

# Discussion Guide: Understanding Parental Grief and Loss

This guide is designed to help parents leading support groups facilitate a conversation with foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers that will help them understand their own grief and loss and find hope in the growth that comes from grief.

## Facilitation tips

Grief and loss can be a difficult subject to discuss. Everyone experiences grief differently; the individual experiences of group members may make this subject especially hard for them. Here are some tips to lead this conversation safely and effectively.

- Set group agreements and ground rules. These can be most helpful during emotional conversations.
- Schedule breaks during the discussion.
- Encourage members to leave the space during the discussion if they need to.
- Include self-care activities in the meeting.
- Pay attention to cues from group members—both verbal and nonverbal—that they may be overwhelmed. Privately check in with those participants during a break.
- Redirect the conversation if one person starts to overtake the conversation or if the conversation gets off topic.

## Topic one: Understanding our own grief

The paths we've taken that led each of us to adoption, foster care, or kinship care are often as different as the paths our children have taken to our homes. One thing we are all likely to share, though, is the grief and loss that our families experience. For our children, the loss and trauma of not being raised by their first families is significant. It affects their daily lives and their development, and it must be acknowledged.

As parents and caregivers, we must also grieve the losses in our own lives. We all had an idea of what parenting was going to look like. When those expectations do not match our experi-

ences, it is natural that we grieve. Our children’s grief also brings out our own, and we must reckon with our losses in order to help our families meet our daily challenges.

*Put these thoughts into your own words to open the meeting:*

### **Discussion questions. Use provided prompts if needed.**

1. Before you were a parent or caregiver, what were your expectations of life with your kids? How has your life been different than what you expected?
2. What losses from your life before caregiving do you grieve most?

PROMPT: Possible losses could include:

- Who you used to be
- Your child’s struggling to make friends or not liking school
- Your child’s not going to college, living independently, etc.
- Your career
- What you used to be able to do
- The impact of parenting on your relationships with your family, your friends, or your partner

## **Topic two: The stages of grief**

The feelings we experience as the result of losses take many forms. There is no one way to experience grief. Many people are familiar with the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages give the impression that grief is a linear process to be walked through and completed. In reality, though, grief is much more complex. Grieving

is nonlinear: you are likely to revisit feelings you've experienced in the past as you continue to process your losses.

These stages, though, can give a helpful framework help you understand how grief can manifest.

*Put these thoughts into your own words to introduce the topic:*

### **Discussion questions. Use provided prompts if needed.**

1. Which of the five stages of grief have you seen in your parenting life: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance?

**DENIAL PROMPT:** Have you ever felt that your child was capable of something way beyond their abilities? Holding on to unrealistic ideas or expectations about your child may mean you are in the denial stage of grieving.

**ANGER PROMPT:** Have you ever found yourself in a meeting at your child's school and you are so upset that you can't remember what you were fighting for? Advocating for your child's needs is very important, but when anger makes you lose sight of your goals, that can be a sign that you are grieving lost expectations.

**BARGAINING PROMPT:** Have you felt like you needed to try every new therapy, every possible intervention, and visit every specialist, hoping that eventually you will find the magic solution to your child's struggles? Investigating all possible options for your child makes sense, but continuing to seek unrealistic solutions may indicate that you are in the bargaining stage of grieving.

**DEPRESSION PROMPT:** Have you felt lost, defeated, worn out, and unwilling to go to any other therapy sessions or school meetings? Even though this may be a symptom of grief, do not hesitate to seek help from mental health professionals if you are feeling depressed.

ACCEPTANCE PROMPT: Can you take joy in the small victories—like your child getting themselves dressed without melting down, or going a whole day without a call from the school? This means you are learning to face your grief with hope for the future, even when that future may be different than what you anticipated.

2. Are there other ways that grief shows up for you that don't fit into the five stages model?
3. Have you felt yourself getting stuck at any of the stages? What have you found that helps you become unstuck?
4. How do you think your grief may be affecting your other children? Your marriage/partnership or other relationships? Your work life?
5. Learning to live with grief is a skill. In what ways has your grief journey made you stronger?

## Conclusion: Seeing the value in a painful process

Confronting our own grief can be challenging. For some parents and caregivers, it can feel like acknowledging our losses discounts the joys we experience in caring for our children. It's important to remember, though, that our joys and sorrows can coexist. We can celebrate the joys even while mourning the losses.

Understanding our own losses help us to connect with the grief and loss our children experience, and help them to heal in a healthy way. Though it can be painful, there is value in the process of connecting with our grief. Let's try to remind ourselves and each other of that truth.

*Put these thoughts into your own words:*

## More resources for parent group leaders

AdoptUSKids offers tip sheets and tools to help parent group leaders facilitate discussions and manage their groups. You can find these resources at [professionals.adoptuskids.org](https://professionals.adoptuskids.org).

### Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent Support Group Leaders*
- *Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders*

### Tools

- *Self-Care Activities for Your Support Group*
- *Discussion Guide: Understanding Childhood Grief and Loss*
- *Discussion Guide: Lying, Confabulation, and Distorted Thinking*



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# Participant Handout: Understanding Parental Grief and Loss

## Understanding our own grief

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As parents and caregivers, we must also grieve the losses in our own lives. We all had an idea of what parenting was going to look like. When those expectations do not match our experiences, it is natural that we grieve. Our children's grief also brings out our own, and we must reckon with our losses in order to help our families meet our daily challenges.

## The stages of grief

The feelings we experience as the result of losses take many forms, and there is no one way to experience grief. Many people are familiar with the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages give the impression that grief is a linear process to be walked through and completed. In reality, grief is much more complex. Grieving is non-linear: you are likely to revisit feelings you've experienced in the past as you continue to process your losses. These stages, though, can give a helpful framework to help you understand how grief can manifest.

## Seeing the value in a painful process

Confronting our own grief can be challenging. For some parents and caregivers, it can feel like acknowledging our losses discounts the joys we experience in caring for our children. It's important to remember, though, that our joys and sorrows can coexist. We can celebrate the joys even while mourning the losses.

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## Resources

- *Understanding Ambiguous Loss*  
<https://azfamilyresources.org/pdf/UnderstandingAmbiguousLoss.pdf>
- *The Grieving Process Worksheet*  
<https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/grief-process-worksheet.pdf>
- Resources on grief and loss from the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), available at [nacac.org/help/parenting/grief-and-loss](https://nacac.org/help/parenting/grief-and-loss)



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