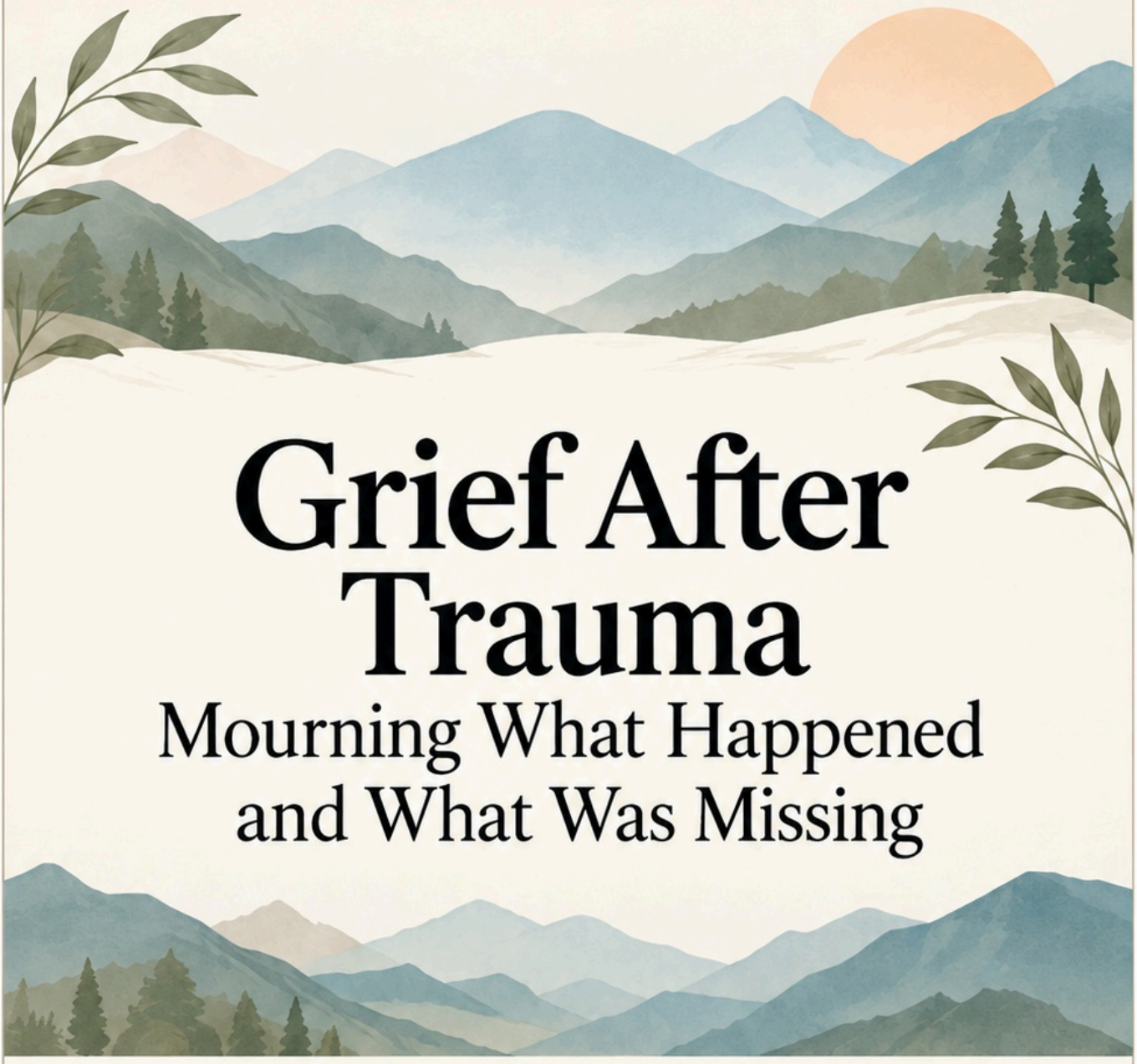


Grief After Trauma

Mourning What Happened and What Was Missing

Trauma can lead to many kinds of loss – losses of safety, trust, health, relationships, opportunities, a sense of self, and more. Grief can be a natural and understandable response to these losses. It may involve mourning what happened to you, and what was missing for you.

This resource offers information about how grief can show up after trauma, why it matters, and ways to support yourself through the grieving process.

Trauma and Grief: Related but Not the Same

Trauma and grief can overlap without being the same thing. Understanding their differences can help make sense of your experience and support more targeted care.



Trauma Responses

Trauma responses often center on threat, safety, and survival. They may include:

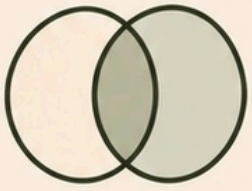
- feeling on edge or constantly alert
- intrusive memories or nightmares
- avoidance or numbing
- changes in mood, beliefs, or sense of self
- protective responses like fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown



Grief Responses

Grief responses often center on loss and adaptation. They may include:

- sadness, longing, or emptiness
- thinking about what was lost
- waves of intense emotion
- changes in identity, relationships, or life meaning
- physical sensations and shifts in energy
- periods of numbness or disconnection



They Can and Often Do Overlap

It's common to experience both trauma and grief. Trauma can lead to significant losses, and grief can be more complex when trauma is involved.

One Way Grief May Become More Visible

Grief can be present at many points after trauma. For some people, it may become more visible over time as safety, support, distance from the trauma, or capacity increase. These are not stages and do not occur in a required order, but rather a possible pattern for how grief may emerge.

1



Survive and Protect

In the early aftermath, much of the energy may go toward survival, safety, and managing traumatic stress responses. Grief may be harder to access when the nervous system is in high alert.

2



Gain Capacity

With time, support, or increased stability, some people have more emotional and physical capacity. As distress begins to feel more manageable, there may be more space to notice what was lost.

3



Recognize the Cost

It may become clearer what the trauma took — including what happened, what changed, and what was missing. This can bring a deeper awareness of losses that may need to be grieved.

4



Mourn and Integrate

Grief may involve feeling, expressing, and making meaning of these losses in your own way and time. Integration does not require forgiveness, reconciliation, excusing what happened, or finding a silver lining.

Grief Moves in Waves, Not Stages

Grief is not a linear process. It often comes and goes in waves, and the intensity, focus, and timing can change over time. It's common to move between attending to loss and engaging with other parts of life.

Attending to Loss

- feeling the pain
- thinking about what happened and what was missing
- noticing and expressing emotions
- grappling with meaning, identity, or unfairness

Attending to Life

- focusing on daily responsibilities
- engaging in relationships, work, or enjoyable activities
- taking breaks from grief
- building new routines and sources of meaning

Both Are a Natural Part of Grief

Moving between loss and restoration does not mean you are "doing it wrong." This pattern is consistent with the **Dual Process Model,** which was developed in bereavement research and is used here as a helpful framework for understanding how people may move between trauma-related loss and present-day life.

What Can Be Grieved After Trauma?

Trauma can involve many types of loss. The loss may be something that happened to you, or something essential that never happened for you.

Mourning What Happened

Grieving the losses that resulted from the trauma, such as:

- a sense of safety or trust
- health, energy, or physical well-being
- relationships, community, or belonging
- a sense of self, identity, or confidence
- opportunities, goals, or future possibilities

Mourning What Was Missing

Grieving what you did not receive, such as:

- safety, care, or protection
- consistent support or validation
- nurturance or attuned relationships
- opportunities for a more typical or secure developmental experience

Complex Losses

Some trauma-related losses can be more complicated, including:

- ambiguous loss (a loss that remains unclear, unresolved, or psychologically present, such as a relationship that is physically present but emotionally absent)
- disenfranchised grief (grief that is not adequately recognized, validated, or socially supported)
- multiple or cumulative losses

Supporting Your Grief After Trauma

There is no single "right" way to grieve. These ideas can offer gentle ways to support yourself as you process and adapt to your losses.

Create Safety and Stability

Support your nervous system with predictable routines, supportive relationships, and grounding practices.

Give Grief Space

Allow grief to be present in your own way and time. Grief may show up emotionally, cognitively, relationally, physically, or through periods of numbness and disconnection.

Draw on Support

Grief can be less overwhelming when shared with safe and supportive people. This may include trusted friends, support groups, or a therapist.

Use Meaning-Making Practices

Some people find writing, creative expression, nature, spirituality, or other practices helpful in making sense of their experience.

Be Patient with the Process

Grief often unfolds over time, with progress and setbacks. Healing is nonlinear, and new layers of grief may emerge as you grow and reclaim parts of your life.

When Additional Support May Help

Consider additional support if grief feels persistently overwhelming, significantly interferes with daily functioning, or trauma symptoms are becoming harder to manage.

Research Notes & References

Grief After Trauma: Mourning What Happened and What Was Missing

Evidence and Context

- Most formal grief research focuses on bereavement after death. Here, "grief" also describes significant non-death losses in a broader, non-diagnostic sense. Applying bereavement frameworks to trauma-related non-death losses is a clinically informed extension of that research.
- Grief is not a required stage of trauma healing. The pattern described on page 3 is illustrative, not a validated stage model.
- Prolonged Grief Disorder specifically concerns grief following the death of a close person. It should not be used to label the non-death losses described here.
- Grief is shaped by personal history, culture, community, spirituality, identity, relationships, and the nature of the loss. There is no single correct way or timetable for grieving.

Selected References

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Educational Use Only

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