STILL WATERS
MEDIATION

When Grief Boils Over

Navigating Conflict During Challenging Times

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Learning Objectives

1. Understand how grief impacts brain function and emotions, including fear and guilt, especially in conflict situations.
2. Recognize how fear and guilt can influence personal reactions and interactions.
3. Identify coping strategies to manage strong emotions.
4. Apply practical approaches to navigate interpersonal conflicts while grieving.
5. Reflect on the material and relate it to their own experiences.
6. Connect with other participants to share insights and support.

The Boiling Pot

Grief fills the pot of our emotional capacity.

It doesn't take much heat for everything to boil over...

Understanding Grief: Brain Regions Affected

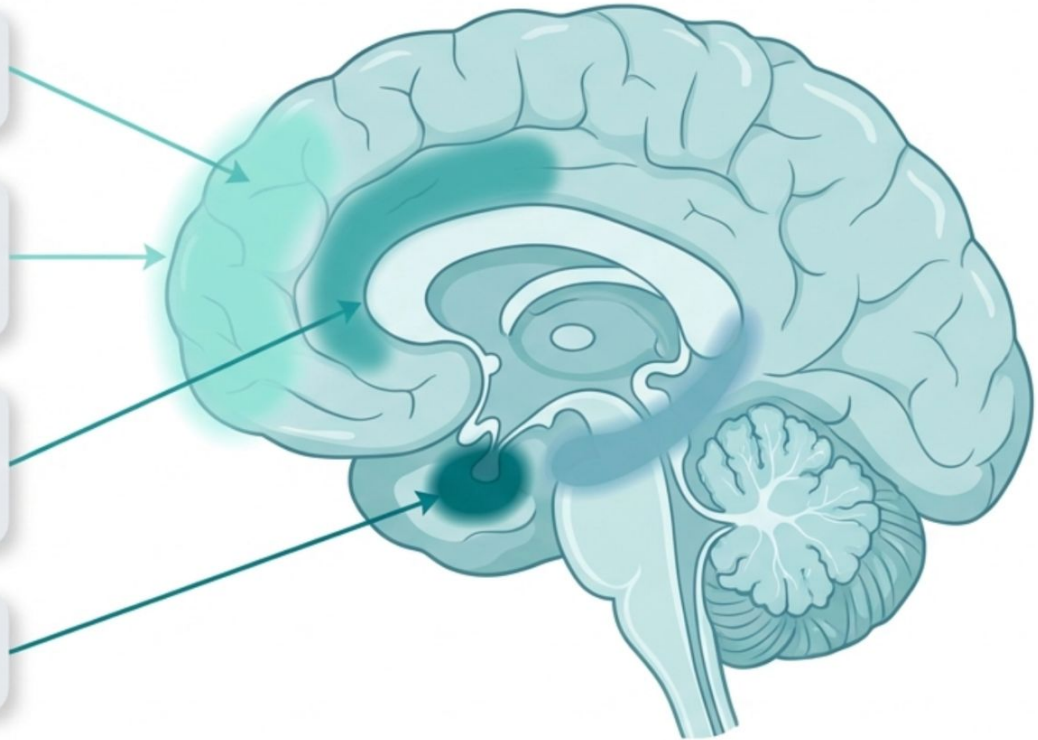
Grief is both emotional and neurological.

Amygdala: Heightened fear and emotional sensitivity (The fear center is overactive).

Prefrontal Cortex: Reduced decision-making and impulse control (The 'thinking center' is underactive).

Anterior Cingulate Cortex: Decreased empathy and social regulation (The emotional regulation center is underactive).

Hippocampus: Altered memory and meaning-making.



The Brain in Protective Mode

During grief, the brain shifts into a protective mode:

- More reactive to tone, facial expressions, and disagreement
- Less able to regulate stress
- More likely to misinterpret others' intentions
- Increased emotional overwhelm
- Harder to think clearly or make decisions

This sets the stage for conflict.

Emotional Changes During Grief

Fear

- Fear of future losses
- Fear of making the “wrong” decision
- Fear of being alone or unsupported
- Fear of conflict

Guilt

- Caregiver guilt
- Survivor guilt
- Decision guilt
- “I should have…” thoughts

Other Common Experiences

- Sadness, despair
- Anxiety and worry
- Irritability and sensitivity

Why Fear and Guilt matter in conflict.

These internal emotions often drive specific, difficult external behaviors:

Defensiveness: Reacting to perceived attacks.

Urgency: "We need to decide now" (driven by anxiety).

Misunderstandings: Assuming the worst in others.

Rigidity: "This is the only right choice" (driven by fear of making a mistake).

Emotional Withdrawal: Shutting down to protect oneself.

Controlling Behaviors: Attempting to regain safety.

Family Dynamics Under Pressure

Role Shifts

Loss can disrupt established roles, leading to confusion and conflict. (Example: Parent dies and leaves a power vacuum).

Perceived Inequities

Resentments from the past. “Mom loved you best.”

Caretaker Burden

Increased responsibilities leading to stress. “I’ve always had to be the responsible one.”

Unmet Needs

Lack of support for grieving members. “No one is there for me.”

The Amplifier Effect on Family Systems

Grief doesn't just create new problems; it turns the volume up on every existing crack in the family foundation.

- Cracks Become Canyons: Minor, pre-existing annoyances become intolerable under the weight of grief
- Regression Under Stress: Family members often revert to childhood roles
- Systemic Freeze vs. Forced Change: The system resists change (homeostasis) while being forced to restructure, creating tension

Communication strategies to ‘Cool Down’ the heat.

Timing

Discuss matters only when everyone is calm and rested.

Curiosity

Listen first. Ask questions to understand the other perspective.

Awareness

Be mindful of voice volume, tone, and body language.

“I” Statements

Avoid blame. Use: “I feel [emotion] when you [action] because [reason].”

Validation

Acknowledge their pain. “I understand this is hard for you, too.”

Boundaries

Clearly define when, how, and how frequently you will communicate.

The STOP Skill

S – STOP

Don't react. Don't move. Your emotion may want you to act without thinking. Remember, stay in control.

T – TAKE A STEP BACK

Take a step back from the situation you are in. Take a deep breath. Don't act in an impulsive way because of your emotions.

O – OBSERVE

What are your feelings? What are your thoughts? What are others saying or doing?

P – PROCEED MINDFULLY

Be aware. Think about the situation, your feelings, and the feelings of others. Think about your goals. Ask: What consequences would your actions have? Would they improve or worsen the situation?

Strategies to Manage Emotional Health: TIPPS in DBT

T - Temperature. In stressful situations, cooler temperatures can decrease your heart rate and slow your thinking.

I - Intense Exercise. When you have built-up energy, expend it doing a cardio work-out to facilitate relaxation thereafter.

P - Paced Breathing. Control your breathing to rid the physical symptoms of overwhelming emotions.

P - Progressive Muscle Relaxation. Paired with paced breathing, tense and relax muscle groups throughout the body to promote a relaxing effect.

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When more help is needed.

Professional medation can help navigate complex family conflicts during grief.

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