

Understanding Behavior Through Grief:

A Guide to the Four Functions of Behavior by BeSelfist

by Jenna Sage, PhD, BCBA — Executive Coach | Grief, Growth & Resilience in Leadership

What Are the Four Functions of Behavior?

In behavioral science, every behavior serves a purpose, a **function** that helps a person meet a need. Understanding these functions can help us respond with clarity, compassion, and skill especially in the presence of **grief, loss, or emotional overwhelm**.

The four core functions of behavior are:

1. **Escape/Avoidance** – trying to get away from something unpleasant.
 2. **Attention** – seeking connection or recognition.
 3. **Access to Tangibles** – trying to get or control something concrete (e.g., items, outcomes, information).
 4. **Sensory/Automatic** – soothing or stimulating the nervous system, often unconsciously.
-

PERSONAL CONTEXT:

Why am I acting this way? Why is my loved one?

Function	How It Might Show Up in Grief	Supportive Strategies
Escape/Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding calls, skipping rituals, numbing out with TV or alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create safe, flexible spaces for expression; don't force engagement
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Oversharing on social media, anger outbursts, clinging to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Validate the need for connection. Ask, "Do you want comfort or space?"
Access to Tangibles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needing information about a diagnosis, obsessing over control, managing logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help organize tasks or provide agency where possible — small wins matter
Sensory/Automatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crying, pacing, over/under-eating, ritual behaviors (e.g., lighting candles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normalize these behaviors as regulation attempts. Invite grounding tools.

"Every behavior is a message. In grief, the body often speaks what the mind cannot yet name."

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT:

What do I do when a team member is grieving — or I am?

Function	How It Might Appear at Work	Trauma-Informed Leadership Response
Escape/Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missed deadlines, zoning out in meetings, calling out sick	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer adjusted timelines, clarify expectations with empathy
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawal or emotional oversharing in meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quiet check-ins, acknowledgment, peer connection opportunities
Access to Tangibles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requesting more structure, controlling minor tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Co-create predictability — calendars, checklists, boundaries
Sensory/Automatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tapping, sighing, fidgeting, or needing space to cry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normalize regulation needs. Provide privacy + sensory breaks

You don't need to "fix" grief — but you can lead in ways that honor it.

NOTES:

www.beself.ist

