



“We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world – the company of those who have known suffering.”  
- Helen Keller, *We Bereaved*

Grief is a human experience that has been expressed across cultures in different ways throughout history. Ancient Aztecs held feasts believed to be connected to today's Día de los Muertos. Burial traditions in Tanzania focused on confronting death with affirmations of life, such as the song and dance now reflected in “jazz funeral” processions in New Orleans. Celtic cultures documented an act of crying grief aloud, called “death wails,” which is still practiced by indigenous people from Asia to South America. Our instincts may tell us what grief is, but the academic study of grief had not sought to define and understand it until about a hundred years ago.

### **Timeline of Grief Theories**

#### **1917**

Psychologist Sigmund Freud defines grief as a natural process. He initially believed someone grieving needed to disconnect from the memory of their loved one. He would later change his views after personal experiences of grief, but this idea of “letting go” stuck around for many decades.

#### **1969**

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross publishes her book, “On Death and Dying.” This groundbreaking research was the first to ask dying patients about their experiences, informing the “Five Stages of Grief.” This framework has since been applied not only to guide the grief of people dying, but to their surviving loved ones’ as well.

#### **1972**

Colin Murray Parkes expands on John Bowlby’s attachment theory – previously focused on child-parent relationships – to connect it with the experience of grief. Their theory discusses how meaningful attachments can cause distress and emotional disturbance when threatened, broken, or lost. Under this lens of human development, they view grief as a universal and instinctive response to separation.

#### **1991**

Worden introduces his model of grief, named the “Four Tasks of Mourning.” He echoes Kübler-Ross in recognizing that grief does not fit neatly into check boxes, requiring movement within tasks and phases throughout the grief process.

**1996**

A new era begins as psychologists begin to challenge former perspectives of grief, establishing new theories over the next decade that acknowledge its complexity.

It starts with Phyllis Silverman and Dennis Klass, believing grief is never fully resolved, there is no “closure” or “recovery.” Instead, people grieving are adjusting to the meaning of their loss and how it fits into their life. Instead of “letting go,” memories of the person who died are honored as their impact is recognized by the people they loved.

**1999**

Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut present a dynamic model, called the “Dual Process Model,” which highlights necessary oscillation between addressing grief and loss, and taking a break through positive distractions, encouraging integration into a changed life.

**2007**

The first study is published to introduce the concept of “complicated grief,” a type of grief that worsens over time and is commonly caused by a complicated relationship with the person who died. This will usher in following conversations about complex grief and prolonged grief.

**2020**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, concepts such as “collective grief,” “delayed grief,” and “cumulative grief” are given new attention as researchers seek to understand the impact on society.

**2022**

Prolonged Grief Disorder is added as a diagnosis to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders by the American Psychiatric Association.

Find more about this in our Teams folder.

References:

[What Ancient Cultures Teach Us About Grief, Mourning and Continuity of Life](#)  
[Theories of Loss](#)

If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process, please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email [griefsupport@palliativecare.org](mailto:griefsupport@palliativecare.org) for more information, resource and support.