



Practice Manuals
for Busy
Professionals

Loss and Grief

A Manual for Human Services Professionals

SECOND EDITION



Neil Thompson

ROUTLEDGE

‘Neil Thompson has given us a uniquely helpful resource for professionals and paraprofessionals who find individuals, families and communities coming to terms with loss in their practice. The book synthesizes and draws the wisdom from current bereavement literature and practice in a way that gives readers both the intellectual framework and practical advice to bring their own skills and resources to their clients. Thompson understands loss broadly. While the death of a significant person is the paradigm, he understands that many of the same dynamics play out in other losses causes, ranging from economic conditions to physical disability. Thompson’s writing is clear, the case vignettes well chosen, and the practical advice solid.’

Dennis Klass, PhD, *author of Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: The Selected Works of Dennis Klass (Routledge, 2022)*

‘There cannot be a manual for how to grieve, but Dr Thompson has crafted an informative manual for practitioners to understand responses to loss and how to support people who are grieving. He goes beyond psychosocial theories to describe the wider contexts and experiences of grief, including social, cultural and spiritual aspects. Dr Thompson confronts the challenges people may face when grieving, acknowledging the that grief is not limited to death-related losses. Unlike many other books about grief, this book crucially provides a critical and holistic perspective that blends theory and practice.’

Professor Erica Borgstrom, *The Open University*

‘This manual is Neil Thompson’s magnum opus! As one of the leading scholars of dying, death and bereavement, his work represents the best of analytical powers. The manual is impressive in its scope and theoretical analysis. It analyses the many approaches in the field and, in a clear and understandable fashion, is able to present both the theoretical approaches that are false and those that are acceptable. His use of a sociological approach demonstrates that many attempts to explain loss and grief using a psychological model are without foundation and that the sociological explanations offer a solid, practical way to understand human behaviour. This book is not only a must for courses in the sociology of dying and death classes, it is destined to become a standard in the field. Anyone who hopes to understand the field of thanatology needs to read this soon-to-be classic!’

Dr Gerry Cox, Emeritus Professor, *The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse*



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Loss and Grief

This comprehensive guide offers a holistic perspective on loss and grief that extends beyond traditional death-related circumstances.

The integration of sociological insights and spiritual dimensions to provide a broad understanding of grief in various professional contexts enables readers to link theory and practice in supporting others through significant life changes. Practical applications are presented to empower practitioners to recognize and respond effectively to the full spectrum of loss.

Essential reading for human services professionals, including counsellors, social workers, healthcare providers and educators across all sectors who work with individuals experiencing loss.

Neil Thompson is Director of Studies at the Neil Thompson Academy and a visiting professor at the Open University. He has been involved with the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement for over 30 years.

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Loss and Grief

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Second Edition

Neil Thompson

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Welcome!

... to this manual on loss and grief. Facing a major loss is one of the most challenging experiences we can encounter in our lives. A significant loss can turn our world upside down and can even leave us feeling that we no longer really know who we are – the effects can be that profound and that far reaching. And those effects don't stop short at the level of the grieving individual and their family and friends. The impact can be felt in communities in workplaces and even across society as a whole.

There is a vast knowledge base relating to death, dying and bereavement and to loss and grief more broadly and it could take years of study to get to grips with it. However, there is also a great deal of misinformation around these matters – for example, contrary to popular belief, there is little or no evidence that people grieve in stages. Making sense of what we know about loss and grief – whether for personal or professional reasons – is therefore not a straightforward matter. This manual has therefore been developed to offer a foundation of knowledge and understanding that should be good enough to give you a sound basis for making sense of loss and grief and for building up that knowledge over time.

Loss and grief are highly significant issues in any era, but the immense and far-reaching impact of the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted just how much such matters underpin our social lives and we are still feeling the effects of this (Borgstrom and Mallon, 2022). The death and suffering brought by the pandemic created a significant rise in major losses, while for much of the time the restrictions designed to curb the spread of the virus made mourning even more challenging in a number of ways. The pandemic situation therefore increased even further the importance of understanding, acknowledging and responding to the challenges presented by loss and grief.



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About the author

Neil Thompson is an award-winning writer, educator and adviser. He has held full or honorary professorships at five UK universities and is currently a visiting professor at the Open University. He has been a speaker at seminars and conferences in the UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, the Czech Republic, Turkey, Hong Kong, India, Canada, the United States and Australia.

He is now the Director of Studies at the Neil Thompson Academy which offers Chartered Management Institute qualifications in leadership and a range of e-learning courses and development tools. The Academy also offers an online Centre of Excellence for leaders of all kinds.

He is a Fellow of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement and holds the Dr Robert Fulton Award for excellence in the field of death, dying and bereavement from the Center for Death Education and Bioethics at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

His website, with his acclaimed *Manifesto for Making a Difference*, is at www.NeilThompson.info. He is active on social media – see <https://linktr.ee/drneilthompson> for details.



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I want to divide the people I owe gratitude to into three groups. In terms of the first group of people, those I am grateful to for helping to form the learning on which I have based this manual, if I were to provide a comprehensive list it would take up several pages. I must therefore limit myself to a general acknowledgement to those people I have learned from through discussion, reading their work and listening to their contributions to conferences and workshops. This includes, but is not limited to, members of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement, of which I have had the good fortune to have been a member for almost 30 years; the regular attenders at the annual International Death, Grief and Bereavement conference at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and my Open Thanatology colleagues at the Open University.

The second category of people to whom I owe a debt of thanks are those who have been more personally involved in the development of my understanding and who have supported me in various ways. These are Ron Abraham and the late Donna O'Toole; Miriam and the late Sidney Moss (to whom my *Loss, Grief and Trauma in the Workplace* book was dedicated); Bob Bendiksen, formerly of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; the late Dick Gilbert formerly of Mercy College, New York and the World Pastoral Care Center; my very good friend, Denise Bevan and the late Bernard Moss, Emeritus Professor at Staffordshire University. Special thanks are due to Gerry Cox, emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, who has been a very special friend, an excellent role model and a delight to work with as a co-author on various projects.

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Finally, I owe a vote of thank to Chris Hall of Grief Australia (formerly the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement) not only for his helpful Foreword, but also for his excellent stewardship of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement over many years.

Preface

The overall aim of this manual is to provide a clearly written, well-informed introduction to the complex and demanding subject of grief to serve as a foundation for further study and especially for meeting the demands of actual professional practice across a range of disciplines. There should also be much of value for both professionals and others to learn about loss and grief in their own lives.

The manual is largely based on my earlier work *Grief and its Challenges*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2012 and now out of print. The previous publication has been updated, extended and refocused to produce what I hope will be an invaluable guide for anyone wrestling with the many challenges presented by loss and grief.

In writing the manual I had a number of objectives in mind, specifically:

- (1) To provide a basic introduction to grief as an inevitable feature of human experience;
- (2) To demonstrate that grief is a much more common experience than most people realize by showing that grief arises from a wide range of loss experiences and not just from bereavement;
- (3) To provide a critique of oversimplified theories of grief that rely on a reductionist stages model or medicalized understandings of human responses to loss;
- (4) To present, as a basis for practice, a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of grief that does justice to the complexities involved;

- (5) To show how grief often underpins a range of psychological and social problems;
- (6) To show how grief can be ‘transformational’ – that is, a positive (albeit painful) source of growth and development; and
- (7) To provide guidance on how best – whether in a personal or professional capacity – to support people who are wrestling with the challenges of grief.

You would, of course, be right to assume that this is an awful lot to squeeze into one relatively short manual. But my plan has been to provide a broad sketch of the landscape of grief in order to counterbalance the all-too-frequent tendency to focus too narrowly on grief – in particular, to adopt a (bio-)psychological view that neglects sociological aspects and which often has little to say about spiritual dimensions.

By adopting this broad focus, I am hoping to show how extensive an issue grief is and will, in the process, also emphasize how complex it is. A key ‘message’ of the manual, then, is to warn against the dangers of narrow and oversimplified approaches. From a theoretical point of view, these can prevent us from developing an understanding of grief that does justice to the complexities involved. From a practice perspective, they can lead to a distorted picture of the situations we are dealing with which, in turn, can result in not only a failure to be helpful, but also, in some circumstances, making the problems and suffering worse.

Who is the manual for?

This manual will appeal primarily to students and professional practitioners across the helping professions (social work and social care; medicine and health care; youth and community work; hospice work; funeral services; child welfare; counselling and psychotherapy; ministry and pastoral guidance), especially – but not exclusively – those whose work brings them into regular contact with dying or bereaved people. There will also be much of interest to other professional groups, such as police and other emergency services personnel, as well as teachers and other childcare workers (play workers, foster carers and so on). Furthermore, there are many people outside the professional arena who could find the manual of value – for example, hospice volunteers. I am also aware that many grieving people use the literature around grief as a form of ‘bibliotherapy’, and so they too may find that the manual has considerable appeal for them. The same can also apply to people who are supporting someone who is grieving – friends, relatives and colleagues who may feel helpless in the face of such intense emotion and such significant difficulties.

What is distinctive about the manual?

There are various ways in which this manual differs from other texts available. In particular, it offers the following:

- A *critical* perspective on grief theory – much of the literature (and associated practice) relies on an uncritical acceptance of outdated and discredited theoretical perspectives that can distort our understanding of the situations we encounter;
- A *broad* perspective on grief, not limited to death-related losses;
- A *holistic* perspective on grief – that is, one that is psychosocial (it combines psychological and sociological insights) and spiritual in its scope, rather than narrow and individualistic in its focus; much of the current literature lacks a sociological dimension and some of it also lacks a spiritual dimension;
- An *exploration* of how grief – especially ‘complicated’ or trauma-related grief – often underpins psychological and social problems;
- An *examination* of ‘transformational’ grief as a basis for personal growth and empowerment – recognizing that, while grief brings many demands and potential problems, it also brings the potential for personal development and better ways of coping with life’s challenges;
- A *blend* of theory and practice – many of the texts available fall into either the highly theoretical or technical category or the practical ‘how to’ category, but relatively few do a good job of *integrating* theory and practice;
- A *balance* of intellectual credibility and emotional sensitivity – parallel with the blend of theory and practice (much of the material available is rational and theoretical and has little to say about the emotional sensitivities involved, while other texts show great emotional sensitivity but make little or no reference to the theory base).



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Foreword

Over the past two decades, the academic study of grief and bereavement has undergone a profound change in how we understand the human experience of loss and how our response to the grieving person is conceptualized. Long-held views about the grief experience have been discarded, with research evidence failing to support popular notions which construe grief as the navigation of a predictable emotional trajectory, leading from distress to ‘recovery’. The field has moved away from the idea that successful grieving requires ‘letting go’ of the deceased and a move toward recognizing the potentially beneficial role of maintaining continued bonds with the deceased.

However encouraging this transformation has been, much more is required. With its roots in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, grief is still primarily conceptualized as a psychological process with a focus on the intrapsychic experience of the individual, disconnected from their family, community, culture and spirituality. Grief is still largely limited to the examination of death-related losses, with issues such as the grief of violence, relationship breakdown, abuse and homelessness rarely examined through the lens of loss. Structural factors of race, class, gender, spirituality and age remain poorly explored areas of inquiry. Too slowly, it is now recognized that grief is not purely a psychological phenomenon. It also has deep roots in sociology. Somewhat curiously, these two orientations – the sociological and the other psychological have been rarely joined together in a single book to deeply inform theory and practice.

Loss and Grief is an antidote to many of these shortcomings. Dr Neil Thompson has emerged as a leading voice in sociology and thanatology and compellingly