



# Framework for Grief and Mourning in Addiction Treatment for Individuals and Loved Ones

**VCU Department of Rehabilitation Counseling**



**WE ARE THE UNCOMMON.**

# Grief and Loss Touch Every Life

As a member of the larger recovery community personally or professionally, as an ally, or provider, you're uniquely positioned to walk alongside individuals and families during some of their most vulnerable moments.

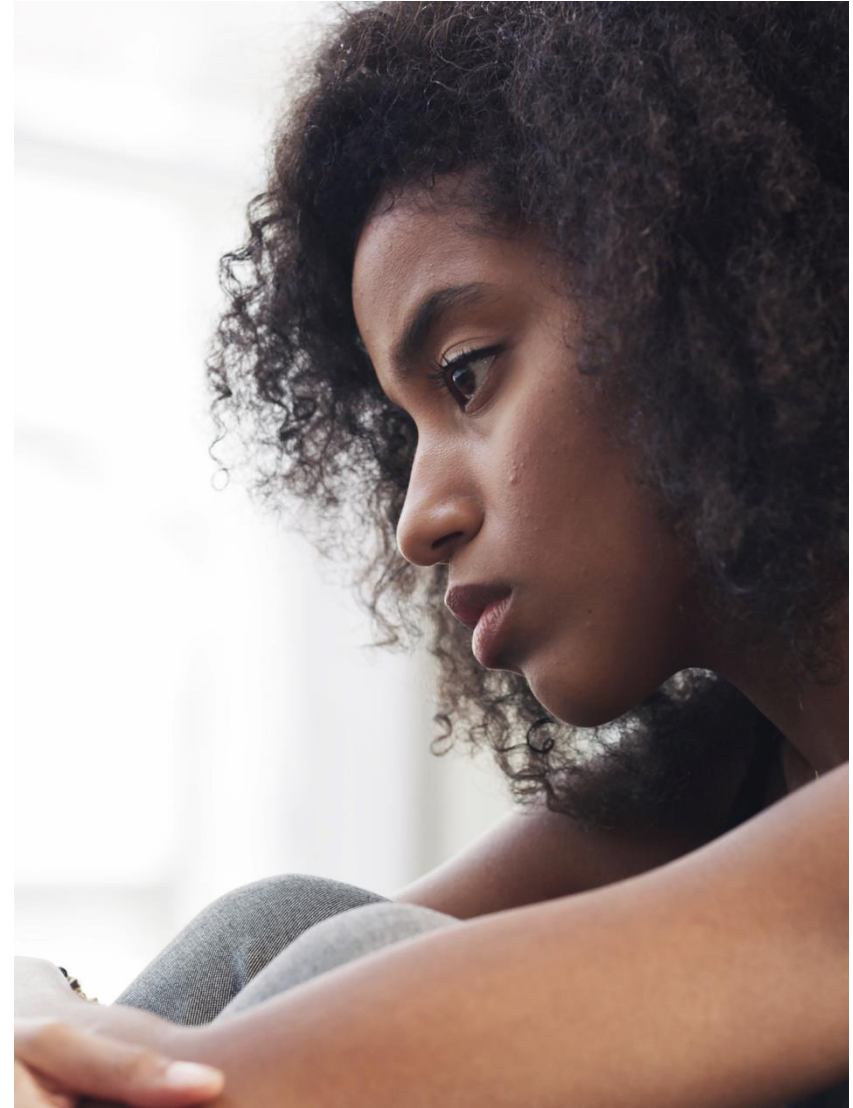


We'll explore the many faces of loss – from the tangible (like death of a loved one, job, or of the loss of a home)...

to the deeply personal (such as identity, safety, or a sense of hope.)

- Together, we'll deepen our understanding of how grief can show up in the lives of individuals and families we serve *and* within ourselves.
  - **Educational:** practical framework for recognizing different types of loss, engaging in sensitive conversations, and offering meaningful, trauma-informed support.
  - **Experiential:** during this session, you'll have a chance to pause, reflect, and grow in how we show up for others and ourselves.

# Definitions and Framework of Loss and Grief



# Loss

- State of something or someone no longer being available to; not having as much of something; the process that leads to this.
- A failure to keep or continue
- Can cause grief

# Grief

- Grief is a natural emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral response to loss.
- Highly individual experience
- Process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried – and there is no **no** “normal” timetable.

# Emotional Impacts

- Shock, numbness, denial, and confusion
- Anger, guilt, searching, and yearning
- Disorientation, depression, withdrawal, or lack of energy
- Replaying decisions, what-if's thereby inducing guilt and shame
- Fear; specific and generalized
- Sadness

# Physical and Cognitive Impacts

- Sleep difficulties in both extremes
- Changes in appetite
- Concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Physical pain

- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Lowered immunity
- Weight loss or weight gain

# Complicated/Prolonged Grief

- “Complicated grief is a prolonged, bereavement-specific disorder with significant psychological and physical consequences.
- Individuals with substance misuse were at increased risk for subsequent development of complicated grief, particularly when increases in substance consumption preceded bereavement.
- Conversely, complicated grief predicted increases in smoking and alcohol dependence.”



Clinical Feature	Prolonged Grief Disorder	Major Depressive Disorder	PTSD
<b>Primary focus of distress</b>	Longing for, preoccupation with, or difficulty accepting the death of the deceased	Pervasive low mood, hopelessness, worthlessness, or loss of interest not limited to one relationship or loss	Fear-based response to a traumatic event, threat, injury, or exposure to death
<b>Core symptoms</b>	Persistent yearning, identity disruption, disbelief, avoidance of reminders, emotional numbness, meaninglessness, loneliness	Depressed mood, anhedonia, appetite or sleep changes, fatigue, guilt, poor concentration, suicidal ideation	Intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, hyperarousal, avoidance, negative changes in mood or cognition
<b>Relationship to loss or trauma</b>	Symptoms center specifically on the death and ongoing separation from the deceased	Symptoms may follow a loss but are broader, more persistent, and not exclusively tied to the deceased	Symptoms center on the traumatic nature of the event rather than longing for the deceased
<b>Typical emotional pattern</b>	Waves of grief, yearning, sorrow, or emotional pain triggered by reminders of the person who died	More persistent depressed mood or inability to experience pleasure across situations	Fear, threat response, hypervigilance, emotional reactivity, or numbing after trauma reminders
<b>Timeframe</b>	At least 12 months after the death in adults; at least 6 months in children	Symptoms present for at least 2 weeks and represent a change from prior functioning	Symptoms persist more than 1 month after trauma exposure
<b>Clinical assessment focus</b>	Assess yearning, preoccupation, avoidance, functional impairment, cultural norms, and grief-specific severity	Assess mood, anhedonia, neurovegetative symptoms, guilt, suicidality, and impairment across life domains	Assess trauma exposure, re-experiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, safety concerns, and trauma reminders

**Clinical note:** These conditions can co-occur. A client may meet criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder and also have symptoms of major depression or PTSD, especially after sudden, violent, or traumatic bereavement.

# Grief Assessments

- Measure loss
- Measure symptoms of grief
- Multiple are free
- NONE specific to addressing SUD or recovery.

<b>Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG)</b>	13	Distinguishes normal from complicated grief reactions; tracks grief symptoms over time	Ongoing monitoring; evaluating effectiveness of grief interventions	Freely available
<b>Bereavement Risk Assessment Tool (BRAT)</b>	Variable	Risk of complicated or prolonged grief reaction; considers personal, interpersonal, and situational factors	Hospice and bereavement settings; identifying clients at elevated risk	Freely available
<b>PG-13-R (Prolonged Grief 13-Revised)</b>	13	Severity of Prolonged Grief Disorder per DSM-5-TR criteria; persistent yearning, functional impairment, and related symptoms	Screening and monitoring for Prolonged Grief Disorder specifically	Freely available
<b>Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG)</b>	19	Indicators of complicated grief including yearning, anger, disbelief, and difficulty accepting the loss	Complicated grief screening; research and clinical outcomes measurement	Freely available

# Types of Loss

- Bereavement (death of a loved one)
- Death of a pet
- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of health
- Loss of a job
- Loss of financial stability
- Retirement
- Loss of a cherished dream

- Identity
- Freedoms
- Security
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after a trauma
- Housing (selling the family home, losing housing)
- A loved one's serious illness
- Disability adjustment

# Additional losses related to addiction

- Not knowing who you are?
- What could have been? Aspirations
- Missing out on past self
- Relationships: damaged, loss of access or no longer congruent with recovery
- Places: social, housing, environment
- Things: memories, the way you spent time, routines

# Additional losses related to addiction for families

- Relationship
- Time
- Rupture without repair
- Family system being altered (no contact, anger, fear)
- Aspirations

# Helper Framework: Start by

- Acknowledging their loss
- Validating their emotional and physical responses
- Using empathy
- Staying present
- Modeling how to sit with complex, painful feelings

# Helper Framework: Continue by

- Showing up over and over again establishing safety
- Educating about grief and loss in addiction if needed
- Expressing you have no expectations; they have choice
- Reinforcing the validity of acknowledging loss and grief versus holding in or pushing under
- Understanding capacity for where the individual/family might be:
  - 1) Not acknowledging, minimizing or lack of awareness = constriction
  - 2) Awareness, attention, feeling into = room for expansion

# Avoid

- Rushing to try and make them feel better
- Using cliches in general such as “you are strong”, “you’ll get through it”, “religious views”, “at least.”
- Setting any timeline or mention of when they “should” start feeling better
- Talking about your own losses (at least initially)

# Delma

- Is 35 yo and just coming out of a 6 month incarceration.
- She has been estranged from her family for more than 5 years.
- Her use became a point of rupture within the family.
- She has felt abandoned by them recently. In a call that took her a long time to work up the courage to make, she shared she had been in a recovery program while incarcerated and would like to see them.
- Her sister responded angrily and rehashed the past hurt the family experienced. She told Delma that she was not welcome to visit.
- Delma has not worked consistently for quite some time. She has waited tables and worked in a convenience store. She's scared.
- Delma also has come to understand that her previous relationships with partners often left her feeling smaller and less than.

# Grief Assessment at a Glance

A Quick Reference for Clinicians



## 1. IDENTIFY THE LOSS

- What was lost?
- When did the loss occur?
- What is the client's relationship to what was lost?
- Was the loss sudden or anticipated?

Understand the nature and context of the loss.



## 2. ASSESS SYMPTOMS

- Emotional (sadness, yearning, emptiness)
- Cognitive (preoccupation, disbelief, confusion)
- Physical (fatigue, sleep changes, pain)
- Behavioral (avoidance, withdrawal, decline in functioning)

Evaluate the presence, severity, and duration of symptoms.



## 3. EVALUATE IMPAIRMENT

- Impact on work, school, or daily functioning
- Strain in relationships
- Ability to experience positive emotions
- Sense of purpose and meaning

Determine how grief is affecting overall functioning and quality of life.



## 4. SCREEN FOR RISK & COMORBIDITY

- Assess for PGD, depression, PTSD, anxiety, and substance use
- Evaluate suicidality and self-harm risk
- Consider medical conditions and medication effects
- Identify protective factors and supports

Identify risks, co-occurring conditions, and protective factors.



## 5. INFORM TREATMENT PLAN

- Determine level of care
- Select evidence-based interventions
- Set measurable goals
- Involve supports when appropriate

Use assessment findings to guide treatment planning and referrals.

### RISK FACTORS FOR COMPLICATED OR PROLONGED GRIEF



Loss was sudden or traumatic



History of mental health challenges



Limited social support



Previous unresolved losses



High level of dependence on the deceased

*Risk factors do not predict outcomes, but help inform monitoring and treatment intensity.*




### CLINICAL TIP

Grief is a normal response to loss, but when symptoms are intense, persistent, and impairing, structured assessment helps determine the right level of support and improves client outcomes.



**ASSESS. UNDERSTAND. SUPPORT. HEAL.**  
Your assessment makes a difference.

 Thorough assessment is the foundation of effective, compassionate grief care.

- Help individuals/ families acknowledge their pain through empathy and reflections.
- Encourage acceptance that grief can trigger many different and unexpected emotions. All of which are valid.
- Educate to help them understand that the grieving process will be unique to them.
- Encourage and even talk through how they can seek out face-to-face support from people who care about them.
- Ask about how they can/will support themselves emotionally by taking care of the physical.
- Educate individual/ families to help them recognize the difference between grief and depression (as needed).

# Professionals working in the field

“Despite four decades of scholarship demonstrating the importance of integrating loss and grief in the treatment of substance use disorder (SUD), little is known about how professionals themselves perceive and address loss and mourning.” Dagan and Baum

- What impact is there on the professional?
- Attunement was noted with expressed grief but some grief remains elusive (think disenfranchised, cultural relational rules)
- How can we better address the need for this to be a standard part of intervention?

# References and Resources

- Caparrós B, Masferrer L. Coping Strategies and Complicated Grief in a Substance Use Disorder Sample. *Front Psychol.* 2021 Jan 15;11:624065. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.624065. PMID: 33536987; PMCID: PMC7848780.
- Parisi A, Sharma A, Howard MO, Blank Wilson A. The relationship between substance misuse and complicated grief: A systematic review *J Subst Abuse Treat.* 2019 Aug;103:43-57. doi: 10.1016/j.jsat.2019.05.012. Epub 2019 May 23. PMID: 31229191
- Gilad Dagan, Nehami Baum. “Space for pain in measured doses”: How professionals navigate the hidden presence of grief in substance use treatment, *Journal of Substance Use and Addiction Treatment*, Volume 189, 2026,210021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2026.210021>
- <https://www.icanotes.com/2024/07/25/assessing-grief-and-treating-grief/>
- Full Circle Grief- local to Richmond metro
- Find a GriefShare group meeting near you – Worldwide directory of support groups for people grieving the death of a family member or friend. (GriefShare)
- Find Support – Directory of programs and support groups in the U.S. for children experiencing grief and loss. (National Alliance for Grieving Children)

Crisis Call Center at 775-784-8090



• Christian based online support for Providing Hope, Love and Support to Grieving Mothers

<https://mendingheartsmintistry.org/>

**WE ARE THE UNCOMMON.**

A collage of colorful sticky notes (yellow, blue, green, orange, pink) scattered around a central white rectangular note. Each sticky note has a hand-drawn black question mark. The central white note has the word "QUESTIONS" written in a large, black, handwritten font. Several colorful pushpins (yellow, red, blue, green) are pinned to the sticky notes, securing them to a light-colored background.

QUESTIONS