

# “That club nobody wants to belong to”

## FRAMEWORKS FOR GRIEF PEER SUPPORT

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Hundreds of organizations across the world follow the peer support model in grief support programming. However, there has been no systematic probe into the **predictors and process** of grief peer support. A recent Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) meta-analytic report on 219 grief care studies could identify only 6 studies on peer support interventions. Regarding the effectiveness of peer support, the report could “not identify studies reporting in sufficient detail to compute effect sizes for incidence of grief disorder. Individually and across studies there was no statistically significant effect of peer support on quality of life scores.” This can be attributed to the dearth of comprehensive end-to-end conceptualization of peer support. In short, while we know **what** grief peer support is, we have sporadic and insufficient evidence on **what** it does, and even weaker understanding of **how** and **why** it works.

This research initiative takes a first step in establishing peer support as a **standardized and measurable** method of intervention in bereavement. Drawing from research, and evidence from participant interviews, I propose a **conceptual framework of grief peer support** as a dynamic psychosocial process with outcomes embedded in its experience, which are beneficial to bereaved individuals. The framework can be used in developing and evaluating programs, and I hope it empowers practitioners, researchers, and caregivers, to better understand and support bereaved individuals.

### Grief’s Unique Challenges

- Grief is a misunderstood situation with myths, silence, and stigma attached to it.
- Grieving individuals are often dismissed, criticized, patronized, or provided unhelpful advice.
- It leads to withdrawal and/or pretense with even close friends and family, and more isolation.

### Grief Peer Support is Unique

Unlike disease or addiction, which can be perceived as an “adversary,” grief is a natural response to loss. Unlike peer support for disease or addiction, which can come with the pledge of “fighting it together,” **grief needs to be integrated into post-loss life. Thus, in addition to outcomes, the peer support process becomes significant and meaningful.**

### QUOTES FROM GOOD GRIEF PARTICIPANTS

ON NORMALIZATION:

**“It’s nice to not be different.”**

ON VALIDATION:

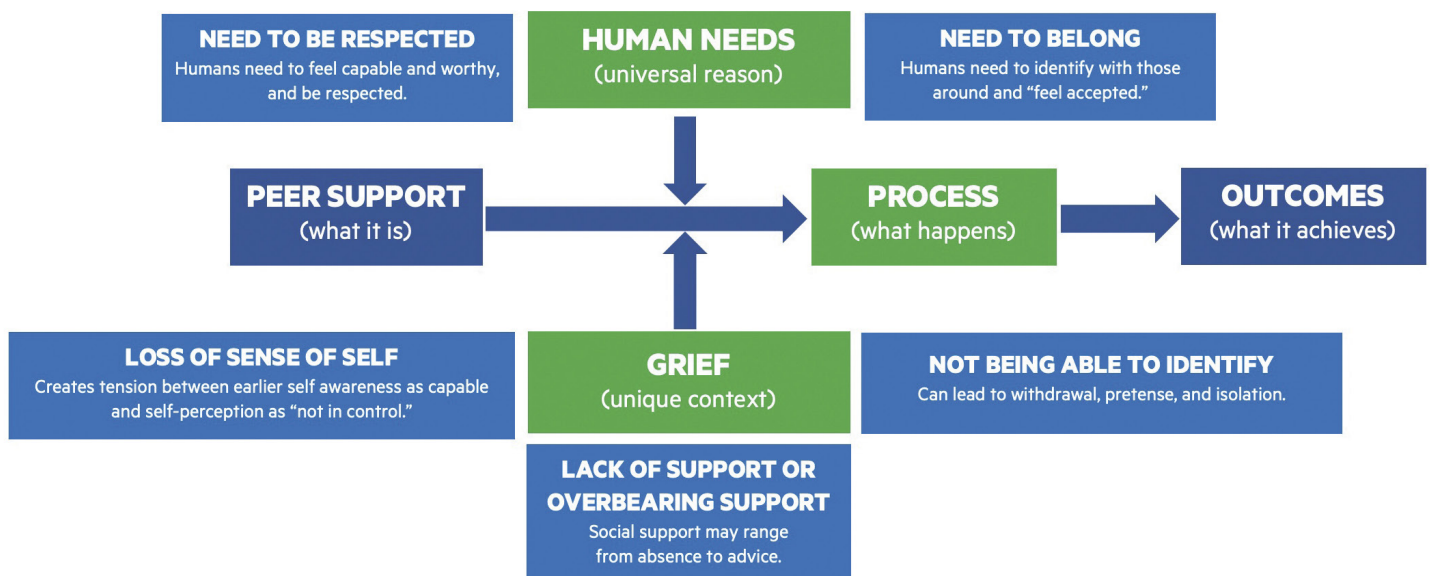
**“Oh, I’m not alone. I don’t want to mow the lawn. You don’t either.”**

ON DEEPER REALIZATIONS:

**“What kind of clothes you wore? What kind of car you drove? You know, it just became irrelevant.”**

ON EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

**“So you have those kinds of emotional alliances, which you don’t really have anywhere.”**



## Methodology

One-on-one interviews with 26 adult participants from Good Grief's Nights of Support program were conducted. The question asked was: **Good Grief follows a peer support model. How has this been for you?** Since the focus was to develop a new framework grounded in the data itself, the **Grounded Theory approach** was taken. The constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to derive codes, cluster them into categories/themes, and identify a relationship between themes to derive three frameworks.

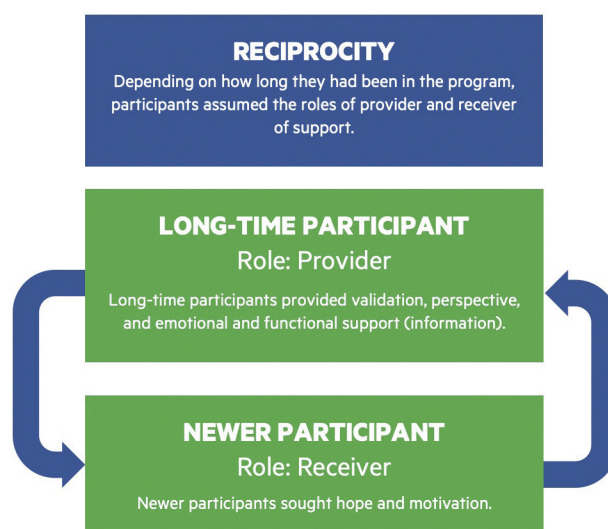
## Arriving at the Frameworks

The themes could be connected in three ways: Level-Based, People-Based, and Process-Based.

**LEVEL-BASED:** In the grief-averse culture we live in, it is necessary for grieving individuals to feel safe and comfortable before all else. Safety provided the foundation against which interpersonal support (at the group level) and personal growth (at the individual level) took place. Once this was laid out, and the participants settled in, the three became part of an interconnected process.



**PEOPLE-BASED:** This was based on the dynamic between participants, and was a function of how long they have participated in the program.



**PROCESS-BASED:** This emphasized why and how peer support is experienced, and applied to all participants.

