



Who Gets to Grieve?

Substance Use as Grief Behavior and the Systemic Punishment of Pain



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Toronto

About CMHA Toronto

CMHA Toronto is the city's leading community mental health agency. We provide accessible, quality care for people in Toronto through programs, research and advocacy.

From supporting individuals experiencing a mental health crisis to providing tools that support day-to-day mental health, when people need support in Toronto, we're here to help create belonging and hope.

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Learning Objectives



Understand how grief can manifest as substance use and other complex behaviors



Recognize how privilege and identity impact responses to grief within systems



Begin applying trauma-informed strategies to challenge personal bias and reframe assumptions



Grief is what happens when something meaningful is lost.

“To live is to grieve. But we don’t all get to grieve equally.”

- Definition: beyond death — loss of self, safety, community, identity
- Grief is full-body, spiritual, social — not just sadness
- Grief is the loss of normal

What are you grieving right now — that you may not have named?



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**People grieve
in different
ways. But not
all coping is
treated the
same way.**

*“Pain doesn’t always look like tears.
Sometimes, it looks like coping.”*

- Grief behaviors: TV, food, overworking, sex, dissociation — and yes, substance use
- Harm reduction: grief isn’t pathological — it’s adaptive
- Some coping rewarded, some punished (race, class, gender matter)

*Who gets to be seen as in pain?
Who gets labeled a problem?*



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The Individual Level: Understanding Your Own Grief + Bias

“Before we change the world, we need to check our own lenses.”

Explore:

- Your grief stories
- Biases about “acceptable” grief
- How you cope

Whose grief do you find hardest to validate — and why?



Challenge With Care: Addressing Grief Bias in Community

“Systems are built by people. Culture is changed through conversation.”

- “Challenge with Care” Framework (Catch it → Name it → Hold it → Model it)
- Practice calling in grief stigma
- Encourage community rituals: sharing circles, grief-informed meetings
- Example: Normalize memorials for overdose deaths, not just obituaries



Systems Change Starts with Your Sphere of Influence

“If we only individualize grief, we miss the harm that’s manufactured by systems.”

- Criminalization of coping
- The overdose crisis and grief in justice-involved populations
- Intergenerational grief in colonized, equity-deserving, disabled communities
- Systemic gaps: inadequate bereavement leave, lack of safe supply, stigmatized harm reduction, need for policies that support all social determinants of health

What systems are making grief worse?



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Key Takeaways — Grief, Substance Use & Systemic Compassion

*“You can’t transform the system alone.
But you do influence it.”*

- Reflect on sphere of influence (policy, HR, team culture, supervision, etc.)
- Advocacy doesn't have to be loud — it has to be *consistent*
- Examples of grief-informed workplace interventions:
 - Expand bereavement policies
 - Normalize grief training in onboarding
 - Include grief in mental health frameworks



From Grief to Organizing: Building a Grief-Literate Culture

“Grief Is a Portal — What If We Let It Shape the World We Build Next?”

- Grief organizing as resistance: honour, name, collectivize
- Partnerships: harm reduction orgs, peer-led networks, Indigenous-led grief spaces
- Model public grief responses: healing/community gatherings, system accountability rituals
- Framework:
 - Policy: Push for grief-supportive policies
 - Community: Host or join grief-informed conversations
 - Systems: Join advocacy efforts (grief funding, missions supporting social determinants of health)



Grief, Substance Use & Systemic Compassion – Key Takeaways

- Grief is universal, but unequally received and treated
- Substance use can be a grief behavior — not just a “bad choice”
- Bias shapes who gets support, and who gets punished
- You have power — in your mindset, your work, your community
- When grief is honored, healing becomes possible — and policy becomes more human





"We have been sad long enough to make this earth either weep or grow fertile."

- Audre Lorde

- **What's one thing you'll do differently tomorrow?**
- **What space will you open up for grief — in yourself, in someone else, in your system?**



Continuing the conversation



CONTINUE LEARNING

We promote mental health through workshops, resources, and programs, fostering skills for creating safe living and working spaces.

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JOIN THE CIRCLE OF BELONGING

Support CMHA Toronto with a monthly donation and allow us to offer mental health services to those in need in our community.

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION ONLINE

Download our resources and join the conversation online as we show that #CompassionConnects

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THANK YOU!

For supporting CMHA Toronto and helping everyone thrive in the community



Help us improve: Your voice matters!



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