

Grief Surrounds Us: Coping with Grief in the Workplace in the Modern Era

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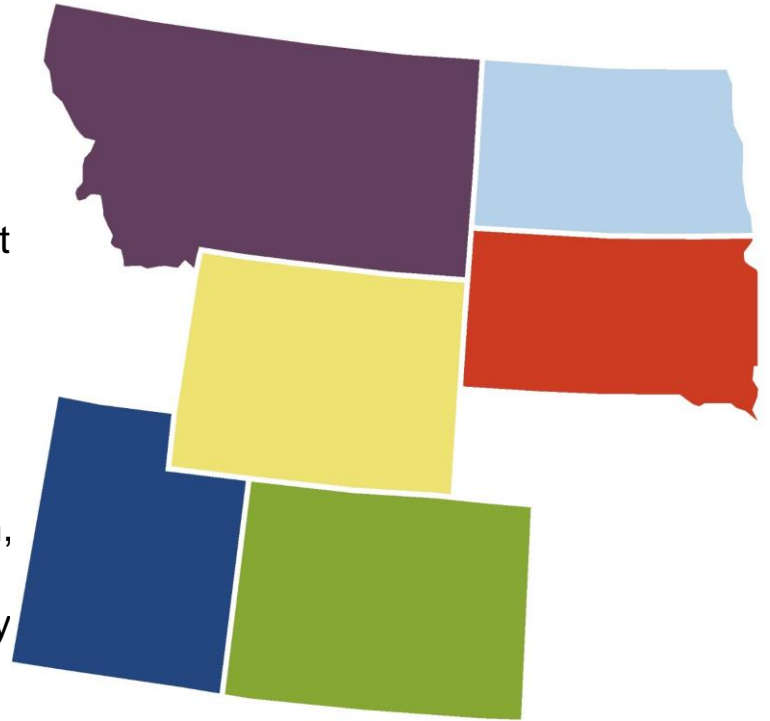
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The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Mountain Plains MHTTC) provides training and technical assistance to individuals who serve persons with mental health concerns throughout Region 8 (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming).

We belong to the Technology Transfer Center (TTC) Network, a national network of training and technical assistance centers serving the needs of mental health, substance use and prevention providers. The work of the TTC Network is under a cooperative agreement by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA).



Land Acknowledgement Statement

Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate - presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota - the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.



The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND
ACCEPTING OF
DIVERSE CULTURES,
GENDERS,
PERSPECTIVES,
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED AND
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND
FREE OF LABELS

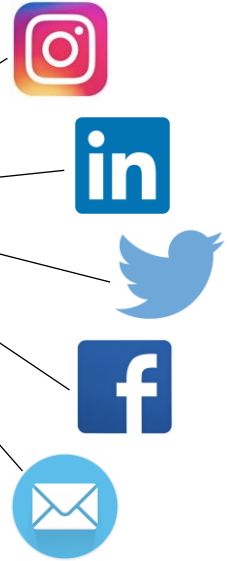
NON-JUDGMENTAL AND
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

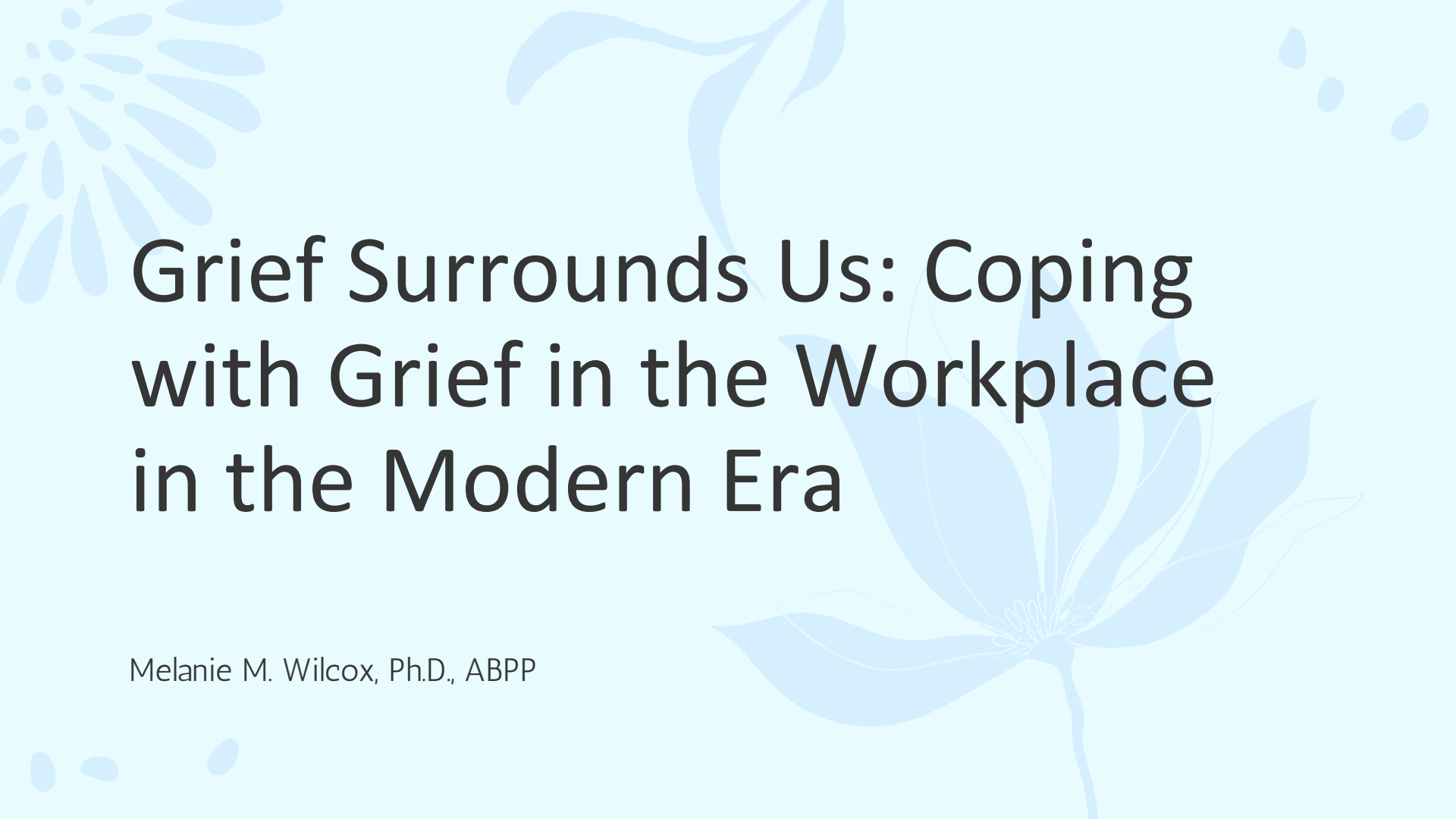
RESPECTFUL, CLEAR
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH
OUR ACTIONS,
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

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Grief Surrounds Us: Coping with Grief in the Workplace in the Modern Era

Melanie M. Wilcox, Ph.D., ABPP

About Me



- Ph.D., Counseling Psychology, University at Albany (2015)
- Currently: Augusta University and Aguirre Center for Inclusive Psychotherapy
- President-Elect, APA Division 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology)
- Member, APA Board of Educational Affairs

Objectives

01

Name

At least two sources of grief in the workplace

02

Identify

At least two barriers to responding well to grief

03

Explain

How to respond more compassionately and responsively to grief

Breathe





Grief

Characterizes our modern era

Grief



Is the experience of anguish in response to significant loss.

Such anguish can take many forms—and some of them are not easily recognizable as grief.

Grief is a **normal** response to loss, and everyone's grief process looks different.

Grief Is Not Restricted to Loss through Death



Loss of a
job,
resources



Loss of health,
abilities



Loss of a
relationship



Loss of
something
expected, like
a promotion



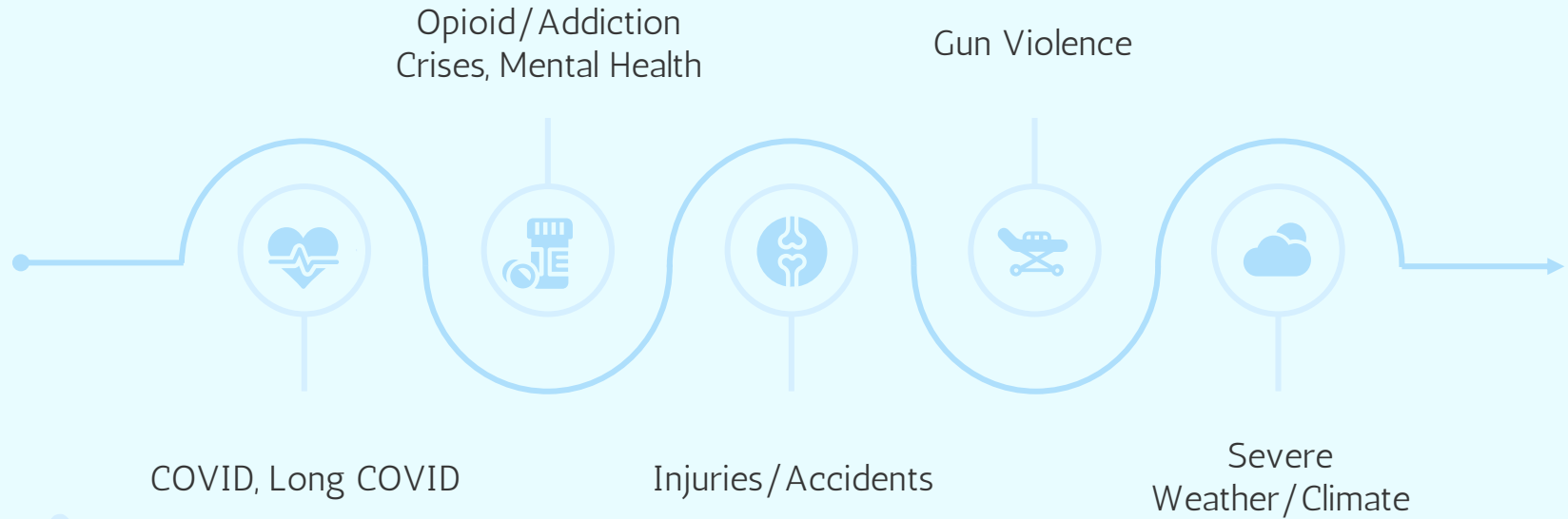
Anticipatory
Grief



Vicarious Loss
- Racial Violence and
Injustice

- Anti-LGBTQ,
Gender Violence
and Injustice

Although there is plenty of loss



and don't underestimate pet loss

In the helping professions....

...we are at greater risk of experiencing grief *because* of our work



and loss can (and does) accumulate

It Adds Up



Amidst all of these painful realities, it may seem like we have grown numb to loss.....

....but we're not automatons. It will eventually catch up with us.

The statistics alone would suggest that many of us are dealing with unresolved grief.

A tropical beach scene at sunset. The sky is a mix of deep blue and vibrant orange, with scattered white and orange-tinted clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the ocean. In the foreground, there are large, dark grey rocks on the right side, and several palm trees leaning towards the left. The text "Take a Moment" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font at the bottom of the image.

Take a Moment

The top left corner features a cluster of small, light blue teardrop shapes. The top right corner features a stylized sunburst or flower-like pattern with multiple teardrop-shaped petals radiating from a central point.

Grief Already Exists in Our Workplaces

The bottom left corner features a large, stylized flower with several long, pointed petals and a central cluster of stamens. The bottom right corner features a stylized leaf or branch with several teardrop-shaped elements at its base.

Are we honoring it?

Grief in the Workplace

Manns and Little (2011): Employees who recently experienced the ending of a romantic relationship had difficulties with executive function (e.g., focus), loss of interest and energy, and decreased work performance—and felt as though they did not receive needed compassion and assistance from colleagues, supervisors, or organizational policies

- Those who were *married* seemed to receive more support than those who were not married

These participants are not alone: Hidden and/or unaddressed grief is estimated to cost U.S. companies \$75 *billion* per year

Grief in the Workplace

Much grief in the workplace remains unaddressed because, first and foremost, culturally, we're pretty terrible at dealing with grief

- Most Western cultures are high in "death-denial"
- Greater death denial is associated with higher death/loss anxiety
- We become further avoidant of things that make us anxious
- This also decreases our exposure to opportunities to work through the anxiety, and increases our sense of "awkwardness"



Grief in the Workplace

Further,

- Many managers/supervisors/leaders are not well-trained in dealing with grief
- Organizational culture (and U.S. employment culture generally) is production-centered
- Personnel policies can be rigid and limiting
 - Amount of paid time off
 - Qualifying events
 - Proof required



Grief in the Workplace



Shellenbarger (1999): Understanding of grief is a weak spot for many organizations, and "workplace attitudes are stuck in the Industrial Age."

The pervasiveness, and even internalization, of this production culture sometimes means that even if we *can* and want to help, we may not easily realize help is needed.

Suppressed or *stifled* grief occurs when an individual intentionally or unintentionally hides their grief—often an unspoken *expectation* in the workplace.


Grief in the Workplace

Disenfranchised grief occurs when others in a griever's social system (e.g., colleagues, supervisor, friends, family) do not recognize the loss, its importance, its impact, or otherwise invalidate the griever's experience.

This is especially tough, as social support is absolutely necessary for grief recovery and healing.

It can lead employees to stifle their grief.



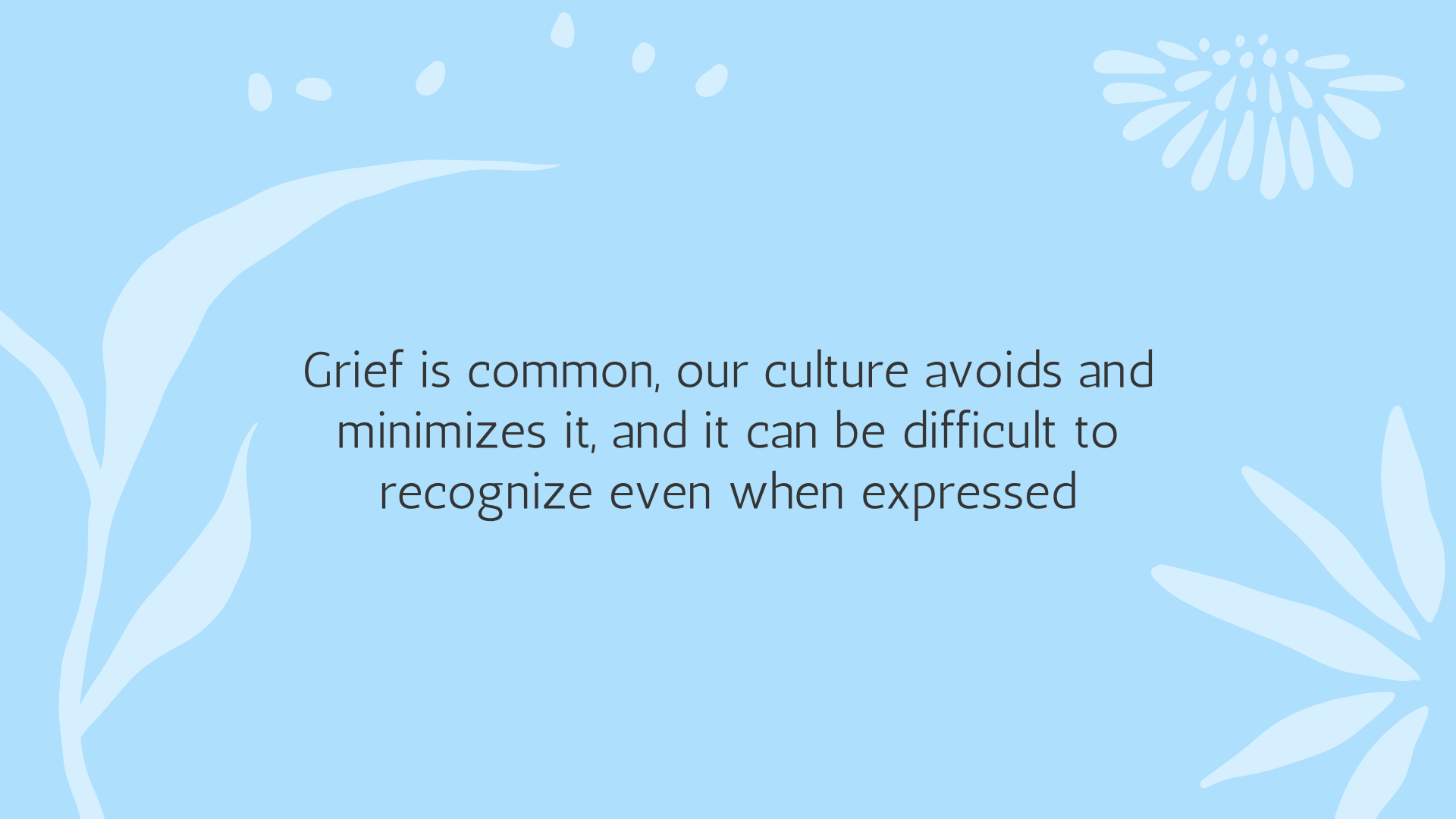


Even aside from
work demands,
our expectations
of grief can be
invalidating

Other Causes of Disenfranchised Grief

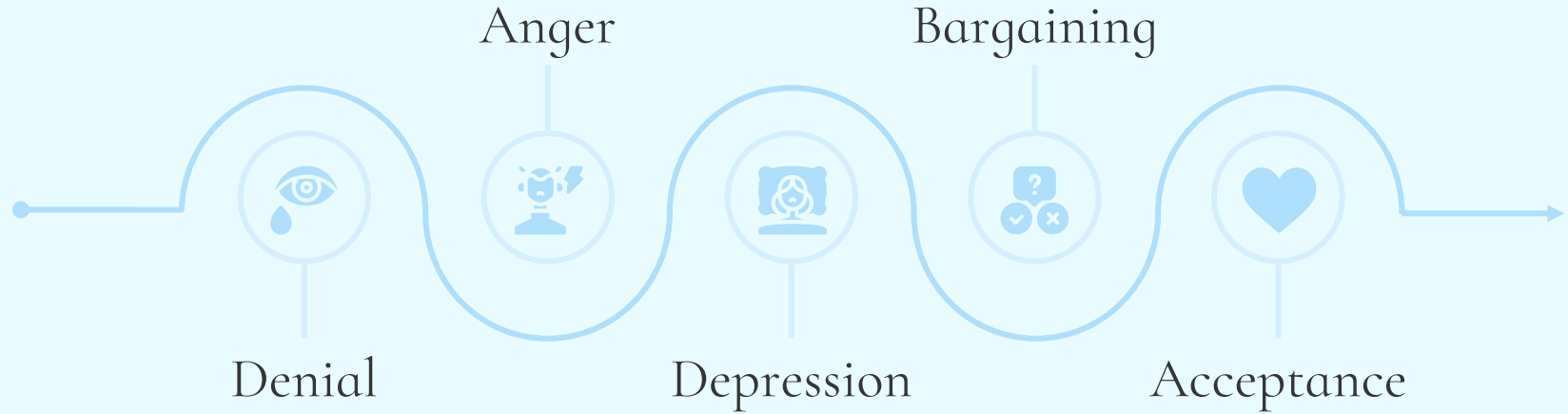


- Relationship judgments
- Not showing the "appropriate" emotions
- Not adhering to the "appropriate" timeline
- Taboo causes of death
- Losses other than death

The background is a solid light blue color. It features several white, stylized floral and leaf patterns. In the top left, there are several small, teardrop-shaped elements. In the top right, there is a large, multi-petaled flower-like shape. On the left side, there are long, curved leaf-like shapes. On the right side, there are several pointed, leaf-like shapes.

Grief is common, our culture avoids and minimizes it, and it can be difficult to recognize even when expressed

“Stages” of Grief



Signs of Grief

01

Fatigue/Exhaustion

And other physical symptoms
(e.g., headache; nausea)

02

Difficulty Concentrating

And other executive function
symptoms (e.g., memory)

03

Negative Emotions

Anger, guilt, sadness, apathy,
numbness

04

Interpersonal Withdrawal

05

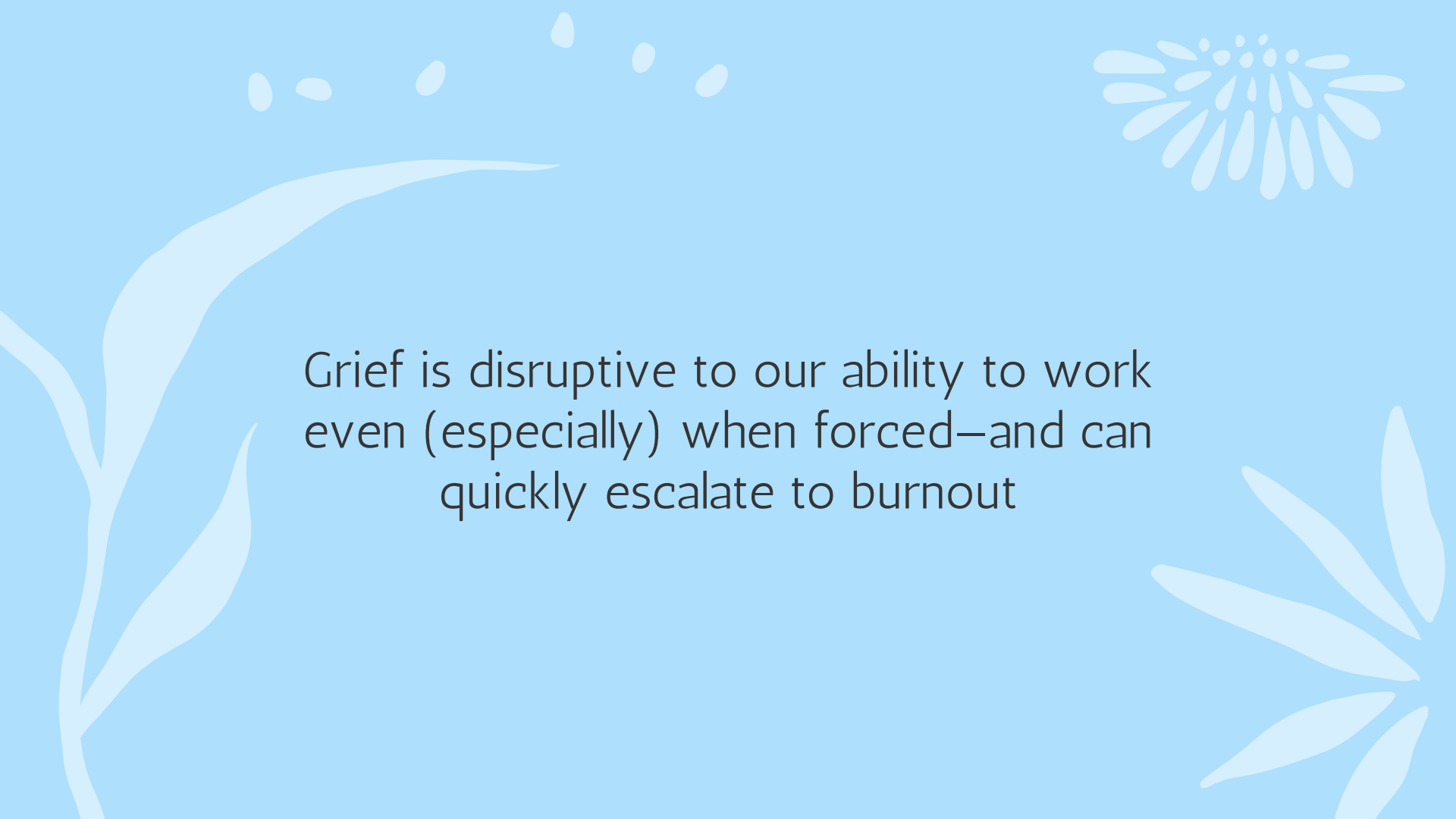
PTSD Symptoms

06

Substance Abuse



A Moment of Peace

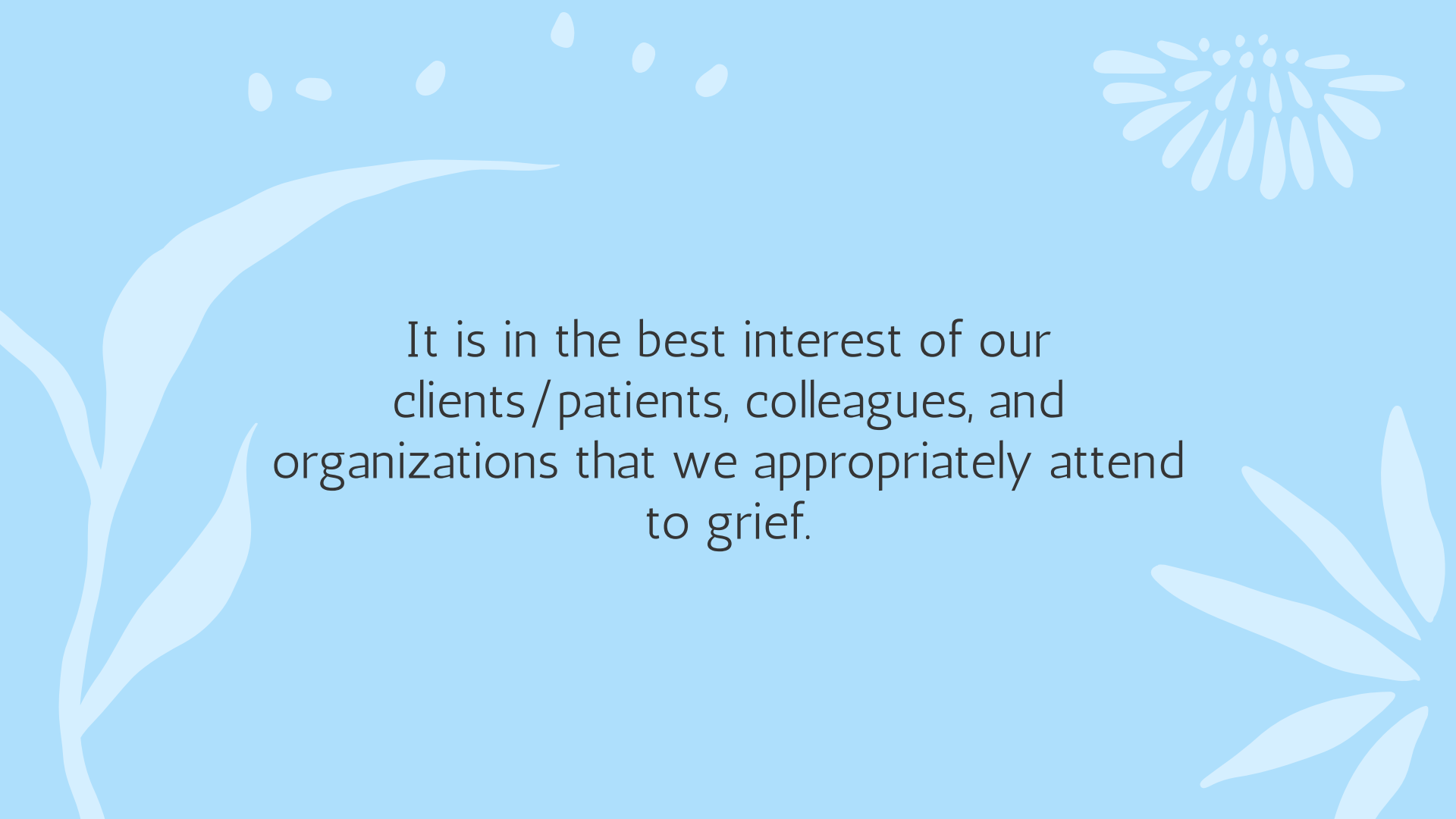
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Grief is disruptive to our ability to work even (especially) when forced—and can quickly escalate to burnout

Grief and Burnout



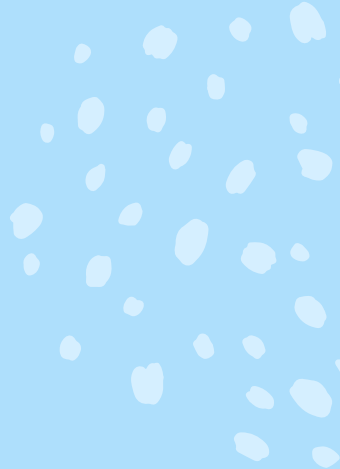
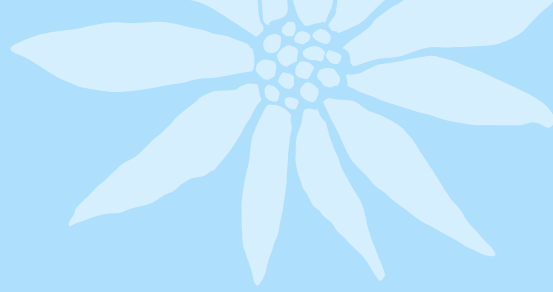
- In fact, the results of unaddressed grief and burnout are pretty similar:
 - Similar symptoms
 - Executive function difficulties
 - Cynicism
 - Irritability / Anger
 - Reduced sense of work efficacy
 - Emotional exhaustion
 - Negative effects on organizations
 - Increased turnover
 - Reduced organizational commitment
 - Greater absenteeism
 - Negative attitudes

The background is a solid light blue color. It features several decorative elements: a large, stylized leaf on the left side; a cluster of small, teardrop-shaped motifs in the upper left; a large, stylized flower head in the upper right; and another cluster of stylized leaves in the lower right.

It is in the best interest of our
clients / patients, colleagues, and
organizations that we appropriately attend
to grief.



What can we
do differently?



Simple is Most Important: Talk About It

This is the #1 thing we struggle with culturally when it comes to death, loss, and grief.



Discussing and Acknowledging Grief

- Research has found that, when asked, griever most often say they wish colleagues and supervisors had acknowledged their grief
- Given that so many people do not feel comfortable or competent at discussing grief, training and education can be really important
 - Not unlike this presentation ☺
 - Can be helpful to provide training periodically to entire organization



Discussing and Acknowledging Grief

- Acknowledging can feel awkward – that's okay! It's still better than not acknowledging.
- Even when you are experienced with grief, it is very common to not know what to say – because the "right" response does not exist.
- As long as we are trying to acknowledge and connect rather than minimize and judge, we're on the right track.



Nonjudgmental Stance toward Grief

So many issues stem from judgment: How grief should look, what qualifies for acknowledged grief, the appropriate length of time for grief

The experience of grief is agnostic to these judgments; it does not yield to others' expectations.

The best thing we can do is be open to and honor the reality of others' grief.



Proactively Offer Support



- Cultural norms, shame, fear, and more can lead those grieving to stifle their own grief, avoid asking for help, and even reject help when it is offered
- Establish good communication
- Offer support and assistance early and often
 - While recognizing that grief is rarely linear
- Normalize accommodating grief
- Encourage flexibility

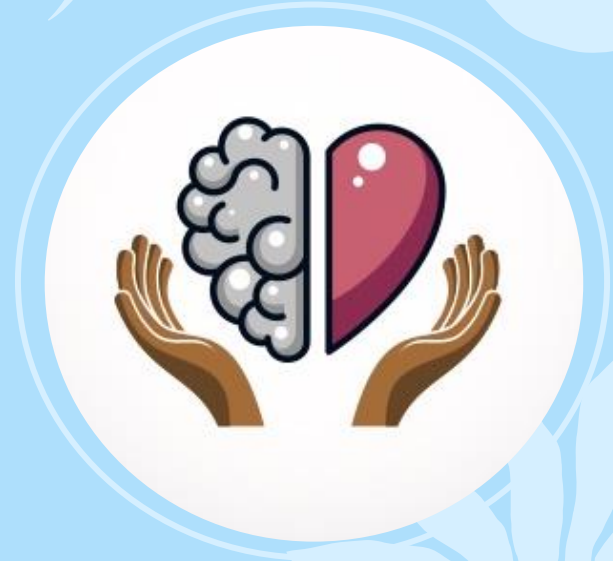
Advocacy

- One of the best ways to be proactive is through organizational policy
 - Lessons from the burnout literature
- Individual decision-makers need the flexibility to be *more* compassionate when possible, but baseline compassion should not be contingent upon being "lucky" enough to have an understanding supervisor
- Compassionate grief policies show that an organization and its leaders take grief, and employee wellbeing, seriously
 - They can also help to normalize grief
- Compassionate policies should outline *minimums* and be flexible
- Offering of Employee Assistance Programs can be helpful



Advocacy

- Fears about "abuse" of compassionate policies are overwhelmingly unfounded—when employees feel cared for, they often feel greater commitment to the organization.
- Repeated over-reliance on such policies and support is certainly something that can be monitored on an individual level but should never undermine a more compassionate approach at the organizational level



As Always, Heal Thyself



- It is difficult to help our colleagues and our organizations when we are not well ourselves
- How much grief – in general, and especially from the last few years – have you been holding in?
- In what ways might you have internalized
 - The “production over humanity” expectations?
 - Limiting what “qualifies” for acceptable grief?
 - Expecting grief to have an expiration date?

A Note About Organizational Grief

- This presentation has largely focused on individual grieving; however, sometimes events can result in grief on a larger scale
 - Loss of a colleague or shared client/patient
 - Disaster
 - Contagious illness
 - Layoffs
 - Can result in a type of survivor's guilt
 - Major changes to the organization
- Even more imperative in such situations for MUCH space and flexibility to be offered



A Note About Collective Grief

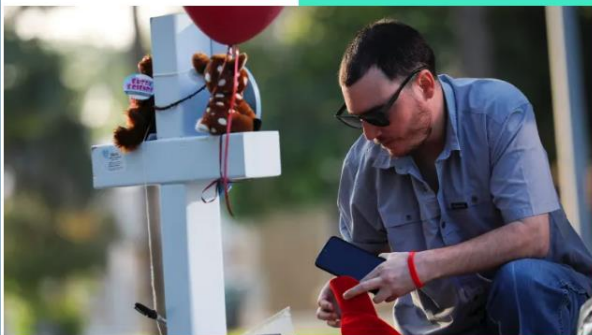
HEALTH AND WELLNESS

The U.S. is wrapped in 'collective grief' from school shootings and the pandemic—and it's rewiring our brains, experts say

Published Fri, May 27 2022-1:15 PM EDT

Elizabeth Yuko, Special to CNBC

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A man kneels at a memorial in Town Square in front of the county courthouse, for victims of the Robb Elementary school shooting, three days after a gunman killed nineteen children and two adults, in Uvalde, Texas, U.S. May 27, 2022. Marco Bello | Reuters

- We have to take care of ourselves and each other
- We cannot keep everything bottled inside
- We have to allow ourselves and others to process and heal
- Collective action can offer a sense of purpose and belonging, which are ultimately helpful to healing from grief

A wide, flat beach with waves in the distance under a blue sky with light clouds.

One more collective breath

Thank you!



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