

RETHINKING GRIEF



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A Conceptual and Moral Analysis for Palliative Care Providers

INTRODUCTION

Palliative care providers are particularly well situated to recognize and respond to the grief of dying people and those who care for them.

This poster presents a series of reflective questions about the meaning of grief, and of the ways society tends to engage with grieving people. We draw on relational ethics and the work of grief scholars, such as Macdonald and Klass, to explore the ethics of this engagement. Our reflection is oriented by the following questions: *What is grief? Can one's grief be known by another? and What is the moral significance of grief?*

WHAT IS GRIEF?

The word 'loss' is often used to describe and make sense of grief, as in *"I'm sorry for your loss."* In death, loss might refer to the person who has died and who is physically gone, or any of the many other losses that precede and follow the actual death - a routine, a connection, an identity. And yet, for many people, relationships with the deceased are not truly lost but transformed.

Macdonald [1] writes, ***"Even now, six years after my mother's death, I still keep her shoes."*** Even though she knows her mother will no longer need them, she keeps the shoes to protect the space of absence. Recognizing the ways that, in addition to experiences of loss, the bereaved maintain ongoing relationships with their dead, and hold space for their absence, helps us to better understand and support their grief. Such ongoing relationships are known by various names, such as *continuing bonds* [2], *presence of absence* [3], and *ghosts* [1,4].

A more ethical way to engage with someone's grief and respond to someone's experience of loss, is to appreciate the many ways that death can change a relationship, without ending it.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF GRIEF:

Neimeyer et al. [5] describe grief as ***"a situated interpretive and communicative activity"*** (p.486), highlighting its complexity and intersubjective nature.

Grief is commonly seen as an individual experience, rather than existing within relationships. Certain ways of grieving are labelled as 'healthy', while others are pathologized [5-6]. Expecting people to conform to pre-set standards of 'healthy' grieving, for example by trying to guide them through stages of grief, can cause harm [7].

Seeing grief through a relational lens, rather than an individual one, creates space for grief to be accompanied and supported.

What relationships are significant in grief?

Feel free to add your thoughts to our word cloud:



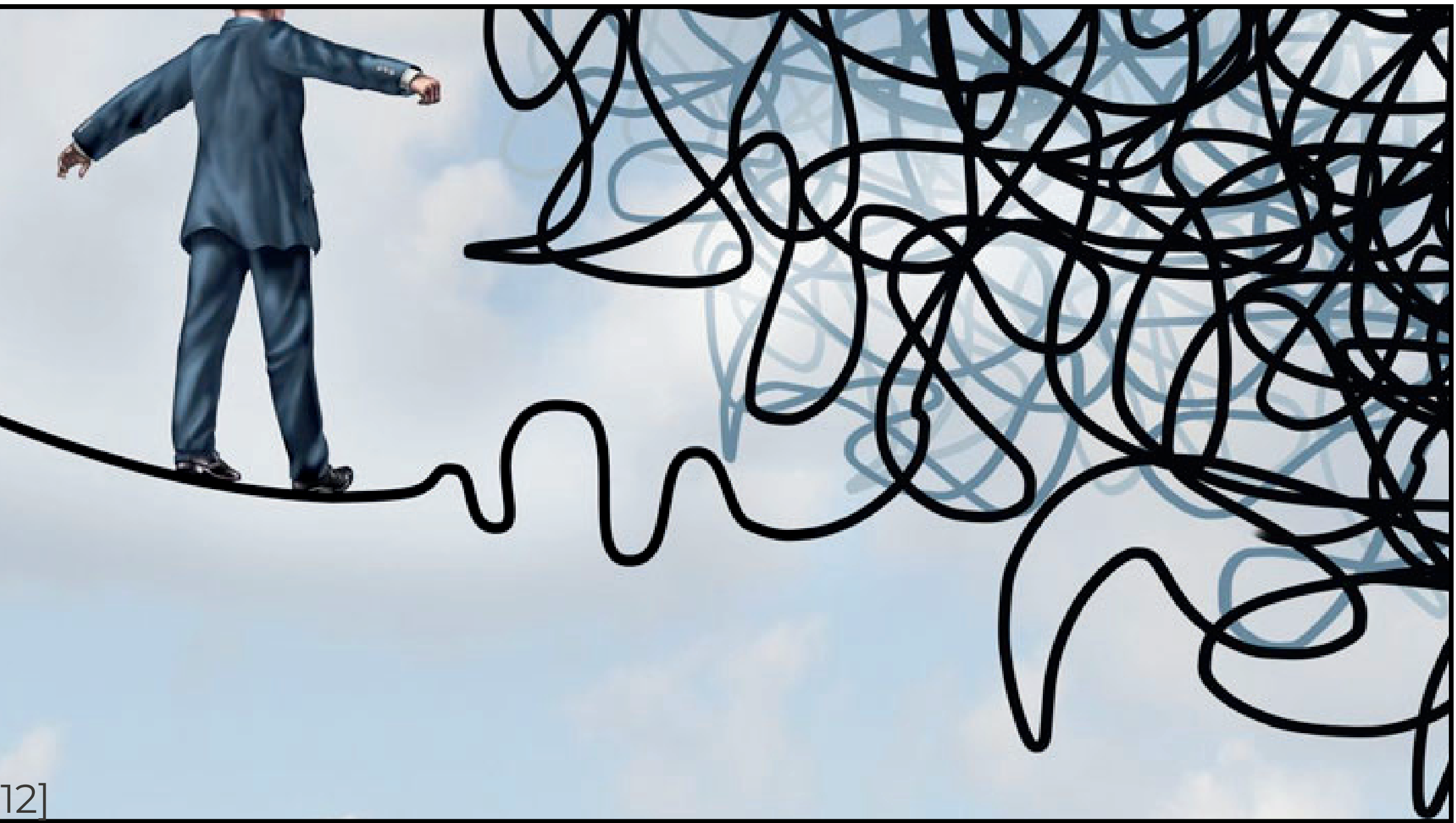
CAN ONE'S GRIEF BE KNOWN BY ANOTHER?



A key theme in bereavement literature is that there is no uniform way of grieving. Everybody grieves differently. Grief exists in a contextual web of relations, including ways that community supports (or denies) someone's grief, ways that spirituality, religion, or other meaning-making systems inform beliefs about the nature of life and death, and ways that circumstances of the death align with (or deviate from) normative master-narratives or cultural scripts.

Some suggest that it may be impossible to truly understand another's grief[6]. **While there are limitless ways to experience grief, grief can be accompanied.** This presence requires both an effort to better understand, and the humility to recognize what cannot be fully known. Viewing grief as an interpretive and communicative activity implies that when a person engages with another's grief, they become a part of that person's grief experience. Palliative care providers do this every day. They are part of other peoples' most significant moments that are filled with love, sadness, hope, anger, joy and in all this, grief.

Bearing witness [8] can be one of the most ethical ways to attend to and honour the grief of another.



What does grief mean to you?

Feel free to add your thoughts to our word cloud:



WHAT IS THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE?

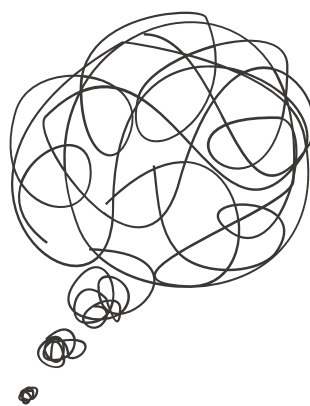
Grief carries significant moral valence: its presence is often seen as bad, and its swift resolution as good. This is most clearly evidenced by our society's denial of grief. Macdonald [4] highlights this denial by critiquing dominant discourses that silence grief, for example by framing grief as something that needs to be *managed or contained*.

Society's discomfort with grief is also revealed, for example, in the experiences of bereaved parents who are made to feel that their grief is contagious: friends, neighbours, and fellow parents avoid them, as if they might 'catch' their misfortune. [4]

There is much at stake, for grievers. Grief can involve a profound sense of helplessness and loss, as the bereaved grapple with being unable to have the dead in their lives in the way they once did. There is pressure to be 'strong' and 'move forward', perpetuating misguided ideas that eliminating grief is the ultimate goal. Harm is done [9] when grief has become so sanitized that the bereaved are robbed of a language and space to communicate what they are experiencing.

This is the moral significance of grief and grief support: there is an ethical imperative to engage with grievers' experiences *as they are*, and working to repair damaging and toxic discourses that risk leaving grievers feeling diminished and isolated.

RETHINKING GRIEF



We propose a reconceptualization of grief, moving away from grief denial and towards an openness and acceptance of grief experience, in whatever form it may take. Recognizing grief as a social experience requires careful attention to our language, our communities, and our relationships. As healthcare providers, we can start by regularly asking the following question in almost any clinical encounter: ***"What grief might be happening here?"*** This helps foster a deeper understanding of what another is going through and how we might support them [10].

We endorse the call by Breen et al. [11] for greater grief literacy. This means equipping ourselves and our communities with the knowledge, skills, and values to recognize and respond to grief with compassion and care. A grief literate world is characterized by mutual concern and acknowledgment of our interdependence. Grief, though sorrowful and unpredictable, should not be lonely.

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