

# Grief Attitudes: Understanding & Healthy Coping

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November 20, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed looti (2025). *Grief Attitudes: Understanding & Healthy Coping*. Psychepedia.  
Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=24977>

## Introduction to Societal Attitudes Toward Grief

Societal attitudes toward grieving encompass the collective, often unspoken rules and expectations that dictate how individuals should react to and recover from significant loss. These attitudes are deeply embedded in cultural scripts, influencing everything from the duration of mourning periods to the acceptable intensity of emotional expression. In Western industrialized nations, a prevailing attitude often emphasizes swift recovery, encouraging the bereaved to "move on" and return quickly to productivity, an expectation that frequently clashes with the complex, non-linear reality of the grieving process. This normalization of minimizing visible distress stems partly from a historical shift away from public, communal mourning toward a more private, individualized experience of sorrow, suggesting that grief is a personal burden to be managed internally rather than a social experience requiring collective support.

These normative pressures create a framework wherein certain types of grief are validated and supported, while others are subtly or overtly dismissed, leading to significant psychological strain on the bereaved. The underlying attitude often reflects a discomfort with intense emotional pain, viewing it as disruptive to social order and requiring quick resolution, rather than recognizing grief as a fundamental human response to attachment disruption. Consequently, individuals who exhibit prolonged or intense mourning behaviors often face **social stigma**, being pathologized or urged to seek treatment, reflecting a societal impatience with the natural timeline of deep sorrow. Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they shape the resources available to the bereaved and dictate the psychological safety within which they can process their loss.

The prevailing attitude often establishes an idealized trajectory for grief, sometimes referred to as the "stage model," which, despite its widespread critique among clinicians, remains deeply ingrained in public consciousness. This expectation suggests a linear progression--denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance--implying that failure to navigate these stages in order constitutes abnormal grieving. This oversimplification ignores the reality that grief is chaotic, involving oscillation between loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping, as described by the Dual Process Model. The societal pressure to achieve "acceptance" quickly often forces mourners to mask their true feelings, contributing to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding, thereby compounding the pain of the loss itself.

## The Historical Evolution of Grieving Norms

Historically, attitudes toward grieving have undergone dramatic transformations, particularly within European and North American contexts. The Victorian era, for instance, exemplified a highly formalized, public, and ritualized approach to death and loss. Detailed codes of conduct dictated mourning attire, the duration of seclusion, and the acceptable display of sorrow, often extending for years. This structured environment, while perhaps restrictive, provided a clear, socially sanctioned

role for the bereaved and ensured communal recognition of the loss. The attitude was one of **shared responsibility** for the mourning process, where the community actively participated in supporting the bereaved through established customs and visible symbols of remembrance.

The transition from the Victorian period to the mid-20th century saw a pronounced move away from these elaborate public rituals toward a more privatized and medicalized understanding of grief. Advances in sanitation and the shift of death from the home to the hospital environment contributed significantly to this change, distancing death and subsequent grief from daily communal life. This shift fostered an attitude where grief became primarily an internal, psychological matter rather than a social event. The increasing emphasis on individual psychological adjustment replaced the communal framework, leading to the expectation that individuals should manage their grief independently, often with professional assistance if symptoms became severe, reflecting a growing discomfort with the visible manifestations of profound sorrow.

Furthermore, the rise of industrialization and the prioritization of economic productivity injected a new urgency into the expected timeline for recovery. Long mourning periods, once standard, became viewed as economically inefficient and socially disruptive. The contemporary attitude often tacitly suggests that excessive grief is a sign of personal weakness or maladjustment, rather than a natural response to profound attachment loss. This historical trajectory illustrates a fundamental shift in societal valuation: moving from viewing grief as a necessary, integrated component of community life to framing it as a potentially debilitating psychological condition requiring efficient resolution and return to baseline functioning.

## Cultural Variations in Grief Expression

Attitudes toward grieving are profoundly shaped by cultural context, demonstrating vast differences in appropriate emotional display, communication styles, and the expected integration of the deceased into ongoing life. For example, many collectivistic cultures, such as those found in East Asia and parts of Africa, often emphasize communal grieving, where the responsibility for emotional support and ritual performance is distributed across the extended family or village. In these contexts, the attitude is one of **interdependence**; intense emotional expression may be encouraged during specific rituals, but the focus rapidly shifts toward reinforcing the social cohesion of the group following the loss, ensuring that the survivor remains deeply integrated into the social network.

Conversely, some cultural traditions mandate specific forms of emotional control. In certain Japanese contexts, for instance, public displays of intense sorrow, while felt internally, may be heavily moderated, reflecting cultural values placed on stoicism and maintaining social harmony (*wa*). The underlying attitude is not that the loss is unimportant, but that controlling one's visible

distress is a sign of respect for the deceased and for the stability of the community. This contrasts sharply with attitudes in Mediterranean or Latin American cultures, where loud, passionate, and highly visible expressions of anguish are often not only permitted but actively expected and encouraged as a valid testament to the depth of the relationship lost.

These differences extend to the relationship with the deceased. While many Western attitudes prioritize "letting go" and achieving closure, numerous cultures adopt an attitude of "**continuing bonds**," where the deceased remains an active, integrated part of the survivor's life through ongoing rituals, communication, and remembrance. This continuation is not viewed as pathological attachment but as a healthy, adaptive way to maintain the relationship in a new form. The varying cultural attitudes highlight that there is no universal, biologically mandated "correct" way to grieve; rather, acceptable grieving behaviors are constructions determined entirely by local norms regarding attachment, emotion, and the nature of personhood following death.

## The Concept of "Grief Work" and Its Critiques

The concept of "grief work," largely formalized by figures like Sigmund Freud and later emphasized by attachment theorists such as John Bowlby, established a core attitude in clinical psychology regarding how mourning should be managed. This model posits that the bereaved must actively engage in a demanding psychological process: confronting the reality of the loss, withdrawing emotional energy from the deceased, and reinvesting that energy into new relationships and life pursuits. This attitude suggests that failure to perform this strenuous internal labor--the "work" of mourning--will inevitably lead to pathological outcomes, such as chronic grief or depression. For decades, this prescriptive approach served as the gold standard for healthy adjustment, reinforcing the societal attitude that grief requires forceful, conscious effort toward **detachment**.

However, contemporary research and clinical experience have led to significant critiques of the mandatory nature of grief work. Critics argue that the concept places an undue burden on the bereaved, framing their emotional pain as a task to be completed rather than a natural state to be navigated. Furthermore, the emphasis on severing bonds directly contradicts the increasingly accepted notion of continuing bonds, which recognizes that maintaining a psychological connection to the deceased can be highly adaptive and comforting. The forced detachment inherent in the traditional grief work model reflects an attitude rooted in early 20th-century psychoanalytic theory, which viewed persistent connection to the deceased as a potential neurotic fixation.

A major ethical and practical critique of the grief work attitude is its implicit pathologizing of alternative coping mechanisms. If an individual copes by distraction, ritual, or focusing on restorative activities (such as managing finances or restructuring life), the grief work model might incorrectly interpret these behaviors as avoidance or denial. Modern models, like the Dual Process Model (DPM), offer a more flexible attitude, suggesting that healthy grieving involves oscillation

between confronting the painful reality of the loss (loss orientation) and engaging in life maintenance and secondary adjustments (restoration orientation). This shift acknowledges that effective grieving is not about ceaseless emotional processing but about finding balance and temporary respite from the pain, challenging the rigid, labor-intensive expectations imposed by the classical "grief work" paradigm.

## Professional and Clinical Attitudes: Diagnosis and Intervention

Clinical attitudes toward grieving have shifted dramatically, particularly concerning the boundary between normal sadness and diagnosable mental illness. For decades, the standard clinical attitude, formalized in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), was to exclude grief from major depressive disorder diagnoses for a specific period (the "bereavement exclusion"). This exclusion reflected an acknowledgement that intense sadness following loss was a natural, non-pathological response. However, the removal of this exclusion in the DSM-5 signaled a significant change in attitude, suggesting that intense grief, even within the immediate aftermath of loss, could potentially meet criteria for depression if severe enough, raising concerns about the **medicalization** of normal human suffering.

The most significant recent development reflecting a clinical attitude shift is the formalization of diagnostic categories for prolonged or complicated grief. The DSM-5-TR introduced **Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD)**, and the ICD-11 included Complex Grief Disorder (CGD). This move formalizes the clinical recognition that for a minority of bereaved individuals, the intensity and duration of their symptoms extend far beyond typical expectations, becoming debilitating and requiring specific therapeutic intervention. The criteria typically include persistent yearning, intense emotional pain, and difficulty accepting the death or reintegrating into life, persisting for six months or longer (ICD-11) or 12 months (DSM-5-TR, for adults) following the loss.

While the establishment of PGD/CGD provides a framework for identifying and treating individuals truly stuck in their mourning, it simultaneously reinforces a societal attitude that places time limits on sorrow. Clinicians must navigate the ethical challenge of validating the pain of loss while also preventing the premature pathologization of normal, though intense, grieving. The professional attitude must therefore be one of careful differentiation: recognizing the difference between intense, adaptive sorrow and chronic, disabling distress. Intervention is most effective when it is sensitive to the individual's unique cultural context and avoids imposing a standardized, time-bound recovery narrative that invalidates the depth of their attachment and subsequent pain.

## The Influence of Media and Technology on Public Perception

Modern media, encompassing traditional news outlets, film, and social media platforms, plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward grieving by disseminating idealized or

sensationalized narratives of loss. Traditional media often promotes the heroic recovery narrative--the story of the bereaved individual who swiftly transforms tragedy into triumph or meaningful action. This attitude reinforces the societal expectation that grief must be productive and transformative, subtly pressuring individuals to find a silver lining or higher purpose, thereby invalidating sorrow that remains simply sorrowful and unresolved.

Social media platforms introduce a unique dynamic by turning grief into a performance space. The expectation to post tributes, share memories, and publicly document the mourning process creates a new set of pressure points. The public attitude here is one of mandatory visibility; failure to adequately perform grief online may be misinterpreted as a lack of care or insufficient attachment. Conversely, excessive or highly emotional sharing can lead to what is sometimes termed "**grief shaming**," where the bereaved are criticized for seeking attention or for not grieving "appropriately," illustrating the stringent and often contradictory rules governing digital mourning.

Furthermore, technology facilitates "digital continuing bonds," allowing mourners to interact with the digital presence of the deceased through saved profiles, photos, and archived communications. While this can be comforting, it also challenges traditional attitudes that prioritize physical separation. The persistent digital presence of the deceased forces society to re-evaluate what "closure" means in a perpetually connected world. The media's role, therefore, is complex: it can offer widespread validation and community support, but it also enforces narrow, often unattainable ideals of what a "good" or "healthy" grieving process should look like, often prioritizing aesthetics and speed over genuine emotional complexity.

## Disenfranchised Grief and Marginalized Losses

A critical aspect of understanding attitudes toward grieving involves examining the concept of **disenfranchised grief**, a term coined by Kenneth Doka, which describes grief that is experienced when the loss cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. This lack of validation stems directly from negative or indifferent societal attitudes toward the relationship lost, the manner of death, or the identity of the mourner. When grief is disenfranchised, the bereaved are denied the necessary social scaffolding and rituals that aid in adjustment, forcing them to carry their sorrow in isolation.

Disenfranchisement occurs across several dimensions. Society may deny the relationship (e.g., losses related to extramarital affairs, pet loss, or non-romantic friendships), deny the loss itself (e.g., miscarriage, abortion, or losses related to dementia where the person is physically present but psychologically absent), or deny the mourner's competence to grieve (e.g., children, individuals with intellectual disabilities, or the elderly). In these instances, the prevailing attitude is one of dismissal: "It wasn't a real loss," or "You shouldn't be feeling that much pain." This institutional denial exacerbates the suffering, transforming normal grief into complicated sorrow due to the

added burden of secrecy and invalidation.

Losses related to highly stigmatized deaths, such as suicide, overdose, or AIDS, are particularly prone to disenfranchisement. The societal attitude surrounding these deaths often involves judgment, blame, or moral disapproval, which transfers directly onto the bereaved family members. Instead of receiving sympathy, they may encounter curiosity, avoidance, or veiled accusations, forcing them to adopt a defensive posture or conceal the true cause of death. Addressing disenfranchised grief requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes toward greater inclusivity and validation, recognizing that the emotional pain caused by attachment disruption is valid regardless of the nature of the relationship or the social acceptability of the death.

## Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions in Grief Acceptance

Contemporary challenges in achieving greater acceptance of complex grieving processes often revolve around institutional structures, particularly the workplace. Despite growing awareness, many organizations maintain rigid attitudes toward bereavement leave, often granting only a few days for the loss of immediate family members and none for significant non-kin relationships or pet loss. This institutional attitude underscores the ongoing prioritization of **productivity over psychological well-being**, forcing employees to return to work prematurely and suppress their emotional needs, thereby impeding healthy adjustment.

A significant future direction involves the widespread adoption of **trauma-informed care** principles in bereavement support. Many losses, especially those that are sudden, violent, or tragic, involve elements of trauma that must be addressed concurrently with the grief itself. The emerging attitude in professional circles recognizes that traditional grief counseling, focused purely on emotional processing, is insufficient when the memory of the death is itself highly distressing. Future acceptance requires an integrative approach that validates both the sorrow of loss and the symptoms of trauma, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the complexity of the experience rather than imposing a single, standardized model of recovery.

Ultimately, fostering more humane and inclusive attitudes toward grieving necessitates public education aimed at dismantling the myth of linear recovery and the pressure for rapid closure. This requires promoting the understanding that grief is a lifelong process of adjustment, not a temporary illness to be cured. Moving forward, society must cultivate an attitude of patient presence--allowing the bereaved to express their pain without judgment, offering sustained support long after the initial crisis, and validating the diversity of human responses to profound loss, whether through continuing bonds, quiet adjustment, or intense emotional expression.