

Supporting Clients Through Grief

(Adapted from Groundswell Out of Homelessness; UK)

Understand the Nature of Grief

Grief will look different for all people and for those who have been marginalized, unhoused, abandoned or harmed by those meant to care for them grief is often shaped by trauma, instability and exclusion. It's important to recognise:

- **Grief may be hidden.** People may avoid expressing emotions to survive or avoid being seen as weak.
- **Loss is frequent.** Repeated losses including: housing, family, friends, support networks, pets or partners can cause grief fatigue or emotional numbness.
- **Stigma adds pain.** Society often ignores the grief of our vulnerable and marginalized communities. Which can make people feel invisible or unworthy of support.
- **Friends are like family.** Bonds amongst those with similar experiences or histories of being “left behind” can be deep and profound.. Losing a friend may feel like losing a sibling.
- **Losing a pet.** Losing a pet can be deeply upsetting, as they provide vital companionship, comfort, and a sense of normality in difficult circumstances.
- **Trauma is often retriggered.** This can be especially true for people with past experiences of bereavement, abuse or abandonment.
- **Disenfranchised grief.** Disenfranchised grief can be experienced by anyone who is suffering a loss when: Their grief is not openly acknowledged or their grief is not socially validated or their grief is not publicly observed. Examples of when disenfranchised grief can occur are cultural dismissals of the overdose death of a friend, or the grief a person experiences when a loved one commits a violent crime and is now gone from their life.

When grief is not openly acknowledged, survivors may feel the need to grieve secretly and silently, hiding their grief from others because their loss isn't recognized. Similarly, when grief is not socially validated, survivors may attempt to share their loss with others only to experience attempts by others to diminish their grief. When grief is not publicly observed, survivors are not given the recognition and support needed to move forward in their mourning process.

Recognize Common Grief Responses

Grief doesn't always look like sadness. Look out for:

- Anger or irritability (even toward service providers or other clients).
- Withdrawing or going quiet.
- Increased drug or alcohol use, or risky behaviour.
- Hypervigilance or sleeplessness.
- Guilt: “I should've done more” or “It should've been me”.

Create Space to Talk

- Be present and patient – just listening is often the most valuable thing you can do.
- Use their words – avoid jargon like “bereavement” if it doesn't fit.
- Validate their feelings – “it's okay to feel sad, angry, nothing, or everything”.

Offer Practical Support

- **Support memorials or rituals.** Light a candle, share memories, help with a small gathering or attend the funeral. Consider group conversations or informal memorials with others who knew the person.
- **Create safe spaces.** Identify or create informal spaces where people can just be present. This can include art supplies, books, journaling, quiet, or the ability to talk.

- **Provide grief resources.** Provide written or online resources with information about how grief can be experienced or show up in their life. Help normalize that it is not a linear path and it is ok to not be ok.
- **Help with disruption.** If the death occurred in a shared space, help find alternatives or speak to housing teams.
- **Support closure.** Help someone find out what happened if appropriate. Proceed gently, without making promises.
- **Reintroduce structure.** Encourage a gentle return to routine: hot meals, washing, school, work, and casework check-ins.
- **Respect beliefs:** Ask if the person marks loss in a particular way—avoid assumptions.
- **Support action-based grieving.** Some may want to help pack belongings, attend funerals or make remembrance gestures. Please only offer options that you have control over and don't over promise if you would need permission from others to achieve what they are hoping to do.
- **Support boundaries around media consumption.** In cases where law enforcement or the media is involved, it may be helpful to help create a plan around how much they are consuming and signs that a break may be useful.
- **Monitor risks.** Look out for increased substance use, suicidal thoughts or mental health decline. Provide intervention and additional support as needed.

Helpful Phrases

- "I'm sorry to hear about [name]. That's a big loss."
- "You're not alone—we're here if you want to talk."
- "It's okay to feel how you feel. There's no 'right' way to grieve."

When Someone May Need More Help

If someone talks about wanting to die, seems emotionally overwhelmed, or is unable to cope, help them access support:

- **[Suicide Prevention and Crisis Services in Ithaca:](#)** Free and confidential crisis counseling, staffed by trained crisis counselors and volunteers.
 - Call/Text 988 or visit 988lifeline.org to chat
 - Local Crisis Line: Call 607.272.1616
- **[Cayuga Health Behavioral Services:](#)** Emergency care for adult/youth inpatient mental health services.
 - Call 911 for emergency intervention or access care at the Cayuga Medical Center Emergency Department: 101 Dates Drive Ithaca, NY 14850
- **[Tompkins County Mental Health:](#)** Outpatient counseling and mental health services for adults, youth, and couples within Tompkins County.
 - Green Street Mental Health Clinic: 607.274.6400
 - Open Access, Walk In Hours at Green Street Clinic: Walk in and get same day intake.
 - Mon, Tues, Thursday 8:30a-2:00p or Wed 10:30a-3p
 - Call 607.274.6200 to confirm Open Access Hours.
- **[Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services \(C.A.R.S\):](#)** Offers intensive residential and outpatient treatment services including Medication Assisted Treatment.
 - Outpatient Services (Ithaca or Trumansburg locations): 607.273.5500
- **[REACH Medical:](#)** Low threshold, stigma free, harm reduction based medical and behavioral services including Medication Assisted Treatment & Primary Care.
 - Ithaca Office: 607.273.7000 (Mon-Fri, 9a-5p)