Traumatic Grief

Understanding Your Grief & Finding Support | Client Education & Self-Reflection

What is traumatic grief?

Traumatic grief can arise when someone dies in circumstances that feel sudden, violent, frightening, unexpected, or deeply distressing. Grief and trauma responses may occur together: you may miss the person intensely while also struggling with images, questions, shock, or fear related to how the death happened. There is no single correct way to grieve.

Grief is not a problem to fix

Grief is a human response to loss and love. Feeling overwhelmed, angry, numb, relieved, guilty, disconnected, or even briefly okay does not mean you are grieving incorrectly. Grief does not follow a predictable sequence or deadline. Needing additional support does not mean your grief is abnormal.

How traumatic grief can affect you

Emotions: sadness, longing, disbelief, guilt, anger, fear, loneliness, or moments of tenderness and connection.

Thoughts: replaying events, “what if” questions, difficulty concentrating, searching for explanations, or worrying about another loss.

Body and nervous system: changes in sleep or appetite, tension, fatigue, startle responses, restlessness, or feeling shut down. These experiences vary and do not automatically indicate a disorder.

Relationships and identity: changes in roles, beliefs, routines, connection with others, and your sense of the future.

What is grief-affirming support?

Grief Affirming Practice® (GAP), developed by Terri Waibel and taught through the Southwest Institute for Grief and Trauma Studies, emphasizes compassionate, individualized, non-pathologizing, trauma-responsive, person-centered care. It considers the griever’s culture, relationships, identity, values, and lived experience. Rather than requiring someone to “move on,” support can make room for grief while helping the person live with the loss.

Ways to support yourself without rushing grief

Give yourself permission: You may talk, cry, rest, remember, seek company, or choose privacy. You do not owe others a particular emotional response.

Support your body gently: Drink water, eat when you can, take breaks, and orient to your surroundings if distress rises. Grounding is an option, not a requirement.

Choose connection: Tell a trusted person what helps: listening, practical assistance, remembering your person by name, or simply sitting together.

Honor the relationship: Memories, rituals, photographs, letters, and acts of remembrance may offer connection. You can choose what feels meaningful.

Set boundaries: It is okay to decline questions, gatherings, or advice that feels unhelpful.

Educational purposes only; not a substitute for mental health assessment, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you are in crisis, call or text 988. For an immediate emergency, call 911.

When additional care may help

Consider talking with a grief-informed mental health professional when distress feels unmanageable, traumatic memories interfere with daily life, or you feel persistently unsafe or unable to function. Grief itself is not a diagnosis; clinicians can help distinguish grief from treatable trauma-related or other mental health conditions.

Self-reflection: Your grief, your pace

You may skip any question. There is no right answer. Share your responses with your therapist if you wish.

1. What do I most want others to understand about my grief?

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2. Which reactions have felt most difficult or surprising?

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3. What has helped me feel even slightly supported or less alone?

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4. How would I like to remember or stay connected to the person who died?

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5. What advice, expectations, or interactions do I need permission to set aside?

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6. What is one gentle way I can care for myself this week?

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_____

A reminder

You do not have to find meaning in the death, forgive anyone, or reach “closure” on someone else’s timeline. Your grief deserves care, respect, and room to change over time.

Framework acknowledgment & sources

This original educational handout draws on publicly described principles of Grief Affirming Practice® from Center for Compassion (thecenterforcompassion.com) and Southwest Institute for Grief and Trauma Studies (swigts.com). It is not an official GAP® training resource or an endorsement by either organization.