Facilitator Tips:

TURNING THE LENS INWARD

Examining our Assumptions About Grief

DOUGY CENTER

"I'm really worried about him! He's not working through his grief."

Have you ever heard a remark like this? Or caught yourself thinking something similar? These comments might come from well-meaning adults who are worried about children, teens, or adults who are grieving. As a facilitator, you might hear a similar sentiment in an adult caregiver group, or even from a child, teen, or young adult who has received that exact same message from people in their lives. What stands out about these comments is less about whether it's true and more about how frequently the children and families we support face this kind of judgment.

While opinions about how someone is grieving may sound harmless, even genuinely caring, they can cause harm if left unchecked.

The person sharing the opinion becomes the judge and evaluator. The person receiving the comment might doubt or blame themselves or others in their family as they wrestle with questions such as:

- Am I too emotional or not emotional enough?
- Am I grieving too much or too little?
- Is there such a thing as "too much" grief?
- Am I grieving on schedule? Am I taking too much time?
- What is the right way to do this?
- Is it okay for me to express my grief here? Now? Is it okay to show this person?

In some ways, grief is a universally shared phenomenon, but it is also profoundly personal, shaped by social context, cultural influence, and other aspects of identity.

As facilitators, we work to support children and families to grieve in their own way, at their own pace, and in their own time.

Since grief can be so unique, even identical twins grieving the death of the same person may experience and express their grief differently. Even though there is no right or wrong way to feel, there can be helpful and less helpful ways to express and adapt to grief. For example, it's not inherently right or wrong to need a break from the pain of loss. Some avoidance strategies can be helpful, like getting lost in a movie or book, or distracting oneself with activity. Others may be understandable, but not necessarily helpful, like relying on substances to numb the pain.

Grief affects our entire human experience, including our physical bodies, emotions, intellect, spiritual beliefs, and social relationships. Some people are emotionally expressive in their grief, shedding tears with others or when alone. Others experience it physically, feeling aches and pains, or releasing energy through movement. Some might grieve more with their minds, searching for answers, wisdom, and guidance through books, podcasts, or other avenues of information. Most children and families move through a unique combination of all these ways.

Facilitator Tips:

Someone who is emotionally expressive isn't grieving "better" than someone who intellectualizes or processes through their body.

The best approach we can take when we are concerned about how someone is grieving is to employ the skill of awareness and first evaluate ourselves:

- Have we made it safe for this person to share whatever it is that they are experiencing — without judgment or preconceived ideas?
- Have we expressed our care and concern without any strings attached, including not needing a response?
- Have we recognized that this person may continue to grieve over time, and are we okay with that?
- Have we checked our assumption that grief only looks a certain way, or considered that they may be expressing it in spaces we don't see?
- Can we tolerate seeing someone grieve differently than we do?

Finally, have we acknowledged our wish to rescue, solve, minimize, dismiss, or distance ourselves from this person, perhaps to reduce our own anxieties, fears, or other emotions?

Exploring these questions helps us challenge our assumptions about grief and create safer spaces for children and families to grieve in their own way.

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Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources
Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center
Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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