



Portland Institute  
For Loss and Transition

## *Principle of Practice*

# Enfranchise the Disenfranchised Grief

While COVID-19 has greatly disrupted our daily lives with lots of ripple effects, it has also disenfranchised the various losses and grief that many experience during this period of time. Such disenfranchisement may manifest in different ways. For instance, while it is understandable for COVID-19 to be in the limelight at this stage, it is not the only “disaster” happening in the world and people’s lives, but all the other events are simply eclipsed by COVID-19. While the loss of a life through COVID-19 is rightfully painful and agonizing, other non-death losses resulting from COVID-19 can be equally disturbing and cause distress.

Thus, if disenfranchised grief means that a griever is not given the “right” to grieve because his/her loss experience is not socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged and publicly mourned, as helping professionals our mission is to give the *RIGHT* back to them:

### **Recognize that Loss Is Experienced Personally and Subjectively.**

Before we can be empathic and helpful to our clients, we need to first clear the hurdle of being presumptuous and operating from our existing worldview. Treating job loss as simply a practical problem to be solved or loss of time with friends as simply a temporary inconvenience can reinforce the disenfranchisement that clients have experienced from other people. Instead, we need to be mindful that whether an incident is

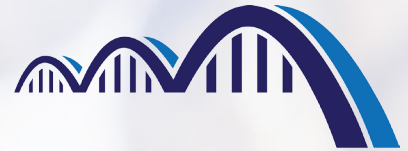
considered a loss or not is very much dependent on clients’ perception and felt experience. Hence, we need to operate from a “not-knowing” stance and stay curious to listen to clients’ stories and avoid comparing or rank-ordering losses experienced by different clients.

### **Identify What and/or Whom Was Lost in the “Event Story”.**

As we listen to clients’ narratives, we may invite clients to reflect on what and/or whom was actually lost in the incident concerned. The “what” may refer to tangible and intangible things, like regular income or a sense of freedom, as well as ordinary and special things, such as daily routines of exercise and cancellation of an anniversary celebration. The “whom” may refer to significant others through illness, treatment and death, but may also refer to different aspects of oneself, like certain roles and personal traits because of the circumstances. Spending time to listen to clients, counting their losses and empowering them to claim their unclaimed losses can help counteract other encounters that downplay or even deny their losses and grief.

### **Generate the “Back Story” of the Loss Experience.**

Behind every loss is a relational story, be it between clients and their significant others, or between clients and their other objects of attachment, which could range from animal companions, through familiar places or roles,



## Portland Institute For Loss and Transition

to a spiritual faith. We need to understand the kind of relationship clients used to have with their lost attachments and appreciate why they are important to clients. Only then will we come to realize the impacts of losing these people, places and positions, as well as validating and empathizing with clients for the grief and pain experienced as a result.

### **Honor the Griever's Values, Wishes and Preferences.**

In massive crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, there are bound to be large-scale precautionary measures and interventive directives that are standardized across relevant settings and apply to all individuals concerned. As such, like it or not, clients have to comply and follow suits, instead of being given the allowance to go by their own choices and decisions. This often further aggravates their sense of helplessness and loss of control when they already could not do much to stop the loss from happening. Hence, it is crucial for us to explore what clients actually wish or prefer to do in response to their loss and grief, if they could have had their say. It is also essential to understand their personal worldview, values and principles of living because there may be other means to uphold these important pillars in case their initial wishes or preferences may not be feasible.

### **Tailor Suitable Rituals and Therapeutic Interventions.**

Under the circumstances of a pandemic, many usual practices and rituals may be delayed, shortchanged or even skipped because of the overwhelming needs within the community, as well as severe exhaustion or shortage of manpower in the relevant institutes or agencies. As a result, clients may not receive much needed

support and have the appropriate platforms to express their grief and perform any rituals that are meaningful to them. Certain losses may not even have any existing customary practices to acknowledge the loss and garner support for the grievers. Therefore, we need to incorporate what we gathered from clients and tailor suitable symbolic rituals and relevant interventions to legitimize their loss experience, facilitate their overall integration, and possibly solicit supportive witnesses as well.

*Author:* Carolyn Ng, PsyD, FT, MMSAC, RegCLR is an Associate Director of the Portland Institute, and maintains a private practice, Anchorage for Loss and Transition (<https://www.anchorage-for-loss.org>) for therapy, supervision and training in Singapore.

✉ [carolyn@portlandinstitute.org](mailto:carolyn@portlandinstitute.org)