

#UnderstandGrief

Get Grief-Informed: Loss, Grief, & Youth in Foster Care

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Grief is a natural response to loss. How youth in foster care grieve privately or publicly varies and is based on many factors, including their personality and what their social context has shown, taught, or demonstrated as “appropriate.” A dominating attitude in “mainstream” society is that grief is an individual emotional experience which has predictable stages and a defined timeline. Defining grief this way suggests that if your “symptoms” last too long, or are too intense, you may have a “mental disorder” needing treatment. And this is problematic.

Everyone responds to grief in a unique way and grief can last a lifetime...and that is completely normal. This doesn't mean grieving is easy or that people won't experience emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or relational challenges. Rather than label youth in foster care as “disordered” or “dysfunctional,” we need to understand the holistic nature of grief. To be grief-informed not only means having knowledge about grief, it also means knowing how to put this understanding into action.

10 CORE PRINCIPLES OF BEING GRIEF-INFORMED

To become grief-informed begins with the initial step of identifying and embracing 10 core principles about grief. These core principles involve recognizing what grief is and best practices for supporting youth in foster care who are grieving.



Natural. Loss is a normal, inevitable, and universal human experience. Youth in foster care have an innate capacity to adapt to loss and function healthily.



Complex and Nonpathological. Grief is an adaptive, nonpathological response to loss. Grief is complex and complicated because people and relationships are complex and complicated.



Contextual. Grief is not solely an individual experience; grief is interwoven in a sociocultural context, influenced by family, community, and other social systems. Acknowledging and addressing the sociocultural and historical factors

that impact grief can reduce disparities and promote equity and inclusion.



Disruptive. Grief challenges our identity, relationships, beliefs, and assumptions about the world and our role in it.



Relational Connection and Perceived Support.

Having people who care and support youth after a loss helps youth in foster care navigate the changes in their lives. Feeling heard and having people to share with helps youth know they're not alone in their grief.



Personal Empowerment and Agency. Experiencing loss and grief can make youth in foster care feel helpless or out of control. Choosing their own healthy responses, rather than what others tell youth to do or not do, can help youth in foster care regain a sense of balance and personal “agency.”



Safety. Experiencing loss challenges youth's sense of safety in the world. Paying attention to a youth's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs will help youth in foster care cope with all the changes that happen after a loss.



Person-centered. The intensity and experience of grief are unique for every youth in foster care.



Dynamic. The dynamic nature of grief cannot be fully captured by stage, phase, or other prescriptive models. There are no universally acceptable or “correct” ways to grieve.



Nonfinite. Loss is interwoven into a person's identity; therefore, grieving is not a finite experience. Grief doesn't have some magical end point. Youth in foster care can grieve someone throughout their lives.

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This is a condensed version of a longer document. For the full position paper, please visit: dougyc.org/grief_informed

While knowledge of the ten core principles is a critical first step to getting grief-informed, we must recognize that knowledge is most impactful when it is put into action. It is time that we as a nation take a stand and acknowledge grief for what it truly is: a natural and normal response to loss that is interwoven into a sociocultural context. Grief is not an experience that needs to be “silenced,” “treated,” or “pathologized.” Grief, and all the many complications it imposes on the griever, is an experience that needs and deserves understanding, support, and community. Here are 10 action steps to implementing grief-informed knowledge for youth in foster care.

- 1. Advocate that grief is not a mental disorder; our social and cultural context impacts how we grieve.** Youth in foster care are impacted by the people in their lives, the foster care system, and the world in which they live. As you listen to or read about how grief is an individual experience (i.e., grief happens in isolation of the world around us), question the narrative of “mental disorders” and consider all the factors that can contribute to how a youth responds to the loss of someone in their lives.
- 2. Consider the language you use and how it can impact youth in foster care.** The language we use to describe youth in foster care and their experiences shapes how we view and respond to them. When it comes to grief and grieving, we have the potential to be helpful or harmful. Youth who are grieving often receive patronizing responses to “move on” or “find closure” when what they need most is to feel understood.
- 3. Educate others about becoming grief-informed for youth in foster care.** Share the 10 core principles of being grief-informed with case managers, foster parents, child welfare agency staff, and others who want to know how to support youth in foster care who are grieving. If or when you notice someone is misinformed or misrepresenting grief in foster care, respond! For example, if you don’t agree with what is portrayed in the news or media, write a letter to the editor, contact a reporter... weigh in with your opinion and experience.
- 4. Broaden the dialogue about the need for diversity and inclusivity in grief research and support.** Many of the studies in the field of thanatology (the study of death, dying, bereavement, and loss) in the U.S. are based on studies of adults in “mainstream” culture, and have been used to represent the “standard” of how people grieve and how to support them. This research fails to include how grief is experienced by people of different ages, beliefs, cultures, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. Black and Native children are overrepresented in the U.S. foster care system and we need deeper research into the biases that result in these outcomes, as well as acknowledgment of the social factors that lead to higher rates of childhood bereavement in racially and ethnically minoritized youth.
- 5. Challenge myths about grief. Grief doesn’t follow an orderly path of stages, tasks, or assignments to complete.** When a youth in foster care is grieving, don’t impose expectations on them about how they should feel or respond, or how long their grief should last. Every experience of loss is different, and how youth feel or respond to loss will be influenced by their relationship with the person who died or who they have been separated from, their beliefs, experiences, levels of social support, and many other factors.
- 6. Acknowledge and address the injustices of labels.** Youth in foster care are 2.4 to 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder compared to youth in similar socio-economic conditions who were not in foster care. With the addition of “Prolonged Grief Disorder” in the DSM and ICD, another “disorder” label can join the top four that youth in foster care are most commonly given: Oppositional defiant disorder/ conduct disorder, Major depressive disorder, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and Reactive Attachment Disorder, all of which may be reframed as logical responses to the situations in which they have been placed. We need to reframe these alleged “disorders” into youths’ attempts to cope in difficult and challenging situations, and stop stigmatizing them for what has happened to them.
- 7. Recognize and acknowledge that every experience of loss is a unique experience.** Youth will likely respond to the loss of each person in their life differently because every relationship is unique (e.g., original parents, siblings, foster parents, case managers, friends, community, homes, etc.). Let’s not assign youth in foster care who are already struggling into preconceived and stereotypical boxes.

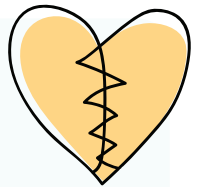
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8. **Strengthen relational connections.** Our mainstream society values independence and, as such, the challenges experienced when grieving are often viewed as occurring “within the individual.” Unfortunately, this unrealistic position underestimates, and may even ignore, the value of interpersonal support when a youth in foster care is grieving. Youth in foster care need connections with others who are understanding and compassionate, especially when difficult and painful things happen.
9. **Honor lived experience.** There are as many ways to grieve as there are people in the world, and there’s no “right way” or “wrong way” to feel. It’s important to know how to support youth in foster care, even when their lived experience and grieving responses differ from our own. When we place expectations and judgments on youth in foster care because they are in foster care, it can create barriers rather than relational connection and perceived support. To honor the lived experience of youth in foster care involves offering the gifts of nonjudgmental listening, open mindedness, and support.
10. **Understand and advocate on behalf of the losses and grief youth in foster care carry.** It is often assumed that youth who are placed into foster care are getting their needs met, given that they presumably have shelter, food, and basic physical necessities attended to. But in the

words of one youth in foster care, “No one acknowledged my loss and hurt. I felt terrible. It was just awful. Nobody took great concern to understand what I was going through or what any kid in foster care was going through.” When supporting youth in foster care, consider acknowledging, and not ignoring, their losses – without judgment or trying to “fix” their experiences. If a youth is comfortable talking about their experiences, consider asking, “How has your life changed since being in foster care?” or “Who or what are you missing?” Advocate that loss and grief are important parts of well-being that deserve recognition, acknowledgment, and opportunities for expression and healing.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families



Join this national call to action!

Let us know what you and/or your organization are doing to raise national consciousness on being grief informed. We’d love to hear from you! On social media use #UnderstandGrief and tag us at @thedougycenter. Go to dougyc.org/UnderstandGrief for more.