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YOUTH COMMUNICATION

BEREAVEMENT & BELONGING TOOLKIT

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
THE NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

In this toolkit, you will find resources from Youth Communication to support educators and other youth-serving adults who are working with grieving students.

Through the power of true stories, written by youth who have been systemically marginalized, Youth Communication creates more supportive and successful learning communities. Our vision is to create a more empathic and respectful world for and with our young people, so they feel represented, heard, and supported to achieve their dreams.

Founded in 1980, Youth Communication (YC) helps young people write personal stories about their lives to benefit others. We publish the stories in our two award-winning digital magazines. We also incorporate those stories into 11 story-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula. Our professional development staff then trains educators to use the curricula to support positive relations among teens and between teens and educators.

In this toolkit, you will find several stories and resources from Youth Communication about grief. Youth Communication's stories are especially salient and developmentally targeted to adolescents. However, those working with younger students may also benefit from these resources.

In this toolkit, you will find:

- Activities to help define grief and loss
- Guidance on what to say and not say to grieving children
- Youth Communication stories with reflective questions and exercises for practitioners. The stories can also be shared directly with grieving young people.
- Strategies for connecting grief to oppression
- Definitions of social and emotional learning
- Story-based lessons to use with discussion groups of adolescents

Youth Communication also offers a series of trainings for educators. You can find more information about those workshops on the following page. To learn more about Youth Communication, please get in touch with us at info@youthcomm.org.

Warmly,

Betsy Cohen
Executive Director

MAKING ROOM FOR GRIEF:
A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE FOR PRACTITIONERS

YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY ARE GRIEVING.

Young people today are experiencing losses of all types—mourning the death of a loved one, grieving the death of Black men and women at the hands of police, experiencing homelessness and migration.

WHAT ARE PRACTITIONERS TO DO?

In this professional development series, participants will read true teen-written stories from Youth Communication writers about the losses they face and what helps them deal productively with grief. These stories and the activities in the sessions will help educators:

- **Reflect** on their own grieving process
- **Examine** the complexities surrounding grief
- **Know** what to say and what not to say to a grieving student
- **Discuss** the role oppression plays in the grieving process
- **Understand** the role that educators and youth workers play in supporting grieving youth

For more information,
contact YC's Partnership Team:

PARTNERSHIPS@YOUTHCOMM.ORG

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THE NON-STAGES OF BEREAVEMENT: UNLEARNING WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW
Before we can help youth process their own bereavement and experiences with the death of someone they know, we first have to reflect on our own relationship to bereavement. Part of this is having a shared language with definitions of grief, bereavement, memorialization, and other terms related to loss. Centered on reflection through freewrites, drawing, and reading a true, teen-written story, this foundational workshop asks us to think about what we might be grieving, how we each of us has a unique process by which we learn from and carry our grief, and how bereavement affects us. In taking a moment to examine ourselves, we can then begin the next step of helping our youth.

CIRCLING BACK: NAVIGATING OUR GRIEF USING SEL
Supporting youth who are grieving depends on our ability to understand not only the emotions and behaviors that surface but also the connection between grief and social and emotional learning (SEL). It is here that we begin to understand our role in helping youth process loss and see it as an opportunity to build on kids' SEL skills. Excerpts from the stories of YC's writers will give us unique insight into the impact of grief on our youth and allow for rich discussion regarding what kinds of support kids are asking for when it comes to the loss they've experienced.
Prerequisite: The Non-Stages of Bereavement

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE: GRIEF AND SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION
Grief is inextricably linked to the ways in which we see ourselves and the world sees us. As members of a society that operates on systemic oppression, we can't ignore the effects that this has on the way we experience loss culturally and racially. To make sure the support we provide is culturally responsive, we will read a teen story through this lens and discuss ways to address the many layers that come with grief, especially for youth of marginalized communities.
Prerequisite: The Non-Stages of Bereavement

THE RIPPLE EFFECT: BEREAVEMENT AS A COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE
The death of a loved one never affects just one person; grief often ripples out and it takes a community of people to support someone who is grieving. In this workshop we'll read a true, teen-written story and explore the larger community involved in a person's death and our role as a member of that community. We'll discuss statements and phrases–both helpful and unhelpful–to a person who is bereaved. Participants will walk away with a deeper sense of their role in supporting youth who are grieving, along with concrete actions and next steps to take in talking with and helping those youth succeed.
Prerequisite: The Non-Stages of Bereavement

GRIEF AND ADVOCACY: PUBLIC VIOLENCE & DEATH
Mass shootings, death at the hands of police, and mass displacement cannot help but seep into our culture and trigger a type of mourning very different from our traditional ideas of grief. During this workshop, we'll read Youth Communication writer Kayla Ruano-Lumpris's "Not Your Lesson" about a teacher who shows a video of the killing of Tamir Rice, which triggers and traumatizes Kayla. While reading this story, we'll discuss how witnessing public violence and death, particularly tied to race, impacts youth. We'll also identify ways to help youth and youth workers, who may feel helpless, advocate for change.
Prerequisites: The Non-Stages of Bereavement & Seeing the Big Picture

NOT ALL GRIEF LOOKS THE SAME: UNDERSTANDING LOSS
Grief isn't always tied to bereavement, or the death of a loved one. Loss of home, autonomy, community, and many other losses impact our youth every day. The way we process loss is both similar and different to bereavement, which YC's writers demonstrate in the several excerpts that we'll read. This reading and the activities during the session will give us ideas about how to support these students and how the expansion of our understanding of loss is vital to supporting youth.
Prerequisite: The Non-Stages of Bereavement

Quotation from Kiese Laymon's memoir, *Heavy*:

"I sat there thinking about all the teachers I had from first through twelfth grade. I'd gone to majority black schools all but that one year at St. Richard and that one year at DeMatha. Ms. Arnold, my fourth-grade teacher, was the only black teacher I had. Ms. Raphael, who taught us at Holy Family in sixth and seventh grade, loved us so much that LaThon and I once made the mistake of calling her Mama. The rest of my teachers maybe did the best they could, but they just needed a lot of help making their best better. There were so many things we needed in those classrooms, in our city, in our state, in our country that our teachers could have provided if they would have gone home and really done their homework. They never once said the words: "economic inequality," "housing discrimination," "sexual violence," "mass incarceration," "homophobia," "empire," "mass eviction," "post-traumatic stress disorder," "white supremacy," "patriarchy," "neo-confederacy," "mental health," or "parental abuse," yet every student and teacher at that school lived in a world shaped by those words.

I loved all my teachers, and I wanted all my teachers to love us. I knew they weren't being paid right. I knew they were expected to do work they were unprepared to start or finish. But I felt like we spent much of our time teaching them how to respect where we'd been, and they spent much of their time punishing us for teaching them how we deserved to be treated."

- **Bereavement** – What does the length of time of bereavement depend on?

- **Grief** – What are some examples of emotional, behavioral, etc. responses to a death or loss?

- **Mourning** – what influences the way in which an individual mourns?

- **Memorialization** – what's a method of memorialization that someone in your group has used in the past or is currently using?

- **Grief Literacy** – How do we build our grief literacy?

You Mean You Don't Weep at the Nail Salon?

BY ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

it's the being alone, i think, the emails but not voices. dominicans be funny, the way we love to touch — every greeting a cheek kiss, a shoulder clap, a loud.

it gots to be my period, the bloating, the insurance commercial where the husband comes home after being deployed, the last of the gouda gone, the rejection letter, the acceptance letter, the empty inbox.

a dream, these days. to work at home is a privilege, i remind myself.

spend the whole fucking day flirting with screens. window, tv, computer, phone: eyes & eyes & eyes. the keys clicking, the ding of the microwave, the broadway soundtrack i share wine with in the evenings.

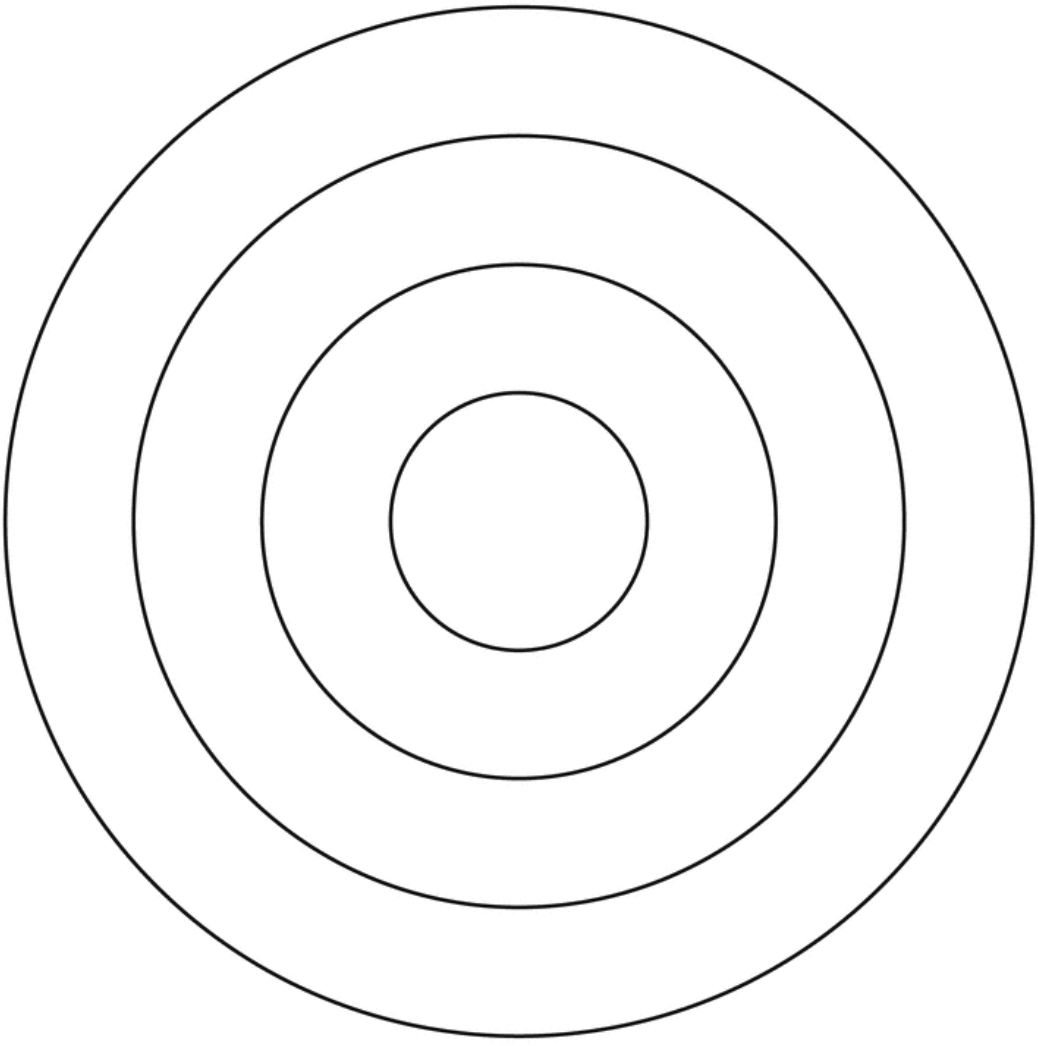
these are the answers, you feel me? & the impetus. the why. of when the manicurist holds my hand, making my nails a lilliputian abstract,

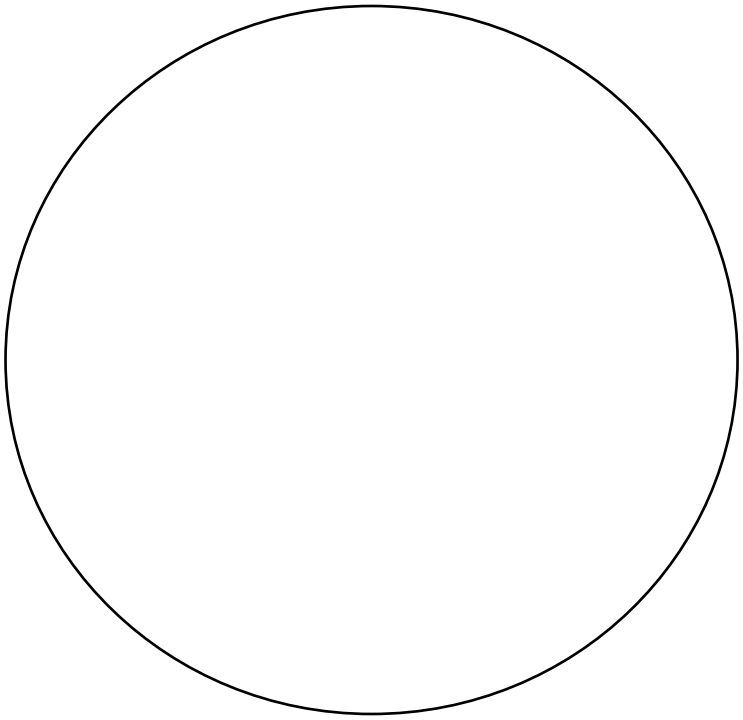
i close my fingers around hers, disrupting the polish, too tight i know then, too tight to hold a stranger, but she squeezes back & doesn't let go & so finally i can.

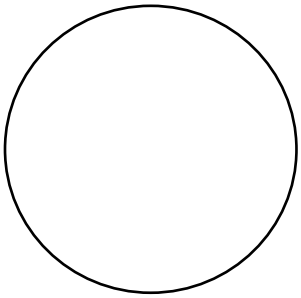
Source: *Poetry* (April 2018)

THE GRIEF RIPPLE

Let's say the grieving person in the middle represents you or a youth you know well. In the first circle surrounding the inner one, who do you or your youth immediately turn to for support? Who on the outer rings might you or your youth not necessarily turn to but is affected by your/your youth's grief indirectly?







What Not to Say

Take-Home Message

Many school professionals worry they may say the wrong thing to grieving students and make matters worse. Understanding what not to say will help you be more confident and effective when you reach out to students. The suggestions can help you support grieving children.

How to Act

Here are some behaviors that will increase children's comfort, sense of safety, and ability to express themselves.

- Be present and authentic. Keep the focus on the student. Offer supportive statements that honestly reflect both your relationship with the deceased and your sense of the student's response.
- Listen more, talk less. Keep your own comments brief. Ask open-ended questions to help students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- Avoid trying to "cheer up" students or their families. Grief is painful. Attempts to cheer people up or bring focus to the good things in their lives are likely to communicate that you don't want to hear students or their families talk about their pain.
- Accept expressions of emotion. Expressions of sadness, anger, selfishness, or confusion are common in grieving children. These are an important part of the process. When children hear they should "toughen up" or "be strong for their families" they are less likely to fully express their feelings of grief.
- Show empathy. Reflect back what you hear students say and the actions you observe. Use compassion. Avoid judgment.
- Step in to stop harmful actions when safety is a concern.

It's important to let children express their feelings of grief. Sometimes these can be quite dramatic—shouting, crying, kicking the floor. It's also appropriate to stop behaviors that may be harmful to the children, to others or to property.

What Not to Say

Many common and well-intentioned statements are not helpful to grieving children and their families. Here are some comments to avoid, and suggestions for what to say instead.

Don't worry if you've used these statements in the past. Children are very forgiving as long as they feel valued and supported. They hear our concern more than our exact words.

Don't Say This	Say This Instead
"I know just what you're going through." You cannot know this. Everyone's experience of grief is unique.	"Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?"
"You must be incredibly angry." It is not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel. It is better to ask. People in grief often feel many different things at different times.	"Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?"
"This is hard. But it's important to remember the good things in life, too." This kind of statement is likely to quiet down true expressions of grief. When people are grieving, it's important they be allowed to experience and express whatever feelings, memories, or wishes they're having.	"What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?"
"At least he's no longer in pain." Efforts to "focus on the good things" are more likely to minimize the student or family's experience (see above). Any statement that begins with the words "at least" should probably be reconsidered.	"What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?"

(Continued)

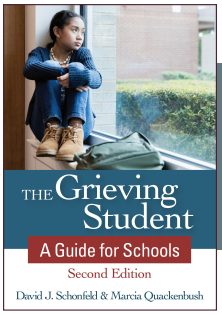
What Not to Say

"I lost both my parents when I was your age." Avoid comparing your losses with those of students or their families. These types of statements may leave children feeling that their loss is not as profound or important.	"Tell me more about what this has been like for you."
"You'll need to be strong now for your family. It's important to get a grip on your feelings." Grieving children are often told they shouldn't express their feelings. This holds children back from expressing their grief and learning to cope with these difficult feelings.	"How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?"
"My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling." It is not useful to compare losses. Keep the focus on grieving children and their families.	"I know how I've felt when someone I loved died, but I don't really know how you're feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?"

Expect a Range of Responses

The most important thing you can do is simply be with students while they are grieving. Witness their distress. Listen to what they have to say. Tolerate silence when they're not ready to speak.

Suspend judgment about how students "should" cope with their situations and stay open to the wide range of responses children may have. Let them experience their grief in their own way. Let them know you will be there with them. While it's important to intervene when you think children may hurt themselves or others, most of the time children are able to express intense feelings without danger.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

WHAT TO SAY & WHAT NOT TO SAY

The first column contains phrases that are unhelpful to youth who are grieving. The second column asks you to reflect on *why* that statement could be perceived as unhelpful. The third column asks that you rephrase the statement in column one. And the fourth column asks that you provide reasoning for why the new comment works better than the first.

DON'T SAY THIS	WHY DOESN'T IT WORK?	SAY THIS INSTEAD	WHY DOES IT WORK?
"I know just what you're going through."			
"You must be incredibly angry."			
"This is hard. But it's important to remember the good things in life, too."			
"At least they're no longer in pain."			

“I lost both my parents when I was your age.”			
“You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.”			
“My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.”			

Adapted from a handout by the Coalition to Support Grieving Students

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Letting Go

By Cynthia Orbes

When I was very young I thought my future would be typical—I would finish high school and go to college with my mom helping me along, and my mom would be there when I got married. I never could have imagined that by the time I was 10 years old both my parents would have died and my sister and I would be living with people we didn't know.

The neighborhood my family lived in when I was small was calm and clean. We had a safe playground with trees here and there. I remember my father pushing me on the swings. My family's apartment was the greatest. We had a big kitchen and a cellar and a backyard with a tree. My sister and I used to ride our bikes and play in the mud.

My mother couldn't do much because as far back as I can remember she was in a wheelchair. But she liked to read to me. My father was sometimes kind to me too, like when he took me to school or called me "sweetness," or when he let me help him cook.

But by the time I turned 6 I knew something was wrong. My mom and dad yelled at each other a lot. My mother would cry and sometimes my father stormed out of the apartment cursing. I hated it when my mother cried. I would run to her and hug her. I worried that my dad would hurt my mom. My parents also drank all the time. It made me feel bad to be around them when they were drinking. It was like watching my mother and father fall apart. I could tell they were not too happy and I felt sorry for them.

Then my father got sick with cancer and was in the hospital. My sister and I had to walk to school alone. I missed my father. I wanted to see him but my mother would never take me. He died on May 6, 1996. I couldn't tell him goodbye.

How do the circumstances around a death impact our grief process?

Even my father's death did not make my mother stop drinking. And we had to move a month later because the landlord doubled our rent. When my mother told me that we were moving, I was so mad. Too many things were changing. I did not want to leave the house that I grew up in and move to some old junk place. I did not want to leave all my friends. I did not want to go to a new school. I liked my life the way it was.

The new apartment that we moved to was small, and my mother told us that it was not a very good neighborhood. I'd complain and say, "I want to leave, I hate it here." My mother told me that we would not stay for long, just until we found a better place. I believed her but two weeks passed and then a month and then two months. I realized that we were going to stay there. So I dropped it. I just had to become used to this new life.

My sister and I looked for cool places and found a junkyard with high hills we called mountains because some of them were twice as high as we were. We hid behind big rocks and trees, getting our pants and sneakers all dirty. When we came home for dinner my mother would say, "Where were you playing, in garbage?" I loved going there.

But after two years, my mother passed away. December 17, 1997. I was filled with sorrow and disbelief. I wanted everything to go back to the way that it was. I wanted to rewind time.

For years afterward, I was angry. When I heard people say, "God does everything for a reason," I'd think, "What's the reason for this? How could a good God take away both my parents?" I felt abandoned. I could not believe that I had to go on the rest of my years without parents. People said, "It was her time," but that just seemed dumb. I even stopped believing in God, because I couldn't believe there could be a reason for what happened to me.

The day my mother died, the cops came and took my sister and me to an office to wait for a foster home. I was thinking, "Where am I going? Who is going to take care of me?"

We got into a foster home that night. It was a big, beautiful house, but I felt stranded. I only felt protected around my sister and followed her everywhere she went.

After I got into foster care, I had a lot of people telling me not to be sad. They said, "You cannot change the past so you are just going to have to deal with it." So I tried not to think about my feelings. When people asked me if I was OK, I would say that I was, although behind my smiles were held-back tears. Eventually people stopped asking.

On the anniversary of my mother's death, my 6th grade teacher told me, "Cynthia, you're going to have a lot more days like this to come. You just have to be strong about it." Her words made me feel strong enough to handle my life, but it did not help the pain go away.

Sometimes, we unintentionally say the wrong things to grieving people. What else could we say besides "It was their time," and "You have to deal with it?"

I tried so hard to forget what happened and pretend that my mother was somewhere watching over me. I started reading fantasy books that kept my mind off my mother's death and let me live in a fake world.

If I spent too much time in the foster home I'd end up thinking, "Why am I here? Is it real?" I'd remember when my mother would get her check and would take us out to eat at McDonald's, our favorite place. Or when my mom would cook. I just liked knowing she was in the kitchen cooking.

Thinking about the nice times would make me sad and then I'd get mad because I didn't want to be sad. So I would try to ignore my memories and pretend that my past wasn't real. It made me feel a little better to tell myself, "I've always lived with Miss Molly. My life started at 10."

I hated life. I felt angry that I didn't have parents and I didn't want anyone to try to act like a parent to me, even at school when teachers told me what to do. I would walk around my school with an "I don't care" attitude. I was afraid to care about anything or anyone because I thought I would lose them. That feeling of loss—I was tired of that feeling. I did not want to lose any more things that I liked, loved or had become used to.

To keep from thinking about the past, I tried to stay busy. I spent all my free time reading or with friends, my sister, my mentor, and, as I got older, my boyfriend. I hoped that I could just keep on distracting myself from the pain of my past. But in the last few years, my past has been stronger in my mind and my "I don't care" attitude changed to "Please help me. I am alone right now and desperately need some guidance."

That feeling that I am alone is always with me. My foster mom doesn't really take care of me, and even though I have my sister and she cares a crazy amount about me, she doesn't live with me anymore and is not my caretaker.

Sometimes the feeling of being abandoned and scared is so strong. Sometimes when I have a lot of homework and responsibilities, I have a hard time saying, "I can do this," and being positive. I start saying to myself, "I can't do this on my own with all of this pressure." I want help from my parents at those times.

Once in school we watched a movie about the health effects of smoking. It showed people who were dying from it. I began thinking about my mother, saying to myself, "People waste their lives because they don't think about the side effects until it's too late."

I left school and went to the store, almost in tears. I wished my parents could've found another way besides drinking and smoking to keep themselves from feeling so sad. It's easier said than done, but I feel angry that they let their sadness ruin their lives and ours.

Cynthia discovers that seeing images of the health effects of smoking triggers her grief. How does *not* knowing what triggers your grief impact how you experience it?

Just a few weeks ago, I broke down.

It happened on a Monday night. When I got to my foster home I wanted to be alone to try to figure out why I was feeling so bad and depressed. So I walked in to the bathroom and locked the door. I started thinking about how my parents aren't here to help me. I thought how my life would have been with them. I thought about how bad my life is without them and I felt forsaken.

Then I started seeing all of these visions of my parents from before they died. Them waiting for me somewhere. They both looked so sad. I wished that the visions were real so that I could go see them.

I started to cry. I wanted to stop crying but I could not. I felt weak, and I felt like I was crazy because I kept pacing and trying to stop thinking about the pictures of my past that were flashing before my eyes. Finally, they faded when I stood up and stopped crying.

Why am I crying? The scary and upsetting part is that I think of myself as being strong emotionally. That's always been my biggest characteristic. It's very important to me to seem and act strong. I fear that, like my parents, I might get sadder and sadder and never feel better.

When I look back at my parents, I wish they had done some more positive things to help themselves with their sadness, instead of escaping by smoking and drinking. At least I use positive ways to take care of myself, like keeping busy, listening to music, reminding myself of my goals in life and spending time with my sister. Being able to stay strong makes me believe I can get through life.

I fear that if I let my feelings out everyone is going to see me as this sad and depressed girl and I don't want to be that girl. (Who does?) But now I think I have to open up that sad part underneath, because I have feelings from my past that I really need to deal with. I feel like my brain is telling me that I can't continue to hide.

Cynthia sees a connection between her parents' deaths and their mental health. How can this knowledge make the grieving process more difficult?

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Excerpt from "Life After Death"

By Winnie Tang

Trigger warning: teen death, violence

Names have been changed.

It had been a typical January day during my sophomore year at Brooklyn Tech HS. I'd been sitting in the lunchroom, chatting away happily to a few of my friends, when Alex showed up looking teary-eyed. I stopped being bubbly. "What's wrong?" I asked.

At first, he didn't want to say anything, but then he told me that Victor, his neighbor and long-time friend, was dead. Walking home from a friend's house in Brooklyn, Victor, 18, had been mugged and murdered.

I didn't know how to respond. I was disturbed that someone I knew had died, but I was even more stunned that it had made Alex cry. To my group of friends, Victor was an acquaintance. We all felt shocked by Victor's death, but in a way, our sadness was about Alex's sadness, because he was our good friend. Alex's reaction affected me almost as much as Victor's death itself.

Alex and I were pretty close and when we talked about how we felt about our friends and family, we sometimes got emotional. One time, when my parents were fighting, and they didn't talk to each other for a few days, I was scared that my family was going to fall apart. I called Alex to talk it out, and in the middle of the conversation I started crying like a baby.

I cried sometimes, but Alex didn't. He'd get mad or pissed off, like when his dad did things like cut his phone line or break his door. I'd listen to him vent about what a jerk his dad was, how his dad didn't know how to be a good father. But I never saw Alex cry.

Most of the time, though, Alex's personality was just as carefree as mine. Nothing ever hit him hard enough to make him sad for a long period of time. Not until Victor's death. All I could do that day was give him a hug and tell him it would be better, but I thought to myself, "How can I know that?" Who knew what the future might hold?

Victor's death made no sense. Until then, I hadn't thought of the future, at least not in any philosophical way. To me, the future was, "What am I going to wear tomorrow?" or "What tests do I have this week?" But death, that was deep, burdensome, and far from me. Or so I thought.

On the subway home from school, our group of friends usually chatted and played card games. But the week that Victor died, Alex sat on the train by himself, in a corner seat, far away from where

we were playing cards. When I went over to talk to him, he told me to go away.

It wasn't until a few days after Victor's funeral that Alex stopped sitting by himself on the train and came back to us for a game of Chinese poker.

Some of Alex's responses to Victor's death ran deeper. Alex was especially pained by Victor's death because the last time he'd seen Victor, they'd had an argument and Alex stalked off without saying goodbye. Losing Victor didn't change life drastically for me or most of my friends. After all, we weren't his family. We didn't know him well. What we lost was a nice acquaintance, and that was sad.

But what we also lost, which changed us more, was a feeling of immunity from danger, and from death. I'm not scared of dying, but I am scared of not making anything of my life, and the fact that I'm not immortal means I only have a certain time limit to make something of myself.

After Victor's death, Winnie begins to think about her own mortality. What other thoughts or feelings might death bring up for kids, even if the person who died isn't someone who is close to them?

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Excerpt from "Acting Out"

By Rubie Sanchez

I was 12 years old when my grandfather died, and I didn't know how to feel. The only emotion that stood out from the rest was anger. I often asked myself, "Shouldn't I be crying or showing some sign of sadness?"

Even at the funeral, everybody cried but me, and since I wasn't, I felt confused, guilty and ashamed.

Like me, teenagers often don't realize that grief can be angry. Instead, I was scared of the different emotions going on within me that I just didn't understand.

Many teenagers don't know if their reactions to death are normal, or they don't understand why they're reacting the way they are.

Rubie worries that she isn't grieving in the "right" way. How can we help normalize for youth the various feelings that come with grief?

So I talked to Sharami Kerr, the founder of HeartBridge, a Manhattan center where kids can get help dealing with grief, loss and transition. Sharami said that although the first major emotion of grieving is sadness, the second major emotion is anger. It is normal to react angrily at having someone you love pass away, she told me.

When someone dies, you feel robbed, because you have had someone taken away from you who you didn't want to lose. It's reasonable to feel angry that something so precious has been stolen from you.

There are other signs of grieving that teenagers should be aware of. If you are suffering from grief, you might be sleeping too much or not sleeping at all, eating too much or not eating at all. Some people who are grieving find it hard to concentrate, some have dreams about the person who has died. A person might cry a lot, and even suffer from guilt.

Many people who have had a loved one pass away often ask themselves, how can I cope with death? Is it normal to grieve the way I do? Will this loneliness ever go away? Does anyone understand me? Am I going crazy? This is especially true for young teens when it's their first time losing someone close.

After the shock, Sharami said that it's normal to feel guilty and think "if only." That's how I felt after my grandfather's death: if only I had done more to help him, to help my family. If only I had told him that I loved him.

In order to get rid of this guilt, Sharami said that it's important to learn to express and share these feelings and learn to forgive yourself. Talking things over is definitely important. Grief is such a painful experience, with so many conflicting emotions, that it's necessary to express your feelings and sort them out.

However, because the teenage years often are such an exciting time, Sharami explained, teenagers don't want to talk about painful things. But holding inside such serious emotions like sadness and anger often will force you to act out the anger in a way that may be harmful to others or to yourself.

Death and bereavement can easily knock us out of our windows of tolerance. How do we as adults serving youth, help our kids widen their window of tolerance especially when they are grieving?

Excerpt from "Missing My Elderly Friend"

By Anonymous

Trigger warning: suicide

I grew up in Bylakuppe, a huge Tibetan settlement in India. When I was in 10th grade, my class was assigned to volunteer at the nursing home. We visited every Sunday for a whole year, even though Sunday was our only free day out of the week, since we had school Monday to Saturday.

We were thrilled to help the elders. As Tibetan refugees, many of us had few relatives in India. Spending time with the elders meant we could shower them with the love and care we couldn't show our own relatives, who were far away.

On our first day, our teacher told us to choose the Popo or Momo (grandfather and grandmother in Tibetan) that we wanted to look after. I chose Momo Phurbu. I don't know why, but I instantly felt a connection to her.

She was a short Momo with even shorter hair. She wore chupa, a traditional Tibetan women's dress, and a brown beanie. It was a weird combination since we didn't normally wear traditional clothes with Western ones, but it suited her perfectly. At first, I was shy and awkward around her. However, as the weeks went by, I became more comfortable and started looking forward to our Sundays together. She was stubborn, sarcastic, and self-reliant. She was special.

She was special in the way her entire face lit up at the sight of her favorite dish, boiled pork with tsampa. She was special in the way she was patient with me when I was inexperienced at doing the chores. She shared what little she had with me, like fruits from gift bags that were donated to the nursing home. She treated me like her own granddaughter.

Every Sunday morning, Momo Phurbu eagerly waited for me on her chair near the balcony. Then we went to her room. I'd start by giving her a bath. Next was doing her laundry. Sometimes, I got distracted and chatted with my classmates who were doing the laundry too. When that happened, Momo Phurbu often showed up out of nowhere and told me to hurry up and get back to her. I smiled at her and did just that.

After I was done with my chores, we talked and caught up. We often talked about my own Momo who was at home. I have a soft spot for elders, as I was raised by my grandmother ever since I was a baby. And then, when I was 12, my parents and siblings left me and my Momo behind in Bylakuppe to migrate to New York, which left the two of us feeling abandoned. This made the bond between me and my Momo even stronger, since we only had each other in India.

Being with one Momo reminded me of the other. They had similar personalities: kind and loving, yet feisty and sarcastic. They also seemed lonely: Momo Phurbu in the nursing home, because her family was too busy to spend much time with her, and my grandmother alone in Bylakuppe with her family abroad. I wanted to take care of them both. I thought they could be long-lost best friends. I wished they could meet each other.

The writer's culture influences the relationship them and their friends have with the elders. How can we be mindful of culture—an important factor in a child's grieving process—when helping youth navigate loss?

When the year came to an end, I felt melancholic for all the elders and my classmates, because we created amazing memories together. The elders treated us like their own grandchildren, giving us snacks even though they didn't have much for themselves. As upset as I was about the change, I knew that we had to move on with our lives. I also knew I could visit Momo Phurbu anytime.

A few months passed by. I had wanted to visit her but I had been busy studying. I told myself that I'd meet Momo Phurbu right after my exams were over. That decision made me feel a little less guilty.

One day, while I was on my way back home after an exam, one of my schoolmates stopped me. She said, "If I am not wrong, your grandmother from the old age home passed away earlier today. I heard there was an ambulance." I was stunned.

"No, that is not possible!" I said. Surely she made a mistake, I thought. Even as I tried to comfort myself with this thought, an unsettling feeling slowly crept up on me, and I hoped it would go away. I immediately rushed to the nursing home. Whenever I visited Momo Phurbu, she normally greeted me, smiling, from her chair on the balcony on the first floor. But today, when I walked up to the balcony, all I saw was an empty chair. The nursing home was so eerily calm that I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. I kept walking because I was desperately hoping that it was all a horrible dream. Every step I took felt heavy and all I wanted to do was turn back and run away.

I eventually got to the balcony and stood there, frozen. I could not process what was happening. Then, I asked other elders where my Momo was, hoping they would say she was in her room. A Popo, with teary eyes, said: "Bhumo (girl in Tibetan), she killed herself. She's no more."

When I heard those words, I could hardly breathe. I finally let the dam of tears flow free.

"Don't cry," he said.

How could I not? So many thoughts ran wild in my mind. *Why? Was she unhappy? If I had gone to visit her, would she have told me about her concerns?* I went back home that day and cried in the arms of one Momo and grieved for the other. My heart hurt so much that it physically pained me.

This was the first time I had lost someone so dear to my heart. Not only was Momo Phurbu's death the first loss I experienced, I had to come to terms with the fact that she decided to end her own life. I never got to say goodbye, and I never got to ask her why she planned such a drastic step. Momo Phurbu had seemed happy most of the time, so it never occurred to me that she might have been going through difficulties that she couldn't talk about with others. It scared me to think that someone dear to me had felt so helpless.

To add to the misery, my loved ones didn't fully appreciate the extent of my loss. They were generally sympathetic but didn't ask too many questions about Momo Phurbu's death or how I was handling it. Because no one asked me how she had died, I never told anyone that it was by suicide.

The next few months were filled with sadness and guilt. I started to feel responsible for what happened. The tiny voices inside my head were constantly fighting with each other. While some of these voices were kind and gentle, the rest were cruel and resentful.

If you had gone to meet her, you could've prevented this from happening, You could've helped her, the vicious voice said.

No. This is not your fault. Please don't blame yourself, said another voice tenderly.

However, a few months ago when I started working on a school project about regret, I had a lot of time to think about these feelings. After frequent crying and reasoning, I finally realized why I had been blaming myself: I desperately wanted to hold on to the tiny ounce of power that came with feeling responsible for her death. Blaming myself and feeling like I failed at helping Momo Phurbu was preferable to feeling completely helpless for something that happened so abruptly.

Momo Phurbu's death was not my fault, and I couldn't have prevented it. With this realization, a heavy weight was lifted from me.

What complicates the writer's grief and what helps them navigate those complications?

youth COMMUNICATION

Letting Go

By Cynthia Orbes

As we read Cynthia's story again, mark the places where you see examples of systemic oppression.

When I was very young I thought my future would be typical—I would finish high school and go to college with my mom helping me along, and my mom would be there when I got married. I never could have imagined that by the time I was 10 years old both my parents would have died and my sister and I would be living with people we didn't know.

The neighborhood my family lived in when I was small was calm and clean. We had a safe playground with trees here and there. I remember my father pushing me on the swings. My family's apartment was the greatest. We had a big kitchen and a cellar and a backyard with a tree. My sister and I used to ride our bikes and play in the mud.

My mother couldn't do much because as far back as I can remember she was in a wheelchair. But she liked to read to me. My father was sometimes kind to me too, like when he took me to school or called me "sweetness," or when he let me help him cook.

But by the time I turned 6 I knew something was wrong. My mom and dad yelled at each other a lot. My mother would cry and sometimes my father stormed out of the apartment cursing. I hated it when my mother cried. I would run to her and hug her. I worried that my dad would hurt my mom. My parents also drank all the time. It made me feel bad to be around them when they were drinking. It was like watching my mother and father fall apart. I could tell they were not too happy and I felt sorry for them.

Then my father got sick with cancer and was in the hospital. My sister and I had to walk to school alone. I missed my father. I wanted to see him but my mother would never take me. He died on May 6, 1996. I couldn't tell him goodbye.

Even my father's death did not make my mother stop drinking. And we had to move a month later because the landlord doubled our rent. When my mother told me that we were moving, I was so mad. Too many things were changing. I did not want to leave the house that I grew up in and move to some old junk place. I did not want to leave all my friends. I did not want to go to a new school. I liked my life the way it was.

The new apartment that we moved to was small, and my mother told us that it was not a very good neighborhood. I'd complain and say, "I want to leave, I hate it here." My mother told me that we would not stay for long, just until we found a better place. I believed her but two weeks passed and then a month and then two months. I realized that we were going to stay there. So I dropped it. I just had to become used to this new life.

My sister and I looked for cool places and found a junkyard with high hills we called mountains because some of them were twice as high as we were. We hid behind big rocks and trees, getting our pants and sneakers all dirty. When we came home for dinner my mother would say, "Where were you playing, in garbage?" I loved going there.

But after two years, my mother passed away. December 17, 1997. I was filled with sorrow and disbelief. I wanted everything to go back to the way that it was. I wanted to rewind time.

For years afterward, I was angry. When I heard people say, "God does everything for a reason," I'd think, "What's the reason for this? How could a good God take away both my parents?" I felt abandoned. I could not believe that I had to go on the rest of my years without parents. People said, "It was her time," but that just seemed dumb. I even stopped believing in God, because I couldn't believe there could be a reason for what happened to me.

The day my mother died, the cops came and took my sister and me to an office to wait for a foster home. I was thinking, "Where am I going? Who is going to take care of me?"

We got into a foster home that night. It was a big, beautiful house, but I felt stranded. I only felt protected around my sister and followed her everywhere she went.

After I got into foster care, I had a lot of people telling me not to be sad. They said, "You cannot change the past so you are just going to have to deal with it." So I tried not to think about my feelings. When people asked me if I was OK, I would say that I was, although behind my smiles were held-back tears. Eventually people stopped asking.

On the anniversary of my mother's death, my 6th grade teacher told me, "Cynthia, you're going to have a lot more days like this to come. You just have to be strong about it." Her words made me feel strong enough to handle my life, but it did not help the pain go away.

I tried so hard to forget what happened and pretend that my mother was somewhere watching over me. I started reading fantasy books that kept my mind off my mother's death and let me live in a fake world.

If I spent too much time in the foster home I'd end up thinking, "Why am I here? Is it real?" I'd remember when my mother would get her check and would take us out to eat at McDonald's, our favorite place. Or when my mom would cook. I just liked knowing she was in the kitchen cooking.

Thinking about the nice times would make me sad and then I'd get mad because I didn't want to be sad. So I would try to ignore my memories and pretend that my past wasn't real. It made me feel a little better to tell myself, "I've always lived with Miss Molly. My life started at 10."

I hated life. I felt angry that I didn't have parents and I didn't want anyone to try to act like a parent to me, even at school when teachers told me what to do. I would walk around my school with an "I don't care" attitude. I was afraid to care about anything or anyone because I thought I would lose them. That feeling of loss—I was tired of that feeling. I did not want to lose any more things that I liked, loved or had become used to.

To keep from thinking about the past, I tried to stay busy. I spent all my free time reading or with friends, my sister, my mentor, and, as I got older, my boyfriend. I hoped that I could just keep on distracting myself from the pain of my past. But in the last few years, my past has been stronger in my mind and my "I don't care" attitude changed to "Please help me. I am alone right now and desperately need some guidance."

That feeling that I am alone is always with me. My foster mom doesn't really take care of me, and even though I have my sister and she cares a crazy amount about me, she doesn't live with me anymore and is not my caretaker.

Sometimes the feeling of being abandoned and scared is so strong. Sometimes when I have a lot of homework and responsibilities, I have a hard time saying, "I can do this," and being positive. I start saying to myself, "I can't do this on my own with all of this pressure." I want help from my parents at those times.

Once in school we watched a movie about the health effects of smoking. It showed people who were dying from it. I began thinking about my mother, saying to myself, "People waste their lives because they don't think about the side effects until it's too late."

I left school and went to the store, almost in tears. I wished my parents could've found another way besides drinking and smoking to keep themselves from feeling so sad. It's easier said than done, but I feel angry that they let their sadness ruin their lives and ours.

Just a few weeks ago, I broke down.

It happened on a Monday night. When I got to my foster home I wanted to be alone to try to figure out why I was feeling so bad and depressed. So I walked in to the bathroom and locked the door. I started thinking about how my parents aren't here to help me. I thought how my life would have been with them. I thought about how bad my life is without them and I felt forsaken.

Then I started seeing all of these visions of my parents from before they died. Them waiting for me somewhere. They both looked so sad. I wished that the visions were real so that I could go see them.

I started to cry. I wanted to stop crying but I could not. I felt weak, and I felt like I was crazy because I kept pacing and trying to stop thinking about the pictures of my past that were flashing before my eyes. Finally, they faded when I stood up and stopped crying.

Why am I crying? The scary and upsetting part is that I think of myself as being strong emotionally. That's always been my biggest characteristic. It's very important to me to seem and act strong. I fear that, like my parents, I might get sadder and sadder and never feel better.

When I look back at my parents, I wish they had done some more positive things to help themselves with their sadness, instead of escaping by smoking and drinking. At least I use positive ways to take care of myself, like keeping busy, listening to music, reminding myself of my goals in life and spending time with my sister. Being able to stay strong makes me believe I can get through life.

I fear that if I let my feelings out everyone is going to see me as this sad and depressed girl and I don't want to be that girl. (Who does?) But now I think I have to open up that sad part underneath, because I have feelings from my past that I really need to deal with. I feel like my brain is telling me that I can't continue to hide.

Journal Activities

Which parts of yourself have you killed in order to function in our society? Which parts of yourself should you resurrect?

How can you show extra grace to young people experiencing the intersection of grief and oppression?

Do you prefer to grieve in solitude? What could it look like to grieve as a community?

What We Can Do To Honor the Loss of Tyre Nichols

by Enoch Naklen

On January 7th, Tyre Nichols was pulled over by five Memphis police officers for "reckless driving" according to NBC News. What followed was 13 minutes of him being brutally beaten and tased by these police officers. He died in the hospital three days later.

When I first heard Tyre's name circling around social media, I figured it was another classic case of a White police officer racially profiling a Black man. I avoided looking into his case for a couple of days, with feelings of deja vu plaguing my soul. Why read about yet another promising black man slain by the system?

Then, a couple of days later, I was casually scrolling through my Instagram, looking for a distraction from the homework I should have been doing. I usually speed run through these stories, unless something catches my eye. And so as I was tapping away, a story reel with the words "five Black police officers" was headlined and cut to a video.

I decided to tap back and watch the reel, which talked about Tyre's killers. I couldn't watch the whole thing—not because of the graphic content (I've been desensitized by now)—but because of my shock in learning it was five officers that looked just like me and Tyre.

After confirming this from three other sources, I felt… different. This was not the cold hurting feeling evoked from seeing Derek Chauvin forcing his knee into George Floyd's neck, or the very similar bludgeoning of Rodney King.

This time around, my blood boiled in not just anger, but betrayal. The actions committed by these officers was not just police brutality. This was a case of intra-community violence that feeds into the same systematic inequalities our black community wish to dispel in America. As a Black man in this society I am forced to recognize that there is a target on my back, but the fight for equality becomes even harder if I have to worry about my own brothers and sisters potentially targeting me as well.

This time around, my blood boiled in not just anger, but betrayal.

As I transition into my adulthood, I want to pursue a career that allows me to be an advocate for social change and the empowerment of all minorities. It isn't common for underrepresented communities to be in a position of power like these officers. As Black people we need to hold those opportunities as a chance to uplift our community, not tear it down. Someone who goes into policing should feel that they have just as much, or maybe even more opportunity to uplift their community than someone who becomes a defense attorney.

As the world awaits the fate of those officers, I sympathize and mourn with the family of Tyre Nichols. He was an amazing father to a 4-year-old son, and son to RowVaugn and Rodney Wells. He was also an upcoming photographer and skateboard enthusiast.

All I can hope for is for this to be a lesson for everyone. Tyre Nichols's life was involuntarily taken, but it shouldn't be in vain. We all need to do better. But Black people in positions of power particularly, must be accountable to their ethical imperative to uplift and support Black people and communities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do you think Enoch has become desensitized to witnessing police brutality in the media? How has access to videos of police brutality affected how we digest them?

What about the news of Tyre Nichols' death impacts Enoch?

What does Enoch ask of Black people who are in positions of power? How is this different from the allyship needed from White and non-Black community members?

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Face to Face With Grief

by Sonia Fung

I heard my mom talking on the phone to my uncle, her brother. Her voice was quiet, a cracked whisper I had never heard her use. "When?"

Then she turned to me and switched to Cantonese: "Mommy died. She died last night. The nurse called me just now. Mommy died. She died in her sleep."

She cried, and I started to cry too. "Don't worry about me," she said. "Just get ready for school and don't worry about me." She patted my head absentmindedly and went to her room to tell my dad. I wondered how I could do a normal thing like go to school.

But I did, and on my way, I saw a new friend. She waved to me, but I didn't wave back. I couldn't. I tried to smile, but I don't think she saw because we were all wearing masks.

Later in class, another friend started ranting about how the shirt she wanted from Urban Outfitters didn't have the cuffed sleeve she wanted. I turned away. I felt bitter that she could worry about a cuff sleeve.

One of my friends asked, "Are you alright? You seem a little down today."

"I'm good."

I doubted they really wanted to hear me talk about what happened, so I didn't tell them about my grandmother. I didn't want them to feel like they had to react a certain way or treat me differently. I knew they would rather talk about something happy or funny.

How do you think Sonia's decision not to talk about the death of her grandmother with her friends will affect her?

I sat in a classroom memorizing the quadratic formula while I thought about my mom's world falling apart.

After school, I dreaded going home. Outside, at least I could get lost in the hum of an apathetic city. But every step on the sidewalk, every traffic light, took me closer to my mom's sorrow.

I wanted my mom to open the door as usual and smile, her eyes lighting up, and ask, "Why aren't you wearing your jacket? It's so windy outside!" Or "You're 10 minutes late today; did you miss the bus?"

So I could say, "No, I actually missed the train." And then maybe we would laugh.

Instead she opened the door and gave me a strained smile. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she squinted at me like I was a stranger.

"Are you OK?" I asked cautiously.

"Nothing's wrong with me," she said hurriedly. "Nothing's wrong."

The heaviness in my heart changed to anger and frustration. I wanted to hear her say, "Everything is falling apart," or "Grandma is gone forever, nothing could ever be the same again," or *"Today was the worst day of my life."* I needed confirmation that everything was not just in my head.

"Stop saying nothing is wrong."

"What do you want me to say to you then?" she snapped back. She looked like I was hurting her.

I asked, "Did you have something to eat yet?"

"Don't worry about me, I'm alright, OK?"

A week later, there was still a cloud around my mom, and both my dad and I felt it.

"Sooo, what did you do today?" I asked, but my dad said, "Don't ask her that, she doesn't want to talk about it."

"So we can't have a conversation anymore?" I yelled. Silence followed, a black hole swallowing us.

What role can the community of people around Sonia play in supporting her as she acknowledges her grief?

I had imagined 8th grade, my senior year of middle school, to be a fun time where I enjoyed seeing people again after two years of quarantine. I had imagined fun events, senior trips, and hanging out. But now I hated being at school and being at home.

I was mostly anxious about my mom. She didn't eat, sleep, or talk much. Throughout my life, my mom called my grandma every night and shared everything–all her worries, problems, victories, ruminations. Who would she go to now?

I was so worried about my mom that it didn't hit me that my own grandmother was truly gone until I went to the funeral, about two weeks after her death. My breath caught when I walked in and saw her body looking peaceful, like she was asleep. They had curled her hair in the way she had liked and put makeup on her face. She looked beautiful and free from stress.

In the rows of chairs, I saw my cousin in the front rolling up red slips of tissue paper. She motioned for my sister and me to come over and sit next to her, handing each of us a stack of the red paper. "What is this for?" I asked.

"We're making paper money for Grandma so that she can be rich in heaven or in her next life," my cousin explained, demonstrating how she folded the paper. I thought of the red envelopes with money inside that my grandma gave me every year for my birthday. I would never get one from her again.

She would never see me go to high school or college. *Make sure to do well in school,* she used to tell me. Look! I wanted to say. I'm graduating middle school soon. *Listen to your mom and take care of her*, she said, right before I left that last time I saw her in the hospital. I'm trying, I wanted to say. But it's so hard when you're not here.

I thought these things, but I didn't cry.

A few months later, my mom started talking about normal things again. She went grocery shopping on weekends. She started cooking dinner again instead of ordering takeout. But I wasn't able to snap back.

I had spent so long barricading myself from any joy, feeling guilty if I was able to be happy. So I pushed away opportunities and invitations. Everything else—my grandma's death, my mom's pain, my family's changes—seemed out of my control. But when I didn't text a friend back, *I* was ignoring someone, not the other way around. If I didn't study for a test, *I* caused my bad grade.

But dropping grades and losing friends just made me unhappier. I spent my days under the covers, mindlessly scrolling through YouTube. Then one day, I clicked on a video of a spoken word poem by Andrea Gibson, called "The Nutritionist."

Up until then, I felt that everyone was happier than I was. Hearing the poem made me realize I wasn't alone in my despair. And that even if everything else seemed unsalvageable, I could still create, and I could still connect with people.

Why is recognizing grief as a communal and universal experience important for a young person's grieving process?

The next morning, I walked into the cafeteria and saw some classmates playing cards. I heard bursts of laughter and hurried chatter. It had been a while since I joined a group of people and I didn't know how things would turn out.

But I still walked over to the table. "What are you guys playing?" I asked.

A few people looked up smiling while others stared at the cards, focused on the game.

"Uno. Wanna join next round?"

"Yeah," I said.

During the game, I marveled at how a blue card with a +2 on it could get my heart racing, how easily I could laugh when a yellow +2 was piled on top of it, how victorious I felt yelling "Uno!" It was hard to believe that all of this was there all along, waiting for me.

I found warmth in letting these small moments wash over me.

The poem somehow brought me back into the world. I reconnected with old friends, and then, that fall, I entered high school. I met new people, joined different clubs and learned to play new sports. I even studied a lot because I felt powerful when something I practiced for paid off.

I realized that I was able to have more fun with others when I wasn't sad. My friends started telling me that I was always such a positive person. I knew it was because I avoided opening up about sad things, but I figured that was better for everyone. So I didn't talk, or even think about the gloomy months I'd just lived, and I didn't talk or think about my grandma.

Then, in March, my parents told me that we were going to visit my grandma's gravesite. The thought of going back to the cemetery felt dangerous. I worried that my family and I would slide back to the sorrow and despair we'd been in after her death.

On the two hour car ride, I wanted to throw up. Gravel crunched underneath the car as we drove up the slope of the hill to her grave. A gray blanket of clouds lay above, as if the sky didn't feel like showing up either.

We got out of the car, and a cold wind whipped my hair. I stuffed my hands inside my pockets. Next to me, my mom was carrying a bouquet of chrysanthemums and baby's breath. We stopped in front of my grandma's gravestone.

The flat rectangle of dirt was so barren, and underneath was her *body*. My grandma, a person full of stories and love and soul, was a body in the ground.

Memories flooded back. I went to her house every day in the summers while my parents worked. She cooked me oatmeal for breakfast, and she would crack an egg in it and add sesame powder, which made the oatmeal taste rusty. Years later, I would ask my mom to buy me sesame powder so I could cook my oatmeal the way she did.

I sat with her while she watched her C-dramas, and she would explain the entire plot and all the character dynamics to me. My grandma named the characters as they appeared, but I didn't try to remember them; I knew she would explain the whole thing to me all over again next time.

Instead, I leaned my head into her shoulder, my cheek against the soft fabric of her shirt.

Next to the grave, tears blurred my vision. I was breathing hard, sucking in the cold air, my chest heaving up and down, my hands ferociously swiping tears away. I was face to face with the grief I had been avoiding.

I had been trying to shut myself out of my grief the way my mom had shut me out of hers. But this grief was a part of me, flowing through my veins as natural as blood and as the tears that finally flowed. I was afraid to go to the cemetery and really feel the loss, but connecting with my grief helped me reconnect to myself.

I still don't know if my mom will ever want to talk to me about my grandma's death, or if I'll ever talk about it with my friends. But for now, I can make the choice to stop living as if the grief never happened.

How can we make space for kids to talk about their grief with us if they want to?

Not Your Lesson

By Kayla Ruano-Lumpris

One afternoon at the beginning of 8th grade, I was sitting in the room where Model United Nations (we called it MUN) met after school. Under the guise of open and inclusive debate, students played the roles of ambassadors. We talked about every political topic under the sun: the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the immigration policies of the Obama administration, and police brutality in the United States, among others.

Sometimes there was yelling and crying, and occasionally a silence heavy with more meaning than any words could ever have. There was rarely accountability when people said hurtful things.

Whenever we had these emotional moments, I stared intently at my shoes. As a perfectionist who didn't like revealing my imperfect feelings, I carefully crafted a hard exterior. On top of that, being one of the few Black and Latina people in predominantly White schools all my life made me feel like an outsider and, thus, even more afraid of expressing my opinions, particularly those on race related topics.

That day, it was late and getting dark outside, and only the MUN advisor, four other girls, and I remained in the room. I was friends, or at least acquaintances, with these girls, but I kept a wall up around them. The room was big, but all of us sat clustered together near the projector at the front of the room.

We were talking about the 2014 murder of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black boy shot by a White policeman immediatley upon arriving on the scene. The officer claimed he thought Tamir's BB gun was an actual firearm. In the officer's eyes, Tamir was not a young boy—one who had barely lived his life—but a grown, dangerous man.

My advisor was shocked when I told him that I had never seen the video of the shooting, as though it were a rite of passage for a young Black person to see one of their own people brutally killed.

"You really need to see this," my advisor, a tall White man, insisted as he cued up the video on the projector. I felt it wasn't necessary for me to view the video. I already felt connected to Tamir and his family. Their reality could have easily been mine.

The other girls scooted closer to the projector. Only one of them was Black. I don't know how she felt about being made to view the video, but neither of us said anything.

I had a bad feeling, but it was hard to disagree with our advisor. He had a deep, confident voice that made everything sound important. Everyone in MUN competed for his approval, and he encouraged it. The person I was then, desperate to be liked, particularly by authority figures, felt I had no choice but to watch the video. Who was I to argue with someone so enlightened?

So, there I was, waiting as the teacher casually cued up a video of a child being killed as though we were about to watch The Weather Channel.

All of us girls crowded around the screen. The first thing I saw was the blurred figure of a boy walking with something in his hand, an object I already knew was a toy gun. The shooting happens so quickly you can blink and miss it. I froze.

Watching someone take a human life was shocking. The officer pulls the trigger without even hesitating, and I still wonder how someone could do that. I felt myself about to cry, but these were people I didn't know well and I felt uncomfortable. I blinked furiously and bit my cheek hard, until the taste of metal and blood distracted me from the tears.

My advisor then announced that he wanted to listen to the audio (the video was silent). He barely gave me time to process what I had just watched. Nevertheless, I didn't know how to say no.

For me, hearing it was the worst part: the dispatch, the gunshot, the police commentary, all of it, each little piece of the story chipping away at the tough exterior I had placed around my sensitive heart.

When I heard 12 years of life ending in two seconds, my vision turned blurry as my eyes welled up with salty tears. What hurt the most was hearing the officers walk over to Tamir's body and claim that they just shot an 18-year-old man—as if he were old enough to vote and drive and get drafted, not a 12-year-old kid whose life had barely started.

My tough exterior shattered, and the emotions I had been holding back flooded out of my eyes and stained my face wet with tears. My hands shook erratically as the audio replayed in my head over and over, the gunshots still ringing in my ears. It was a humbling, hopeless feeling to realize my life can be taken away so easily.

Why is watching the video more harmful than helpful?

As embarrassed as I was, it was almost relieving to feel so much at once. I had mostly lived my life with a quiet intensity, rarely stating my thoughts and opinions. I thought I could keep my sadness, rage, and frustration bottled up inside, but I was a volcano just waiting to erupt.

My sniffles and quiet sobs disrupted the uncomfortable stillness. I felt alone and isolated even with these people near me. They made me feel pitied, and I was filled with resentment and jealousy. My innocence was stripped away from me so early in my life. Why should they get to keep theirs?

As I began to collect myself, I glanced at the faces of my advisor and peers. My advisor smiled in a way I could only interpret as condescending. Did he see me as some naive student, now enlightened because of what we just watched? Why else would he use my pain as a lesson for all?

The eyes of my White classmates shifted from my gaze to various parts of the room as they saw the pain on my face. They were clearly uncomfortable. At that moment, I started to realize that I could spend the rest of my life being subject to the opinions of people like them, who made me feel separate and lesser, or I could be bold and force people to hear what I have to say.

After we watched the video, I had an argument with one of my White peers. She didn't feel that the officers should be held fully accountable for their actions.

"They were trying to do their job," she argued.

"At the expense of a child's life?" I said, aggravated.

"People said he was pointing a gun!"

"And a police officer should know the difference between a BB gun and a real one!"

Our exchange got more heated as the other girls watched with their eyes wide. Our advisor stood there quietly, remaining frustratingly neutral. Hot tears rolled onto my cheeks while the other girl's pale face looked cold, other than a flush of slight irritation. The other Black girl didn't say much, besides an occasional chime of agreement with me. Does she still think about this too?

"How does the teacher's attempt to remain neutral impact Kayla? What should the teacher have done differently?"

I was finally using my voice, so I didn't let up, not until I saw the moon glistening through the open windows and knew I should head home. I was still angry at my classmate, my advisor, and the world. Everyone else's visible emotions quickly faded as they grabbed their backpacks and headed towards the door.

The other girls all hugged each other before they left. My advisor gave me a pointed look and gestured towards the girl I had argued with, as though I should pretend that her words hadn't hurt me. Her lips curled up in a small smile as she stared at me, waiting for me to give up. I reluctantly sent her a tight-lipped smile, gave her a quick, awkward hug, and headed swiftly towards the door. My moment of boldness was short-lived.

I became closer with all of those girls and was friends with them for a couple of years, but something shifted that day. Sometimes, I wish it never happened, and it shouldn't have, but the strong emotions ignited a fire within me.

I became involved with the equity team at my predominantly White school and helped craft our Black History Month celebration. I organized an equity summit at school to discuss the unfair New York City school admissions process we were all benefitting from.

"Kayla chooses a path of advocacy, but what is the responsibility of adult allies in supporting young people who experience communal, public violence?"

Somehow, a day marred by hurt, pain, and anger revealed so much to me about my life, humanity, and the world. I saw how afraid the cops were of Tamir's brown skin and nappy hair. His Blackness was a threat to our White supremacist society. Seeing the video of his death motivated me to become another voice within a movement fighting for Black people to be respected and treated as human beings.

Sometimes, I wonder if anyone else thinks back on that day. Do they remember that moment like I do, or has it become a blur among many MUN experiences? Do they remember how I wept for Tamir, or how none of them tried to comfort me afterwards? Was the display of my terrifying reality simply a lesson for them, our conversation an intellectual experiment? Do they know that their words and actions left scars on my tender heart?

When I look back on what happened, it still hurts. Black trauma shouldn't have to be channeled into something positive. Experiencing racism isn't inspiring, and that bad memory is still just that. My pain is not a lesson for all, and neither is the murder of Tamir Rice.

"How does Kayla reflect on her experience towards the end of the story? What do you think she asks of us?"

Grief & Advocacy:
Tips & Strategies for Discussion

Remember:

- The denial or erasure of trauma and the need to grieve is harmful
- Kids pay attention to what we *don't* talk about as much as what we *do* talk about
- "Black youth in urban spaces can be disproportionately exposed to violence"[i]
- "Despite experiencing elevated rates of homicide, Black communities—and particularly the boys within them—are drastically underserved relative to culturally appropriate grief support"[ii]
- "Anger, a common response to trauma among adolescents, can be magnified in disenfranchised grief experiences"[iii]
- Conversations about grief and loss need to be normalized
- Trauma complicates grief; students may experience vicarious trauma from hearing about communal loss
- "You can't teach a wound to heal; you can only provide the wound with an environment for healing to take place."[iv]

Strategies:

- Pay homage to the loss (through expression like art, music, writing) and give options for how students do this (some students may not have words for their loss, so offer alternatives to writing)
- Recognize grief in its many forms (loss of the ideal, loss of trust/faith in humanity, loss of safety in your community)
- Memorialization, sometimes including the importance of visiting community sites where memorials are held
- Taking action – discussing ways to advocate for change in students' schools, communities, and larger arenas

- Grief requires ritual – what rituals can we develop to honor loss?
- Help kids listen to clues from their body; grief is not just emotional, it's physical ("the body keeps the score") - are they feeling disconnected, withdrawn, angry, etc.? Naming those emotions
- Remember the power of writing goodbye letters
- Avoiding re-traumatization by rewatching graphic images from the news or social media
- Grief is isolating – let students know they are not alone and validate their grief
- Just sitting there and being with your student(s)
- Phrases:
    - "I appreciate you"
    - "I'm here for you"
    - "I care about you"

[i] From the article, "It Don't Affect Them Like it Affects Us: Disenfranchised Grief of Black Boys in the Wake of Peer Homicide by Amber Jean-Marie Pabon and Vincent Basile. Published April 21, 2021.
[ii] From the article, "It Don't Affect Them Like it Affects Us: Disenfranchised Grief of Black Boys in the Wake of Peer Homicide by Amber Jean-Marie Pabon and Vincent Basile. Published April 21, 2021.
[iii] From the article, "It Don't Affect Them Like it Affects Us: Disenfranchised Grief of Black Boys in the Wake of Peer Homicide by Amber Jean-Marie Pabon and Vincent Basile. Published April 21, 2021.
[iv] From MPR interview

Reconnecting With My African Roots

By Everina Mustafa-Bennett

In 2009, at the age of 7, I arrived in America, escaping war in my homeland of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The circumstances were not of my choosing, and the upheaval in my life left me with little opportunity to learn about my own culture. I had traveled with a family of nine and we settled in Buffalo, New York.

This family was my only connection to my roots, but I faced abuse at their hands. I was then transferred into foster care and moved about two hours away, to a suburban area.

My journey took a significant turn in 2015 when I found my forever home with my adoptive parents, Ashley and Emory Bennett. Their unwavering support and encouragement enabled me to become a naturalized citizen at the age of 18. In 2021, I proudly graduated from high school.

Throughout my tumultuous journey, I have been on a quest to understand and reconnect with my cultural heritage. Being separated from my homeland at such a young age left a void in my identity.

Because I experienced abuse myself, I now participate in various mental health events and advocate for systemic change to ensure foster children receive the support they deserve. I have worked in a peer-to-peer program at my counseling agency. My job was to talk to other foster kids as well as to foster parents to try and explain how foster kids might feel and how and why foster kids act a certain way. I want to create a network of support that uplifts and empowers foster children, ensuring that their voices are heard and their dreams are nurtured.

I also worked as a refugee resettlement intern at Journey's End, which forced me to confront the loss of my African languages, including my tribal language. I felt self-conscious as an African child, disconnected from a part of my identity that was slipping away.

Now, I am slowly discovering glimmers of hope. I am learning to appreciate the family I have gained through adoption and the safe space they provide for me to explore my cultural identity without fear of trauma or rejection. My parents are the people to drive two hours and pay $200 to get my hair done. They also found resources for me like the app 'Swahili Bubbles' to ensure I continue to learn African languages. I am beginning to understand that I have my whole life ahead of me to search for that culture in a way that feels safe and nurturing.

Moving forward, I plan to continue my exploration of my African heritage. I want to learn about my culture, traditions and history. I also hope to visit my homeland, reconnect with family if possible and immerse myself in the rich tapestry of African life.

In sharing my journey, I hope to inspire others who may be facing similar challenges to seek healing, embrace their roots and find strength in their unique experiences. It's never too late to reconnect with one's cultural identity and find a sense of belonging.

"In what ways does disenfranchised grief show up in Everina's story? How might disenfranchised grief particularly impact our students of color?

Excerpt from How Gentrification Has Affected Me

By Enoch Naklen

I've watched the construction of 111 Montgomery, in my Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, since it was nothing more than a large empty lot.

There was a playground nearby where my brother and I always played competitive 2v2s basketball with the neighborhood kids. They were strangers at first, but after the first or second interaction they became people I dapped up daily on the way home from school.

The block had big broken concrete chunks that I would jump over when I wanted to feel like a child again.

Then, during construction, traffic guards directing cars and constant jackhammers replaced the calm quiet.

When that side of the block was newly repaved in what seemed like a night's time, it caught me off guard. Then came a Citi Bike station, and then eventually the green scaffolding signaling a new building. Three years later, by my junior year, 111 Montgomery was finished.

People started moving in two years ago and I've started noticing that the new residents are mostly white or non-Black Latino. That wasn't surprising to me once I read that 111 Montgomery was the newest *luxury* apartment building in my area.

At some point, I noticed that the familiar faces at the basketball court had disappeared. And although my neighborhood is still predominantly Black, now I run into a lot more white, Asian or Latino neighbors to play with.

The differences may seem small, but they are important to me. There was a familiarity playing with a dark face like my own, and the dap up came so naturally after a game. Those boys became neighborhood friends not just because of the basketball, but because there was an unspoken, mutual understanding of who we are and where we come from that I felt while playing. I don't get the same vibe when I'm offered a "gentleman's handshake" by my white counterparts after the game.

I can't blame other people for moving into 111 Montgomery because they have the means to do so. But I wonder what happened to my original friends at the courts. Where are they now and how have their lives changed?

This isn't just happening in my neighborhood. Jeremiah, a fellow Brooklyn Latin student and friend of mine, would constantly remark about a new luxury apartment building being built in Bushwick, when we passed it on the way to school.

"It's so crazy how they're making such an expensive building when they could be reinvesting into the projects right next to it," he observed. "It's so corrupt the society we live in. The audacity of some people to casually build a multi-million-dollar apartment when there are residents in the area who can barely afford public housing."

"Do you know what it was before?" I asked.

"I think it was a broken-down apartment building, but I do know that there had to be people displaced for this building to be here now," Jeremiah said. "Then you wonder why there's so many citizen app reports in the area recently. What did they expect to happen?"

I couldn't agree more. I see more homeless people on the streets now. It feels like a sick cycle: innocent people are kicked out of their homes, but then are demonized for resorting to crime because of a lack of resources.

What's happening in my neighborhood is what's called gentrification, "a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses, and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents," according to the dictionary definition.

While there are some pros to gentrification, such as more diversity and job opportunities in the affected communities, I think it's mostly negative because it creates displacement. What bothers me most about it is no one ever hears about where these displaced residents have gone and what happened to their lives as a result.

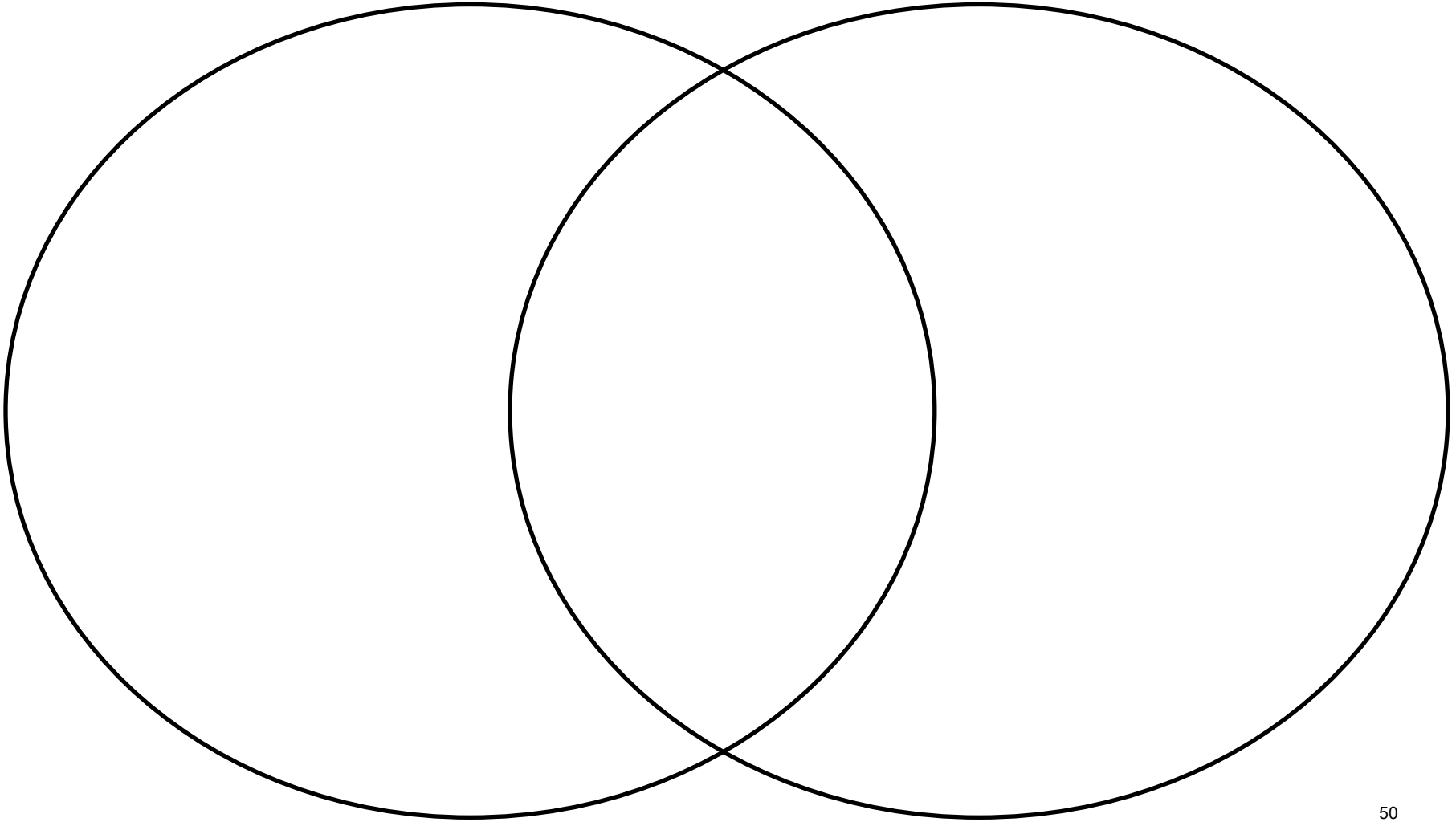
We shouldn't be expected to just accept the eradication of our culture and neighborhood. You can't just accept that places that made your home *home* are no longer there, replaced by people and places that don't represent you.

"For Enoch, what kind of losses does gentrification trigger? What are some ways we could support youth who may be experiencing this type of disenfranchised grief?"

1) In the left circle, list the types of loss that might fall under the title of disenfranchised grief as well as the effects that having your grief disenfranchised might have on a person. 2) In the right circle, list the types of loss that fall under traditional bereavement as well as the traditional ways that grief is expressed. 3) In the middle, where the circles intersect, write down some things that are similar between these two types of losses (e.g. expressions of that loss, possible effects of the loss).

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

TRADITIONAL BEREAVEMENT



youth COMMUNICATION

Excerpt from Something Good Out of Something Bad

By J.C.

I don't remember my first hospitalization. I was either too young to understand it or too high off the five milligrams of morphine. But for as long as I can remember, I've gone to the hospital for extreme pain about 10 times a year. Almost monthly. I could practically put my address down as the hospital rather than my medium-cute apartment in the Bronx.

Sickle cell anemia is a genetic blood disorder passed down from parent to child. About 70,000-100,000 Americans, mostly Black people, suffer from this disease. For a person to get sickle cell anemia, both parents have to have an abnormal gene called hemoglobin S. (The hemoglobin S gene evolved to protect against severe malaria, and doesn't cause health problems. Unfortunately, however, when both parents have the trait, they have a one in four chance of having a child with sickle cell anemia.)

I was adopted when I was 7, after five years in foster care. My diagnosis means my birth parents both had hemoglobin S. I don't actually remember them and they never showed up for visits. We've never discussed my sickness or anything else.

Normal red blood cells are round. If you have sickle cell, your red blood cells are an "S" shape, like a sickle. The S-shaped cells die faster than normal blood cells, causing a shortage of healthy blood cells. The S-shaped cells block blood flow, causing extreme pains throughout your body. I know that pain, also known as "sickle cell crisis," firsthand. The first crisis I remember was when I was 7, not long after I was adopted.

I was watching "Dora the Explorer" when pain attacked my arm. I cried and pointed at my arm.

"What does it feel like?" my mom asked.

"Like a shark bit it off!" OK, maybe I was being dramatic, but I couldn't understand why or how it could hurt so much.

That pain, sharp and stabbing, went on for four days. On the fourth night, I woke my mom in the middle of the night, sobbing and screaming, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy."

"OK, OK, We are going to the hospital now. Just try to relax, OK? Go sit on the couch while I get dressed."

My mom carried me into the hospital like a fragile vase because I was in too much pain to walk. An ambulance rushed past. Inside the gloomy emergency room, screams and cries echoed. Patients looked like dried up fruit left out in the sun too long; some slouched in uncomfortable chairs.

My mom talked fast to people in blue scrubs, tears flooding her eyes. The lady in blue guided my mom to the back room and stuck me with a needle. The feeling of being pricked didn't bother me, but then a burning feeling rushed through my veins, like fire racing through my body. In 15 minutes, my vision blurred, my body went numb, and I finally slept. I found out later that I'd been injected with morphine.

A few nights later, still in the hospital, I was hooked up to an IV, like a PlayStation with cords coming out of me. Still getting morphine every couple of hours. Every morning I was woken up by needles sucking out my blood.

That was my first crisis, but far from my last. The disease basically has a brain of its own. It sneaks up on you like you're playing a game of tag, and the disease is "It." You're running to base, which is the hospital.

I couldn't participate in other activities, even with the medication I take every day. I can't swim in a pool or play in the snow, because if I get too cold I risk a pain crisis. I can't play rough or do gymnastics, extreme dance or basketball. I can't even sit in air conditioning on blast without warm clothing.

"Oftentimes we don't think about the toll that physical illness takes on us mentally and emotionally. How does J.C. experience loss in this way?"

I spent my 13th birthday in the hospital. The night before, my mom and my grandmother decorated my hospital room on the ninth floor, which is for blood disorder and cancer patients. However, that same night my oxygen levels got worse, and I had to be moved to the 10th floor to be hooked up to the bipap machine. That's a device that forces oxygen into your lungs through a mask. It feels like sticking your head out the car window.

I get hospitalized with pain crises 10 times a year, and in seven of those 10, I get blood transfusions that make me feel like a lab rat. Seeing a bag of blood dripping slowly into me was especially weird as a young girl. I don't feel any pain during a transfusion, but afterwards, I feel as itchy as if I swam in a swamp full of mosquitos.

Moving from house to house as a young kid made me feel silenced and alone. Being sick on top of that made me feel different and like a burden. An unnecessary object that nobody wanted or cared about.

Once I got adopted, I definitely felt more seen. But because I had always been shut down in previous households, I didn't know how to express my emotions about my illness and my pain. Furthermore, nurses and doctors treated me differently. "Weren't you just here a few weeks ago?" "We just gave you Tylenol three hours ago—are you sure your pain is still a nine?" I felt it was because of the color of my skin, and I've since read that medical personnel often dismiss Black people's pain. Being disbelieved was even more isolating.

When I am sick, I don't sleep, eat, or drink. I get only IV fluids and light foods that my stomach can hold down. After I am discharged from the hospital, I go through withdrawal from the pain medication. My life is constantly put on pause.

I have read a lot of science. What they don't tell you is the mental toll you will have to endure and the feeling of becoming less and less like yourself or like a person in general. They don't tell you about the loneliness, feeling like a burden, not being understood, resenting yourself and the rest of the world. I hated my body: It felt like I was cursed to suffer.

When I was 7, I was prescribed hydroxyurea, and was told I had to take it every day for the rest of my life. Hydroxyurea makes me feel sick and sluggish, like an alien is going to burst out of my stomach and turn me into acid. I took it every day for eight years. I felt like I was in an arranged marriage where I had no say about what I put into my body.

At age 15, I finally advocated for myself and got onto a different medication called Adakveo. On the new meds, I felt human, less sick, almost normal.

It was hard advocating for myself, but it's my body and I'm the only one who feels the pain I go through. Not the doctor, not the nurses, not my mom or my siblings. So I am my best advocate. Now I'm not saying patients shouldn't take their medicine; I'm saying do what's best for you and your body to make you feel comfortable. The new medication was my balance, and it worked for me.

One thing that helped me cope was meeting Janelle in the hospital when we were both 14. She also has sickle cell and also has siblings who can do anything, while the two of us can't play in the snow or go in a pool. She understood everything I was going through, and I felt more understood than I did in a long time. (She also happens to have the same name as my sister.)

For the first time in a long time, I [haven't felt] like just "the girl who's always in the hospital." I have achieved a lot despite spending so much time in pain and on the sidelines of normal teen life. I'm the girl who deals with sickle cell but still manages to make something good out of something bad.

"What does J.C. do to cope with a grief that often goes unrecognized?"

CASEL'S SEL FRAMEWORK:

What Are the Core Competence Areas and Where Are They Promoted?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.

Learn more: www.casel.org/what-is-SEL

THE CASEL 5:

The CASEL 5 addresses five broad, interrelated areas of competence and examples for each: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills,* and *responsible decision-making*. The CASEL 5 can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts to articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers.

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SELF-AWARENESS: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose. Such as:

- Integrating personal and social identities
- Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets
- Identifying one's emotions
- Demonstrating honesty and integrity
- Linking feelings, values, and thoughts
- Examining prejudices and biases
- Experiencing self-efficacy
- Having a growth mindset
- Developing interests and a sense of purpose

SOCIAL AWARENESS: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports. Such as:

- Taking others' perspectives
- Recognizing strengths in others
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion
- Showing concern for the feelings of others
- Understanding and expressing gratitude
- Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones
- Recognizing situational demands and opportunities
- Understanding the influences of organizations/systems on behavior

SELF-MANAGEMENT: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation & agency to accomplish personal/collective goals. Such as:

- Managing one's emotions
- Identifying and using stress-management strategies
- Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation
- Setting personal and collective goals
- Using planning and organizational skills
- Showing the courage to take initiative
- Demonstrating personal and collective agency

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed. Such as:

- Communicating effectively
- Developing positive relationships
- Demonstrating cultural competency
- Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving
- Resolving conflicts constructively
- Resisting negative social pressure
- Showing leadership in groups
- Seeking or offering support and help when needed
- Standing up for the rights of others

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being. Such as:

- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems
- Learning to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, facts
- Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions
- Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside & outside of school
- Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being
- Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts

THE KEY SETTINGS:

Our framework takes a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key settings to enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic learning. We believe it is most beneficial to integrate SEL throughout the school's academic curricula and culture, across the broader contexts of schoolwide practices and policies, and through ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations. These coordinated efforts should foster youth voice, agency, and engagement; establish supportive classroom and school climates and approaches to discipline; enhance adult SEL competence; and establish authentic family and community partnerships.

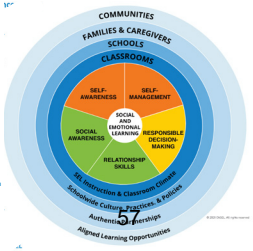
CLASSROOMS. Research has shown that social and emotional competence can be enhanced using a variety of clasroom-based approaches such as: (a) explicit instruction through which social and emotional skills and attitudes are taught and practiced in developmentally, contextually, and culturally responsive ways; (b) teaching practices such as cooperative learning and project-based learning; and (c) integration of SEL and academic curriculum such as language arts, math, science, social studies, health, and performing arts. High-quality SEL instruction has four elements represented by the acronym SAFE: Sequenced - following a coordinated set of training approaches to foster the development of competencies; Active - emphasizing active forms of learning to help students practice and master new skills; Focused - implementing curriculum that intentionally emphasizes the development of SEL competencies; and Explicit - defining and targeting specific skills, attitudes, and knowledge.

SEL instruction is carried out most effectively in nurturing, safe environments characterized by positive, caring relationships among students and teachers. To facilitate age-appropriate and culturally responsive instruction, adults must understand and appreciate the unique strengths and needs of each student and support students' identities. When adults incorporate students' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds and seek their input, they create an inclusive classroom environment where students are partners in the educational process, elevating their own agency. Strong relationships between adults and students can facilitate co-learning, foster student and adult growth, and generate collaborative solutions to shared concerns.

SCHOOLS. Effectively integrating SEL schoolwide involves ongoing planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement by all members of the school community. SEL efforts both contribute to and depend upon a school climate where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and engaged.

Because the school setting includes many contexts—classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, playground, bus—fostering a healthy school climate and culture requires active engagement from all adults and students. A strong school culture is rooted in students' sense of belonging, with evidence that suggests that it plays a crucial role in students' engagement. SEL also offers an opportunity to enhance existing systems of student support by integrating SEL goals and practices with universal, targeted, and intensive academic and behavioral supports. By coordinating and building upon SEL practices and programs, schools can create an environment that infuses SEL into every part of students' educational experience and promotes positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students.

Continue to families/caregivers and communities...



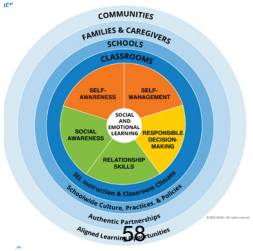
THE KEY SETTINGS (CONT.)

FAMILIES/CAREGIVERS. When schools and families form authentic partnerships, they can build strong connections that reinforce students' social and emotional development. Families and caregivers are children's first teachers, and bring deep expertise about their development, experiences, culture, and learning needs. These insights and perspectives are critical to informing, supporting, and sustaining SEL efforts. Research suggests that evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into the home, and families are far more likely to form partnerships with schools when their schools' norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences. Schools need inclusive decision-making processes that ensure that families—particularly those from historically marginalized groups—are part of planning, implementing, and continuously improving SEL.

Schools can also create other avenues for family partnership that may include creating ongoing two-way communication with families, helping caregivers understand child development, helping teachers understand family backgrounds and cultures, providing opportunities for families to volunteer in schools, extending learning activities and discussions into homes, and coordinating family services with community partners. These efforts should engage families in understanding, experiencing, informing, and supporting the social and emotional development of their students.

COMMUNITIES. Community partners often provide safe and developmentally rich settings for learning and development, have deep understanding of community needs and assets, are seen as trusted partners by families and students, and have connections to additional supports and services that school and families need. Community programs also offer opportunities for young people to practice their social and emotional skills in settings that are both personally relevant and can open opportunities for their future. To integrate SEL efforts across the school day and out-of-school time, school staff and community partners should align on common language and coordinate strategies and communication around SEL-related efforts and initiatives.

> Students, families, schools, and communities are all part of broader systems that shape learning, development, and experiences. Inequities based on race, ethnicity, class, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors are deeply ingrained in the vast majority of these systems and impact young people and adult social, emotional, and academic learning. While SEL alone will not solve longstanding and deep-seated inequities in the education system, it can create the conditions needed for individuals and schools to examine and interrupt inequitable policies and practices, create more inclusive learning environments, and reveal and nurture the interests and assets of all individuals.



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Session 13

Comfort After Grief

SEL FOCUS: RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Story: "In an Octopus's Garden" by Dina Spanbock

Story Summary: Dina connects deeply with her father through their mutual love of music, and she continues that connection after he dies.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Identifying the things that bring them comfort
- Discussing what makes something comforting
- Explaining how relying on things of comfort in difficult times is an important self-management strategy

Youth will practice their literacy skills by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives

Materials

- ☐ Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Between You and Me* anthologies, one for each group member
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper, colored pencils, and markers

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Clear an open space in the room for the Concentric Circles activity.
- Write the directions for the Concentric Circles activity **(in bold)** on chart paper.
- Write the prompt for the Draw It activity **(in bold)** on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Comfort After Grief

- **Review Group Agreements**
- **Opening Activity: Concentric Circles**
- **Read and Discuss: "In an Octopus's Garden" by Dina Spanbock**
- **Explore the Ideas Activity: Draw It**
- **Closing Circle**

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

(12 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity during which they will share their opinions with others.

2. While the group is seated, read aloud the activity procedure you wrote on chart paper:
   - **You will form two standing circles, one inside the other.**
   - **Each person will be facing a partner.**
   - **I will read questions aloud and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens.**

3. Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)

4. Have the 1s stand and move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing *outward*.

5. Have the 2s stand and form a second circle around the first one, facing *inward*.

6. Then explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their first partner.

7. Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you may wish to write these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):
   - **You will take turns responding to a question I ask.**
   - **When one person speaks, the other listens.**
   - **When I say, "Switch," the speaker and the listener switch roles.**
   - **When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will have a new partner.**

8. Have partners greet each other by shaking hands and saying "Hello."

9. Ask the group:
   - "Think of someone important to you. What is an activity you do together that you both enjoy?"

10. After both partners have answered the question, ask the inside circle to move one space to the right while the outside circle stands still. When new pairs form, have group members greet their new partners.

11. Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
   - "What's a memory that you cherish?"
   - "What do you do to to feel comforted?"
   - "What helps you when you're feeling uncomfortable emotions?"

12. Have everyone return to their seats and thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person finding ways to comfort herself after the death of their father.

2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.

Tell the group to turn to p. 78 in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text **(in bold)**. Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Session Story: Turn to p. 78 in anthology

In an Octopus's Garden

By Dina Spanbock

"I'd like to be under the sea in an octopus's garden in the shade." I was in the living room with my dad, listening to his original vinyl Beatles record playing the song "Octopus's Garden." I was about 6 years old, and that line troubled me. It wasn't the idea of a person being under the sea and hanging out with an octopus that bothered me. The issue I had was with the shade.

"How can there be shade under the sea?" I asked my dad. "There aren't shady spots and sunny spots under water!"

13

My father told me that it was make-believe, so it didn't need to make sense. That opened up my eyes. Music and other types of art didn't need to be realistic all the time. I embraced the idea of creativity, and I was drawn to the arts, especially music.

Music has always been a huge part of my life. I attribute that mostly to my father, who passed away three years ago. He loved music, and he instilled that love in me. We bonded through music, and I continue to connect to him through it.

Some of my earliest memories involve my father and music. We always listened together to the radio, CDs, and his vinyl records. He chose the music, mostly classic rock, but sometimes he'd play classical music or smooth jazz when I couldn't sleep.

["How is Dina's love for music connected with her love for her father?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

As I grew older, I began to follow in the footsteps of my older sister and peers, listening to popular music of the day.

But as I neared the end of middle school, something made me go back to my dad's music. I don't remember why, but one day I wanted to listen to the Ramones, a pop-punk band from the '70s and '80s. I went to my father's CD collection and found a solo album by Joey Ramone, the lead singer, from after the band broke up.

As I lay in bed listening to the bright pink CD, I thought about my father and the connection he must have to the music. He could remember when the Ramones were popular, when they broke up, when these albums had come out. They were a part of his life outside of mine.

It made me realize that he wasn't just my father, but a person who had his own life and everything that came along with it, including a childhood. We were both individuals with our own pasts and interests. We had this connection as people now, not just as father and daughter.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["How does their shared love of music help Dina deal with the loss of her father?"]

A few months later, soon after I began high school, my friend and I were walking in New York City's Central Park late one afternoon when I heard what sounded like guitars. We followed the sound and found ourselves surrounded by a group of people singing and playing Beatles songs.

It turned out it was John Lennon's 64th birthday. (One of the lead members of the Beatles, Lennon was killed in 1980.) That was a significant anniversary because of The Beatles' song "When I'm 64." Fans had come to pay tribute to Lennon in Strawberry Fields, the area of Central Park dedicated to him. I thought the chords, rhythms, harmonies, and lyrics were beautiful.

I went home that night and headed to my dad's CD collection again, this time looking for Beatles albums. I listened to them repeatedly for the next few weeks, learning all the songs.

One evening, I sat down at the computer in my dad's bedroom to do my homework. I put on The Beatles' Rubber Soul album and sang along to the first song, "Drive My Car." By the time the second track, "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," began, my dad had walked into the room and was standing near me, singing along as he often did.

We smiled and looked at each other as we sang harmonies and drummed our hands on our thighs with the beat. We didn't speak because we didn't have to. The music spoke for us.

["What does she mean when she writes, 'The music spoke for us'?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

Meanwhile, a new source of music had come into my life. I began to take voice lessons when I was 13. My voice teacher introduced me to songs from musicals, something my dad didn't listen to often. My first performance was a school talent show, only months after I began voice lessons.

I walked on stage, so shaky I was afraid I'd fall over in my high heels. I breathed deeply and prepared for that first note as I brought the microphone up to my mouth. "I hope you never lose your sense of wonder," I sang (from the song "I Hope You Dance," by Lee Ann Womack). Before I knew it, the song was over.

13

I walked off the stage in a daze from the rush of performing in front of a large audience. When I found my father, he was beaming with pride. He'd heard me sing around the house, but this was the first time he'd heard me giving it my all the way I do in voice lessons and performances. We hugged and he told me how lucky he felt to be my father. For weeks afterwards he proudly told me about all the people who had complimented my performance to him.

Looking back, I think my singing deepened our musical relationship. Before, he would offer bands, songs, and music-related facts, and I would receive them. It was my interest in a passion of his. Now I was sharing my own musical passion with him. I was giving something back to him: my voice, my musical creations.

My father passed away suddenly when I was 15 years old, not long after I rediscovered the Beatles. A few months later, I had a performance in a concert my voice teacher was organizing. I decided to sing "Papa Can You Hear Me," a song that the main character in the musical *Yentl* sings to her father after he passes away.

I, too, sang the song for my father. I had a very bittersweet feeling on stage. It was extremely emotional—difficult because my father wasn't with me physically, but also incredibly fulfilling to be doing something I loved that he'd inspired me to do and that I know he would have wanted me to pursue.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["It wasn't easy for Dina to perform a song that could have caused her to be sad. What does she gain from singing the song, though?"]

After the performance, lots of people came and complimented me. One woman I didn't know said she could tell that I had lost a loved one. She told me I sang the song with the emotion that only someone who intimately knew loss could have. I told her that my father had passed away earlier that year and that he had inspired my passion for music and singing.

Listening to and singing music has helped me cope with my father's death because of all the happiness it brings me, and because I know that he would be happy to see me continuing this love. He may not be with me physically, but as long as there is music, he will always be with me spiritually.

To this day, I always privately dedicate my performances to my father. And I always listen to music with him in mind. It is because of him that I love music, and his genetics gave me my musical ear. Because of him, music isn't just a pastime for me. It is a passion, a reason to live, something that never fails to make me happy.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["Although Dina experiences the loss of her father, she honors him through her music for many years after his death. How does finding ways to honor her father help Dina find comfort in the long term?"]

Dina was 18 when she wrote this story. She later earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Hampshire College and worked as a mental health counselor.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DRAW IT

(15 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
   - "Now that we've read the story, we're going to do a drawing activity that's all about comfort!"

2. Read aloud the Draw It prompt from the chart paper you prepared:
   - **Think about all the people, places, and things that bring comfort to your life.**
   - **Draw a gingerbread figure.**
   - **On the outside of the gingerbread figure, write or draw things that bring you comfort.**
   - **On the inside, write or draw out how these make you feel.**

3. Pass out journals or notebook paper, colored pencils, and markers.

4. Give group members ten minutes to complete their drawings. Move around the room offering support and encouragement.

5. Time permitting, group members can share their drawings. As an alternative, you can lay them out on a table (or hang them up on the wall) and have group members get up and walk around to look at them.

6. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them and share with the group.

7. Thank the group for sharing.

(See next page for Closing Circle, Writing Extension and Leader Reflection prompts to complete once the session ends.)

CLOSING CIRCLE (3 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Dina's story, 'In an Octopus's Garden,' and our activities today?"

2. Finish this sentence: "One thing I'll do when I'm feeling sad about a loss is…."

SUPPLEMENTAL

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives group members the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

An ode is a poem that praises a person, place, or object. The poem addresses the object of praise, using "you." Write an ode to a favorite object that you could not live without. Be sure to include your feelings in the poem, as well as how this object became your favorite thing. Describe how this person or object brings you comfort. Remember that poems do not need to rhyme.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- The group discussed people, places, and things that bring comfort to a person after a difficult experience. How easy was it for group members to come up with these comforting people, places, and things? How can you help group members continue to identify what brings them comfort?
- What are some experiences you've had with finding comfort when you are dealing with challenges? How can you share your experiences to better support the group?

Session 10

Gone but Not Forgotten

SEL FOCUS: SELF-MANAGEMENT

Story: "Growing Up Without My Father" by Natalie Betances

Story Summary: Natalie struggles with the death of her father. In exploring her grief, she is comforted by the idea that her father lives on in her memory.

TIPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

This session may be difficult for group members, and it may be useful to know beforehand who in the group might be dealing with grief and loss. Check in with school administration, guidance counselors, social workers, and even other staff to find this out without directly asking the participants.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Describing their feelings and experiences with loss
- Discussing how to process difficult emotions like grief
- Identifying loss and grief as natural parts of life

Youth will practice their literacy skills by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing informally about their opinions

Materials

- ☐ Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Between You and Me* anthologies, one for each group member
- ☐ Journals or notebook paper, pencils

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the Freewrite and Pair Share prompt **(in bold)** on chart paper.
- Write the Explore the Ideas Activity prompts **(in bold)** on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Gone but Not Forgotten

- **Review Group Agreements**
- **Opening Activity: Freewrite and Pair Share**
- **Read and Discuss: "Growing Up Without My Father" by Natalie Betances**
- **Explore the Ideas Activity: Mindfulness Exercise**
- **Closing Circle**

OPENING ACTIVITY — FREEWRITE AND PAIR SHARE

(8 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that will help them personally connect to the story they're going to read.

2. Explain that they're going to do a Freewrite. Remind the group that this is a chance to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. Let them know that the expectation is that everyone writes without stopping for the full time.

3. Read aloud the Freewrite prompt you prepared on chart paper:
   - **What do you think of when you hear the word "grief"?**

4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.

5. Give group members four minutes to respond to this prompt. (They can have the option of writing lists and/or drawing with labels. This supports diverse learners.)

6. When three minutes have passed, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.

7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing the parts of their responses they feel comfortable sharing.

8. Give each member of the pair about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.

9. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who experiences a tough loss in her life but finds comfort in memories.

2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.

Tell the group to turn to p. 61 in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text **(in bold)**. Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Session Story: Turn to p. 61 in anthology

Growing Up Without My Father

By Natalie Betances

The day my dad got sick, I was out shopping with my mom. She bought me a little teddy bear. I was so excited to show it to him that I ran inside his bodega as fast as I could when my mom parked the car out front.

But when I got inside, he wasn't there. A coworker said he'd been rushed to the hospital. My dad had diabetes, but since I was only 7 years old, I didn't understand the seriousness of his illness. My mom just told me he was sick and would be better soon.

A few weeks later, my grandma picked me up from school. I was happy because she bought me a snow cone from the ice cream truck—until it dropped on the ground. I started crying because she wouldn't buy me another one. I had a fit that continued all the way up five flights of my building's stairs, and I refused to go inside my apartment.

It wasn't until my mom came out with red eyes and wet cheeks that I realized something had happened that was bigger than my little problem. "I'm sorry, Natalie, I thought your father was getting better. But he's gotten worse."

When my mom took me to the hospital, I wasn't allowed upstairs to see him because I was too young. He died before I was able to see him one last time.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["Let's pause here and take a breath." Pause and check in with group members about how they are feeling before asking the next question. "How do you think not being able to see her father one last time is going to affect Natalie?"]

On the day of my dad's funeral, I didn't understand why everyone was staring at me with a pitiful look. And why was everyone so sad? I kept thinking I was going to finally get to see him. I didn't yet fully comprehend what death meant.

So much felt confusing to me. Before the service, I didn't understand why I was being introduced to relatives I'd never met before. Why was he in a casket and

not moving, and why did he look plastic and feel cold? When I saw him, I got scared and upset. I ran out of the funeral home crying, "I want to go home!"

My cousins agreed to take me home during the funeral service. As we walked, they gave me hugs and kisses, telling me the same thing everyone else did: That he was in a better place where he wouldn't suffer and would feel peace, like he was taking a long nap.

["Why is it difficult for Natalie to understand her father's death?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

10

They said he was in heaven and watching over me. He was my own personal guardian angel. It made me feel better that he was still with me in spirit, but I would have preferred for him to actually be there with me. I wondered, *If he was taking a nap, why didn't he wake up? And how is he in a better place if I'm not with him?*

Later that night, my mom took me back to the funeral home. My grandma asked a man who worked there to give the two of us time alone with my dad. My mom cried and showed me a pillow under his head that she had made for him. We got down on our knees to pray together and say "I love you" one last time. She kissed his forehead, and helped me reach it so I could, too. After his funeral his body was sent to the Dominican Republic, to be buried with his relatives. I wasn't able to go, even though I wanted to.

After my dad died, my family talked about him in hushed tones or in Spanish so I couldn't understand them. They didn't want to make me sad. But I didn't mind being sad and hearing them talk about him. I thought then, and still do, that it's nice to learn things about my father that I didn't know before. Even after his death, he lives on in other people's memories, not just mine.

I missed him terribly. I couldn't run into his arms, or hang out in his store anymore. Even though my parents were divorced, my dad and I were still close and I would go to his bodega almost every day after school. It had dingy turquoise floor tiles with a few missing, and a little deli counter. Behind the counter he usually put up my artwork, like a wooden picture frame I made with little shells around the edge. The frame held a picture of us outside in the snow.

He was kissing my cheek.

When my dad had customers, I'd help count the money and give him the right amount of change. That's how he helped me practice my math. Customers thought this was adorable. After he died, the bodega was left to my stepmother. Soon after, though, they closed the store and a guitar store opened up in that location.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["What is Natalie remembering about her father? Do you think it is helping her? Why?"]

Since we no longer had my father's financial support, my mom had to work longer hours at her office job. My grandma would watch me on days my mom worked and I didn't have my after-school program. One time I got dressed up in my grandma's clothes. I took one of her jackets and put on her scarf the way she did, with my pajama pants, a pink wig, and a pair of her heels. I put on a fashion show for her, and she loved it, laughing and applauding. She couldn't take my dad's place, but it made me feel good anyway to have her attention and support while I was grieving him.

When my mom came home from work at night, I clung to her because I was afraid to lose her, too. Even now that I'm older, I try not to say or do something that might jeopardize our relationship—whether it's failing a class, not doing what she tells me to, or even talking back. If something happened to her I would feel awful if our last interaction had been upsetting.

As I made my way through elementary school, I still had clear memories of my dad, but I became less sad. Although his death was something my mom tried to explain to me, it was a concept that was too difficult for me to comprehend. So I pushed it to the back of my mind. "You'll understand when you're older," my mom and other relatives would say.

It wasn't until middle school, after he'd been gone for five years, that my bubble of ignorance popped, and I fully understood that he was gone forever. I also learned that my dad didn't have to die so young: His death was caused by complications from diabetes and high blood pressure. Though these are conditions that need to be treated, he kept saying he felt fine and wouldn't go to

the doctor even though my mom often warned him about the consequences. He just disregarded what she said, something a lot of my relatives do. It upsets me that his death could have been prevented if only he'd listened to my mom and gone to the doctor sooner.

["How does Natalie's understanding of her father's death change over time? How do you think her feelings have changed?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

10

It hurts to see girls doing things with their dads that I'll never be able to experience. When I graduated middle school, I missed not having him around to tell me how proud he was and how much he loved me. This year, I didn't want to have a Sweet 16 because I knew if I did, I couldn't do the father-daughter dance, or have him put high heels on my feet, like in Cinderella.

He will never be able to walk me down the aisle on my wedding day and tell me how beautiful I look. He'll never be able to scare away my boyfriends, and I'll never be able to get mad at him because he's embarrassing me.

Friends of his and neighbors often tell me how proud of me he'd be if he was alive. But hearing it from other people instead of him isn't the same feeling.

His absence is like a big, deep hole that I can't fill. In school, whenever we'd make something for Father's Day, kids looked at me as if I were a zoo animal and they were waiting for me to start crying. I made a card for him before he died, though he was never able to read it.

My mom tells me how he was a hardworking and responsible man. She says, "You are your father's daughter" because I'm prudent with my money and hardworking, too. Because I share these qualities with him, she gave me one of his rings. He wore it so much it has dents. It doesn't fit me since my fingers are too skinny for it. So I don't wear it; I'm afraid that I'll lose the last thing I have left of my father. I keep it inside my jewelry box. But I have my memories, so parts of him live on in me.

["What have you learned about grief from Natalie's story?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

Natalie graduated from DePauw University where she was a Presidential Scholar and worked to improve diversity and inclusion at the school.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — MINDFULNESS EXERCISE (12 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
   - "Now that we've read the story, we're going to do a breathing activity that will help bring awareness to how we're feeling. It can help you process uncomfortable emotions such as grief."

2. Tell the group that this five-step exercise can be very helpful during periods of anxiety or stress by helping them focus on the present when your mind is feeling scattered.

3. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.

4. Before starting this exercise, have group members pay attention to their breathing. Remind them that slow, deep, long breaths taken in through the nose and out through the mouth can help them maintain a sense of calm or help them return to a calmer state.

5. After a minute of paying attention to their breath, read aloud the first prompt you prepared on chart paper:
   - **Step one: Notice FIVE things you see around you.** (You could notice a pen, other group members, the floor, anything in your surroundings.)

6. Give group members one minute to respond to this prompt. (They can have the option of writing lists and/or drawing with labels. This supports diverse learners.)

7. When one minute has passed, tell group members to finish their list.

8. Repeat steps five and six with the following prompts:
   - **Step two: Notice FOUR things you can touch around you.** (It could be your hair, the desk, or the ground under your feet.)
   - **Step three: Notice THREE things you hear.** (This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling, that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.)

- **Step four: Notice TWO things you can smell.** (Maybe you can smell your pencil, or maybe perfume.)
- **Step five: Notice ONE positive thing you can think of.** (What was a good thing that happened today? What are you looking forward to?)

9. When finished with the prompts, explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing how this exercise made them feel.

10. Give each member of the pair about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.

11. Thank group members for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE (5 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Natalie's story, 'Growing Up Without My Father,' and our activities today?"

2. Finish this sentence: "One strategy I can use to cope with grief is…."

(See next page for Writing Extension and Leader Reflection prompts to complete once the session ends.)

SUPPLEMENTAL

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives group members the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a story about a fictional character who goes through a loss (it could be the loss of someone close, the loss of a friendship, or the loss of something they loved). Describe what happened and how the character feels. Include what the character does to make themself feel better. Create scenes that show how the character is dealing with the loss and how they interact with others during this time.

Use Natalie's story as a model. Include descriptive details, dialogue, and scenes in your story. In your first draft, don't be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Today, group members discussed grief. Was this a hard topic for the group or for any group member in particular? What resources in the school or community could you connect affected group members with to support them?
- Think about the mindfulness exercise. How did the group members react? Was it easy for them? Would you consider doing this activity regularly with your group?

Session 7

Grief-Stricken

SEL FOCUS: RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Story: "Missing My Mom" by Jovani Hernandez

Story Summary: When Jovani's supportive, loving mother unexpectedly dies, he deals with her painful absence by reflecting on the values and ideas she instilled in him.

Note: This session deals with death and grief. Before the session, consider how to best support group members for whom this topic and story may be difficult. Consult school counselors or social workers about any student who has a particularly difficult time during the session.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Understanding that people have different reactions to grief
- Explaining the feelings associated with losing someone important in their lives
- Describing how thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect actions

Youth will practice their literacy skills by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Explaining what influences "character" actions and motivations
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives
- Discussing and negotiating ideas in a small group

Materials

- ☐ Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- ☐ *Stay the Course* anthologies, one for each group member
- ☐ Flip chart paper

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Draw The Cognitive Triangle diagram on a piece of chart paper for the Opening Activity.
- Clear a space in the room for the Explore the Ideas Activity.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Grief-Stricken

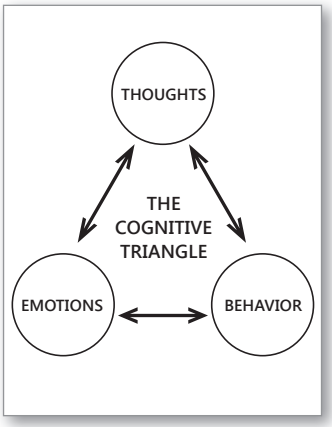
- **Review Group Agreements**
- **Opening Activity: Concept Review and Pair Share**
- **Read and Discuss: "Missing My Mom" by Jovani Hernandez**
- **Explore the Ideas Activity: Thoughts, Feelings, Actions**
- **Closing Circle**

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCEPT REVIEW AND PAIR SHARE (10 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that helps them personally connect to the story they're going to read.

2. Ask the group what they think about the connection between thoughts, feelings, and actions. Let a few participants share their ideas.



3. Review "The Cognitive Triangle" diagram on the chart paper you prepared.

4. Tell the group:

• "The word 'cognitive' means 'relating to the process of thinking.' The Cognitive Triangle shows how thoughts (i.e., the words that run through your head) affect emotions, and how emotions affect behavior (i.e., the things you do)."

5. Share the following example with the group:

- "Imagine you have an upcoming test, and your thought is 'I'm going to fail.' Because of this thought, you start to feel worry. You are so worried that you feel sick just thinking about the test. Because it's so uncomfortable, you decide not to study. The thought ('I'm going to fail') led to a feeling (worry), which led to an action or behavior (not studying)."

6. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share.

7. Ask group members to turn to the person next to them and decide who will be the first speaker and who will be the first listener.

8. Explain that they will respond to a prompt that you will read aloud as if it were a Freewrite. Ask them to try to keep talking about any ideas or thoughts that come to mind.

9. Each member of the pair will have one minute to respond to the prompt before being told to switch.

10. Read aloud the prompt:
    - **Think of the example of The Cognitive Triangle I just gave about you having an upcoming test. How might your feelings and actions have changed if you had thought, "This is difficult, but I can do it with help"?**

11. After one minute, tell group members to switch roles.

12. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who is dealing with the passing of his mother.

2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.

Tell the group to turn to p. 35 in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text **(in bold)**. Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.

Session Story: Turn to p. 35 in anthology

Missing My Mom

By Jovani Hernandez

The youngest of six, I was always Mommy's baby. She tried to shelter me from the world of Brooklyn's Red Hook projects and told me she expected the best from me. Despite growing up in a poor, single-parent household, I never felt ashamed.

"No matter where you come from, or what obstacles you face, you'll always make it if you work hard and stay strong," she would often say. A lot of kids in my neighborhood were in gangs and hung out on the streets at night dealing drugs. This infuriated her: "Where are these kids' parents?"

When I was 7, I remember coming home from school and seeing my mother in tears. She told me a 12-year-old boy had been caught in crossfire just a block from our apartment and killed.

"See why I'm so protective of you? I wouldn't know what to do if that was my child."

Although her constant worrying about me got annoying sometimes, as I got older I realized that it wasn't because she didn't trust me—it was because she didn't trust the people who lived around me. In my pre-teenage years I witnessed multiple kids who were enthusiastic about getting out of the projects but got caught up in selling drugs. They quit school and were in and out of jail. Had my mother not been such a dominant—yet loving and positive—force, I might have ended up like them.

My mother didn't finish high school—a decision she would often tell me she regretted. Her strong work ethic came from recognizing her missed opportunities and knowing her income wasn't a reflection of what she was capable of. She would often tell me, "Go to school, and get everything you can from it. I didn't do that, and that's why I'm not able to give you everything you deserve."

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["How does having someone who is protective of him affect Jovani?"]

82

My mom worked long hours and had persistent health issues, though they didn't concern me when I was growing up. She suffered from osteoporosis and obesity. She also fell twice and had heel and knee surgeries when I was in middle school. But she never complained and always seemed happy despite our financial struggles. Even though she visited the doctors a lot, she exuded strength and vitality to me.

But last fall a new problem arose. My mom started vomiting nearly every time she ate. After a couple of weeks of this, her doctor ordered tests. He said we'd get the results in a couple of weeks.

About a week later, as soon as I walked in the house after school, my mom told me about the surgery she'd be having the following day. "The procedure is going to be minor. The doctor said they found lesions on my colon that are preventing me from digesting correctly. It's going to be three days max, so I need you to stay strong and take care of the house while I'm gone, mijo."

I viewed this surgery in a positive light since she'd been so sick. A three-day hospital visit seemed insignificant considering she had been through a couple of surgeries before. The only difference now would be that my older brother Luis wasn't home because he had recently gone away to college. I'd be on my own for the first time.

When I went to visit my mom after the surgery, she seemed like a different person. Unlike the energetic, overly hyper greeting I was used to, she was so sedated she seemed indifferent to seeing me. I assumed she'd be more like herself the next time I saw her.

But the doctors kept her sedated and the few days in the hospital stretched on for weeks. My older half-siblings were talking with the doctors and handling overall supervision of her care. My brother Luis and I rarely had anything to do with them. They offered to have me stay with them, but their offers felt insincere, and I didn't feel comfortable enough with them, so I stayed home on my own. They told me our mom was going to be OK, and I believed them.

I visited her every day after school. I'd ask, "Mommy, are you coming home soon?" I never got an answer from her; I'm not sure she even understood me.

However, there were times when she would recognize me and say things such as, "Gio, I miss you so much." These sporadic words of acknowledgment were important to me, and they made the long days of hard work in both school and my college enrichment program easier to get through.

The silence in my house was a constant reminder of my mother's absence. When she was home, there was the sizzling sound from the stove and loud voices from the telenovelas she loved to watch. I felt so lonely. A few times I thought about calling Luis at college, but then I'd decide not to bother him.

One Saturday morning, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, attempting to recollect the smell of eggs, toast, bacon, and home fries that circulated throughout our apartment on weekends. The streams of tears down my cheeks met my deep breaths. I missed having her cook for me, help me do my laundry, remind me to stop procrastinating, and be there to talk to. I had no one to tell I was hungry, give me a hug, tell me that my hard work in school would pay off, or even acknowledge my effort to stay strong throughout this stressful time. It didn't occur to me to ask anyone else for help.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["How do you think the uncertainty of his mother's condition affects Jovani's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? How are they connected?"]

Even though my principal suggested I take some time off from school, I didn't miss a day and still went to my enrichment program on Saturdays. Teachers offered to lessen my workload if I needed, but I turned them down. I maintained a 95 average. I heard Mommy's voice telling me to fight the urge to feel sorry for myself and not to ignore my responsibilities as a student. I didn't realize how ingrained her values were in me until then.

My rigorous schedule was also comforting and distracting. Being able to continue to do well made me feel proud of myself.

When I visited my mother at the hospital, her heavy doses of morphine rarely wore off. When they did, she'd grab my hand and repeat, "Mijo, I miss you." I'd hug her and tell her how much I loved her and couldn't wait for her to be home again. When I asked the doctors why she wasn't recovering and when

she would be discharged they told me they weren't allowed to give me that information.

Two weeks later, my half-sister Eileen's husband Vinny called. "I'm gonna be real honest with you G, I know school is important, but you need to get to this hospital every day. You don't got that much time left with your mother." My heart began to pound. These words were heartbreaking, but also confusing. Eileen had told me my mom was getting better, and that her reactions—vomiting, and lack of appetite—were side effects of her medicine. I immediately hung up and called Eileen.

"What is Vinny saying to me?" I yelled.

"What do you mean?" she answered, confused.

"He just called me crying saying I have very little time left with Mom. I thought she was getting better? What is he saying, Eileen?" I began crying.

"Gio, the doctors misdiagnosed her. They thought it was minor lesions in her colon, but they discovered she has stage four liver cancer. If she can keep fighting, the doctors may be able to extend her life for another two years."

I'm generally calm, but the screaming I did at Eileen that day came from all the built-up stress. I felt betrayed because no one had been honest with me. I immediately called Luis, and my other half-sister Alexia, who didn't even know my mother was in the hospital.

I don't know why Eileen kept the truth from us, but after that Alexia had me stay at her house. My last interaction with my mother was about a week later and was limited to a simple back and forth of hums mimicking "I love you" and a big hug for her before Alexia and I headed back to her house. That was the last time I was able to feel my mother's warmth. She died the next day.

["Let's pause here and take a deep breath. Death—especially death of a parent—is a very difficult topic. Would anyone like to share what they are feeling right now?"]

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

I feel bad I didn't have the chance to tell her I appreciate everything she did for me, and to give her one last bear hug, like the mama's boy I was. Since she died, I've felt lonely. Although I currently live with my stepfather, and my brother Luis comes home from college to visit on holidays, I haven't developed a relationship with anyone the way I did with her. I particularly miss the way she'd dote on me when I came home from my long days of school, enrichment, and my internship. Still, our memories comfort me.

Because she died so quickly, I now see I don't know when my life will come to an end, and that motivates me to persist in making every day valuable and productive.

Since my mom's death, I've had to learn to be more independent. Although my stepfather lives with me, he doesn't provide the same loving support. This is not to discredit my stepfather, but Mom showed me so much love and attention. In my mind, no one can ever live up to her. I'm still processing the fact that she is gone forever, and I often get emotional when I look in the mirror because I look just like her.

Although she's gone physically, everything she's instilled in me lives on in me. I know she'd be proud to know I'm determined to be more than just another product of my neighborhood, and I'm not scared to face my feelings of doubt and sadness.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["What does Jovani learn from his experience with grief? How do you think the memories of his mother might affect his actions, feelings, and behaviors moving forward?"]

After high school, Jovani won a full scholarship from to Franklin and Marshall college through the Posse Foundation.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, ACTIONS (15 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
    - "Now that we've read Jovani's story, we're going to do an activity that gets us thinking about how our thoughts affect our feelings and how our feelings affect our actions."

2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
    - "Our group will be split into three teams: Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions."
    - "Each team will stand huddled in three spots around the room."
    - "First, I will explain a situation."
    - "Then, the Thoughts team will go. You'll spend two minutes huddled together and come up with a thought that might result from the situation I explained. The thought can be negative or positive."
    - "Once the Thoughts team has given their thought, the Feelings team will have two minutes to come up with a feeling that might result from that thought."
    - "When the Feelings team has given their feeling, the Actions team will have two minutes to come up with an action that might result from the feeling."
    - "Sometimes I will ask you to come up with another thought, feeling, and action for the same situation."
    - "We will repeat this activity for several situations."

3. Divide the group into three teams by having them count off one through three, directing each number to go to a designated spot in the room for their team.

4. Once teams are arranged, read the following situations one at a time:
    - **Situation #1:** When you get your math homework back from the teacher, every problem is marked wrong.
    - **Situation #2:** You really wanted to make the volleyball team, and you found out you made the cut!
    - **Situation #3:** Your best friend is mad at you and you have no idea why.

- **Situation #4:** You're learning to bake and your first batch of cookies comes out burnt.

5. Give the Thoughts team a few minutes to come up with their thought. Once they do, they should say it to the whole group.

6. Do the same for the Feelings team and the Actions team.

7. After the Actions team has said what action would follow the feeling, ask the group what they noticed or learned from the connection between the thoughts, feelings, and actions.

8. To get the teams thinking about how different thoughts produce different feelings and actions, ask the teams to come up with different responses for the same situations (e.g. if the Thoughts team comes up with a negative thought for the first situation, try the activity again with the same situation but with a positive thought).

9. Repeat steps 4 through 8 until groups have gone through all situations. (Note: you may not get through all the situations in one 45-minute period. Consider extending the session or not covering each situation.)

10. Time permitting, switch up the teams (e.g., the Thoughts team becomes the Actions team and so on).

11. Once finished, have group members share connections they made between thoughts, feelings, and actions.

12. Have group members return to their seats and thank them for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE (3 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Jovani's story, 'Missing My Mom' and our activities today?"

2. Finish this sentence: "When I'm faced with a challenge, a positive thought I'll have to create positive feelings and actions will be…."

88

WRITING EXTENSION

SUPPLEMENTAL

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives group members the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a letter to someone you love and care about. Explain what you enjoy about them, how they add to your life, and how they have affected your thoughts, feelings, or actions. It could even be a letter to someone who has passed away. Include a greeting (i.e., "Dear [Their Name]",) and a closing (i.e., "Sincerely, [Your Name]").

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- How did they respond to talking about grief? Were there any group member who seemed particularly affected by the conversation? What support do they need?
- In what way does The Cognitive Triangle influence your facilitation of the group? How can you connect this concept with the idea of growth mindset discussed in earlier sessions?