

Spotlight on Grief and its Connection to Homelessness

Content warning: The following paper discusses sensitive topics related to grief, loss, trauma, and homelessness. The content may contain descriptions of emotional distress, traumatic experiences, substance use, and instances of loss, which could be triggering or distressing for some readers. Reader discretion is advised.

Grief Awareness Month takes place in August each year, with the mission to educate people on grief and create a space for loss. Grief is the anguish experienced after a significant loss, usually, but not always, the death of a loved one. Grief may also take the form of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself. Grief is a commonly shared occurrence by those experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is often an experience that is entrenched in grief. A person does not come to experience homelessness without first experiencing the traumatic loss of their housing. Grief Awareness Month provides an opportunity to shed light on the profound grief experienced by individuals facing homelessness, highlighting the need for increased awareness and support for this community.

Aside from the lack of affordable housing, the leading reported causes of homelessness according to the 2023 Point in Time (PIT) Count [1] are loss of income, relationship breakdown, mental health struggles, job loss, and substance use struggles, all of which could be related to great loss. The top four reported factors related to homelessness are unemployment, disabling conditions, incarceration and domestic violence. Each of these experiences come with instances of grief as well. **These can often build on top of one another, and a person experiencing homelessness can identify several instances of loss that lead to homelessness.** Entering homelessness does not mark the cessation of encounters with loss, and entering into homelessness is often just a continuation of an experience of loss.

Key Takeaways

- **Link between grief and homelessness:** Among the top reported causes of homelessness are traumatic experiences that deal with loss, including loss of income, relationship breakdown, mental health struggles, job loss and substance use. Homelessness itself can lead to compounding traumas and maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance use.
- **Grief-related outcomes leads to further grief in the homeless community:** Estimates suggest each overdose death leaves an average of five people to deal with their own grief.
- **Underlying issues must be addressed alongside grief:** Housing First approaches provide stability for a person to address grief and other issues that led to homelessness in the first place. Compassion, understanding, and access to housing and other much needed resources are necessary to address the hardships, including grief, that affect people experiencing homelessness.

Handling grief and loss is a deeply personal and individualized process that varies from person to person. Individuals who are grieving may experience moments of intense distress and heightened emotions. These reactions are inherent and characteristic of the universal human experience of coping with loss. Individuals in the midst of grieving may exhibit heightened emotional responses, however that understanding is often not extended to individuals experiencing homelessness. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and often people cope with the first available tool they can find. PIT count data underscores the notable influence that substance use struggles have on respondents. Grieving can lead to high-risk behaviors as individuals grapple with their loss, often resorting to maladaptive coping mechanisms, including [2] substance use.

Substance use to deal with trauma and grief is a known self-soothing approach, however it entails its own risks of loss. More than half [3] of Oklahoma overdoses from 2016-2020 were instances that involved individuals with histories of substance use, and that loss affects more than just the individual. Complicated grief, like that experienced by those surviving homelessness, does not come with a navigation guide. Folks do what they can to withstand the hardships they are facing. Estimates suggest each overdose death leaves an average of five people [4] to deal with their own grief. With about one in five PIT count respondents reporting struggling with substance use, CoC service providers have learned to approach that challenge with Housing First in mind. Despite substance use, or mental health struggles, both outcomes of experiencing grief, peoples' housing is the priority when addressing their homelessness. Loss within the homeless community is not exclusive to only those that use substances, though. Nationally, Dec. 21 is recognized as Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, [5] where communities organize to honor the lives lost of those within the local homeless community. This community finds themselves struck by loss often, as the challenges that come along with homelessness often result in less favorable health conditions.

A Way Home for Tulsa (AWH4T) honors Homeless Persons' Memorial Day with an annual vigil held at the Tulsa Day Center. **In 2022 alone, there were 59 reported losses within Tulsa's homeless community.**

A person's homeless experience can often be defined by a series of events of catastrophic loss. Before a person can even begin experiencing homelessness, they must first lose their homes, their social safety nets, and the lives that they know and are familiar with. Once a person begins experiencing homelessness, they struggle with the loss of their belongings, their access to resources, and their sense of stability and safety. This traumatic loss inevitably leads to grief and can often grow to be complicated grief if left untreated. Compassion, understanding, and access to housing and other much needed resources are necessary to address the hardships, including grief, that affect people experiencing homelessness.

References

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