A Friend Called Grief

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Introduction

There comes a point in many of our lives when we are faced with experiences that we are neither prepared for nor equipped to fully understand. Among the most difficult of these is grief, a deeply personal yet universally felt emotion that often arrives without warning and weighs heavily on the heart and mind. Despite grief being a part of the human experience, it remains often unwanted and unwelcomed, and largely taboo in many societies, avoided in conversation, misunderstood in meaning, and feared in practice.

This disconnect led me to reflect deeply: how can something so natural, so embedded in the human experience, still be treated as an uncomfortable subject? Why is grief, a shared and universal emotion, so often met with silence or discomfort rather than compassion and openness?

My motivation for exploring this topic stems from personal experience. Over the years, I have faced the profound loss of several loved ones. Witnessing the varied responses of family and friends, not only their grief, but the ways in which they coped or suppressed their inner emotions, made me question how we, as individuals and communities, navigate loss. It also pushed me to consider how cultural norms, social expectations, and personal beliefs shape our understanding of grief.

These experiences and reflections have inspired a deeper investigation into how grief is acknowledged, expressed, and, perhaps most importantly, how it might be approached in ways that foster familiarity, empathy, and open dialogue

Alex Webb *New Horizons* 2021,
Magnum Photos

02

RESEARCH QUESTION

The exploration ultimately led me to narrow down my focus to the question, "How can grief be normalized and familiarized to audiences?" Taking on such a complex and emotionally charged topic, my goal was to provide a medium to transform the experience of grief, from something often seen as heavy and isolating, into something more accessible, relatable, and easier to digest for individuals from all walks of life, young and old.

I aimed to bridge the gap between discomfort and understanding, and in doing so, open up conversations around loss in a way that is both compassionate and inclusive. More importantly, I wanted to emphasize that it is better to acknowledge and prepare for grief than to avoid or shield ourselves from it. Grief, while painful, has the potential to build emotional resilience and character, it is after all called a healing process for a reason. (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004)

This research is particularly relevant in a time when conversations around mental health and emotional well-being are becoming increasingly important and socially acceptable, yet grief still remains one of the least openly discussed experiences (Corr, Nabe and Corr, 2018; Doka, 1989).

By examining grief through visual communication and media perspectives, I hope to offer insight into how it can be approached in ways that promote understanding, empathy, and emotional growth. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the existing literature surrounding grief, identify cultural and societal barriers to its discussion, and outline the methods used to investigate and represent this deeply human experience.

"How can grief be *normalized* and *familiarized* ?"

Jérôme Sessini Bordering tunnel between the Haut-Rhin and the Vosges. *Back from Mulhouse*. Sainte Marie aux Mines. April 14, 2020. © Jérôme Sessini | Magnum Photos

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Aims & Motivations

I believe by encouraging a more open and honest dialogue around grief, we allow individuals to feel less isolated in their experiences. We create space for vulnerability, connection, and growth, elements essential to emotional well-being, yet often neglected in societies where grief is seen as something to hide or overcome quickly. Recognizing grief not just as an emotional burden but as a transformative journey allows us to reframe it as a necessary and even meaningful part of life.

Rather than viewing grief as something that disrupts our lives, it can be seen as something that shapes us. Through it, people often gain a deeper appreciation for relationships, a renewed perspective on life, and a stronger sense of self after much research. These are not immediate outcomes, of course, but ones that can emerge when grief is met with understanding rather than silence or shame.

Arthur Miller (right) during rehearsal of "*Death of a Salesman*" at the People's Art Theater. Beijing, China, 1983. All photographs © Inge Morath / Magnum Photos

My aim is to contribute to a shift in how grief is perceived and discussed, moving away from avoidance and toward awareness, preparation, and healing. By exploring grief through multiple lenses, personal, cultural, and social. I hope to show that normalizing this experience is not only possible, but necessary for a healthier, more emotionally literate society. Better state of mind would be equivalent to a better way of life.

04

Context

> "What we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes part of us." _ (Helen Keller, 1929 p.2)

This sentiment has always resonated with me, which is why I believe it is essential for people to feel sadness; when embraced rather than suppressed, it has the potential to transform us. It can deepen our empathy, strengthen our resilience, and add new layers to our character (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

Yet despite grief being one of the most natural human experiences, it is still rarely discussed openly in many Western societies (Walter, 1999). In particular, cultural expectations around masculinity reinforce an unspoken rule that emotions should be contained, masked, or buried. The shedding of a tear is often wrongly perceived as weakness, especially for men (Addis and Mahalik, 2003), reinforcing a culture of emotional silence.

My decision to explore grief in this research stems not only from personal loss, but from the striking contrast I have observed in how people respond to it. Over the years, I have mourned the passing of family members and friends, each loss leaving its own unique imprint on my life.

What has stayed with me are the responses of those around me, some apologised for being "too sensitive" when tears came, as if their grief was an inconvenience to others. Others avoided speaking of the loss altogether, as though silence could somehow make the absence less real. These behaviours reveal a deeper societal discomfort, an inability or unwillingness to fully acknowledge the reality of grief, even when it is shared.

Encyclopædia Britannica (1904)
Helen Keller [Image]. Library of
Congress, Washington, D.C.

Tears Like Mine, from the photo series It's Okay to Cry: 12 Photos Celebrating Male Vulnerability, by Matthew So, published in PAPER Magazine, 5 November 2019. In Black & White.

Another inspiration for my research was observing how some parents chose to explain, or rather avoid explaining the concept of death to their children. Instead of calmly and honestly discussing the circle of life, they would soften the truth with phrases such as "he had to travel somewhere far," leaving children confused and with unanswered questions. In my generation, it was common for children to be excluded from funerals, often told, "You're too young for this," or, "When you're older you'll understand." Looking back, I wish we had been allowed to witness and understand these rituals, so that grief could feel more natural and familiar as we grew older, rather than something to fear or shy away from.

In reflecting on these experiences, I began to question why grief, something so universal, remains shrouded in discomfort and stigma. I realised that this silence is not merely a personal choice, but a reflection of cultural norms, social expectations, and historical narratives that dictate how we are "supposed" to cope and be. For men in particular, the pressure to appear strong often comes at the cost of emotional honesty, perpetuating cycles of isolation and unspoken pain.

Research shows that traditional masculine ideals like stoicism, self-reliance, and holding back emotions, can make it harder for men to be open and seek help, leaving them more isolated and stressed. (Mokhwelepa and Sumbane, 2025). This awareness has fuelled my commitment to not only examine grief as an emotional and cultural phenomenon, but to explore how art, design, and creative expression can help dismantle these barriers. By fostering spaces where grief can be acknowledged without judgement, I hope to contribute to a more open, compassionate understanding of this inevitable part of life.

05

Research Method

The reflection of the moon's light in Zachary's eye. Gold Canyon. Arizona. 2023. Bieke Depoorter / Magnum Photos

"Why is grief hard?"

Before diving into the subject one must ask this particular question. Afterall it is a natural response to loss. However its intensity and impactfulness may vary to certian indivisuals. some may find it "hard" becuase it disrupts everday life, emotions, and even the body. Psycologists have long studied why grief can be challenging.

DISRUPTION OF ATTACHMENT

According to Bowlby's attachment theory, grief is difficult because it represents the breaking of a deep emotional bond. When someone we are attached to is lost, the absence destabilises our sense of security.
(Bowlby, J., 1980)

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Not everyone finds grief equally hard and difficult. Some people adapt more quicker than others due to coping mechanisms, social support, or cultural attitudes. Others may struggle longer and experience extreme prolonged grief disorder. (Bonanno, G.A, 2004)

CULTURAL SILENECE ON DEATH

In many societies, grief is made harder by a lack of open conversation about death. People may feel pressure to "move on" quickly, which can intensify the struggle. There is also an irony, particularly in western cultures: while art, media, and even festivals often celebrate the macabre, open discussions about death and grief remain taboo. This tension creates a form of cultural hypocrisy, where death is both visible and hidden at the same time.
(Walter, T. (1999)

EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY

Grief is not a single feeling but an emotional an roller coasters driven by a mix of sadness, anger, guilt, even relief for some cases. This emotional layering makes it unpredictable and overwhelming.
(Stroebe, M. & Schut H, 2010)

As I began exploring the topic of normalising and familiarising the concept of grief, my initial focus was on children, examining how they perceive grief and the role of their caregivers in helping them navigate it. I also considered the representation of loss in films and literature aimed at young audiences, alongside relevant psychological perspectives. Disney Films such as Bambi, The Lion King, and Up that depict a loss of a loved one. Additionally, I briefly explored how different cultures approach grief, including more extreme or contrasting practices.

The age-related perspective in my research arose from an early fascination with how children perceive death and how these perceptions are shaped by the narratives and guidance provided by parents or caregivers.

This interest extended to comparing children's understanding of mortality with that of the adults responsible for introducing them to the concept. Jean Piaget's theory in The Origins of Intelligence in Children shows that children under the age of seven are in the preoperational stage, which makes it difficult for them to fully grasp the concepts of grief or death (Piaget, 1952). For this reason, my research focuses on children between the ages of 7 and 14, as this age range is more capable of developing an age-appropriate understanding of loss.

Children's need for attention and acknowledgment also plays a crucial role in how they process difficult topics. Cristy James, an assistant professor at Indiana University, states, "Use of positive attention when interacting with children reduces the frequency of negative behaviours. Children want and desire their parents' attention and will do things to get it" (James, 2021).

From Men Don't Cry (Yang, 2023).

This highlights the importance of offering children support and validation, helping them feel valued and included in conversations about grief. Grief in children is often characterized by confusion, emotional outbursts, regression, and periods of seeming indifference. The development of an understanding of death is gradual and evolves as children mature cognitively and emotionally. Younger children may not yet grasp the finality of death and may believe the deceased will return. As they grow older, children begin to understand the permanence of loss, though this realization can be distressing (Elizur & Kaffman, 2003).

Caregivers play a vital role in this process by providing comfort, guidance, and emotional support. Equipping children with the appropriate tools to process loss can foster resilience and emotional intelligence, aiding their journey through grief (Lange & Chase, 2011). Practical strategies for discussing death include using simple, concrete language, being honest and open, and creating a safe space where children feel able to express vulnerability. Encouraging children to share their emotions rather than suppress them helps prevent feelings from festering and supports healthier coping over time.
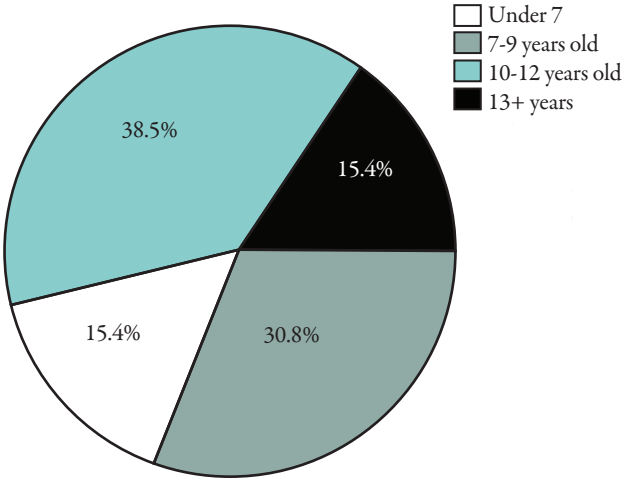
For the age-related perspective, I employed a quantitative method. I designed and distributed three separate surveys, each tailored to a specific demographic group:
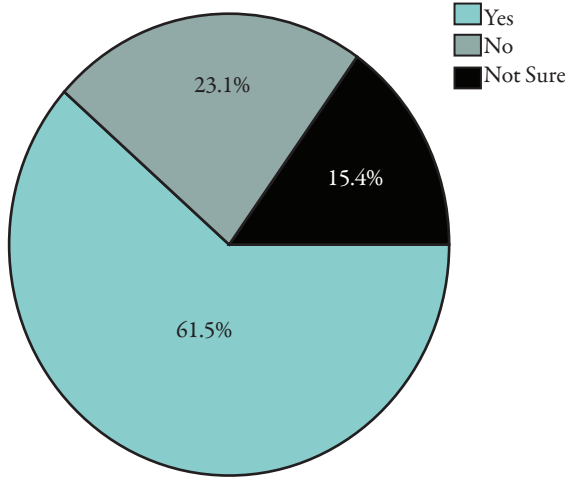
1. Children aged 7–14.
2. Parents and caregivers.
3. Therapists and psychologist

Each survey contained a series of structured questions designed to produce measurable data while allowing for comparative analysis between groups. The questions explored how death is introduced to children, the frameworks or metaphors used, and the influence of religious, cultural, or scientific explanations. There will be more results in the appendix section.

At what age do you think children should be introduced to the idea of grief (losing someone)?

- Under 7
- 7-9 years old
- 10-12 years old
- 13+ years

38.5%
15.4%
15.4%
30.8%

Do you think media can help children understand and talk about grief?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

23.1%
15.4%
61.5%

Did you ever feel it was too early to explain grief to children?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

15.4%
7.7%
76.9%

The psychological perspective allowed me to explore why grief remains a taboo subject in many societies. This involved examining the emotional, cognitive, and social processes that lead individuals and communities to avoid conversations about death, even when such discussions could promote greater understanding, emotional resilience, and healthier coping mechanisms. By understanding these processes, it becomes possible to identify strategies that can gently introduce the topic in ways that are approachable and supportive.

Research shows that the stages of grief, as initially outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969), do not necessarily occur in a fixed sequence, nor do they manifest uniformly across individuals stated in the *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying.* People process loss differently depending on their personal experiences, temperament, cultural background, and support systems. (Stroebe, M., Schut, H., & Boerner, K. (2017)

This variability is especially pronounced in children, whose developmental stage, cognitive understanding, and emotional processing significantly influence how they experience and express grief. For younger children, the concept of death can be particularly abstract, and their reactions may differ from those of adults, especially if they lack a clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding the loss.

Children may show confusion, avoidance, regression, or even moments of apparent indifference, which are natural responses that reflect their ongoing emotional and cognitive development. By integrating these psychological insights into my project, I was able to approach the topic of grief in a way that is sensitive to individual differences and developmental needs that I believe were essential.

Understanding the psychological mechanisms behind grief not only informed my choice of design tools and strategies but also highlighted the importance of creating experiences that allow children, and by extension, audiences of all ages to engage with loss safely, thoughtfully, and constructively.

(National Geographic., photographer by Rob Tilley) in Black & White

The cultural perspective was driven by my curiosity about the diverse ways in which death is acknowledged and ritualized across the world. I adopted the cognitive research approach, which involved observing and analysing funeral practices. For instance, in Mexico, Día de los Muertos aka. Day of the Dead transforms mourning into a vibrant celebration of life, filled with color, music, and community gatherings (Collins, C. 2023).

The Escape (2024) online article image. *The tribe that keeps their dead relatives at home.* in Black & White

In contrast, other traditions, such as the Torajan death rituals of Indonesia, where the deceased are kept in the family home for months or even years, offer a different approach. One that incorporates the physical presence of the dead into everyday life (Bennett,2016). Exploring these extremes provided valuable insight into how cultural frameworks shape both the expression of grief and the social acceptability of discussing death.

After exploring these methods and reflecting on the process, I would say that although I was able to hear directly from my target audience through surveys, I was somewhat disappointed by the restrictions around approaching young students in schools.

Understandably, this is due to the need for their supervision and protection, but I can't help but feel that if it had been clearer that my research was part of a Master's project rather than a personal venture, their perspectives on grief could have been incredibly valuable. That being said, I am deeply grateful for the children who did share their thoughts. I just wish there had been more participants between the ages of seven and fourteen who were willing and able to contribute.

Design Developement

From the very beginning of my Master's in Design for Visual Communication, I knew I wanted to push myself to explore new techniques, tools, and technologies that could expand both my visual aesthetics and storytelling capabilities. Projection mapping, with its ability to transform static objects into dynamic, living narratives, immediately captured my imagination.

Also, I never had the opportunity to use such a tool and was willing to put it to the test and try new materials and add it to my wheelhouse. I saw it as an opportunity to convey the complex, layered emotional journey of grief in a way that could be both immersive and intimate. From the outset, I had a series of questions guiding my process:
How will I convey the story in a way that is meaningful but not overwhelming? How can I make it approachable and digestible, yet emotionally resonant? How can I avoid clichés and create something truly original?

These questions felt like dominos, once one was answered, the next would naturally align, and gradually, the entire narrative began to take shape. As a designer, my mind was flooded with images and ideas, but it was my responsibility to connect the dots, shaping them into a cohesive and expressive whole.

While my initial research focused on children's experiences of grief, I soon realized that grief is universal. To create an experience that could resonate with a broader audience, I expanded my focus beyond age. My choice of Michelangelo's Pietà was driven by my fascination with the Renaissance era, the meticulous attention to detail, lifelike expressions, and profound emotional depth. The sorrow captured in Mary's face offered a compelling medium through which grief could be explored visually. Using a 3D model in Blender, I isolated and 3D printed her face, creating a physical canvas upon which the projection could tell its mystrious story.

Michelangelo's La Pietà

This approach allowed the sculpture to convey grief in a way that is immersive and emotionally resonant for everyone, connecting with the audience's empathy regardless of age. From the outset, I guided my process with a series of questions: How can I convey the story in a way that is meaningful but not overwhelming? How can I make it approachable yet emotionally impactful? How can I avoid clichés and create something truly original? Each answer acted like a domino, gradually aligning to form a cohesive narrative. As a designer, my mind was flooded with images and ideas, but it was my responsibility to connect the dots, shaping them into a unified and expressive whole.

Palestinian Museum Digital
Archive (n.d.) Al-Ahram
Newspaper, the Obituary Column.
Ashtar Theater Collection,
Sub-collection 2: Documents

Al-Ahram Newspaper, the Obituary
Column from 2025 (first 3) &
2021 (bottom right)

Once the canvas was established, my attention turned to the story itself. I explored familiar symbols of grief: wilted roses, melting candlelight, relentless rain, yet these felt too predictable and cliché. I wanted imagery that would resonate deeply without relying on conventional metaphors. This search led me to kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with gold. (BBC Travel, 2021) The symbolism of repairing what is broken with beauty was compelling, but I realized that using it in my work could be considered cultural appropriation. Instead, I sought inspiration within my own heritage.

In Egypt, black ribbons are placed on photographs of the deceased as a quiet but emotional symbol of mourning. Globally, the black ribbon carries its own historical weight. During the Victorian era, widows wore black ribbons around their arms to signify loss. (Greeley Museums, n.d.) This simple visual element became the foundation of my visual language. It could signify grief, but also the potential for healing and transformation. The projection was designed to unfold as a journey across the surfaces of the statue's face, the plinth, and the surrounding walls.

Sequence 1: The Black Tear

Title: *A Heavy Tear*

A single black tear falls down from the cheeks of the mask, dissolving into a thick cloud of ink in water. This moment marks the initial weight of loss, when emotions are raw & heavy. The ink becomes a visual metaphor for the way grief enters quietly but stains deeply, seeping into everything. This is the beginning of learning how to carry the absence of someone who once filled a space.
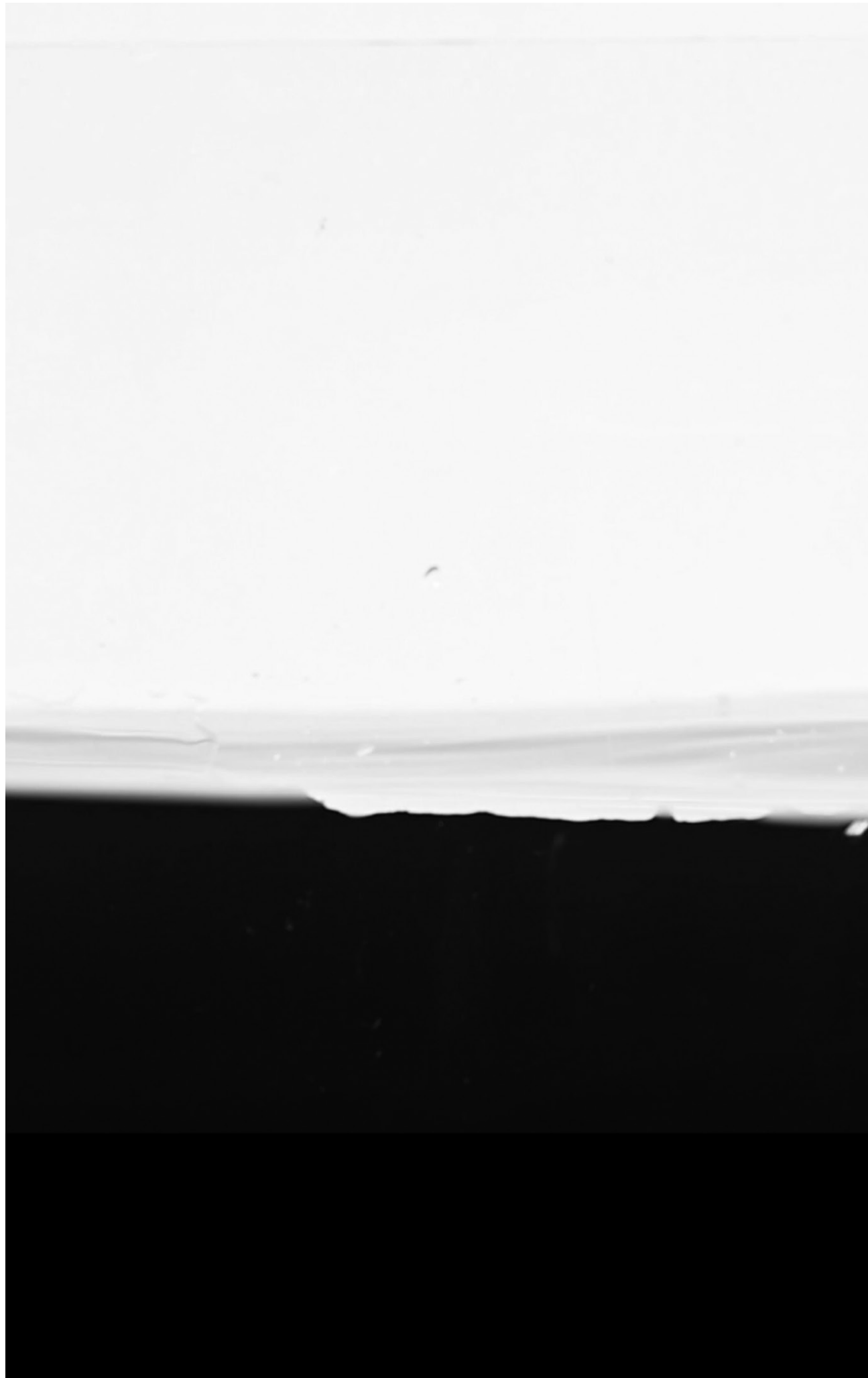
Sequence 2: Spinning Black Ribbon

Title: *Tangled Tornado of Thought*

A black ribbon spins in a circular, storm-like motion, forming a visual whirlwind. This sequence reflects the mental chaos and emotional confusion that often follow loss when thoughts become tangled and time feels distorted. The ribbon also carries a cultural weight: in Egypt, black ribbons are placed in obituary photos as a sign of mourning, which has become a haunting vision and a reminder of absence. Here, the ribbon serves as both an emotional current and a cultural marker, spiralling between memory and identity.

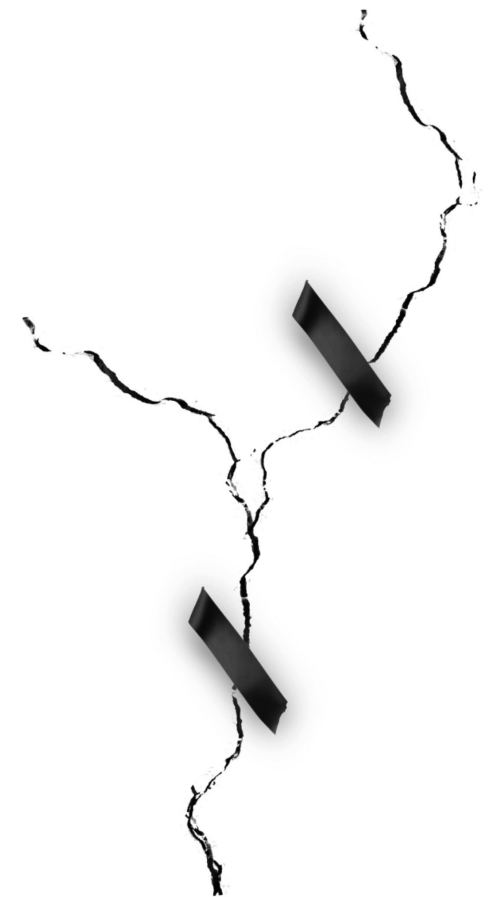Sequence 3: The Crack

Title: *The Fracture*

Suddenly, a visible crack begins to form across the face and background, breaking through the surface. This is the moment of emotional rupture, the point when grief can no longer be held in. We spend so long trying to stay composed, but eventually, pain demands space. The crack doesn't symbolize failure; it symbolizes release, the necessary breaking that makes room for healing.

Sequence 4: Ribbons as Healing

Title: *Patching the Pain*

As the crack settles, black ribbons begin to wrap over it like careful stitches. What was once a symbol of loss now becomes a symbol of renewal. These ribbons don't erase the break, they acknowledge and honour it, showing how grief becomes integrated into who we are. Healing doesn't mean forgetting. It means learning to live with the fracture, not despite it.

Sequence 5: Calligraphy & Ink

Title: *Words That Weigh*

You see details of Arabic calligraphy appear in brushstrokes and black heavy Indian ink, revealing words like حوزن (sorrow), امل (hope), and فقد (loss). The strokes are thick, carefully reflecting each letter weighing heavy with feeling. This moment language and emotion, using the depth of Arabic script to convey the unspeakable. Writing becomes ritual. Ink becomes emotion. Words become weight.

Title: *Embrace the Goodbye*

The journey ends with a poem I have written, presented in both English and Arabic, allowing it to resonate across cultures and audiences. The first line, "prepare, don't protect," serves as a gentle reminder to prepare young children for the reality that loved ones may pass away, highlighting the parent's role in guiding them through these difficult experiences rather than shielding them entirely. The second line, "hug, don't shield," addresses parents directly, pointing out a common tendency to smother or overprotect in an attempt to comfort, which can inadvertently prevent children from developing healthy emotional resilience.

The following line, "let it out, don't let it consume," encourages individuals of all ages to stay in touch with their emotions, acknowledging that bottling grief inside can be harmful, while expressing it allows for healing. Finally, "embrace the goodbye" signifies acceptance, a conscious choice to confront loss, honour emotions, and ultimately move toward relief and understanding. By guiding the audience through this emotional arc, the poem encapsulates the central aim of the project: to make grief approachable, visible, and shared rather than hidden, normalising a natural human experience in a gentle and empathetic way.

"Prepare don't *Protect* استعد، ماتحميش

Hug don't *Shield* احضن، ماتخبيش

Let it Out don't
Let it Consume طلع، ماتكتمش

Embrace the Goodbye ارحب الغياب"

—Omar Aly عمر علي

This final sequence is a quiet offering, an invitation to see grief not as something to fight or hide from, but as something to live with. The last frame reveals the title: A Friend Called Grief.
Not to romanticize pain, but to acknowledge that grief can walk beside us, not as a shadow, but as a reminder of what we've loved, lost, and continue to carry.
This project taught me not only the technical possibilities of projection mapping but also the profound responsibility of using design to navigate and communicate complex human experiences.

Through this work, I realized that design is not merely a tool for aesthetics or storytelling; it is a means of shaping emotional understanding and fostering shared human connection. By transforming grief from something private and isolating into a visual, shared experience, I hope to empower audiences to engage with their emotions, embrace vulnerability, and recognize the potential for healing inherent in every loss. For me, this project is a reminder that, as designers, we have the capacity and capability to illuminate even the most difficult aspects of life, turning sorrow into insight, and vulnerability into deep clear empathy.

A Friend Called
Grief. صـديق اسـمـه الحُزن

07

Audience

When I began this research, my initial focus was on children between the ages of seven and fourteen. I believed this would be a strategic entry point for exploring grief as a subject. This specific age group falls within what Piaget refers to as the "developing stages" of cognitive growth, a period when children are capable of understanding abstract concepts, forming logical reasoning, and beginning to process complex emotions (Piaget, 1972). At this stage, they are not only able to grasp the concept of loss but can also begin to articulate and reflect on their feelings with greater clarity.

Lost Bird Magnum Pictures

There were several reasons for targeting this age group initially. Firstly, preparing children for the realities of life, rather than sheltering them from difficult truths, can foster emotional resilience and empathy. Shielding young people from discussions about grief often leaves them unprepared to navigate inevitable future losses, potentially resulting in severe mental health challenges. By addressing grief early on, we can normalize emotional openness, helping children to develop healthy coping mechanisms from a formative age.

Finally, I wanted to explore the perspectives of parents and guardians: how comfortable they are in discussing grief with their children, whether they view it as a taboo subject, and whether they prefer to postpone these conversations until their children are older, or perhaps avoid them altogether.

However, as my research progressed, I began to question the limitations of this approach. Why restrict this exploration to a single age group when grief is a universal human experience, affecting people of all ages? Expanding my audience to include adults opened the door to a more inclusive approach, acknowledging grief as an ongoing aspect of life rather than an age-limiting experience. Adults may carry unprocessed grief from earlier life experiences, and encountering visual language that explains loss could be both healing and liberating.

By using visual language, I aim to translate the weight of grief into forms that are accessible, relatable, and thought-provoking, encouraging people to see grief not as an overwhelming force to be suppressed but as a natural and integral part of life's emotional landscape.

08

Critical Position

Ultimately, this repositioning of my project reflects the belief that embracing one's emotions, rather than resisting them, can lead to personal growth and resilience. Grief, while often painful, is also transformative. It shapes our identity, deepens our empathy, and strengthens our capacity to connect with others.

In a social context, the project responds to contemporary challenges around mental health, emotional expression, and cultural pressures that often discourage open discussions about loss. Mental health awareness has grown in recent years, yet grief remains a topic many find difficult to discuss openly. By providing visual forms of engagement, the project encourages dialogue and emotional literacy across generations, reducing stigma and promoting healthy coping strategies.

Culturally, the project draws attention to diverse mourning practices, highlighting how cultural frameworks shape the expression of grief. For instance, in Mexico, Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) transforms mourning into a vibrant celebration of life, with public parades and streets festooned with marigolds, and altars adorned with candles, food, drinks, and photographs to honor loved ones (Collins, 2023). In contrast, the Torajan death rituals of Indonesia incorporate the physical presence of the deceased into everyday life, with the dead kept in family homes for months or years, demonstrating an entirely different approach to remembrance (Bennett, 2016).

These examples illustrate how culture influences not only mourning practices but also the social acceptability of discussing death and grief.

Academically, the project contributes to interdisciplinary conversations in design, psychology, and sociology. It explores how creative practice can foster empathy, emotional literacy, and understanding of loss. By using visual language, interactive installations, and projection mapping, the work examines the potential of design to communicate complex emotional experiences in ways that are tangible and accessible.

Day of the Dead. Mexico City, Mexico, November 1st, 1984 (2024) Magnum Photos.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Reflecting on the research process, I recognize both its successes and limitations. Accessing young participants was challenging due to ethical constraints, which limited the scope of data from children aged 7–14. Additionally, cultural perspectives on grief may have influenced responses, underscoring the importance of context when interpreting findings. These reflections informed my decision to expand the project to include audiences of all ages, emphasizing inclusivity and universality.

CRITICAL ACADEMIC POSITION

From an academic perspective, the project engages with debates around emotional literacy, design ethics, and interdisciplinary practice. It situates creative practice as a tool for research, bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and lived experience. By combining insights from psychology, sociology, and design, the project demonstrates how visual and experiential methods can communicate abstract emotional concepts effectively. Ultimately, it contributes to scholarly discussions on how creative practice can foster empathy, facilitate reflection, and provide tools for emotional engagement across diverse audiences.

CRITICAL POSITION

The project positions grief as a shared, collective experience rather than a private burden. Embracing emotions, rather than resisting them, fosters resilience and empathy. The visual language I employ aims to normalize grief, making it approachable and meaningful. By challenging cultural taboos and encouraging intergenerational dialogue, the project transforms grief into a subject that can be acknowledged, expressed, and understood collectively.

Philippe Halsman French poet, artist and filmmaker Jean Cocteau. NYC, USA. 1949. © DACS / Comité Cocteau, Paris 2018 | Magnum Photos

09

ETHICS

From Men Don't Cry (Yang, 2023).

Sustainability also plays a key role in my work, not just in creating meaningful experiences, but in considering their environmental impact. By using eco-conscious materials, projection technologies, and practices that minimise waste, I aim to ensure that the work does not only supports emotional and social resilience but does so responsibly, with care for the planet and future generations. There is a global dimension to this work. Societies worldwide often discourage open conversations about grief, particularly for men, reinforcing harmful norms that equate emotional expression with weakness.

By promoting ethical, inclusive, and empathetic approaches to loss, my work aims to challenge these norms, encourage compassionate communication, and contribute to a broader cultural shift that values mental well-being and emotional honesty. Acknowledging grief is about offering hope, fostering connection, and inspiring sustainable change, both for individuals navigating loss and for the communities that support them.

My work is rooted in a strong ethical framework, treating grief with the care, respect, and honesty it deserves. At the heart of this is empathy, an awareness of the deep pain experienced by widowers or anyone who has lost a loved one and may struggle to express or even understand their emotions. Grief can feel isolating, confusing, and overwhelming, and my aim is to offer a guiding hand through this process, providing comfort and hope to those who may feel lost in their sorrow.

Inclusion is central to this approach. Grief transcends culture, age, gender, and background, yet not everyone has equal access to spaces where it is safe to express these emotions. By making my work accessible to a wide audience, I hope to challenge the barriers that prevent people from confronting and processing their feelings, ensuring that nobody is left to navigate loss alone.

10

CONCLUSION

Upon reflection, I believe it is possible to take a subject as heavy as grief and transform it into an open and meaningful discussion. Grief is universal, yet societal and cultural norms often make it difficult to address openly. My project aimed to make grief approachable, inviting audiences to engage thoughtfully before they encounter it personally.

The exhibition was interactive and immersive. Projection-mapped sequences transformed physical objects into expressive narratives, while the bilingual presentation encouraged personal reflection.

Many visitors approached me afterward to share their thoughts and emotions, including stories of loved ones they had lost, creating an impromptu space for reflection and emotional expression. This highlighted that the work not only sparked discussion but also provided a safe, empathetic environment in which grief could be confronted and processed, almost therapeutic in its effect.

The project also offered tools for healthier engagement with grief. Visual storytelling encouraged emotional recognition rather than suppression, and the poem, with lines such as "prepare, don't protect" and "let it out, don't let it consume", provided practical guidance. Representing experiences across ages allowed the audience to develop empathy and understand grief's universal impact. While my initial focus was on children, I expanded to include adults, recognizing that many struggle because they were never given tools to understand or express loss earlier in life.

By including all ages, the project offered strategies for emotional engagement that support resilience, acceptance, and reflection. In this way, the exhibition served as both a reflective and preparatory experience, demonstrating that grief, when approached openly and empathetically, can be engaged with and understood in healthier ways.

Carolyn Drake, Photographed
The Great Salt Lake Utah National
Geographics

Carolyn Drake, Photographed
The Great Salt Lake Utah National
Geographics

If visual language can translate complex ideas and emotions, then it can also be harnessed to my advantage as a way of reframing difficult subjects. In a world where visual culture dominates, design becomes not only a tool for expression but also a means of shaping collective understanding. Looking forward, if I were to continue developing this work, I would push further into experimenting with different forms of visual language and audience interaction. These explorations could open up new ways to break the silence around grief without overwhelming viewers, offering more varied and personalised experiences.

Ultimately, this reflection reinforces my belief that grief should not remain hidden or feared. I always say that embracing the goodbye is a natural and shared part of life, and by designing ways for people to approach it with openness, we can normalise what has long been suppressed. My project has shown me that creative practice can not only represent grief, but is actively reshaping how it is perceived. Encouraging conversations that are compassionate, inclusive, and transformative. As Rumi wisely wrote, "The wound is the place where the light enters you," (Barks, 1995), and I feel it is my mission to spread light through my talent as a designer.

One of the key challenges I encountered was balancing the emotional weight of the subject with the need for accessibility. At times I questioned whether making grief more "digestible" risked oversimplifying it. However, what I learned through this process was that accessibility does not mean dilution. Instead, it means creating entry points for dialogue that allow people to connect with the subject at their own pace and comfort level. Through the process this insight not only shaped the way I presented my project but also deepened my understanding of design as a tool for empathy and communication.

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Appendix

Key findings from Parents and Caregivers, Parents and Caregivers: described a variety of approaches when explaining the concept of death to children. The most common was a religious framing, in which death was explained as the transition to a "better place", often referred to as heaven, for those who have lived a good life. In some cases, this was expanded with the comforting idea that loved ones who had passed were already there, and that one day, "when the time is right," they would be reunited.

A smaller number of parents used a scientific explanation, describing death in biological terms and making use of familiar, relatable examples, such as the death of a pet or a known public figure, to help children connect an abstract concept to tangible experiences. These varied approaches demonstrate how cultural background, personal belief systems, and a child's developmental stage all play a role in shaping how death is introduced and understood.

A second approach was a life cycle explanation, framing death as a natural and inevitable part of life. In these cases, parents often highlighted that death is not restricted to old age but can occur at any time due to illness or accidents. This framing was frequently paired with an encouragement to "make every moment count" and to focus on positive memories, which can help children appreciate life more.

For Children (Ages 7-14)

1. What does "grief"/"losing someone"/ "sadness" mean to you?

2. Have you ever seen someone in a movie or TV show etc in media lost someone and made you feel sad or cry?
   - Yes / No
   - If yes, what did you think about it?

3. Can you remember a time when you felt really sad about losing something or someone?
   - Yes / No
   - What happened? (brief description)

4. How do you feel when you see someone else feeling sad or crying in a movie or show?
   - I feel sad too.
   - I feel confused.
   - I feel like it's not real.
   - I don't know how I feel.

5. "Can you name a movie, TV show, or book where a character lost someone? How did it make you feel?

6. When something bad happens (like losing a loved one/thing), who do you talk to?
   - Parent
   - Friend
   - Teacher
   - I don't talk to anyone
   - Other: _____

7. What do you think is the best way to feel better when you're sad?
   - Talking to someone
   - Watching TV or movies
   - Doing something fun (playing, drawing, etc.)
   - Time alone
   - Other: _____

8. Do you think it's okay to be sad for a long time if something really bad happens?
   - Yes, it's okay to feel sad for a long time.
   - No, I should feel better quickly.
   - I don't know.

9. Who taught you about grief?

10. How did they explain it to you?

CHILDREN 7-14

For Therapists/Psychologists

These questions will focus on professional perspectives about grief and media exposure for children.

1. **In your experience, how do children between 7-14 typically react to media representations of grief?**
   - o They understand and process it well.
   - o They become confused or distressed.
   - o They tend to avoid thinking about it.

2. **Do you believe that media can be a helpful tool in helping children process grief?**
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Sometimes

3. **At what age do you recommend introducing children to media (books, movies, etc.) that deals with grief?**
   - o Under 7 years old
   - o 7-9 years old
   - o 10-12 years old
   - o 13+ years old

4. **Have you noticed any differences in how children who are exposed to grief in media process real-life grief compared to those who are not?**
   - o Yes, they seem to understand it better.
   - o No, there isn't a noticeable difference.
   - o I'm not sure.

5. **What advice do you typically give to parents who are helping their children cope with grief?**
   - o Encourage open conversation.
   - o Be patient and give time for emotional processing.
   - o Use books or media as tools to introduce the topic.
   - o Other advice: _____

6. **How important do you think it is for children to see grief depicted in media (e.g., TV shows, movies)?**
   - o Very important
   - o Somewhat important
   - o Not important at all

7. **In your experience, what is the most common barrier children face when trying to process grief?**
   - o Difficulty expressing emotions
   - o Lack of understanding about grief
   - o Fear of making others sad
   - o Not having support systems in place

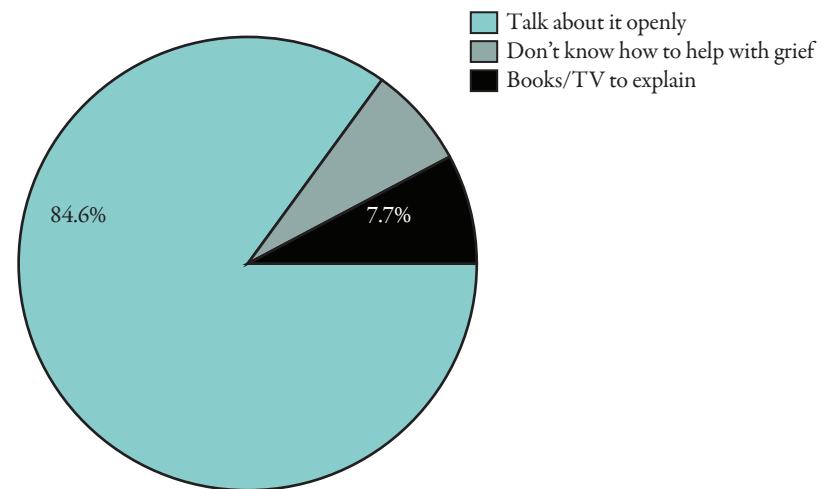8. **Why do you think it's so taboo to talk about this subject to children?**

For Parents

The focus here is on how parents view their child's grief experience and if they feel media plays a role in helping them cope.
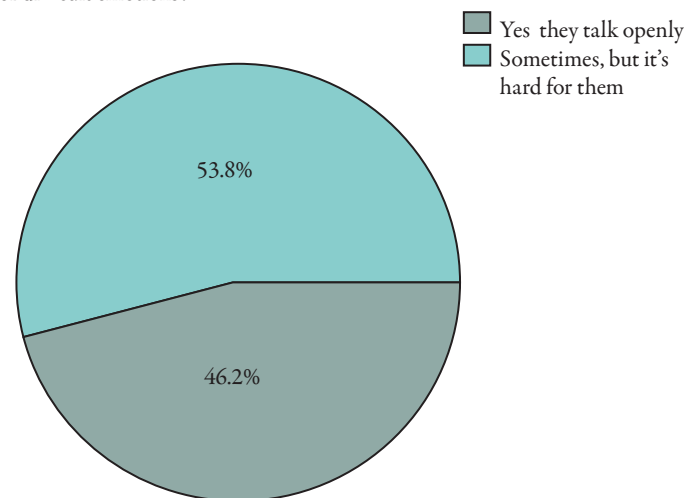
1. **At what age do you think children should be introduced to the idea of grief (losing someone)?**
   - o Under 7 years old
   - o 7-9 years old
   - o 10-12 years old
   - o 13+ years old

2. **Have you used TV shows, movies, or books to help explain grief to your child?**
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o If yes, what kind of media did you use? (e.g., specific shows, books, etc.)

3. **Do you think media can help children understand and talk about grief?**
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o Not sure

4. **How did you help your child cope with grief the first time they experienced it?**
   - o Talked about it openly
   - o Used books or TV shows to explain
   - o Took them to therapy or counselling
   - o I don't know how to help with grief

5. **Did you ever feel it was too early to explain grief to your child?**
   - o Yes
   - o No
   - o I don't know

6. **Do you feel that your child is comfortable talking to you about sad or difficult emotions?**
   - o Yes, they talk to me openly.
   - o Sometimes, but it's hard for them.
   - o No, they keep their feelings to themselves.

7. **In your opinion, does your child understand grief differently after seeing it in media (TV, movies, books)?**
   - o Yes, it made them understand it better.
   - o No, it didn't really help.
   - o Not sure

8. **If you did so, how did you explain grief to your child?**

PSYCHOLOGISTS

PARENTS

How did you help your child cope with grief the
first time they experienced it?

■ Talk about it openly
■ Don't know how to help with grief
■ Books/TV to explain

84.6%

7.7%

Did you feel that your child is comfortable
talking to you about sad or difficult emotions?

■ Yes they talk openly
■ Sometimes, but it's
   hard for them

53.8%

46.2%

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DEDICATIONS

Lastly, this goes out to all the ones
we lost, and to all the ones we loved.
I am here for you &
your voices are heard.

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Colophon

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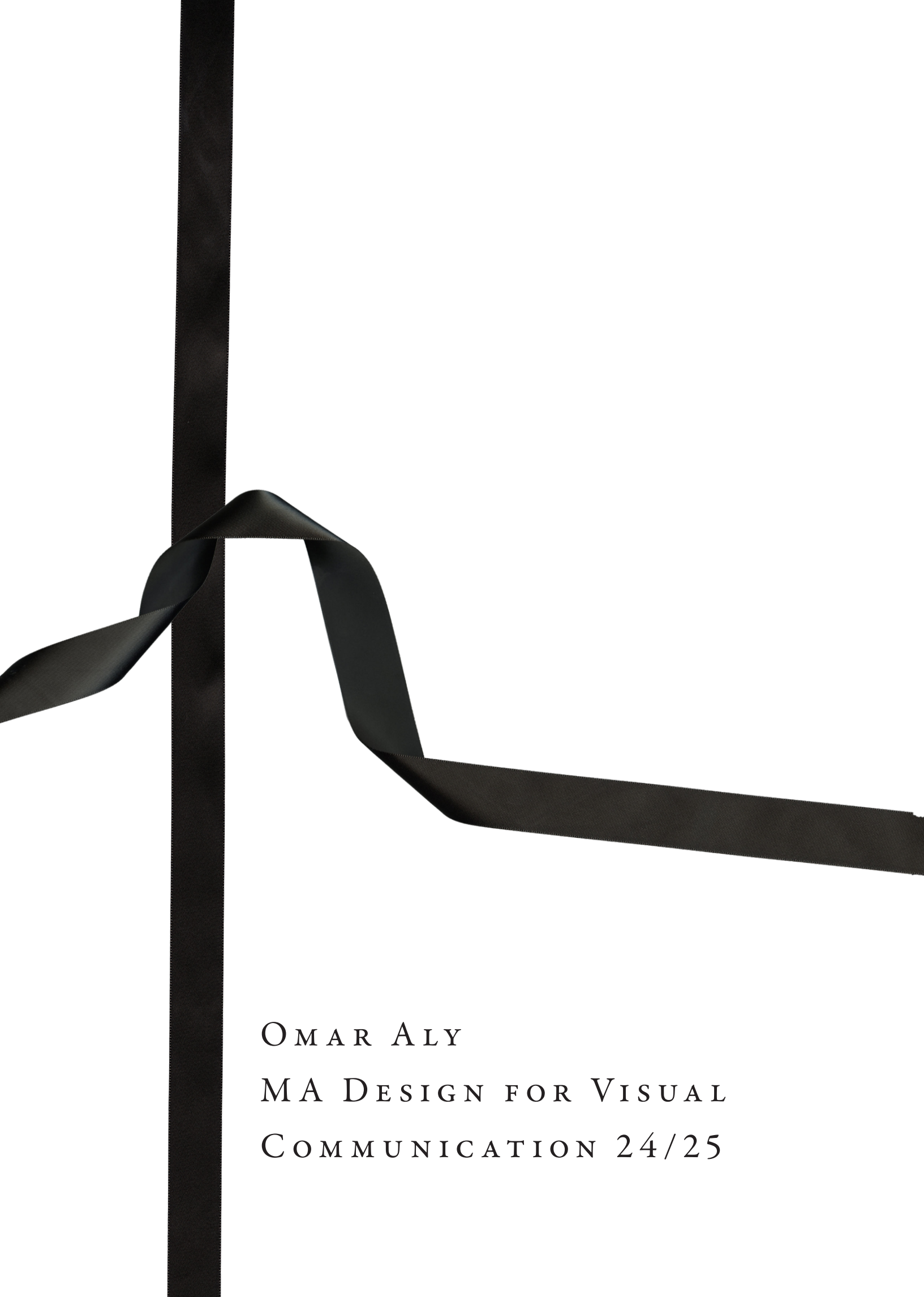YEAR
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