

switchboard

When Grief Is Complex: A Trauma-Informed Response to Loss in Newcomer Communities

July 29, 2026



Today's Speakers



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Learning Objectives

By the end of this event, you will be able to...

Explain

the relationship between grief, trauma, and traumatic grief in newcomer populations

01

Identify

physical, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual expressions of grief that are similar across cultures

02

Describe

how specific cultural beliefs, and systemic barriers, influence how newcomers experience and express grief

03

Apply

trauma-informed strategies to support individuals experiencing grief while recognizing the impact on providers

04



Please be aware that the topics, activities, and case scenarios in this training may evoke personal emotions or memories.

We encourage you to participate in ways that feel comfortable and to take care of yourself throughout the session.



Explain

the relationship between grief, trauma, and traumatic grief in newcomer populations

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**What emotions arise within you
when you think about grief?**



Case Study: Amal

Amal is a 42-year-old Syrian woman who worked as a teacher and was well respected within her community.

Her family was displaced due to the Syrian Civil War.

Since arriving in the U.S., Amal has struggled to rebuild her social network and often says she feels like a “different person.”



What is Grief?

- Adjusting to a **loss of “normalcy”**
- **Experience** versus expectation
- Has emotional, physical, behavioral, and relationship impacts



What is trauma?

- No single definition
- What is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another

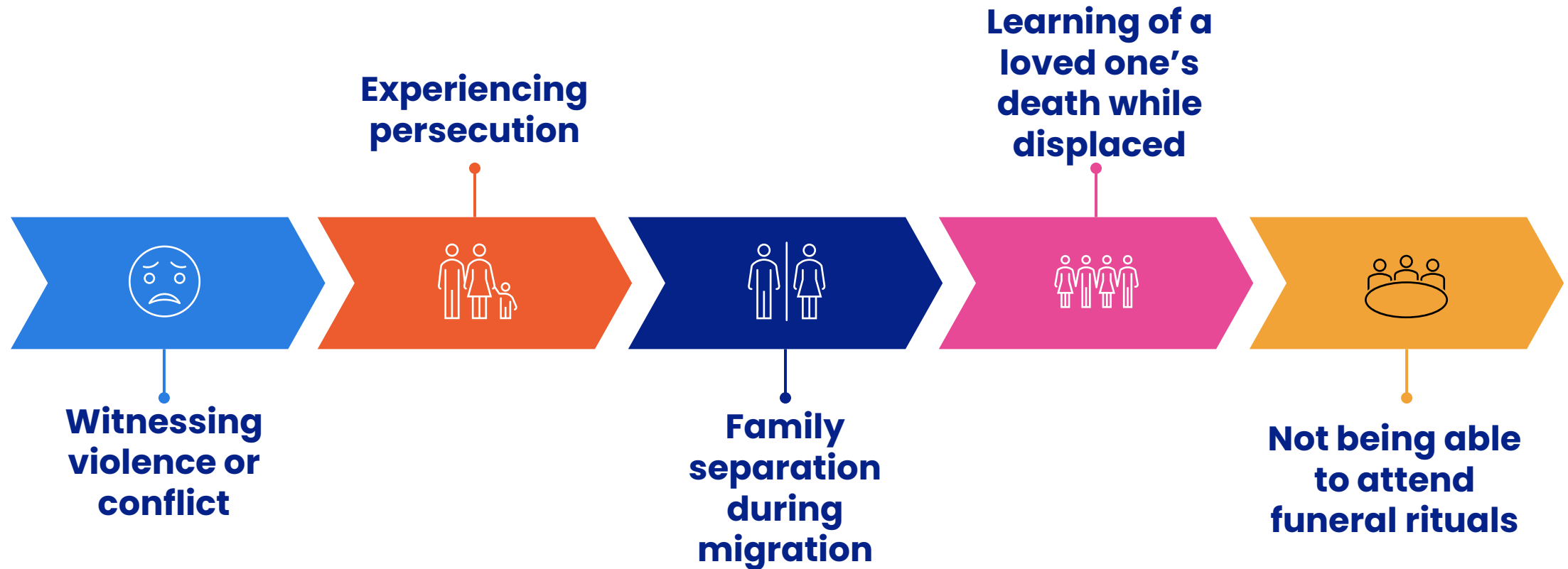


What is Traumatic Grief?

- **Severe** form of grief that can occur following the sudden or unexpected death of a loved one
- Can lead to other clinical diagnoses



Examples of the Relationship between Grief, Trauma, and Traumatic Grief in Newcomer Communities





Impact of Grief versus Ambiguous Loss

Grief

The anguish experienced after a significant loss

Ambiguous Loss

A relational disruption caused by loss that is unverifiable with one's own experience



Case Study: Amal

Amal often thinks about the life she left behind:

- Extended family
- Former students
- Neighborhood
- Daily routines

Amal feels disconnected from the person she used to be.





What losses might Amal be grieving?

Experiences of Loss in Newcomer Communities





Cultural attitudes about loss or death

Death is not the end.

Many cultures believe in an afterlife, but that doesn't free us from the human emotions that surround the loss of a loved one.



Identify

physical, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual expressions of grief that are similar across cultures

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How confident do you currently feel in recognizing grief-related experiences in newcomer populations?



“And no one ever told me about the laziness of grief. Except at my job—where the machine seems to run as much as usual—I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading is too much.”

C.S. Lewis

Case Study: Amal

Amal has become increasingly withdrawn:

- Rarely attends community events
- Has difficulty sleeping
- Complains of headaches and fatigue
- Is distracted and becomes tearful





What signs or expressions of grief do you observe in Amal?



Self-Reflection



Thinking about your clients, what examples of grief have you seen recently or in the past?



How Grief Can Present

Physical Reactions

Thoughts

Emotions

Behaviors

Spiritual Reactions



Common Signs or Expressions

Physical Reactions

- Feeling faint
- Tiredness
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sleep
- Somatic responses
- Sense of relief

Thoughts

Emotions

Behaviors

Spiritual Reactions



Common Signs or Expressions

Physical Reactions

Thoughts

- Short-term memory loss
- Confusion/morning fog
- Difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation with death
- Ongoing connection with the deceased
- Creating new meaning

Emotions

Behaviors

Spiritual Reactions



Common Signs or Expressions

Physical Reactions

Thoughts

Emotions

- Mood swings
- Survivor's guilt
- Bitterness
- Loneliness or fear
- Calm or relief
- Despair
- Nostalgia
- Joy in memories

Behaviors

Spiritual Reactions



Common Signs or Expressions

Physical Reactions

Thoughts

Emotions

Behaviors

- Blaming others
- Acting out (teens and children)
- Avoidance
- Changes in activities
- Self-neglect
- Substance use/abuse
- Self-isolation
- Increased need for social connection

Spiritual Reactions



Common Signs or Expressions

Physical Reactions

Thoughts

Emotions

Behaviors

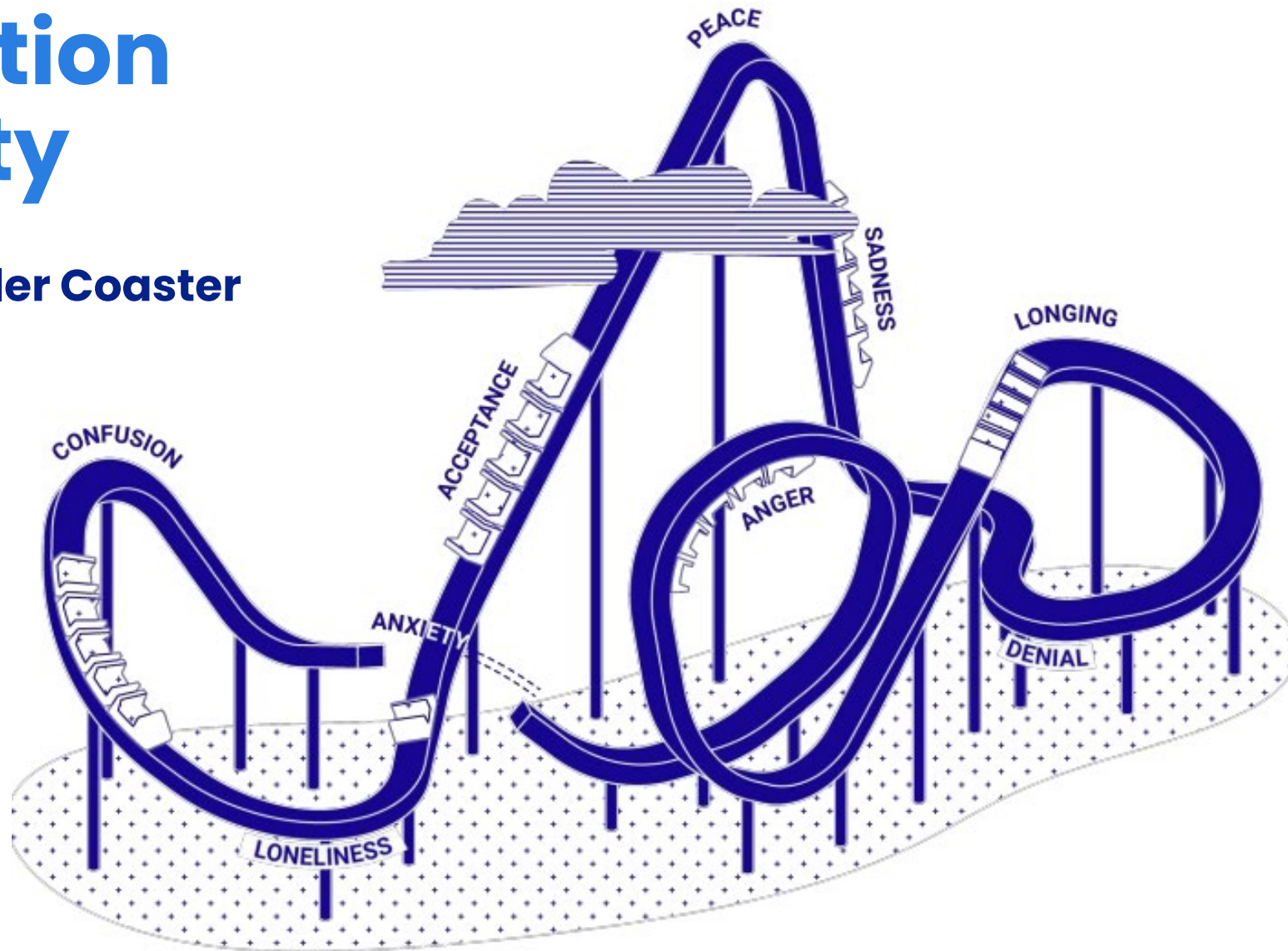
Spiritual Reactions

- Asking “why”
- Reliance on or anger at God/higher power/greater meaning
- Change in worldview
- Change in sense of faith
- Need to find meaning
- Acceptance

Reflection Activity

Grief is a Roller Coaster

5 minutes





Which emotions have been a part of your personal experience with grief?



How have you responded to these emotions?

Activity Debrief

Connecting this to our work with newcomers





Describe

how specific cultural beliefs, and systemic barriers, influence how newcomers experience and express grief

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What factors most influence how a person expresses grief?



A Framework of Meaning Attribution Following Loss



Source: Smid, G. E. (2020). A framework of meaning attribution following loss. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 11:1, 1776563, DOI: 10.1080/20008198.2020.1776563

Cultural Considerations



Afghan Culture

- Funeral practices
- Bereavement and customs
- Differences between men and women
- The effect of trauma on mourning and meaning



Cultural Considerations



Congolese Culture

- Faith
- Funeral practices
- Bereavement and customs
- Burial in ancestral land



Cultural Considerations: Joy and Grief Speak the Same Language

Bahamian Junkanoo Memorial Rush Out

- Junkanoo celebrations are rooted in **African Diasporic** traditions
- Memorial rush outs are demonstrations of **communal mourning** and **cultural celebrations**
- Junkanoo meets **death** the way it meets **life**: with noise, color, and community



Systemic Barriers That Impact Grief Processing



**Language
barriers**



**Housing
instability**



**Stigma around
mental health**



**Financial concerns
or instability**



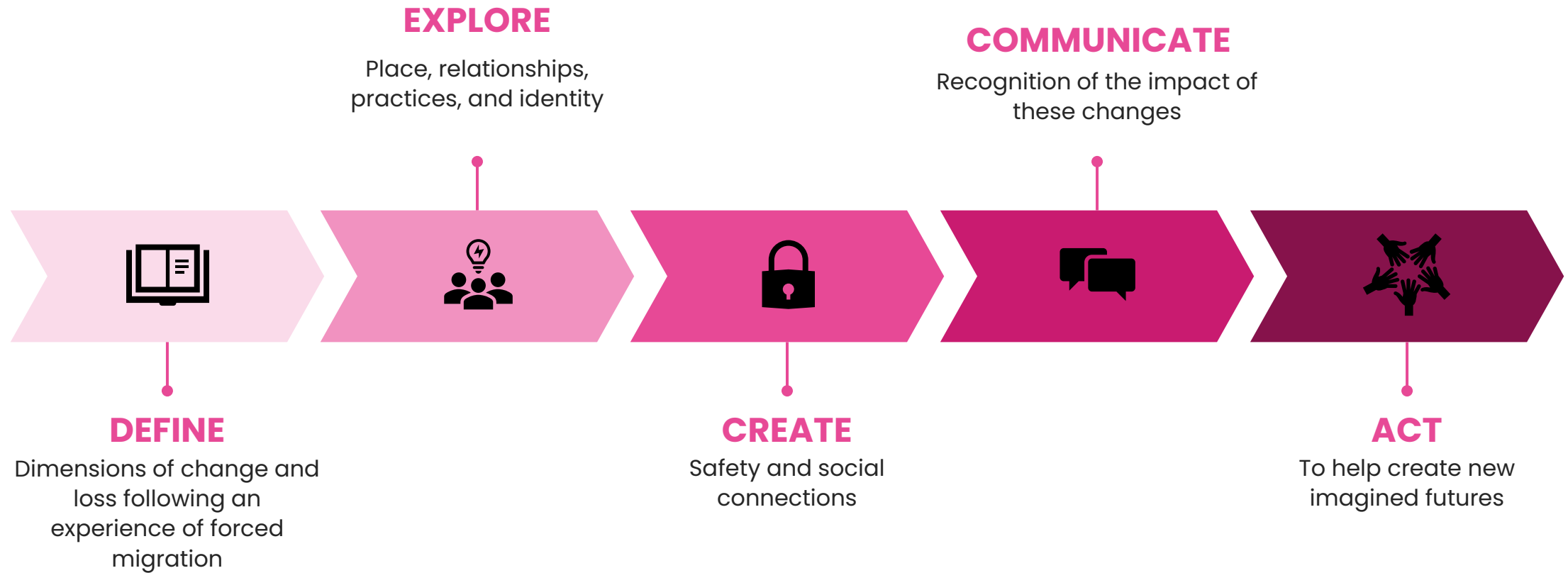
**Interrupted
mourning
rituals**



**Stressors related to
immigration or resettlement
(e.g., separation from family
or community)**



Ambiguous Loss in Newcomer Communities



Case Study: Amal

Amal discloses that her father died a year ago:

- She was unable to go to the funeral services and participate in the mourning rituals
- She feels guilty and thinks that people around her do not understand what she is going through and feeling





How might culture and systemic barriers influence Amal's grief experience?



Apply

trauma-informed strategies to support individuals experiencing grief while recognizing the impact on providers

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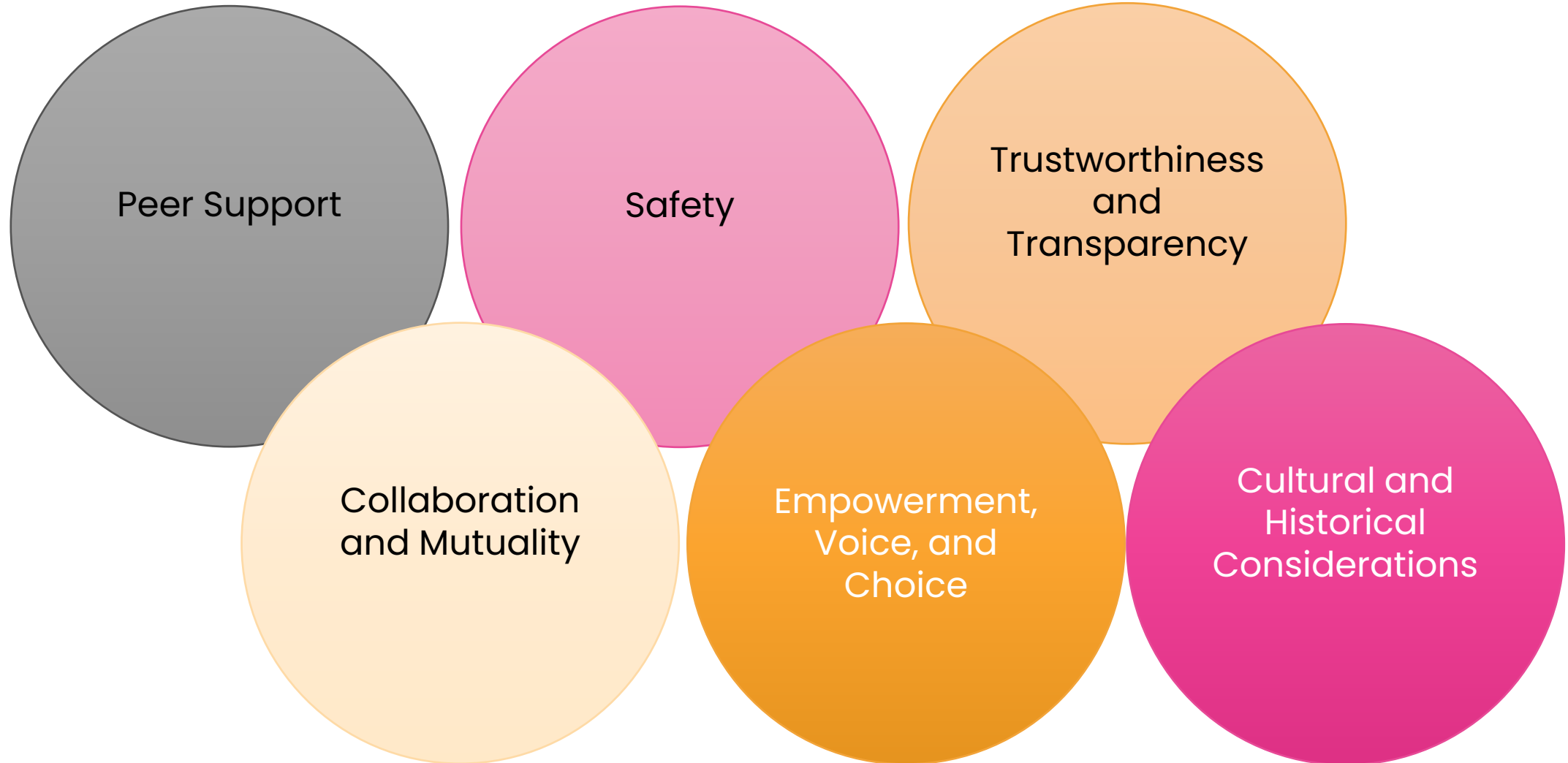
What approaches most influence how a person expresses grief?

Trauma-Informed Approach

- Considers trauma's **physical**, **emotional**, and **spiritual** impacts
- Identifies trauma signs in **behavior, relationships**, and **dynamics**
- Builds **positive, restorative relationships**
- Embraces a **holistic** client approach
- Minimizes trauma **triggers**



Applying a Trauma-Informed Lens



Applying a Trauma-Informed Lens



**Trauma-
Informed
Lens**



Provider Impact: Why does this affect me?

- Expectations we have for ourselves
- History of loss and trauma
- Cultural considerations
- Perceived support
- Unique nature of relationships with our clients
- Secondary traumatic stress, burnout, vicarious trauma





Supportive Responses for Clients

B Be Present

Being physically present sometimes says more than words. Silence is okay.

L Listen

Take a breath, listen actively, and ask the client what would be helpful

V Validate

Remind the client that their feelings and responses to grief are valid

A Avoid Assumptions

Avoid assuming the client's response is wrong or right

R Respect

Respect the client's cultural grieving process and practice

Supportive Responses: What You Can Say

“What would feel supportive for you right now?”

Reminder: Silence and presence **is** a response. Sometimes you do not need to say anything. You can help by sitting in silence and holding space with them.

“That sounds incredibly difficult.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me.
Everyone experiences grief differently.”



What are some supportive responses that could be helpful to Amal?



Youth vs Adult Grief

How Trauma-Informed Support Looks Different for Youth

Creative expression approaches

TIC Principles: Safety, Choice

Art/Storytelling/Play

TIC Principles: Empowerment, Choice

School-based supports

TIC Principles: Trust, Peer Support

Clinical vs non-clinical supportive spaces

TIC Principles: Trust; Empowerment, Voice, and Choice; Cultural & Historical Considerations



Creative Expression as Support



- Art therapy
- Storytelling
- Writing
- Mementos
- Community connection

Case Study: Amal's Syrian Women Embroidery Group





What is one takeaway you will incorporate into your work moving forward?

Key Takeaways

- Grief is influenced by culture, community, spirituality, and personal experiences.
- Expressions of grief may look different across individuals and communities. There is no single “right” way to grieve a loss.
- Western understandings of grief may not fully reflect the experiences and practices of newcomer populations we serve.
- Cultural responsiveness, curiosity, and reflective practice are essential when supporting individuals experiencing grief.
- Instead of making assumptions about how a person should grieve, trauma-informed support creates space for safety, dignity, connection, expression, and understanding.



A photograph of a modern office environment. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a brown sweater over a white collared shirt, is smiling and looking towards the left. She is holding a small black object in her right hand. Behind her, a man with a beard, wearing a maroon sweater over a white collared shirt, is also smiling and looking towards the left. In the background, another person is partially visible, holding a tablet. The office has a desk lamp and some plants in the background.

Questions?

Type your question in the Q&A



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Recommended Resources

Switchboard

- **Evidence Summary:** [What Can Help Refugees Process Traumatic Grief?](#) (2022)
- **Guide:** [Supporting Resettled Afghan Children and Adolescents Experiencing Grief-Related Distress](#) (2024)
- **Archived Webinar:** [Panel Discussion on Faith-Based Healing and Coping Practices Among Afghan Muslims](#) (2023)
- **Archived Webinar:** [Effective Practices for Mental Health Screening Across Cultures](#) (2025)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

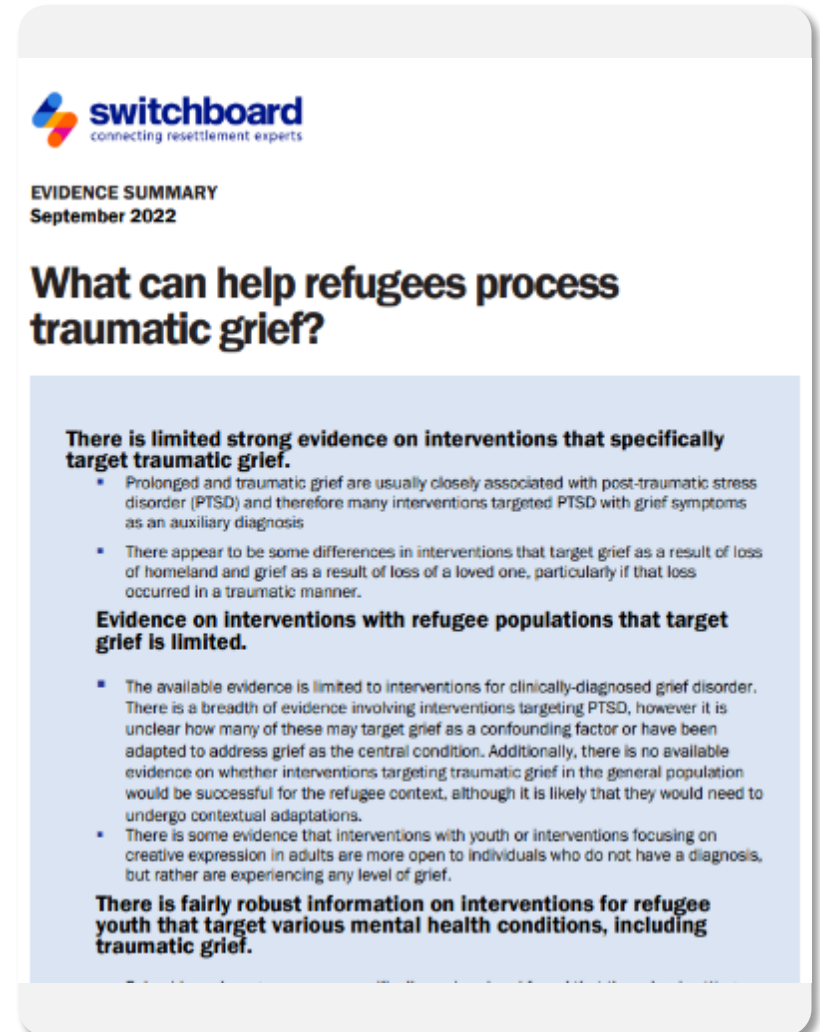
- **Guide:** [Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event](#) (2018)
- **Tip Sheet:** [After a Crisis: Helping Young Children Heal](#) (2018)

Center for Adjustment, Resilience and Recovery (CARRE)/NCTSN

- **Article:** [Navigating Grief and the Holidays for Different Communities](#) (2025)
- **Tip sheet:** [Helping Young Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers](#) (2014)
- **Tip sheet:** [Helping School Aged Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers](#) (2014)
- **Tip sheet:** [Helping Teens with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers](#) (2014)

The KonTerra Group

- **Video:** [Coping with Grief and Loss](#) (2022)





Help Us Help You!

Scan the QR code or click the link in the chat to access our feedback survey!

- Five questions
- 60 seconds
- Help us improve future training and technical assistance



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The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

