

HOLDING HEART IN COMMUNITY

FOR QUEER & TRANS YOUTH AND THOSE SUPPORTING THEM



new
avenues
FOR YOUTH

This resource is a collaboration with the Sexual & Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC), which provides culturally specific support for LGBTQIA2S+ youth in Portland, Oregon. SMYRC is part of New Avenues for Youth, a nonprofit dedicated to the prevention and intervention of youth homelessness. This collaboration arose out of the recognition that there is a lack of grief-specific resources for queer and trans youth and helping professionals who support them. To create this resource, Dougy Center facilitated a focus group with youth from SMYRC. We are grateful for their insights, suggestions, and willingness to share their lived experience of grief.

It's also important to recognize that no one can speak for all queer and trans youth. The community is as vast and diverse as grief itself. We hope though that you discover something in these pages that speaks to you, either as a youth who is grieving or a helping professional in a support role.

**Note: We are using identity-first rather than person-first language in alignment with SMYRC's approach and the preference of the youth we interviewed.*

Before we get into specific reflections and suggestions from the youth who participated in the focus group, we wanted to share Dougy Center's understanding of grief, which comes from over 40 years of supporting children, teens, young adults, and adults who are grieving before and after a death.

- 1 When someone dies, it's natural and normal to grieve.
- 2 Grief is as unique as we are. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and there are no universally predictable stages you need to follow.
- 3 Like most things, grief can be complex and complicated.
- 4 How friends, family, and others respond to us impacts our experience.
- 5 Racism, transphobia, homophobia, and other forms of oppression and discrimination influence how we grieve and the types of support that are accessible.
- 6 Grief can disrupt everything and leave us questioning ourselves, others, and what we believe about the world.
- 7 When someone dies, we often feel alone and isolated. Supportive connections and community help.
- 8 It's common to feel helpless and powerless when someone dies, so finding ways to have choice and agency in our lives can be empowering.
- 9 The world can feel and be unsafe and uncaring when we're grieving. It's important to find people and places that contribute to physical, emotional, and mental safety.
- 10 There's no finish line for grief. It's okay to still miss the people, places, and pets who have died, to be disappointed or hurt by things they did or said, and to wonder how life would be different if they were here, days, weeks, and even years after they die.

Below are some excerpts from our focus group with the youth from SMYRC.

Dougy Center: *While our program primarily focuses on supporting youth before and after a death, grief can be part of any change or loss. For many queer and trans youth, there are concrete losses related to resources, housing, education, and physical safety. There are also more abstract ones related to family, connection, community, and identity. What non-death losses have you experienced?*

- “I was taken away from the Black side of my family and raised in a predominantly white society, and so a lot of culture was taken from me, and I feel that in my identity. On the maternal side of my family, we have lost Mexican heritage, like speaking Spanish, and I see that absence and pain in my family with loss of culture and confusion of identity. That is a loss that I feel stronger on some days than others.”
- “A major loss in my life that doesn’t have to do with death is I moved out here with my stepsister and her kids and literally 14 days later she kicked me to the curb. I lost everything. My car, all my belongings, everything from high school, and family photos. So, I had to rebuild everything. I’m still grieving that.”
- “More than anything I miss my family photos. I know my mom took my photo albums apart and threw stuff out. But I had pictures of family members who aren’t around anymore and pictures of friends who I lost as well. Family photos are really the big thing for me because I sit at home with my husband and look through their family photos with them and think, ‘I really wish I had these, I was a weird looking kid.’ It feels like it takes away from the positive memories that you have from negative periods of time.”
- “My family experienced a lot of mental illness and addiction my whole life and that came with a loss of stability and community. When I was 14, I

got kicked out and went to live with my dad and experienced his mental illness, instability, and lack of community. Around the time that I turned 15, I had become addicted to various substances and became homeless on my own as opposed to with my family. I lost childhood friends and contact with my family and then when I came out as trans I was officially disowned. So, I kind of lost everything.”



TIP:

Grieving a non-death loss is just as valid as grieving when someone dies. Because these losses can be less visible, those around you may not know they exist or think to ask about them. You might even find yourself dismissing them. Remember that disconnection from family, being cut off from resources, or having to deny a part of your identity are all real sources of grief. As you’re able, make time and space to acknowledge these losses and find ways to express how they impact you. Talking, writing, drawing, dance, music, and other forms of movement can be great options. If you’re a helping professional, consider asking what other losses, historic and current day, a youth has experienced.

It’s important to seek out support that helps you feel less, not more, alone in your experience. One youth had this to share:

When I did seek out grief counseling at 17, I found it unhelpful. I was in group settings with people who were experiencing serious loss for the first time in their 20s and I thought, “Oh, this happens to me all the time, I’ve lost everything.” I felt like no one thought I was taking it as seriously as I was – that it was not as new to me or as shocking to me as it could be.

Dougy Center: *When someone dies, queer and trans youth may have to navigate family members and others who are not supportive. Examples include being misgendered or being called by the wrong name, not being able to bring a partner or friend to a memorial service, and having to dress or present in a way that is not gender or identity affirming. All this adds layers of uncertainty and potential harm to what is already a difficult time. What are your experiences with family dynamics and grief rituals? What was helpful for you in those situations?*

- “I’d at least start with prepping a little bit beforehand, mentally knowing that I had maybe 1 or 2 solid options if I do want to go. What place is safe? What person can you talk to while you’re there? If you do need to get away, maybe what you can do is find that safe person or safe place, or know what to do to decompress, or make a simple phone call.”
- “Just needing to hang out in the restroom is always a good call.”
- “I think nowadays, some things are recorded or on virtual versions which does help you be connected. It’s not always the same... but having physical distance sometimes makes it safer if that’s an actual risk.”
- “Each of you are individuals and at the end of the day, you, your wholeness, the way you express your individuality as long as it’s good and safe, is really important. Your safety matters a lot. Look out for future you, because you got this. That’s what I would say.”
- “Do not sacrifice your mental health for others. You are the only person in your life that you could trust, so don’t throw it away just because you feel like you have a duty to go to a funeral for someone.”



- “If you don’t feel comfortable going, have your own little ceremony by yourself to represent that person. I’m really into [spiritual belief] and I do a bunch of little ceremonies for my parents who passed, because I knew that if I went back to my hometown for my mom’s funeral, I would probably just be completely destroyed and probably out on the streets in my [terrible] little racist hometown.”
- “Grief is complicated and no one is in a good spot, so it kind of doesn’t matter at all what anyone else is thinking or feeling about your presence, because it’s only about you and the person you’re grieving. You’re allowed to be like ‘I’m over this, I’m only here for Grandma.’”



It can be very painful if the person who died is being misgendered or called by the wrong name by their family and friends. Here is how one young adult addressed the situation:

I’ve been in a lot of situations like that where I’ve done a lot of figuring out that I’m allowed to say my piece on their behalf. When my boyfriend passed, his whole family was there and misgendering him and everyone was getting a chance to speak. I went up and spoke and said, “Hey, he was a great man. He did all of these great things.” You are still allowed to speak your piece for your people. Or, if that’s not an option that feels safe for you, you’re also allowed to go and just be in that space and have a little communication with that person and say, “I see you and this sucks, but this doesn’t reflect your real life.”



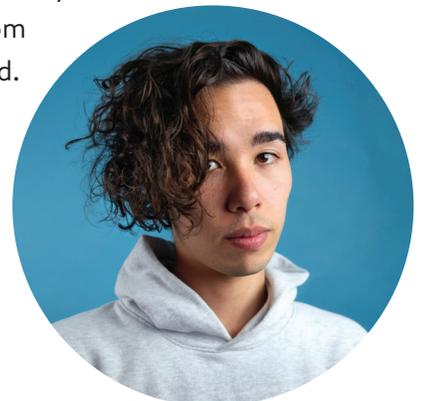
TIP:

Other things to try when the grief gets intense:

- Get grounded by taking 3 breaths, finding 2 things you see, and noticing 1 thing you hear.
- Move your body through dance, stretching, or taking a walk/run/roll.
- Listen to or play music.
- Connect with a friend or supportive community member.
- Choose an intentional distraction to shift your attention in a healthy way.
- Give yourself the space to feel what you're feeling and express yourself.

Dougy Center: *What do you most wish helping professionals understood about your grief?*

- “More than anything, I want people in supportive positions to not be overly sympathetic or overly apologizing. It’s so hard to open up when people just say, ‘Aww, I’m so sorry.’ Immediately in my brain, I’m like, ‘I’m not talking to you.’ It’s just the hyper-sympathetic response is just off-putting.”
- “I have a lot of anger with my grief, and after a while it didn’t feel like this is a very sad thing that happened. I mean, like it is sad, but at first in the process it’s like something took this person away from me, and maybe they took themselves away from me. It makes me mad. It’s hard to receive support when I feel so angry, because after a while you kind of get jaded to it happening.”



Dougy Center: *Since grief is different for everyone, what feels helpful can also be individual and unique. What’s been helpful for you?*

- “I feel like grief is a personal thing. I know that some people like to be with others when they’re grieving, but I don’t. I prefer to go to someone’s grave on my own, see their ashes on my own, instead of being around people. Sometimes it feels like a grieving contest, or like I have to worry about someone else when I’m trying to just focus on my emotions.”
- “The only place I’ve really felt comfortable grieving is spontaneous moments in the car with my husband or like on my friend’s couch bursting into tears and them just knowing that the way they need to address it is like, ‘This is heavy and it sucks.’”
- “Having someone just sit there and not say anything, or sometimes they’ll just cry with me. Having someone there who isn’t gonna be like, ‘It’s gonna be ok’ because I don’t always believe that. I need someone who is gonna let me be really ugly about it, and then let me move on.”
- “When grieving my best friend, some years I’m really sad and I just want to spend time and have people there, and some years I scream and yell and cry about, ‘How dare you be a junkie like me and let that take you away? We were supposed to grow up together, we were supposed to be together!’”
- “Art, doodles that won’t be published or shown. Doing something for just you something that’s personal. It’s a little bit cathartic.”

For some youth, there can be grief related to their person never getting to know them fully – in particular for trans folks.

One of the things I have grappled with a lot is how my dad would have reacted to me coming out as queer and then as trans in high school and college and missing out on the ways our relationship could have evolved if he was alive long enough to see me grow into the adult I am today.

- “I just wanted to add that dissociating is huge with grief I feel like. [When I dissociate] I look like a wall of a person and I feel like that’s something that makes people uncomfortable. It’s not something that you should be comfortable or uncomfortable with, it’s just that the person is trying to process in their way and they just want to escape a little bit. I don’t think people understand that — that it’s ok to escape once in a while from your reality, from the feelings you’re feeling, just for a quick moment.”
- “[It’s important to know that for a lot of people in] Middle and High School age they might have a total flip-flop Jekyll-and-Hyde home life. For me I had a split mask that I had to have for school and home. I had a lot of sick [family] in my life, so I had to be in a caretaker, good-[child] role. You have to compartmentalize a lot. I guess in grief sometimes people have things that you can’t see beneath the surface — mental health, and a lot of people have underlying family stuff too. The things that go on in your mind, your heart, your actual spirit, sometimes you have to shift and shape and that’s really ok.”

Thank you for taking the time to read through these tips and suggestions from queer and trans youth who are grieving. Everyone’s grief is unique to them, and we know that five pages is not long enough to address everything that can come up for youth who are grieving. If you or someone you know needs additional support or resources, please reach out to either of our organizations for more information.

CRISIS RESOURCES

- **The Trevor Project** (call/text/chat): www.trevorproject.com (English)
- **The Trans Lifeline:** 1-877-565-8860 (English & Spanish)
- **YouthLine:** text Teen2Teen to 839863 (English)
- **Crisis Text Line:** text HELLO to 741741/Envía un mensaje de texto con la palabra HOLA al 85258
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** English - call 988 or 1-800-273-8255/Deaf or hard of hearing dial 711 and then 1-800-273-8255/ Spanish - call 1-888-628-9454



SMYRC - New Avenues for Youth provides a safe, harassment-free space for queer and trans youth ages 13-23, where you can create art, play music, and join in on our open mic nights, drag shows, and support groups. You can access services like counseling, school support, and much more. Whatever you are looking for, we are here to honor, empower, and support you.

newavenues.org/smyrc • 503.224.4339



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

help@dougy.org • 503.775.5683