

# Organizational Grief Model

BY RICHAEAL FAITHFUL

## ABOUT THIS MODEL

*"A Way to Understand Collective Grief"* is a resource to support organizations in understanding and processing grief. As a narrative-driven model, it provides prompts for an organization to acknowledge its grief and make sense of how grief has changed the organization over time. Its purpose is to scaffold a structure for people who are part of an organization's staff team or its broader community to *articulate their own grieving experiences*, and to *make sense of change together*, even if/when people make different meanings of collective experiences.

Grief, in this model, is defined as a range of emotions and experience in connection to a sense of loss. Given how death-denying and grief-resistant dominant culture is in the U.S., supporting people and organizations to even acknowledge grief can be a breakthrough. This model helps organizations turn toward grief, rather than deny or repress its presence.

How grief expresses itself inside an organization can be distinct from other settings. Sometimes an organization experiences acute, traumatic events or losses, in which grief is visible and palpable to everyone. Other times, we may simply notice the presence of grief and/or grieving occurring at different levels: carried by individuals, teams, staff, leadership, and/or people served by an organization. It's also likely there are multiple sources of grief, which may include: high turnover/staff transitions, dramatic leadership changes, financial cuts/anxieties, and/or mission creep/identity erosion. All grief is always more pronounced by contextual and environmental grief — the traumas and losses inherent in our systemic conditions, cultural tensions, and political realities.

It's common for grief to exist in multiples — compounded from different sources, and at different levels. An organization may feel anxiety, fatigue, or conflict-prone from chronic, untended grief. It's important for organizational leaders, stewards, and capacity-builders to be able to touch and process grief before it creates significant imbalances.

## WHO IS IT FOR?

This resource is for people who can lead grief processing at an organization — from organization staff to outside consultants. Ideally, these individuals have strong, trauma-aware facilitation skills, and either have sufficient support to metabolize their own grief or are distant enough from the organization's core grief to lead a grief integration process. It is highly recommended to those in facilitation roles to work in a pair or small team.

## HOW TO USE IT?

There are at least two ways to use this resource.

First, it can be used as a teaching tool to help people identify stages of organizational grief. Most popular grief models are for dying people, not for changing institutions. The resource is divided into stages with descriptions. Understanding how grief can be experienced can help grief feel less intimidating, and invite people into a shared grieving process.

Second, it can be used as a processing tool to turn toward, make sense of, and integrate grief. Each stage contains reflection prompts. These prompts can shape reflections that are collectively shared, catalyze group discussions, form a grief circle, and/or serve as building blocks for other kinds of processing (e.g., somatic or art prompts). Facilitators can support a group to process through all of the stages or specific stages. These prompts can also be customized to better fit the organization's needs.

Remember, untended grief never goes away — it simply expresses itself in other ways within an organization's culture. I encourage you to be creative with the model, adapt it to your needs, and share what you learn with other facilitators and capacity-builders.



This [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator [Richard Faithful \(richaelfaithful.com\)](https://richaelfaithful.com). Thanks to RoadMap Social Justice Consulting ([roadmapconsulting.org](https://roadmapconsulting.org)) for its support to format and distribute this resource.

# Organizational Grief Model

BY RICHAEAL FAITHFUL

## A Way To Understand Collective Grief

*A model based on Robert A. Neimeyer's narrative model and Claire Bidwell Smith's work on anxiety and grief. This model is non-linear, recognizing that stages are often "out of order" or experienced at the same time.*

### **STAGE: It Happened. It Matters.**

*Beyond total shock or denial, we grapple with having experienced a significant change that feels like an end and/or loss. Here, we enter the grief constellation.*

Potential Question: What was meaningful, sacred, profound or appreciated about what was lost?

### **STAGE: Meaning-Making.**

*Beliefs that we held, and realities that we knew, are confronted. At this stage, we have constant opportunities to reinforce our pre-existing beliefs and fit our understandings into our previously-known realities and/or challenge our long-held beliefs and adapt within our fragmented, emerging sense of reality.*

Potential Questions:

- Which beliefs feel validated and/or stable through this period of change?
- What is your awareness around how your day-to-day reality will shift, if at all?
- In which ways have you already experienced change within your group?

### **STAGE: Relating to feelings.**

*Emotions (even their absence) are a dynamic language communicating to us onto themselves. How we associate with, and relate to, our feelings can tell us about our inner lives, our existing relationships, and our relationship with time and change.*

Potential Questions:

- Which emotions are accompanying your experience at this grief-moment?
- Are there any signs that anxiety is present?
  - If so, which skills do you have to regulate or co-regulate?
  - Are you able to trace the anxiety to specific conditions or triggers?

[continued next page]



This [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator [Richard Faithful \(richaelfaithful.com\)](https://richaelfaithful.com). Thanks to RoadMap Social Justice Consulting ([roadmapconsulting.org](https://roadmapconsulting.org)) for its support to format and distribute this resource.

# Organizational Grief Model

BY RICHAEEL FAITHFUL

Potential Questions [continued]

- What, if any, collective anxiety are you noticing and how is it impacting you, your group members, and/or those you serve?
- Are you exhibiting any signs of burnout or resentment and if so, what group and/or relational support do you need?
- Is there any anger or rage in your body or psyche? In which ways can these emotions be intentionally released or redirected?

## **STAGE: Collapse time through integration.**

*What is clear to you, as you make meaning over time, about what happened and is happening? In this clarity, which wisdom is available to you about who you are and how to relate to the changes and/or losses?*

Potential Questions:

- What is the prevailing organization story of what happened and is happening? How can we “widen the aperture” of this story so that the conditions which surrounded us are also a part of it?
- In our most generous understanding of what happened, what are our lessons?
- How do we integrate what happened to be part of our group/collective history?
- Which aspects of our group life do we need to intentionally adapt to as a collective, and which aspects do we need to adapt relative to each team/individual?
- How do these changes shift our view of futures? Are there any plans that need to shift to support our adapted realities?

## **STAGE: Continuing, as changed.**

*As the sense of grief-change is less acute, we continue to reflect on our integrated beliefs and realities.*

Potential Questions:

- The change and/or loss that was felt revealed a quality of meaning to us. What can be practiced from what you learned or feels transformed or possible with that “quality of meaning?”
- Which opportunities may continue to widen because of your group’s growth through these changes/losses?
- How do you want to continue remembering, together (if at all)?



This [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator [Richaël Faithful \(richaelfaithful.com\)](https://richaelfaithful.com). Thanks to RoadMap Social Justice Consulting ([roadmapconsulting.org](https://roadmapconsulting.org)) for its support to format and distribute this resource.