

When the Losses Keep Coming

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How do we journey with cumulative loss?

Our Hospice Yukon team has been feeling, pondering and researching how to best acknowledge and support the complex needs of people who approach us "when the losses keep coming."

All humans experience loss and grief, and we have many different ways of mourning and coping when deaths touch our lives.

But some of us experience more losses than others.

Many communities are losing young people to the opioid crisis.

Some journey with the complex harms caused by residential schools.

People in caregiving roles may feel overwhelm as their clients die.

People on the front lines after violent or sudden deaths may not be able to process the feelings that come with this work, unable to release one trauma before the next happens.

And a background hum of anxiety for environmental and economic challenges doesn't make coping any easier.

There's been a lot more conversation – locally, nationally and globally – about grief and loss.

And yet it's hard to find much research on cumulative loss, cumulative grief, compound grief, traumatic loss... especially as it affects our community experience.

This publication doesn't offer to fix anything. But it shares a few perspectives that may help a little.

In these pages, we describe some of the words we're using in the face of multiple losses.

A Metis palliative care nurse shares examples of what helps her cope.

We also hold space for the multi-layered grief of indigenous experience in Canada, by sharing words from a national working group.

The Yukon Circle of Change invites people to engage in ways to heal from harm.

We share a conversation with Victoria Hospice, and some stories of how we mourn at Hospice Yukon.

Caring can break our hearts wide open. Some of us carry many names of people who died too soon.

Caring can also make us feel numb, angry, or many other emotions. We feel to heal.

We heal in different ways, and sometimes healing is supported by connection with others. ♥

Heather Finton is Hospice Yukon's Communications Coordinator



Too many losses can make life hard to feel

Words to name the grief

Sometimes it helps to find words that fit our experience.

Acknowledgment – recognizing that a significant change has happened, and that it's ok to feel an emotional response, including sadness, anger, confusion or anything else.

Cumulative loss – multiple losses, when a number of deaths or other losses happen, sometimes in a short timeframe.

Cumulative grief – the feelings that come with cumulative losses, especially when there has not been an opportunity to mourn each loss. Also called **grief overload** or **compound grief**, because of the compounding or overlapping emotional effects of multiple losses.

Traumatic loss – a death that happens in a potentially traumatizing situation of sudden or unexpected death, violence, suicide, accident, injustice, or other trauma.

Complicated grief – when intense grief is ongoing and interferes with daily functioning. Can include intrusive memories, addictions, difficulties regulating emotions, feelings of isolation and other complications.

Empathic distress – Healthy empathy allows for connection without becoming overwhelmed by the other person's distress. Empathic distress is a more intense emotional response that can lead to anxiety, avoidance/withdrawal, emotional exhaustion and other symptoms.

Moral injury – occurs when people participate in, are prevented from acting in, or witness actions that violate their moral code, such as being unable to provide adequate care due to system limitations.



One of the most difficult emotions that survivors of sudden, violent death face is the feeling of loss of control.

Something awful has happened and you were unable to prevent it....

Empower yourself to “do something” with your grief - to mourn it, to express it outside of yourself, to find ways to help yourself heal.

*Adapted from Alan Wolfelt,
Healing Your
Traumatized Heart*

Vuntut Gwitchin Elder Lorraine Netro



Years ago, Lorraine was skeptical about Healing Touch.

And now:

“We are in an opioid crisis, we’ve moved through the pandemic, and we’re still facing so many losses, of our loved ones, of our relatives within our communities and Nations...

Healing Touch has helped me in my own healing journey, from trauma, from grief, from so many losses... to be able to walk and support my family and community.”

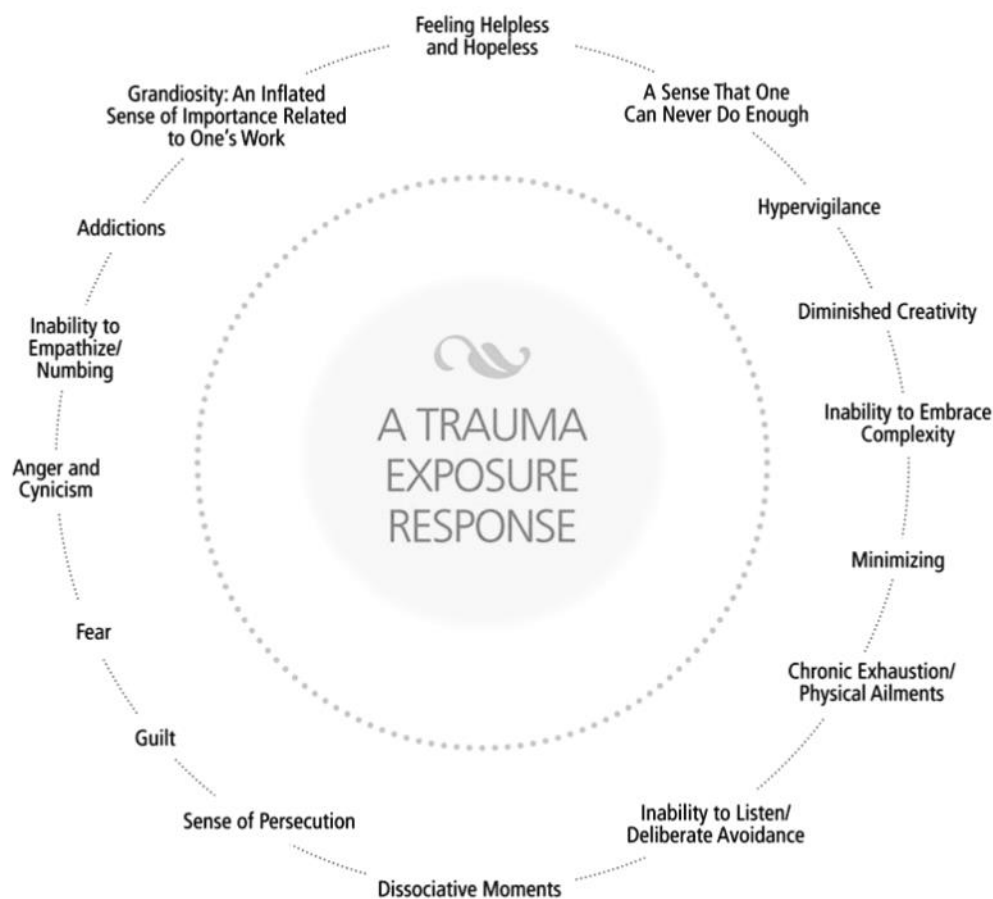
Listen to Lorraine speak about Hospice Yukon at
<https://hospiceyukon.net/en/services/healing-touch/>

Common responses to trauma exposure

Words and image are adapted from

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others,
by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk

When we experience trauma, directly or by accompanying others, we may experience some of these challenging responses:



Trauma stewardship can help us develop healthier responses. It is not simply an idea. It can be defined as a daily practice through which individuals, organizations, and societies respond to the hardship, pain, or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or our planet itself.

Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering.

As caregivers, we may find it nearly insurmountable to attend to our own well-being at times...

How do we care well enough for ourselves to reconcile all that we are witnessing?

Tending our Losses

Like fireweed in a charred forest, some people manage to thrive despite great pain and loss.

At Hospice Yukon, we understand that thriving is not guaranteed. We keep learning to sit with people in places that are scarred, smoky, devastated and where new growth feels impossible.



We recognize the vital necessity of honouring our pain, of softening enough that our sorrows can be named. In honouring our pain, there can be a new flow of feeling and reconnection to the fullness of life.

This kind of living can help nourish us, help us find patience and trust that colour may return to our inner landscape.

But not always. Sometimes it's not about wishing for colour, but just taking a few deeper breaths in the middle of the fallen trees, the smouldering ground, and sometimes with a supportive listener nearby.

In our workshops we point to the Spiral developed by Joanna Macy, an activist and teacher who taught about the value of honouring our pain as a natural expression of our caring and interdependence (<https://workthatreconnects.org>).



We also create simple rituals in our workplace, ways for staff to mourn our clients during work hours, to help support healthy boundaries for our lives at home.

In our office, this means a little shelf in the kitchen that serves as an altar, with a candle and simple messages. We pause together whenever we need to, with the names of people who are filling our hearts. We can bring our whole selves to work, naming the challenges that arise from the work and from the life that unfolds in our day-to-day.

We've witnessed other workplaces that use different expressions: a memorial wall, a quiet room with a grief jar, an annual commemorative fire, a celebratory wake, a pause to remember each life that has touched the team. There are countless ways to mourn.

We understand the fear of losing our capacity to care, because of the numbing that can happen when grief is not released. We encourage each other to keep feeling, recognizing that "self-care" is not just the responsibility of the individual but is supported by the team.

Beyond work life there is also great value in expressing our grief both alone and in community, whether through art, movement, Lights of Life tags on trees, letting nature hold us.

Together we can take turns as bright fireweed, burned logs, or seeds that journey in the wind before they come to rest.



Cumulative grief aka grief overload aka "holy crap I can't handle all this loss!!!"

If we don't have the time we need before another loss occurs we end up overwhelmed by these multiple losses and unable to give them the attention they need.

Unfortunately, there is no magic answer for how to cope with cumulative grief. If you have suffered multiple losses, either all at once or before integrating the previous loss, some important things to remember are:

- 1) **Be aware of the risk of cumulative loss/grief overload.** Knowing is half the battle! Just being aware that multiple losses in a short period poses unique challenges and can put you at risk for a grief process that is especially complicated is important.
- 2) **Be sensitive to other friends or family members who have suffered multiple losses and are at risk for cumulative grief.** When we lose someone we become absorbed in our own way of grieving. We can find it difficult to deal with people who are grieving differently.
- 3) **Be aware of the increased possibility of avoidance or denial.** To make it through, one day at a time, you may find yourself more prone to avoidance than you have ever been in the past. Professional support may be a good idea if attending to the grief of these losses is feeling impossible.
- 4) **Keep in mind that time is not the only factor in cumulative grief.** A loss that was never fully attended to years before can be brought back up by a new loss and can be overwhelming.
- 5) **Substance use can increase the risk for cumulative grief.** When a person stops using drugs or alcohol they may face multiple losses that they failed to grieve over the course of years or even decades.
- 6) **Age can increase the risk for cumulative grief.** As individuals progress into their 70s, 80s, and 90s they may find themselves experiencing the deaths of friends and family members more regularly.
- 7) **Grief is as unique as each person we lose, so we cannot rush grieving multiple losses.**

Adapted from full article by Litsa Williams
<https://whatsyourgrief.com/cumulative-grief-aka-grief-overload/>



"We're encouraging people to become involved in their own rescue."

"One of the hardest things we must do sometimes is to be present to another person's pain without trying to "fix" it, to simply stand respectfully at the edge of that person's mystery and misery.

Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life."

Parker Palmer

How I cope with cumulative losses

Lauren Ross is a Metis palliative care nurse working and living in the Yukon. She has generously shared some of what keeps her healthy as she works with the dying and their families.

Cumulative losses in my work role mean that I have needed to listen inwardly and honestly in order to process, hold, and allow the things that make me uncomfortable be my teacher. I am **learning to hold space** for those who are grieving and bear witness to immense suffering and heartbreak.



I'm doing my "own work" so that I can show up not only for myself, but also in a healthy ability to support my team through their own process of cumulative loss.

Within the team, feelings around loss are held in the belly of the **shared experience**. The hard times we face as a collective create a special kind of relationship. I am aware of the importance of a foundation of **trust** and I deeply **respect** the people I have the honour of working alongside. With informed consent, sharing experiences in a safe space is powerful in the healing journey.

When I am feeling overwhelmed, I find myself choosing to pull back from the depth of my interactions at work. There is such **beauty in connection** during difficult times that this may be one of the silver linings of cumulative grief. However, all of this takes more energy and time when things feel heavier.

Unprocessed/abundance of cumulative loss for me feels like **muscle tightness** especially in my shoulders, neck, back, and body aches. I get tension headaches, it increases the frequency of migraines. It prevents me from falling asleep and shows up at 3 am with dread and heaviness. Unprocessed loss significantly reduces my bandwidth for social and emotional interactions in both my personal and professional life.



We know the only way to process feelings around loss is by feeling the emotions. This is a hard path. Recognizing, processing, sitting with and experiencing hard emotions is necessary to be well.

A friend I sit in circle with shared that our **tears are healing**. I rely heavily on rituals, ceremony and community in my personal life.

I recognize and deeply **respect the sacred**. I am aware that we are all guided by unseen forces, this brings relief in knowing that I am never alone.

Breath is a significant tool that I use in moments when I am needing grounding. I use breath in acutely stressful situations and to guide me during quiet times of processing and healing.

A powerful visualizing technique is intentionally placing certain experiences of loss into a **container**.

This visualized container is then put in a place where it sits until I am ready to take it out and work through its contents. This technique is very empowering for me. These containers have their own characteristics of tangible nature, colour, smell and presence.

Some of the places where these containers sit to rest until I am ready have been anywhere from the rivers, tree stumps, the north wind, to aches within my body.

The energy of these places guides my healing.



I typically do my visualizing and unpacking of these containers when I am walking in the forest either alone or guided by my therapist when the containers are more difficult.

I have found that **professional mental health support** is a must.

Walking is a form of bilateral stimulation which is a key component of EMDR therapy, one of the tools in my toolbox.

Intentionally **being in nature**, whether on the land or the water, has been profound in my healing journey.

My **bookshelf** includes *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chödrön, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* by Francis Weller, and Peter Levine's work *In An Unspoken Voice: How the body releases trauma and restores goodness*.



Small moments of quiet, space, breath and gratitude infused throughout the day are incredibly influential and easily accessible.

Lighting a candle with intention creates healing energy.

I am learning about the importance of moving energy through intense **physical activity**, which then allows for space.

This space created increases my ability to sit in quiet reflection.

I am grateful to have been introduced to Kundalini yoga and Mantra which I have found to be very powerful already, although I am just in the very early stages of these practices.

I have the honour of working within a team of people with whom I feel comfortable giving and receiving support, and for this I am grateful. **As a team we debrief** specific situations "in the moment" as best possible.

I find it challenging to acknowledge loss at work when "time" isn't available, and we are moving from one important interaction to another. When we don't **make time for acknowledging loss**, it piles up in an unhealthy way.

Traumatic deaths are very difficult to support and work through because of the immense complexity. Bearing witness and supporting these situations is very challenging. In these times, we rely on each other as well as outside support.

Given the work I do, I have become acutely aware of the limitations in my "emotional bandwidth" and have been supported when I need to take time: whether this is an hour, a day, week or month. This work can be **emotionally exhausting**.

My wish is that everyone feels **safe and empowered** to recognize and support mental wellbeing on all systemic, cultural and personal levels. I know this continues to evolve.

Learning where my edges are and feeling confident in **advocating for myself** has been a process all of its own.

I have noticed that moving through challenges in processing loss becomes more fluid as I continue to **nurture my spiritual and self-care path**. ♥



GRACE



The GRACE process can help with empathic distress, secondary trauma, and moral suffering.

Gather your attention by pausing, taking an in-breath, and giving yourself time to get grounded. On your exhale, invite yourself to be present in a place of stability in your body.

Recall that your intention is to serve others, act with integrity, and preserve the integrity of others. Your motivation keeps you on track, morally grounded, and connected to your highest values.

Attune to self by first noticing what's going on in your own body, heart, and mind. Notice whatever biases might be present and shift your perspective accordingly.

Then attune to the other person.

Consider what will really serve by letting assumptions go and insights arise. Don't jump to conclusions too quickly.

Engage, enact ethically, and then end the interaction and allow for emergence of the next step. Compassionate action emerges from the field of openness, connection, and discernment you have cocreated with the other person.

Draw on your expertise, intuition, and insight and look for common ground consistent with your values and supportive of mutual integrity.

*Adapted from full article
by Roshi Joan Halifax*

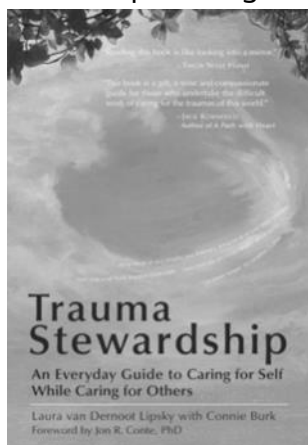
www.lionsroar.com/help-when-your-heart-breaks/

From Our Library

We wish we had a quick fix to offer.

It would be great to have "that one book" to help you journey with the effects of multiple losses.

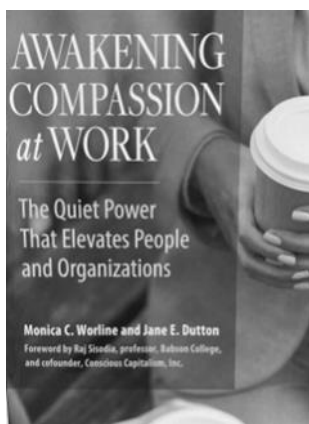
We hear some wise voices in this handful of books... people who know what it is to walk with others towards healing even when the losses keep coming.



Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others, by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk shares many stories of people on the front lines of traumatic situations and the effects of this exposure.

The book also shares a variety of techniques to help us stay present with suffering: "Being present is a radical act. It allows us to soften the

impact of trauma, interrupt the forces of oppression, and set the stage for healing and transformation."



Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power that Elevates People and Organizations by Worline and Dutton, offers responses to the fact that "Suffering in the workplace can rob our co-workers of humanity, dignity and motivation and is an unrecognized and costly drain on organizational potential."

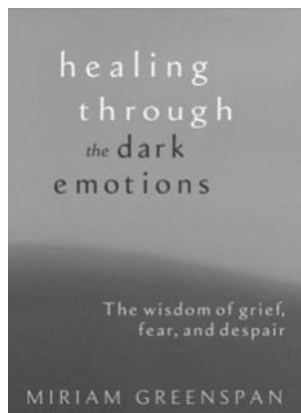
To find these books and more... drop by our lending library for a book and a cup of tea.

**We're open Mon - Fri
11:30am to 3pm**

Caring for others requires our healthy empathy, integrity and other qualities.

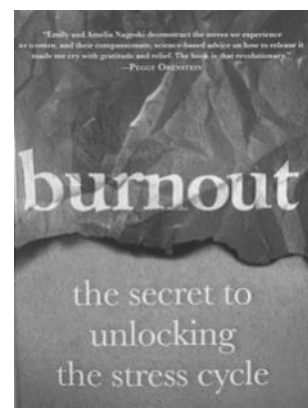


In ***Standing At the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet,*** author Joan Halifax alerts us to the ways that showing up for others can push us into personal and social suffering, and offers practices to protect us from these kinds of harm.



Healing through the dark emotions: The wisdom of grief, fear and despair offers psychotherapist Miriam

Greenspan's view that avoidance and denial result in psychological disorders, and that we can trust dark emotions to heal and transform.



Burnout: the secret to unlocking the stress cycle by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski offers science-backed tips for women to help end the cycle of burnout and exhaustion.

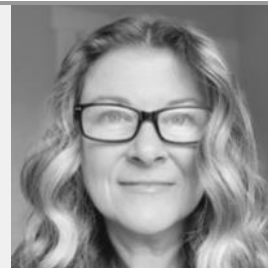
They suggest that "Wellness... is a state of action; it is the freedom to move through the cycles of being human..."

It is the flow of givers giving and *accepting support*, in all its many forms."



Let's talk about multiple losses

Marney Thompson is Director of Bereavement Services at Victoria Hospice Society.



What helps when people experience cumulative loss?

Take breaks – don't feel you must (or can) grieve it all at once. Losses have a way of showing up when they need attention. Though you may be carrying many losses and much grief, and experiencing a jumble of thoughts and feelings, trust that what needs care will surface.

When that doesn't happen and your internal world feels more like a logjam, try asking "what feeling is strongest? What thought is taking up the most space? If I give myself a moment to simply reflect on my losses, what memory surfaces?"

What else can help?

Take a pen and paper and make a list, timeline, or mind map. Give yourself permission to write down every loss that comes to mind. Use different colours if you can.

Some losses have secondary losses related to them. For example, the death of a parent might also include the end of an identity (like "daughter"), the end of dreams for their future with you, end of a familiar routine in the week. The losses you identify might be feelings, places, people, plans. Don't edit. Link them if you see connections.

Take a moment to reflect on the impact of any or each of the losses you've identified. Maybe ask yourself, "are there any surprises here? What feels like it needs more attention? What hurts the most right now? How could I acknowledge and honour these losses?"

Instead of writing this out in words, you can explore these feelings in other ways like drawing, sewing, sculpting, building a garden, or a conversation with a trusted person.

What kinds of national trends are you seeing when it comes to cumulative loss?

I think many of us are feeling insecure about a loss of connection to community, family, each other. For some there is heightened or new mistrust and fear in relation to our health systems, government, and even the health of our world.

Deaths and harms related to the toxic drug crisis, historic and ongoing harms to Indigenous Peoples, current politics and war have contributed to immense grief in people all over the world.

Some innovative projects are things that inspire and support communities to join to acknowledge losses and grieve together. One that comes to mind is Grief Matters in Nova Scotia, where people take part in community teas, walks and other activities to name and honour their grief.

What broad changes would you like to see?

The most powerful cultural change that I feel is needed is a shift in how we respond to grief, our own and each other's. In families. In neighbourhoods. In teams and workplaces. That we need to be able to normalize, name, and listen to grief. Most often grieving people don't need an expert or counsellor, they simply need to be seen and heard by someone who can listen with care and compassion.

Grief doesn't need to be fixed. It is a natural, adaptive response to loss.

What has helped you in your own healthy responses to cumulative loss?

The things that most help me, that I try to make more space for:

- Patience (one thing at a time, this isn't a sprint to the finish, grief will be part of my life)
- Trust (that I have what I need, can ask for help)
- Surrender (my need to feel better)

Grief, multiple losses and healing from harm

Telling your story can be powerfully transformative when traumatic death, abuse, criminal acts and other kinds of harm have taken place.

Restorative conversations supported by trained facilitators can help nurture repair and healing.

The Yukon Circle of Change offers two pathways.

Healing Circles: for individuals

Healing Circles are small groups that meet each week for 8 weeks. They help people listen, learn, and heal together.

Each separate circle brings together people who:

- Were harmed (green circle)
- Caused harm and want to make things right (purple circle)
- Love someone who was harmed or caused harm (orange circle)

The groups are led by trained Circle Keepers and follow a clear curriculum.

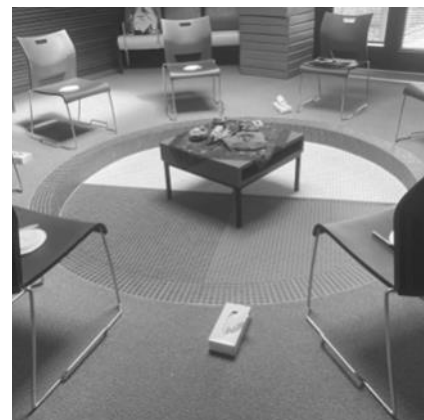
The meetings are confidential and safety is a priority.

The circles meet online and welcome participants from all over Canada.

Restorative Processes: for communities

When there is conflict or harm, communities can benefit from trained facilitators who can lead culturally sensitive processes to meet different kinds of harm, from workplace dynamics to complex cases such as murder and sexual harm.

The Yukon Circle of Change is a non-profit society that can be reached at yukoncircleofchange@gmail.com or by calling (867) 333-9936.



Indigenous Grief from aboutgrief.ca



For Indigenous communities, grief both encompasses the loss of loved ones and is deeply intertwined with the loss of culture, land, and social structures disrupted by colonization. This grief transcends generations, rooted in centuries of systemic violence, forced assimilation, and dispossession.

Traditional practices around grief

Historically, Indigenous Peoples have had rich and diverse cultural practices for caring for one another through life's transitions, including death. These practices are based on community knowledge, spiritual teachings, and strong family connections, emphasizing collective well-being. However, the arrival of European settlers brought assimilation policies such as the Indian Act and the establishment of the Indian Residential School system. [...] This forcible removal of culture is a significant source of grief in itself, as Indigenous Peoples were denied the right to care for their sick, mourn their dead, and pass down ancestral knowledge.

Addressing Indigenous grief

Addressing Indigenous grief requires recognition and understanding of its multifaceted nature. It is not just about the loss of loved ones but also about the loss of culture, identity, and connection to the land. Healing begins with acknowledging the past and its ongoing effects on Indigenous communities. It involves supporting the restoration of cultural practices, promoting community-based healing initiatives, and addressing the systemic inequities that continue to impact Indigenous Peoples.

**Listen to dozens of indigenous voices sharing cultural practices to support living and dying,
www.livingmyculture.ca**

Programs and Services

Living with Loss - An Introduction to Healthy Grieving

Gain a better understanding of the grief journey in this online education session. Offered four times per year.

Counselling

One-on-one counselling support for those who are dying or grieving, and those who love and care for them.

Grief Support Groups

We offer a variety of groups to help grieving people find support and connection with others who are also experiencing loss.
Visit our website for upcoming offerings.

Healing Touch

A relaxing energy therapy that supports holistic health.
Volunteers trained in Healing Touch use gentle touch to clear and balance your energy system.

Lending Library & Kids Corner

Our extensive library of books and resource material is open to the general public.

Professional Support

Support, education and resources for professionals and caregivers.

These resources are provided at no charge.

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www.hospiceyukon.net

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