

**ECHO IDAHO**

Behavioral Health in Primary Care

# Grief, Loss & Substance Use

**March 19, 2025**

**Natalia Samudovsky, LCPC, Therapist**

Trivium Life Services

None of the planners or presenters for this educational activity have relevant financial relationship(s) to disclose with ineligible companies whose primary business is producing, marketing, selling, re-selling, or distributing healthcare products used by or on patients.



**University of Idaho**  
School of Health and Medical  
Professions



# Learning Objectives

- Understanding Grief & Loss
- Substance Use & Misuse
- Link between Substance Use & Grief
- Healing & Support

# What is Grief and Loss

- Grief
  - A deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement
  - The anguish experienced after significant *loss*, usually the death of a beloved person. Often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future. Intense grief can become life-threatening through disruption of the immune system, self-neglect, and suicidal thoughts. Grief may also take the form of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself.
- Loss
  - The act of losing something or someone important
  - Loss is an event that provokes an emotional response of grief



# Types of Grief (refresher)

- Uncomplicated
  - The expected and natural response to loss, resolving over time
- Anticipatory
  - Grief before a loss, associated with terminal illness
- Delayed
  - when emotional processing of loss is significantly delayed after event, often months or years later
- Masked
  - grief that is not outwardly expressed but instead manifests as other behaviors that interfere with normal functioning



# Grief review cont'd

- Traumatic
  - Occurs after a sudden, violent, or traumatic loss
    - Loss due to accident
    - Homicide
    - Disasters
    - Witnessing someone's suffering or death
- Disenfranchised
  - Grief over a loss that is not recognized or validated
    - Loss of a pet
    - Miscarriage or stillbirth
    - Loss of loved one by suicide or overdose
- Complicated/PGD
  - Prolonged and debilitating form of grief that can significantly impact a person's life
  - Identity disruptions (feeling part of oneself has died)
  - Difficulty with reintegration



# Substance Use Spectrum



- Stages of Substance Use
  - Experimentation
    - Usually seen in adolescents, begin trying substances for first time
  - Regular Use/Social use
    - When use begins to follow patten (drink on weekends or at social gatherings)
  - Risky Use/Misuse
    - Begins when substance is used more often, in higher amounts than originally planned leading to negative consequences that are often ignored.
    - Binge drinking, black-outs, getting into fights, hang-overs, DUI, getting hurt, etc.
  - Dependence
    - Development of physical, mental and emotional reliance on substance.
    - Person is no longer using for recreational purpose- need to feel 'normal'
    - Includes increase in tolerance & withdrawal symptoms
  - Addiction
    - Symptoms will increase in severity
    - Misuse becomes more compulsive
    - Severe physical & mental side effects

# Link: Substance Use & Grief

- Coping Mechanism
  - Escape emotional pain through mind & mood altering substances
- Temporary Relief vs. Long-Term Damage
  - Experience some reprieve temporarily
  - Risk of preventing and complicating the healing process
- Risk of SUD during Grief
  - Vulnerability
  - Emotional instability
  - Desire for escape



# Cycle of Grief, Loss and Addiction

- Initial Loss and Grief Response
  - Emotional impact
    - Initial reaction to loss is often deep sorrow, sadness, anger, confusion and sometimes guilt or regret.
  - Physical Effects
    - Grief can manifest physically, causing fatigue, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite and even physical pain.
  - Desire to Escape/Sooth
    - Due to emotional weight of loss, painful emotions can be overwhelming leading many to seek escape or ways to sooth emotional turmoil.
- Turning to Substances
  - Avoidance of Pain - through substance use, numbing and avoiding feelings, thoughts or memories of loss
  - Denial of Grieving – Instead of going through natural stages of grief (such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance)





# Vicious Cycle

- Grief Fuels Addiction
  - Unresolved grief continues to fuel the need for substances, as the pain of loss feels unbearable. This makes it difficult to break free from the addiction, as the substance is seen as a 'solution' to the pain.
- Addiction Fuels Grief
  - The substance use cycle worsens emotional and psychological well-being, making the grief even harder to process. The person may feel hopeless or stuck in their emotional pain, leading to doubts that they can move on or get better.
- Vicious Cycle
  - Grief deepens and the addiction cycle increases, overlapping and compounding each other making healing from loss and substance misuse difficult.



# Case Example

- **Presenting Problem:** After Max's death, Sarah struggled with the loss of her husband. She became withdrawn, felt deep sadness and had difficulty focusing on work. Despite her grief, Sarah initially tried to manage her emotions without outside help, thinking that with time her pain would heal. However, as the weeks went on, Sarah found herself using alcohol to cope with overwhelming sadness. What started as an occasional drink, turned into a daily episode, sometimes binge drinking at night to numb the emotional pain.
- **Symptoms:**
  - Increase alcohol consumption
  - Difficulty sleeping, drinking to help fall asleep
  - Impaired social relationships. Avoiding calls and gatherings, avoiding conversations about Max or her grief.
  - Loss of interest in hobbies- she used to enjoy reading, going for walks with her kids. Her energy levels diminished, and she started neglecting her children's emotional needs.
  - Work performance declined- difficulty with concentration, showing up to meetings late or unprepared.
- **Decline:**
  - Sleep worsened, appetite diminished, and she became increasingly irritable. The guilt and shame she felt due to her drinking compounded her grief, leading to depression. Her children noticed her emotional withdrawal and physical absence, which hurt Sarah deeply. She felt trapped in her grief and addiction.



# Sarah's Intervention & Treatment

- Recognition of the Cycle
  - Sarah eventually reached out for help after a concerned family member intervened. The painful cycle of her grief and substance use playing off each other was acknowledged and she was willing to address both her loss and substance use simultaneously.
- Professional Help
  - Sarah began seeing a therapist that focused on grief and substance use counseling. Sarah was able to see how her unresolved grief increased her reliance on alcohol. Sarah worked to express her emotions more freely and process the loss of Max, allowing her to experience her feelings of sadness, anger, and guilt in a safe space.
- Addressing the Substance misuse
  - She enrolled in an outpatient program where she attended group therapy, learning strategies for managing her cravings and triggers. Sarah was introduced to mindfulness techniques to manage her emotional responses without turning to alcohol. CBT helped Sarah identify thought patterns that led to her substance use and replaced them with healthier coping strategies.
- Support Groups
  - Sarah began attending support groups for both grief and substance recovery. In grief groups she found solidarity with others who understood her pain and offer support as well as in her substance groups, she was able to develop a sense of community with those that shared her goals of recovery.

# Healing from Grief and Substance Use

- You have to *feel it to heal it*
- Psychoeducation of the Grief process and Risk of SUD
- Substance Use Prevention/Relapse Prevention strategies
- Support
  - Family & friends
  - Professionals – therapy, emotional regulation skills (DBT), validation, compassion, motivation for new meaning/purpose
  - Process Groups
    - Highly supported positive results per research- especially with Complicated/prolonged grief

# Key Points

- Grief and substance use often form a cyclical relationship:
  - The pain of grief can lead individuals to use substances as a form of coping, but this avoidance strategy only exacerbates the emotional turmoil and delays the grieving process.
- Substance use can mask the pain of grief, but it prevents the person from processing and eventually healing from the loss.
- Dual focus on Grief and Substance Use:
  - Effective treatment must address both the emotional and physical components of grief and addiction simultaneously, as they are intertwined.
- Support networks are essential:
  - Support from family, therapy, and peer groups is critical in breaking the cycle of grief and substance use and fostering long-term recovery.

# Resources in Idaho

- <https://www.mygriefconnection.org/events.html>
- <https://www.stlukesonline.org/communities-and-locations/find-classes-and-events/results?topic=Grief+Support>
- <https://www.griefshare.org/>
- <https://www.boisecounseling.org/grief-therapy>

# References

- American Addiction Centers. (n.d.). *The link between grief and addiction*. American Addiction Centers. Retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/link-between-grief-and-addiction>
- Ernstmeyer, K., & Christman, E. (Eds.). (2021). *Nursing fundamentals* [Internet]. Eau Claire (WI): Chippewa Valley Technical College. Chapter 17 Grief and Loss. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK591827/>
- O'Connor, M.-F., Wellisch, D. K., Stanton, A. L., Eisenberger, N. I., Irwin, M. R., & Lieberman, M. D. (2008). Craving love? Enduring grief activates brain's reward center. *NeuroImage*, *42*(2), 969–972. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2008.04.256>
- Parisi, A., Sharma, A., Howard, M. O., & Wilson, A. B. (2019). The relationship between substance misuse and complicated grief: A systematic review. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, *103*, 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2019.05.012>
- Pilling, J., Thege, B. K., Demetrovics, Z., & Kopp, M. S. (2012). Alcohol use in the first three years of bereavement: A national representative survey. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, *7*(3). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1747-597X-7-3>
- Psychology Today. (2023, February 20). *The role of grief in addiction*. Psychology Today. Retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-grief/202302/the-role-of-grief-in-addiction>
- Stahl, S. T., & Schulz, R. (2014). Changes in routine health behaviors following late-life bereavement: A systematic review. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *37*(4), 736–755. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-013-9520-1>