

# Creating and Holding Space for Ourselves and Each Other After Student Death

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*A guide to processing, meaning-making, and integration as educators for our collective recovery and renewal*



February 2023

*The* DINNER PARTY *labs*



# About Us

## The DINNER PARTY labs

The Dinner Party Labs designs approaches to community healing with those impacted by isolation and fragmentation. Our flagship program, The Dinner Party, is a platform for grieving 20-, 30-, and early 40-somethings to find real community and build lasting relationships, whether one-to-one, or in small, peer-led groups. We've been featured on NPR's Morning Edition, On Being with Krista Tippett, CNN, NYT, O Magazine, BuzzFeed, and dozens of other publications, and as a case study in various books, including *The Upside of Stress*, *The Power of Ritual*, and *How We Show Up*. Grab a seat: [www.thedinnerparty.org](http://www.thedinnerparty.org)

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The **School Crisis Recovery and Renewal (SCRR)** project was launched in June 2020 to support students, educators, school staff, and school-based clinicians to effectively implement trauma-informed crisis recovery and renewal strategies. Funded by the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA), the SCRR project is a [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) (NCTSN) Treatment and Services Adaptation Center (Category II, 2020-2025). The SCRR project is led by the [Center for Applied Research Solutions](#) (CARS) in partnership with [Trauma Transformed \(T<sup>2</sup>\)](#). For more information visit us at: [www.schoolcrisishealing.org](http://www.schoolcrisishealing.org)

**This guide was written in collaboration with The Dinner Party Labs' and the School Crisis Recovery and Renewal project's trained hosts.**



# Welcome

“Grief is like glitter. You can throw a handful in the air, but when you try to clean it up, you'll never get it all. Even long after the event, you will still find glitter tucked into corners, it will always be there...somewhere.

- Kevin Pádraig

These last months and years have seen no shortage of individual and collective grief, and educators have borne an enormous share.

If you're reading this guide, chances are you're here because you lost a student or students at some point in your life. You might be in the same classroom or school site that held the loss/es, or you might be in a completely different space, profession, and be reflecting about how the past informs the present. Maybe there has been a rupture on your team, in your community, in your organization, or in another space that needs repair. Maybe there is past or present pain from a school shooting that never got processed, a hurricane's impact that still requires meaning-making, or a death by suicide whose ripple impact is still reverberating.

We come together with a shared desire to explore how this loss (student death or more) has impacted our lives and our work — and to create a community around student grief, bereavement, trauma, or crisis that is unique.

## Context

This guide emerged from Life After Loss Tables: Educators Edition, a joint program of the School Crisis Recovery and Renewal (SCRRE) project and The Dinner Party Labs. Between 2021-2022, we brought together a group of educators who had each experienced the loss of a student — and in many cases, students — from across the country for a series of virtual gatherings. (We called the gatherings “tables,” in a nod to the physical spaces we longed to share.) Over the course of a year, the educators sat together in intentional, peer-led spaces, as a chance to engage in conversation around their experience with death-related, school-based losses and to explore paths toward healing.

## What will you get in this guide? And why do we need this?

Like you, we believe that healing is collective, that moving forward is not the same as moving on, and that our most honest and revelatory conversations happen not in school board or faculty meetings, but in spaces that feel familiar, with people who've been there, too. **Holding spaces by educators creates safety, collaboration and mutuality and the opportunity to make meaning of overwhelming experiences.**

We regularly get asks from educators like you who want to grow in skill, knowledge, and practice in the art of holding space when it comes to talking openly about loss, and exploring its impact and integration into their professional and personal lives.

In the following pages, we offer tips and strategies for how to hold space for one another in the aftermath of student death and/or grief in our school communities, whether that's one-to-one, in a formal peer-led group, or in another environment.



This guide is sectioned in two parts:

## **PART 1: [Educator Grief and Student Death 101](#)**

In Part 1, we begin with an overview of grief and some of the paradoxes that attend it, along with the particular impacts of student loss on educators and school communities, as a form of disenfranchised grief. We examine the causes and consequences of grief bias, and the need to set up conversations that honor and protect those who have been harmed most by the injustices of our time.

- [The Three Paradoxes of Grief](#)
- [The Impact of Student Death on Educators](#)
- [Student Loss, Educator Grief, and Identity](#)

## **PART 2: [Holding Space for a Grieving Friend or Colleague](#)**

In Part 2, we turn to the principles and practices of holding space: how to notice and name what you do and don't have capacity for, what it means to sit with discomfort, be it your own or that of a grieving friend or colleague, tips on how to ask good questions, and group facilitation tips to keep in mind as you seek to create and maintain a brave space.

- [Take Inventory: Are You Physically, Intellectually, and Emotionally Able to Hold Space Today?](#)
- [Being There: Do's and Don'ts](#)
- [Tips When Facilitating a Group Conversation About Student Death, Loss and Bereavement](#)
  - [Establish Group Agreements](#)
  - [When and How to Pivot a Conversation](#)
  - [Practice Brave Space](#)
  - [Want Better Conversations? Ask Better Questions](#)
- [A Few Tips on Talking About Student Death by Suicide](#)
- [If You're Concerned About Yourself or a Friend or Colleague](#)
- [Letting Go What Isn't Yours](#)
- [Closing](#)
- Appendix:
  - [Additional Rituals and Exercises to Help You Process Student Death, With or Without a Group](#)
- [Acknowledgments](#)

Throughout this guide, we'll look at the myriad impacts of loss on educators — particularly when it comes to the loss of students. We ask ourselves and each other questions like...

*How might the experience of a school-based loss years ago impact your current practice?*

*How might we make sense of school-based loss and how that informs who we are as administrators, educators, clinicians, and youth advocates?*

*How might we incorporate the losses we experienced as students ourselves, now that we are educators — perhaps even in the same community in which we grew up?*

*How do we hold space to name and reflect on those experiences?*

*How might we create a community of people who get it — who want to be there for one another through the messiness of loss and life after as educators?*



We invite you to join us as we lift up the curtain on loss and its impact, and how it informs who we are as administrators, educators, clinicians, and youth advocates. Together, we wish to create community not in name only, but in action — in how we show up, how we ask for help, and how we support one another through recovery towards our individual and collective renewal.

Take a look, lean on one another, and know, more than anything: **You're not alone. And: You've got this.**

In community,  
The [School Crisis Recovery and Renewal](#) project and [The Dinner Party Labs](#)

February 2023



# PART 1: Educator Grief and Student Death 101

We begin with an overview of grief and some of the paradoxes that attend it, along with the particular impacts of student loss on educators and school communities, as a form of disenfranchised grief. We examine the causes and consequences of grief bias, and the need to set up conversations that honor and protect those who have been harmed most by the injustices of our time.

“ I define grief as the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual experience we have after loss. At every layer of the self, grief is there, shaping our thoughts, feelings, our form, and our function. More specifically, grief impacts our brains — how we cognitively process and function. It impacts our physical bodies — our energy levels, our health. It impacts our emotional lives — bringing up new emotions, old ones we haven’t accessed in a while, and our ability to express what we’re feeling and how we’re feeling it. And grief impacts our spiritual lives — what we believe, how we believe it, what we seek from our beliefs.

- Alica Forneret, Executive Director of PAUSE

## Reflection

What words do you associate with grief? With bereavement?



## The Three Paradoxes of Grief

“ As educators, it's not really something that people talk about. I came from a background where my whole career was talking about grief and loss and death, into a space where the staff feel uncomfortable with it because they're already carrying so much for their kids. They can't let themselves go there. Because people don't talk about it, you feel like you're the only one carrying around that trauma. This reminds you that you're not alone.

- Melissa Gillespie, pilot participant, *Life After Loss Tables: The Educators' Edition*

Loss, like any traumatic experience, can cause or surface shrinkage or expansion, individually and within a community. Grief can be messy. What works for one person may not work for another,



and for every universalism, the opposite is often true. Like all good paradoxes, these don't come with simple fixes. As educators and school leaders navigating post-student death aftermath, the acknowledgement and awareness of the presence of these opposites can help you feel more efficacious and steady.

**Paradox 1: You're not alone...AND no two stories [about a student or any type of loss ] are ever the same.**

We find even the simple act of naming something can relinquish its hold over us. It can be such a relief to name what you've been afraid to say out loud, and to see someone's head nod across the table (or in another corner of the screen).

But that search for commonality can sometimes lead to erasure, and a failure to appreciate real differences in our stories. We all know what it's like to hear "Oh, I totally get that" and think "wait, but do you?"

The reality is that no two stories are ever the same, because no two relationships are ever the same. Those within a school community may be experiencing a shared loss, but each person's experience will be different, on account of who we are as individuals, our relationships to the student or students who died, and what was happening in each of our lives when we were struck by the loss.

In the words of Audre Lorde, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

**Tip:** Enter any conversation with a fellow grieving educator knowing that others' stories won't look like yours. The act of naming that upfront creates a space that normalizes difference in experience, and lets everyone know from the get-go that whatever it is they're carrying is valid.



**Paradox 2: We are meaning-making creatures...and sometimes we use meaning to bypass pain.**

If you are leading a conversation about how student death has impacted a team or community, you will hear a variety of ways educators have coped with loss. You might hear how student death and loss can create new ways of seeing the world, sometimes reminding us of our original call to schooling and education. For many, student loss becomes a deep source of empathy, strength and reconnection to educators' original Why.

Be wary of language like "everything happens for a reason," or the instinct to search for a "silver lining." There's nothing inherently wrong about coping strategies that involve searching for the positive, but be sure that that tendency doesn't become a cover for an inability to sit with suffering. The science of post-traumatic growth doesn't teach us that there is anything inherently good about suffering, or that trauma automatically leads to growth. And, sometimes it's going to be impossible to make meaning of students' lives lost. It's okay to not be okay. It's okay to feel your student loss is completely devoid of meaning.

**Tip:** Resist the urge to find the fix, or the happy ending, or to try to find the positive spin. And when someone discovers sources of resilience they didn't know they had, by all means honor that, too. Just remember the meaning doesn't belong to the death: It belongs to you.



### Paradox 3: Grief craves witnesses...and joy is engine-fuel.

One of the most powerful things we can do for one another is simply to witness and be witnessed (the connected pillar in crisis renewal is [Creating Structural Witnessing](#)). That means giving people permission to name the things we struggle to say out loud — the unfixable realities, the unresolved anger you feel toward the student (for example, “Why were they at the wrong place at the wrong time?” “Why did they get in the car?”). Student death often surfaces really tricky and uncomfortable thoughts.

Many of us have never spoken openly and at length about the sources of our educator heartbreak. It may be the first time we don’t have to apologize for crying, or worry about making someone else uncomfortable. When we hold space for educator grief we...

- Reduce isolation that educators are feeling in their work
- Normalize holding this space and having these conversations (particularly professionally)
- Prioritize time for healing even when it feels like we don’t have time for it (especially as busy educators, in the middle of a pandemic, etc.)

**Tip:** When opening up conversations about grief and loss, make room for both laughter and tears. As educators, accessing humor is often one of our go-to strategies to move through suffering. Our job in holding space for one another is to normalize that range of experiences and to welcome everyone to join where they are and how they are.

## Reflection

When you hear the phrase “life after loss,” what comes up for you as an educator?



## The Impact of Student Death on Educators

“When I lost someone, there was nobody I could sit at the table and have a conversation with. Now, I can talk and release some of those pains, and I don't have to worry about somebody being upset, because we are all releasing and holding and caring at the same time.

- Beverly Canady, pilot participant, [Life After Loss Tables: The Educators' Edition](#)

Loss comes in innumerable forms, whether that's a loss to death, or the loss of relationships, security, a sense of normalcy, connection, or routine. Wherever you are, whether in a school community, a place of worship, or passing strangers in a grocery store, chances are high that you or someone around you is experiencing grief.

But student death — as with any school-based crisis — is different. Student death — whether by illness (e.g., cancer), accident (e.g., car accident) or by human-led violence (e.g., school shootings) — should not be guaranteed, and yet for many school communities, it is. Often, it is the direct or indirect product of social structures of systemic violence, oppression, intentional policies, and harm.





And yet we have little language to describe the experience, let alone resources with which to support those impacted.

Educator grief is a form of what's called "disenfranchised grief," in which the griever does not have the opportunity or permission to move through grief.<sup>1</sup> Student death crises are often met with an initial response, followed by silence. We may lack the time to actively process: In a hierarchy of needs, school cultures rarely prioritize space for this. The death itself may be invalidated, silenced, or stigmatized, often as a direct consequence of the identities of those who died. We as educators are expected to be in a significant relationship with students, and then find ourselves systematically under-supported if or when that relationship changes due to death or loss.

As a result, those of us who have experienced the loss of a student may not identify as "grieving." In fact, many of us struggle with the word, whether that's because we don't associate the experience of student death with grief, or because we were never afforded the "right" and the space to grieve, or because the death happened years or even decades ago, and we've long since found ways to move forward, even as our professional roles and personal identities continue to be colored by the experience in ways big and small.

But make no mistake: It does have an impact.

**Student death, whether of current or former students, can:**

- Impact our future relationship-building with new students
- Activate personal feelings of efficacy, control, and responsibility
- Cause dissociation or over-association
- Bring up our own personal experiences with past loss (e.g., the student could look like a friend who died when we were young, the student could look like our own children)
- Surface different belief systems about who "deserved it" or whose life mattered (e.g. "the good kid" or "the kid who had it coming")
- Lead to moral injury when left unaddressed in school cultures (because of stigma, adult fear)
- Surface "investment war" - e.g., "we invested so much in them and they made a stupid decision, our investment was worthless" OR "we didn't care enough..."
- And so many more life after student loss impacts

**Healing thus depends, first, on our embracing and imbuing a collective permission to grieve as educators, whatever that looks like.**

It may mean acknowledging the grief that lingers for a moment when you hear of a student who graduated who died over Winter Break, or the evolving feelings over the course of a semester, as an empty chair in class continues to draw your gaze. It may be the feelings that surface at night when flashbacks of a student's funeral return, or the grief that emerges twenty years later when you're no longer at that school or in that position, and now you have time to think and reflect about it all.

It's all real.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "disenfranchised grief" was coined by Dr. Kenneth Doka, who described it as the grief that "results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned" (2008). Educators often experience this kind of grief because the educator-student relationship in the context of bereavement is not often awarded the social recognition or public acknowledgement that it is real, exists, and is impactful. For more, see Doka, K. J. (2008). *Disenfranchised grief in historical and cultural perspective*. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, and W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 223–240). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14498-011>



## Student Loss, Educator Grief, and Identity

Grief — the way we define it, move it, approach it, respond to it, and hold it — is informed and formed by our identities (e.g., our class, language, ability, etc). Moreover, how we validate or invalidate our students' deaths is deeply informed by our students' identities, as a result of what's called "grief bias" (e.g. who had "it coming"? Who "didn't deserve it"?).

For example, for White educators who work in communities in which they do not live or did not grow up in, student death can surface internalized racism and other structural forms of violence that can impact the way we understand or make meaning of a student's death. For educators of color, if a student who shares their identity dies, the experience might bring up a personal loss narrative.

So let's take a moment to unpack disparities in grief:

- Grief is not shared equally, and never has been.
- Societally, we most often focus on single, episodic loss, while erasing the bigger picture of communal, collective grief and the social inequities that permeate our world.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, mortality ratios for Black and Latinx communities in the US were 3.6 and 2.6 times higher, respectively, than the mortality ratio for non-hispanic Whites<sup>2</sup> — a pattern seen again and again throughout our country. The disproportionate losses borne by communities of color expose inequities driven by racism embedded within our healthcare, labor, and economic systems. Among students of color, the range of structural forces that contribute to student death include housing insecurity, gun violence, family separation, and addiction, to name a few.

For people who've experienced racism and other forms of oppression, those disproportionate losses can activate other layers of trauma, threatening our sense of safety and hopefulness.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to grief recovery and renewal. The conditions that invite psychological safety and honest expressions of vulnerability may look different depending on one's racial identity, and thus require different approaches to facilitating conversations, depending on who's in the room.

### Reflection

Power and privilege can take many different forms in our society, and provide a spectrum through which we can better understand the various positions we occupy. Think about the various roles and experiences you have: What parts of your own identities do and do not carry power and privilege, right now, in this moment?

How might those identities inform your relationship with grief, student death(s), and the culture of school crisis?



<sup>2</sup> Bassett MT, Chen JT, Krieger N. The unequal toll of COVID-19 mortality by age in the United States: quantifying racial/ethnic disparities. Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies working paper, volume 19, number 3. Available at: [https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1266/2020/06/20\\_Bassett-Chen-Krieger\\_COVID-19\\_plus\\_age\\_working-paper\\_0612\\_Vol-19\\_No-3\\_with-cover.pdf](https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1266/2020/06/20_Bassett-Chen-Krieger_COVID-19_plus_age_working-paper_0612_Vol-19_No-3_with-cover.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Forneret, Alica. "How People Of Color Can Experience Grief Differently Than White People." Huffington Post, 12 April 2021, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/people-of-color-grief\\_l\\_6030100ec5b6cc8bbf3b8a34](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/people-of-color-grief_l_6030100ec5b6cc8bbf3b8a34)



In a society that's structurally unequal and inequitable, it is imperative that we think about how to set up a conversation with our colleagues in a way that honors and protects those who have been harmed most by the injustices in our time.

Holding space for ourselves and the community for grief and healing comes with certain commitments:

- We educate ourselves/stay informed and aware.
- We establish, communicate, negotiate and respect boundaries when we need to have them.
- We are attuned to the experience of grief and lived experience and how it can make our grief response, recovery and renewal needs different.
- What other commitments might you carry into this?

## Reflection

Who in your life might be grieving and why? What might lead educators of color to grieve differently? How might educators of color experience life after student death differently?

How might the barriers to talking openly about grief change, depending on a person's race, age, tenure, seniority, location, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, role, or vocalness?

Now, think about the ways you already show up for people in your life with different lived experiences than your own. How might your support for grieving peers differ based on who's in the room?



# PART 2: Holding Space for a Grieving Staff, Colleague, or Organization

Here we turn to the principles and practices of holding space: how to notice and name what you do and don't have capacity for, what it means to sit with discomfort, be it your own or that of a grieving friend or colleague, tips on how to ask good questions, and group facilitation tips to keep in mind as you seek to create and maintain a brave space.

## Reflection

When it comes to holding space for a grieving friend or colleague, what existing skills or practices can you draw upon? How are you already caring for your community?

What is one action that you can take to ensure you are equipped to care for peers who've likewise experienced student loss?



## Take Inventory: Are You Physically, Intellectually, and Emotionally Able to Hold Space Today?

We're not always in a spot where we can hold space for others; sometimes, we just need space held for us. What's important is to know what might activate you, and how to quiet that, and if that's something that can be done right now, or if the thing you need is time.

One way to gauge this is simply to check in with some of the different dimensions of your wellbeing, one at a time. **Read over the prompts below during a time you feel grounded** and well, so that you have a healthy baseline to reference. Before you attempt to hold space for a friend or colleague, think back on this exercise and evaluate honestly what you do and don't have capacity for, keeping your baseline in mind.

You may notice things like, "it's that time of year of the wildfire, and I can feel my body tensing up." It may be that you simply wish to name that for the group or the person you're in conversation with. But know, too, that there is no shame in stepping back when you need to.

**ACTIVITY »** Taking inventory and asking for help as needed is so important for the long game of your wellbeing, and it's a beautiful way to model and invite mutual care and support among the folks you're building community with.

**Am I physically ready to hold space?** — Check in with your body. Are you feeling settled and well enough to be present with yourself and others? Is your heart rate or breath racing with anxiety?

Did you remember to eat, hydrate and sleep enough to be grounded and present? Sometimes our nervous system shows up in ways we can take care of, but when you can't just yet, your community is here to support and step in.

**Am I intellectually ready to hold space?** — Check in with your mind. Are you able to listen and engage with what people share? Is your mind preoccupied with the news or to-do's? Has a traumatic experience or difficult memory come up that has made following a train of thought difficult? Stress, grief, trauma and other factors impact how we focus, process and remember, and there's no shame in giving your brain a break if it's hitting a limit for now.

**Am I emotionally ready to hold space?** — Check in with your feelings. Are you grounded enough to empathetically connect with others and allow their emotional experiences to co-exist with your own? Does a feeling (like jealousy, sadness, or rage) seem likely to overpower you from sitting with other people with other feelings? Are you having a hard time being aware of your own emotions, or which way they might go? We all have moments where responding to our own feelings needs to be the singular priority, and it's okay to step back when that's the case.

If you start to feel overwhelmed, don't be afraid to model the same vulnerability you're inviting in others. If you have a meeting scheduled or a plan to meet a colleague for coffee to process these experiences together, it's okay to say, "Hey, I'm really sorry, but I'm just not in a place where I can hold this today. Can we reschedule?"

#### Additional self-attunement tools:

- 1. Body scan.** Emotions tend to take up residence in our bodies. By tuning into the places we feel tension, we can become aware of feelings we didn't know were there, and begin to relax the parts of ourselves that feel tightly wound. Check in with your feet, your stomach, and your shoulders: What do you notice? Here's a [great five-minute meditation](#) from our friends at the Greater Good Science Center, which you can use to tune into the places you feel tension, and to begin to release that tension.
- 2. Pick a color or a weather forecast to describe your mood.** Are you a raging purple thunderstorm, or the sun-soaked yellow of a breezy summer picnic? The dark, heavy green of a thick, humid jungle, or an impenetrable gray fog, or the periwinkle blue of a cloudless sky? (We know this can feel cheesy, but that's the point: On days when we're holding a lot, we cannot be expected to thoughtfully articulate what it is we're feeling. The less you have to think your way through this, the better.)
  - **Now ask yourself:** *How do I want to feel?* There are times when our raging thunderstorms actually want to pass; we just gotta wait this out. Maybe it's better that we do that alone, or maybe we want to borrow a little bit of someone else's sunshine. There are other times when we want to boom and crackle, and to be loved no less for it. We're not interested in whatever rainbow waits on the other side, but we do want to be fully seen, right here, right now, ideally with others who've experienced their own thunderstorms.

Communication tends to break down in the moments we feel triggered. When our brains are in fight or flight mode, we cannot be expected to thoughtfully articulate what we need, let alone be able to listen fully to someone else reflect on their needs. If what you need is to be alone, know that there's no shame in naming you cannot hold this today. In fact, expressing that kind of vulnerability will give the folks you're in relationship with the permission to likewise name they're not okay.



## Being There: Do's and Don'ts

### Reflection

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Recall a time when you \*weren't\* heard or listened to — when communication broke down. How did it feel? What conditions contributed to this?

Next, close your eyes, and think of a time when you felt fully welcome and truly supported.

Draw a picture in your head, in as much detail as you can: What time of year is it? How old are you? Who are you with? How familiar are you with the space: is it a place you know intimately, or is this a special occasion? What do you see? What do you hear? How does it feel to be there? Slowly open your eyes, and think about what — and who — it was that made you feel that way.



When we think back on a person with whom we felt truly safe, some of us think first of a professional — a counselor or therapist, a chaplain, or perhaps a beloved teacher or mentor. For others, that person is a friend or a family member — someone without any formal training, who simply understood what it means to listen.

Most of our common platitudes are born out of good intentions. We want to lessen the blow, or to find a silver lining, or to fix the unfixable. We gloss over pain and seek reassurance that everything is okay, even if those reassurances are cloaked in silence and concealment. But contrary to popular belief, comforting one another doesn't require having comforting words to say: Acknowledging pain is more comforting than trying to reduce it.

**Whether you're holding space for one person or a group of educator peers, here are a few tips:**

**Be present.** Listening and multitasking do not mix. That means no distractions: Studies show the mere presence of a phone on a table impedes the quality of conversation.<sup>4</sup> It also means focusing your attention on the person or people you're with: If you're constantly worried about what you're going to say, you're liable to miss what's being said.

**Befriend silence.** Don't fear pauses. Try to take a few moments or beats after asking a question. (Chances are you practice something akin to this as an educator.) Silence often means "I'm thinking" or that someone's working up the courage to say something out loud for the first time.

**Mirror back:** Validate the person's experience by reflecting back what you hear. Try repeating back certain words or phrases that stand out to you, to help reiterate their point or meaning. Practice active listening with phrases like, "I hear you saying that ..." and "I appreciate you sharing with me that..."

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<sup>4</sup>Przybylski, A.K and Weinstein, N. "Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2012, pp. 237–246



**Acknowledge — and resist the urge to fix.** “Grief cannot be fixed; it can only be carried,” writes author Megan Devine.<sup>5</sup> The most powerful thing we can do for one another is simply to witness. Physical gestures — eye contact, placing your hand on your heart, simply choosing to breathe deeply with someone — can go a long way. You can also use phrases like, “thank you for sharing that,” and “wow, I need a moment to sit with that. Thanks for trusting me to hold that with you.”

**Know that your perspective is exactly that — yours.** You might not understand something someone is going through: That's okay. Your job is to create a container for people to share without feeling alienated, or put in a position to be the “teacher”.

**Be mindful of your own identities and those of the educators you're with.** Consider questions like:

- Where does power lie amongst the people I'm in conversation with?
- What are our shared beliefs? Do we have a baseline agreement, for example, that racism is real?
- Are the people with privilege in the conversation willing to hear the stories of the other participants, consider what they might not know, and hold the stories as sacred?

Keep in mind that we each carry both visible and invisible identities, and that what you don't know of someone's story vastly exceeds what you do.

**ACTIVITY »** Not sure where to start? Here are a few conversation-starters to try. (Note that each one focuses more on the life — both that of the student you lost and your own — than on the death.)

- #SayTheirNames: Tell me about them. What were they like?
- What do you wish you could share with them today?
- Describe how the experience of loss left you changed as an educator, and as a person. How are you different now than you were before?
- What do you wish others would ask you? What do you long to talk about?
- What's been coming up for you lately?
- “I've been thinking a lot about...and I'm curious if that does or doesn't resonate?”

## **Tips When Facilitating a Group Conversation About Student Death, Loss and Bereavement**

You may have noticed: Humans are messy. Educators are messy. School culture is messy.

Talking openly about grief and loss can be uncomfortable, especially if you've never been asked to reflect on your experiences out loud before. We find ourselves stumbling over our words, as we try to make sense of an experience in real-time. We long for connection, so we're quick to relate experiences that take attention away from the person sharing.

### **Three Key Ingredients to Facilitating Conversations About Student Death with Educators**

1. Model the relational way of being you want to cultivate in your group.
2. Set the tone for organic conversation.
3. Be curious.

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<sup>5</sup> Devine, Megan. It's OK That You're Not OK. Sounds True, 2017.



Facilitating conversations about student death impact is a “both/and” experience: It means holding space for yourself and others simultaneously. Knowing grief yourself is exactly what it takes to help hold the grief of others, and to witness one another in grief.

It matters that you bring your own story with you into conversations with peers. By letting vulnerability lead, you give permission to others to do the same.

Once you sit down, ask open-ended questions, and leave space for interaction among the group. You can think of these as questions that people can answer without giving the whole context of their story. We don't need details of events in order to hear how someone is. Think simply: “What’s coming up for you today?”

Think of your role as one of invitation: To build a space where people need not come with the same stories, tools, or reactions — a space where you navigate all of this together, bringing what you have, and remaining open to hearing and witnessing what you don't.

**ACTIVITY »** Before you sit down, take a moment to consider: **What do you really want to talk about?** What are you \*really\* sitting with?

If we talk about loss at all, we tend to talk about the circumstances of a loss, or the date in which it happened, or what was and wasn't meaningful at a memorial service (if indeed one happened). All of that is valid, and you may find that you and the folks you're gathering with are longing to share stories that they never had the chance to process or talk openly about. (Indeed, another pillar of crisis renewal is [Encouraging Individual and Collective Storytelling](#).) **But reflecting on where you are now — how loss has impacted who you are, and how you think about the work you do — requires time. Checking in with yourself about your own grief will encourage others to do the same.**

If you're genuinely curious to hear and share and listen, others will be, too. What do you want to explore in your own grief? How does losing a student continue to shape what you think about and how you live and how you work?

## Establish Group Agreements

Building the trust necessary to really open up — especially when it comes to expressing vulnerability — takes time. Introducing group agreements (or deciding on them together) is a way to both offer parameters you all can work within, and to let everyone know that you (and they) are engaging in these conversations with intention.

Here are a few we at The Dinner Party recommend for groups as they get started. Feel free to use whatever feels resonant:

**Be present.** We encourage you to turn off notifications during our time together. If this is a virtual gathering, resist the urge to shift between tabs on a computer screen or to engage in other tasks around you.

**Speak from your own experience, and in a way that accommodates the grief of others.** Use “I” statements, knowing that your experience is yours and others' experiences are theirs. Remember: You can stand in your truth and also know that others have their own. Expect others' stories to look different than yours. Just as no relationship is the same, no two people are ever the same: What we need, what we long for, how we're feeling varies from person to person.

**Being here is participating.** You are, at no point, under pressure to talk. We welcome silence just as much as we welcome speech, and ask only that when you speak, you do so intentionally. Here there's no such thing as an awkward silence.





**Make space for every voice.** Notice that you're talking more than others? Step back and give other voices a chance to be heard. Be patient and respectful with speaking turns and speaking times.

**Meet hard moments with curiosity.** Conflict and tension can come up naturally when we bring different and deeply held experiences. We encourage you to meet them first with reflection (including self-reflection), centered on curiosity, learning, empathy and respect. That said, we are also each welcome to name our boundaries of what we will engage, share and receive.

**Keep it confidential.** What's said here stays here. No quotes or identifying details will be shared without permission. Share what you felt or learned from your own experience.

**Safety and self-preservation first.** You know yourself best. If you need to shake it out, find something green in the room, hydrate, or take a walk please do.

### ACTIVITY SUGGESTION » Set your Group Agreements together.

- **Facilitator instructions:** Draw a large circle. (If hosting this virtually, you can use a powerpoint slide, or simply open a google doc and create two lists, labeling one "Inside the Circle," and the other "Outside the Circle.")
- **Prompt for the group:** How do you want to feel leaving this gathering? What are the norms that we want to carry forward throughout our time together, and into the future? What do we want to leave at the door?
- **Record your group agreements** — what is welcome in this space — inside the circle. Record all the things people want to leave at the door outside the circle. (If you're gathering in-person, you can use this as a visual reminder of the agreements you've chosen to hold with one another. Even if you're gathering virtually, it's a good idea to hang onto this document/visual, in case you want to revisit or refer back to it during a future gathering.)

## When and How to Pivot a Conversation

**What should we do when those agreements are bruised or broken?** Getting comfortable with discomfort is part of how we heal, individually and collectively. But there's a difference between the mundane fumbles of everyday conversation, and occasions in which something is said or done that does real harm, however inadvertently. Those moments can quickly shut down a conversation or close off a relationship, so it's important to know how to gently intervene. A few things to watch out for:

- **Ball-hogs:** There are days when we need a little extra space to share what's on our minds, whether that's an anniversary of a death, or a triggering event. It only becomes a problem if it's a pattern, such that others can't respond, or share what's coming up for them.
- **Advice-givers:** Typically, if someone is longing for advice, they'll ask for it. Most of the time, we just want to be heard. Pay attention to the impulse to fix the unfixable, or to believe we have the answers.
- **Intellectualizing:** There's a difference between talking about vulnerability and actually being vulnerable. Talking about an issue from a theoretical standpoint can be a defense posture for avoiding how we actually feel about something.
- **Erasure:** This typically takes one of two forms: The first is when someone rejects or denies another's experience ("You must have misunderstood...", or "I'm sure that wasn't their intention.") The other is what researcher and civil rights leader john a. powell calls "samings"<sup>6</sup>: "I don't see race," "I don't see disability," or attempts to relate to something they can't: When in response to, "My partner died," someone says "Oh, I know exactly what you're feeling. My parakeet died.") What we don't know of each other vastly exceeds what we do. Our role is to witness and appreciate the unique roads each of us has walked.

<sup>6</sup>powell, john a. "Us vs them: the sinister techniques of 'Othering' – and how to avoid them." The Guardian. 8 November 2017.



- **Emotion Judges.** Everyone has a right to their feelings. They don't have a right to deny others' theirs.

### How to pivot the conversation (particularly when in a group conversation):

- **Affirm and redirect:** Let the person come to a pause and thank the person for sharing. Then pivot the conversation with compassion by asking if what that person was saying resonates with anyone else. (*"I'm curious what that brings up for other people?"*) Feel free to share what's coming up for you here, too. Be purposeful in opening up the conversation to others, so that people know it's their time to chime in.
- **Make the clock your friend:** Redirect to let the rest of the group in by interrupting and saying gently, *"I want to pause you right there, simply because I want to make sure that everyone who wants to share has that chance during our time together."*
- **Call back to your Group Agreements.** *"Tonight, I want to ask that all of us pay attention to how we're participating and showing up in this space. If you notice you're talking a lot, maybe try stepping back to let others' voices in."*
- **Be willing to interrupt harmful rhetoric by calling people in, not out.** If you hear something offensive that targets someone else in the conversation, or you notice that someone says something that shuts another person down, it is your responsibility as facilitator (whether formally or informally) to name it. Otherwise, moments of harm can become (another) elephant in the room, diverting all attention away from the group and the conversation at hand, and putting the impacted person at risk of further grief and isolation. You want the people around you to know you've got their back. When someone says something in a conversation that you know to be harmful, follow this three-step response:
  1. **Pause the group, and name what came up for you.** There are a few different ways to do this:
    - **Name how it landed on your body:** *"Hey, I want to stop us for a second, because that thing you said just made me bristle a little bit."* *"Can I pause us? When I heard you say that about [the student] I noticed my shoulders tense."*
    - **Assume good intent and hold them accountable to it.** *"I know you well enough to know that you don't mean to do harm. [Or, "my experience of you in this conversation is that you really do care about your community."] Because of that, I want to pause you because I think the thing you said actually is harmful in a way you don't intend."*
  2. **Name why it was harmful.** *"Though you might not have meant for it to, that language that you used has some harmful implications that feel important to name."*
  3. **Offer a different way forward for the whole group.** It's important to not put someone on the defensive, or, in group conversations, to not give everyone permission to pile on a person who might have said something harmful. In order to avoid these things, your third step is to name for the group a way forward. For instance, *"From this point forward, language we can use instead is death by suicide instead of 'committed suicide.'"*

**And remember:** The facilitator of a conversation is every bit as capable of causing harm as any other participant. If you catch yourself saying something that lands differently than you intended it: Pause. Breathe. Apologize, and be specific about what you're apologizing for. And reinforce the agreements you've made to one another, and what you'll do differently moving forward.



## Reflection



It can feel intimidating to speak up on your own behalf or that of someone else when you notice a moment of harm. But the truth is, each of us can think of a person — someone you know personally, or a historical figure, or a leader you admire — who taught you to stand up for what you believe in. Think about that person, and the lessons they modeled.

Now, think about a moment you stood up for something or someone when they needed it, or a moment you wish you had.

## Practice Brave Space

We're all familiar with the idea of "safe space." We prefer the language of "brave space." Why? Because we recognize that for those who've been most marginalized, there is no such thing as a safe space. And because, too often, we confuse a safe space with a comfortable space. Learning to sit with each other's truths means we have to learn to sit with discomfort.

Practicing brave space means a number of things:

**Brave Space is co-created.** It means that in any given conversation, every party is working to create this moment of connection.

**Brave Space is willing to get uncomfortable.** Our conversation might require us to get uncomfortable — to look at ourselves, and our world, through another lens.

**Brave Space reminds us that we all contain multitudes.** It means resisting the urge to reduce someone to a stereotype or a single story. It means recognizing that we all have held pain in our bodies, and we have all fallen short of doing right by others at some point. When you notice yourself reacting to or passing judgment on a particular part of someone's story they might be sharing, practicing Brave Space means asking questions to see what a deeper story might be. It is the practice of being mindful that there might be more going on here than meets the eye.

**Practicing Brave Space is to be really present.** It demands we pay attention — that, in the words of Parker Palmer, we "let the soul speak," and listen deeply as others do the same. This includes attending to the cultural narratives, assumptions, and perspectives shaping how we listen and how we speak. What is impacting the room that is not being said, and what is being said implicitly?

**Brave Space affirms the dignity of all people. This conviction requires that we interrupt the societal norms that privilege certain people over others.** In a society that is riddled with power, privilege, oppression, injustice, and inequity, not everyone's voice and perspective is welcome or valued in our society. So, in our conversations, we take seriously the work to counter that, by centering those in the conversation who are on the margins in our society. We make a particular effort here to make space for and lift up the voices that are silenced and marginalized elsewhere.

**Brave Space holds complexity, allowing people to start where they are.** It's resisting the impulse to shame others or ourselves for not knowing better. It asks that we be gentle with ourselves, and gentle with each other.



**Brave Space remembers that what we don't know about each other far outweighs what we do.** We see this as the responsibility to be open to changing. Brave Space invites us to examine our own stories. It asks us to go deeper, to not be satisfied by our starting point, and to trust that we always have room to examine, learn, and grow.

**Practicing Brave Space is the radical acceptance of how a conversation went. It is the willingness to continue conversation when necessary, and to let go when necessary.** It is trusting that it matters for us to show up, to bear witness to each other, and to hold each other's stories as others hold our stories. It makes room for the messiness that sometimes shows up here.

## **Want Better Conversations? Ask Better Questions.**

*“What does it mean to ‘hold space’ for someone else? It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they’re on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control.”*

- Heather Plett, [The Art of Holding Space](#) (2020)

Most of us aren't looking to be fixed. We're looking to be witnessed. That requires that we set aside the impulse to offer advice, and that we relinquish control — turning our attention to offering questions, rather than answers.

Good questions **connect us back to the intention** of the conversation. They keep us focused on deepening our connection with the person we are talking to, and help us to avoid straying into tangents.

Good questions are **questions that anyone can answer**, and that allow for varying degrees of depth. They are accessible to everyone who is part of the conversation, whether or not someone chooses to answer it directly. (Feeling uncomfortable with a question, or not having an answer, is an answer, too.)

Good questions **take us beneath the surface**. They invite us to see the stories that propel a person to show up in the world in a particular way, giving us a window into the forces that shaped them. Good questions unearth the stories we rarely share, inviting a person to go deeper. They remind us there's always a lot more to a person's story than meets the eye.

Good questions are **honest and open**. “An honest, open question is one you cannot possibly ask while thinking, ‘I know the right answer to this and I sure hope you give it to me,’” writes Parker Palmer, founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. “Thus, ‘Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?’ is not an honest, open question! But, ‘What did you learn from the experience you just told us about?’ is.”

Good questions are not meant to satisfy your own curiosity; they are questions that **connect a person back to their own experience**. They allow a person to recognize their own wisdom.



## A few spacious questions we love:

- What's coming up for you today?
- What are you feeling in your body?
- What are other moments in your life that this brings up?
- How has that showed up for you?
- What has this meant for you?
- What would happen if you don't make a decision today?

## A Few Tips on Talking About Student Death by Suicide

Suicide has long been a subject of taboo. Efforts to break the silence around suicide are new, and we're only just learning to talk about it. Even today, families will sometimes go to great lengths to hide the cause of death. And schools are no better when it comes to either our colleagues, students, or community members.

Here are a few guidelines to follow when talking about suicide:

1. **Stop saying "committed suicide."** Simply put, it's out of date. People commit crimes: Using that word subtly implies fault and perpetuates the stigma around suicide. Instead, use language like "died by suicide" or "took their own life." Changing a few simple words displays empathy towards the person who died and acknowledges their often long and terrible fight against diseases like mental illness and addiction.
2. **Aim for headlines over details.** We don't need every conversation to go back to the description of the student's death, both to respect our own nervous systems, and the dignity of the student and their family. Focus on what's happening in the present-tense: "I'm struggling with being able to connect with my new student who reminds me of one that I lost."
3. **Nope: Suicide isn't selfish.** It's often easier to offer help than it is to ask for it, and those contemplating suicide are often wracked by guilt, or feel the world would be better off without them. Suicide is a response to pain, not indifference. And our work as educators is holding the reality of that pain, examining how we can better understand that pain in ourselves and in our broader community and process that pain together.

## If You're Concerned About Yourself or a Friend or Colleague

Peer-led conversations about student loss may be therapeutic, but they're not therapy. We're not interested in professionalizing anything, but in humanizing everything. If you yourself are a counselor or school-based social worker, find a peer to talk with and ask if they're open to a conversation in which you're both permitted to take off your professional hats for a bit.

If you're worried about the safety of yourself or someone you know, start by reminding that person that they don't have to hide. *"Thank you so much for sharing that with me. I want to be someone with whom you can talk about that."* We recommend you voice that worry and look to crisis resources:

- In an emergency, you can now call 9-8-8 to be connected to a trained counselor in a local crisis center
- Crisis Text Line (741-741)
- For a list of additional hotlines for specific situations, please visit: <https://www.pleaselive.org/hotlines/>

Keep in mind that thinking about death and wanting it all to be over is different from someone who's actually thinking about leaving and has a plan.



## Reflection

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Recall a moment in your healing when you needed something more (or something different) than your community could offer.

How did it feel?

Why were your needs unmet?

What resources did you wish you had? How did you know you needed more, or something different?

What did you do/where did you go to take care of yourself?



## Letting Go What Isn't Yours

Holding space — especially in the context of healing after a student death — requires energy. It's often the case that some of the relief we feel from sharing and holding space can be accompanied by a weightiness, too — the “oof, that was a lot” feeling. And that's totally normal.

Just as it's important to be intentional about how we open up space for grief, it's important, too, to reflect on how we close it, in order to return to the other demands on our days.

- **Do something that brings you joy.** After an emotionally heavy reflection or conversation, take some time to empty your mind.
- **Let go of what isn't yours.** On the heels of a gathering or conversation with educator peers about grief, you might experience a big emotional release at having shared something you'd otherwise kept under lock and key; energized and empowered at having discovered you're not alone; purposeful and enriched with meaning at having been of real service to people when they needed it. You might also feel really heavy, as a result of having opened the doors on your own sources of sadness, or fear, or anger, or of having listened intently as others did the same. (Spoiler-alert: It's likely you'll feel all of those things.)

If you notice that weight settling on your body, take a minute to assess: *Is this mine, or is it the collective's? Is this grief mine to carry, or am I feeling this way because I just sat with ten other people, and I'm now attaching to their stories and pain?* You may not know the answer at that moment, and that's okay. Here's a small ritual you can use to center yourself and settle your mind and body:

## Reflection

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Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths and mentally thank your group for sharing space with you.

Now, with your next few breaths, repeat to yourself, "For now, I let go of what isn't mine. I honor my personal space and story. I am safe."



# Closing

*More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me. When all the shock of white and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath, the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us, a return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.*

**- Ada Limón, "Instructions on Not Giving Up"**

Again and again, science points to the same finding: Talking openly about personal and meaningful topics, particularly when it comes to traumatic events, can improve our mental and physical wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> Studies among military veterans, sexual assault survivors, and parents who've lost children consistently point to the same thing: The most helpful support comes from sharing with others who've lived it, too.<sup>8</sup>

By naming our pain out loud, we free ourselves of its control, and discover capacities for resilience we did not know we had.

Doing that work is brave work, but we are no strangers to bravery. As educators, we know the power of constructing safe spaces for the students we serve. We hope that you have found within these pages tools and inspiration to construct those spaces for yourselves and each other — that you might discover, in the words of Ada Limón, "the strange idea of continuous living," winter bark and green new leaves and all.

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<sup>7</sup> Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental disclosure and its moderators: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132(6), 823–865. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.132.6.823>

<sup>8</sup> Sandberg, Sheryl and Grant, Adam. *Option B*. New York, Knopf, 2017.



# Appendix

## ADDITIONAL RITUALS and EXERCISES TO HELP YOU PROCESS STUDENT DEATH, WITH OR WITHOUT A GROUP

Looking for additional prompts and rituals that can help you go deeper? We pulled together a set of practices and exercises that can help spark further reflection and conversations, and in some cases, actions you can take together or alone.

### Reflection exercises:

- **Tiny letters:** (This practice was inspired by OG Dinner Partier Christina Tran's [Dear Daughter](#) series.)
  - **Instructions:** Write three tiny letters: One to yourself, sharing lessons and words you needed to hear; one to the student(s) you lost, sharing words you wish they could hear; and one to a fellow educator, sharing words you want to pass forward.
- **You're stronger than you think:** (This practice was adapted from [The Upside of Stress](#) by Stanford psychologist Dr. Kelly McGonigal.)
  - **Instructions:** Take a few moments to think about what loss has taught you about your strengths and what's most important to you. Write about the experience, addressing any or all of the following questions:
    - What did you do that helped you get through it?
    - What personal resources did you draw on, and what strengths did you use? Did you seek out information, advice, or any other kind of support?
    - What did this experience teach you about how to deal with adversity?
    - How did this experience make you stronger?

Now think about a current situation you are struggling through: Are there any coping skills or strengths you want to develop? If so, how could you begin to do so using this situation as an opportunity to grow? Which of these strengths and resources can you draw on in this situation?

- **Start with a "Third Thing":** "The soul is like a wild animal — tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient and yet exceedingly shy," writes Parker Palmer in [A Hidden Wholeness](#). Asking a person to share something deeply vulnerable the instant they walk into a room is generally a sure-fire way to scare them off. The Center for Courage and Renewal, the organization he founded, employs what they call "third things" — typically a poem or a song — to help kick off a conversation. Participants are invited to share whatever it is that comes up for them in hearing that particular piece or story, and to reflect on why they respond in that particular way.
- **Your Precious Student Snapshot:** Ask everyone to share a snapshot of the young person they are grieving. Give everyone one minute to close their eyes, and to imagine their student on their best day. Then invite folks to share: What do you see? What do you feel? What are they doing? Who/what are they surrounded by? What are their hopes for their world?

## RITUALS FOR REMEMBERING

According to social scientists, demarcating certain practices as rituals adds to their potency: one's belief that a specific series of behaviors constitutes a ritual is key to a ritual's psychological efficacy.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Tami Kim., Ovul Sezer, Juliana Schroeder, Jane Risen, Francesca Gino, and Michael Norton, (2021). Work group rituals enhance the meaning of work. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 165, 197-212.





- [Making It Through, Together: Ritual Collection for Life after Loss](#): In early 2020, The Dinner Party (TDP) teamed up with Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah in a quest to increase the accessibility of spiritual and cultural rituals and practices. We worked with a dozen spiritual leaders from across traditions to curate a set of rituals and practices that people throughout time have used to navigate loss and life after. Use what speaks to you, and feel free to adapt and remix the rituals to fit your needs.



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## Connect with SCRR

This work is complex and always benefits from support. Please contact us if you would like consultation, coaching, or training with any part of what we offer in this guide. We're here for you.

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