

Dr Lynsey Bennett
lynseybennett@nhs.net

Dr Sheena Sharma
sheena.sharma6@nhs.net

A Consultation Model for Bereavement, Change and Loss

An educational resource for
clinicians

Why?

**Managing loss is
central to the
holistic work of a
GP**

Grief is a universal human experience – not just when someone dies, but also with changes in life circumstances

Widely reported negative effects of grief on mental and physical health

Diverse manifestations of grief – physical symptoms as well as emotional distress

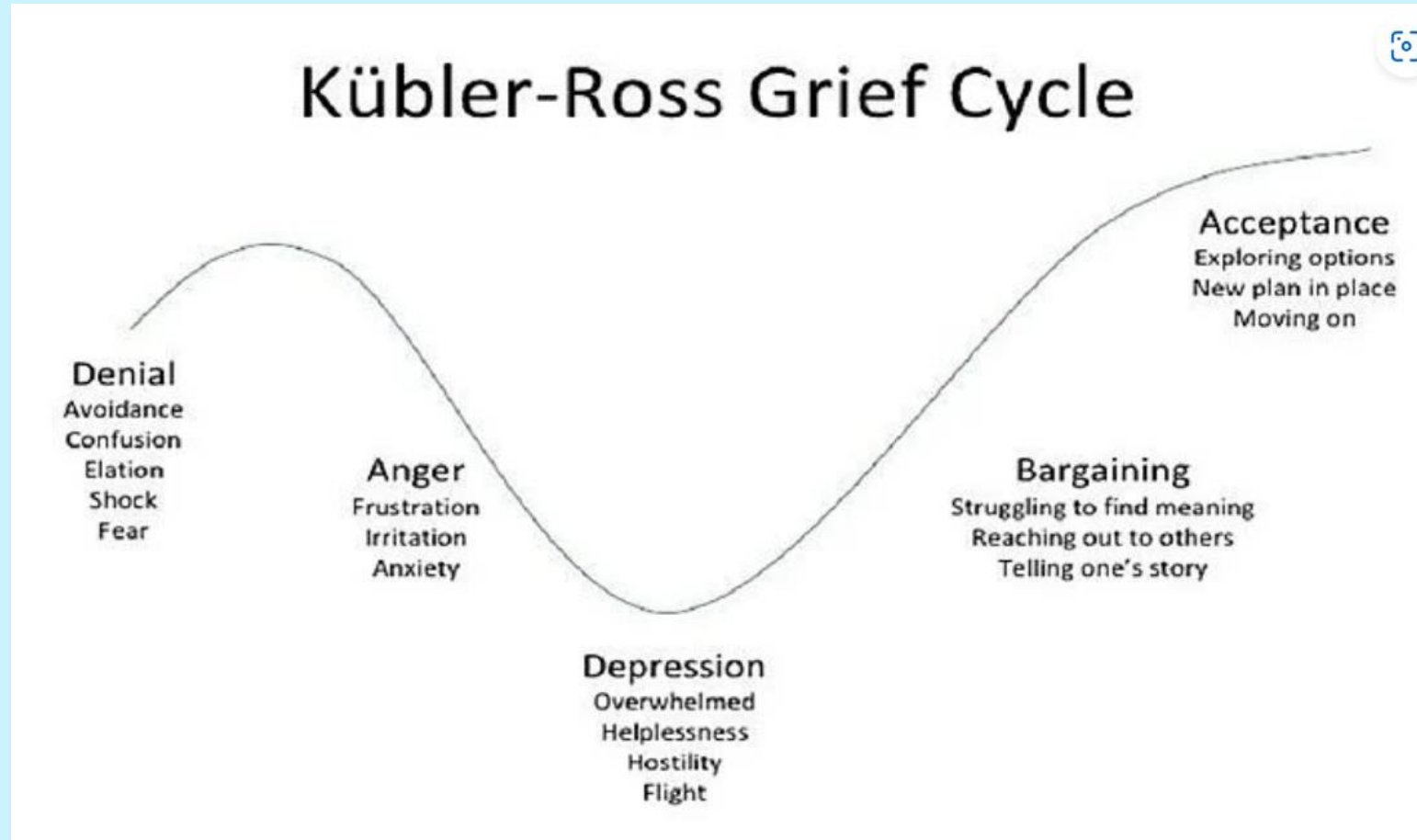
Challenging consultations

How did we develop the model?

- Years of clinical experience
- GPs are central to good bereavement care, **in a unique way**
- Experience as educators – use of consultation models
- Modern grief theory, bereavement literature and neuroscience
- ‘spiral curriculum’ – can be adapted to teach anyone who works in primary care



What we already know



On Death and Dying. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. The MacMillan Company, New York, 1969



The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement –Stroebe and Schut 1999

Grief is unique, multi-faceted and oscillates between loss and restoration

Our toolkit

**Acute
grief**

**Heath L, Sharma S. Bereavement
Care: a toolkit for finding
connection and compassion in
consultation.**

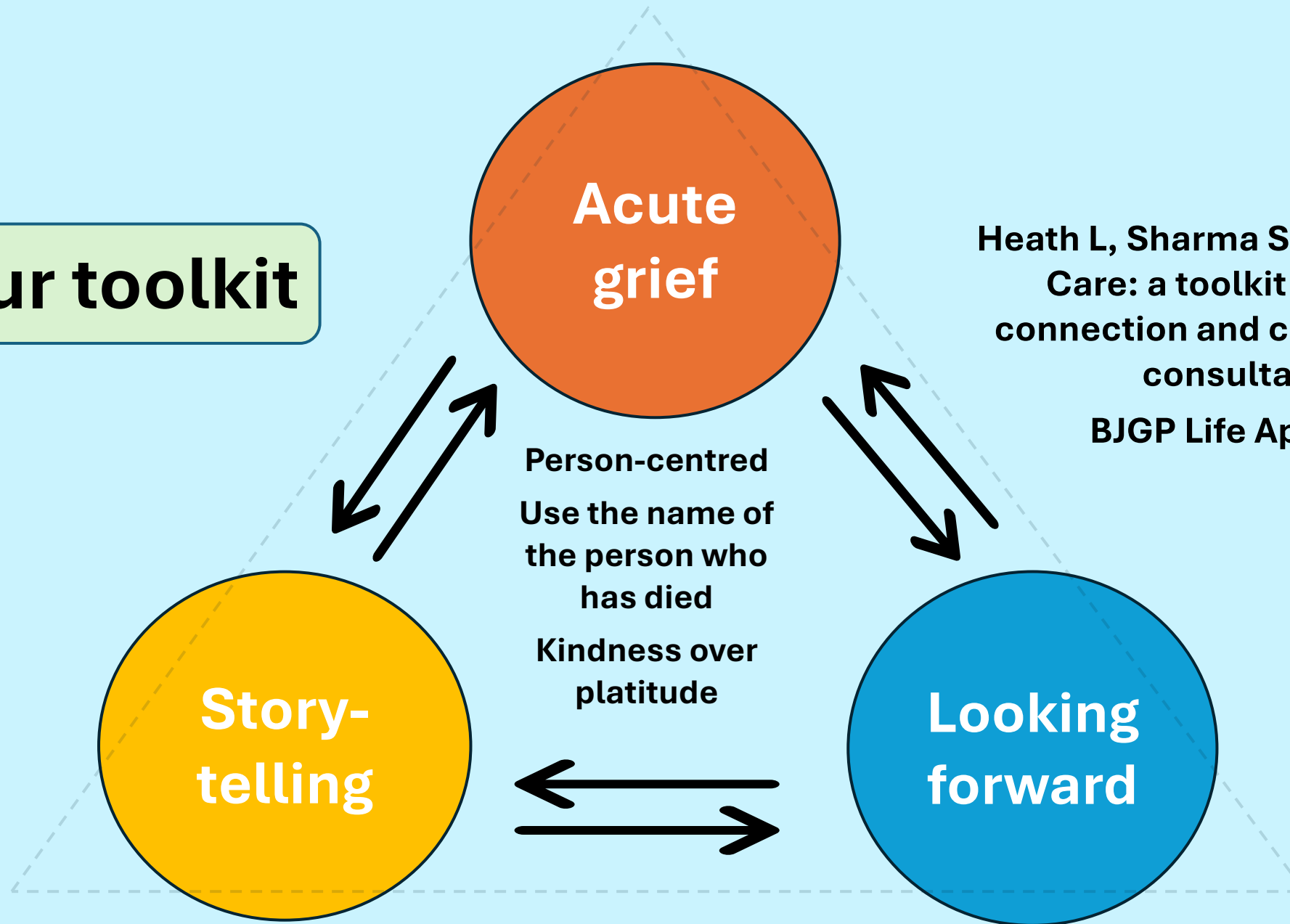
BJGP Life April 2022

**Person-centred
Use the name of
the person who
has died**

**Kindness over
platitudes**

**Story-
telling**

**Looking
forward**



Acute grief (1)

- **Tolerate distress and hold the space**
- Allow negative emotions to fill the encounter
- Normalise the need for support
- Emphasise the individuality of grief
- Supportive phrases which avoid inferring recovery

'I can see how painful this is for you right now. That pain might never go away, but you will learn ways to live with it.'



Acute grief (2)

- **Tolerate distress and hold the space**
- No judgement- hold your own assumptions at arm's length

O'Connor M, Breen L. General Practitioners' experiences of bereavement care and their educational support needs: a qualitative study. BMC Medical Education 2014

- Time off work
- Explore rituals around death
- Practical support – funeral directors, registrars, Cruse/Sue Ryder



Physicality of grief

'No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear...the same fluttering in the stomach, the restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.'

C S Lewis, A Grief Observed. 1961

- Chest pain, palpitations, breathlessness
- Nausea, anorexia, heartburn
- Physical pain
- Insomnia
- Anecdotally, women tend more towards symptoms in the chest; men in the legs

Warner J et al. Evaluating the use of benzodiazepines following recent bereavement. British Journal of Psychiatry 2001

Storytelling

- Recalling memories of loss helps us to adjust
- Remembering the person who has died – use their name
- Ask simple questions ‘how are you right now?’
- Excessive rumination can be a risk factor for depression or prolonged grief disorder
- Introduce the concept of a rest from grief
- Connect with the grief of others – books, films, support groups

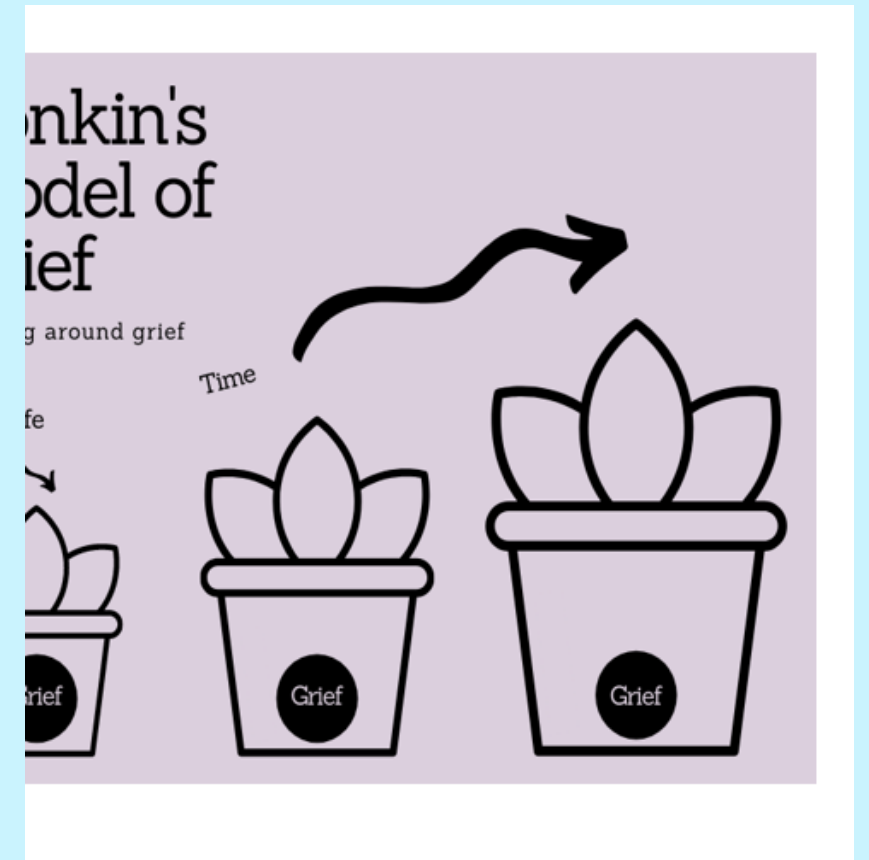
O’Connor M. *The Grieving Brain*. HarperOne 2022

Eisma MC et al Adaptive and maladaptive rumination after loss: A three-wave longitudinal study. *Br J Clin Psychol*. 2015



Looking forward

- Continue to refer to the person by name, even years after death
- Once again, keep your own assumptions at arm's length
- Open questioning style
- Motivational interviewing - allow the patient to reflect on where they are now and where they would like to be
- Memorial events or 'touchstones'
- Introduce the idea of growing around grief



Grief can take many forms

- **Our toolkit is designed to be applicable in all forms of grief**
- We may grieve eg when we lose a job, a house, a particular role
- We may grieve for someone we have never known eg a parent who died when we were very small, or from whom we are estranged
- Anticipatory grief – when we know someone is going to die
- Men may grieve differently to women; Ethnicity and culture
- Grief plus mental illness – difficult to tease out grief vs depression/anxiety
- Grief plus cognitive impairment - <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/>

Examples

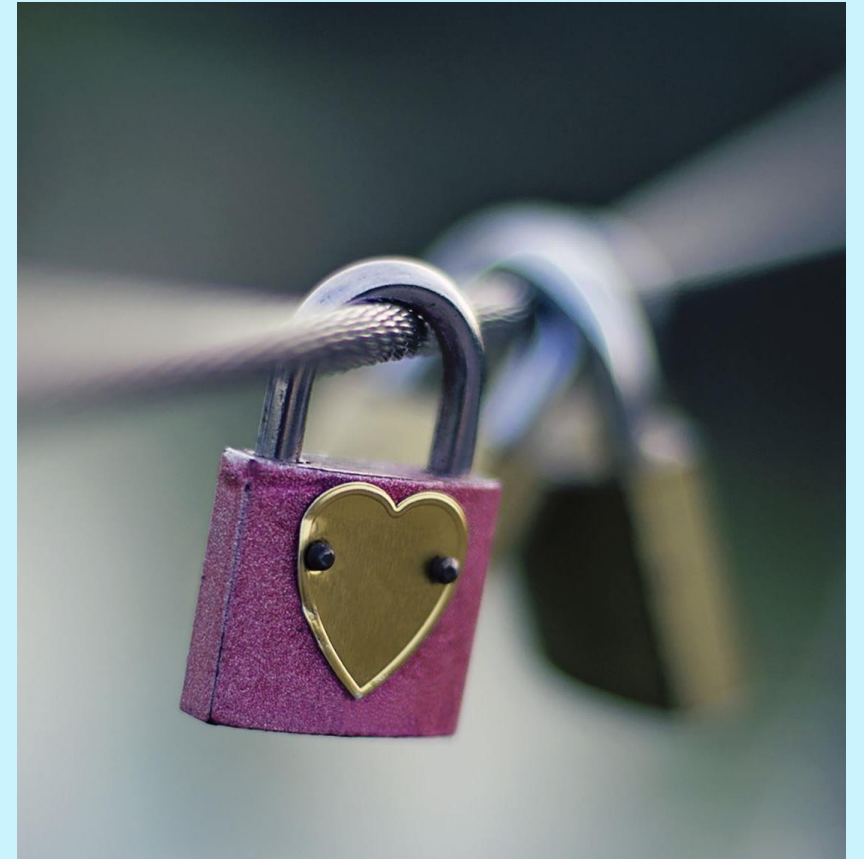
81 F. COPD, heart failure, leg injury. Husband died suddenly 8m ago

62 F. TAH BSO 4w ago. Post op haemorrhage at home 10d later

59 F. depression. Approaching her 60th birthday

Prolonged Grief Disorder

- when we are 'stuck'
- ~10% - an underestimate?
- Included in the latest ICD-11 & DSM
- 'Intense yearning, emotional pain, inability to function for a year or more'
- Risk factors – relationship with the deceased; circumstances of death; social isolation
- **Our tools are universally applicable - don't be scared to try them!**
- Targeted grief therapy by a skilled clinician
 - M K Shear et al (2014) "treatment of complicated grief in elderly persons: A randomised clinical trial"





Neuroscience of grief

- It's an amazing and exciting science, lots going on to try to identify who is at risk of complicated grief and what we might be able to do about it
- Changing Lives of Older Couples (CLOC) University of Michigan – grief resilience - Bonanno et al
- Center for Complicated Grief – Columbia University – novel therapy for grief (CGT)
- University of Rotterdam – alterations in brain volume and cognitive function in grieving people
- Grief, Loss and Social Stress (GLASS) Lab – University of Arizona – fMRI work

The Grieving Brain (2022) Mary Frances O'Connor

Useful resources

- Sue Ryder – grief guide <https://griefguide.sueryder.org>
- Cruse <https://www.cruse.org.uk>
- The Good Grief Trust <https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org>
 - Useful site with many resources all in one place, can order cards for waiting room
- Contact your care navigator/social prescriber/church/mosque/synagogue to find out what support is already in place – often there is a lot
- **Grief Works book and app** – tools to facilitate a grief journey, authored by Julia Samuel MBE, psychotherapist. Accessible and useful self-help. App is subscription only.
- **Good Grief Festival** – online community bringing together grief experts and the bereaved for virtual and in person events <https://www.goodgrieffest.com>
- **Death Café.** At a Death Cafe people drink tea, eat cake and discuss death. <https://deathcafe.com>



Fancy learning a bit more?

- **Books**
 - The Grieving Brain* (2022) Mary Frances O'Connor – **neuroscience and psychology**
 - Grief Works* (2017) Julia Samuel
 - Good Mourning* (2023) Sally Douglas and Imogen Carn – **both self-help books**
 - Notes on Grief* (2022) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – **writers' personal accounts**
 - The Madness of Grief* (2021) Rev Richard Coles **so all are beautifully crafted books**
 - The Year Of Magical Thinking* (2005) Joan Didion
 - A Grief Observed* (1960) C S Lewis
- **Good Grief Festival Grief Academy** –live webinars with grief experts – these are super useful! There is a cost, but you don't have to be a pro
- **Podcasts** there are so many! Of varying quality. Those on BBC Sounds are good, search 'grief'