Change in recreation  
Fired or dismissal from work  
Change in social activities  
Change in sleeping habits  
Change in number of friends  
Change in eating habits  
Holidays, traveling  
Loss of approval  
Loss of safety  
Loss of trust

Ageism  
Loss of control  
Retirement  
Eviction, foreclosure  
Major purchase  
Law violations, imprisonment  
Car accident  
**Guilt, shame**  
Stigma, racism  
Violence  
Suicide  
Rape, robbery, assault  
Environmental loss  
Loss from natural disaster  
Loss from contamination  
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

# Grief Responses

- Symptoms typically remain for several weeks to months, but can last as long as several years
- Some experience intermittent symptoms for the rest of their lives
- About 30% report *abnormal outcomes*; 10-15% report significant distress
- Prevention is key:
  - *Resilience & social support*
  - *Awareness & sensitivity*
  - *Distinct process of grief recovery*

Normal	Abnormal
Feelings of shock followed by tears, crying or sobbing that may be intense at first but typically abate with time	Sustained intense feelings of shock, sadness, pain, detachment, sorrow, hopelessness, emptiness, or longing/searching for the deceased
Mild sleep pattern changes, changes in appetite, and an overall lack of energy	Severe or atypical change in functioning, typically accompanied by self-destructive behaviors, such as substance use, excessive sleep, sleep deprivation and/or and suicide ideation
Questioning spiritual or religious beliefs, job/career choices or life goals	Difficulty or inability to accept the death or nature of the loss that often obstruct one's reality
Frequent episodes of apathy regarding daily tasks or life in general	Apathy that does not fade or abate with time that can impair or prevent persons from leading a normal life
Feelings of anger, guilt, loneliness, depression, emptiness, sadness, etc. but still occasionally experiencing moments of joy/happiness	Intrusive and/or intense episodes of anger, irritation or fits of rage that may be at times uncontrollable and increasingly more severe
Withdrawing from normal/usual social interactions and relationships	Preoccupation with the deceased, the death itself, or the nature of the death with an inability or an unwillingness to engage with others
Difficulty concentrating or focusing on a task, whether at work, personally, a hobby, etc. 'grief-fog'	Focusing solely on reminders of the deceased or an excessive avoidance of such reminders

# Factors Influencing Grief Responses

- Unfinished business
- *Secondary losses*
- Sudden vs. expected
- Cause of death
- Disenfranchisement

# Primary LOSS

(Death)



## Secondary Loss (es):

- income or financial security
- identity
- hopes, dreams, expectation
- faith
- support system
- home or property
- security
- health



# Factors Influencing Grief Responses (cont.)

- Age at loss
- Gender/sex
- Nature of the loss
- Coping strategies
- Level of resiliency
- Previous experience with loss
- Social, cultural, religious/spiritual context (i.e. *Grief Myths*)

# Grief Myths

- (MIS) information we have learned about grief
- Learned in childhood and reinforced through observation
  - Don't feel bad
  - Replace the loss
  - Grieve in silence and alone
  - Time heals all wounds
  - Be strong '*Real (wo)men don't cry*'
  - Keeping busy and the art of distraction
  - Don't talk poorly about deceased

# Attitudes Affect the Process

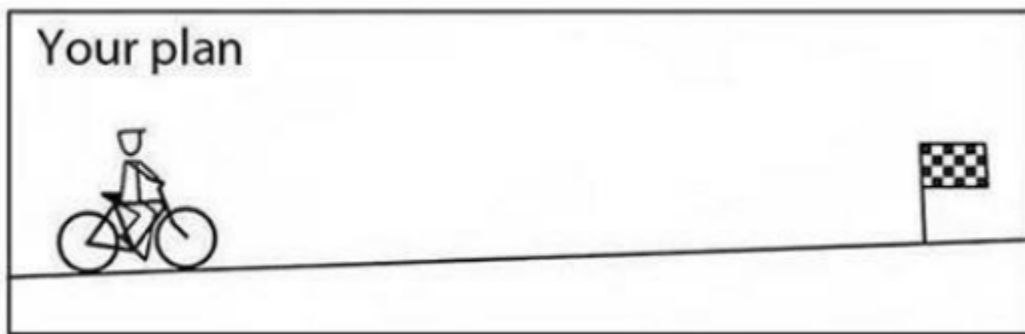
- Acquired in childhood and maintained through adulthood
- Enshrinement vs. Bedevilment
- Rooted in historical experiences with loss
  - Denial lessens the impact
  - Loss/death is feared
  - Anxiety provoking
  - Distress/disturbance

“We have been taught from our earliest age that sad, painful, or negative feelings were to be avoided at all costs.”

John James

# Denial

- Denial/avoidance used as a maladaptive coping mechanism
- Grief is a 24/7 situation
- Requires an **ACTIVE** process of recovery
- Complicated by medications that numb



# Adaptive Coping Strategies

- Normal periods of resting, eating, sleeping, and time spent alone
- Engaging in mild/moderate physical activity
- Reaching out for help and support
- Allowing space and time to grieve and heal.
- Being gentle with oneself and others
- Providing oneself permission to grieve
- Managing/sustaining routines within reasonable limits
- Reflecting, remembering, and celebrating

# Maladaptive Coping Strategies

- Depending on the culture, most people are socialized to hide or bury grief
- Lifestyle behaviors that hinder the grieving process
- Reinforce the illusion that short-term release provides a reprieve from pain
- Smoking, drinking alcohol, excessive sleep, overeating, substance use
- Prescription misuse; particularly among women
- Rumination on the 'what-ifs' or manner of death/loss
- Other avoidance behaviors of '*reminders*'

# Grief and Addiction

- Grief often provokes first-time substance use in effort to cope
- If history of substance, usage and likelihood of addiction increases
- Addiction furthers loss(es), which exacerbates grief
- Binge-drinking and heavier periods of episodic drinking are likely
- Anxiety often follows grief for up to 6 months after loss
- People are most commonly prescribed ***Benzodiazepines*** (highly addictive)







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# Grief Influences Relationships

- Family relationships
- Friend relationships
- Marriages
- Careers
- Communities
- Populations
- Coworkers

BEers	DOers	SHELfers
<p><u>These people will BE there to:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* sit with you</li><li>* cry with you</li><li>* listen without judgement</li><li>* sleep next to you and your children</li><li>* hold you &amp; hug you without words</li></ul>	<p><u>These people DO things for you like:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* make your meals</li><li>* shuffle your kids to their activities</li><li>* complete household chores</li><li>* help you re-organize your finances</li><li>* drag you outside for a walk or run</li></ul>	<p><u>These people may need to sit on your SHELF due to negative or toxic habits such as:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>* constantly judging you</li><li>* consistently giving unsolicited advice</li><li>* leaving you feeling even more drained</li></ul>

# Things You 'Wish' You Had Been Told

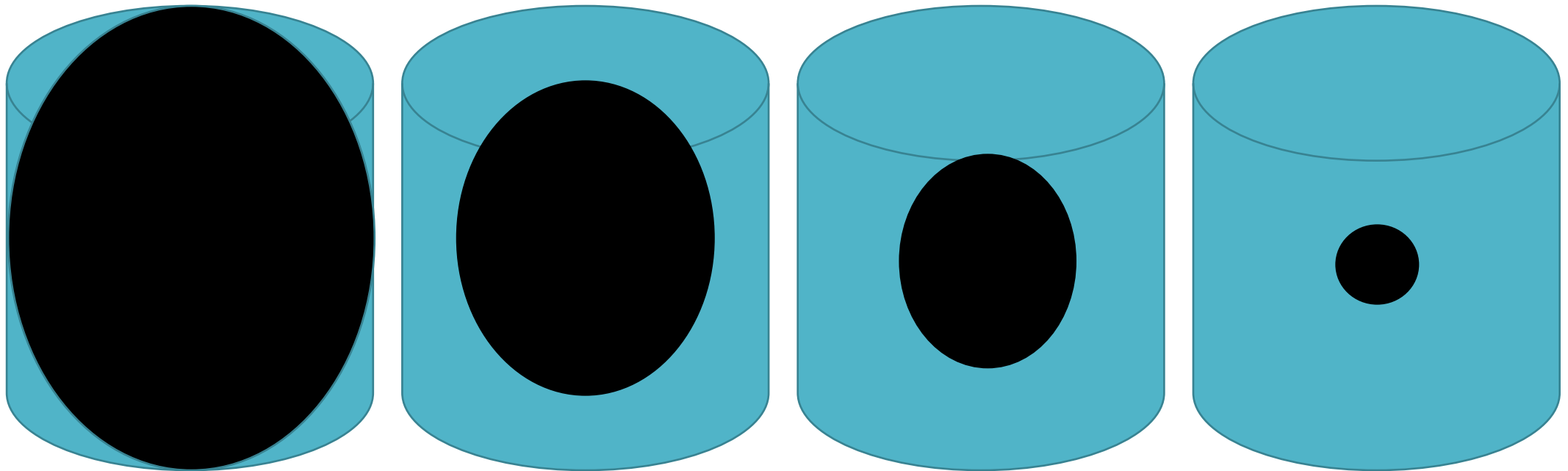
- **Weight:** You may put on weight. You might lose weight.
- **Sleep:** You might NOT sleep. You might sleep constantly.
- **Allies:** You will quickly learn who really matters; and who does not.
- **Numb:** Some people become numb; while others get active.
- **Isolation:** Despite being surrounded by people, grief is one of the loneliest times in life.
- **Insensitivity:** People will say the most absurd and ridiculous things to you.

\*Unfortunately, many things' people say to grievors are reflections of their own fears/biases\*

# Things You 'Wish' You Had Been Told (cont.)

- **Waves:** Grief comes in inconsistent waves of emotion and unpredictable reactions.
- **Not-Optional:** Grief is not optional; it is the price of admission ~ M. Williams
- **Tolerance:** It's 100% okay to NOT be okay.
- **P S:** You will grieve many secondary losses too...
- **Growth:** You will be changed as a person in so many unfathomable ways; some good/bad
- **Identity:** Grief intersects with multiple parts of identity. You may loose/find yourself.

# Distinct/Active Process of 'Grief *Recovery*'



# Tasks of Mourning and Loss

- Adjust to a new life without \_\_\_\_\_
- Accept the reality of the loss
- Process the pain
- Find the 'new normal'
- There is NO '*right*' or '*easy*' or '*quick*' or '*simple*' way to grieve
- Requires a healthy support system
- Know triggers and develop a plan

“The only cure  
for grief is to  
grieve.”

Earl Grollman



# Beliefs Matter in Healing from Grief

- Characterize healing and grief recovery as an active choice one makes
- Loss is (solely) responsible for pain
- Griever must disassociate from '*victim*' mentality and take responsibility for grief recovery
  - Why did this happen?
  - Who is to blame?
  - What is the meaning, reason, or purpose for all of this?
- Grief recovery and healing is an INSIDE job
- Letting go of '*what-ifs*' and hopes, dreams, expectations in relation to the loss
  - Did (s)he suffer?
  - If I just would have...then....
  - Was (s)he afraid?

# 'Others' Reactions to Your Grief

- Witnessing grief can be profoundly unsettling to Others.
- Others will complain about their situations, which will feel like utter nonsense to you.
- Others will seem completely clueless about the seriousness and severity of your pain
- Others cannot help being uncomfortable; and are often at a loss for words.
- Others may expect you to be sad; while Others may feel “it is time for you to move on.”
- Others comments are not about you, but about themselves and their own problems.
- Others insensitivity is persistent and often unapologetic.
- You cannot stop others insensitivity, but you can change your reaction to it.

# Do Say

- Everything you're feeling right now is okay
- I can't imagine how you feel
- I don't know what to say
- I can't imagine how heartbreaking that must be
- I am here to support you

# Don't Say

- I can't believe you are so upset
- I know how you feel
- You just have to be strong
- You'll be fine in time
- It was just a dog...cat, bunny, etc.
- You just need to keep busy
- You'll get over it
- (S)he is in a better place

# Grieving Guests During Holidays

Privately acknowledge your guest's grief when you make the invitation:

*"I know this time is difficult for you and your heart is hurting. You and your grief are welcome in our home. Come as you are, I'd be honored to have you."*

Also, be sure to invite them without the need for commitment and permission to change their mind.

*"You don't have to decide right now. I'll check in again the day before to see if you're feeling up to coming over and if there's anything you'd like me to know about how I can support you."*

# Identify/Address Your Grief '*Triggers*'



- The 'Empty' chair – Identify it. Name it. Sit with it.
- It is next to impossible to avoid grief triggers entirely.
- Just because an emotion is negative doesn't mean it's unhealthy.
- Learn to pinpoint your triggers; anticipate the cycle of your emotions.
- Its going to get messy at times.
- A degree of grace and self-compassion is *KEY*.

“Our dis-ease  
is the root of our  
disease.”

L. M. Hall

After all, 100% of  
us are grievors

# The 'Art' of Grieving Well

**You** are the only person in the world who can know your grief, the steps you need to take to recover from it, and the kind of support you need to live with the new normal.

**You** are the only person who has the power to listen to what your grief is communicating to you by not ignoring it or blocking its advances.

**You** have every right to shut someone down when what they are saying is harmful to you and your grieving process.

- Thank you, but that is not what I need to hear right now.
- I appreciate you're trying to help, but I would rather handle this in my own way.

# Wayfinding in Grief

- Give yourself permission...
- Listen to your grief. Once it's told you what it has to say, gently escort it out to make room for happiness
- Talk to a '*safe*' third-party
- Acknowledge the 'should haves' or 'could haves'
- Identify what was good and bad of what was lost
- Look for acts of service and love
- Honor the loss through remembering, ceremonies, and giving back in your loved one's memory

**Example:** Perhaps (s)he had a cause they cared deeply about or a community they supported. Find out how you can contribute to this subject in a productive, meaningful way.



# Principles of Navigating Grief

- Actualize the loss through action and communication
- Identify and ***EXPERIENCE*** emotion
- Establish new normal through problem-solving approach
- If possible, find meaning in loss
- Pay attention to critical periods
- Distinguish between normal/abnormal behavioral responses
- Rule-out pathology and trauma
- Identify triggers
- AVOID platitudes
- **DO NOT** be F. I. N. E.

# The Many *Gift* (s) of Grief

- Acknowledgment of ways that the loss has transformed life
- Identification of how assumptions, values, and priorities have changed since loss
- Growth and/or growing because of loss
- Living the NEW normal while honoring the past (i.e., loss)
- Released from shattered assumptions about the world, the self, and other
- When you are so far down, the only place left to go is up
- It takes one (i.e., griever) to know one
- A greater sense of compassion and empathy
- Resources



# Compassion Community Advocacy

- Death cafes
- [\*The Dinner Party\*](#)<sup>®</sup>
- Positive grieving art and poetry exhibitions
- Open mic-grief stories
- Animal companion remembrance day
- Book clubs and public forums on grief, death, and loss

# Thank you

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