

Honoring Grief

Invitations for Educators to Allow & Embrace Our Own Lived Grief Experiences, in the Classroom and Beyond



Introduction

Grieving is not a moment—it is a landscape we all walk through at different times, in different ways. Whether stirred by loss, sudden change, or communal tragedy, grief touches the heart of every school community.

As educators and leaders, we are often called to navigate this landscape while holding space for students, staff, and families. We get checklists of what to say on Monday morning, the week after a student dies. We get sent emails with hyperlinked resources after a hurricane. Or, we get nothing at all and figure it out on our own.

At the School Crisis Recovery & Renewal Project (SCRR), we strongly believe that in tandem with supporting students' grief, we can also honor the many dimensions of our own grief—the experiences, skills, strengths, and literacies that exist within and around us.

Is it part of our work to help students navigate grief? Yes. Have we as educators been given the adequate resources and support to do that? Not always. The following invitations are designed to offer support as you weather these storms, encouraging you to honor your own grief processes as you support students in navigating theirs.

This guide is a summative collection of learnings, teachings, and insights from educators and crisis leaders curated over two years of facilitating the “Honoring Grief” series. We offer ways that we as educators can honor [our own!] grief to move with it towards our [own!] renewal.

What is this guide?

SCRR has always been in dialogue about grief, as it so clearly intersects with our school crisis recovery and renewal framework, and because we were funded to launch in April 2020, amidst pandemics and national grief experiences. Responsively, we created a multi-year program called “Honoring Grief,” specifically focusing on strategies for honoring grief in classrooms.

“Grief really is that feeling that you have, the sort of intensity that just overwhelms you, and that sort of momentary experience. Grieving, on the other hand, is the way that grief changes over time without ever actually going away.”

- Mary Frances O'Connor, PhD



The program focuses on how we develop grief literacy, hold our own grief as educators, and strategize how to build classroom/school structures to hold grief with students. In virtual sessions, educators, clinicians, and advocates nationwide focused on boosting our collective fluency when discussing grief to consider the current literature and conversations on the topic alongside our lived experiences. This series brought together people at various stages of their own grief experiences who were also seeking how to lead others through theirs.

Here, the program creators and facilitators, Brianna Young and Oriana Ides, offer and uplift participants' collective wisdom from these program's sessions so that we can sync together and gain clarity on our collective

wisdom from these program's sessions so that we can sync together and gain clarity on our collective understanding of ways we might honor grief that are authentic, liberating, and possible in our school communities.

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How are we making space for students to process and heal from the emotional toll of grief in their lives, and how are we attending to ourselves and our grief?

Educators, how are you making space for students to process and heal from the emotional toll of grief in their lives?

What are the rituals, structures, and practices you've integrated into your pedagogy to make sure there is a place where grief is seen and held, tenderly?

-The Essential Questions of SCRR's Honoring Grief Program

"I have many students in my school who have experienced or are experiencing grief in different ways. By increasing my understanding of grief, I feel I will better serve them."

-SCRR Participant from our 2023 Honoring Our Grief Series: How to Move with Grief in Our School Systems



Invitation One: Honor the Expansiveness of Grief

Our work has revealed that grief is unique, individual, contextual, and as diverse as we are. Grief is deeply relative because it is shaped by individual experiences, cultural context, and the person's unique emotional capacity.

This journey isn't about “fixing” grief but about learning how to sit with it, listen to it, and move forward with compassion. In holding space for both personal and collective grief, we create the conditions for true connection, growth, recovery, and renewal—together.

As educators and crisis leaders, understanding and holding others through the expansiveness of grief is key to meeting grief in all its forms, because the more we understand our experiences, the more open we can be with others toward theirs.

✨Grief Has Many Forms, Not Just Death✨



Throughout our Honoring Grief series, educators shared over and over that they indeed grieved the death of students or death in their families or of a colleague. However, grief is not exclusive to experiences of death.

Grief forms can show up like...

- Participants shared that certain experiences of death were grieved differently in their communities and often were uniquely placed in the middle of grieving students, colleagues, and families.
- They experience loss beyond loss of life in their school community, but in changes to the profession since the COVID-19 pandemic, the general rhetoric around education in the nation, and the continued tension of feeling under-resourced and how that translated into less for their students.
- What impacts our society and communities impacts our school culture, often manifesting as grief.

Each of these experiences led to feelings of grief. Grief is not exclusive to experiences of death.

Collective crises, like a natural disaster or a health crisis like Covid, can lead to grief. While the death of a loved one might evoke profound grief, less easily identifiable losses—such as losing a needed support staff position or switching school communities—can also be deeply impactful. What may seem like a minor loss to one person could be devastating to another. For example, think about a time as a classroom teacher when a student classmate has moved away. Their middle school classmates arrange their collective mourning rituals, preserving their friend's now-empty seat in the cafeteria for over a month. They have memorialized a different type of loss.



When we work with young people, what is significant to them may feel vastly different from what feels significant to us. Grief is proportional to the perceived significance of the loss. The more something matters to a young person, the more deeply they feel its loss.

As we witness young people navigating loss, whether from losses we may perceive to be significant or not, validating their emotions, offering them opportunities to commemorate and memorialize, and continuing to listen to them are strategic supports for holding their grief.

Pause here. *Sit with and reflect on what experiences you have and have not allowed yourself to grieve. Then, consider ways the experience of others may have also been touched by the expansiveness of grief.*

- *How might you move differently toward yourself and others in light of this reflection?*

✨Grief Leads to Grieving✨

Grief is an emotional state. Yet, as we explored this concept in the “Honoring Grief” series, the various labels and experiences within those emotions were broad and unique to the participants. What surfaced was pain, sorrow, relief, uncertainty, sentimentality, and more. This place can feel overwhelming and confusing, as emotions labeled and unlabeled come in unpredictable waves. It is the immediate reaction to loss, encompassing the broad spectrum of emotions that arise.

Grief is the feeling, the intensity, the immediate state after the loss. Grieving is the active process of working through grief. It involves emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral responses to the loss. Grieving is the journey of coming to terms with loss, and finding ways to adapt to life without what has been lost.

Honoring Grief participants observed the ways that grief and grieving...

- Shaped student relationships
- Impacted student engagement
- Informed school culture and climate
- Evolves, and is a constant presence in many ways after the loss



Grieving moves across settings, time, and changes. It is in the process that educators and leaders will begin to reconnect with themselves in new ways, re-engage with the community, and begin to redefine their future as they move through grieving.



Pause here.

- *What experiences might you be in a state of grief with, and what might you be grieving?*
- *What does moving from grief to grieving feel like for you, and how might that impact your school community?*

✨**Grief Does Not Always Look, Feel, Sound Like, and Show Up the Same Way**✨

Each experience in grief will look different. Some grief is loud, some is quiet. Some members of our school community will have observable emotional impacts, where the grief of others may surface as dropped tasks or missed deadlines. It might look like anger, despair, reminiscing, and denial, and it might cycle through each of these as grief moves into grieving. It could even look like joy and liberation, Hope and lightness.

Honoring Grief participants explored the ways that grief and grieving...



- Invites us into compassionate curiosity with each other
- Requires having an openness to what might be underneath the actions we see people take, and holding on to the potential that it might be rooted in a sense of grief, which can shift our responses towards each other away from frustration and blame and towards care and dignity.
- Encouraging us to find collective ways to make space for each other to just be, feel, and do what we need to feel and do, can be an empowering way to honor the different ways grief might manifest in our school communities.

Loud spaces, memorial spaces, creative art spaces, and spaces for physical activity and movement are just some of the potential ways that we can make opportunities for members of our school community members to move through grief as they need to, both in the immediate time after when they are in grief, and the months and years after while they continue grieving.

Pause here. *Consider a time when you experienced a loss that others may not have understood. This could be as a young person experiencing a loss that was not related to a death, or another time in your life.*

- *How did that grief manifest in your body and mind?*
- *How did that grief manifest or not manifest in your actions and behavior?*
- *How might you have asked the others around me to honor what I was feeling?*



Invitation Two: Honor Your Own Experiences

You matter, too.

Knowing ourselves and our responses to grief is a vital component of honoring it. This transcends just our own grief; we cannot effectively help others navigate grief if we have not examined our own relationship with it.

Too often we seek to skip over the act of grieving because as educators and leaders we immediately need to step into care mode, when honoring our own experiences with grief may be the exact approach we first need to take so that we can more effectively support others. This does not mean we will “be over it” before we support it. It means we recognize and respond to it to help others do the same.



✨ Reflect on Your Own Relationship with Grief ✨

Sitting with our own experiences with grief is not something many of us regularly walk into. But there is power in naming our experiences explicitly, and from our collective conversations, we learned that many experiences we label as something else, be it trauma or sadness or something else, maybe grief-based.

Making that time and space felt important, and when we engaged in that practice in the “Honoring Grief” sessions, attendees valued the space to just be and notice their experiences.

Take a look at Bri’s reflection on grief below:

“Reflecting on my own relationship with grief, I’ve come to realize how fluid and multifaceted the experience can be. Like most people, I’ve encountered grief in various forms, from personal losses to the broader grief of witnessing societal changes or collective tragedies. I find that the way I approach grief shifts depending on the type of loss, the emotional connection I have to what was lost, and the life context surrounding it. In moments of deep personal loss, grief feels heavy and all-encompassing, as if it touches every part of my day-to-day life. In contrast, with more distant or abstract losses, grief might simmer in the background, occasionally surfacing when triggered but not always at the forefront of my mind.”



“One of the most profound aspects of my relationship with grief is realizing that it doesn't necessarily end—it evolves. Over time, grief has changed from an intense, raw experience into something softer, like an undercurrent that flows through my emotional landscape, and at other times new spot of grief might emerge aggressively and unexpectedly. Other times I'm numb. I've noticed how some losses resurface unexpectedly, reminding me that grief is something I carry with me, and I've learned to permit myself to feel whatever comes up without judgment. The most important lesson I've gleaned from this reflection is that grief, when given space and attention, can also offer moments of connection, healing, and even transformation.”

Pause here. Consider the questions below as you consider your own relationship with grief.

- How do you typically react when faced with loss, and what emotions tend to arise first?
- What coping mechanisms or strategies do you turn to when grieving?
- How has your experience with grief changed over time or with different types of losses?
- What role does your support system (friends, family, community) play in your grieving process?
- How do you integrate grief into your life over the long term, and have you found ways to honor or process your losses?



✨ Reflect on the Cumulative Impact of Grieving ✨

Grief can feel magnified depending on the person's life circumstances. A job loss during an already precarious financial situation, for instance, could trigger immense grief. If the loss involves unresolved emotions or conflicted feelings, grief can extend over a longer period. For some, experiencing multiple losses might build emotional fortitude and familiarity, making future grief feel less overwhelming. You may have learned coping strategies or adapted your emotional responses. For others, repeated losses can intensify grief. Each new loss might reopen old wounds, creating a cumulative burden of grief that feels overwhelming and may arise in unexpected times and in unexpected ways.

As part of honoring our own experiences, we also might consider...

- How what we are grieving is showing up in what we are experiencing at this moment. At times, our grieving can feel like a hindrance. At other times, our grieving may feel like it heightens our sensitivities in a way that might empower how we nurture and connect with other people.



As part of honoring our own experiences, we also might consider... (continued)

- The loss of classroom community that was experienced at the start of the pandemic perhaps undercuts the frustration we feel at our current relationship challenge in the classroom.
- Experiencing the death of a student may impact the way we teach their younger sibling.

The lens of grieving through which we now see the world will reveal needs we may have in a moment and can be a clue to figuring out how we might take care of ourselves to honor the grief we've experienced.

Pause here.

- *How can we explore our own needs within grief and grieving?*
- *What emotions are you experiencing most intensely right now, and how are they affecting your day-to-day life?*
- *What do you feel you need most in this moment—comfort, space, support, or something else—and how can you ask for or provide that for yourself?*
- *Are there other tangible ways the loss is impacting you (income, support network, etc.)? How might you take care of yourself or ask for help?*
- *In what ways are you feeling overwhelmed or stuck in your grieving process, and are there small steps you can take to move through those feelings? Or is this a spot where you need to extend grace to yourself?*
- *How has this loss impacted your sense of self, your relationships, or your view of the future?*
- *Are there specific memories, moments, or aspects of the loss that you're struggling to process, and what might help you explore or release them?*

✨ Reflect on Your Grief Biases ✨

Some cultures emphasize collective mourning where grieving is communal, while others expect more private and internal grief. These differences can change the duration and perceived intensity of grief. **What we are familiar with, when it comes to grieving, can influence the way we expect or allow others to grieve.** Society has also stigmatized the types of death and loss that can be grieved when we have seen the ways grief is layered and complex on all sides of a crisis. We see biases emerge in grief both in the sense of cultural manifestations, as well as biases toward grieving certain losses over others.



Honoring grief requires examining our grief biases because...

- Limiting anyone's grief limits the ability of other members of the community to grieve as well. If we carry a marginalized identity, reflecting what we believe about how we can or cannot express ourselves in grieving is a vital part of unpacking biases placed on us that may be internalized.
- If we hold privileged identities, we need to hold on to how we center our experiences and reevaluate our approaches to moving in and out of grieving privately and publicly.

This also extends to different types of loss and how that loss is grieved. A member of the series had the experience of one of her former students committing a fatal crime against another student. The grief of both the death and the pain of the surviving student was complex to navigate. She discovered she had biases about how to grieve both the student who died and the student who was incarcerated for the crime. Both evoked feelings of grief: loss, disbelief, pain. To fully honor her own experience, she needed to let go of the judgments of the type of loss and allow the feelings to come as they did.

Pause here.

- *How might you begin unpacking your grief biases?*
- *Are there ways I want to grieve but feel like I can't? Are there ways I am expecting others to grieve and am inadvertently limiting their ability to do so?*
- *What have I been taught about grief, either actively or passively, through the lens of my own culture and familial identities? What do I know about grief in other cultures and communities, and how might I expand my understanding?*
- *What types of losses do I feel like I can or cannot grieve? Why is that?*
- *How might I increase my understanding of different ways to grieve to honor the expansiveness of it?*

Invitation Three: Honoring Grief Can Be Nurtured Through Connection

The relationships and rituals we have in our school communities will help us move within and through grief. Proactively creating a community of warmth, and safety in hard conversations, and celebrating the natural resiliencies and gifts in our young people is a means of growth through grief.



In our Honoring Grief series, we examined the ways that the community around us is both something we co-create and a source of collective healing and well-being. The cadence we establish in our classrooms and school communities can become a protective factor for us in the face of a crisis.

Some ways connecting with members of our community, particularly those with whom we share identities, can nurture our grieving. Our connectedness and the culture we helped create will not only support others but also be supportive of us.

✨Nurture Warmth and Belonging in Your Classroom/Space✨

How we engage in the day-to-day and the mundane communicates a lot about how we engage in crisis and times of heaviness.

As part of honoring grief as a connector, we can...

- Maintaining an approachable presence, nurturing, and curiosity rather than punitive when it comes to discipline, are all strategies that can create a grief-honoring culture in our school communities.
- Helping students feel connected, and also connected with you as a person, not just you as a school professional, is a way to help replicate relationships and foster a sense of belonging.
- Celebrating the identities of our students, and the traditions of their cultures and families is another great way to lean into proactive grief literacy.

And these moves are co-regulating—they are also healing for YOU! The warmth and rapport you establish also benefit your well-being through more effective partnerships with students.

Pause here.

- *What might you need in your classroom space to offer you regulation and memorialization of the losses you've experienced?*
- *How might you model a warmth toward grieving that honors your needs in the classroom?*

✨Nurture Time and Space for Grief✨

In the fast-paced world of education, it can be hard to cultivate the muscle of slowing down to make space for the softer, yet vital skills in life.

There is strength in slowing down.



To honor grief we can...

- Be attentive to the moods of yourself and your students.
- Being cognizant in conversations and designing lessons for potential grief-activating moments is part of making that space for grief.
- Building intentional pauses into the rhythm of the day provides room for both laughter and tears, helping students feel seen, heard, and held in whatever they are experiencing.

When big things come up, do you have a plan for how to navigate them? Beyond a structured plan, have you created flexible moments in your schedule for downtime, where spontaneous and meaningful conversations can unfold? Authentic dialogue about silly, everyday things is just as valuable as space for serious, emotional topics—it's often through these lighter moments that students feel safe enough to share their deeper feelings.

Grief, after all, doesn't arrive neatly between the lines of a lesson plan; it sneaks into unexpected spaces.

Pause here.

- *What elements of your classroom culture might you leverage to make space for grief conversations?*
- *How might the structures you create for students also empower you in your grieving?*
- *What might you risk in your well-being if you don't slow down when grief strikes the classroom community?*



✨ Nurture Our Grief Literacy Strengths and Skills: Trusting Ourselves ✨

As much as we walk on our path to build a relationship with grief, helping students build emotional intelligence is another vehicle for curating grief awareness in them. Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions—allows students to process complex feelings like sadness, anger, confusion, or even relief in healthy and sustainable ways. However, emotional intelligence is just one avenue.

To fully support students through grief we can...

- Tap into their unique strengths and natural inclinations as tools for resilience and meaning-making
- Ally with our students to help them identify their natural giftings and strengths that can be vehicles for their resilience in times of grief, helping them find healing and make meaning of their experience navigating grief and grieving



To fully support students through grief we can... (continued)

- Go beyond only emotional intelligence: what other skills do our students have that we can leverage in supporting them through grief? Are they social? Are they creative and artistic? Are they athletic and love to move their body? Just like us adults, students can process their grief through diverse means and on different paths.

Pause here. Consider how you can make space for and learn about the way your students and their communities might grieve.

- *What do I know and what do I need to know about my young people and their cultures and families to support grief and grieving?*
- *How might I ensure we have rituals and practices to uplift and discuss grief and grieving as they arise naturally in our school?*
- *How can I make space for and support my students in tapping into their own grieving and healing experiences?*

Invitation Four: Honor the Resources Around You

Grief supports can be like hidden gems: there are so many grief-metabolizing resources embedded in our school life. Some of them are directly and explicitly grief-related, while others are not. By resource mapping the assets we have around us - from community resources, to culture, to curriculum - we might find enormous already existing ways we honor grief in our school communities.

✨Tap Into the Wisdom of Your Community✨

The availability of community support or lack thereof plays a critical role in how school members experience grief and engage in grieving. Those with strong support networks may navigate grief with more ease, while those isolated in their experience may feel more overwhelmed.

To identify resources that support our grief we can...

- Asset map when we are not actively grieving, look for what exists in our community not only to support others but also to support ourselves in the future. Examples include: religiously affiliated and secular spaces, grief groups, and mental health supports; community-based nonprofits and national organizations offer resources and spaces for individuals navigating a range of losses; libraries, education agencies, behavioral health and public health systems, and more all exist in our community and offer resources and connections to help us metabolize and move through grief; and workplaces offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) with grief counseling options.



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- Community map: Resource map places and spaces in the school property and the surrounding neighborhoods. Beyond grief-specific spaces, consider where else in the community can be a grief-metabolizing space. Bodies of water, hikes through nature, and familiar and nostalgic places can all carry a healing component to support honoring grief.
- Connect with ancestral roots and cultural hubs: Connection to cultural heritage is a protective factor against the negative impacts of grief and is a beautiful source of strength and resilience. The ancestors we come from taught us wisdom that has passed down through word of mouth but also through our DNA. Learning into cultural experiences and traditional ways that our historic communities have grieved loss is important, especially as the impacts of white supremacy culture continue to limit the ways individuals can fully express themselves in how they move through grief in school spaces that do not intentionally celebrate their identities.
- Curriculum map: Growing capacity to honor our grief sometimes looks like focusing just on grief and sitting with it and exploring it. Other times, we grow comfortable with it when we seek it out in the day-to-day and normalize being with it and around those who are experiencing it. Literature is a powerful vehicle for this. Storybooks, such as [The Rabbit Listened](#) by Cori Doernfeld, offer a way to scaffold conversations about grief awareness in our classrooms by offering a neutral character to see emotions and reactions. As the literature gets more complex, such as Jason Reynolds's [A Long Way Down](#), the conversations can also scale up to the more complex reflections around grief. Social studies and science also carry experiences with grief, as young people learn about historical events or climate challenges of the planet, this can be another space where grief conversation may also surface.

Making space in our learning environments for spaces where grief may naturally arise is a way we can honor grief as a normal facet of life.



Pause here.

Consider what resource mapping might reveal.

- Where do you feel a sense of peace and calm that can support your grieving?
- Where within the school day can you create a space for yourself and others?
- Where are resources you can tap into to feel like you don't need to walk grief alone?
- Who might you lean on in your community to support your students when you don't feel able to?

Consider which facets of identity are important to you and which facets of identity might be important to the members of your community.

- How might those different identities navigate grief, and how might that historic wisdom support your healing grief journey today? How might it support the young people in your community?
- After reflecting on the culture in your community and investigating grieving looks like how might you invite community members into the decision-making processes related grief support in your work?

Consider what other forms of media are you using in your curriculum that might allow you to uplift different types of grief and grieving.

- Where might you naturally be able to incorporate song, art, historical information, or questions about loss and change that could also support honoring the different ways we grieve?
- How might you invite your young people to identify stories, songs, or historical events that reflect their own experiences with grief- in the hard and in the joy?



Closing

Grief asks us to move with it rather than around it. It isn't something we fix or finish—it's something we carry, something that softens and sharpens in different ways over time.

In our school communities, grieving is an act of courage. As individuals, colleagues, educators, and school leaders, grief invites us to sit in discomfort, honor both the visible and invisible losses, and hold space for the many ways grief shows up in our communities.

The work of honoring grief in schools is not only about addressing crises but also about fostering connection and growth and honoring the grief strengths, gifts, and know-how we already possess.

It challenges us to embrace the pauses, to create room for stories, rituals, and relationships that give grief the space it needs to breathe. Whether through spontaneous conversations, creative expression, or cultural traditions, we nurture healing when we allow grief to unfold naturally.

As educators, leaders, and community members, our role is not to solve grief but to make space for it—to bear witness to the complexities of loss with compassion and humility. In doing so, we cultivate environments where healing becomes possible, where resilience emerges, and where each person, young and old, is empowered to honor their unique grief journey.

Together, we create the conditions not just for survival but for renewal—for carrying our losses with care and finding meaning along the way.

As Mary-Frances O'Connor reminds us, grief is an intense moment, but grieving is the journey. And in this shared journey, we discover that when held with intention and love, grief is worthy of being honored.



Extended Resources to Honor Grief in Our Schools for Our Recovery & Renewal

National Resources:

- [Black Emotional Mental Health Collective](#)
- [Children's Bereavement Center](#)
- [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)
- [Childhood Traumatic Grief: Youth Information Sheet \(NCTSN\)](#)
- [The Dinner Party](#)
- [National Alliance for Children's Grief](#)
- [The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#)

SCRR Resources:

- [A Book List to Help Navigate Grief with Young People](#)
- [Creating and Holding Space for Ourselves and Each Other After Student Death](#)
- [Creating the Container: Designing Collective Rituals to Metabolize Grief Together as a School, Team, Community and Culture](#)
- [Grief Leadership Recovery and Renewal After Wildfire: A Place to Process for Educators, School Mental Health Providers, and Youth/Young Adult Leaders and Allies](#)
- [Our Right to Grieve: Grief-Informed Recommendations and Resources](#)
- [Taking Pause: Holding Vigil for our Collective Grief](#)
- [Three Texts to Help You Reflect on Your Grief-Responsive, Trauma-Informed Practice](#)
- [Honest Reflections from an Educator about Holding Circles after Loss](#)

Opening Quote: [Speaking of Psychology: How grieving changes the brain, with Mary-Frances O'Connor, PhD](#)

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