

Grief  
Literacy  
Through a  
Trauma-  
Informed  
Lens

Understanding grief with  
compassion, safety, and  
equity

Laura Bradbury, LCSW, PhD

Caring Connections: A Hope and Comfort in Grief Program

University of Utah College of Nursing

# What Grievers Experience



- Grief is highly individualized
  - The nature of the loss *to the person*
  - The individual's personality
  - The norms within the person's culture and family
  - Other stressors in the person's life
  - History of coping with other losses

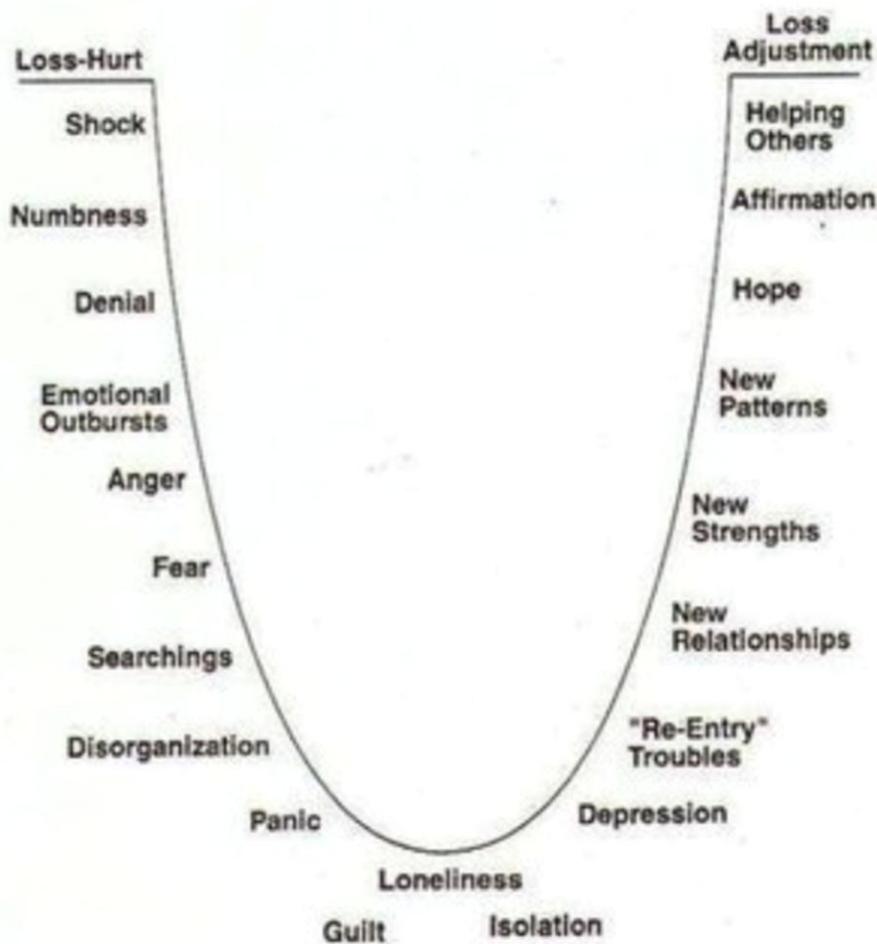
THE "STAGES OF GRIEF"



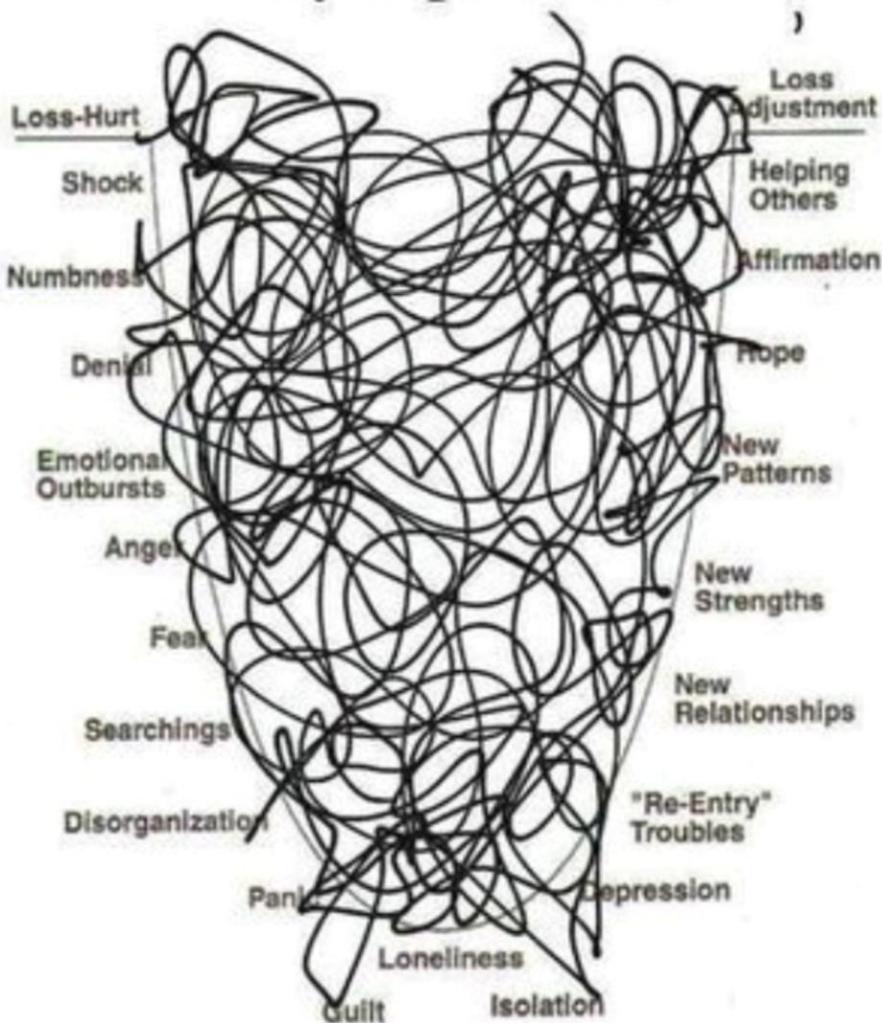
REALITY



# STAGES OF GRIEF



# My experience





# Grief May BE:

---

Present

---

Past

---

Preparatory

---

Exponential

# Factors Affecting Coping with Loss

---

Nature of the relationship.

---

Nature of the death(s).

---

Multiple deaths.

---

Causal factors: real or perceived, self or others.

---

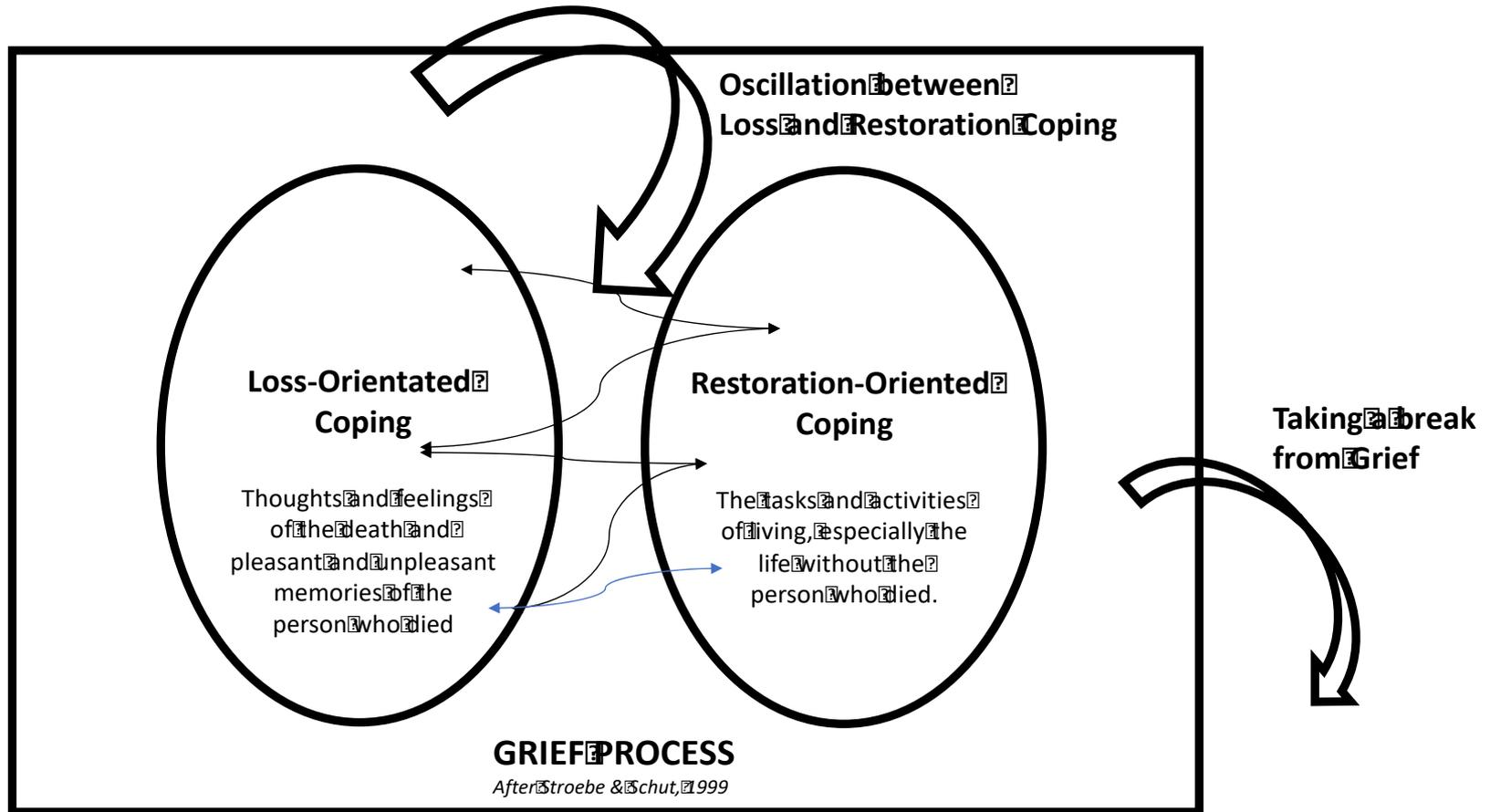
Visual and auditory experiences; *witnessed event*.

# Natural Grief Reactions



- Guilt
- Shame
- Blame & Anger
- Anxiety-Fear
- Isolation

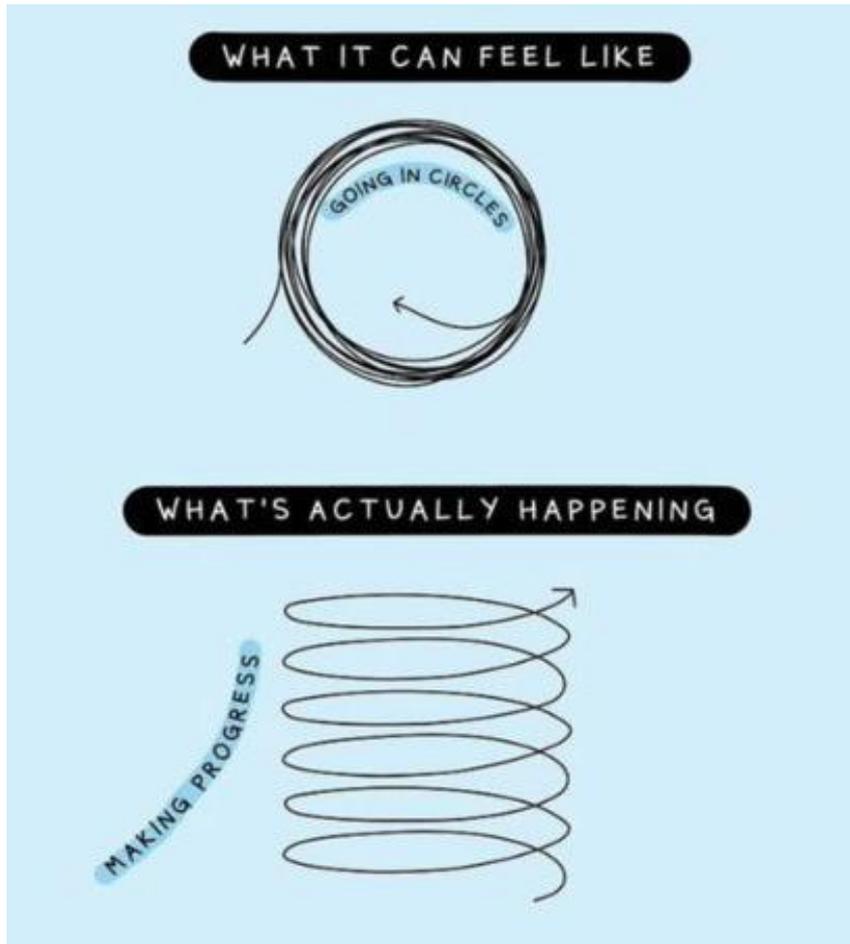
# Dual Process Model



**GRIEF  
DOES NOT  
STOP**



# Moving toward integration



- Imagining life without the deceased
- Reinvesting love/care into new relationships/ideas
- Continuing bonds
- Meaning making

# Integrated Grief

- The permanent response after adaptation to the loss, in which satisfaction in ongoing life is renewed.



# Grief and Trauma Often Intersect

- Grief can be traumatic; trauma can complicate grief
- Grievers may not show sadness—they may express anger, numbness, or withdrawal
- Trauma-informed grief literacy allows for nonlinear, complex grief expressions



# Safety and Trust Are Foundational

Prioritize emotional and  
psychological safety

Avoid pathologizing grief;  
respect individual timelines

Safe spaces allow for  
authentic grief expression

# Power, Privilege, and Systems Matter

Grief is shaped by racism,  
poverty, and social stigma

Some grief is  
marginalized or  
disenfranchised

Trauma-informed literacy  
must acknowledge  
systemic inequities

Regulation  
and  
Compassion  
Over Fixing

---

Trauma-informed care  
emphasizes presence  
over solutions

---

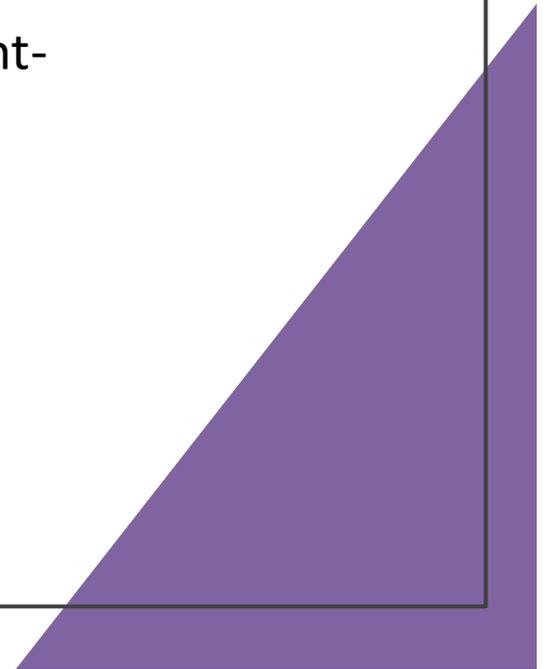
Support through co-  
regulation and  
attunement

---

Grief is not a problem  
to fix—it is a human  
experience to honor

# Education Is Prevention

- Grief literacy builds community resilience
- Normalize diverse grief responses with consent-based education
- Gentle, inclusive teaching prevents retraumatization



# Grief Is a Lifelong Landscape

---

Grief does not end—  
it evolves

Trauma-informed  
support recognizes  
recurring and re-  
emerging grief

Make space for  
revisiting and  
reintegrating grief  
over time

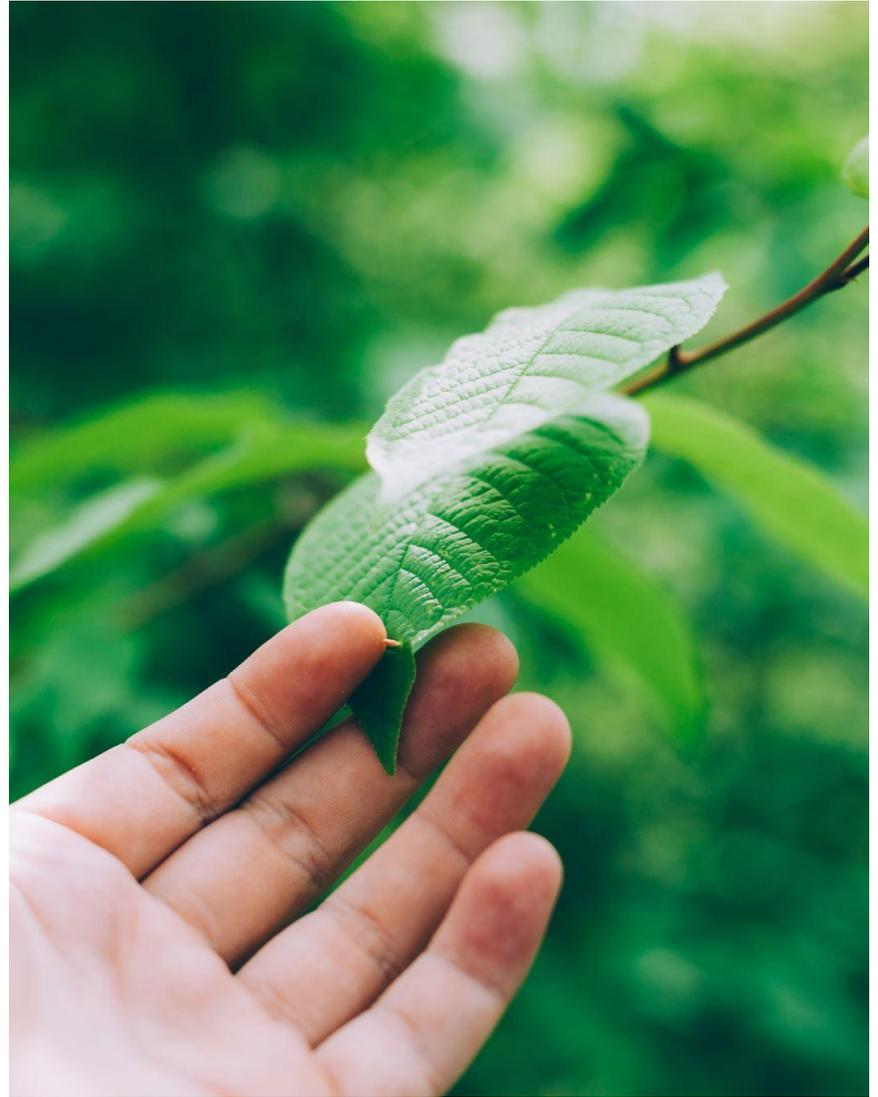
# How You Can Help

---

Encourage self care

Support recovery

Make their environment safer



No one is exempt  
from a crisis.

**988 is for you, too.**

# WHAT WOULD HELP YOU NOW?

## HELP

- A meal
- Drive the kids
- Mow the lawn
- Help with response cards
- Go for a walk
- Explore solutions
- Check in call

## HEARD

- Listen to feelings
- Listen to doubts
- The story of the death
- The story of the life
- Share your own memories of the deceased

## HUG

- Presence (not everyone is a hugger)
- A hug is showing up

# GRIEF IS...



A reminder  
about death

Awkward

Scary

Uncomfortable

Vulnerable



Most people are  
not intentionally  
hurtful...but....

We say the  
“wrong thing”  
in a clumsy way

Or

We withdraw  
for fear of



Can we be vulnerable and compassionate in the presence of suffering?

# Grief Literacy

- Grief Literacy is a goal within the larger *compassionate communities* movement.
- Recognizing that our society is fragmented, and the varying norms and traditions to support one another in times of suffering are unclear, increasing grief knowledge would “enable the general public and professionals to identify grief more readily, to seek out relevant information and to adopt appropriate supports and thereby be proactive in avoiding complications from the grieving process such as depression” (Clark 2003).



Why do we  
need grief  
literacy?



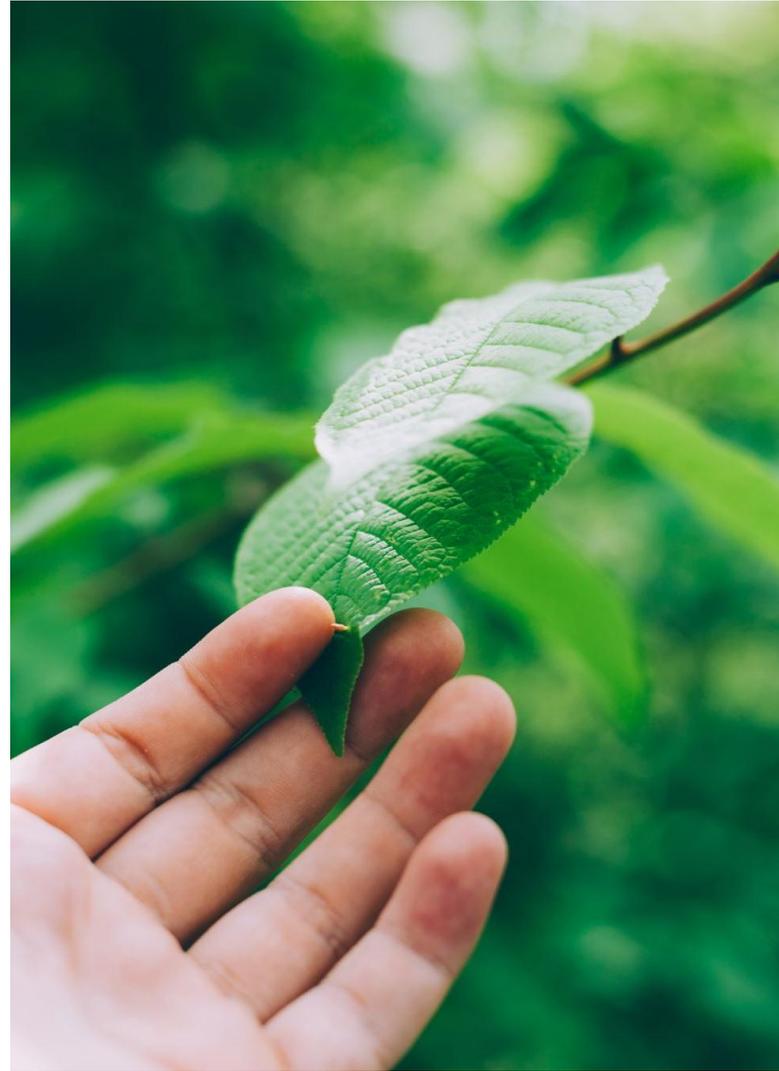
*“You’ve entered the final stage of  
grief—milking it.”*

# How You Can Help

Encourage self care

Support recovery

Make their environment safer



No one is exempt  
from a crisis.

**988 is for you, too.**

# WHAT WOULD HELP YOU NOW?

## HELP

- A meal
- Drive the kids
- Mow the lawn
- Help with response cards
- Go for a walk
- Explore solutions
- Check in call

## HEARD

- Listen to feelings
- Listen to doubts
- The story of the death
- The story of the life
- Share your own memories of the deceased

## HUG

- Presence (not everyone is a hugger)
- A hug is showing up

# GRIEF IS...



A reminder  
about death

Awkward

Scary

Uncomfortable

Vulnerable

# Remember:



***It is not your job to take away  
the pain of the bereaved.***



**-The Helping Encounter  
Therese Rando**

It is never easy to watch someone suffer.  
It is normal and natural to want to take  
some of that pain away, especially when  
the griever is someone we know and love.



But pain is an important part of the  
grieving process, and can also promote  
healing. Rather than trying to take away  
their pain, perhaps you can instead sit  
with them, so they are not suffering alone.



Most people are not  
intentionally  
hurtful...but....

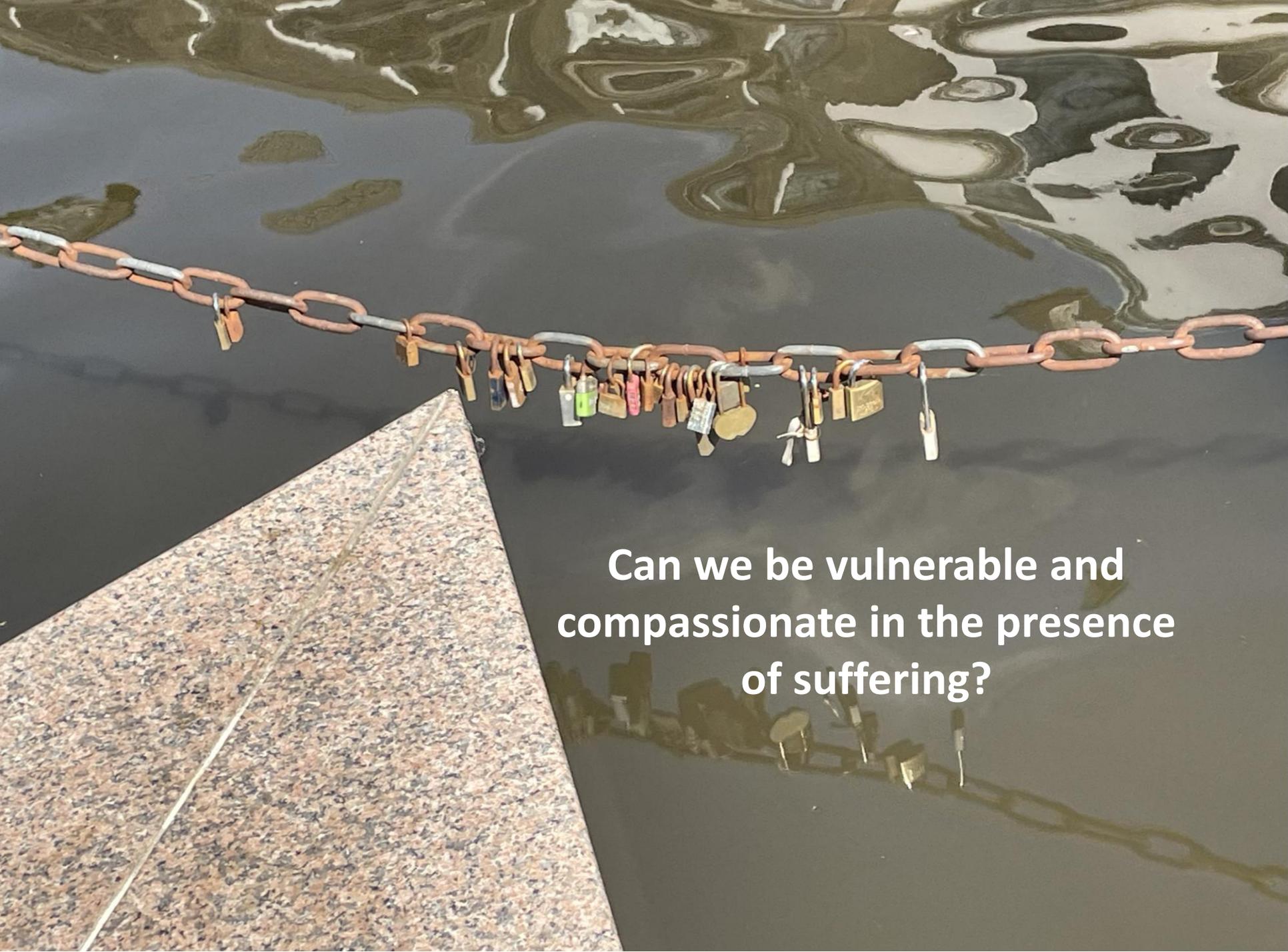
---

We say the “wrong thing” in a  
clumsy way

Or

We withdraw for fear of saying or  
doing the wrong thing





Can we be vulnerable and  
compassionate in the presence  
of suffering?

What do grievors  
tell us they hear  
and see out in the real  
world—the world  
that is going on while  
their world  
has been tragically  
ground to a halt?



# Grief Literacy

- Grief Literacy is a goal within the larger *compassionate communities* movement.
- Recognizing that our society is fragmented, and the varying norms and traditions to support one another in times of suffering are unclear, increasing grief knowledge would “enable the general public and professionals to identify grief more readily, to seek out relevant information and to adopt appropriate supports and thereby be proactive in avoiding complications from the grieving process such as depression” (Clark 2003).

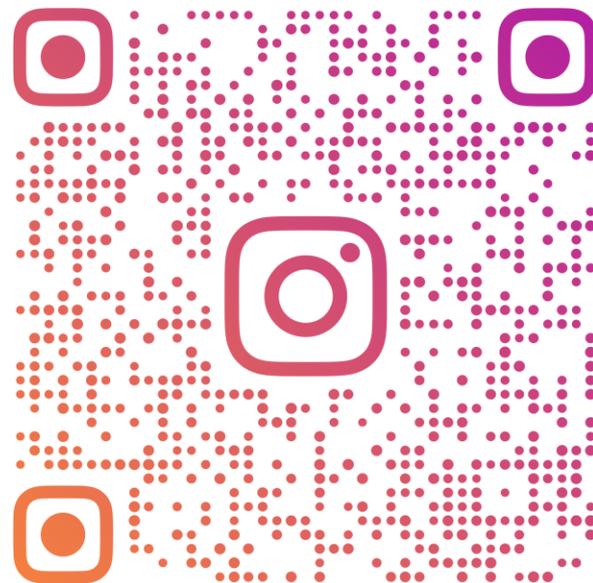


Why do we  
need grief  
literacy?



*“You’ve entered the final stage of  
grief—milking it.”*

# Grief Literacy



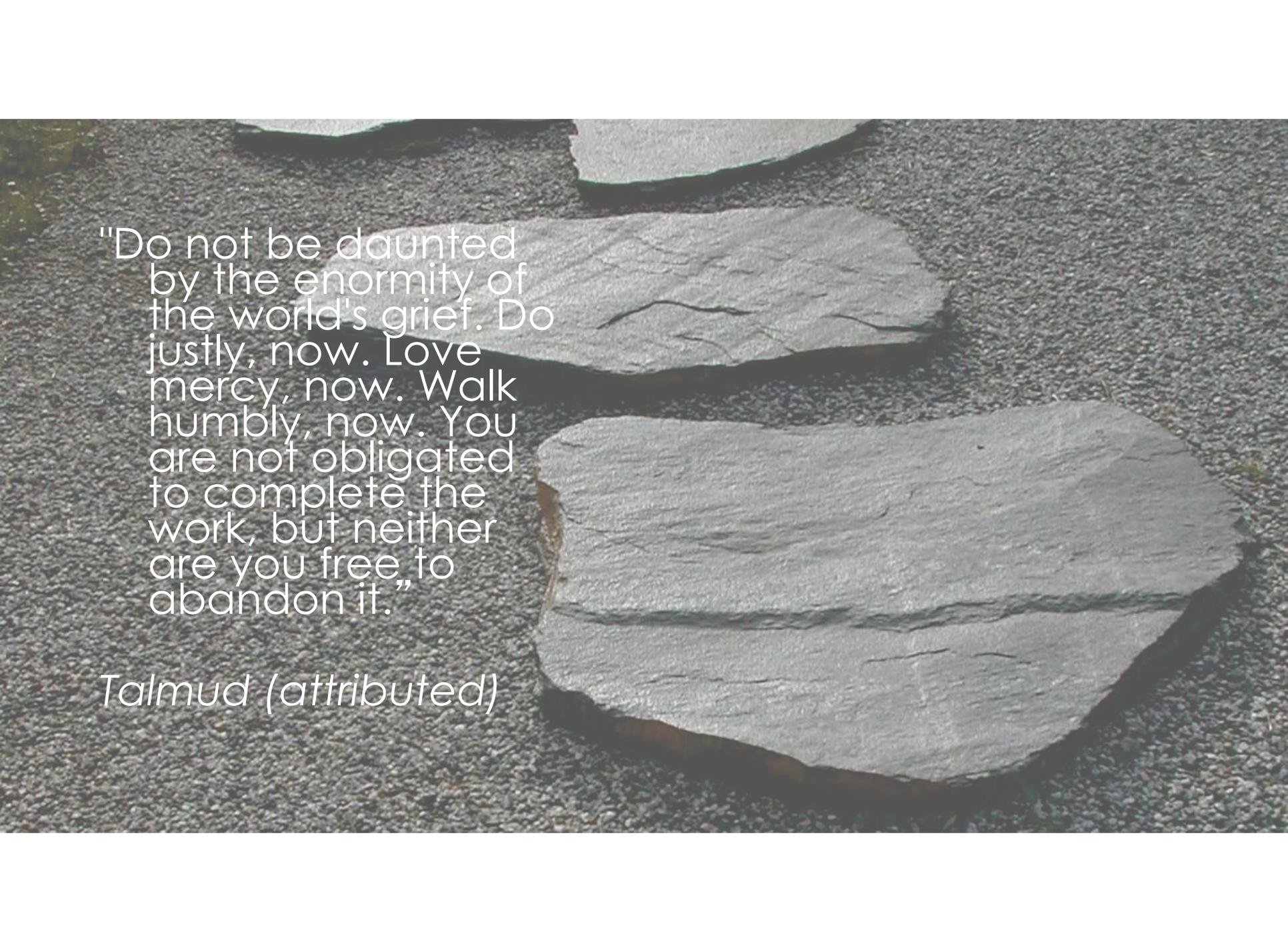
GRIEFLITERACY



Who needs grief support in the presence of loss?



**Connection  
Makes a  
Difference**



"Do not be daunted  
by the enormity of  
the world's grief. Do  
justly, now. Love  
mercy, now. Walk  
humbly, now. You  
are not obligated  
to complete the  
work, but neither  
are you free to  
abandon it."

*Talmud (attributed)*

“Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.”



— Walter Brueggemann



“When it seems that our sorrow is too great to be borne, let us think of the great family of the heavy-hearted into which our grief has given us entrance. And inevitably, we will feel about us their arms, their sympathy and their understanding.” —Helen Keller

# In appreciation of the contributions of

- Lauren J. Breen, Daisuke Kawashima, Karima Joy, Susan Cadell, David Roth, Amy Chow & Mary Ellen MacDonald;
- The International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement Committee on Grief Literacy-Anne Goossensen, David Roth, David Wright, Susan Cadell, Sherry Cory & Kathie Supiano;
- The Canadian Virtual Hospice
- The Social Work Hospice and Palliative Care Network~Grief Literacy Workgroup



Death Studies



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/udst20>

## Grief literacy: A call to action for compassionate communities

Lauren J. Breen, Daisuke Kawashima, Karima Joy, Susan Cadell, David Roth, Amy Chow & Mary Ellen Macdonald

To cite this article: Lauren J. Breen, Daisuke Kawashima, Karima Joy, Susan Cadell, David Roth, Amy Chow & Mary Ellen Macdonald (2022) Grief literacy: A call to action for compassionate communities, *Death Studies*, 46:2, 425-433, DOI: [10.1080/07481187.2020.1739780](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1739780)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1739780>

# In gratitude for our support from

- State of Utah Department of Health and Human Services  
Crisis & Suicide Prevention Programs
- The Clark L. Tanner Foundation
- The University of Utah College of Nursing

