

# Defining Grief

*American popular understandings of grief harm people in grief in a particular way: limited understanding of their own experiences which only makes a complex, challenging experience only more so. Grief is varied, and remarkably complicated, but despite the many different prongs of grief, a couple of ideas about it are universal: that grief is an extension of love.*

Grief like its precursor, loss, is a universal experience. Each of us is fated to live with and through grief at some point.

Yet, despite its certainty in human experience, many of us are surprised by the forms grief takes when it arrives in our lives. Comedian Patton Oswalt remembers his experience following his wife's death, "When you lose someone you tend to eat Wheat Thins for breakfast and rewatch *The Princess Bride* about 80 times and not sleep all that well. So I don't know when the push-ups are going to show up in my grieving process." ([NPR](#))

Oswalt is reacting to the limited pop culture representations of grief in American culture, which emphasize, among other ideas, the notion that one works their way through grief to resolution + closure; that this is a relatively consistent process across people, etc. (Key ideas of American myths of grief are covered in [episode 1](#)). One writer also describes the progressive "privatization of grief" in the U.S. which has seen grief, and grief care, to be solely borne (and quickly resolved) by the individual in grief ([The New Yorker](#)).

All this quiet about grief contributes to a challenging grief culture for all of us, and is especially harmful for people in grief who find it difficult to make sense of their experiences. A better understanding of the vast and varied nature of grief can be powerfully clarifying. Writer Sheon Han observes in covering a story about grief, "it was as if a label had finally been put on a constellation of ghoulish emotions each [of my interviewees] has felt." ([The Atlantic](#))

Han's piece considers the particular nature of migratory grief, a kind of grief for a place left behind that comes with migration.

The recognition that grief can come with the loss of a place that comes with migration is emblematic of a conceptual expansion in definitions of grief amongst psychologists and other grief/mental health care professionals in recent years. Kenneth Doka, who works as senior vice-president for Grief Programs for the Hospice Foundation of America, notes that grief is now understood to be a reaction to loss of anyone or anything an individual is deeply attached to ([Counseling Today](#)). This expansive conception of grief allows us to see that people may grieve the death of an important person in their life, yes, but they may also grieve the loss of a job, of a pet, unfulfilled dreams/plans, a breakup or, as in the case of some of Han's interviewees above, a home that no longer is.

Grief support professionals have also evolved a couple of terms to describe particular constellations of grief experiences: anticipatory grief attends the threat of death of a loved one, it may attend the entry of loved ones into end-of-life care, or into violent battle. "The level of distress caused by the possibility of the

death of a loved one may be intense enough to result in an abstract adjustment to the threat of death,” writes psychologist Dorothy Holinger in [The Anatomy of Grief](#).

Disenfranchised grief follows losses that aren’t “socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged, or publicly mourned” ([The Atlantic quoting Kenneth Doka](#)). This may be grief related to shunned losses like suicide, or incarceration, or losses where distress is considered unwarranted like pet loss. ([The Anatomy of Grief](#))

Migratory grief can also be a kind of disenfranchised grief, particularly in the United States where migration is narrativized as a net positive (see tales of migrants joining the nation and living into the American dream).

Often grief is conflated with trauma, but trauma is not always a part of grief. Rather, psychologists refer specifically to traumatic grief as grief that includes both mourning of the loss as well as trauma symptoms, like intrusive, preoccupying thoughts ([PsychCentral](#)). This kind of grief may emerge in the wake of sudden/unexpected loss, like a death caused by an accident.

When grief is “persistent and pervasive, and interferes with functioning,” it is said to be complicated or prolonged (The Columbia Center for Complicated Grief). Complicated grief occurs due to a number of factors, including a close/dependent relationship with the deceased, compounding stress such as financial difficulty, and a lack of family and social supports, a history of as well as a vulnerability to depression and anxiety ([The Anatomy of Grief](#) and [Mayo Clinic](#))<sup>1</sup>.

Ambiguous grief accompanies unsettled losses, such as the loss of a missing person, or of a loved one who is presumed dead. Birth parents in closed adoptions may also experience ambiguous grief, arising from the mystery surrounding the evolution of their child’s life.

The nuances among types of grief notwithstanding, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather they can “overlap like intersecting circles in a venn diagram,” writes Dorothy Holinger in [The Anatomy of Grief](#). A person may simultaneously experience qualities of disenfranchised grief and traumatic grief if a loved one dies by suicide, for instance. Or a grief can be both

Similarly, many grief experiences appear to share some emotional qualities. Psychologist Julia Samuels says “grief often feels like fear and you have all these competing feelings of anger and sadness and confusion and loss and—all of that at the same time” ([Happiness Lab](#)). Searching and yearning also appear to predominate in grief. ([The New Yorker](#))

These shared qualities of grief notwithstanding, certain social and structural factors may influence the grief. Vanessa Bravo of Elon University finds that immigration status can impact the loss of a loved one in

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier this year, prolonged/complicated grief was added to the DSM IV, psychology’s official diagnostic manual but it was met with much controversy. There is some agreement that support, be it community or professional, may be particularly critical for navigating grief experiences that significantly interfere with functioning. The rub seems to emerge in assessing the utility/appropriateness of a diagnostic category that essentially casts prolonged grief as a mental illness, as well as the length of time in the DSM IV diagnosis—1 year. Advocates of the new category argue that it unlocks access to more determined/targeted care for people living with grief that significantly interferes with their functioning; but opponents argue that it unnecessarily pathologizes the highly variable experience of grief, and would only expand a cultural tendency toward overmedication into the realm of grief. They point to the fact that a medication for treating addiction is among those already being tested for treatment of prolonged grief. For now, it appears that the APA is keeping the category, but whether it will enter into common use remains to be seen. (Sources: [NYTimes](#), [Letters to the Editor of the New York Times](#))

one's home country. "Grieving a death in our home country is unique for undocumented people because the option to be physically present during that difficult time doesn't exist. We're restricted from the opportunity to participate in the rituals taking place in our homelands" ([Teen Vogue](#)).

A similar structurally enforced distances also experienced by people who are incarcerated complicating their grief experiences, as well as the challenge of living + grieving in a hostile environment; Dwayne Hurd writes of his experience following his grandfather's death while he was incarcerated, "Suddenly, I felt tired—a weariness inside my soul. Then the tears came. For a moment I lost myself. Then, realizing where I was, I hung up the phone without saying goodbye. I rose to my feet and asked to leave, wiping angrily at my tears. I was ashamed for having revealed softness in the presence of my oppressor." ([The Marshall Project](#))

Much has also been studied + documented about grief's physicality, the way it expresses itself in our biology. In Western cultures grief is typically discussed as a psychological phenomenon—largely as a cognitive challenge, an emotional reaction to loss. In many other cultures, however, grief is viewed as a *somatization*, where "personal and interpersonal distress [is manifested as] physical complaints [and people have learned to respond to their losses] through the medium of the body" ([encyclopedia.com](#)). Increasingly, however, western scientists recognize that grief has physical implications: studies suggest bereaved spouses face a higher risk for cardiovascular disease, infections, cancer, and chronic illnesses like diabetes ([NY Times](#)). There is some consensus that grief releases stress hormones that strain the cardiovascular and immune systems.

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One truism from our exploration: grief is remarkably complex and variable. Yet in grief-avoidant mainstream U.S. culture, this complexity can be difficult to appreciate. In POC cultures/migrant cultures in the U.S. and beyond, grief is understood more complexly. Rather than a conception that sees grief as a linear experience that ends in resolution, many cultures around the world see grief, loss and remembrance as lifelong practices.

Families in and with roots in Mexico, for instance, maintain connections with departed ancestors in the rituals of Dia de los Muertos. One study of a small sample of Mexican American families living with grief from child loss also found that families retain relationships with those who have died via a number of channels, including dreams, storytelling, and keepsakes (Research paper). Similarly, in China, "mourners regularly speak to dead ancestors, and one study has shown that the bereaved there suffer less long-term distress than bereaved Americans do" ([The New Yorker](#)) In Aboriginal communities in Australia, the name of the deceased is not spoken for a culturally prescribed period, the communities believing that doing so would disturb their spirit ([Common Ground](#); [Creative Spirit](#)).

These ongoing relationships with the departed may be partially linked to differences in understanding of loss in POC cultures as against western cultures. From [encyclopedia.com](#):

"Dominant cultures in Western countries tend to define loss dichotomously: an object is either present or absent, a person is either dead or alive. However, coexisting cultural groups in the West and other parts of the world may categorize losses by many levels of gradations—thus, someone from whom we are recently separated (through death or physical separation) may be seen as still communicating and with an active presence, different from someone who has been physically absent for many years (Rosenblatt 1993)."

In Korean culture, the idea of Han also captures a more complex sensibility about grief. The concept is understood both as "the deep-rooted grief, bitterness, and longings that Koreans experience as the result

of a long history of oppression and injustice”, as well as “the pain that Koreans experience from their individual life circumstance.” Han appears to encapsulate both the difficulty that comes with grief and loss, and perhaps a sense of beauty that can emerge from difficult experiences. “At the collective level, Korean American novelist Richard E. Kim’s (1991:25) view is representative in his insistence that han is one of the most important elements in understanding Korean and diasporic Korean cultural texts psychologically and philosophically ...Despite the deeply negative and destructive quality of han, it is not a one-dimensional “bad” affect. It historically has been characterized as also creating complex beauty.” In addition, “anthropologist Roy Grinker (1998:78) observes that han conceptually provides ‘a path for the movement of the present into the past, for a fresh and creative movement from the past and present into the future.’” (Research Paper)

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A consensus among grievers? It does not end. One writer observes: “People will tell you it gets easier; they don’t know what they’re talking about. Those of us who have lost someone know that it doesn’t get easier. If anything, you get better at not letting it take over your life and invade your thoughts but missing someone never gets easier” ([What’s Your Grief](#)). This runs counter to the idea of closure that predominates U.S. culture

## Helpful Articles

- [Grief, Loss and Bereavement](#), at encyclopedia.com

A sweeping look at grief and loss. Sample excerpt:

There are several imprecise terms used to discuss reactions to loss, and it is important to clarify their intent. The usual reaction to a loss of someone or something that was valued is termed *grief*. It consists of emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions (Stroebe et al. 2001) and there has been debate as to whether grief occurs only for individuals, or whether there is such a thing as *family grief* (Gilbert 1996; Moos 1995).

[...]

The term *mourning* is often used to describe the varied and diverse social expressions of grief. Affects can range from pain and sadness to humor, pleasure, and joy. Actions, rituals, and emotions observed during mourning are shaped and controlled by the beliefs and values of a society or cultural group and are intended to be for the benefit of grievers and/or the community.

[...]

*Bereavement* is used to describe the objective situation of someone who has experienced deprivation through the loss of a person or thing that was valued (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2000). Although bereavement is a factual situation of loss, how individuals respond to loss can be highly varied.

- [When You No Longer Recognize Your Home Country](#), by Sheon Han in **The Atlantic**

The piece takes a close look at the nature of migratory grief. Excerpt:

*Every person who leaves their country of origin—exiles, refugees, international students, migrant workers—experiences loss. Many have to memorialize family gatherings, languages spoken without self-consciousness, positions of respect in a community—essentially, an emotional belonging. Grief is a natural response.*

*But not all migratory grief is exactly alike. People like Monastyrskyi who emigrate from countries that have undergone severe political changes can feel that their home has irreversibly transformed. They grieve not merely their severance from a homeland, but the demise of a place as they knew it....*

*Some psychologists argue that many of its feelings have parallels in the aftermath of a loved one's death: a sense of helplessness, displaced anger, and an idealization of what one has lost. But Joseba Achotegui, a psychiatrist and professor at the University of Barcelona, told me that unlike grieving a person, the loss of one's country can feel more symbolic and ill-defined—the intangible disappearance of language, culture, social status. It's partially similar to other ambiguous losses, such as a kidnapped child or a missing soldier. The process of separation is recurring, Achotegui said, because the country of origin still exists, constantly reminding the migrant of their loss. Migratory grief can also be a disenfranchised grief, one in which the griever's feelings might be dismissed because society doesn't understand them.*

- [Now We Are Five](#), by David Sedaris in The New Yorker
- [The Singular Sorrow of Grieving Begins Bars](#), Dwayne Hurd in The Marshall Project
- [Marvel's Darth Vader Comics are finally letting the Sith Lord Grieve](#), by Rafael Motamayor at Syfy

The Marvel comics have made it clear that Vader's story is one of failure and grief. In the movies, we see Anakin grow darker out of anger and grief over losing his mother and fear that he might lose Padme as well.

## Pop Culture Representations of Grief

- [Grief Representations on TV shows](#)
- [Movies with a grief/loss story line](#)
- Grief in Star Wars:  
[Forbidden Grief, the Real Tragedy of Anakin Skywalker](#)  
[Star Wars Reveals How Jedi Are Expected To Grieve](#)
- [Assessment of death/grief representation](#)