

10. supporting someone who is grieving



This module examines how to understand grief and loss in order to support someone who is grieving, without trying to “fix” or “save” them.

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EXIT the module

1. welcome

welcome to
WHERE WE ARE AT
supporting
someone who
is grieving



Welcome to ***Where We Are At***, a training course for Provincial Peer Support Workers. We're glad you're here! This course is made up of 16 modules, all designed to support your training in peer support work.

The purpose of module **10. supporting someone who is grieving** is to give you a broad view of the impact of loss and the process of grief that comes along with that.

Any of the modules in this training can stand alone, but you'll notice they are very interconnected. All of the concepts and core values have many layers, and they will look a little different when you see them through the lens of different topics. For example, self-determination, one of the core values that is essential for peer support work, will look a little different when we look at it through the lens of learned helplessness, grief and loss, or goal planning, but the main message will always be the same.

You will get to experience all of those layers and intersections when you move through each module of the training. Feel free to navigate back and forth between modules as you move along since learning never has to be linear. There will be references to other modules intersected throughout.

Thank you for joining us on this educational journey!

2. gratitude



Before we begin this
new **learning** journey, we ask that you
reflect on the following question:

What am I grateful for today?

We know that taking time to reflect can give us the clarity and strength to do what can sometimes be difficult emotional work.

Download the [reflection journal](#) below and use it to record your thoughts. Please don't rush. Take all the time you need. This journal will be used for several questions throughout the module.



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61.4 KB

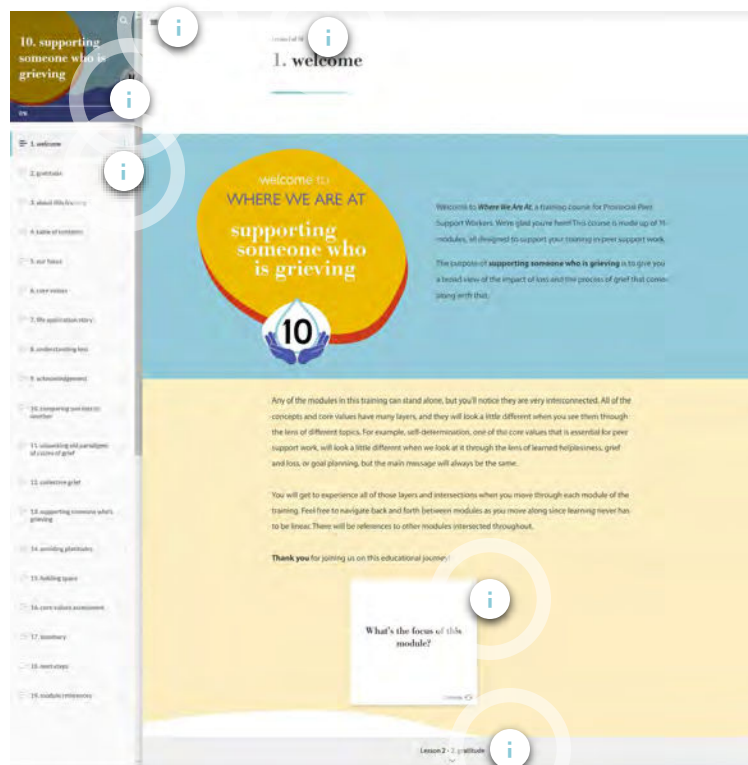


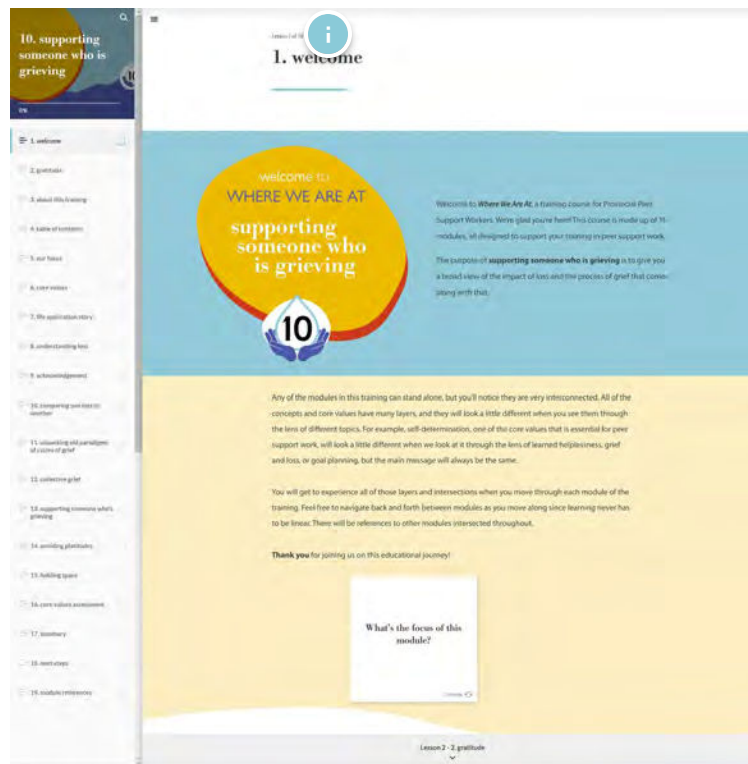
3. about this training

The course content has been guided by consultations that were held with peer support workers. It's with the utmost respect for their experience and wisdom that we share these learnings.

course navigation

You may have questions on how to use this course. We designed an interactive diagram to give you the chance to explore the different functions on the screen. Click the buttons below to learn more.





Lesson titles

Lesson 1 of 19

Above each lesson title, the lesson count is shown.

CONTINUE

reflection journal

As you discovered in the previous section, included in this training is a reflection journal. The journal is designed for you to use throughout the training. It's full of reflective questions related to the topics being explored that will get you engaging in the world around you with curiosity.

Feel free to use the journal in a way that works for you:

- 1 You can print it off and write in it or just use it to support reflective processing
- 2 You can use the fillable PDF version and complete it online
- 3 You can write in your own journal, using the questions as guides

We encourage you to find a safe, comfortable spot to engage with these questions.

CONTINUE

where we are at

provincial peer support worker training curriculum

The *Where We Are At* educational curriculum includes 16 modules. You'll find a brief description of each below.

1. the foundations

An overview of all the practices and knowledge that will be transferable to all of the modules in this training.

2. peer support & wholeness

Provides an introduction to peer support work and explores differences between the peer support role and other roles within the mental health and substance use systems.

3. categories & containers: unpacking our biases

Helps you understand how and why we judge.

4. self-determination

Looks at self-determination, the theory of self-determination and how peer support workers can support creating an ecology where people trust their own inner wisdom.

5. cultural humility

Explores how to approach your peer support work through the lens of cultural humility and helps you understand how culture (and the destruction of culture) shapes our lives.

6. understanding boundaries & what it means to co-create them

Examines boundary creation within the context of peer support, grounded in the core value of mutuality.

7. connection & communication

Focuses on cultivating compassion and empathy, listening deeply to understand, and asking powerful questions to increase reflection and connection.

8. healing-centred connection: principles in trauma-informed care

Brings together all the learnings from previous modules to support the creation of environments and relationships that are safe and trauma-informed.

9. social determinants of health

Explores the social determinants of health and how social, economic and other factors lead to better or worse health outcomes.

10. supporting someone who is grieving

Examines how to understand grief and loss in order to support someone who is grieving, without trying to “fix” or “save” them.

11. substance use & peer support

Explores the principles and methodologies around the harm reduction approach to substance use disorders and some of the history around the criminalization of substance use.

12. mental health & supporting those in crisis —

Explores the mindset shift necessary to support someone through a crisis.

13. goal planning —

Focuses on how peer support relationships can support the creation and meeting of goals.

14. building personal resilience —

Explores ways to build resiliency, create wellness plans and practice self-compassion.

15. family peer support —

Explores family peer support work and how, by working from a place of shared lived experience, family peer support workers can create positive change for families by building long-term relationships based on trust with those supporting loved ones.

16. working with youth & young adults —

Explores the unique application of peer support principles to working with youth and young adults.

4. table of contents

Below you'll find a short overview of the topics you'll find in this module.

As you move through these topics, please remember you can always return to this page to revisit the main ideas being explored in each lesson.



life application story —

A scenario about supporting someone who is grieving.

understanding loss —

Examines different forms of loss and the ways in which it is complex and multilayered.

acknowledgement —

Explores how being heard and seen is the most supportive thing for someone experiencing loss.

comparing one loss to another —

Emphasizes the need to be careful about judging or comparing someone's grief or trauma and how to meet each person where they're at without biases or assumptions.

unpacking old paradigms of cycles of grief —

Unpacks the notion that people must cycle through the five stages of grief when they've experienced a loss and proposes there's no standard formula or timeframe for healing.

collective grief —

Explains how traumatic global events like 9/11, the COVID-19 pandemic, or B.C.'s ongoing overdose crisis can cause collective grief and a sense of shared loss.

supporting someone who is grieving —

Explores ways to support those who are grieving without pushing people along in their grief before they're ready and how we need to deal with our own discomfort around pain, letting go of our desire to fix someone else's pain.

avoiding platitudes —

Proposes that platitudes – remarks that’ve been used too often to be useful, interesting or thoughtful – leave people feeling unheard.

holding space —

Emphasizes ways to stand with someone and intentionally make room for them to process their pain in a way that works for them, not us.



5. our focus

What's the focus of this module?

1 of 1

Grief is something that most human beings experience at some point in our lives, yet most of us are ill-equipped to support someone who's grieving. This module will take a broad look at the impact of loss and trauma, and the process of grief that accompanies them. As people in a supporting role, we can't fix someone's grief; there is no magic wand that will take away someone's pain. So, we'll look at how we can come alongside someone and hold space for them as they navigate their own healing road for themselves.

We'll also explore collective grief and trauma. We experience this in smaller communities, for example, when we face the untimely death of a community member. In mental health and substance use, we see this when people we know and care about die from suicide or overdose.

We can also experience grief, loss and trauma on larger scales – nationally or even globally. We see collective trauma and grief in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic as well as global events like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the escalating Islamophobia that followed.

after reviewing this module, you'll be able to...



Explain and express that there is not one right way to manage grief



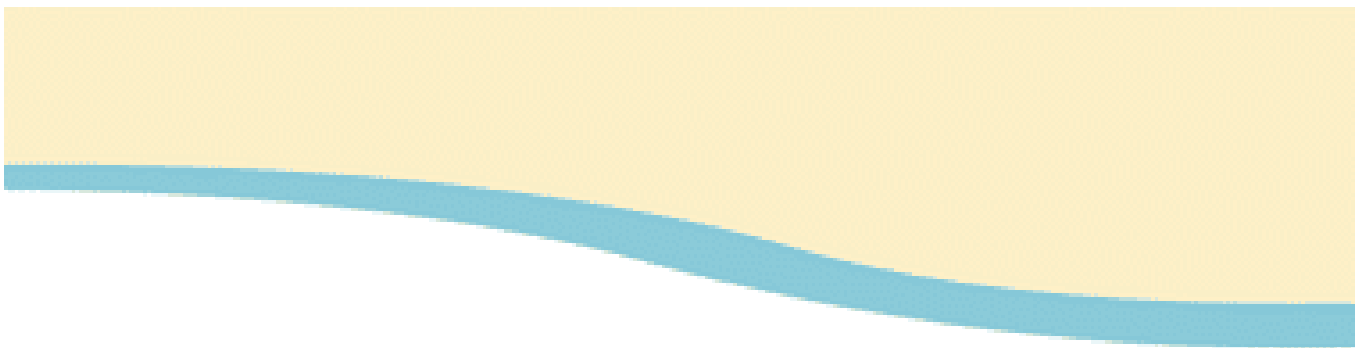
Demonstrate recognition, respect and humility for the different ways people process their own grief and loss. This includes religious and cultural differences.



Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of holding space together with someone who's grieving.



See, acknowledge and challenge the desire to “save” someone from their grief and become equipped to sit with the discomfort (in western culture, most of us are not taught to sit with pain; rather, we often want to fix it and take the pain away).



This module might be tough to get through if you have unprocessed grief and loss. Please do what you need to do to take care of yourself before proceeding. If you need to get up and move, stretch or take a break, please do it. Talk to a trusted supporter if that helps.°

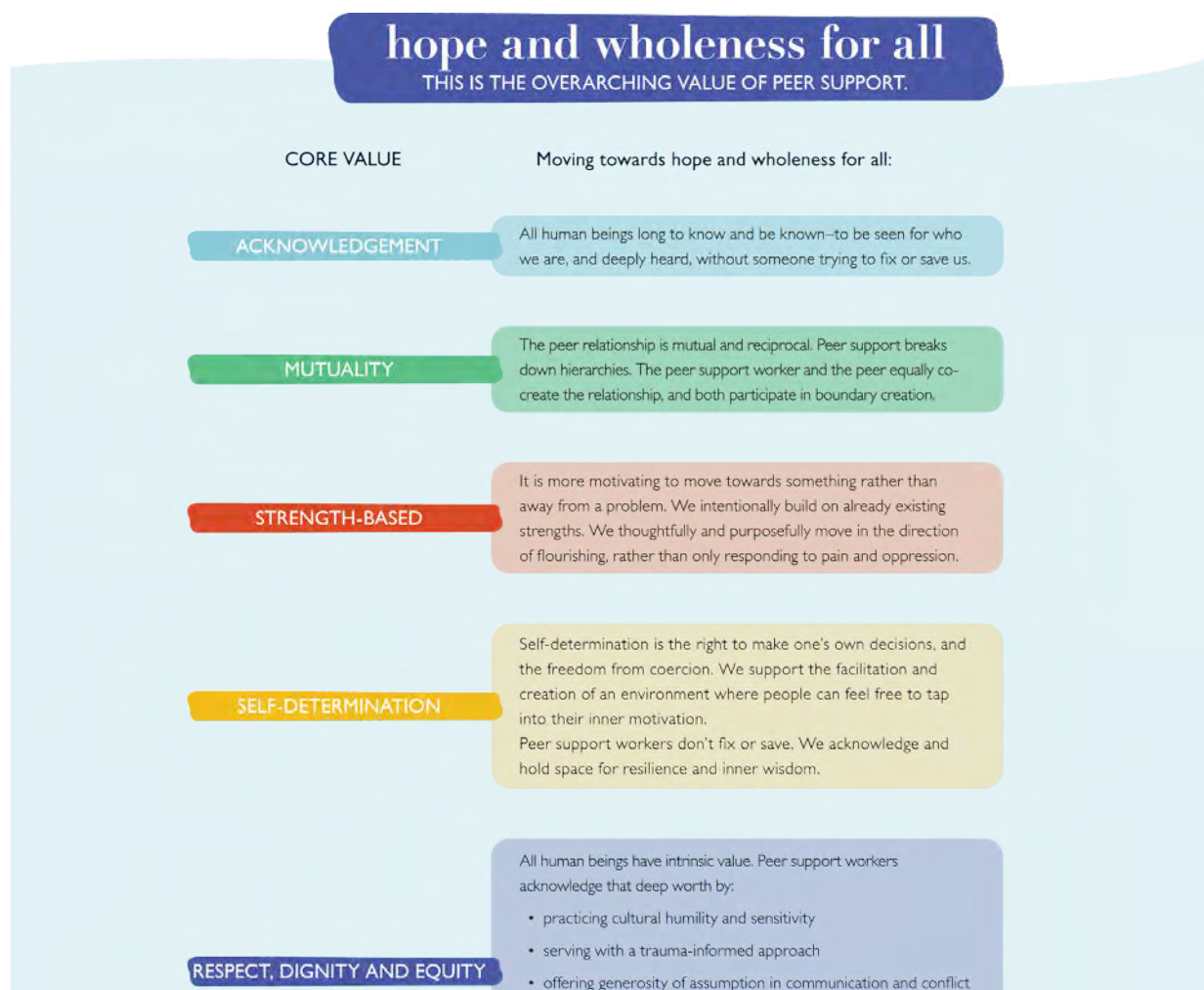
Within this training package, we've offered mindfulness practices, journals and self-care practices – feel free to use any of these tools to support you through this module. We also encourage you to practice self-compassion as you work through it. It's necessary to complete this module to receive your completion certificate. However, this entire training is grounded in compassion and the core values of peer support.

For those taking in-person training, we encourage you to talk to your facilitator if you need some extra support.



6. core values

The following core values are essential for peer support work. At the end of this module, you'll be asked to decide which ones are key to this topic.



- mindfully addressing personal biases

Peer support is about meeting people where they are at and serving others with a knowledge of equity.

BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Peer Support acknowledges that all human beings need to belong and be a part of a community. Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community. We actively work towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support workers serve with a social justice mindset, and intentionally practice empathy, compassion & self-compassion.

CURIOSITY

We are always intentional about how curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

This curiosity isn't fueled by personal gain but by a genuine interest in connection. We encourage curiosity while respecting the boundaries and protecting the privacy of the people we support.

We are continually curious, but not invasive, while challenging assumptions and narratives. We ask powerful questions. We offer generosity of assumption to those who think differently than we do. We know that listening and asking questions are more important than providing answers.

***Note on the meaning of the term "generosity of assumption" from the glossary of terms:** Assumptions happen when we don't know the whole story, and allow our brains to fill in the blanks. Often we make negative assumptions about people or situations. Generosity of assumption means that we extend someone the most generous interpretation of their intent, actions, or words.

7. life application story

Check out this scenario with Greg and Michael.

part one

Greg (a peer support worker) had been spending time with his peer, Michael, for several months. Michael was finally opening up about the death of a close friend who passed away several years ago and how it was impacting him.

"It's just really unfair. He was just getting started with his career. He had a young family... I feel like he was the only person I could really be myself with."

"That's awful. But I'm sure you have other people in your life who understand you too," said Greg.

"Yeah I guess," replied Michael.

Greg quickly realized that his comment was unhelpful as he felt Michael withdraw and noticed a disconnection swelling up between him and Michael. Greg recognized that his own discomfort around grief and loss, and his need to fix things and make them better, was what made him react the way he did.

Greg continues to think carefully about what he said to Michael, as well as Michael's reaction. Now, see what happens next when Greg changes his approach.

part two —

"I'm sorry Michael. I shouldn't have said that. You've lost someone very important in your life who you had a unique relationship with. I can't imagine how hard that is. Do you want to talk about your friend for a while?"

Michael thanks him for his apology and is able to open up again to talk about his friend and how hard it was to lose him. Greg recognized that he kept wanting to bring the conversation to a lighter place, to move Michael out of his pain before he was ready. Greg worried that he should be doing something, saying something, to help Michael feel better. He took a breath and resisted the urge to provide platitudes. He reminded himself to simply listen and be a witness to Michael's pain.

"It's been two years since he died. I should be over it," said Michael.

"You know, I still grieve the loss of my father, and he died over 10 years ago. There's no appropriate timeline for when you're supposed to move on," Greg responds.

"Yeah. I just can't believe I've lost my best friend. I don't know if I'll ever get over it."

Michael and Greg sat in silence for some time. There were lots of things Greg wanted to say to help Michael feel better, but he recognized that there was nothing he could really do or say to help except be there with him in the moment. He really struggled with not knowing "the right thing" to say.

Over the next few months, Michael would often talk about his best friend. Greg still found it hard to know what to say, but he slowly felt more comfortable to simply listen with compassion.

8. understanding loss



Sometimes something happens and life explodes into a million tiny pieces.

Nothing feels the same after a big loss. It's as though colours, smells and tastes are different, and life will never be "normal" again. Eventually, although very slowly, we find ourselves healing. We put one foot in front of the other, and somehow, we find the strength to get up and live another day. Often, we're forever changed by a loss, but we can celebrate our resilience and our ability to create a **new** normal.

As a peer support worker, this is most likely something you know and understand personally. Most of us at some point in our life have experienced a loss that has felt like a kick in the gut, and we've found ourselves struggling to catch our breath for a little while after. Your resiliency is one of the things that has brought you to this very training. Celebrate it and appreciate your strength.

understanding loss

Loss is part of the human experience, even though most of us wish it wasn't.

Over a lifetime we face many losses. The losses can range from **minor inconveniences** to **significant traumas** that can impact the rest of our life. Loss and trauma can intersect. Something is traumatic when we feel a loss of control, a sense of isolation and an overwhelming of our ability to cope; we feel an impact on our physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual health.

Some examples of losses people face are:

☐

Death of a loved one

☐

Diagnosis of an illness

☐

Injury

☐

Miscarriage

☐

Dealing with a chronic disease



- ☐ Experiencing a natural disaster
- ☐ Loss of job or career
- ☐ Loss of financial security
- ☐ Loss of child custody
- ☐ Divorce or loss of relationship
- ☐ Death or loss of a pet

This list is just a sample of potential losses. For the purpose of this module, we want to be clear that loss is more than death.

Consider the losses that have happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are some losses you and people around you have experienced because of COVID?

Loss is complex. We aren't just dealing with what we have lost but also how that loss continually impacts us in the future. In our life experience story example, Michael isn't just grieving his past relationship with his friend, he's also experiencing grief and loss around life without him in the future.

CONTINUE

abstract and future loss

Another example of loss is the loss of a dream or another kind of **abstract** loss. In a sense, a person hasn't actually lost something concrete; however, their future is forever impacted by the loss.

The movie *Little Miss Sunshine* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006) includes an example of this kind of abstract loss. It's a quirky . Im about a dysfunctional family on a road trip. They're traveling from New Mexico to California in a VW bus. In a pivotal scene, 7-year-old Olive is playing eye doctor with her older brother, 15-year-old Dwayne. Olive has some photocopied papers, and she's checking his vision. Dwayne has taken a vow of silence until he's able to leave his dysfunctional home to pursue his dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. In this scene we see that through Olive's primitive test, Dwayne is most likely colour blind. His uncle says, "Dwayne, I think you might be colour blind. You can't fly jets if you're colour blind." In this simple moment, we see this teenager's dream crumble before our eyes.

"The road is twisted and so are the laughs.
This one is a winner."

ROLLING STONE



GREG
KINNEAR

STEVE
CARELL

TONI
COLLETTE

PAUL
DANO

WITH ABIGAIL
BRESLIN

AND ALAN
ARKIN

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE



everyone pretend to be normal

FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES, in association with BIG BEACH, presents a FOX BEACH / ZOVIA / FOX SEARCHLIGHT / JONATHAN DUTTON / VALERIE FISKE film
"LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE" STEVE CARELL, TONI COLLETTE, ABIGAIL BRESLIN, PAUL DANO, GREG KINNEAR, ALAN ARKIN
MUSIC BY JACQUES JARRE, LYRICS BY PHILIPPE MATHON, PRODUCTION DESIGNER JONATHAN DUTTON, COSTUME DESIGNER ANNE LEE, EDITOR MICHAEL WELLS
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JONATHAN DUTTON AND MARC LUTHELMANN, PRODUCED BY JONATHAN DUTTON AND MARC LUTHELMANN, WRITTEN BY JONATHAN DUTTON AND VALERIE FISKE
DIRECTED BY JONATHAN DUTTON
www.foxsearchlight.com
www.littlemisssunshinemovie.co.uk

His dad pulls over and Dwayne gets out of the bus. We see him running down a hill wailing. His mother attempts to comfort him, but she seems to have little empathy, because she's more worried about getting to their destination on time. Little Olive shuffles down the hill in her bright red cowboy boots. She says nothing. She just puts her arm around Dwayne and hugs him. It seems that even though she's a small child, she has an understanding of what he has just lost. After a tender moment together, they both get up and walk back to the bus.

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Consider other pop culture (movies, books, stories). What are some other stories that reflect this kind of abstract loss?

1 of 3



How did other characters support the character experiencing loss? Or did they cause more harm?

2 of 3



What can we take away from



**these stories that we can apply
to our own work?**

3 of 3

CONTINUE

Many of us have experienced abstract losses like Dwayne's. Loss can also be multilayered. One loss can be the catalyst for more loss. It's important when we support people that we realize that loss can be complex and can go very deep.

covid-19 and loss

Most people globally were affected by **concrete, abstract** and **future** loss in 2020,2021 and 2022 due to COVID-19. Plans were changed, graduations and weddings were cancelled or postponed, businesses were lost and career paths needed to shift. Many were gripped by the loss of connection to loved ones, due to isolation. Substance use increased. Many people's lives were lost to overdoses.



During COVID stay-at-home orders, isolation increased. Many people were home alone for long periods of time, and using alone. There's already a lot of shame and stigma for people who use substances. Shame combined with loneliness, problematic substance use and the stigma of a mental health diagnosis is a recipe for overdose. The border closures meant that drug toxicity increased, because many substances were mixed with fentanyl.

Heartbreakingly, 6,263 lost their lives due to toxic drugs in B.C. between 2020–2022.

Fewer people have been affected by the virus itself, but everyone has been impacted by losses due to COVID-19.

how were you impacted by covid-19?

CONTINUE

ambiguous loss

based on the collins dictionary, if you describe something as “ambiguous” ...

- You mean that it's unclear or confusing because it can be understood in more than one way
- You mean that it contains several different ideas or attitudes that don't fit well together

The term “ambiguous loss” was coined by Pauline Boss in the 1970s. Boss is a researcher who was studying the families of soldiers who went missing in action.

“Everyone experiences ambiguous loss if only from breaking up with someone or having aging parents or kids leaving home. As we learn from the people who must cope with the more catastrophic situations of ambiguous loss, we learn how to tolerate the ambiguity in our more common losses in everyday life.”

Pauline Boss

Ambiguous loss describes the kind of loss that lacks emotional closure or a clear understanding. It leaves a person searching and complicates the grieving process, often resulting in unresolved grief.

Now, let's look at the life application story from earlier in the module through the lens of ambiguous loss.

life application story revisited —

Michael knows with certainty that his friend has passed away, so he's able to experience his grief. If his friend went missing, however, and hadn't been found, Michael would have been left with the uncertainty of ambiguous loss. Is his friend alive or dead? Will he come back sometime or is he gone forever? These are the kinds of questions people face when they experience ambiguous loss.

An ambiguous loss is complicated. One can feel hopeless and lost due to lack of certainty; since there's so much unknown in these situations, the grieving process freezes – or remains on hold – for people. It's like being stuck in grief limbo.

Pauline Boss has created two categories of **ambiguous loss**:

1. physical absence with psychological presence —

- Divorce
- Lack of contact with a loved one due to immigration
- Someone is missing

2. psychological absence with physical presence —

This means someone is emotionally, cognitively or psychologically absent, which can be due to

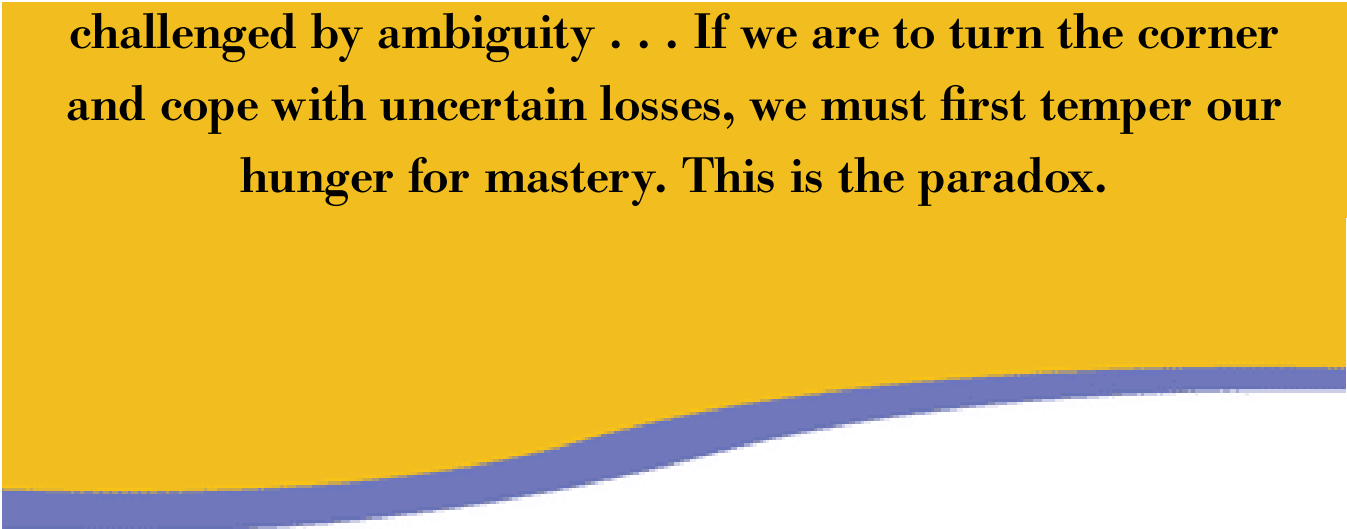
- Dementia
- Traumatic brain injury
- A mental health diagnosis
- Problematic substance use

what are some other examples of ambiguous loss?

In her book *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (2000), Boss says:

Ambiguous loss makes us feel incompetent. It erodes our sense of mastery and destroys our belief in the world as a fair, orderly, and manageable place. But if we learn to cope with uncertainty, we must realize that there are differing views of the world, even when that world is less

challenged by ambiguity . . . If we are to turn the corner and cope with uncertain losses, we must first temper our hunger for mastery. This is the paradox.



building resilience in the face of ambiguous loss

In the article *Ambiguous loss: A Complicated Type of Grief When Loved Ones Disappear* (Boss, Yeats, 2014, pp. 67-68), the authors share some guidelines for building resilience when experiencing ambiguous loss. These guidelines are not linear, and don't need to be followed in a consecutive fashion. They're not steps and don't need to be followed in any particular order.

Click on the graphic to learn more.





finding meaning

Meaning and hope go hand in hand. It's hard to hold on to hope without meaning. Finding meaning will be different for every culture.

Boss and Yeats (2014) say "Grieving the loss of someone who is here but not here, or gone but not for sure, defies logic. Its irrationality challenges meaning making. So how do people make sense out of ambiguous loss? It takes some time, but we start by naming the problem; what you are experiencing is ambiguous loss, one of the most difficult types of loss, because there is no possibility of resolution."

Once someone is able to accept the uncertainty, then they can begin to make meaning. Isolation inhibits meaning making. Connection and community support it. In peer support, you have the opportunity to connect and support someone to not feel alone in their struggle.



discovering hope

(Since the publishing of this article, Boss has since changed this to "Discovering new hope")

Hope is something we talk about a lot in this work already. As we get more comfortable with the discomfort of uncertainty, we begin to have more capacity for hope. Many people find purpose and hope in supporting others who are facing similar situations; which can often be a big motivator in why many of us choose to become a peer support worker.

Discovering new hope is about finding new things to motivate us to get out of bed in the morning. It's about harnessing all the good things about connection and creativity.



revising attachment

This is about balancing the tension of holding on to what was lost, and also letting go so that we can experience something new. It requires a **both/and** attitude and that can be hard since either/or mindsets are often valued in western culture.

It also involves the act of grieving and celebrating what was lost, and at the same time seeking new connections and experiences. There will never be closure to the loss, the grief will likely always be there, but there's also the potential for new connections and attachments. Learning to practice presence is very important for revising attachment.



normalizing ambivalence

Ambivalence is the state of having mixed feelings that may even contradict each other. With ambiguous loss there can be a wide range of feelings – anger, guilt, even fear. Conflicting feelings are so normal for those experiencing ambiguous loss. Denying the feelings never helps. Acknowledging them while learning techniques to allow the presence of big feelings, and then letting them pass, is very important when normalizing ambivalence.



reconstructing identity

When we are defined by a role (parent, spouse, or even a work role like teacher or nurse) and that role changes due to ambiguous loss, we can find ourselves questioning our very identity. Restructuring identity is about creating new meaning around our identity and discovering new things about ourselves as an independent person. Connection and community are really important, as isolation will keep us resisting the work of reconstructing a new identity.



tempering mastery

(Since the publishing of this article, Boss has since changed this to “Adjusting mastery”)

Mastery is the need for control and certainty. With ambiguous loss there is no certainty. We can’t control that, but there are other things we can control. Creating practices and routines such as exercise, meditation, prayer, listening to music or anything like that can help.

For those of you who are familiar with wellness plans such as WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan), something like that can go a long way in supporting us to deal with uncertainty.

The common denominator in all of the guidelines above is connection. Connection and community while experiencing ambiguous loss is very important. As a peer support worker, you get to be in the role of connecting and facilitating broader community connections. Please remember that you can never take away or fix someone else’s pain.

You get to be there as a support, hold space and acknowledge their pain.

CONTINUE

family peer support & ambiguous loss

Ambiguous loss can grip many families as they support a loved one who's struggling with a mental health diagnosis or substance use. This kind of loss often has no end in sight. People can experience ongoing grief for years as they watch their loved one struggle.

Family peer support workers certainly understand ambiguous loss. Depending on how their loved one is doing, they might be in the midst of navigating their own ambiguous loss. This can potentially bring up difficult feelings as they support families. Practicing self-care and having clear boundaries will be an important aspect of this work.

This is a great example of the mutuality of peer support. The connection can be supportive for both the family peer support worker and the person they are working with. Sharing with someone who understands first-hand what you are going through can create connection and the opportunity for comfort.

However, if at some point it becomes too painful for a family peer support worker to continue a relationship, it's okay to take a break or step away from the relationship and find a different person to work with them.

CONTINUE

check your knowledge

In the *Little Miss Sunshine* example above, Dwayne suffered what is known as an _____ loss because his future is impacted by the loss of his dream to be a pilot.

Type your answer here

SUBMIT

A loved one is experiencing mental health and substance use issues. What type of loss might this example represent, according to Pauline Boss?

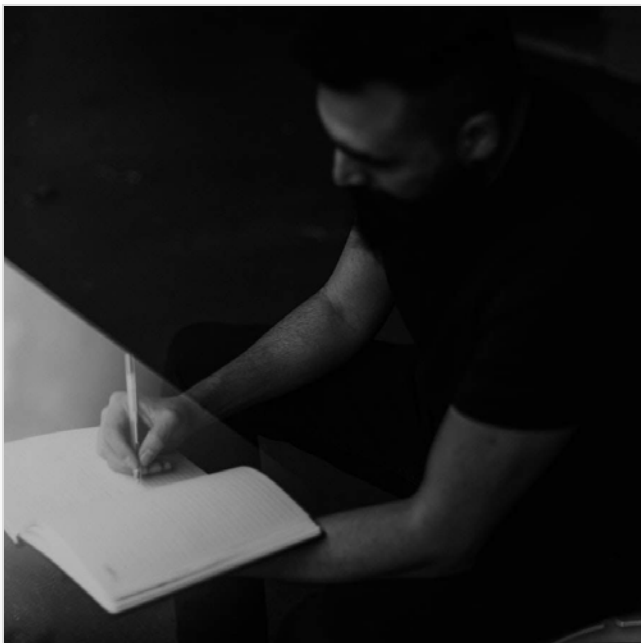
- ☐ ambiguous loss
- ☐ future loss
- ☐ abstract loss

SUBMIT

CONTINUE

question for reflection

Answer this question in your reflection journal.



**List some concrete ways you
can support someone who's
dealing with ambiguous loss.**

1 of 1

9. acknowledgement

“True comfort in grief is in acknowledging the pain, not in trying to make it go away. Companionship, not correction, is the way forward.”

Megan Devine

CONTINUE

Being heard and seen is the most supportive thing someone experiencing loss can be given.



In our Life Application Story, Greg struggled to know what to say. Often, we feel similar to Greg, and we get uncomfortable and awkward when we're speaking with someone who is dealing with loss. When we feel awkward, we can end up being dismissive by avoiding the other person's pain.

Acknowledgement means that we choose to see and hear someone's pain. We know that nothing we say or do can fix their pain. As much as we would love to wave a magic wand and take the pain away, we can't.

The best thing we can give to someone is connection and acknowledgement.

examples of acknowledgement

How do we acknowledge someone's pain? Acknowledgement requires empathy, and, as you'll remember from **module 1: foundations**, according to Dr. Brené Brown, empathy requires at least four skills.

perspective taking —

Being willing and able to see and feel the world through the eyes of another person.



staying out of judgement —

Judgement is often an attempt to protect ourselves from others' pain. Staying out of judgement means being open to what they are feeling.



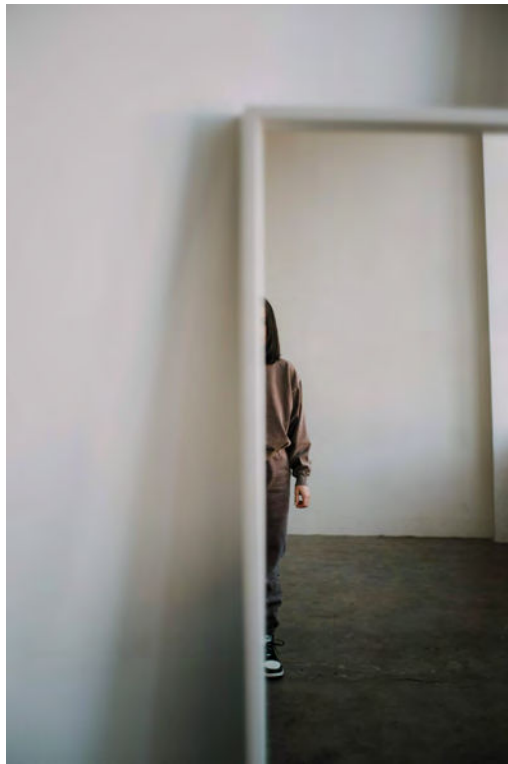
recognizing the emotion

Recognizing the emotion means looking into your own experience and remembering what the other person seems to be feeling.



communication —

Try to validate what they are feeling by speaking what you see back to them.



What we say shouldn't be a formula. But the statements below give an example of how we might show acknowledgement:

- ☐ "I'm sorry that's happening. Do you want to tell me about it?"
- ☐ "It sounds like you are in a hard place now."
- ☐ "I'm truly sorry to hear that you're going through this."
- ☐ "From what I'm hearing, you're feeling..."
- ☐ "We can talk about this for as long as you need."
- ☐ "I don't even know what to say right now. I'm just glad you told me."

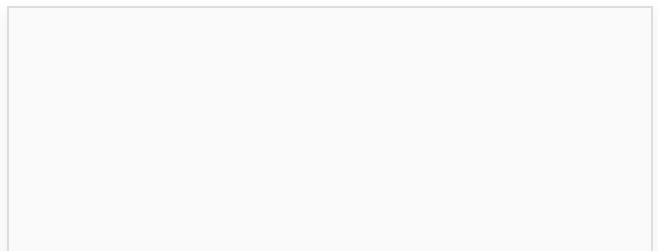
“The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is.”

Parker Palmer

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.





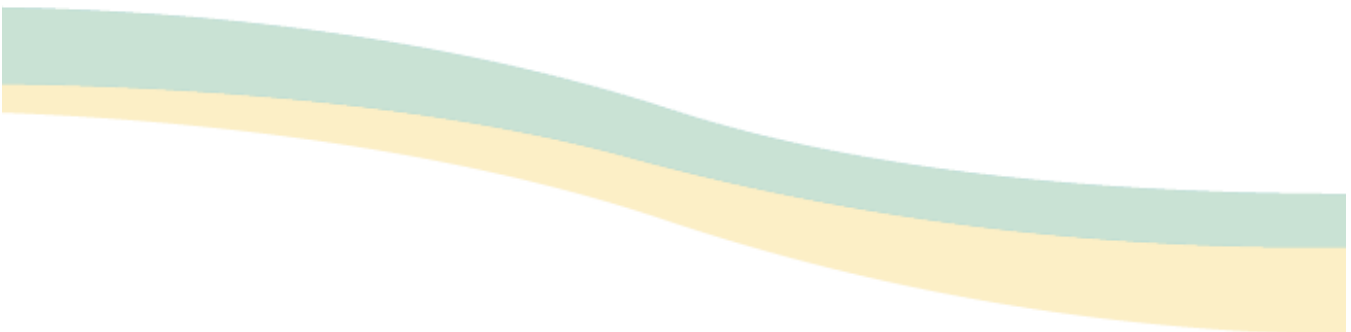
What are some ways you can be present and support someone who is experiencing grief and loss?

1 of 2



Consider the topics that we have covered so far, especially worldview, self-determination, cultural humility and trauma-informed care. How will these topics influence how you connect with someone who's experiencing grief and loss?

2 of 2



10. comparing one loss to another



It's so easy to compare one loss to another. Competition and judgement come with being human. One of the biggest take-aways from the "Categories and Containers" module is that we all have different perceptions and judgements based on our own experiences. There's no one right way to see something, because everything is filtered through our experience.

With a mindful approach we can begin to unpack our judgements and biases, learn to question them and suspend them.

Judgements around loss and trauma can be very common. As we mentioned in the trauma-informed care module, trauma isn't the event itself. Trauma is the physiological and emotional response after a traumatic situation.

This means that people can have very similar experiences and have different trauma responses. One person might feel very traumatized by a situation, and for someone else it might not make them feel powerless at all. They might simply get back up and walk away with very little emotional impact.





Because of this, it's very important that we never judge someone's loss or trauma response against another's. The sentiment, "why are they still struggling...? They should be better by now" is never helpful. It invalidates and isolates people.

As supporters we never compare losses. We support each person exactly where they're at.

invisible disabilities and loss

People with invisible disabilities fall into many categories, including:



Chronic pain conditions such as fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome

- ☐ Those living with mental health diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia
- ☐ Neurological conditions such as autism, ADHD or epilepsy
- ☐ Chronic illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, lupus or Crohn's disease
- ☐ Hearing or vision impairments
- ☐ Learning disabilities such as dyslexia or dyscalculia
- ☐ Chronic migraines or headaches
- ☐ Chronic respiratory conditions such as asthma
- ☐ Autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis or Hashimoto's thyroiditis
- ☐ Chronic digestive conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or celiac disease

It's important to remember that just because a disability is not visible, it's no less valid or disabling. People with invisible disabilities often face unique challenges and obstacles in their daily lives, and may require accommodations or support to help them manage their condition.

As such, their responses to trauma or loss can seem surprising to those who don't know the reality of their situation.

For example, an autistic person may be hypersensitive to bright lights or certain wavelengths as well as certain sounds, smells, textures and tastes. They may be triggered by changes in routine, anxiety or communication difficulties. In the face of such overstimulation, that person may become overwhelmed, angry or have a meltdown. To the outside observer, such a strong response to a smell or light may seem excessive and ridiculous. Rather than support the person in a time of need, they may instead try to convince them their response is inappropriate, or even shame them for being so extreme. This can cause additional stress to the autistic person who is already experiencing trauma.

Peer support workers must avoid such judgements and instead, focus on supporting them. This will require consciousness of the judgement, an effort to understand the person's circumstances, and a willingness to accept and love them wherever they are.

CONTINUE

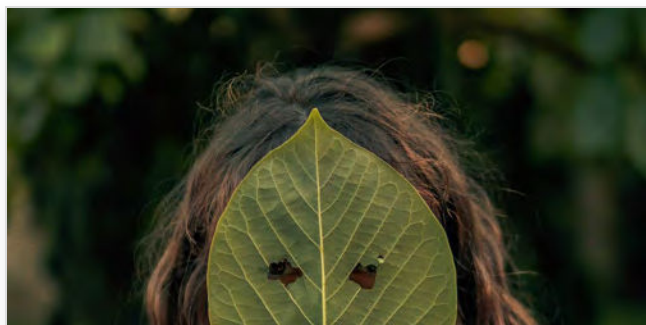
questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Have you ever compared one loss or trauma response to another? If so, why did you do it?

1 of 3



Have you ever misjudged someone with an invisible disability? If so,



how did you treat them? How did they react?

2 of 3



How can you suspend your judgements against others?

3 of 3



11. unpacking old paradigms of cycles of grief

the five stages of grief

Many of us grew up hearing about Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' model of the Five Stages of Grief.

Stage 1	Denial
Stage 2	Depression
Stage 3	Anger
Stage 4	Bargaining
Stage 5	Acceptance

It's still a common strongly held belief that it's essential people cycle through these five stages of grief when they've experienced a loss. We see the five stages written in pamphlets, referred to at hospice centres and by many professionals. You may have even had someone share these stages with you.

However, what's **not** commonly known is that Kübler-Ross originally wrote the five stages of grief for people who were given a terminal diagnosis. The five stages came from her book *On Death and Dying*, originally published in 1969. She theorized that people who found out that they were dying needed to go through these stages as a journey toward acceptance of the diagnosis.

These five stages were never written for people who were experiencing grief or loss of a loved one, and they have never been scientifically researched or proven. The book was based on case studies of dying people who sought Kübler-Ross' services when she was in medical school.

**Case studies are anecdotal, meaning they are
based on personal accounts not research or
facts.**

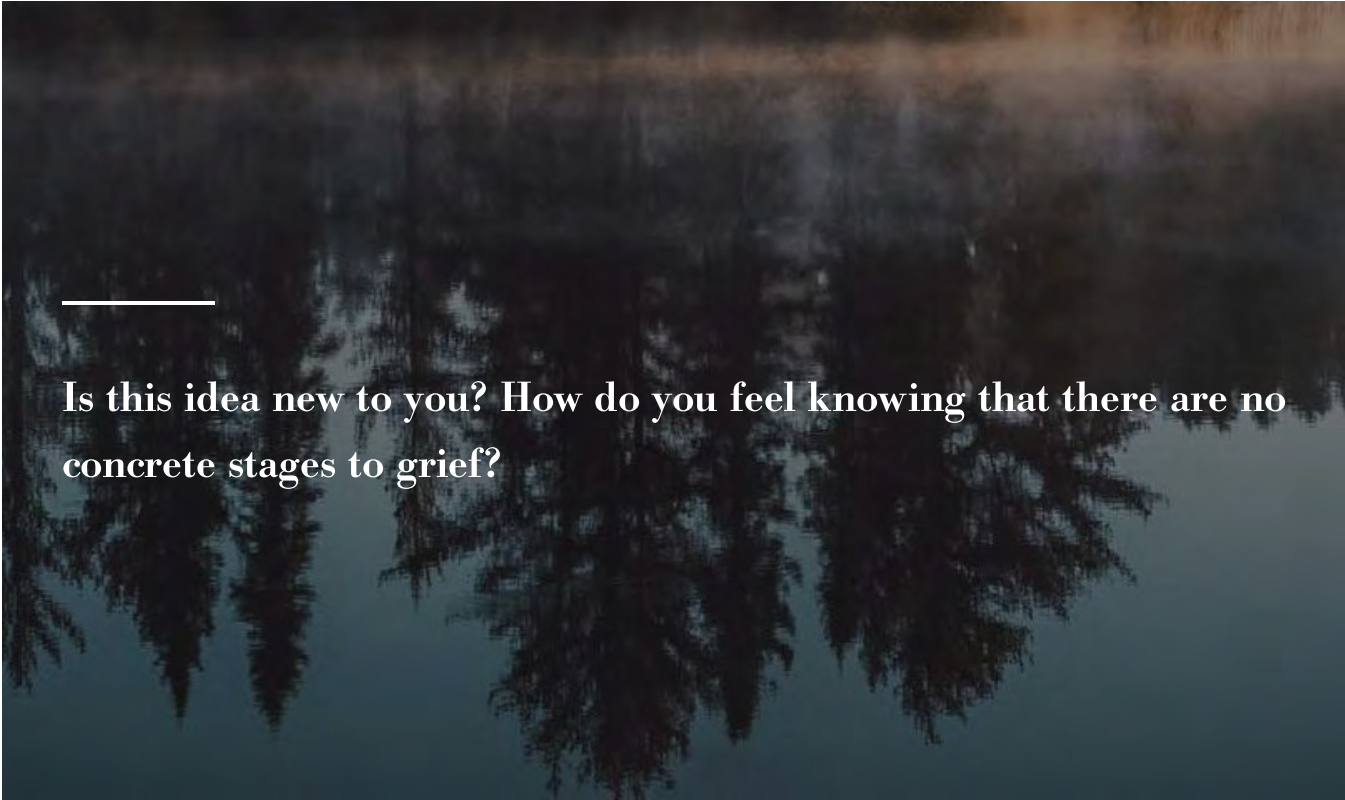
In the Psychology Today article *Why the Five Stages of Grief Are Wrong*, author David B. Feldman, Ph.D. (2017) says this:



Studies now show that grieverers don't progress through these stages in a lock-step fashion. Consequently, when any of us loses someone we love, we may find that we fit the stages precisely as Kübler-Ross outlined, or we may skip all but one. We may race through them or drag our feet all the way to acceptance. We may even repeat or add stages that Kübler-Ross never dreamed of. In fact, the actual grief process looks a lot less like a neat set of stages and a lot more like a roller coaster of emotions. Even Kübler-Ross said that grief doesn't proceed in a linear and predictable fashion, writing toward the end of her career that she regretted her stages had been misunderstood.

Because the process is not linear, grief and healing from loss tend to be processed in waves. There's no standard formula or timeframe for healing, and some losses will always be felt. Some losses change us, and we adapt, but we will never be the same.

There's no right way to experience loss. There's no wrong way to grieve. Everyone's journey will be individual and unique.



Is this idea new to you? How do you feel knowing that there are no concrete stages to grief?

12. collective grief

Some grief and loss are individual, and some losses are felt collectively as a community or even a nation. Connection is sometimes easier to achieve when we experience a collective loss, although only if people are willing to talk openly about it.



community loss

Some losses we face as a smaller community, like when we lose people within our communities whom we care about. These communities can be neighbourhoods, workplaces, church or group organizations, or friend groups. There can be an extra element of trauma when the loss stems from a suicide or an overdose.

**In community losses, there is a need for
the community to come together to
process pain collectively.**

b.c. overdose losses during covid-19

The fentanyl poisoning crisis in British Columbia has cut a swath through every demographic and socio-economic status – the phrase “overdose affects us all” rings true in every community in our province.

It cannot be overstated that certain populations and communities that face institutional and systemic oppressors are disproportionately impacted by B.C.’s first of two compounding public health emergencies (the second being the COVID-19 global pandemic).



Peers have found themselves at the forefront of these two crises, innovating overdose prevention services and filling the gaps that have arisen as a result of government inaction. Sadly, many of the peers working in these

services have experienced tremendous trauma and grief as a result of a public health emergency that's killing their colleagues, friends and loved ones.

The community grief shouldered by peers in this sector is profound and casts a ripple effect into the lives of countless others. While this course, and others like it, is here to arm you with the tools to navigate these troubled waters, we have to acknowledge that normalizing something that is in fact, not normal, is problematic.

Supporting peers to strengthen their resilience amidst the tragedy of losing lives to preventable causes is one small step we can and should take. But we must also acknowledge that this workload is both untenable and unacceptable. To truly stem the tide of death and grief, peers and allies must also continue to act as advocates, pushing for a system that one day will not place so many at risk of dying, and so many others at risk of losing the people they love.

As a peer support worker, you may find yourself in a position of facilitating an opportunity for your community to come together to grieve. If you feel unable to manage this due to your own grief, you might be in a position to advocate for your employer to offer that support. Often when tragedies impact an organization, counsellors or therapists are brought in to support people affected.

Regardless of the formal support available, it's important to create opportunities to come together, share stories and grieve after community losses; these are key to healing.

CONTINUE

global loss due to the covid-19 pandemic

In 2020 onwards, we face another kind of loss and global trauma with the COVID-19 pandemic. Every human in the world is facing a loss that's affecting them in one way or another. It's important to talk collectively about the various losses people are facing.

Throughout the pandemic we've seen an increase in overdose deaths. Due to ongoing isolation, many people are also struggling with increased anxiety and depression, not to mention the psychological effects on people who are dealing directly with the COVID-19 virus itself.

There can be a tendency to tell people to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps"; however, those kinds of platitudes^{*} are never helpful or effective. It's important to feel our feelings, as that's the only way to process them. Coming together to process the pain, support each other and brainstorm coping strategies are all helpful for individuals and communities.



* We'll discuss platitudes a little later in the module.

CONTINUE

traumatic global events

In addition to the collective losses listed above, we also experience global events that are traumatizing. Natural disasters bring collective loss – such as the wildfires in Fort McMurray or the Thailand tsunami.

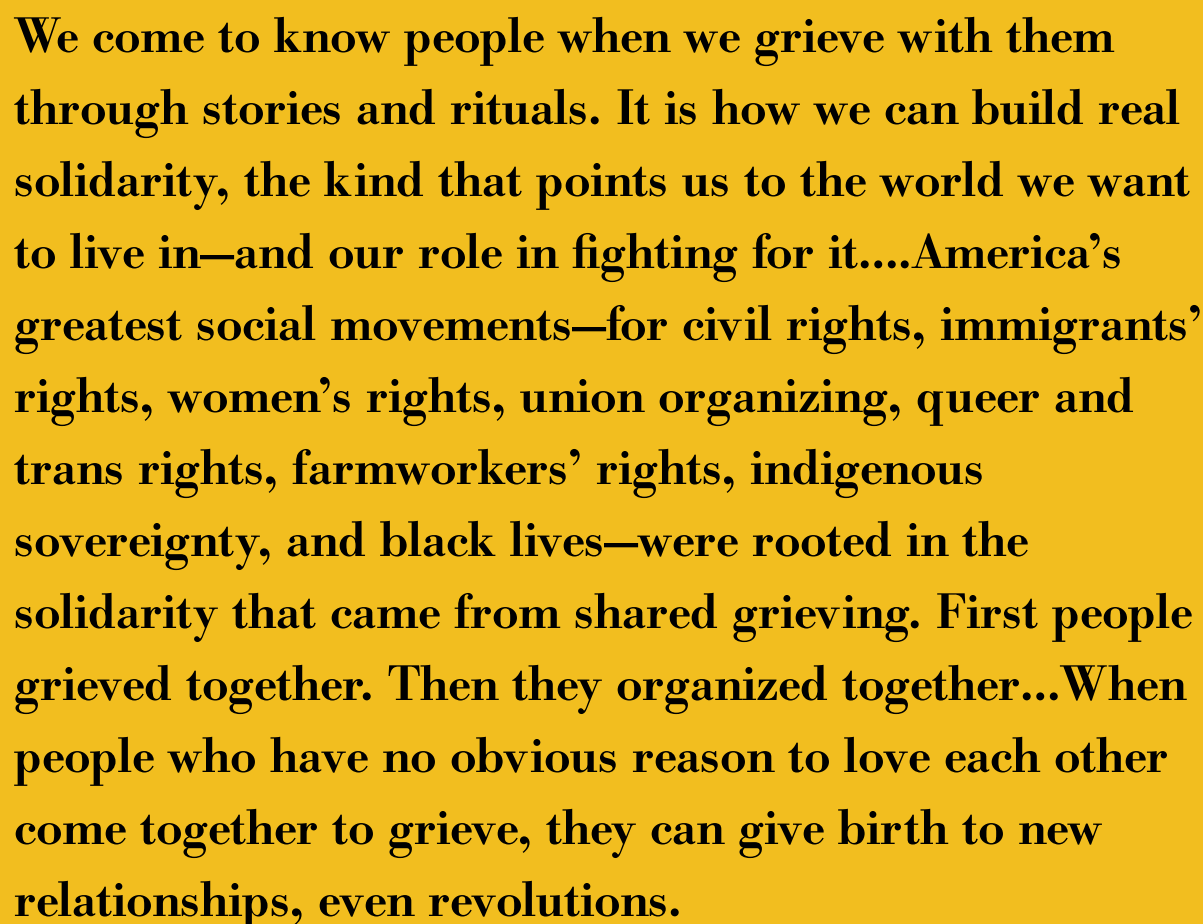
the impact of 9/11



The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 also had a huge impact on many people. It was a pivotal moment in the world, and much tragedy and loss stemmed from that event. In situations like that, it's so essential that we grieve together as a society.

When we pause and take the time to grieve, we're able to proceed in a more thoughtful way. When we don't allow ourselves time or space to feel our feelings of loss, sadness and grief, we're more likely to move forward in a way that is fuelled by anger and a desire for vengeance.

In her book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (2020), Valarie Kaur talks about collective grief in regard to the events of September 11, and the aftermath of racist attacks that followed:



We come to know people when we grieve with them through stories and rituals. It is how we can build real solidarity, the kind that points us to the world we want to live in—and our role in fighting for it....America's greatest social movements—for civil rights, immigrants' rights, women's rights, union organizing, queer and trans rights, farmworkers' rights, indigenous sovereignty, and black lives—were rooted in the solidarity that came from shared grieving. First people grieved together. Then they organized together...When people who have no obvious reason to love each other come together to grieve, they can give birth to new relationships, even revolutions.



canada's truth and reconciliation commission

Canada's [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) existed with the purpose of acknowledging the truth of Canada's terrible history through the sharing of people's stories and experiences. The goal of the Commission was to support the ongoing need to tell and hear the truth about the horrible acts of colonization in order to create opportunities for reconciliation. Acknowledging the pain that was caused is always the first step in any reconciliation process.



CONTINUE

residential schools



In recent years, numerous unmarked graves have been discovered on the grounds of residential schools in Canada. These schools were established in the 19th century and were run by the government and various religious institutions with the aim of assimilating Indigenous children into Canadian culture. The graves discovered are believed to contain the remains of Indigenous children who died while attending these schools, many of whom were victims of abuse, neglect and disease.

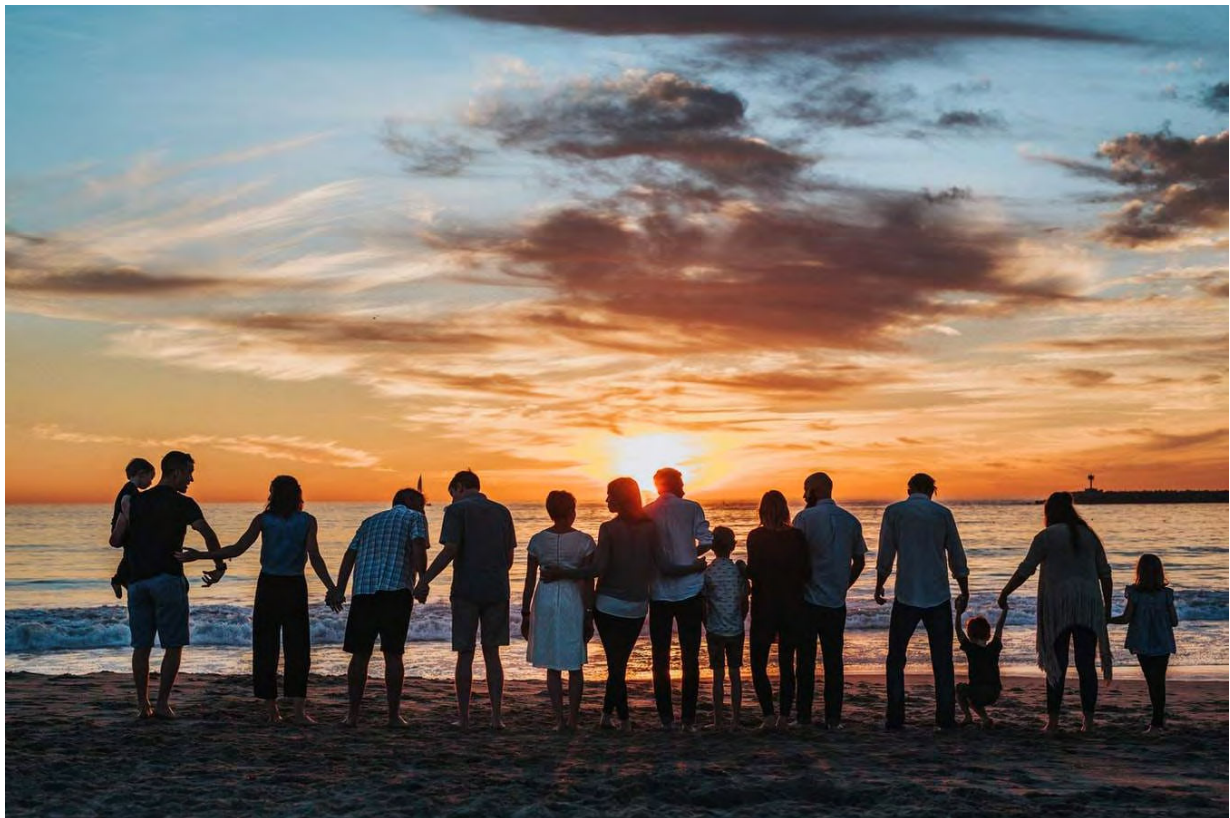
The discovery of these graves has sparked a national reckoning in Canada, with Indigenous leaders calling for justice and accountability for the atrocities committed against Indigenous children in the residential school system. People across the country – and the world – have felt a collective sense of grief as this tragedy has unfolded. Uncovering the reality of these schools and the anguish they have inflicted on countless individuals is just a starting point in the lengthy journey of recovery.

CONTINUE

consumer/survivor movement

The [consumer/survivor movement](#), which birthed the grassroots peer support movement, also began as an opportunity for people to come together to grieve and support others who had experienced the same systemic oppression.

Those early gatherings were the birth of a movement that has essentially made this training and work possible.



13. supporting someone who's grieving

“Sadness is treated with human connection.”

Pauline Boss

CONTINUE



A lot of us never learn how to support someone in their grief. It can be very uncomfortable to face the discomfort we feel when we are unable to fix the loss or change the situation that someone we care about is facing. The truth is that we can't fix someone who's grieving. We can't fix the grief or remove the pain. As much as we wish we could, we're unable to change the situation.

**When the people we support are experiencing grief and loss,
our role as peer support workers is to come alongside and
hold space for them.**

In her book *It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* (2018), Megan Devine says:

The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside. There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of. You don't need solutions. You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life. Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

CONTINUE

We may feel helpless and lost when supporting someone who's grieving.

That sense of helplessness can sometimes fuel a need within us to do something to ease the person's suffering.

We want to fix it and provide some relief for them. This desperation within us can cause us to say things that come from a good place but can be hurtful to the person experiencing grief.



As a result of our own discomfort – we humans tend to be quite uncomfortable with pain, especially someone else's pain – we find ourselves trying to push people along in their grief before they're ready. We can feel a desire to be a "cheerleader."

Being a cheerleader means that we aren't necessarily engaged with the person but instead are focused on cheering them up or cheering them on from the sidelines, like an observer. We can find ourselves offering platitudes, thinking that we're supporting someone to move forward. However, when we're really honest with ourselves, the desire to fix comes from a need to ease our own discomfort.

**Our role is NOT to be a cheerleader. We're there simply to be a support.
Don't try to fix that which can't be fixed. Don't try to cheer someone out**

of a grief that must be felt.

Sharing a platitude like “everything happens for a reason” does more to dismiss someone’s pain, than to alleviate it or support them through it. The truth is that pain from grief and loss is not fixable by someone else, especially from someone simply cheering another person on. Some pain is just not fixable, and we need to do our own work to deal with that discomfort.

A photograph of three women from behind, standing under the branches of a cherry blossom tree. They are wearing traditional headscarves: one is red with a floral pattern, one is white with a floral pattern, and one is white with a green and red border. The background is a soft-focus view of the blossoms and a distant mountain range.

A cultural humility mindset is also very important when supporting someone in grief. Many cultures and religions have specific traditions and practices around grief and loss. We must humbly respect those practices.

CONTINUE

questions for reflection

Answer these questions in your reflection journal.



Can you remember a time when someone tried to support you with a “cheerleader” approach? How did that make you feel?

1 of 4



What are some ways you can support someone without trying to fix them? (Refer to this module’s life application story)

2 of 4



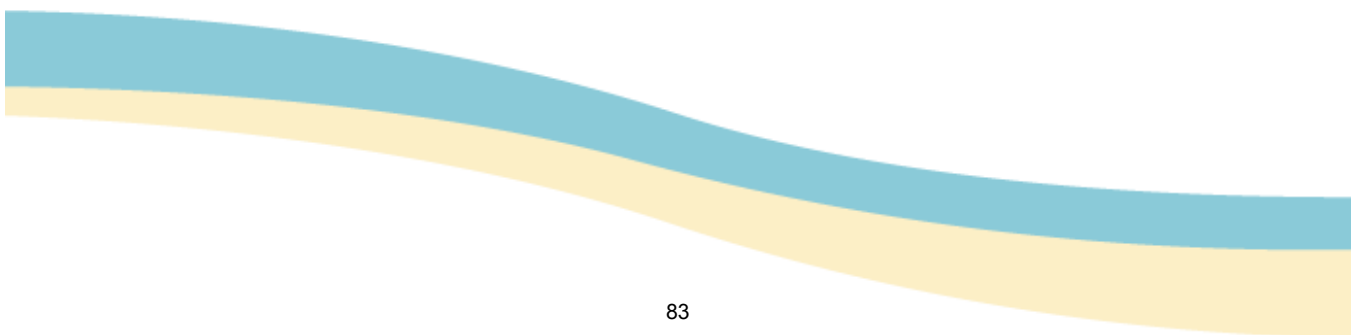
Do you have any cultural traditions around grief and loss?

3 of 4



Do a little online research around how some cultures grieve. Write one or two things you learned about three different cultures.

4 of 4



14. avoiding platitudes

what is a platitude?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a platitude as a remark or statement that may be true but is boring and has no meaning because it has been said so many times before.

1 of 1

It's easy to let a platitude roll off our tongue. We have all heard them a million times before, but platitudes are quite dismissive and can leave someone feeling unheard. Let's unpack this a little, with some examples.

things to avoid saying and why

“Everything happens for a reason.”

This is trite. The truth is that sometimes bad things just happen. We hope that we can all get through hard things but saying “everything happens for a reason” negates the person’s pain.

Instead, we can say something like, “I see how much this is hurting. I want you to know that I’m here.”

“Your person is in a better place.”

“But they are not here... with me, right now.”

This can be felt as dismissive. It can make the person feel ashamed for feeling sad. Comments like this also can keep people from doing the important work of processing their pain.

Instead we can say something like, “I’m so sorry you have to go through this.”

“Your person would want you to move on ”

As we covered in this module, grief has no time limits. When this is said to someone, they can hear it as: “your grief is taking a long time... you need to get over this.”

“I know that things will get better for you.”

You don’t actually know that. You can be holding hope for someone, but you don’t have a crystal ball.

Consider some other ways you can share hope with them, rather than a platitude. What can you do to share hope?

“At least you had some good times with that person. Treasure those moments.”

Again, this negates their pain. Instead say, “Tell me about your person. Tell me a story.”

Many people love talking about their loved ones who they’ve lost. It keeps the memory alive, but people are sometimes afraid to ask about the loved one.

“I know how you feel.”

Everyone’s experience of loss is different.

Instead, try “I don’t know what you’re feeling but know that I’m here.”

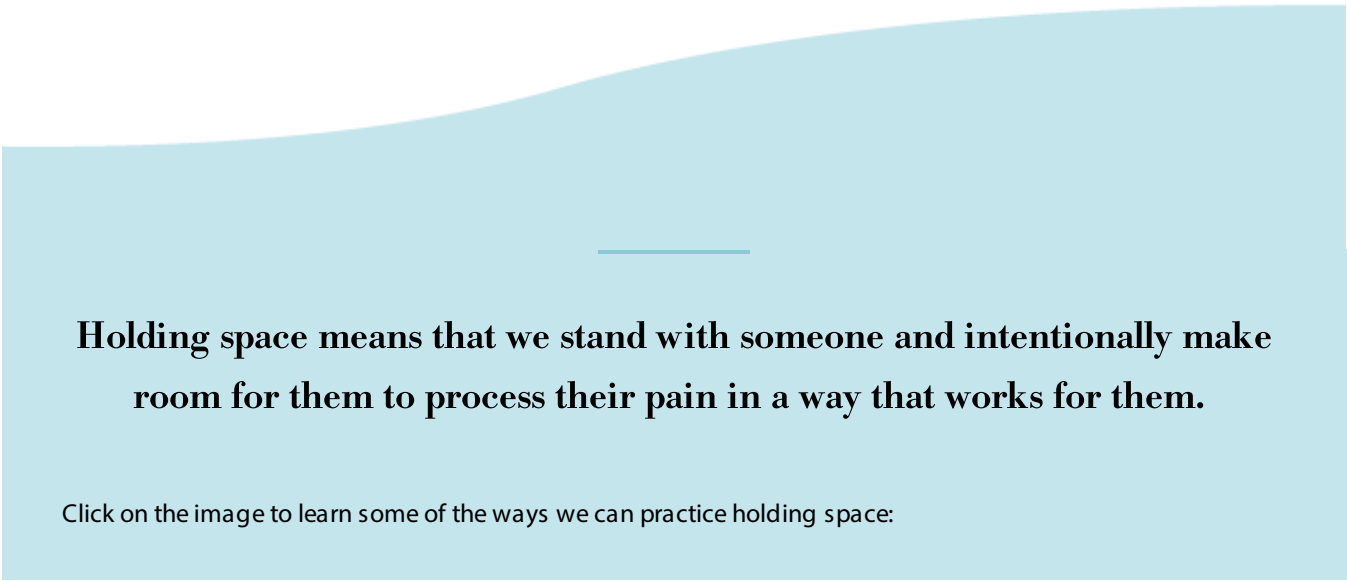
“Cheer up!”

This strongly negates someone’s feelings.

Instead, continue to be invitational. Invite someone to go for a walk, out for coffee or to see a movie. Be okay if they say no, but never stop asking.

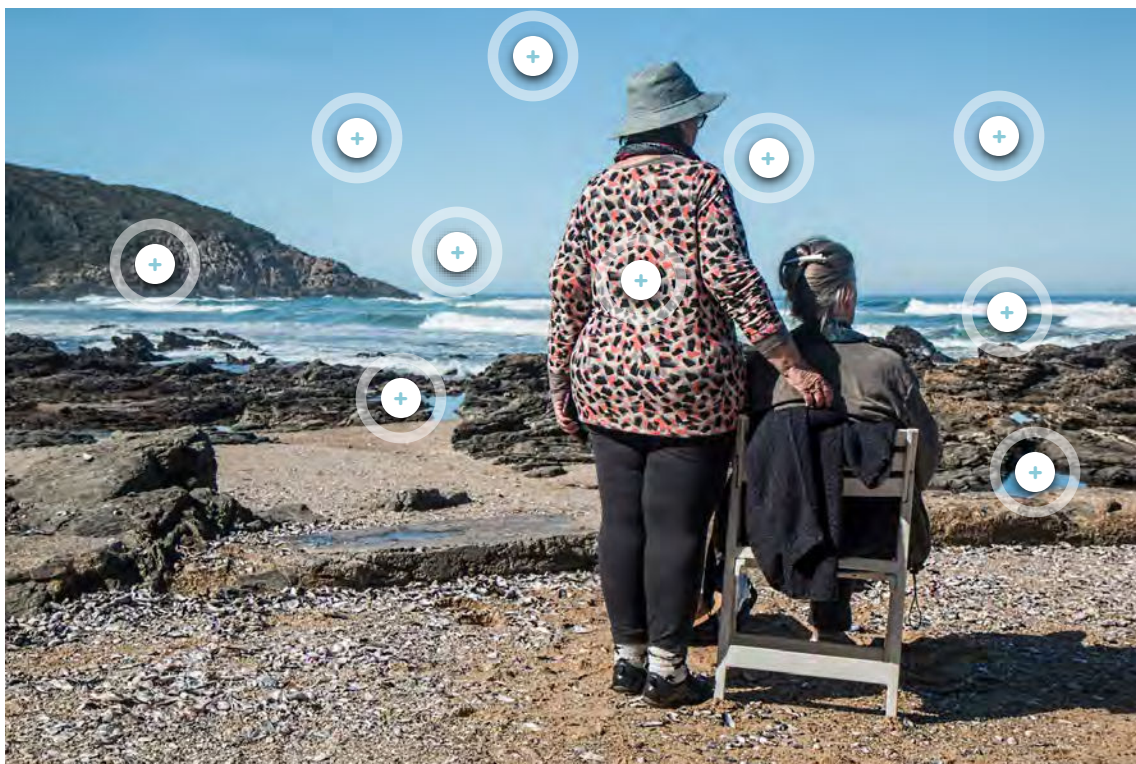


15. holding space



Holding space means that we stand with someone and intentionally make room for them to process their pain in a way that works for them.

Click on the image to learn some of the ways we can practice holding space:





Come alongside someone and bring your full presence.

Notice – and then suspend – any judgements, biases or assumptions we might have. It's not for us to judge the way the person is processing their situation. Remember that we're seeing the situation from our own perspectives.

Let go of any agendas we might have.

Create a safe space at all times. This invites people to share if and when they want to.

Be humble. Humility helps us consider other's needs to be as important as our own. When we practice humility, we are willing to serve others.

Let go of your ego and the need to see a particular outcome. The growth or lack of growth the person is experiencing is not reflective of the support we're offering.

Don't take someone's power away by doing too much for them or by making decisions for them that aren't for us to make.

Don't try to fix the person – trust their inner wisdom. Trust allows us to have confidence that the right thing will come about without trying to control it or make it happen.

Listen and engage with empathy. Empathy allows us to be deeply present to someone's thoughts and feelings with such compassionate accuracy that they can hear their own thoughts more clearly,

Don't fill the sacred space with advice, too much talking or anything that's not welcomed by the person, especially if the motivation for filling the space is about masking our own discomfort.

16. core values assessment

question for reflection

Answer this question in your reflection journal.



In what ways have the core values (see list below) intersected with the topic of supporting someone who is grieving?

1 of 1

CONTINUE

core peer support values



acknowledgement —

All human beings deserve to be seen for who they are.

IN ACTION: Peer support strives to acknowledge – and deeply hear – people where they are in their journey.

PSWs SUGGEST: Asking open-ended questions and actively listening to the PSW to see if they feel comfortable sharing their experience. Ask: “What do you think about that situation?” “Is there a coping strategy that you have used in a previous similar experience that worked for you?”

mutuality —

All healthy relationships are mutual and reciprocal.

IN ACTION: Peer support relationships are co-created, with all parties participating in boundary creation.

PSWs SUGGEST: Having a conversation about what is and isn’t okay to discuss with the PSW.

“...Even though I am a PSW, it’s painful for me to make eye contact with people. Hopefully, clients will see that if I’m looking away that it actually means that I am deeply listening to them. Being vulnerable and open seems to allow the other person to do their version of the same, building trust and respect and co-creating the relationship.”

strength-based —

Every human being has strengths.

IN ACTION: Peer support intentionally builds on existing strengths. It thoughtfully and purposefully moves in the direction of flourishing, rather than only responding to pain and oppression.

PSWs SUGGEST: Finding things that the PSW feels really confident about and expanding on those areas or delving into those areas and supporting their choices.

self-determination —

Motivation works best when it's driven from within.

IN ACTION: Peer support encourages self-determination and acknowledges and holds space for resilience and inner wisdom.

PSWs SUGGEST: Support the PSW in making decisions and doing things on their own – based on their wants, needs and goals.

respect, dignity & equity —

All human beings have intrinsic value.

IN ACTION: Peer support honours human value by

- Practicing cultural humility and sensitivity
- Serving with a trauma-informed approach
- Offering generosity of assumption
- Addressing personal biases mindfully
- Meeting people where they are
- Serving with a knowledge of equity

PSWs SUGGEST: Treat PSWs as you would like to be treated and expect to be treated. Learn about them on a personal level and treat them as equals.

belonging & community —

All human beings need to belong and be a part of a community.

IN ACTION: Peer support recognizes that many people have barriers that keep them from developing community and it actively works towards deconstructing those social blockades that prevent inclusion and acceptance. Peer support encourages a social justice mindset, and intentionally promotes empathy, compassion and self-compassion.

PSWs SUGGEST: Help PSWs feel wanted and cared about. Help them find resources that foster a sense of community and belonging.

“My quality of life improves immensely when I am surrounded by one or a community of people who understand me. I don’t feel alone. I can be myself among people who I know understand me on a deeper level. When I feel like I can be myself, I feel more confident and able to take positive risks, thus improving the quality of my life. The root of this is connection and being able to be seen for who I truly am. Peers can help people be seen in a real way.”

curiosity —

Curiosity and inquiry support connection, growth, learning and engagement.

IN ACTION: Peer support

- Is continually curious
- Challenges assumptions and narratives
- Asks powerful questions
- Offers generosity of assumption to those who think differently
- Knows that listening and asking questions is more important than providing answers

PSWs SUGGEST: Ask questions and be engaged in learning about your PSWs. Find out about their culture and explore with them.



17. summary

Let's review some of the key concepts covered in this module.

☐

There's no one right way to express or manage grief and loss.

☐

Loss comes in different forms, from concrete to abstract to ambiguous, but any type of loss is complex and can have an impact on our physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual health.

☐

Sitting with our own discomfort and pain without trying to "fix" someone is an important part of supporting someone who's experiencing loss or grief.

☐

The best thing we can give to someone who's grieving is empathy, connection and acknowledgement, not empty platitudes.

☐

Grief is not linear, it's experienced in waves; therefore, old models of understanding grief may not serve us well.

☐

Grief and loss can be collective, not just individual; coming together to process the pain, brainstorm coping strategies and support each other is important for both individuals and communities.

☐

Many cultures and religions have specific traditions and practices around grief and loss; we need to acknowledge and respect those practices with humility.

☐

Intentionally making room for someone to process their pain in a way that works for them (not us) without judgements, biases or assumptions is what holding space means.

☐

Our role as peer support workers is to come alongside someone who is experiencing loss or grief and hold space for them, without expecting a certain outcome.



Our role as peer support workers is to come alongside someone who is experiencing loss or grief and hold space for them, without expecting a certain outcome.



18. next steps

We want to thank you for taking the time to walk alongside peer support workers on a shared path of learning from lived experience.

You are now ready to visit another module of the Peer Support Worker training curriculum!

Please head home to <https://peerconnectbc.ca> where you will find the individual training modules and facilitation guides. You will also find a [resource page](#) at that site to continue your learning about peer support work and the issues surrounding it.

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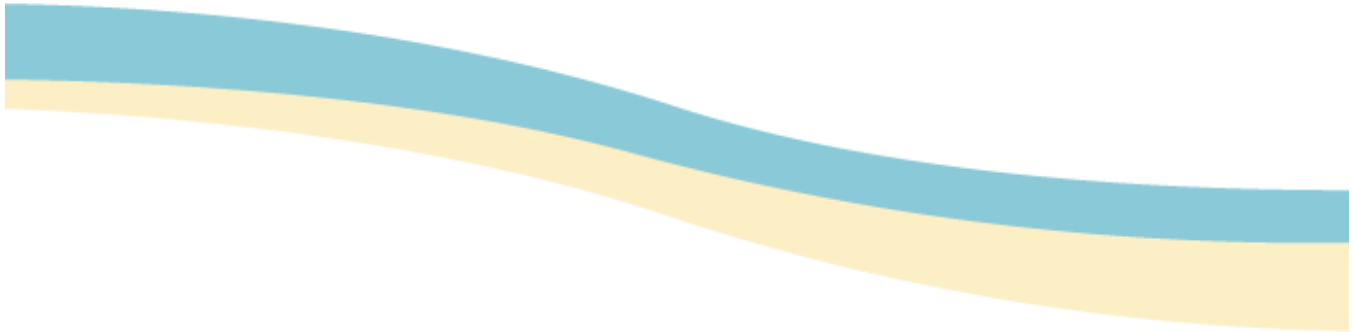
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for this module:



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