

#UnderstandGrief

Being Grief-Informed: From Understanding to Action

Donna L. Schuurman, EdD, FT & Monique B. Mitchell, PhD, FT

Grief is a natural response to loss. How people grieve privately or publicly varies and is based on many factors, including their personality and what their social context has shown, taught, or demonstrated as “appropriate.” A dominant attitude in “mainstream” society is that grief is an individual emotional experience which has predictable stages and a defined timeline. Defining grief this way suggests that if your “symptoms” last too long, or are too intense, you may have a “mental disorder” needing treatment. And this is problematic.

Everyone responds to grief in a unique way and grief can last a lifetime...and that is completely normal. This doesn't mean grieving is easy or that people won't experience emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or relational challenges. Rather than label people “disordered” or “dysfunctional,” we need to understand the holistic nature of grief. To be grief-informed not only means having knowledge about grief, it also means knowing how to put this understanding into action.

10 CORE PRINCIPLES OF BEING GRIEF-INFORMED

To become grief-informed begins with the initial step of identifying and embracing ten core principles about grief. These core principles involve recognizing what grief is and best practices for supporting people who are grieving.



Natural. Loss is a normal, inevitable, and universal human experience. People have an innate capacity to adapt to loss and function healthily.



Complex and Nonpathological. Grief is an adaptive, nonpathological response to loss. Grief is complex and complicated because people and relationships are complex and complicated.



Contextual. Grief is not solely an individual experience; grief is interwoven in a sociocultural context, influenced by family, community, and other social systems. Acknowledging and addressing the sociocultural and historical factors that impact grief can reduce disparities and promote equity and inclusion.



Disruptive. Grief challenges our identity, relationships, beliefs, and assumptions about the world and our role in it.



Relational Connection and Perceived Support.

Having people who care and support us after a loss helps us navigate the changes in our lives. Feeling heard and having people to share with helps us know we're not alone in our grief.



Personal Empowerment and Agency. Experiencing loss and grief can make us feel helpless or out of control. Choosing our own healthy responses, rather than what others tell us to do or not do, can help us regain a sense of balance and person “agency.”



Safety. Experiencing loss challenges our sense of safety in the world. Paying attention to our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs will help us cope with all the changes that happen after a loss.



Person-centered. The intensity and experience of grief are unique for every individual.



Dynamic. The dynamic nature of grief cannot be fully captured by stage, phase, or other prescriptive models. There are no universally acceptable or “correct” ways to grieve.



Nonfinite. Loss is interwoven into our identity; therefore, grieving is not a finite experience. Grief doesn't have some magical end point. We can grieve someone throughout our lives.

While knowledge of the ten core principles is a critical first step to becoming grief-informed, we must recognize that knowledge is most impactful when it is put into action. It is time that we as a nation take a stand and acknowledge grief for what it truly is: a natural and normal response to loss that is interwoven into a sociocultural context. Grief is not an experience that needs to be “silenced,” “treated,” or “pathologized.” Grief, and all the many complications it imposes on the griever, is an experience that needs and deserves understanding, support, and community. Here are 10 action steps to implementing grief-informed knowledge.

continued...

This is a condensed version of a longer document. For the full position paper, please visit: www.dougy.org/grief_informed

CALL TO ACTION

1. Advocate that grief is not a mental disorder; our social and cultural context impacts how we grieve. We are impacted by the people in our lives and the world in which we live. As you listen to or read about how grief is an individual experience (i.e., grief happens in isolation of the world around us), question the narrative of “mental disorders” and consider all the factors that can contribute to how a person responds to the death of someone in their lives.

2. Consider the language you use and how it can impact people. The language we use to describe people and experiences shapes how we view and respond to them. When it comes to grief and grieving, we have the potential to be helpful or harmful. People who are grieving often receive patronizing responses to “move on” or “find closure” when what they need most is to feel understood.

3. Educate others about being grief-informed. Share the 10 core principles of being grief-informed with your friends, family, coworkers, and others who want to know how to support people who are grieving. If or when you notice someone is misinformed or misrepresenting grief, respond! For example, if you don’t agree with what is portrayed in the news or media, write a letter to the editor, contact a reporter... weigh in with your opinion and experience.

4. Broaden the dialogue about the need for diversity and inclusivity in grief research and support. Many of the studies in the field of thanatology (the study of death, dying, bereavement, and loss) in the U.S. are based on studies of adults in “mainstream” culture, and have been used to represent the “standard” of how people grieve and how to support them. We need to reach beyond these limited and narrow perspectives to understand and support how grief is experienced by people of different beliefs, cultures, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, and experiences.

5. Challenge myths about grief. Grief doesn’t follow an orderly path of stages, tasks, or assignments to complete. When someone is grieving, don’t impose expectations on them about how they should feel or respond, or how long their grief should last. Every experience of loss is different and how people feel or respond to loss will be influenced by their relationship with the person who died, their beliefs, experience, social support, and many other factors.

6. Acknowledge and address the injustices of labels. Does yearning for someone who died mean that someone has a mental disorder (e.g., “Prolonged Grief Disorder”)? Rather than labeling people who are grieving with a mental disorder, or permitting others to label us, consider framing

the challenges we face when we’re grieving as just that: challenges we experience when coping with the death of someone in our lives.

7. Recognize and acknowledge that every experience of loss is a unique experience. People will likely respond to the death of each person in their life differently because every relationship is unique. Let’s not assign people who are already struggling into preconceived and stereotypical boxes.

8. Strengthen relational connections. Our mainstream society values independence and, as such, the challenges experienced when grieving are often viewed as occurring “within the individual.” Unfortunately, this unrealistic position underestimates, and may even ignore, the value of interpersonal support when someone is grieving. We need connections with others who are understanding and compassionate, especially when difficult and painful things happen.

9. Honor lived experience. There are as many ways to grieve as there are people in the world, and there’s no “right way” or “wrong way.” It’s important to know how to support others, even when their lived experience and grieving responses differ from our own. When we place expectations and judgments on others because they are different from us, it can create barriers rather than relational connection and perceived support. To honor the lived experience of others involves offering the gift of nonjudgmental listening, open mindedness, and support.

10. Be compassionate with yourself and with others. Oscar Wilde famously stated that “only the shallow know themselves,” suggesting that there’s always more to learn about ourselves and others, no matter our age, education, or social status. One of the ways we can “walk our talk” is to demonstrate the same compassion toward ourselves that we hope others will have for themselves, particularly when we’re grieving.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Join this national call to action!

Let us know what you and/or your organization are doing to raise national consciousness on being grief informed. We’d love to hear from you! On social media use #UnderstandGrief and tag us at @thedougycenter. Go to dougy.org/UnderstandGrief for more.

