

# **Grief Process Group**

## ***Facilitator copy***

### **Introduction**

My name is Jenny Robbins. I'm a mental health counselor in the Denver area. I practice therapy at South Platte Counseling in Englewood. I also provide support at a resiliency center that provides services for a community that was impacted by mass violence.

My specializations are trauma and grief. I feel passionate about grief and trauma education and coping. My work in these areas is informed by my schooling, but mostly by my lived experience. Ten years ago my 19-year-old son, Kade, died. He accidentally drowned and alcohol was a factor. When I mention his death I like to mention his life, too. He was a whitewater rafting guide in his rookie year, loving living in the mountains. He loved to ski, fish, camp, and play bass guitar.

### **A Few Simple Ground Rules:**

Confidentiality

You are welcome to pass if you wish.

Encouraged to share, because talking about things is one of the most helpful interventions.

If you tend to talk a lot, perhaps be cognizant of this, and make sure others have a chance to share, too. If you tend to not speak up, perhaps challenge yourself to say something.

### **Ritual**

Ritual can be calming and helpful in healing. It helps us to transition to a different sense of presence. It helps us drop into our feelings. It signifies importance.

It engages the senses, and grounds us in the present, and that mindfulness as well as physicality helps in healing.

Ritual can be honoring in grief. It doesn't have to be grand or even include others, and can be small micro-rituals.

## Opening Ritual

### ***Healing the Soul in the Age of the Brain***

*It's typically American to equate healing with doing something. When we have a problem, we fix it, and we prefer to do it quickly. But fixing is not the same as healing; In fact it can easily get in the way of healing. Fixing is something mechanical, scientific, economic, military. Healing is something human, emotional, spiritual. As a psychologist and psychotherapist, as a patient and a person, I have learned that before you can fix a problem, you first have to feel the problem. Healing happens not through doing but through feeling.*

## Introductions

(If small enough group, everyone do introductions)

**I'd like to begin by opening it up to the group, as this is here for you.**

What is coming up for you? What feels important to talk about? Do you have any questions about the experience of grief? Is there something you'd like to bring up about what you're experiencing?

## Vicarious trauma or secondary trauma

When we hear about a tragedy on the news, or even when we see it in written form, it can cause vicarious trauma. The impact of seeing or hearing it, can be similar to experiencing it, and our brain doesn't necessarily differentiate.

Vicarious trauma is when our fight-or-flight response is triggered by something that we experience indirectly, such as hearing a news story, watching a video, or seeing a photo of a disturbing event.

Trauma, both direct and vicarious, can cause a variety of responses in the physical and emotional body:

- confusion/brain fog
- anxiety and fear
- feeling numb
- wanting to isolate from others
- anger or irritability

## **Trauma is Somatic**

Because trauma is somatic, or related to the body, it can be helpful to do somatic (body-based) practices to process our emotions.

### **Here are a few ways to process trauma somatically.**

**Yoga-** moving the body is great for soothing the nervous system, and some yoga teachers are certified in trauma-informed yoga.

**Get outside-** Getting into nature has been shown to reduce anxiety, which is one of the most common trauma responses. Plus, if you take time to put your phone down and step away from the news feed, that can help prevent further exposure to disturbing information.

**Shake it out-** When our body goes into fight-or-flight, blood goes to our major organs in the torso to help us survive. When we shake it out, we are moving blood back into the limbs and helping soothe our nerves.

## **Dr Joanne Cacciatore's Selah model of the 3 phases of trauma and grief healing**

This can be directed to trauma healing, secondary trauma healing, or to the pain of mass shootings and social injustice:

### **1. Being with your experience** – the state is pause, the goal is attunement

It includes things like:

Solitude

Self-awareness

Meditation

Telling the story

Body care (nutrition, exercise, massage)

### **2. Surrendering to your experience** – the state is reflection, the goal is trust

It includes things like:

Radical acceptance

Ritualizing

Support group for self

Remembering/retelling

3. **Doing with your experience** – the state is meaning, the goal is responsible action

It includes things like:

Seeing others' suffering

Calling to a greater cause

Seeking kindness opportunities

Volunteerism

Gratitude journal

### **RAIN exercise to practice acceptance**

We can use the practice of the “RAIN acronym,” a combination of mindfulness and self-compassion, when we find ourselves in a pattern of suffering: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture.

We can use an example of something in yourself difficult to accept.

(have someone volunteer)

**Recognize** – Tara Broch, who created this exercise, recognized that she may not have a long time with her mom, and that she was not directing enough attention to her.

**Allow** – Just let it be here. Not try to judge it. This is happening—I am not giving my mother enough attention. I am feeling anxiety, guilt.

**Investigate** – not cognitive, like it sounds. It's investigate 1) how you are feeling it in your body. She was feeling a tightness in her chest. And to 2) ask what that place needed. She realized she needed to remind herself that she was a good person.

**Nurturing** – Puts your hand on your heart (this physical touch releases oxytocin, a feel-good nurturing chemical). Tell yourself, It's OK. I trust my goodness.

**After the RAIN** – Sense the presence that emerges. Feel what's happening.

### **Grief, Loss, and Trauma Concepts**

#### **Grief**

The NORMAL process of reacting to a loss. The distress that occurs when an individual's existing assumptive world is lost because of a significant life-CHANGING event. It includes the loss of a self-defining role. Overarching losses may involve the loss of a part of ourselves or our place in the world that made us feel secure.

### **Loss**

Change is loss. Can be physical (as in death) or social (as in divorce). Can be any CHANGE. Even positive change can involve loss.

There are an infinite number of losses

A better job may include a loss of coworkers, routine, or comfort zone. A new baby may include a loss of the dynamic of how your family was before the new addition.

### **Ambiguous loss**

A non-death loss that is difficult to name or describe.

Someone may be unclear on what has been lost.

A person may be physically absent but mentally present (as in divorce when an absent parent is in the minds of the children), or a person may be physically present but mentally absent (as in when a person may be emotionally unavailable due to an addiction).

### **Disenfranchised loss**

A person may have a very significant reaction to a loss, but the loss/grief are not recognized or validated by society.

There may be messages that one must "move on" from a troubling incident because of a lack of understanding on society's part.

There may be judgment around the loss. For example, an individual whose ex-spouse dies.

### **Living loss**

A loss that remains as an ongoing presence in life. The individual will continue to "live" with the loss experience. The ongoing nature of the loss will require continual adjustment.

### **Secondary loss**

When a loss impacts many areas of one's life, creating multiple losses stemming from the "primary loss".

Though it is easy to think our grief is the single loss occurrence, grief is also the pain of the other losses caused as a result.

### **Collective grief**

Grief felt by a collective group such as a community, society, or nation as a result of an event such as a war, natural disaster, terrorist attack, death of a public figure, or any other event leading to mass casualties or national tragedy.

### **Guilt – "I could have done more." "I should have..."**

This is where things like having a self-compassion practice is important. We are heaped judgment from society on how to grieve, or to feel, and for how long.

You feel guilt? That's OK. Name it. That takes some of its power. Guilt is normal; so common that it is experienced after nearly any death or accident. I have found that journaling about my remorse is helpful.

Hear each others' guilt without talking them out of it. The goal of grief healing is not to feel better or be cheered out of our feelings, even guilt. It's learning how to carry them.

One way to help with guilt is to think of it this way. What if you thought of guilt as something to feel if you wanted to harm someone? If you were knowingly wishing harm on another person, guilt may be appropriate. This is seldom the case when feeling guilt after a death. It's usually not the case that you meant the person ill or harm. Actually, it's usually the opposite. We cared greatly for the person who died and wanted the best for them. Sometimes after a death we feel guilty for having been human.

A very powerful exercise around guilt and remorse is writing an apology letter. Even more powerful is writing a letter back "from" our person.

### **You think you should not be feeling a certain way**

It's not helpful to compare grief. Our experience doesn't take away from someone else's. We can honor our own experience to the fullest. When we're happy, we can be fully joyful. When we're grieving, we can fully grieve. Both can happen at the same time.

### **What to say to people**

It's hard when there are no words, or few words. I find the most helpful things I have heard have been simple. "I don't know what to say but I'm here for you." When there are not great words, presence is helpful. "Let's get coffee." "Let's go for a walk."

Authenticity. Pausing helps us know what to say. Because it helps us know how we feel. We could respond, "You know what? Today's not great. I heard a song on the way to work that made me think of my friend, I shed some tears, and I feel a little off today." Might that invite a little more connection than, "I'm fine"? When we share authentically how we are doing, others are invited to do the same. When we are authentic we're doing the work of destigmatizing grief.

### **Nondualism**

Also referred to as "both/and thinking" or normalizing ambivalence.

In life, as well as loss, people tend to think in black and white, right and wrong, this option or that one.

Life, as well as loss, is messier than that. Two seemingly opposing things can be true at the same time, and we can hold them both.

We can drop the struggle between two things and hold both (for example, "I am so mad at \_\_\_\_\_ for taking his life. And, I miss \_\_\_\_\_ so intensely.")

### **Delayed grief**

When we move houses for example, delaying grief seems the most logical thing to do. "I don't have time to be sad or depressed, I've got a house to pack!"

Only later does the grief hit them, and it may be in the middle of the best day they've had. All of a sudden, there is an overwhelming desire to cry over the most trivial loss.

This is so prevalent, isn't it?--pain and loss avoidance. Our culture does not help with its toxic positivity.

Why is it important to recognize these concepts around loss? We all experience loss and grief. My grief therapy class instructor said that grief isn't rocket science. It basically demands one thing: to be attended to.

### **Why should we be intentional about tending to loss?**

When we don't deal with it, it deals with us. It is healthy modeling for others and for society.

One of my favorite leaders in grief said this on her book tour:

A woman in the audience said she “can’t cry” or be sad in her family because they don’t talk about the loss. Dr. Cacciatore responded that she doesn’t find it helpful to appease those who do not talk about it.

She made the point that if those going through though hard times do not share their experiences, how will others know what it is like? How can they support when support is needed? She made the point that society *should* intuitively hold and support us adequately, but it often does not. Voicing what we need does fall onto us at times.

We know the connection between mental health and physical health. They’re basically inseparable. When we have congruence (our insides match our outsides) in our emotional wellness it contributes to our overall wellness.

### **What happens when losses are ignored?**

When we are not intentional, when we are avoidant, that’s when we see our pain manifest in ways not of our choosing. If we do not deal with our grief, it will deal with us. It may come out sideways, like in irritability, anxiety, and anger.

We might start numbing to avoid emotional pain. Do you know what happens when we choose to numb instead of lean in to our grief for years? If and when we stop numbing, we may find ourselves feeling the intensity of early grief years from the loss.

Counter-intuitively, leaning IN to our grief lessens the pain. It allows it to move through.

It opens us up to being fully human, authentic, able to experience the richness of all the colors of the coloring box of feelings and life.

### **Finding meaning/meaning making**

We can distill meaning after loss. This is nuanced, person-specific, and takes time. It is not dismissing our loss in favor of silver linings. It is not saying the loss had to happen in order for there to be meaning or growth.

### **Integration**

With the traumatic loss of my son years ago, much of the result of my grief work has been INTEGRATION. How do I integrate this loss, and live forward with it?

I don't deny it, I acknowledge the tragedy of it, and that it has utterly changed me. Trying to be who I was before is impossible and will not serve me. My loss is not all of me, but my children are a big part of me. The loss of my son is a big part of me.

Research shows that those who integrate their loss tend to have better outcomes.

### **What are common trauma reactions?**

- Intrusive memories of the event
- Strong bodily reactions (increased heart rate) upon a reminder of the event
- Avoidance of thoughts or feelings that bring up memories of the event
- Negative evaluations about yourself, others, or the world ("The world is an evil place.")
- Elevated self-blame or other blame
- Feeling detached from others
- Irritability or aggressive behavior
- Feeling "on guard" (hypervigilance)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Problems sleeping

### **What is happening in the brain and body with trauma?**

- The brain is primed to be hypersensitive to possible danger in the future.
- There is change to the memory center. This is in the "lizard brain," or old brain, and is reactive. The new brain would be more thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving.
- This elevated state (hypervigilance, or fight, flight, or freeze response) is caused by the chemical, cortisol, in the body.
- Cortisol is harmful to cells, and literally shortens lives.
- The cortex, or thinking brain, is on hold with the flood of cortisol until "the alarm" quiets. Sometimes the alarm does not quiet—This is PTSD.
- Treating trauma responses, bringing the body back to a calm state (homeostasis), is important.
- Rapid heartbeat, immune system suppression, gastrointestinal problems are some physiological functions of trauma.

### **What is happening with emotions with a trauma response?**

You may feel under threat.

You may avoid situations you perceive as threatening. This can look like isolating, anger, irritability, aggressiveness, feeling disconnected from others, and having difficulty feeling happiness, love, and joy.

### **What are some healthy ways of coping with trauma?**

- Spending time with people
- Exercise
- Counseling
- Mindfulness
- Journaling
- Lifestyle changes such as tending to sleep, nutrition, and stress
- Support groups
- Engaging in hobbies and enjoyable activities can help with the process of creating new habits.
- Getting outside, into nature, into sunshine, has shown to be helpful.
- Grounding exercises, like noticing things in the room and planting feet on the ground, that help link to the present can be helpful for symptoms.
- Counseling can help with processing of trauma, alleviating the avoidance that creates the environment for PTSD symptoms.

### **Unhealthy Coping**

- Drug or alcohol use
- Overeating
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm
- Aggression
- Avoidance

### **My favorite grief resources**

The book, *Bearing the Unbearable* by Joanne Cacciatore. This is my favorite book on traumatic grief that I believe every clinician and griever should read.

The book, *It's OK that You're not OK* by Megan Devine. This is my second favorite book on grief.

The grief workbook, *Selah: An Invitation Toward Fully Inhabited Grief*. It is a beautifully written workbook by Joanne Cacciatore. The exercises are hard but helpful in processing. The flow of this book is to be with grief, surrender to grief, then do with grief.

The grief art journal, *How to Carry what Can't be Fixed* by Megan Devine.

The website, *What's Your Grief*. This website has countless research-based articles on various grief-related topics.

The book, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. This book shows how life can have meaning in the most difficult of circumstances.

### **My favorite recommendations and tools**

Talking about it, with trusted people, with each other, with a support group, or with a therapist trained in grief and trauma.

Expressing your feelings when you're feeling them. Shifting your automatic thoughts and beliefs about grief or feelings. They're OK. Normal. Not shameful, but a part of being human. It's when our feelings are denied that we get into trouble, or participate in numbing behavior that is problematic.

Journaling: such an efficient way of processing.

Remember the basics: sleep, water, eat, exercise, sunlight, doing fun things.

### **My favorite mindfulness app (free)**

Insight Timer

### **Closing ritual**

#### **A Poem by Rumi**

##### *The Guest House*

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,

who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.