GLOBAL GRIEF NETWORK | EDUCATION CENTER

Grief Glossary

Plain-language definitions of common grief and support terms



Grief comes with its own vocabulary. This glossary explains common words used in grief education and support, in plain language. Definitions are written by Global Grief Network for learning purposes. Some terms are clinical: they are used by licensed health professionals, and only those professionals can assess or diagnose the conditions they describe. Entries marked GGN term are the Global Grief Network's own plain-language names used across its programs. Entries marked Outside term come from other authors or fields; they are credited and point to the GGN name used instead.

> **In immediate danger: call 911. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** call or text **988** (US). Elsewhere, use your local emergency number and crisis line.

A

Accompaniment

Walking alongside a grieving person without trying to fix, rush, or direct their grief. The focus is on presence, listening, and steady company rather than advice.

See also: Witnessing, Holding space, Peer support

Acute grief

The intense, often overwhelming grief of the early period after a loss. It can affect sleep, appetite, concentration, and energy, and it usually softens and changes shape over time.

See also: Integrated grief, Shock

Ambiguous loss

A loss that has no clear ending or answer, such as a missing person, or a loved one who is still here but deeply changed by dementia.

Outside term. Associated with the work of Pauline Boss. GGN name: Unclear Loss.

See also: Unclear Loss, Anticipatory grief

Anniversary reaction

A return or rise of grief around a meaningful date, such as a birthday, holiday, or the date of a death. It can begin in the days or weeks before the date itself.

See also: Grief burst, Triggers and reminders

Anticipatory grief

Grief that begins before a loss happens, often while someone we love is seriously ill or declining. It can include sadness, worry, and early mourning alongside hope and caregiving.

See also: Caregiver grief, Unclear Loss

B

Bereavement

The state of having lost someone important through death. Bereavement describes the situation; grief describes the response.

See also: Grief, Mourning

Bereavement leave

Time away from work after a death, sometimes called compassionate leave. Whether it is offered, paid, and how long it lasts depends on the employer and on local law.

See also: Workplace grief

Borrowed Steadiness

Settling a little with the help of a calm, steady person nearby: their unhurried voice, relaxed pace, and kind attention. GGN practitioners offer it on purpose by staying steady themselves.

GGN term. Used in GGN somatic practitioner training.

See also: Regulation, Safety Signals

Breaks Belong

The GGN idea that grieving people naturally move back and forth between facing the loss and living with the changes in everyday life, and that taking breaks from grief is a healthy part of grieving, not avoidance.

GGN term.

See also: Oscillation, Love That Stays

C

Caregiver grief

The grief that people who care for an ill or aging loved one can feel, both during caregiving and after the person dies. It often mixes loss, exhaustion, relief, and love.

See also: Anticipatory grief, Compassion fatigue

Collective grief

Grief shared by a community, nation, or group after a loss that affects many people at once, such as a disaster, a public tragedy, or a pandemic.

See also: Disaster grief, Ritual

Compassion fatigue

Emotional and physical exhaustion that can build up in people who regularly care for others who are suffering. It can reduce a helper's ability to feel empathy and to rest. The term is closely associated with the work of Charles Figley.

See also: Secondary trauma, Self-care

Complicated grief

A term once widely used for grief that stays intense and disabling for a long time and makes daily life very hard. Many professionals now use the term prolonged grief disorder for the clinical diagnosis.

Clinical term. Only a licensed health professional can assess or diagnose it. GGN programs do not diagnose.

See also: Prolonged grief disorder, Grief That Gets Stuck

Continuing bonds

The ongoing connection many people keep with someone who has died, through memories, rituals, conversations, values, or a sense of presence.

Outside term. Associated with Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman. GGN name: Love That Stays.

See also: Love That Stays, Legacy

Coping

The things we do, think, or lean on to get through something hard. Coping can be active (making a plan) or restful (taking a break), and different approaches suit different moments.

See also: Breaks Belong, Self-compassion

Cultural humility

An attitude of curiosity and respect toward other people's cultures, faiths, and traditions, including their ways of mourning. It means asking rather than assuming, and recognizing the limits of our own view.

See also: Mourning, Ritual

Cumulative grief

Grief that builds when several losses happen close together, before there has been time to absorb the first. It is sometimes called grief overload or bereavement overload.

See also: Secondary loss, Collective grief

D

Disaster grief

Grief after a disaster such as a fire, flood, storm, or mass casualty event. It can include the loss of people, homes, routines, and a sense of safety all at once.

See also: Collective grief, Traumatic grief

Disenfranchised grief

Grief that is not openly recognized, supported, or allowed by others.

Outside term. Associated with Kenneth Doka. GGN name: Unseen Grief.

See also: Unseen Grief, Stigma

Dual process model

A research model that describes grief as movement back and forth between facing the loss and attending to life's changes, with breaks from grief as part of the process.

Outside term. Developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. GGN name for the everyday idea: Breaks Belong.

See also: Breaks Belong, Oscillation

E

End-of-life doula

A non-medical companion who offers emotional, practical, and planning support to a dying person and their family. Training and titles vary, and doulas work alongside, not instead of, medical and hospice teams.

See also: Hospice, Accompaniment

G

Gathering Supports

Noticing and building up the people, places, memories, beliefs, and body sensations that help a person feel even a little steadier. GGN groups supports as inner, outer, people, meaning, and Love That Stays supports.

GGN term.

See also: Support Map, Grounding

Grief

The natural response to losing someone or something we care about. Grief can show up in emotions, the body, thoughts, behavior, relationships, and beliefs, and it does not follow a set schedule.

See also: Bereavement, Mourning

Grief burst

A sudden, strong wave of grief that can arrive without warning, sometimes long after a loss. A song, a smell, or an ordinary moment can set one off. Grief bursts usually pass, even when they feel overwhelming.

See also: Triggers and reminders, Anniversary reaction

Grief literacy

Knowing enough about grief to recognize it in ourselves and others and to respond with care. It includes knowing what tends to help, what tends to hurt, and where to find more support.

See also: Accompaniment

Grief That Gets Stuck

A GGN noticing phrase for grief that stays so intense, for so long, that daily life keeps shrinking around it. It is not a diagnosis; it is a signal to suggest a licensed mental health professional.

GGN term.

See also: Prolonged grief disorder, Complicated grief

Grief Weather

A GGN way to name how the body feels right now: Storm (wired, racing, on edge), Fog (heavy, numb, far away), Rain (tears and sorrow while still feeling present), and Clearing (moments of ease). Rain is not a problem to fix.

GGN term. Used in Nervous System Regulation While Grieving and in practitioner training.

See also: Settled Middle, Nervous system

Grounding

Simple ways of bringing attention back to the present moment and the body, such as noticing your feet on the floor or naming things you can see. Grounding can help when feelings or memories feel too big.

See also: Regulation, Settled Middle, Looking Around

Guilt and regret

Common grief experiences in which a person replays what they did or did not do, or wishes things had gone differently. These feelings are understandable and can be talked through with support.

See also: Self-compassion, Meaning-making

H

Holding space

Making room for someone's feelings and story without judging, fixing, or changing the subject. It is a way of saying, through attention, that their grief is welcome.

See also: Accompaniment, Witnessing

Hospice

Care focused on comfort and quality of life for people near the end of life, and support for their families. Many hospice programs also offer bereavement support to families after a death.

See also: Palliative care, End-of-life doula

I

Inner Listening

The GGN practice of paying kind, unhurried attention to sensations inside the body, such as breath, heartbeat, warmth, or tension, without needing to change them.

GGN term.

See also: Somatic, Grounding

Integrated grief

Grief that has found a place in a person's life. The loss still matters and can still hurt, but it no longer takes over every day, and the person can engage with life and relationships again.

See also: Acute grief, Love That Stays

L

Legacy

What a person leaves behind: values, stories, work, traditions, and the ways they shaped others. Honoring a legacy can be one form of Love That Stays.

See also: Love That Stays, Memorial

Living loss

A loss that continues over time while life goes on, such as a chronic illness, an estranged relationship, or a changed future. It is sometimes called nonfinite loss.

See also: Unclear Loss, Anticipatory grief

Looking Around

A GGN steadying skill: letting the eyes move slowly around the room and rest on something neutral or pleasant, to help the body notice it is here, now.

GGN term.

See also: Grounding, Gathering Supports

Loss

The ending or absence of someone or something we valued. Losses include deaths, and also relationships, health, home, work, identity, safety, and hopes for the future.

See also: Primary loss, Secondary loss

Loss-oriented coping

In the dual process model, the side of grieving that faces the loss directly.

Outside term. From the dual process model. GGN plain words: facing the loss (see Breaks Belong).

See also: Dual process model, Breaks Belong

Love That Stays

The ongoing inner relationship many people keep with someone who has died, through memories, rituals, conversations, values, or a sense of presence. Many people find it comforting, and it is a common and healthy part of grief.

GGN term. Used in Ways We Carry Love and across GGN programs.

See also: Legacy, Ritual, Continuing bonds

M

Meaning-making

The ongoing process of making sense of a loss and of life after it. It might involve questions about why, about identity, about faith, or about what matters now. There is no single right answer.

See also: Legacy, Love That Stays

Memorial

Any act, object, place, or gathering that honors someone who has died, from a formal service to a planted tree or a shared meal.

See also: Ritual, Legacy

Mourning

The outward expression of grief, often shaped by culture, faith, and family. Funerals, rituals, wearing certain clothing, and sharing stories are all forms of mourning.

See also: Grief, Ritual

N

Nervous system

The body's network of nerves that, among many other jobs, responds to stress and safety. Grief can affect it, which is one reason grief may show up as tiredness, restlessness, or tension.

See also: Regulation, Somatic

Numbness

A feeling of flatness, distance, or unreality, especially soon after a loss. It is a common response and often eases with time.

See also: Shock, Acute grief

O

Oscillation

Moving back and forth, for example between facing grief and taking a break from it.

Outside term. Used in the dual process model. GGN name for the everyday idea: Breaks Belong.

See also: Breaks Belong, Visit and Return

P

Palliative care

Specialized medical care that focuses on relief from symptoms and stress for people with serious illness, at any stage. It can be offered alongside treatment, and it is not only for the end of life.

See also: Hospice

Peer support

Support offered by people who have lived through a similar experience. Peer support groups can reduce isolation and offer practical wisdom. Peer support is not a replacement for professional care when that is needed.

See also: Support group, Accompaniment

Perinatal loss

The death of a baby during pregnancy or around the time of birth, including miscarriage, stillbirth, and newborn death.

See also: Stillbirth, Unseen Grief

Postvention

Organized support offered after a suicide death to the people affected, such as family, friends, schools, and workplaces. It aims to support grieving people and reduce further harm.

See also: Suicide loss survivor

Primary loss

The main loss, such as the death of a person. It often brings other changes with it, which are called secondary losses.

See also: Secondary loss, Loss

Prolonged grief disorder

A mental health diagnosis for grief that remains intense, persistent, and impairing well beyond what is expected in a person's culture and context. It is listed in the DSM-5-TR and the ICD-11.

Clinical term. Only a licensed health professional can assess or diagnose it. GGN programs do not diagnose. If grief feels unbearable or is not easing, a licensed professional can help.

See also: Complicated grief, Grief That Gets Stuck

R

Regulation

The ability to return toward a steadier, more settled state after stress or strong emotion. People do this in many ways, such as slowing the breath, moving, resting, or being with a calm person. GGN calls settling with the help of a steady person Borrowed Steadiness.

See also: Grounding, Settled Middle, Borrowed Steadiness, Nervous system

Resilience

The capacity to adapt and keep going through hardship. Resilience does not mean not grieving; people can be resilient and deeply sad at the same time.

See also: Integrated grief, Coping

Restoration-oriented coping

In the dual process model, the side of grieving that attends to life's changes and to breaks from grief.

Outside term. From the dual process model. GGN plain words: living with the changes (see Breaks Belong).

See also: Dual process model, Breaks Belong

Ritual

A meaningful action, often repeated, that marks a loss or honors a person, such as lighting a candle, visiting a grave, or cooking a family recipe on a special day.

See also: Mourning, Memorial, Love That Stays

S

Safety Signals

Four things a GGN practitioner offers on purpose to help a grieving person feel safer: a warm, unhurried voice; a soft face and open posture; predictable steps; and real choices.

GGN term. Used in GGN somatic practitioner training.

See also: Borrowed Steadiness, Steady Ground Habits

Secondary loss

A loss that follows from a primary loss, such as losing income, a role, a home, friendships, routines, or a sense of the future after a death.

See also: Primary loss, Cumulative grief

Secondary trauma

Stress reactions that can develop in helpers from hearing about or witnessing other people's traumatic experiences. It is also called vicarious trauma.

See also: Compassion fatigue, Self-care

Self-care

Everyday practices that help us meet our own needs, such as rest, food, movement, connection, and limits on what we take on. In grief, small and gentle is often enough.

See also: Self-compassion, Support plan

Self-compassion

Treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding we would offer a friend who is hurting, especially when we feel we are grieving the wrong way.

See also: Guilt and regret, Self-care

Settled Middle

The GGN name for the zone in which a person can feel strong emotions, including deep sorrow, and still stay present: able to talk, listen, cry, and come back. It can grow roomier with safety and support and get narrower with exhaustion or reminders.

GGN term.

See also: Grief Weather, Window of tolerance

Shock

An early response to loss, especially a sudden one, that can feel like disbelief, confusion, or being on autopilot.

See also: Numbness, Sudden loss

Small Sips

A GGN pacing tool: touching difficult feelings or memories in small amounts, then pausing, so a grieving person is never asked to take in more than they can hold.

GGN term. Used in GGN somatic practitioner training.

See also: Visit and Return, Settled Middle

Somatic

Relating to the body. Somatic approaches pay attention to physical sensations, posture, breath, and movement as part of how we experience grief and stress.

See also: Nervous system, Grounding

Stages of grief

A popular idea that grief moves through set stages in order. The best-known stage model came from work with people who were dying, and many grief educators now emphasize that grief is not linear and that people do not move through fixed steps.

See also: Breaks Belong, Grief

Steady Ground Habits

Five GGN habits for safer grief support: Predict, Ask, Pace, Respect, and Connect. They put the GGN Steady Ground Promise into everyday practice.

GGN term. Used in Trauma-Informed Grief Support and practitioner training.

See also: Trauma-informed

Stigma

Negative judgment or silence around a topic. Deaths by suicide, overdose, or violence, and some relationships, can carry stigma that makes grief harder to share.

See also: Unseen Grief, Suicide loss survivor

Stillbirth

The death of a baby before birth, after the point in pregnancy that a country or medical system uses to define it (the cutoff differs between places).

See also: Perinatal loss

Sudden loss

A death or loss that happens without warning, such as an accident, a sudden illness, or a violent death. Sudden losses can bring shock and unanswered questions.

See also: Shock, Traumatic grief

Suicide loss survivor

A person grieving someone who died by suicide. Survivors often face complex feelings and stigma, and specialized peer support exists for them.

See also: Postvention, Stigma

Support group

A regular gathering, in person or online, where people with a shared loss meet to talk, listen, and support each other. Groups may be led by peers or by trained facilitators.

See also: Peer support

Support Map

A GGN practice for drawing or listing the supports a person already has and the ones they want to add.

GGN term.

See also: Gathering Supports

Support plan

A simple written plan listing who and what helps, what to do on hard days, and where to turn in a crisis. It can be shared with trusted people.

See also: Self-care, Peer support

T

Trauma

The lasting effects that can follow an experience that overwhelmed a person's ability to cope, often one involving threat, violence, or sudden death. What is traumatic varies from person to person.

Trauma-related conditions are assessed and treated by licensed professionals.

See also: Traumatic grief, Trauma-informed

Trauma-informed

An approach that recognizes how common trauma is and aims to offer safety, choice, trust, and respect, so that support does not cause further harm.

See also: Trauma, Accompaniment

Traumatic grief

Grief that is tangled with trauma, often after a sudden, violent, or frightening death. Distressing images or fears can make it hard to remember the person in other ways.

If distressing memories or fear do not ease, a licensed professional experienced in trauma and grief can help.

See also: Trauma, Sudden loss

Triggers and reminders

People, places, dates, sounds, smells, or situations that bring grief to the surface. Some reminders can be planned for; others arrive unexpectedly.

See also: Grief burst, Anniversary reaction

U

Unclear Loss

The GGN name for a loss with no clear ending, answer, or goodbye, such as a missing loved one, or a loved one who is still here but deeply changed. It often comes without rituals or recognition.

GGN term.

See also: Anticipatory grief, Living loss, Ambiguous loss

Unseen Grief

The GGN name for grief that others do not openly acknowledge, support, or make room to mourn, such as grief for an ex-partner, a pet, a pregnancy, or a death that carries stigma.

GGN term.

See also: Stigma, Perinatal loss, Disenfranchised grief

V

Visit and Return

A GGN pacing tool: briefly visiting something hard, then returning to a steadier home base such as the feet or a support. Home comes first, the return is longer than the visit, and the person can always decline the next visit.

GGN term. Used in GGN somatic practitioner training.

See also: Small Sips, Breaks Belong

W

Window of tolerance

A term for the zone in which a person can feel emotions and still think and function.

Outside term. Introduced by Daniel Siegel. GGN name: the Settled Middle.

See also: Settled Middle, Grief Weather

Witnessing

Listening to and acknowledging someone's story of loss so that it is seen and heard, without needing to change it.

See also: Holding space, Accompaniment

Workplace grief

Grief as it shows up at work, whether after a personal loss or the death of a coworker. It can affect focus, energy, and relationships, and workplaces can respond with flexibility and care.

See also: Bereavement leave

Y

Yearning

A strong longing or pining for the person who died. Yearning is one of the most common feelings in grief.

See also: Grief, Love That Stays

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