

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GRIEF AND LOSS

IN CHILD DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

TYLER COUNSIL, ED.D.
DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR EDUCATION &
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
ZERO ABUSE PROJECT
CORONER, DAVIESS CO.

Learning Outcomes

- **Distinguish** clearly between grief and trauma and their complex interplay in child death.
- **Analyze** the unique characteristics and profound nature of parental grief, including its long-term identity and relational impacts.
- **Detail** the cognitive and emotional impacts of acute grief and trauma on family members, and their direct implications for investigative interviews.
- **Explain** modern grief models, focusing on fluidity and "tasks" rather than rigid "stages," including the concept of "continuing bonds."
- **Apply** this psychological understanding to develop and enhance trauma-informed communication and interviewing techniques specific to grieving families.
- **Discuss** the profound influence of additional factors on grief expression and coping mechanisms.

Deepen Your Understanding



Deconstructing Grief

A Holistic Human Response to Loss

- **Definition:** Grief is the natural, multi-faceted response to loss. It is not just sadness.
- **Dimensions of Grief:**
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Physical
 - Behavioral
 - Spiritual
- **Grief is Work:** Often exhausting, non-linear, unpredictable.



GRIEF VS TRAUMA

A Critical Differentiation for Investigators

G

Grief

The universal human response to loss.

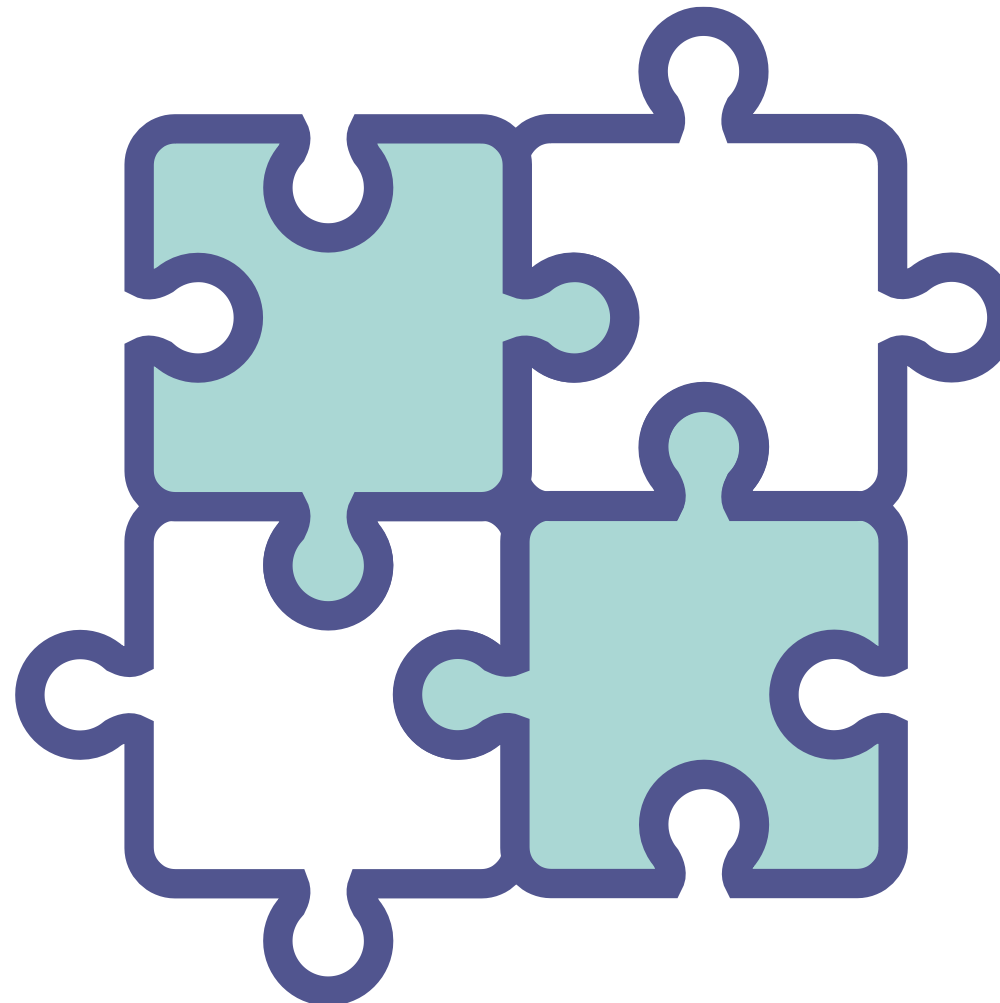
- **Focus:** The absence of the loved one, adapting life without them, restructuring meaning.
- **Examples:** Sadness over missed future, longing for presence, finding new purpose.

I

Interplay

Interplay in Child Death: Child death often causes both profound grief AND significant trauma.

- **Grief:** For the specific child and the future lost.
- **Trauma:** From the sudden, unexpected, violent, or horrific nature of the death, or the investigation process itself.



T

Trauma

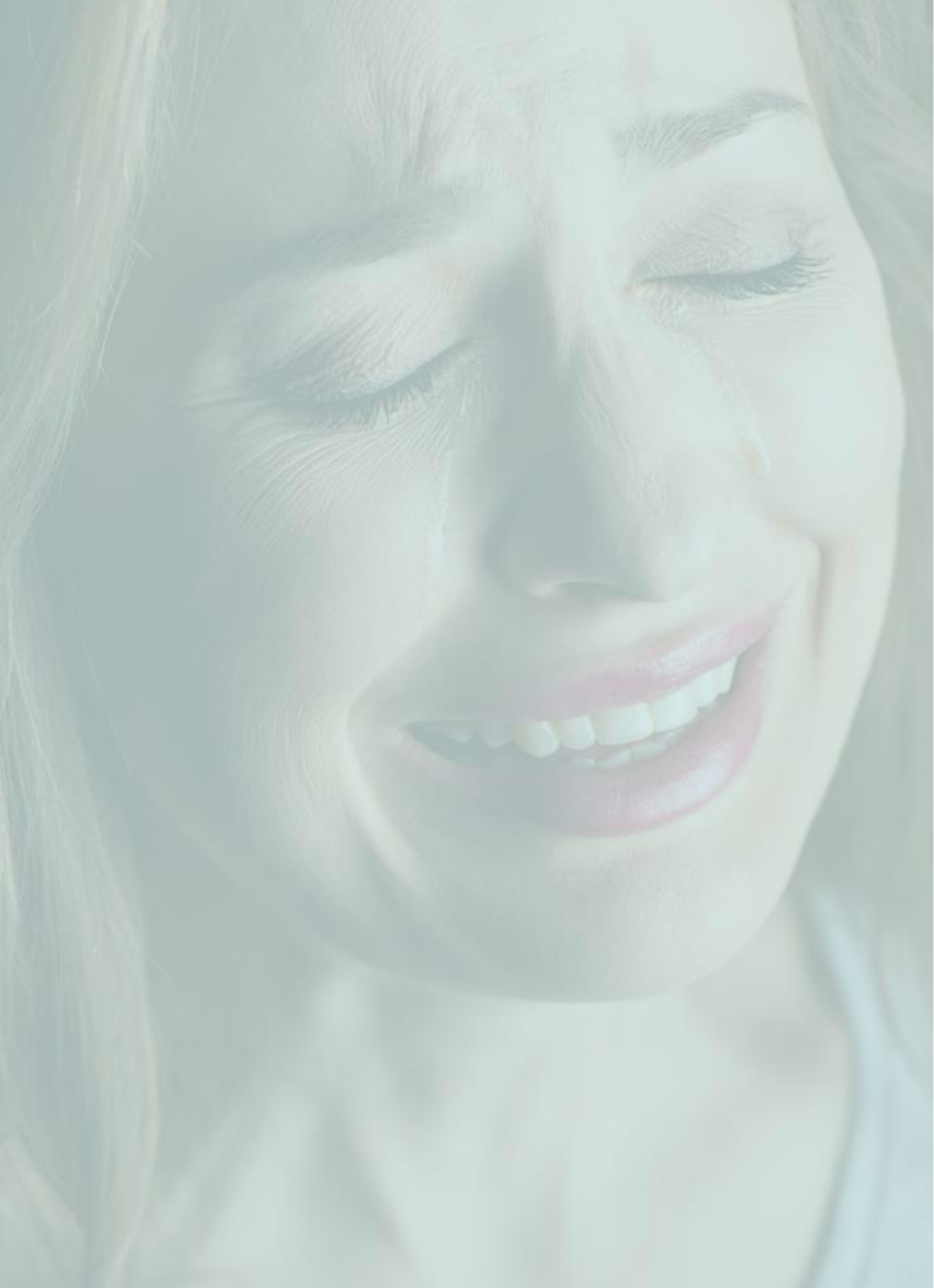
The psychological and physiological response to an overwhelmingly distressing or life-threatening event.

- **Focus:** The event itself, feelings of terror, helplessness, horror, profound threat to safety.
- **Examples:** Flashbacks of discovery, panic attacks, hypervigilance, dissociation, nightmares related to the incident.

R

Relevance

Trauma can significantly impair cognitive function and emotional regulation, directly impacting information gathering during an investigation.



The Uniqueness of Parental Grief: A Violation of Natural Order

- "Out of Order" Death
- Loss of Future
- Threat to Identity
- Profound Guilt & Responsibility
- Isolation & Misunderstanding
- Spousal & Family Strain
- Often Lifelong Journey

Cognitive Impacts: Understanding the Brain in Grief



Grief Brain" / "Fog": Common term for cognitive impairment.



Difficulty with Focus/Concentration:

- Short attention spans, easily distracted by internal thoughts or external stimuli.
- Investigative Strategy: Keep interviews concise, offer frequent breaks, conduct in quiet, low-stimulus environments.



Impaired Information Processing:

- Difficulty understanding complex questions or explanations.
- Inability to absorb multiple pieces of information at once.
- Investigative Strategy: Break down information, repeat key points, use visuals/written summaries.



Impaired Decision-Making:

- Struggles with even simple choices (e.g., funeral arrangements, what to wear).
- Overwhelmed by options.
- Investigative Strategy: Offer limited, concrete options; guide gently, provide support for decisions.



Memory Distortions/Gaps:

- Inconsistent recall, "fuzzy" memories, blackouts around the traumatic event.
- Fragmented narratives, sequencing difficulties.
- Investigative Strategy: Do not automatically assume deception; corroborate with other sources, explore different memory retrieval cues gently.



Disorientation/Derealization/Depersonalization:

- Feeling "unreal," detached from surroundings or self, as if watching from outside.
- Investigative Strategy: Gently ground them in the present (e.g., "You're safe here."), acknowledge their experience without judgment.

Emotional Impacts:

A Spectrum of Intense Feeling

- Shock & Numbness
- Intense Sadness & Despair
- Anger & Rage
- Guilt & Self-Blame
- Anxiety & Fear
- Helplessness & Hopelessness
- Irritability & Impatience





"Normal" Grief vs. Complicated Grief: Awareness for Referral

- **"Normal" Grief:** Wide range of individual responses; symptoms eventually decrease in intensity over time.
 - Fluctuating emotions, waves of sadness, ability to eventually engage in life.
- **Complicated Grief (Prolonged Grief Disorder):**
 - Persistent, pervasive, and debilitating grief reactions lasting for an extended period (e.g., >6-12 months), significantly impairing functioning.
 - *Symptoms:* Intense longing, preoccupation with deceased, difficulty accepting death, feeling life is meaningless, social isolation.
 - *High risk for:* Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation.
- **Investigator's Role:** Not to diagnose, but to recognize signs that warrant professional mental health referral.
- **Importance of Referral:** Early intervention can prevent long-term suffering.

Phases / Tasks of Grief:

A Dynamic &
Oscillating Process

- **Beyond Linear "Stages"**
- **Instead:** Tasks, Processes, or Dual Process Model:
 - Task 1: Accept the Reality of the Loss.
 - Task 2: Process the Pain of Grief.
 - Task 3: Adjust to a World Without the Deceased.
 - Task 4: Find an Enduring Connection with the Deceased in the Midst of Embarking on a New Life.
- **Oscillation/Flipping**
- **Highly Individualized**



Continuing Bonds:

A Healthy Way to Remember



- **Historical Misconception:** Grief as "letting go."
- **Modern Acceptance:** Healthy grief involves maintaining a meaningful, evolving connection.
- **How Bonds Continue:**
 - Memories & Stories
 - Symbolic Objects
 - Rituals & Commemorations
 - Sense of Presence
 - Internalized Values/Legacy
- **Implication for Investigators:**
 - Understand why families talk about their child constantly, share intimate details, or resist removing belongings.
 - Normalize and validate their connection; use the child's name.
 - Avoid language that implies forgetting, moving on.

The Dual Process Model of Coping

Oscillating Between Pain & Rebuilding

- Stroebe & Schut's Model:
 - People oscillate between two types of stressors:
 - Loss-Oriented Coping
 - Restoration-Oriented Coping
- Healthy Oscillation



A background image showing several hands of different skin tones gently cupping a small baby's foot. The image is faded and serves as a backdrop for the text.

Experiential Activity:

Recognizing Grief Expressions

Scenario: You are speaking with three different family members after the death of a 2-year-old:

- a. Mother: Speaks very little, appears withdrawn and numb, occasionally staring blankly.
- b. Father: Angry, demanding answers, expressing frustration with the paramedics and hospital staff.
- c. Older Sibling (8 years old): Playing quietly in the corner, not crying, but occasionally asks where their sibling is.

• **Task (Individual Reflection):**

- For each family member, identify one psychological dimension of grief/trauma they might be exhibiting.
- How would your communication strategy differ slightly for each individual?
- What is the risk of misinterpreting any of these reactions?

Influences on Grief

A Tapestry of Responses

- Norms
- Beliefs
- Historical Trauma
- Family Traditions



Influences on Grief

Additional Considerations

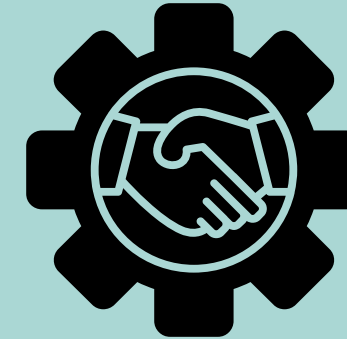
- Avoid Imposing Your Own Norms
- Ask, Don't Assume
- Accommodate Where Possible
- Language Matters
- Recognize Power Dynamics
- Humility-Driven Rapport



Trauma-Informed Communication: Applying Psychology to Practice



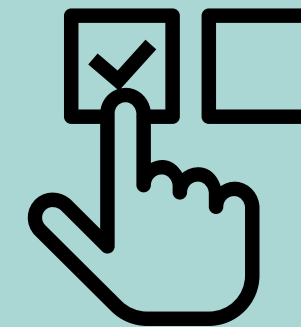
Safety (Physical & Emotional): Create a calm, private environment. Acknowledge their distress.



Collaboration & Mutuality: Involve families in practical next steps where appropriate (e.g., funeral choices).



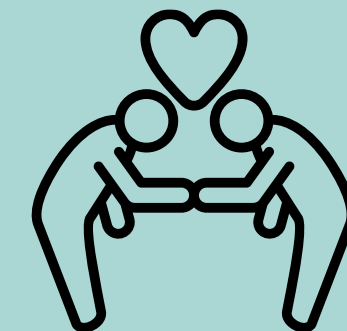
Trustworthiness & Transparency: Be honest about what you know/don't know. Explain processes clearly.



Empowerment, Voice, & Choice: Give them options when possible (e.g., breaks, timing of follow-up).



Peer Support (where available): Connect families with those who have similar experiences.



Humility: Acknowledge and respect unique factors (as discussed).

Practical Communication Techniques

Part I

- Patience & Slow Pace
- Simple, Direct Language
- Active Listening
- Empathy, Not Sympathy
- Acknowledge the Child
- Validate Emotions
- Non-Verbal Cues



Practical Communication Techniques

Part II

- Explain Purpose Clearly
- Tandem Conversation
- Open-Ended Questions
- Focused, Brief Questions
- Offer Breaks
- "Looping" Back
- Avoid Leading Questions
- Avoid "Why" Questions (Initially)





Hypothetical:

The Non-Linear Interview

- **Scenario:** You are interviewing parents about the last 48 hours before their 18-month-old's death. The mother keeps jumping between describing the morning of the death, then suddenly recalling a detail from a month ago, then talking about her child's favorite toy. The father is silent.
- **Task (Individual Reflection):**
 - How would you gently guide the mother back to the relevant timeline while remaining trauma-informed?
 - What assumptions should you not make about the father's silence?
 - How would you ensure the parents feel heard and respected, even amidst the non-linear narrative?

Providing Resources and Ongoing Support

Part I

- Victim Services Agencies
- Grief Counseling Hotlines/Crisis Lines
- Local Grief Support Groups
- Community Mental Health Services
- SUID Specific Resources
- Population Specific Resources



Providing Resources and Ongoing Support

Part II

- Financial Assistance
- Legal Aid
- Faith-Based Support
- Designated Point Person
- Resource Handout
- Follow-Up Contacts (Planned)



A blurred background image showing several people in a meeting or collaborative work environment. The image is out of focus, emphasizing the text in the foreground.

Managing Expectations: Realistic Communication

- Honesty about Timeline
- Acknowledge Information Gaps
- Explain Agency Roles
- Confidentiality Boundaries
- No Guarantees of Specific Outcomes
- Focus on Process & Effort
- Empowerment Through Information

Interagency Coordination

A Unified Front of Support

- Unified Message
- Designated Spokesperson/Lead
- Pre-Briefings
- Debriefings
- Shared Information Protocol
- Respectful Cross-Agency Conduct
- Joint Home Visits/Notifications



Legal & Ethical Considerations

Guiding Our Compassion

- Family Rights
- Investigative Mandate
- Balancing Act
- Confidentiality vs. Need-to-Know
- Potential Conflicts of Interest
- Sensitivity & Bias
- Media Protocols





Self-Care for Investigators: The Inevitable Cost of Caring

- Vicarious Trauma / Secondary Traumatic Stress
- Compassion Fatigue
- Burnout
- Impacts on Investigator are Numerous
- Warning Signs are Dynamic
- Several Proven Mitigation Methods



Key Takeaways

- Grief & Trauma Distinction
- Unique Parental Grief
- Cognitive/Emotional Impact
- Grief as Tasks/Dual Process
- Continuing Bonds:
- Population Influences
- Trauma-Informed Communication
- Self-Care & Collective-Care



Resources for Further Learning

- **American Psychological Association (APA) – Grief Resources:**
<https://www.apa.org/topics/grief>
- **Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC):**
<https://www.adec.org/>
- **Center for Prolonged Grief (Columbia University):**
<https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/>



Thank you very much!

TYLER COUNSIL, ED.D.

TYLER@ZEROABUSEPROJECT.ORG

[HTTPS://ZEROABUSEPROJECT.ORG/](https://zeroabuseproject.org/)